



The Crossover Generation: Baby Boomers and the Role of the Public Library

Presentation at SLV Seminar
Baby Boomers: Ageing and Engaging

by

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Overview of Presentation

- Explores concept of baby boomers (BBs) as a 'crossover' generation, embodying characteristics of previous and later generations.
- Context is retirement of BBs and its potential impact on the public library.
- Five principal areas explored: Comparative generational characteristics; work and finances; information needs and resource use; social needs; and role of volunteering.
- Presentation theme: BBs are a 'crossover' generation with characteristics of previous 'silent', pre-boomer generation and generations that follow. There are implications for public libraries.



Research Foundation

Pilot study: 2005

- 2 focus groups (FGs) – Newcastle and St Kilda, Victoria (16 BBs, born 1946 – 1965, ABS definition). All library users except one.
- 4 gatekeepers (GKs) – visionary leaders in the BB age range, with broad knowledge of the needs of their communities

Major study: 2007-08 (included pilot study data where possible)

- 5 FGs: Mildura, Sydney, Brisbane, Darwin and Cottesloe / Peppermint Grove (WA). 43 BBs, all library users.
- 13 GKs (including library GKs and high profile community members)

Total participants: 76 voices



Research Foundation (Cont.)

Research partners

- Marion Bannister (Adjunct Lecturer, CSU)
- Jen Sullivan (Monash University)

Partners and funders

- Upper Murray Regional Libraries (Lynne Makin)
- Public Libraries Australia
- State Library NSW

Publications

See reference list (at end). Talk based on: Williamson, K., Bannister, M. & Sullivan, J. (2010). The crossover generation: Baby boomers and the role of the public library. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 179-190.



The Literature Concept of Generations

- Common age location; common beliefs and behaviour; and perceived membership in a common generation (Strauss and Howe, 1991)
- Common beliefs and behaviours forged during childhood and particularly during “coming of age” experiences.
- Shared social, cultural, economic and technological environments



The Literature BB Characteristics

- A major cohort and an influential market sector, making up about one-quarter of Australia's population.
- Mostly well informed and educated, often affluent, socially engaged, accustomed to easy access to information, often competent users of technology.
- Remaining youthful and mentally young is important.
- Retirement viewed as an active period of life. Many will want to work part-time, pursue leisure activities, want community involvement, and to stay in their own homes. Some concerned with loss of status in retirement.
- Financial position is likely to be stronger for older than younger BBs.



The Literature Characteristics of the Silent Generation

- The post-war generation, born 1923 – 1943.
- “The most startling fact [about this generation] ... is its silence, especially compared with their fathers and mothers.” (Time, 1951)
- Described as the ‘lucky generation’ because of stronger and more stable values. (Hugh Mackay)
- Dubbed ‘the frugals’ by Bernard Salt: They value sacrifice and austerity, and live off their savings.
- Accepting of the stigma of ageism.



The Literature BBs in Comparison

- BBs far from silent: rather vocal and influential.
- Have had a more carefree life, experiencing stability and plenty often through the sacrifice of their parents.
- In some ways less confident than their parents perhaps because of rapid societal change.
- Abhorrence of concept of old age - carrying connotations of decrepitude, uselessness and guilt at idea of being a social burden.
- Are likely to deconstruct many ‘old age’ negative stereotypes.
- Unlike their predecessors, BB women more likely to have worked than to have stayed at home.
- But BBs are last link to conservative values of the earlier generation. (Salt, 2006)



The Literature Generations X and Y

- Highly educated through increased high school retentions and availability of university education.
- Gen X seen as changing jobs and residences often, having high disposable incomes, and seeking work-life balance, not always approved by their parents.
- Suggestions that Gen Xers see BBs as thwarting their economic rise and being not prepared to relinquish controlling positions.
- Gen Xers have been able to make more life choices at an even earlier age than their BB mothers.
- Gen Y, a comparatively small cohort, seen as having been indulged by BB parents and to be very demanding in the workplace.
- Younger generations, especially Gen Ys are digital natives, compared to digital immigration status of BBs.



Study Findings Characteristics of BBs: Generational Comparisons

“Ears pinned back, full on – there’s been a kind of generational impatience about boomers...there’s all this wonderful world out there to explore”.

Yet [They exhibit] “a yearning to be more connected... and to be part of the neighbourhood” ... [and will be] “voracious consumers of nostalgia...they really do love looking back”. (Hugh Mackay, social researcher and study participant)

- Thus BBs are perhaps more like their parents than they like to admit.
- They yearn after the closer community ties older generation has enjoyed.



Study Findings Differences with Impact on PLs

Most study participants emphasised differences in characteristics between BBs and silent generation than similarities.

"Their expectations of the library services will be completely different to their parents and preceding generations. ...And they're going to be more aware of what they want and less reticent about telling us that that's what we want." (LGK)

"They're wanting a lot; they're articulate, they're assertive, they know what they want...as opposed to an older generation." (LGK)



Study Findings Attitudes to Ageing

"[They] will probably be angrier than any previous generation, as their faculties fail. Because how can you be young and deaf, or...young and immobilized – it just doesn't work. [They] will be very cranky. That's something to look forward to." (Hugh Mackay)

"I don't see the baby boomers as falling into their rocking chairs and being patient receivers of large print. I think they'll be quite demanding and quite discerning borrowers." (LGK)

- BB also likely to be an asset to PLs if used effectively, e.g., in advocacy roles, given their assertive dispositions.
- The skills of this articulate and demanding cohort can be used to advantage.



Study Findings Work and Financial Status

Again similarities and differences with earlier generation.

- BBs in some respects echo strong work ethic of parents as many wish to remain in work force beyond retirement age.

"I've never thought about retirement, it's not in my focus in any, way, shape or form. ...I work for myself, I expect to work for myself until I'm going to kick the bucket. ...My own parents have never retired." (FG participant)

- But BBs don't expect to loyally work for one employer like their parents and retire without fuss.

"Retirement doesn't equal not working. ... [They] hope they are not going to stop working but...[rather] stop working for other people or...where their time is controlled by someone else." (Sociologist GK)



Study Findings Work and Financial Status (Cont.)

- There is considerable ambivalence in BBs attitudes to work and retirement.

"Work is a kind of sign that you're still fully alive, still fully engaged. ...They will start to be interested in doing other things that emphasise...they've got something to offer, they're still worthwhile contributors." (Hugh Mackay)


- Some FG participants relished the idea of retirement.

"Since my retirement I've been more involved in community work than I was when I was working – all sorts of different groups, and I have done a bit of part-time study as well." (FG participant)

- Sociologist GK emphasised that younger boomers (especially single women) are likely to struggle financially. Since then the GFC has taken place and could affect older boomers as well.


Study Findings

PL Implications: Work and Finances

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- PLs have opportunities to help BBs to feel engaged and useful contributors (as volunteers and advocates).
 - PLs can assist with information on wide variety of work options, perhaps providing a specialist in area of new career development and work choices.
 - PL can provide information on financial management, availability of financial assistance and counselling, but would need to handle this with care.
 - Important to remember that not all BBs will be in a strong financial position. The traditional 'free' library service may be very attractive to many retired boomers.

Study Findings

Attitudes to Technology

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- Varying attitude: an older BB described himself as a 'technical junkie', while a younger BB in the same group said she was a 'technophobe'.
 - Some scepticism about the quality of Net information:
"[What] you find on the net is pretty bland kind of stuff whereas the books I accessed were written with passion."
 - Fear of falling behind technologically:
"I think as we age, we get marginalized if we can't do [technological] stuff."
 - An attitude of betwixt and between. Most participants wanted to maintain their accustomed connectivity of the workplace, especially email use and information access on the Net.
 - But younger generations see email as "old technology" and emphasise social networking tools.



Study Findings

PL Implications: Technology

- Training in use of new technology tools will be an ongoing issue for BB 'digital immigrants'.
 - Continuing advent of new devices already challenging for BBs who do not necessarily revel in latest and greatest new toy, unlike younger generations.
 - A key PL role could be carved out in the technology training area.
- "[Classes in] windows movie maker to make family albums, or family DVD's...[are] really popular...[and] classes on scrap booking, and not just physical scrap booking, but online virtual scrap booking" (LGK)



Study Findings

The Importance of Books

- Most BB participants loved books: the feel and smell. For some, sensual aspect of books was almost as important as content.
- "[It's] the feel and the touch [of books]. Like those lovely Bloomsbury series books that are nice and small and beautifully bound." (FG participant)
- "I still like to have a book in my hand and read a book. It's a sensual thing, it's more than just the information that you're getting off the page." (Senator Jan McLucas)
- Thus participants hoped and believed books will continue to exist in libraries of the future, endorsed by Hugh Mackay: BBs have grown up with the pre-eminence of the printed word over other forms of media communication and attachment to books will continue (in common with silent generation).



Study Findings

Information needs and electronic access

- Participants wanted access to a wide variety of information in as many formats as possible.
- There was acknowledgement of specialised databases PLs can make available, e.g., medical dbs.

"I don't think the Internet can be a very credible source of medical information so I think it is better to use the special medical database for health issues." (FG participant)

- As a library GK mooted, BBs will want electronic access to a variety of content, for example, on health and wellbeing, travel and gardening. All these information needs were important to the older, silent generation (and those older still) in Williamson's PhD research.



Study Findings

Information Needs and Electronic Access

- There will be expectations of PLs:
"The library will be the place that you can access the up-to-date information and services and not have to pay a great deal to maintain that at home." (FG Participant)
- PL will be expected to have leading edge technology.
- Virtual access to library catalogues and databases is vital, as is training in their use.
- Library access Australia wide will be important.
"[BBs will] want to have access and be able to borrow from any particular library...and drop off at any particular library rather than being constrained by the rules of one individual library" (LGK)



Study Findings Social Needs

- Most participants saw the PL as potentially a community social hub and imagined visiting the library for more than borrowing their beloved books.
- Classes of all varieties and interest group meetings could be offered; many saw a coffee shop as a vital addition.
- Library viewed as conduit for information sharing, research into issues challenging local communities, e.g., climate change and water use; as a centre of inclusive community.

"The library as the village green, the meeting place, the stimulus for social contact and discussion will be attractive to [BBs] partly because...a library seems to be not devoid of values, of course, but not carrying cultural baggage [like churches and schools]." (Hugh Mackay)



Study Findings Social Needs (Cont.)

- FG participants, Hugh Mackay and Bernard Salt saw the library helping BBs re-connect with community:

"I'm very frightened about the isolation of getting older and I would like to see that sort of networking with less isolation...in the library." (FG participant)

"Making some of these connections that will compensate them in their later years for the fact that many of their extended families have been fragmented, and they haven't been communitarian." (Hugh Mackay)

"There's a lot of loneliness, a lot of isolationism, out in the 'burbs that no matter how connected you are on the Internet...radio and television, you still want companionship, and where do you find that? At a point where you can actually access other people similarly situated which is, I think, the library." (Bernard Salt)

But "[What] you want to get away from is that it's sort of a defacto senior citizens' club. ...It needs to have the right...energy, a bit of edge to it, so you want young people there as well." (Bernard Salt)



Study Findings BBs and Volunteering

"The boomers are highly educated, still very active and fit. There's the opportunity for them to network into places that we can't imagine at the moment, create partnerships that will assist not just other boomers but other parts of the community." (FG participant)

- Volunteering provides benefits for both library and volunteer. BBs will provide a large pool of volunteers.
- Many participants expressed desire to 'give back' to PL – with time and skills.
- Some participants emphasised value of intergenerational mingling through volunteering, e.g., activities for children; teaching games such as chess to young people. Mention of learning from young people.
- Many other suggestions: story telling and poetry for adults; facilitating courses and groups in areas of interest; contributing to library newsletters.



Study Findings BBs and Volunteering

- BBs will not be such compliant volunteers as silent generation. Will want incentives and flexible, diverse options.
- Ideas put forward in FGs were largely not of routine kind as in past.
- LGKs were concerned that current valuable volunteers, mostly of silent generation, were ageing and it may be harder to recruit volunteers in future for more humdrum roles.
- There is no doubt that PLs will need to engage BB volunteers differently than in past. It is essential to develop meaningful volunteering roles that engage BBs' previous skills and experiences.



Conclusion

- Useful to view BBs as a 'crossover' generation, with characteristics of both older and younger cohorts.
- Sharing of communications revolution with younger generations has brought strong connections.
- Differences with generation above not as stark as sometimes portrayed. E.g., love of real books and continuity of information needs.
- Shared characteristics and attitudes can indicate where continuities in services may be acceptable.



Conclusion (Cont.)

- No doubt that retirement of BBs requires innovative responses on the part of public libraries.
- Current paradigm of library services for 'seniors' not suitable.
- Vibrant, well targeted services required for major user group.
- Many ideas available, e.g., forums and workshops to provide information about future careers (post-retirement), financial planning, positive ageing and health management.
- Opportunity to harness the energy and creativity of BBs to enhance public library services through volunteerism.
- Choices for public libraries are wide ranging and exciting!



Publications and Presentations

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Publications and Presentations (Cont.)

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