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## **Sociological Perspectives on the Baby Boomers: an exploration of social change**

### Abstract

The 'baby boom' generation has emerged as a significant group in debates focusing on population change. The demographic context concerns the increase in the birth rate across industrialised countries from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1960s. From a sociological perspective, boomers have been viewed as a group with distinctive experiences that set them apart from previous generations. In the UK context, however, there have been relatively few detailed studies of the characteristics of the boomer generation, and in particular that of first wave boomers (born between 1945 and 1954) now entering retirement. This article draws on a research project exploring changes in consumption and identity affecting this cohort. The paper reviews some of the key social and demographic changes affecting this group, highlighting a mixture of continuities and discontinuities over previous cohorts. The article concludes with an assessment of the value of sociological research for furthering understanding of the baby boomer generation.

Keywords: Baby boomers, family change, housing, consumption, leisure and retirement

### **Introduction**

The 'baby boom' cohort has emerged as a significant group in debates around population change. The demographic context concerns the increase in the birth rate across industrialised countries from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1960s. This trend was in reality highly variable. Some countries (e.g. Finland) had a relatively compressed surge in birth rates following demobilization, this coming to an end at the beginning of the 1950s (Karisto, 2005). Others (Australia, France and the USA) experienced a longer period of increasing birth rates – from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1960s. The UK had a distinctive pattern of two separate peaks - in 1947 and 1964 - this creating so-called '*first wave*' (roughly 1945-54) and '*second wave*' (1961-1965) boomers.

Despite the demographic significance of boomers, from a sociological perspective their importance is less clear. Arguments focus on their part in reconstructing the life course, from youth through to retirement. Gilleard and Higgs (2002: 376) view first wave boomers as a 'mid-century generation' that has set a 'new and distinct course through adult life...one marked by change,

challenge and transformation'. They argue that: 'The baby boom generation broke the mould of the modern life course'. At the same time, applying the term 'cohort' to a group such as baby boomers itself raises problems in terms of the lack of clarity around who might count as either a 'first' or 'second' wave boomer; where the boundaries are between the groups concerned; and the degree of arbitrariness about what constitutes a cohort (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005; Jones et al., 2008).

Bengston, Elder and Putney (2005: 495) suggest that birth cohorts share a social/cultural history: 'Characteristics of a birth cohort and events that the cohort experience combine to affect members in distinctive ways, influencing their attitudes, behaviours and outcomes across the entire life-course'. Riley and Riley (1993) make the point that as well as being changed by social structures, cohorts can themselves influence social change. First wave boomers may be an especially interesting group in this regard, representing in many respects a 'bridging generation' between preceding as well as succeeding cohorts.

In the UK context there have been few detailed studies of the characteristics of the boomer generation, and especially first wave boomers now entering retirement. This article draws on a research project exploring changes in consumption and identity affecting this cohort. The overall aim of the research was to examine the extent to which boomers are a distinctive group in areas relating to consumption and attitudes to ageing. This article considers the type of social changes affecting first wave boomers and the likely impact of these on approaches to retirement. The article examines continuities and discontinuities over preceding cohorts, as well evidence for diversity within the boomer cohort. The paper concludes with an assessment of the case for developing a sociological perspective on first wave baby boomers.

### **Data collection**

Research for this article takes the form of both secondary data analysis and primary data collection from first wave boomers<sup>1</sup>. The former analyses data from the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (ELSA), the initial wave of which commenced in 2002 (Marmot et al., 2004). ELSA interviewed people aged 50 and over which in our study restricts the relevant group to those aged 50-57 (those born between 1945 and 1952). We have also drawn upon the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), an annual survey that commenced in 1983 and which charts changes in values and attitudes over time.<sup>2</sup> Finally, we have complemented this material with findings from a sample of 150 people born 1945-1954 and living in South Manchester, part of a study of personal relationships and consumption patterns among boomers for the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption Research Programme<sup>3</sup>.

### **Continuity and discontinuity among the boomer generation**

The theme of first wave boomers as a 'bridging' generation is reflected in changes around marriage and the family. Taking marital status first of all, Table 1 suggests that the first baby boom cohort has characteristics similar to

preceding birth cohorts. First wave boomers appear as the last cohort to have lived through what has been viewed as the 'golden age' of marriage that prevailed in Western societies from the 1950s to the 1970s (Kiernan, 2003). Among those born in 1946, 96% of women and 92% of men had either been married or been in a permanent co-habiting union by the time they were 50. This contrasts with those born in 1964, where the equivalent figures are expected to decline to 90% for women and 84% for men (Evandrou and Falkingham, 2000). First wave also contrast with second wave boomers in terms of the proportion remaining childless: this fell to under 12% for those born in the late 1940s (who became of childbearing age during the 1960s baby boom) but is projected to increase to around 21% for those born in the early to mid-sixties (Ruddock et al., 1998).

In other areas, however, first wave boomers mark a change from preceding cohorts. They provide early indicators of the growth of divorce and re-partnering characteristic of the post-war family, with 35% in a category other than 'first and only marriage' or 'widowed'; this reducing to 31% for those born 1937-1944 and 23% for the 1929 -1936 cohort. First wave boomers also show a distinct break over preceding cohorts in the proportion who have lived at some point with a partner without being married, with nearly one in five among those born 1945-1954 compared with an average of less than one in ten in the preceding cohorts (Table 2). Boomers also reversed the upward trend, developing from the late 1920s, in average completed family size, this falling to below 2.1 children (by age 45) per woman for the 1952 cohort – this matching that of the 1922 cohort.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

The above summary indicates a mixture of continuity and discontinuities in the behaviour of boomers as compared with previous cohorts. This pattern is further demonstrated when data on the family life of boomers is examined, although here the changes are more in the direction of *increased* rather than decreased family activity. ELSA shows 43% of those born between 1945-1952 having at least one child living at home, varying from 61% for a 50 year old to 25% for a 57 year old. On the other hand, while only 23% have a grandchild, this rises to nearly one in two (48.9%) of those aged 57. Financial responsibilities may also be relevant here: in our own survey of boomers, 37% boomers had financial responsibility for another member of the household – children in the majority of cases.

A further change among first wave boomers, reflecting improvements in life expectancy over the past 50 years, is the survival of one or both parents: in the ELSA survey 43% of those aged 50-57 still had a mother alive (average age 79.8 years); 20% had a father alive (average age 80.7). This factor, coupled with lower rates of childlessness among this cohort, may lead to a 'sandwiched generation' of boomers (women especially) caring for grandchildren on the one side and elderly parents on the other. From a sociological perspective, first wave boomers appear in fact as the first 'pivot generation', providing (especially in the case of women) a key link in the 'chain of solidarity between generations' (Attias-Donfut and Arber, 2000: 15).

## Housing and baby boomers

The housing career of first wave boomers illustrates a key aspect of social change over the period since 1945. Most boomers would have been born in rented accommodation, much of which – especially in the main urban areas – was in urgent need of renewal. Sandbrook (2005: 168), writing of the 1950s, notes that: ‘Many of the poor lived in houses barely fit for human habitation, a legacy of the shattering destruction of the Second World War that, even a decade later, still cast a shadow over British housing’. Over a third of Britain’s 12 million dwellings in the late-1940s had no bath or hot water (Kynaston, 2007).

Dreams of owning their own home were central to the parents of the boomer generation and subsequently to boomers themselves, leading to the increase from around one in four owner-occupiers in 1950 to one in three in 1970, and two-thirds by the mid-1980s. Among first wave boomers, ELSA data show 33% already owning their house outright, with another 52% having a mortgage, leaving 16% renting in some form or another. However, class differences in home ownership remain important, with 26% of boomers from working class occupations still renting as compared with just 6% and 13% from the upper class and middle class respectively. In the survey conducted for our own study, 43% of respondents were currently paying a mortgage, with 38% of these still having a mortgage term of 10 or more years.

Once established on the housing ladder, boomers appear to want to stay in their existing home rather than move around, with the 2004 BSAS showing one in two (50%) having lived in their present home for 15 or more years. On the other hand, thoughts of moving are also important with 28% thinking that they would like to move home at some point in the future (mainly to a ‘better area’ or to a ‘larger/smaller’ home). Boomers have also led the way in the growth of second homes: ELSA data show 15% owning a second home, this rising to 19% of those from upper class groups. Our survey also found 15% of boomers with a second home (house, flat or apartment) but with an additional 14% with a caravan, mobile home or timeshare.

Boomers have again been an important ‘bridging generation’ in influencing preceding and succeeding cohorts about the importance of housing. Most are home owners (though with a substantial group still paying for their home); some have second homes; virtually all ‘work’ on their homes: among our respondents 47% had paid for work on the exterior of their house in the 12 months prior to the survey; 58% had paid for work inside the home over the same period. Judged from the qualitative study, funding home extensions – conservatories, shower rooms, new bedrooms – is an important part of boomer lifestyles and expectations. Improving the ‘value’ of homes is also important – especially in the context of the potential for using housing to fund consumption in retirement. ELSA data reported elsewhere (Banks et al., 2005) found that at least 80% of individuals aged between 50 and state pension age (SPA) have some net housing wealth. Half of individuals had (at the time of the first wave of ELSA interviews in 2002-3) at least £101,000 of net housing wealth, while 20% had at least £200,000.

## Retirement, income and leisure

Boomers have also been viewed as a group likely to transform attitudes to retirement, with suggestions that they are likely to have higher expectations as compared with earlier cohorts. Higgs et al. (2003: 776) argue that: 'Retirement is no longer necessarily a period of decline, dependency or disengagement; rather it can be seen as a positive choice, to leave the responsibilities of [the] 'second age' of work and child-rearing'. Underpinning this development has been, first, the increase in the number of years spent in retirement; second, the growth of withdrawal from work ahead of State Pension Age.

For the UK, life expectancy for men at the average effective age of retirement (2004 figures) is 17.6 years (compared with 10.5 years in 1970); for women the figures are 21.9 years and 15.3 years respectively (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006). Among men in the UK aged 60-64, labour force participation declined from 82.9% in 1971 to 54.1% in 1991; by 2000, the rate had declined to below 50%. The proportion of men aged 50-64 neither in work nor looking for employment increased from 11% in 1976 to 27% by the end of the 1990s. This trend started to go into reverse in the mid-1990s: 68.6% of men aged 50 to SPA were in employment in 1999; a figure which had increased to 72.8% by 2007 (equivalent figures for women were 63% and 70.1%). Nonetheless, withdrawal from work ahead of age 65 (in the case of men) is increasingly common and may be reinforced given a move into economic recession.

To what extent are boomers a 'bridging generation' in their approach to work and retirement? On the one side, early retirement is much more common (a distinctive change over previous generations); on the other side, there are still distinctive in how retirement is approached and experienced. A relatively small minority (19% of men and 14% of women in ELSA) list as a reason for leaving work 'to enjoy life while still fit and young'.

Health issues are likely to be important in precipitating early retirement but also influencing more general attitudes towards retirement as a stage in life. This is important to emphasise because the image of boomers as a group with freedom to pursue new lifestyles in middle age will be tempered by what for many will be poor health along with a disability of some kind. Among first wave boomers, data from ELSA shows 46% have a long-standing illness of disability, this rising to 52% of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds compared with 41% of those from upper socio-economic groups. This is also confirmed in subjective ratings of health, with 42% of working-class boomers rating their health as fair or worse compared with 32% from the middle class and 23% from upper-class groups. This also influences expectations about future work, with ELSA data showing working-class men estimating a 42% chance that their health will limit their ability to work before they reach 65 (as compared with 37% of upper-class men); with figures for women in the same social class groups of 46% and 38%.

Concerns about health might also influence the degree to which boomers view retirement as a new stage in life, requiring active planning and preparation. The evidence suggests that for earlier cohorts of men and women, planning and preparation for retirement was relatively modest in scope (Phillipson, 1993), reflecting limitations associated with income and health in addition to negative views about retirement: to what extent has this changed among the boomer cohort, reflecting arguments that new retirees have 'greater expectations [about their] post-working life' (Higgs et al., 2007)? Is there, for example, evidence for more positive views about planning and preparation for the years ahead? Our own survey found 69% of respondents agreeing that it was possible to plan for retirement, but with most respondents (71%) either making 'no' or only 'limited plans'. Of those who had carried out some planning this was mostly in the form of thinking about future social or leisure activities (26%) or financial planning (28%).

The degree to which boomers might transform retirement must, in any event, be modified by evidence about the extent of income inequality within this cohort. Evandrou and Falkingham (2006), contrasting the boomer cohorts with their parents' generation, demonstrate that while there has been a substantial increase in the median income of boomers, there is also much heterogeneity. Among the 1930s cohort, the poorest members had an income 18% of that of the richest members; for first wave boomers the equivalent figure had declined to 15%. Gini coefficients calculated by Evandrou and Falkingham (2006) to examine inequality within and between cohorts, confirm the steep rise in inequality among first wave boomers as compared with the 1916-20 and 1931-35 birth cohorts (see further Rees et al., 2008). At the same, changes in the field of pensions, with the fall in the number of workers enrolled in occupational pension schemes, bring further insecurities and risks to retirement lifestyles (Blackburn, 2007).

Finally, what evidence can be found for boomers representing a distinctive group in respect of social and leisure-time activities? In broad terms, there is no clear evidence that this is the case, with data from ELSA showing comparability between cohorts (the oldest being the exception) across a number of indices relating to organizational membership and social activities. The exceptions here are though important and do indicate significant aspects of social change. Cohort differences in use of the internet or World Wide Web is one significant element, with a significant break between earlier and late cohorts. Social class variations are though striking, with data from the BSAS on internet use outside of work among first wave boomers varying from 86% among managerial/professional groups to 29% among those in semi-routine and routine occupations.

Another major change concerns the increase across cohorts in overseas travel – with a gradual increase here from older to younger cohorts. Travel may in fact be a more important indicator than general cultural or social activities as a defining characteristic of boomers. Giljeard and Higgs (2005: 131-2) make the point that: 'Even if the majority of older people do not leave home for good, a steadily increasing number are engaging in seasonal migration both in America and Europe. A new 'life cycle' pattern of international holiday travel has become

evident, where rates peak during young adulthood, before childrearing and work ties people down until early retirement, and then rise again after child rearing and work are over'. This point is reflected in our own survey where nearly one in two boomers (45%) reported going on holiday abroad on two or more occasions each year (10 respondents were going quarterly to holiday homes, with one respondent going monthly<sup>4</sup>).

## Conclusion

First wave boomers *are* a significant group in a number of ways, influenced by but also contributing to key areas of social change. They have developed new styles of personal living, reflected in the rise of co-habitation before marriage, the growth of divorce, and the move to smaller family size. Boomers have also been influential in promoting 'active consumerism', reflected in the importance attached to home ownership and the acquisition of commodities for the home (Rees et al., 2008). And boomers are certainly different from previous generations in some aspects of retirement – with the greater likelihood of earlier retirement, aspirations for overseas travel, and (for some) migration to a new country.

But the contrasts with previous cohorts can be overstated. Most boomers have retained strong ties with family and friends. If anything, far from being 'individualized', many boomers are faced with competing demands in the family sphere – supporting children stretching out their transition into adulthood; supporting a parent moving into late old age; and caring for grandchildren (see, further, Ogg and Renault, 2006). Retirement has changed but only a minority of boomers may have the confidence or resources to envisage a radical alteration to their lives. Many will be held back by limitations of finances or of health – especially for those from lower socio-economic groups.

The above conclusion is of a piece with revisionist accounts of the post-war period, these questioning the extent of social and political change pioneered by boomers and other social groups. Judt (2005: 349) asserts here that: 'European teenagers of the late 50s and early 60s did not aspire to change the world. They had grown up in security and modest affluence. Most of them just wanted to look different, travel more, play pop music and buy stuff'. (See, also, Sandbrook, 2005; 2006).

But does the above assessment make any focus on boomers of limited value? In fact, three reasons might be advanced for developing sociological perspectives on the boomer generation. First, the social (as opposed to demographic) construction of first wave boomers is of increasing importance, with contrasting images stressing, on the one side, threats to the viability of pensions; on the other side, boomers as producers of and contributors to various forms of social capital. From a sociological perspective, such arguments lead to broader questions about securing appropriate identities for retirement and the likelihood of developing social roles other than those related to work and occupation.

Second, with first wave boomers at the leading edge of post-war consumer culture, questions remain about the extent to which consumption will transform post-working life. Boomers, as we have observed, are in many respects a bridging generation – continuing but also pioneering new ways of living. Following Rees et al., (2008), the research question concerns the degree to which retirement and ageing have become assimilated into wider processes associated with the shift from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ consumerism: to what extent are boomers using identities shaped around post-war consumerism to re-create a different type of mid-life and retirement?

Third, a major feature of the experiences of boomers will be the diversity in resources and outlook they will bring to later life. Such variability will be amplified by contrasting financial experiences over the life course, reinforced through differences in pension outcomes. How will social institutions develop policies for a more heterogeneous cohort, characterized by a wider gulf between groups (in comparison with older people in the past) in income and assets?

For the above reasons, boomers are emerging as an important group justifying further study. They will almost certainly start to transform ageing and retirement as a period in the life course, but with substantial differences in experiences and outlooks across different social classes and sub-cultures. In this respect, boomers are already setting significant agendas for analysis in sociological and policy-related research.

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Table 1: Marital status of birth cohorts

	Cohort				Total
	<1929	1929-1936	1937-1944	1945-1952	
Single, that is never married	5.9	4.7	5.4	6.6	5.7
Married, first and only marriage	38.7	60.1	61.6	60.5	55.2
Remarried, second or later marriage	5.7	8.8	13.5	14.2	10.8
Legally separated	0.6	0.9	1.2	2.0	1.2
Divorced	2.9	8.2	10.7	13.5	9.0
Widowed	46.3	17.4	7.5	3.2	18.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Base	2731	2580	2886	3385	11582

Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Wave 1, 2002

Table 2: Experience of living with a partner without being married

	Cohort			
	<1929	1929-1936	1937-1944	1945-1952
Yes	4.2	7.9	13.5	21.8
No	95.8	92.1	86.5	78.2
Total	100	100	100	100
Base	160	179	213	228

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey, 2004