

'60s generation is heading for conventional old age

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Britain's post-war baby boomers, associated throughout their lives with social change, are failing to break new ground in their approach to growing old.

Academic research supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and Arts and Humanities Research Council shows that most members of the baby boom generation – often regarded as the first teenagers of a more affluent consumer society - have modest ideas for their retirement. While some plan substantial projects, particularly in relation to travel or using second homes, most people's ideas for spending time after retirement retain a traditional pattern – watching television and films, playing records or going for long walks.

Findings from the study, says Dr Rebecca Leach, "provide only limited evidence that first wave boomers are developing new third age lifestyles." Most have fairly modest aspirations, hoping at best to maintain current lifestyles and activities provided health and finances permit them to do so. The range of lifestyles is greater than would have been the case with previous generations but there is little evidence of 'alternative' models of consumption. Alternative health provision, for example, was widely practiced by between only three-seven per cent of people interviewed for the research. Many of those questioned "professed a critique of materialism, yet demonstrated ambivalence about this in practice."

The first wave baby boom generation, born between 1945 and 1954,

represents 17 per cent of the UK population. Born at a time of austerity, this group later experienced relative prosperity and the emergence of a mass consumer society. The research project by Dr Leach at Keele University and King's College, London, looked in particular at the role of consumption in approaches to adult ageing. It examined the extent to which baby boomers see themselves as part of a distinctive generational group, and how this might affect consumption patterns.

Baby boomers are shown to be a diverse group, varying considerably depending on wealth, class and education. Only a minority – 41 per cent – of those interviewed by the researchers identified with the term boomer and the study showed that members of the group view themselves in different ways. These are:

- The baby bulge group, who were aware of themselves competing with many others for school places and jobs.
- The burden group who worried about the consequences of being followed by a smaller generation.
- The lucky generation who felt they had benefited most from economic growth and the welfare state.
- The political generation who believed they had been trailblazers through their lives, taking initiatives that had produced social and cultural change.

Baby boomers have been widely characterised as more individualistic than previous generations, leading to suggestions that this would make them less family oriented. Yet the research shows that family responsibilities among boomers have increased rather than reduced. Demographic data shows that 43 per cent of those born between 1945-1952 have at least one child living at home while 37 per have

financial responsibility for other members of the household – usually children. Improvements in life expectancy mean that 43 per cent of people aged 50-57 still have a mother alive, and 20 per cent a father.

Boomers demonstrate a changing attitude towards inheritance, with surveys suggesting they are more likely to want to use their wealth to enjoy life than to worry about leaving a bequest.

Housing has played a big part in boomers' lives. The proportion of owner-occupiers rose from around one in four in 1950 to two-thirds by the mid-1980s. Today, 33 per cent of boomers own their homes outright and 52 per cent have mortgages, while 15 per cent have second homes. Home improvements, shows the research, form a significant part of boomer lifestyles. So does increasing the value of homes, especially in terms of using housing to fund life during retirement.

Most boomers – 70 per cent – regard age as unimportant in terms of their personal identity and, almost without exception, they told the researchers that they felt younger than their actual age. Boomers regard themselves as being more like their children and younger people than like their parents and older generational groups and, say the researchers, "see ageing as something that requires managing but is not overly problematic." The Dr Leach showed that while 69 per cent of people interviewed agreed that it was possible to plan for retirement, 71 per cent were themselves making either no plans or only limited ones.

Dr Leach identify global travel and cosmopolitan food choices as powerful examples of lifestyle activities associated with the boomer generation: 81 per cent of the people surveyed went on holiday abroad at least every two years.

"Travel was a major consumption item for boomers and loomed large in projects for retirement," says Dr Leach. "Less evident was any wholesale

transfer of teenage consumption concerns into midlife: boomers might have been the first teenagers, but they have now grown up. Consumer interests have matured, notably around interests linked to homes, gardens and travel."

This, comment the researchers, does not entirely undermine the idea of boomers as early exponents of a consumer society. "In the same way that music, fashion and mobility were used to construct a teenage identity, consumption can be seen to play a similar role in mid-life: the notion of the big trip or the retirement project – usually a hobby or home building project – providing a focus for boomers' spending as well as a source of self worth and esteem."

Dr Rebecca Leach, summarising importance of the research, says: "There are lots of assumptions about baby boomers: that they are wealthy, radical individuals who are spending the kids' inheritance; but this research shows that the reality is much more complex and ordinary – some of what it means to be a 'boomer' is because of shared life experiences but some of it is driven by the same challenges (health, wealth, jobs and family) as those faced by all of us."

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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