Lifestyles and their relevance for ageing in post-industrial societies

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D. Chaney, Lifestyles and their relevance for ageing in post-industrial societies. Gerontechnology 2003; 2(3):260-262 In this paper I briefly explore some of the ways in which we might see lifestyles as becoming more central to the experience of ageing. I suggest that they are instances of broader processes of cultural change in which the elderly will necessarily be caught up.

Keywords: lifestyle; cultural change; performance

Are lifestyles purely of relevance to the young and/or the wealthy? With the stress on innovation that lifestyle imagery evokes it might seem so. In this brief presentation I will review aspects of the relationships between lifestyles and cultural change particularly as they relate to changes in the meaning of ageing. Although a lot of contemporary commentary has been fascinated by or deplored the so-called New Materialism[1], I think it is important to locate lifestyles in a broader sense of cultural change[2-3], also in relation to its ramifications in everyday life[4]. A more empirical account of changing lifestyles has been given by Bennett et al[5].

I should say as an essential preliminary that while there are inevitable physical changes involved in the ageing process these do not occur at the same points in all life-cycles and their meanings are not uniform across social groups. Therefore I begin by assuming that the meaning of ageing is malleable and that all of us have to learn others' expectations for the ageing process as well as deal with the individual experience.

CULTURAL FRAGMENTATION

It seems to me that the most significant aspect of the emergence of lifestyles as a mode of social categorisation is that they signal a change in the relationship between an individual and their culture[6]. What I mean by this is that the patterns and boundaries of any particular culture in the worlds of post-industrial societies are becoming less fixed and are thus less likely to be taken for granted. This process of change can be clarified by being broken into at least three constituent sub-processes of change. Firstly, signs and symbols are being dis-embedded or made more rootless, as in the examples of clothes, food, and decorative imagery which can be appropriated and combined in arbitrary ways. Secondly, cultural patterns, particularly traditional forms, occasions and statuses are losing their authority so that we can say that culture is becoming de-authorised. Thirdly, identities - for example identities associated with social divisions such as age, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality - are being de-stabilised so that institutionalised expectations of rights and obligations in relation to these categories are less powerful.

I have characterised this general pattern of change as one of cultural fragmentation[3-4]. It should not be thought that lifestyles have in some way caused these changes. It is rather that in the more self-conscious play with cultural imagery that lifestyles articu-

late, the prescriptive force of the ways of life of established cultures are necessarily loosened so that the distinctiveness of cultural difference is blurred[2]. Neither should it be deduced that I am arguing that culture has become less important as a result of these changes. In all sorts of ways the reverse seems to me to be in fact true. That is, that culture, including technology, as forms of performance and representation engages more attention and is more significant in the social economy than in earlier phases of the modern era.

PERFORMANCE

Although the relationship between cultural change and lifestyles is not causal they do, however, share a theme of performance. Lifestyles are modes of representation analogous to the more carefully composed narratives of commercial entertainments. Although one's lifestyle may or may not be rigourous in its consistency, it is more important that constituent elements can be assumed to have some form of considered relevance to each other so that their appropriateness can potentially be discussed. Advertising agencies, marketing consultants, health professionals, designers and programme makers amongst many others will be concerned with tracking the changing forms of lifestyle themes, but they should be painfully aware that any labels they seek to apply are necessarily approximations. It is in this respect that Hetherington amongst others[7-9], has suggested that we need to acknowledge the inadequacy of assuming a stable social world 'out there' which can be categorised. The frameworks of appreciation and interpretation commonly used to negotiate the contours of communities of taste[10] are constituted in members' associations and connotations. They are therefore imprecise, unstable, overlapping and inconsistent. I have suggested[6 pts 3&4] that they are better thought of styles or families (with shared family resemblances) that are collected by thematic concerns with sites and strategies.

MAPPING SOCIAL SPACE

Another way then of describing the role of lifestyles in cultural change is to say that they involve changes in ways of mapping social space. What this means in practice is that the commonly understood designations of 'a place' are being made more complex by existing in a number of overlapping life-worlds simultaneously. The process might be familiar in relation to the appropriations of sites for clubs, raves, or just 'hanging out' by the endlessly protean popular culture of the young (cool geographies), or in the re-colonisation of urban districts by new bohemias and then gentrification (loft-living), but is perhaps less familiar in the suburbanisation of the countryside by empty-nesters with the capital to buy second homes or those who seek more tranquil homes for retirement. What I point to then is that in the self-conscious search for difference and authenticity it is not only the lifestyles of the young that treat spaces and places[11 Ch4] as excitingly flexible for new uses and significations.

AN AGEING POPULATION

The second theme in lifestyle formations is the idea that there are strategic concerns in the manipulation of material culture (or one could say lifestyle formations are informed by a sense of practical design). Again it is perhaps too easy to assume that an ageing population will be primarily defensive in their attitudes towards new styles, technologies and relationships etc. It may well be true that the elderly will have a stronger investment in preserving aspects of the culture they grew up with as they find these traditions comfortable and reassuring[12]. But it is also an essential aspect of the force of lifestyles as types of social category that leisure and more creative aspects of everyday life become to be considered more important than occupations and employment-based status and expertise. It is therefore not surprising that attitudes towards early retirement have changed and it is increasingly seen as highly desirable as it offers opportunities for new forms of self-

development and hedonistic exploration. Particularly in the context of new partnerships being formed in mid and later life perhaps as a response to early relationship breakdown or the death of a partner, it is necessary to expect that the ageing will increasingly see their life-phase as an opportunity for new initiatives rather than as a desperate struggle to defend established ways of life and customs.

CONCLUSION

I want then to argue in conclusion that lifestyles are an articulation of cultural change. As such they may well embody objects and services and attitudes that are unattractive to an ageing population whose tastes were formed in relation to different cultural conditions. But this does not necessarily mean that lifestyle concerns with investments in cultural style is completely alien to the elderly. In all sorts of ways the cultural fluidity that lifestyles encapsulate offers opportunities for the ageing that they are eagerly and sophisticatedly exploring.

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