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# *Cultures of Consumption*

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### **Baby Boomers And Adult Ageing In Public Policy: The Changing Relationship Between Production And Consumption**

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## **Baby Boomers and Adult Ageing in Public Policy: a United Kingdom Perspective**

### **Abstract**

This paper provides a critical assessment of academic and policy approaches to population ageing with an emphasis on the baby-boomer cohort and constructions of late-life identity. It is suggested that policy toward an ageing population has shifted in focus, away from particular social hazards and towards an attempt to re-engineer the meaning of legitimate ageing and social participation in later life. Three themes are identified: constructing the baby-boomers as a force for social change, a downward drift of the age associated with 'older people' and a shift away from defining ageing identities through consumption, back toward work and production.

### **Introduction**

The first 'baby boom' generation has emerged as a significant group identified in debates focusing on the impact of population ageing and the various cultural changes affecting older people. This article examines the policy discourse contributing to the construction of boomers as a social group. In a UK context, the idea of a 'baby boomer' generation rests upon the increase in the birth rate following the ending of the Second World War. Attention to this group in the UK is relatively recent, with limited sociological literature

considering their impact as a specifically adult phenomenon (Huber and Skidmore, 2003). Falkingham (1997) suggests that this reflects the ambiguous nature of the UK 'baby boom', with its characteristic split between the immediate post-war (Wave 1) and early-1960s (Wave 2) peaks in the birth rate. This paper examines Wave 1 boomers now entering their 50s and early 60s.

'Baby Boomers' are in a unique position in relation to the growth of 20<sup>th</sup> century consumer society and intergenerational relations. They were the first to experience an explosion of consumer culture in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the first affluent teenagers. Their place in history has put particular pressure on them to manage complex selves and lifestyle whilst maintaining a position of social engagement. Now this group, who have challenged established social roles and institutions are themselves growing older, yet they have had a characteristically ambivalent attitude to adult ageing and intergenerational relations. They often have high lifestyle expectations, but are facing the erosion of many of the policies that supported them in the past. The first teenagers are now becoming the first generation with the cultural wherewithal to radically challenge traditional notions of adult ageing.

There are therefore important questions to be asked about whether this group might experience growing old in a different way to that of previous generations and how this might be reflected in their patterns of consumption.

Baby Boomers are particularly well placed to comment on the continuities and discontinuities that arise through consumption patterns that are generationally located. *Can they choose not to grow old by buying a way out of traditional expectations? Do they see themselves as essentially 'young' proponents of*

*'my generation'?* Or will they develop a more mature imagination that adapts to the changing priorities of midlife and beyond? Such questions raise important issues about how they spend their money; the benefits that accrue from the objects that are purchased; and the broader question of the relationship between consumption and adult identity. The outcomes of the decisions made will have a strong influence upon policy and services for succeeding generations.

These are significant questions when thinking about the future shape of old age: on the one hand, it is argued that baby boomers may 'reinvent' mid-life, creating new institutions and relationships; on the other hand, public policy, alongside divisions among boomers themselves, may restrict the extent of social and cultural innovation. This article will explore some of the arguments on either side as follows: first, we consider the different ways in which Wave 1 boomers have been discussed in academic and popular literature; second, the main differences in approaches within the literature are summarised; third, we consider attitudes within UK public policy towards the boomer generation; finally, the paper considers the likely role boomers might play in re-inventing middle and later life.

### **The Boomer Generations in the USA and Europe**

Despite the absence of a detailed literature in the UK, Wave 1 boomers have been the subject of extensive discussion in the United States, and to a lesser extent in other European countries. The US debate has been driven in large measure by the sheer size of the baby boom generation – a cohort of 76

million – produced in a sustained period of growth from 1945 through to 1964 (Pew Research Center, 2005). Numbers are certainly a significant strand in the debate about the significance of the boomer generation. For Europe, the post-war surge re-introduced children and young people as a major demographic group – after some 40 years of population decline. In 1949 869,000 babies were born in France, compared to just 612, 000 in 1939. By 1960, in the Netherlands, Ireland and France, 30 per cent of the population was under fifteen years old. By 1967, in France, one person in three was under twenty. Reflecting on these figures, Tony Judt (2005: 331) comments: 'It was not just that millions of children had been born after the war: an unprecedented number had survived.'

But it was the world they survived *into* which proved to be important and which has influenced much of the writing about boomers. The contrast in experiences with previous generations became steadily more evident as the children of the late 1940s and early 1950s became the youthful consumers of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sandbrook's (2005) history of this period sets the scene as follows: 'Children born in Britain after the Second World War were fortunate to be brought up in a rich and stable European country, free from civil unrest, hunger and extreme deprivation. They were also more fortunate than their parents who had endured two gruelling world wars as well as the misery of the Depression'. Wave 1 boomers were to become the 'teenagers' of the 1950s, spending (in the case of British youth) by the end of the decade 20 per cent of their money on clothes and shoes; 17 per cent on drinks and cigarettes; 15 per cent on sweets, snacks and soft drinks and in

cafes; and the rest, just under half of the total, on entertainment of various kinds, from cinemas and dance halls to magazines and records (Abrams cited in Sandbrook, 2005: 409).

Whether 'Boomers' in different countries identify with the phrase itself is a moot point. Karisto (2006) indicates that the Finnish cohort are likely to see themselves as a Manheimian 'self-conscious' generational group, and in the USA (AARP,2004) there appears to be a general familiarity with the label. However, in France (Ogg, 2006) this is less likely to be the case. The UK situation is currently unknown- with the phrase being widely used in the media to describe this age cohort with little knowledge of whether it has been adopted by individual members of the age-group. For the purposes of this paper, 'Boomers' will be referred to as an age-cohort and the use of the label in UK policy and in popular self-ascription is left open.

The maturation of a generation distinctive as much as in material as in numerical terms has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Three inter-related approaches might be identified in the UK and US literature: first, boomers as a group re-defining old age; second, boomers as a distinctive group of consumers; third, boomers as workers producers. These aspects will now be elaborated and the discussion will then move to considering the extent to which they are reflected in public policy discussions about first wave boomers.

### **Boomer identities**

The idea of boomers reinventing later life has been pursued in a range of publications and debates over the past 10 years. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has carried out extensive work tracking the fortunes of the boomers, notably with the various waves of the AARP Life Stage Study (see, for example, AARP, 2003). AARP has also organised a number of conferences identifying the over-50s as a 'retirement generation', making new demands in key areas such as work, leisure and social security (AARP, 2004a; 2004b). In the US context, boomers have also been identified as a group with the potential to develop new forms of 'civic engagement' in the form of volunteering and related forms of 'productive ageing' (Freedman, 2001; Harvard School of Public Health, 2004).

In the UK, the idea of boomers 'reinventing retirement' is closely associated with work developed by the think-tank Demos in two reports: *The New Old: why the baby boomers won't be pensioned off* (Huber and Skidmore, 2003); and *Eternal Youths: How the baby boomers are having their time again* (Harkin and Huber, 2004). The emphasis of this research is that boomers are having an impact on society both in terms of sheer numbers but also in respect of the values and attitudes which they are bringing to middle and later life. Harkin and Huber (2004: 13) suggest that:

'Many baby boomers are beginning to enjoy a windfall; the combination of wealth, health and longer life gives them a new phase of life. In this phase they have the chance to 'live again', to focus on being mature but independent, discerning but carefree, and in which they can revisit their own



desire for personal fulfilment free from the pressures of overwork and childrearing’.

The researchers go on to argue that:

‘For those who can afford it, a new ‘experience economy’ of travel, food, learning and lifestyle is growing rapidly. Baby boomers used to working work full time are preoccupied with re-establishing sovereignty over their own routines, and with making use of flexibility to enjoy themselves. Those who find themselves single speak warmly about their ability to enjoy active sex lives. Those released from decades of full-time work are hungrily searching out new cultural and consumption experiences’. (Harkin and Huber, 2004: 13).

As in the US, arguments such as the above are also being used to develop the thesis of boomers representing a distinctive political constituency, one which is ‘...marching towards retirement with a clear set of demands’ (Gordon Lishman cited in the Guardian, 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2006). One analysis of the political implications of demographic change develops the point as follows: ‘Older voters include not only pensioners, whom parties recognised in [the 2005 election] but also ‘baby boomers’. The first ‘boomers’ are marching towards retirement and are a very distinct generation with different experiences, values and expectations from their parents. They have actively created change at every stage of their lives – in family life, the labour market and education. Politicians will need to refine their views of this generation’s diverse values, attitudes and issues in order to communicate effectively with

it'. (Age Concern England, 2006). At the same time, boomers are also viewed as more challenging in their attitudes than preceding generations. Moody (2001: 176) argues here that: '...[over] the next two decades, the huge baby boom generation will enter old age. For an influential segment of boomers in the 1960s political protest and consciousness expansion were prominent themes. As this cohort of boomers moves into old age, they are likely to carry these critical values along with them'.

Arguing that boomers may transform later life still begs questions about the basis on which this will be achieved. Here, the key element is seen to be that of the long-term impact of first wave boomers as pioneers of mass consumption. Boomers are invariably credited with becoming the first teenager generation: born into austerity but experiencing labour market prosperity and leading the expansion in consumerism over the post-war period (Evandrou, 1997; Harkin and Huber, 2004; Judt, 2005). Gilleard and Higgs (2005), drawing on Bourdieu (1992), view people in their 50s as part of a new 'generational field' taking its inspiration from the youth culture established in the post-war period. While an earlier generation of older people were largely passive in accepting the limitations and inequalities associated with growing old, those now approaching or already in middle age are anxious to '...hang on to the positive attributes...associated with their exposure to and participation in youth culture. For those who had grown up in this youth-privileging mass culture, for those who had been told that people over thirty had nothing to say that was worth listening to, for those who had happily listened to the young Roger Daltry "Hope I die before I get old", 'middlesence'

presented a serious dilemma. The issue was as much about not losing the attributes of youth as a particular aversion to growing old. Its resolution was expressed by both either denying or actively resisting ageing, or better still by doing both' (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005: 88).

Harkin and Huber (2004: 31) also emphasise the importance of consumption as underpinning the identity of boomers. Indeed, for these authors the political radicals of the 1960s and 1970s are now the 'critical consumers' of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: 'More generally, our research suggests that a great deal of their [boomers] political radicalism and non-conformism [has] been sublimated into an uncompromisingly militant approach to their rights as a consumers'. This insight also underpins the extensive work around developing appropriate marketing for a new generation of older consumers. David Metz and David Underwood's (2005) *Older richer fitter: Identifying the customer needs of Britain's ageing population* is one such example, their research emphasising the extent of segmentation – by age, income, life stage and life style – within the baby boomer generation.

The possibility of boomers re-inventing old age on the basis of new consumption and leisure-orientated lifestyles is, then, a major strand in academic as well as popular writings. But a further idea concerns the role of boomers as 'producers', extending their working life in new forms of self-employment, flexible working, part-time work and portfolio working (Phillipson and Smith, 2005; Platman, 2003). This idea is itself consistent with US writings about 'productive ageing' (Morrow-Howell et al., 2001) and has been

lent political force with the perceived crisis in the funding of state and occupational pensions (Pensions Commission, 2006). The respondents in the research carried out by Harkin and Huber (2004: 19) were: '...determined not to be forced to retire, and felt that they might have many fruitful and productive years ahead of them. Most workers, especially the professionals among them, saw work an essential part of their life, and one which they would not want automatic retirement at the age of 65'. This attitude is reinforced by what some commentators see as the disadvantages associated with abrupt departures from the workplace, and the value instead of greater flexibility in the transition from work to retirement (Reday-Mulvey, 2005; Whiting, 2005).

In sum, a number of strands have been identified to the creation of baby boomers as a social, economic and cultural group. First, boomers may be seen as part of a more differentiated 'older population', reflecting a loosening of the traditional life course boundaries associated with state pension age (Phillipson, 1998). Second, boomers are seen to illustrate the shift in thinking about the potential of later life, illustrated in the move from the concept of 'structured dependency' (Townsend, 1981) to 'age as opportunity' (Biggs, 2001; Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), 2005). Third, boomers are being presented as a distinctive group of consumers (Metz and Underwood, 2005) having attained what appears to be greater income security in comparison to their predecessors. Fourth, they are increasingly identified as a 'healthier' and more 'productive' group who might – through working later – resolve some of the pension difficulties emerging with population ageing

(Pensions Commission, 2006). Finally, they are seen to bring different attitudes to the question of how they view their own 'old age', with work-based identities giving way to consumption – or culturally-based identities following retirement (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005; Huber and Skidmore, 2003; Metz and Underwood, 2005).

A crucial question remains, however, about the extent to which these different themes are being played out in public policy: which 'boomer' identity (if any) is being supported within the various discourses which shape the construction of public policy? Is a new space for boomers being created, one which allows for experimentation in the different identities which comprise the new middle and later life? Alternatively, is a more restricted approach being set to the challenges posed by the generation approaching retirement? The next section of this paper goes on to consider these questions.

### **Baby boomers and public policy in the UK**

In this section we explore the question: to what extent is the construction of baby boomers as a demographic group is being expressed within social and public policy? The immediate answer to this question is that in comparison to the 'millions of academic papers and journalism devoted to the subject of baby boomers' (Appleyard, Sunday Times, 2005), the debate within public

policy in the UK is remarkably restrained – or at least limited to a specific set of issues concerning the boomer cohort. Relevant UK documents here include the *Foresight* exercise undertaken by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (2000); *Winning the Generation Game* produced by the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) (2000); *Opportunity Age* (Department of Working Pensions, 2005); work undertaken by Better Government for Older People (BGOP); and the research and commentaries associated with the Pensions Commission (2005; 2006).

Boomers were explicitly identified in the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) sponsored *Foresight* exercise. The Ageing Population Panel emphasised the extent to which: ‘In the immediate future, the population will become more middle-aged, as the big generation of post war baby boomers ages into its forties and fifties. Just as many of today’s fifty year-olds are reinventing what it means to be middle-aged, so we can expect them in the years ahead to reinvent what it means to be older’. (DTI, 2000:12). The implications of this are viewed as two fold: first, the need to move from earlier to later retirement ages – in particular raising pension ages in line with the improvements to live expectancy. Second, presenting new marketing opportunities for industry:

‘The re-shaping of the age pyramid will reach into all corners of society. It offers fresh opportunities for businesses large and small. New markets for products and services will open up in the UK as the number of people who are 60 and over rises by more than a 50 per cent to 19 million in 2030. There will

be major international opportunities, especially in countries...which experienced sustained and intense baby booms after the war'. (2000:4).

The valorisation of the Boomer generation is also evidenced by two exemplars: 'Generation M' and 'Still swinging when they are sixty'. The former refers to the success of mature entrepreneurs and the assertion that new businesses set up by people in their fifties are twice as likely to survive as those established by those in their twenties. The latter to the view that 'tomorrow's older people are still likely to maintain many of the core values that they adopted in their formative years'.

Foresight identifies a series of commercial opportunities generated by the baby boom generation, notably for the leisure industry, financial products, health care and preventive technology, IT and communication, and housing. It is argued that: 'older consumers will increasingly drive the leisure industry... seeking more active and interactive forms of leisure reflecting generational improvements in health and the continued attachment to the aspirations of youth culture' (DTI, 2000: 23). Businesses wishing to exploit this growing market have to engage in a tricky balancing act, as older consumers will 'resist ageist design approaches that shoehorn older people into age-based categories' and yet require a 'move beyond 18-35 year old product focus'.

Here, then, boomers are specifically identified and seen as a market opportunity that is at root reassuringly familiar, yet with more nuanced demands for accurate age segmentation than had traditionally been the case.

They are first and foremost consumers, who have a responsibility to ensure the means to continued consumption via prudent financial planning and a continued engagement in work activities.

The Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit paper *Winning the Generation Game* (2000) reflects government concerns about demographic change, focusing upon ‘...people between 50 and State Pension Age and their engagement in economic and community activity’. The primary concern is seen to be the need to ‘consider the implications of the sharp decline in the number of people working in their 50s and early 60s’ (2000:1), with two of five of those in their 50s either unemployed or economically inactive (Disney and Hawkes, 2003). In *Winning the Generation Game* the boomer generation is referred to as the ‘Post-War baby-boomers (who) have just reached 50, rais[ing] the stakes as without change, the non-employment of the over 50s will have a much greater impact than currently’ (Chapter 3: 21). The document foreshadows later policy developments with its emphasis on the desirability of maintaining productivity among those in their fifties. The message of the report is in fact uncompromising about the fate of most post-work boomers: ‘Most people leaving work early do not appear to have done so voluntarily. No more than a third of the fall in employment rates arise from people freely deciding to retire early...People who leave work early often experience growing disillusionment and exclusion. They are not in general replacing paid work with community studies such as volunteering’ (Chapter 1:1). The key policy message of the document is that of ‘enabling and encouraging the over-50s to stay in work’; and ‘helping and encouraging displaced workers to



re-enter work'. These concerns are behind some of the practical policy suggestions such as: providing career information for older displaced workers; raising the minimum age at which an immediate pension is payable; encouraging Civil Servants to work to 65; and promoting flexibility in employment.

The argument for this approach is reinforced by much of the debate about the future income needs of older people, especially in relation to pensions. In particular, the Pensions Commission (2005; 2006), both in its first and second reports, identified the way in which the retirement of the baby boom generation, combined with continued increases in life expectancy, would lead to a steady rise in the old age dependency ratio over the period to 2051. A key element in the Commission's strategy on pensions is the encouragement of later retirement, with its central projections assuming that state pension age rises to 66 in 2030, 67 in 2040 and 68 in 2050. Later retirement would also be implemented with a more flexible approach offering choices between continued full-time work, part-time work with a partial pension or complete retirement.

#### Public policy and age drift

While references to some of the broader boomer themes identified earlier are in fact relatively rare, one exception is the tendency to extend the label 'older people' to include people previously thought to be part of a younger age-

group. A striking characteristic of contemporary UK policy is a consistent attempt to drive down the age at which parts of the population are considered 'older', in a move to cast the discourse in terms of a '50 plus' life-course. So, while explicit reference to baby boomers is limited, UK policy has been marked by trends that push down the age of people affected by policies for 'older people' such that it effectively includes this age cohort. This trend began early in the development of 'new ageing' policies and can be traced to a Government-inspired project *Better Government for Older People* (1998-2000), originally aimed at improving the quality of public services. Better Government for Older People (BGOP) had not referred to a defined age-group, using the generic term 'older people'. However, following a conference of older activists held at Ruskin College (1999) who were 'determined to get out of the 'Pensioners ghetto', a target age group began to emerge identified as '50 plus'. *The BGOP* newsletter 'Strategem' noted the importance of what appeared at first to be a tactical manoeuvre to increase solidarity between generations. It aimed at: '... breaking down traditional barriers of ageism and association with state retirement age, as well as drawing younger people into debates and strategies for an ageing population' (Stratagem 2000, 6: 2).

By 2000, '*Life begins at 50*' (Department of Social Security), '*Action on Age*' (Department of Education & Employment), '*Our present for the Future*' from the BGOP related Governmental 'Older People's Advisory Group' and the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office's own '*Winning the Generation Game*' (WtGG) had all taken 50 years and above as their benchmark. WtGG was specifically aimed at reducing 'perverse incentives' to early retirement, dressed in the

clothing of social inclusion (Biggs 2001). And what began as an attempt to engineer an alliance between working and retired people emphasis switched to an extension of working life through attempts to limit opportunities to retire before 65. Women's retirement ages were brought into line with those of men (rising to 65 between 2010 and 2020). Changes to occupational rules mean that from April 2006 people will be able carry on working for the same employer while drawing an occupational pension. In addition, the age from which from which a non-state pension can be taken will increase from 50 to 55 by 2010. These, along with other developments such as more generous State Pension deferral options, provide the basis for incentives for people to remain at work up to and beyond SPA (Phillipson and Smith, 2005).

The idea of boomers as a group of 'producers' is an underlying theme of the vision of the future of age set out in the Department for Work and Pensions (2005) strategy document *Opportunity Age* (DWP, 2005). This document is especially interesting – given its title – for the virtual absence of any reference to baby boomers. Indeed, the challenges of this generation are themselves deliberately played down: 'The UK has successfully gone through big population shifts before – for example, with the birth of the post-war baby-boomers whose retirement is now beginning to create a bulge in the numbers around 60. While there have to be adjustments – and that is why we need an overall strategy to maintain them – the UK's economy is also in a stronger position than most others to weather the challenge' (Chapter 1:4). In fact, the approach in this document is relatively conventional: on the one hand, stressing the potential of the post-50 group as workers – highlighting the

reversal of the trend towards lower employment rates among older men and women. On the other hand, continuing with a highly conventional approach to 'active ageing', one which eschews the consumption-orientated, lifestyle approach in much writing about the boomer generation.

### **Public policy and the baby boomers**

What are the key points to emerge from this analysis of the academic construction of the boomers on the one side, and the public policy debate on the other? In essence, the argument would appear to be that at present these are running along parallel lines within remarkably few inter-connections. Academic discourse has introduced the idea of a group occupying a new space within the life course, with a blurring of identities and roles between middle and older age (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). Boomers are viewed by some, as noted above, to have the potential to 'reinvent' or 'reconstruct' traditional approaches to growing old, driven by more adventurous, consumer-driven lifestyles (Harkin and Huber, 2004). But the contrasting view is that in many respects those aged 50-64 simply want more of the same: to continue for as long as possible as workers, albeit in a different mode for some – fewer working hours or a different type of job- than before. The interesting point here is that although public policy has gone half way in recognizing the new cultural and social space developed by Wave 1 boomers, it appears to have closed down the range of possible options with a dominant focus upon their role as producers. In many respects this difference in emphasis reflects the conceptual influence of consumption literature on

identity and a more than passing effect of market research, when compared to the macro- economic concerns underlying public policy. The possibilities for pleasure and leisure, then, compared to the perceived needs of National security and corporate viability.

The issue remains as to which discourse will eventually dominate: boomers as consumers and lifestyle pioneers or boomers as adopting a new work ethic and embracing a commitment to extending working life through their late 60s and beyond? Of course, the options are not mutually exclusive: boomers in fact can be seen as a unique generational group in their capacity to both consume and produce in large quantities. But ambitions to reconstruct what came to be defined in the 1980s as the 'third age' may be limited by a preoccupation with activities in the workplace. In any event, the more ambitious targets set for boomers may themselves be frustrated by some of the sociological realities identified even by their most enthusiastic advocates.

An underlying tension in much boomer literature is that while, on the one side, there is talk of a group 'marching' into retirement with unlimited demands and expectations; on the other side, the diversity and heterogeneity of the group is also acknowledged. As a respondent in the Huber and Harkin (2004: 52) study put it: 'The important thing...is to get beyond the demographic, to appreciate how different one baby boomer is from the other'. Scales and Scase (2000) in their report for the ESRC *Fit at Fifty* confirm that those in their 50s may indeed more inclined to engage in a diversity of active, creative leisure pursuits. Against this, as they observe, the possibilities for growing

social and economic polarization are also evident – these driven by the gulf between those in professional and managerial occupations on the one side and manual workers on the other. Again, Harkin and Huber (2004: 103) make the point that: ‘Current wealth divisions within the baby boomer generation are likely to become more pointed as the cohort continues to age. This may mean, for example, that while one segment of the baby boomer generation will be able to afford...holidays...customized products [and other consumption goods]’, others may struggle to find their basic living expenses’. And the complex social relationships of the boomer generation may themselves undermine at least some of the wider aspirations for change. Putney and Bengston (2005), in US research on multi-generational families, found baby boomer women to be significantly more depressed and to have lower self-esteem than their parents generation, a consequence they suggest of the pressures on women of managing the intensified demands of work and family roles alongside the growing contingency of marriage. In the UK, the review by Scales and Scase (2001: 7) points to the increased heterogeneity in social ties among those in their fifties, these challenging traditional images of middle age:

‘As a result of changes of in family forms, as well as broader patterns of social and economic restructuring, a socially homogenous 50s age group has become fragmented into a number of diverse groupings driven by different employment and other biographical experiences. The reconstitution of family forms and the more temporary nature of personal relationships is leading to an increase in the number of 50 year old men and women living alone. The

outcome is personal lifestyles ranging from high degrees of social isolation and loneliness to a rich intensity of personal networks’.

Scales and Scase (2001) argue that one outcome of these trends is likely to be a need for people moving through their fifties to ‘self-manage their lifestyles’ in a way which was less necessary in the past when stable couple relationships predominated (see, further, Bauman, 2001). In this context, it is the personal and social characteristics of boomers, rather than their mobilization as a social group, which may prove to be of greater significance in the long run in changing experiences in middle and later life.

## **Conclusion**

This article has pointed to the gap between scholarly and popular debates concerning boomers and approaches within official reports and debates. The resulting contrast is between perspectives which emphasize a new consumption-orientated space being colonized by boomers, and the constriction of this space with the emphasis on the role of boomers as workers and producers. Regardless of how this tension plays out, the issue of whether, or to what degree, boomers will develop a different kind of ageing to that of previous generations remains a crucial issue to consider. To be sure, boomers are important in terms of their size and their demographic significance for the shape of populations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But ultimately these factors may be less significant than the responses they make to the various transitions affecting mid-life and beyond. Such responses, and the

identities they generate, will almost certainly be made as much by balancing the construction of identities based on production as compared to consumption. As such this will make the study of the boomer generation an important area for future of social policy and for the study of consumer behaviour.

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