NOVA

University of Newcastle Research Online

nova.newcastle.edu.au

Introduction to the Journal of Sociology Special Issue:

'Contesting Boomageddon?

Identity, politics and economy in the global milieu'.

Current word count: 3350.

This issue presents contributions of members of The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) Ageing and Sociology thematic group, formed in 2015 to provide a supportive network for sociologists working in or researching the field of ageing. A key aim of the Ageing and Sociology thematic group is to foster collaborative endeavours and disseminate sociological theory and knowledge, which – particularly in Australian contexts – tends to become subsumed into gerontological research. Aberdeen and Bye (2013) stress the historical biomedical and economic focus of ageing research and research funding in Australia, and argue that this hampers the capacity for sociologists to critically engage with ageing issues on a global level. It also drives the relative neglect of sociological theoretical perspectives within ageing research (Marshall and Bengston 2011) including within the field of social gerontology. In turn, as Asquith laments: "the field [of ageing] has been largely vacated by

sociologists" (2009:266). Not only has research on ageing been commonly treated as of marginal interest to sociology, but the discipline has made few attempts to understand the central importance of age for social structure or personal agency.

 The authors contributing to this special edition throw out a challenge for sociologists and other social scientists to critically engage with ageing discourses and the range of policies generated in response. In doing so they also draw attention to how the experience of ageing is constructed within social, historical, economic and political contexts (Marshall and Bengston 2011). While some progress has been made within the discipline in recent years (Settersten and Angel 2011), there is still a need for researchers of ageing to critically engage with sociological theory in order for new theoretical developments in the field to occur, and to promote sociological research more broadly. A key sociological concern is the tension between agency and structure in shaping individual life experiences and social relationships. A sociology of ageing is theoretically rich and moves beyond traditional biomedical approaches in foregrounding that ageing is a socio-cultural, historical and political construction (Mortimer and Moen 2016; Phillipson 2013). We take as our focus for this Special Issue the post-Second World War baby boom generation, who it has been argued, have profoundly – and at times, quite contentiously – shaped the social milieu around them.

The baby boomer generation

The year 1946 heralded a new global era of post-Second World War peace and prosperity. It also marked a significant turning point or 'boom' in the fertility levels of countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Italy and the United States (van Bavel and Reher 2013). The post-Second World War baby boom has been linked to increased childbirth and nuptiality as well as socio-political contexts including pronatalist policies, labour force markets and

prevailing religious and cultural practices (van Bavel and Reher 2013). This was also the start of a new historic generational discourse.

Definitions of the term 'generation' vary between countries and disciplines. Despite, or perhaps as a result of the important contribution of Karl Mannheim (Mannheim 1998) to the sociology of knowledge in which the generation was a fundamental social category, the term is often regarded as problematic by sociologists (Mannheim 1998; Pilcher 1994). It is certainly a somewhat arbitrary and possibly untrustworthy social category. But the term is widely used in popular culture, advertising, the media, as well as in policy and many fields of applied social research, including demography.

The term 'baby boomers' in Australia is commonly defined by demographers and as those born between 1946 and 1965 (Quine and Carter 2006). This cohort is currently aged between 52 and 72 years of age. In 2014 the baby boomer generation represented 23.7% of the Australian population or 5,574,000 persons compared to (28%) or 6,584,000 persons for generations X and Y combined (born between 1966 and 1986) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). Those born during the immediate post-war decade (1946-1956) grew up in an era of prosperity, high marriage and fertility rates, high immigration levels, and rising participation of women in tertiary education and the workforce (Leach et al. 2013). They are also the first generation to reap the benefits of the longevity revolution and increased life expectancy brought about as a consequence of improved living standards and medical and technological advancements (Victor 2005). However, many of those born at the tail-end of the baby boomer generation (those born in the early 1960s) were less privileged, entering adulthood during a time of widespread unemployment (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Stereotypical descriptions of baby boomers as materialist and selfish, self-indulgent, privileged, greedy and having taken more than their fair share of wealth and resources such as housing, free education, and health care services are not only intergenerationally divisive

(Bristow 2016; Tavener 2010), they ignore the fact that the so called 'baby boomers' are highly heterogeneous in terms of social and economic (dis)advantage over the lifecourse (Leach et al. 2013; Ozanne 2009). Indeed, a 2015 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report noted the poverty rate for older Australians (65 years and over) was 36 percent – equal to one in three (OECD 2015). The number is likely to increase as more baby boomers age.

In Australia and elsewhere, the ageing of the post-Second World War baby boom cohort has been accompanied by profound social, cultural and political change (Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Ozanne 2009). This is often attributed to the entire generation, leading to epochalist (Estes 2011; Lymbery 2010) and 'Boomageddon' discourses (Asquith 2009; Bristow 2016; Phillipson et al. 2008). These are driven by biomedical and economic concerns, such as the projected increase in numbers of older people needing care and pension supports. For example, the Generation Strain report (McNeil and Hunter 2014) foretold that 2017 would be the year when the numbers of older people needing care in the United Kingdom would surpass the numbers of people able to provide it. Likewise, the Australian Government's 2015 Intergenerational Report (Commonwealth Government of Australia 2015) estimated the numbers of people aged 65 years and over would more than double from 3.6 million (2015) to 8.9 million in 2054-55. In addition, aged care expenditure was projected to almost double from 0.9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 2% GDP by 2055, as a result of the increasing numbers of people aged 70 years and over (Commonwealth Government of Australia 2015). Many of these anticipated changes are propelled by the so-called 'ageing population bombshell' (Asquith 2009) as a result of the ageing of the baby boom generation in Australia.

In line with population ageing, the 2015 Intergenerational Report projected that working age dependency ratios would fall from 4.5 persons (2015) to 2.7 persons in 2054-55. However,

the employment participation rate among people aged 65 and over was projected to rise from 12.9% (2015) to 17.3% in 2054-55. Such a rise reflects the increased policy emphasis on extended working lives with the dismantling of retirement age (Biggs et al. 2015) as a means of reducing reliance on and costs of age pension entitlements in Australia. Asquith (2009) contends that Australian government policy responses to the baby boomer generation are grounded in economic concerns, and hence policies have become increasingly directed towards active and productive ageing (Katz 2000). This focus is encapsulated in the key themes of the 2015 Intergenerational Report: population, participation, productivity (Commonwealth Government of Australia 2015). Such a focus positions older individuals as personally responsible for remaining active and productive in later life. However, as many policy responses are biomedically focused and presuppose individual agency and choice; they ignore structural influences such as class, gender, ethnicity, and the increasing polarisation of wealth (Ozanne 2009; Quine and Carter 2006). Policy agendas also obscure the social construction of ageing identities and who or what is considered problematic or risky (Katz 2000; Laliberte Rudman 2006; Powell and Taylor 2016).

Sociological research on ageing: overview of the Special Issue

While we recognise the important interconnections between health, work, identity, and lived experience, we also wish to draw attention to the various ways that ageing, and transitions across the lifecourse, are negotiated in everyday life and embodied within the individual (Gilleard and Higgs 2011; Katz 2000). These themes are taken up in the first group of papers by Sue Banks, Peta Cook, Alan Petersen and Rachel Thorpe. Peta Cook's article takes an innovative photographic approach by having older people themselves take and select personally meaningful photographs as self-representations of their ageing selves, while Banks, Petersen and Thorpe explore the experience of ageing through discourse and narrative. Bank's article draws on Honneth's recognition theory to show how meaning and

practice intersect in the delivery of aged care services. She argues that both aged care workers and the people they care for occupy a devalued position in society. Petersen draws attention to the role of promissory discourses in promoting anti-ageing consumer markets and in commodifying and reinforcing ageism. Over the last two decades these markets have rapidly expanded to encompass a vast array of products and have been driven largely by the ageing of the baby boomer generation, for as Gilleard and Higgs contend: 'the social value [of older people] lies in being still young' (2000:71). Petersen posits that over the short-to-medium term the personal and societal implications of these anti-ageing promissory discourses will be far-reaching. In Thorpe's study of older women, ideas about what it means to look 'old', as well as what are age-appropriate styles of dress and displays of femininity are explored. The paper utilises Foucauldian concepts of self-surveillance and disciplinary power to elucidate perceptions regarding reflecting your age and avoiding dressing 'like an old lady'. These perceptions are discussed within the context of broader discourses of generational change.

In addition to managing identity through consumptive practices such as dress and anti-ageing treatments, many older people live day-to-day with ongoing chronic conditions. For some, such as older men ageing with HIV, a medical diagnosis opens up avenues for support and assistance, while at the same time closing down opportunities for social connection due to stigmatisation and marginalisation. The ageing of the first generation of HIV long-term survivors (many of whom are baby boomers) brings into sharp focus the suffering that decades of activism and the evolution of the clinical management of HIV has been unable to solve. As Bernard Gardiner outlines in his paper for this special edition, although many Australian gay men of the baby boomer generation did not live long enough to age; those that survived have been profoundly impacted by this experience. And whereas the baby boomer generation has been popularly conceptualised as the 'change generation' due to their high levels of political activism (Gilleard and Higgs 2000), Gardiner argues that, such activism

and the collective identities forged through social action can wane over time, as previously contentious or divisive social issues become normalised within medicalisation discourses. As a consequence, older men ageing with HIV can feel as though their experiences and struggles have been forgotten by a population that is increasingly connected via the internet and globalised virtual spaces, yet disconnected from neighbours and others in their community (Stanley et al. 2010).

The themes of social connection, virtual relationships, and the digital divide are taken up in the next two papers by Wilding and Baldassar and Barbosa Neves, Waycott and Malta. In the first paper, the authors examine virtual and non-virtual relationships among ageing migrants in Australia, and the giving and receipt of support and care via these networks. They raise important questions about how care and support networks are conceptualised, and the implications this has for ageing research and practice. However, the quality of virtual relationships is by necessity reliant on having affordable, reliable and accessible internet and social media services. Barbosa Neves and colleagues draw attention to this emerging issue, which is of increasing importance given the greater co-production and delivery of digitised aged and health care services in the home and community (Fisk 2001; Morris et al. 2013). The authors draw on strong structuration theory in their analysis of social media use and access in two countries (Canada and Australia) among older people who are regarded as 'least likely' to use technology – those who are frail, care-dependent and from low socioeconomic/educational backgrounds. The authors point towards the interconnection of agency, structure and context in the sociotechnical process of technology adoption and use/non-use among older adults and argue that the digital divide is 'intersectional', in that it includes factors such as gender, social class, living settings, practices, norms and so on – and is not merely 'grey'.

The final paper in this issue by Curryer, Gray and Byles takes a relatively novel theoretical approach towards ageing and lifecourse transitions. The authors situate their research within a theoretical framework informed by theories of the risk society, reflexive modernisation and individualisation (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), which have previously received scant attention in research on ageing. They posit that Beck's attention to dynamic and interactional processes of ageing hold potential for understanding ageing in contemporary western societies such as Australia and the United Kingdom. As the baby boomer generation ages into their 60s and 70s, later life is becoming more fraught with risk and uncertainty (Powell and Wahidin 2005), and thus traditional theories of ageing are increasingly losing relevance. There is a greater need for ageing researchers to turn towards creative and innovative ways of thinking in meeting the challenges of future populations; and as Curryer et al. suggest, sociological researchers must be poised to step up and play a starring role.

Contesting Boomageddon?

Asquith (2009) and Aberdeen and Bye (2013) have thrown out a challenge to sociology to claim its place within ageing research and to drive new theoretical developments in understanding ageing in the global milieu. The papers in this Special Issue represent a significant and diverse body of theoretical and empirical work on ageing, and particularly within the contexts of the post-Second World War baby boomer generation. Together, they provide a range of sociological insights and critical discussion on a broad range of themes aimed at energising theoretical development. They go some way towards countering the biomedical and economic monopolies evident in ageing research and by extension, social and policy discourses in Australia. This issue therefore sets the stage for a renewed interest in sociological theories of ageing (Marshall and Bengston 2011). In contesting popular discourses of Boomageddon we challenge readers to think beyond or disrupt the current (and

limiting) debates about aged care crises (Bristow 2016; Doughney and King 2006), and to consider how these might be reframed to create the kind of old age where individuals feel valued and connected to the society in which they live. It is these social connections that make us human.

We thank the Journal of Sociology editorial board and Sage publishing for the opportunity to showcase this collection of stimulating papers. We also extend our gratitude to the authors and peer reviewers for their valuable contributions to this issue.

References

Aberdeen, L., and Bye, L.-A. (2013). 'Challenges for Australian sociology: Critical ageing research- Ageing well?'. *Journal of Sociology,* 49(1), 3-21.

Asquith, N. (2009). 'Positive ageing, neoliberalism and Australian sociology'. *Journal of Sociology,* 45(3), 255-269.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *Australian Labour Market Statistics, Jan 2011. Cat. 6105.0.* Canberra: ABS.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *Talking 'bout our generations: Where are Australia's Baby Boomers, Generation X and Y and iGeneration? Population by Age and Sex, Regions of Australia, 2014. Updated 18/8/2015. Cat 3235.0.* Canberra: AIHW.

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* London: Sage.

Beck, U., and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization. Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences.* London: Sage.

Biggs, S., Carr, A., and Haapala, I. (2015). 'Work, Aging, and Risks to Family Life: The Case of Australia'. *Canadian Journal on Aging,* 34(Special Issue 03), 321-330.

Bristow, J. (2016). 'The making of 'Boomergeddon': the construction of the Baby Boomer

    generation as a social problem in Britain'. *The British Journal of Sociology,* 67(4),

    575-591.

Commonwealth Government of Australia. (2015). *Intergenerational Report, 2015.* Canberra:

    Commonwealth of Australia.

Doughney, J., and King, J.E. (2006). 'Crisis? What Crisis? Myth and Reality in the Debate on

    an Ageing Australia.'. *People and Place,* 14(1), 65-74.

Estes, C.L. (2011). 'Crises and Old Age Policy'. In R.A. Settersten and J.L. Angel (Eds.),

    Handbook of Sociology of Aging. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (pp.

    297-230). New York: Springer.

Fisk, M. (2001). 'The implications of smart home technologies. Chapter 5.'. In S.M. Peace

    and C. Holland (Eds.), *Inclusive Housing in an Ageing Society. Innovative*

    Approaches. (pp. 101-124). Bristol: Policy Press.

Gilleard, C., and Higgs, P. (2000). *Cultures of Ageing.* Harlow: Pearson.

Gilleard, C., and Higgs, P. (2011). 'Consumption and ageing'. In R.A. Settersten and J.L.

    Angel (Eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Aging. Handbooks of Sociology and Social*

    Research (pp. 361-375). New York: Springer.

Katz, S. (2000). 'Busy Bodies: Activity, aging, and the management of everyday life.'.

    Journal of Aging Studies, 14(2), 135-152.

Laliberte Rudman, D. (2006). 'Shaping the active, autonomous and responsible modern

    retiree: an analysis of discursive technologies and their links with neo-liberal political

    rationality'. *Ageing & Society,* 26(02), 181-201.

Leach, R., Phillipson, C., Biggs, S., and Money, A. (2013). 'Baby boomers, consumption and

    social change: the bridging generation?'. *International Review of Sociology,* 23(1),

    104-122.

Lymbery, M. (2010). 'A new vision for adult social care? Continuities and change in the care of older people'. *Critical Social Policy,* 30(1), 5-26.

Mannheim, K. (1998). 'The Sociological Problem of Generations'. In K. Mannheim (Ed.), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge. Originally published 1924.* UK: Taylor and Francis Books.

Marshall, V.W., and Bengston, V.L. (2011). 'Theoretical Perspectives on the Sociology of Aging'. In R.A. Settersten and J.L. Angel (Eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Ageing. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research* (pp. 17-33). New York: Springer.

McNeil, C., and Hunter, J. (2014). *The Generation Strain. Collective solutions to care in an ageing society.* UK: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

Morris, M.E., Adair, B., Miller, K., Ozanne, E., Hansen, R., Pearce, A.J., Santamaria, N., Viegas, L., Long, M., and Said, C.M. (2013). 'Smart-Home Technologies to Assist Older People to Live Well at Home'. *Journal of Aging Science,* 1, 101. doi:110.4172/2329-8847.1000101.

Mortimer, J.T., and Moen, P. (2016). 'The Changing Social Construction of Age and the Life Course: Precarious Identity and Enactment of "Early" and "Encore" Stages of Adulthood.'. In M.J. Shanahan, M. Kirkpatrick Johnson and J.T. Mortimer (Eds.), *Handbook of the Life Course, Volume II. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research.* Switzerland: Springer International Publishing Switzerland.

OECD. (2015). *Pensions at a Glance 2015: OECD and G20 Indicators. The Organisation for Economic and Co-production Development*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Ozanne, E. (2009). 'Negotiating Identity in Late Life: Diversity among Australian Baby Boomers'. *Australian Social Work,* 62(2), 132-154.

Phillipson, C. (2013). 'The Social Construction of Ageing.'. In *Ageing* (pp. 70-85). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Phillipson, C., Leach, R., Money, A., and Biggs, S. (2008). 'Social and Cultural Constructions of Ageing: the Case of the Baby Boomers'. *Sociological Research Online,* 13(3), 5.

Pilcher, J. (1994). 'Mannheim's sociology of generations: An undervalued legacy'. *British Journal of Sociology,* 45(3), 482-495.

Powell, J.L., and Taylor, P. (2016). 'Rethinking Risk and Ageing: Extending Working Lives.'. *Social Policy & Society,* 15(4), 637-645.

Powell, J.L., and Wahidin, A. (2005). 'Ageing in the 'risk society''. *International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy,* 25(8), 70-83.

Quine, S., and Carter, S. (2006). 'Australian baby boomers' expectations and plans for their old age'. *Australasian Journal on Ageing,* 25(1), 3-8.

Settersten, R.A., and Angel, J.L. (2011). 'Trends in the Sociology of Aging: Thirty Year Observations'. In R.A. Settersten and J.L. Angel (Eds.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Aging* (pp. 3-33). New York: Springer.

Stanley, M., Moyle, W., Ballantyne, A., Jaworski, K., Corlis, M., Oxlade, D., Stoll, A., and Young, B. (2010). ''Nowadays you don't even see your neighbours': loneliness in the everyday lives of older Australians'. *Health & Social Care in the Community,* 18(4), 407-414.

Tavener, M.A. (2010). *Your bloomin' lot: An empirical study of the popular baby boomer stereotype.* University of Newcastle, Callaghan.

van Bavel, J., and Reher, D.S. (2013). 'The Baby Boom and Its Causes: What we know and what we need to know'. *Population and Development Review,* 39(2), 257-288.

Victor, C.R. (2005). *The Social Context of Ageing.* Oxon, London.: Routledge.