

Learning through consumption: placing ageing through the lifecourse

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Abstract

This paper draws on ethnographic consumption research with young elders, to consider the ways ageing is negotiated through generational influences. Insights from in-depth interviews with twelve participants in Manawatu, New Zealand demonstrate how shopping, purchasing and disposal occurs in the context of familial, household, peer and generational relationships. The research reveals how the ways in which processes of distancing and identification with parental choices in consumption practices extend beyond ones childhood years. Consumption 'at home' does not just involve acquiring, using and disposing of objects but is bound in complex social relationships through which ageing identities may be constructed, contested and negotiated. Three themes emerged from participants' narratives – autonomy, intergenerationality, and absent presence. These themes highlight the importance of consumption practices and experiences in shaping socialities and subjectivities in later life. The results demonstrate the insights to be gained from elders' narratives through making visible the tactics, embodied practices and emotions which both support and confront discourses which discipline and contain ageing subjects. Studying mundane and everyday consumption practices makes visible the moral work done to shape 'citizen consumers', 'family' and 'age', providing an opportunity to reflect on how these categories have gained theoretical and practical significance/power across and in particular spaces.

Key Words: geographies of ageing, consumption, autononmy, intergenerality, absent presence

Despite the recognition that geographies and consumption are shaped differentially through the lifecourse it seems that age as an analytic and research construct for largely disappears through ‘the middle years’ with the focus of geographical consumption research on other dimensions of identity, embodiment and relationality.

Studies of children and youth have examined how their actions as consumers have connected them to wider politicising projects connected with individuation, risk, anxiety, vulnerability, and to identity formation via belonging, exclusion, difference and distinction^{1,2,3}. There has been minimal research on the relationships between older adults and consumption or on generational identities embedded in consumption and the meanings attributed to commodities⁴. Given the diversity, experiences and backgrounds of growing numbers of older people it would seem “connecting the relationships between identity, place, aging, and consumption is a highly relevant avenue for continuing research.”⁵

To engage with growing up as a ‘continual rather than a literal process’⁶ involves accepting how experiences, desires, aspirations and material needs will differ across the lifecourse and how lifecourses themselves differ (ibid). In addition, “All activities from leisure to healthcare, including ironically, death and dying have become personal, consumerist, and “lifelong” experiences”⁷ yet the tendency to regard shoppers’ orientations to commercial culture as naively complicit or knowingly transgressive is unhelpful⁸. Consequently it is important to move beyond understandings of how spaces and subjectivities of ‘the ageing’ are disciplined and represented through consumption to examine the embodied practices and emotions which may simultaneously confront and co-constitute such interpretations⁹.

Since 1984 New Zealand has undergone considerable shifts in state-economy relations, including a restructured and less extensive state apparatus, de-regulation of the economy and a liberalisation of trade, and numerous shifts in social policy directed toward reduced income support, social services and health policy. While there has been a stepping back from extremes of privatisation neo-liberal ideologies continue construct to good ‘citizens’ as individuals who embrace self care, self responsibility and the competency to make the right choices¹⁰. The rhetoric of the successful, independent senior citizen who is able to age in a controlled way, managing vulnerable bodies through consumption is also prevalent in media representations^{11, 12} and individuals are urged to save for their retirement in a context in which future levels of State pension will be reduced. Thus discourses of the elderly as consuming subjects tend to be morally inflected and relatively limited – often revolving around consumption of medical and welfare services and commodities, or around conceptions of ‘active retirees’ engaged in conspicuous consumption as a lifestyle choice¹³. This paper seeks to understand older consumers not as constructs, but as rounded and sentient

human beings who make meaning through complex relationships, practices and spaces of consumption which may be both mundane and extraordinary¹⁴. It presents a preliminary analysis of research currently being undertaken with a group of twelve participants ranging in age from 55-69 dwelling in the Manawatu region of New Zealand.

Method

Participants' names have been selected from those who have volunteered to be interviewed in the second iteration of the Health, Work and Retirement Survey (led by Dr Fiona Alpass and Associate Professor Christine Stephens 2008, School of Psychology, Massey University). Participants were drawn from those who were categorised as being in the lower and upper ends of the Living Standards index contained in the survey and provided a mix of gender, family and work situations. Interviews examined the consumption of groceries, clothing and household items - commodities chosen for differing necessity, durability, positional status and shopping practice but questions were also concerned with the broader social and spatial relations surrounding consumption: with when, why, how, and who commodities were bought for, and with the spaces and temporalities of both first and second hand shopping. The overall aim of the series of interviews and supplementary techniques was to build a complex picture the participants' shopping and consuming practices, places and experiences as both 'talked and practiced'¹⁵ and to situate these in lifecourse changes.

The research involves three in-depth interviews with each participant. These were transcribed in full and the content coded to produce a series of themes arising from the texts as a whole. In addition as tales of events and experiences, interview texts were also subject to narrative analysis an approach designed to focus on how and why individuals tell stories and the performative effects of this¹⁶.

Results

Maintaining autonomy and control

For these 'young elders' both in the hardship and high living standard categories, consumption remained an area of relative autonomy and control. While consumption practices changed over time (shopping modes, spaces, relative amounts spent of purchase and saving), orientations toward consuming (buying on impulse, enjoying or disliking forms of shopping, buying according to need, treating oneself) appeared to alter less over the lifespan.

For those experiencing hardship, control often centered around mechanisms of acquisition including utilising networks of social relationships, gifting, barter and second hand purchase and around economising. For these participants consumption was presented as a source

of resilience, a mean of positively adapting to economic constraint and a mechanism for coping with difficult lifecourse changes as in Dana's case. Dana's was severely income restricted and throughout her interviews sought to construct herself not as a dependent 'victim' but as independent, empowered actor. After telling a complex story about the barter processes she had engaged in to acquire her boy's uniform she states:

You know, so they all worry about them (beneficiaries) being down there and living in the bloody ghetto and they're all depressed. Get off your arse and do something or go, I know I used it to my advantage (getting the uniform) but again it was like being resourceful!"

Dana's references to 'them' (other health and welfare beneficiaries in neighbourhood) throughout the interview also intersected with notions of race and class and provided a way of differentiating her self from the 'others' whom she saw as dependent, idle, non-contributing citizens.

For those who expressed complete freedom in their ability to purchase notions of control tended to be framed around productivity, choice the extraction of 'value' and a lack of waste. A number of narratives also hinted at the resistance of materialistic and self-serving identifications, perhaps rejecting the moral underpinnings of connections between wealth and conspicuous consumption of excess, waste and non-utility:

"I'm not extravagant, but by the same token I've been saying I am (had previously told me she was quite comfortable and didn't have to worry about what she spent). Because I get so cold for instance, last year, being small and I've no bum I went off to Farmers (family orientated department store) and bought little boys track pants you know, and I must have had them a couple of years, they lasted a couple of years...and this year I thought "No bother it!" I've got to replace them, but I went down to Swazi, and they are expensive...

They are, yes....

But...{pause}

Good quality?

But I was so much warmer! (Lorna)

Lorna's recovery of her spending, was justified by the utility of the trousers, their warmth a suitable justification for her lack of economy and 'extravagance'.

Inter-generationality and relationships

The concept of inter-generationality suggests that individual's and group's sense of themselves is partly framed on the basis of generational sameness or difference, indicating that social interaction and generational relations can be significant in creating meaningful spaces and identifications¹⁷. The research revealed that processes of distancing and identification with parental choices in consumption practices extended beyond ones childhood years. Consumption also provided a means of maintaining relationships of care with family and friends, particularly in the case of adult children and grandchildren who lived distant from home.

For some participants, 'shopping with' adult children and grandchildren was an enjoyable way to spend time 'as' a family. For many others buying commodities was about 'shopping for' a means of 'selfless' provisioning maintained through the years as Daniel's excerpt illustrates:

Not very often (don't go out shopping) but in the last two weeks we've been and purchased three house lots of whiteware and furniture for the three new houses. Noel Lemming (appliance store) in the last two months have sold us three washing machines, two dryers, two fridge freezers, a microwave, two vacuums, one, no two kingsize beds ...! so that's...! (*we laugh about their profits for the month*) so as I say that is in the last month, as I say my wife and I don't go shopping that often for ourselves, but we do assist the children. (Daniel)

Shopping for adult children was about shaping 'family', a means of caring at a distance across both physical and generational divides. For Stephen helping his 'kids' maintained a parental ethic of care, shaping family via an alternative form of affection:

Yeah. Well I think that, I think that's important (to lookout for and buy stuff for the kids) even although we don't live particularly close to our kids, I kind of like to, I was just thinking this morning, we're not a particularly close family but I kind of like to try to encourage that cause I'm, bit of thing, see my mother died quite young. (Stephen)

Consumption also provided for a means of intergenerational transfer of knowledge (children to parents and visa versa), values and the moralities. Crystal talked with pride about the ways in which her children were taught to consume, how treats were earned and how now as adults they appreciated this:

Our kids were always very very thrifty, they had to earn their money, they weren't given anything and both of them, our son

especially he could save money out of nothing, anything, and he was so cunning at doing that. And they both now can see the benefit of that, one's got a second house, he has paid off the first one....

Nor did consuming practices only involve intergenerational transfers from older to younger generations. For those participants in the hardship category, children's assistance was often forthcoming. Phillipa explains how the loss of her husband (who took care of the bills) left her feeling overwhelmed, noting how her son helped her regain control of her consumption:

We used to go to Chainey's all the time and they were good to us. But then after my husband died and I said we got a \$800 bill and I said well "how the hell am I going to get that down??" and that is when my son came to the fore, my biggest one he has no children....so they were good and they made me cry even more after I went through all his stuff, I found this \$800 bill.....and then he (the son) came down to WINZ (Work and Income support) it was embarrassing when you had never had to do that before.....(story continues)

Managing absent presence

The 'presence' of absent things and people can also be important in decisions to purchase and in what new commodities should and can be accommodated. When appliances fail, clothes wear out, and food runs out, the dis-order of everyday life initiates new consumption. Yet rather than being a consequence of wasteful 'hedonistic consumerism'¹⁸ wasting, throwing, discarding, and giving, like practices of acquisition are infused with moral meanings and imaginings. As mentioned previously participants, particularly those at the higher end of the living standard index, were keen to dissociate themselves from materialism and excess, often reconciling narratives of spending with recourse to need. Acts of divestment or dispossession are consequently also critical to understanding ageing and consumption relations, with the capacities of material things to engage humans and to effect change in consumption practice and identifications significant¹⁹.

The presence or absence of things and people can continue to have affect through memory long after initial referent gone^{20, 21}. A number of participants sought to negotiate their absent presence, through curbing their purchase, through giving items as gifts and through dispossession of goods (either as 'waste' or transfers to family and friends). Some considered they "had everything we need" noting that to continue to collect possessions at this time in one's life was pointless, though pleasure was still derived from purchasing for others. Notions of absent presence appear to be important in

Lorna's decision 'that the time had come' to gift objects as part of her material legacy.

But no, one year I was there (my daughter's) and I said I think the time has come we don't have any more presents, I think it's time I gave you some things from the house that you like and they thought that was a good idea. And I said to my daughter well, "What would you like?", I said – see that picture of a little girl - if you just cast your eye to the right, and she said that's what I want. I said well you can't have it!!

(laughs) you'll have to wait a while?!

Not because I 'm..... but I'm not taking it off the wall and having a great big mark there.

Lorna had mentioned previously how it was time to start divesting her house of objects, but in gifting but not dispossessing the painting she still saw herself as a guardian rather than the owner of the item. The trace left behind on the wall – would not be filled by a new commodity (her having no 'need' for such provision), but nor would it's divestment now mean it was 'valued' appropriately (she when on to say how the picture was much better 'stored' as her daughter did not have a permanent abode). Lorna talked about how she had collected things her daughter might not want, but that one day after her departure their economic and symbolic 'value' might be realised.

Commodities influence our experience of space and the value placed on different physical configurations, so things purchased for and occupying households are therefore implicated in the structure and reproduction of practice²². The material nature of the commodity, new or old, second hand, bought or sold mattered to the symbolic possibilities of care which could be exhibited. The absent presence of parents, grandparents and friends in the symbolic expression of the commodity can be intimately bound in its material form. For Dana, a very low income restricted her capacity to gift 'first-hand' commodities. Not likely to be received well by her daughter, second hand commodities were purchased in secret and an intermediary enrolled to reconstructed the second hand commodity as given rather than purchased:

Like the kids, it's funny my daughter is 34, lives in Australia, she brought her children up on hand knitting. Now I would go to a second hand shop, you know during the day and I'd buy all this hand knitting and I'd go round to another friend, Cheryl..... But I used to just get all this baby stuff and I'd go round to Cheryl's and wash it cause she'd always have nice Cuddly stuff and things like, wash it all up and I'd put it all into a nice box and then Cheryl would ring up my daughter and say oh Donna you know my sister's

just given me all this stuff, do you want it?. And Donna'd go down there, get this stuff and then she'd say, "Oh my God look what Cheryl just gave me and it was all...", I'd just bought it at the Salvation Army and washed up and made look like..., thought it was lovely. But if I'd taken it home from the second hand shop it was like "oh my God don't do that, don't be doing that". You know.

For Dana then, her absent presence in the commodities, and their unknowing acceptance by her daughter Donna was sufficient for her as an expression of her care.

Conclusion

Consumption 'at home' does not just involve acquisition, but includes the use, re-use at disposal of objects, practices which are bound in complex social relationships through which ageing and other dimensions of identity are constructed, contested and negotiated. The three themes discussed here: control, intergenerationality and absent presence together demonstrate how consuming plays a significant part in constructing notions of care, reciprocity and legacy across the lifespan.

As the participants discussed their purchases they alluded to their cultural and social affordances - their possibilities for work, for use and ritual, display, disposal, for pleasure and pain but also to their performative capacities as objects of value, meaning and morality and identity work. Rudman²³ argues that it is important to investigate how older people shape their ways of being and acting in spaces, ways which may both reproduce and challenge neo-liberal projects. In constructing themselves as autonomous, sovereign and knowledgeable consumers, elders at both ends of the living standards index appeared to accept discourses of neo-liberal citizenship and rationality, with the wealthier simultaneously resisting negative discourses of consumption as materialism and/or waste. The analysis of interviews suggests commodities as objects of consumer culture can tell us much about how spaces and lives within and outside the home are organised according to the place of things. Life changes bring shifting patterns and practices of consumption which may result in differing material contexts and restructured social relationships. The vulnerability of ageing bodies may be expressed through consumption practices and rituals but participants more often provided narrative accounts which expressed a desire to negotiate one's absent presence, reflecting how an absence of the self (through distance or ultimately death) might remain a presence in the lives of loved ones. In endeavouring to move beyond binary constructions of consumers and 'the aged' I hope the experiences and narratives of the elders interviewed begin to make visible a multitude of ways of being and doing and becoming in ones later years.

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