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“Positive Aging” as Consumer Pedagogy: Towards a theoretical linking of adult learning, aging and consumerism

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Key words: consumerism, aging, adult education

Abstract: This paper creates theoretical links between aging, adult learning and consumerism through an exploration of the contemporary cultural discourse of “positive aging.” Through the lens of adult education, we examine the pedagogical implication of positive aging as both a process of learning and consumption. This consumerist approach to aging is driven by modern gerontology, which reconstructs aging on the basis of individual abilities needs and functions. As a result, the culture of positive aging raises many questions for adult educators, particularly those who are interested in informal learning.

Introduction

In recent years adult educators have begun to undertake a more rigorous study of the role of consumerism in contexts of both formal and informal learning (Sandlin, 2008; Tisdell, 2008; Jubas, 2006). Similarly, in the emergent field of critical gerontology, researchers are now examining the experience of aging in the context of consumer society (Katz, 2003; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). Consumerism itself is increasingly recognized as one of the definitive features of modern Western culture, “our new ideology and the archetypal activity of modernity” (Norris, 2011, p. 32) This paper attempts to create theoretical links between aging, adult learning and consumerism through an exploration of the contemporary cultural discourse of “positive aging.” As Katz and Marshall argue,

Within this culture, timelessness, impermanence, and simultaneity have become necessary and central assets because all activities from leisure to education to healthcare, including, ironically death and dying have become personal, consumerist, and “lifelong” experiences. (2001, p.5)

This blurring is accurately captured in the popular expression “40 is the new 30” or its variations such as, “60 is the new 40.” In the postmodern world, all experiences are seemingly available to us at any time and any age, provided that we can pay the price.

Through the lens of adult education, we examine the pedagogical implications of Katz’s arguments somewhat differently with a view of positive aging as a both a process of learning and consumption. The culture of positive aging raises many questions for adult educators, particularly those of us who are interested in informal learning. Sandlin (2008) urges adult educators “to investigate various sites whose main purpose is consumption (such as shopping malls, sporting events, leisure sites, fast food restaurants, television, magazines, movies), and explore how they also serve as sites of adult learning and education (p. 56). In response, we examine how these sites of informal learning (vs. formal schooling) function as a social and cultural context for learning about aging, and ask the following questions: What does the

marketplace teach us about aging? How have science and business created a market for anti-aging products and services through the construction of baby boomer identity? What are the social and cultural implications of positive aging? Through an exploration of these questions, we argue that the discourse of “positive aging” constitutes a form of “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000) that legitimizes a consumerist approach to aging. Positive aging is an all-encompassing modernist social vision of resistance to obsolescence, a vision that is supported by the study of demography and economics, and is further promoted by a range of corporate marketing strategies.

This essay is divided into two sections. The first explores the development of baby-boomer identity as the driving demographic force behind consumerism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The second section explores the modernist underpinning of gerontology as a class-based and culturally-biased disciplinary perspective which excludes alternative visions of positive aging. We conclude with some final thoughts on the implications of “positive aging” for adult learning.

Baby Boomers and Consumer Identity

According to the Statistics Canada 2006 Census, the number of people aged 65 and older has topped the 4 million mark for the first time (4.3 million) in Canadian history (Statistics Canada, 2007). In 1901, this age group represented 5% of the population, whereas it now represents close to 14%, and is expected to reach 20% of the population by 2027 (Statistics Canada, 2005). What these statistics reveal is the so-called demographic “tidal wave” or “ticking time bomb” of baby-boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) retiring from the workforce (Thompson and Foth, 2003). In ideologically loaded language, we are inundated with media reports of impending labour shortages and an unprecedented strain on social security as boomers begin drawing on their pensions. However, despite the dire warnings there seem to be large areas of oversight in much of the literature on baby-boomers. Research generated by government and business tends to neglect the depth and diversity of this generation’s experiences. In North America, the aging population is frequently depicted as a problem to be managed by public policy initiatives or labour market planning. Businesses often describe older adults in grossly opportunistic terms as little more than an enormous target market (Lipshultz et al., 2007). Implicit in these popular portrayals of baby-boomers is the notion that this group is homogeneously white and upper middle-class, a problematic notion given the increasing numbers of ethnic elders in North America and Europe, a concern we will return to later.

North American studies in the field of social and educational gerontology, and more recently *critical* gerontology have begun to address the issue of a pervasive ideological baby-boomer construct. For example, Rudman (2006) uses methods of media discourse analysis to explore the aggressive marketing strategies aimed at an aging population, resulting in a “neo-liberal” construction of baby-boomers as “active, autonomous and responsible.” Earlier studies such as, Cole (2002), Katz (2000) and Andrews (1999) come to similar conclusions, finding that the dominant definition of positive aging in North America revolves around the virtues of financial independence, disposable income, high levels of physical activity and a vibrant social life. As Biggs et al. (2006) point out, “The first teenagers are now becoming the first generation with the cultural wherewithal to radically challenge traditional notions of adult ageing.” But are the challenges to traditional experiences of aging truly radical? Or are middle class baby-boomers simply following “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991) by artificially prolonging their idealized youth to retain their consumer subjectivity?

It is important to note that the trend towards positive aging is a relatively new cultural phenomenon. Until the 1970s, marketing literature portrayed the mature adult consumer as “sexless, senile, crotchety, frail and unhappy” (Sawchuk, p. 177). With the publication of Ostroff’s *Successful Marketing to the 50 plus Consumer* in 1989, marketers changed their view of aging in their zeal to “serve” (or cash in on) the aging baby-boomer generation. Ostroff observes that “boomers won’t age gracefully, creating an enormous marketing industry centered on health and fitness” (p. 280). What marketers have succeeded in doing is capitalizing on the baby-boomers’ ethic of generational rebellion, so crucial to their identities in the 1960s. Marketers understand that baby-boomers do not want to age the way their parents did, and will likely maintain the habits of their youth, that is, the habits of a generation raised on consumerism and mass media. Most marketing campaigns for anti-aging products and services target individuals between the ages of 50 and 65, those are considered the “young-old” (Black, 1994), who are still in relatively good health and have significant discretionary income. It is in fact rare to see for example an 80-year-old in a wheelchair in an advertising campaign. Such biases towards the “young-old” render invisible the experiences of failing health, mental decline, social isolation and poverty that are very real aspects of aging (Katz, 2001). The cultural images of positive aging show us what old age ought to look like, and by the strategic omission of images that contradict this vision, the market also tells us how *not* to age. The very structure of advertising serves to promote youth and youthfulness. Although people generally have more money as they age than when young, it is far easier to influence people’s product preferences when they are young than when they are old. It is in fact far more difficult to encourage adults to change products than young people to try something new. For this reason, most advertising is in fact geared to younger people and results in the idealization of youthfulness. Benjamin Barber explores how for this reason consumerism promotes an “ethic of infantilism” (Barber, 2008).

The Science and Culture of Positive Aging

As we have outlined, positive aging represents a relatively recent paradigmatic shift in the discourse of marketing. We would also argue, however, that corporate interests have not acted alone in creating this change. Modern gerontology is founded on a belief in science and progress as constituting policies that give rise to institutionalized systems of healthcare, social services and adult education. Modernity itself has inspired the disciplinary development of gerontology to reconstruct aging on the basis of individual abilities needs and functions.

This functionalist perspective in gerontology emanates from a similar tradition in sociology, dominant in North America from the 1930s to the 1970s (Blaikie, 1999). During this period, gerontologists focused on the problems of “role loss” among older people. Old age, defined as a “role-less role” (Lemert, 2006) was seen as a period of life in which feelings of dissatisfaction and low morale determined a poor quality of life. The structural-functionalist theory of aging, known as “disengagement theory” (Phillipson, 1998), tends to focus excessively on the inevitable withdrawal or disengagement of older people from paid labour, and active family and child-rearing responsibilities. For labour policy-makers, disengagement theory also served to accommodate large numbers of baby-boomers entering the workforce beginning in the late 1960s (Foot, 1996).

Another functionalist approach to the “problem” of aging (and no less problematic itself) is “activity theory,” which developed in reaction to disengagement. Early proponents of an active retirement stressed the value of maintaining pre-retirement roles and relationships, advocating what was an essentially “anti-aging” stance, Havinghurst and Albrecht (1953, cited in Lemert,

2006). By lifting the mandatory retirement age, and encouraging individuals over age 65 to remain actively employed, labour policies play a significant role in the discursive transformation of what it means for the aging citizens to contribute to society. The flaw in both strands of gerontological theory, “disengagement” and “activity” or in other words, “resignation” vs “resistance” lies in part in its assumption that all aging individuals are autonomous and self-motivated agents in the marketplace, and that all have an equal capacity to make choices in their lives. Neither of these macro-theories recognizes the profound inequalities of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class that persist through old age.

In contrast to a view of baby boomers as a homogenously white and affluent group, Sandra Torres (1999, 2002, 2004) explores alternative definitions of successful aging in immigrant communities in the United States and Western Europe. Torres’ (2004) research focusing on the Iranian immigrant community in Sweden reveals some striking differences in the perceptions of what it means to age well. Prior to immigration the participants in Torres’ study had not considered the values of autonomy, and social and physical activity as characterizing life in the post-retirement years. Instead, aging Iranians believed that an attitude of “resignation” (p. 130) was most appropriate in the later years of one’s life. According to Torres, resignation traditionally entailed dependence on adult children, acceptance of inevitable physiological decline and reduced activity. However, Torres also notes that even just few years of living in Sweden, post-immigration, some of the Iranians began to accept or at least contemplate elements of the “western” paradigm of aging, which emphasized “mastery” of old age vs. “resignation”. This cross-cultural dilemma of “mastery” vs. “resignation” is a recurrent issue in the literature on aging and ethnicity, especially for middle-class aging women, whose physical experiences of aging are socially constructed in ways that place extreme emphasis on anti-aging strategies, for example anti-wrinkle creams, nutritional supplements, fitness regimens and “menopause management” products (Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Hurd, 2000).

Such studies of cross-cultural aging also point out that even on a global scale the binary relation of young/old plays out in the favour of the historically “young” Western nations. Featherstone (1997) notes that “the operation of the binary tradition/modernity within sociology tends to cast the global south always on the wrong side of the divide, forever subjected to the constraints of tradition” (p. 153). Implicit in this view of the tradition-bound cultures of Asia, for example, is the belief that a society is not “modern” until it fosters the kind of consumer culture that represents democratic freedom in the West. Thus, the modernist view of aging rooted in the rise of capitalism, industrialization and consumerism reconstructs aging as essentially a problem of obsolescence (Katz and Marshall, 2003).

Another serious implication of our fear of obsolescence is the contemporary drive towards constant narcissistic self-improvement in the guise of “lifelong learning.” In the relentless pursuit of the best “self” we can possibly achieve, are we not setting ourselves up for failure? Furthermore, are we in fact turning our backs on the Other when we reify the Self as the “object of study” (Sandlin, 2008, p. 54). What effect does this have on our sense community and social responsibility? While these questions cannot be taken up here, we think they are worth considering. The self, like so much of consumer culture, has the potential to become a bottomless pit of “ideologically-generated” needs (Baudrillard, 1969). The discourse of informal adult learning, with its current emphasis on “self-improvement,” “self-discovery” and “self-knowledge” colludes, perhaps inadvertently, with the marketing of “lifestyle and confessional practices” (Sandlin, 2008; Usher, et al., 1997), in turn, encouraging forms of self-consumption and self-commodification.

Conclusion: What Does The Market Teach Us About Aging?

Returning to our introductory questions about the pedagogical implications of the consumerist approach to aging, we argue that the market, through the construction of baby-boomer identity, teaches us that positive aging is primarily about resistance to aging. It tells us that in order to fight aging, we must consume, creating in effect what could be called “a consumerist pedagogy of aging.” Upon closer examination, it is also clear that positive aging is in fact *anti*-aging; and yet, as with all aspects of consumption, the question of *who* has the power to consume looms large behind the marketing discourse. Who indeed can afford the various anti-aging strategies on offer? The reality is that broad marketing categories like “the seniors market”, “empty nesters” or even the affluent “baby boomers” only denote a relatively small upper-middle class segment of the mature adult population. For adult educators, it is important to note that the aging subject exists within the context of not only a consumer society, but also a neoliberal *learning* society, where many different kinds of education take place in de-regulated, non-traditional contexts for vastly different reasons and with distinct social and economic outcomes (Usher & Edwards, 1996).

In sum, “positive aging” is an idealized Western construct driven by consumerism that excludes non-commodified or commodifiable dimensions to aging. It neither reflects the realities of the elderly—particularly non-western elderly—nor makes the elderly seem of any social value except as consumers. A social and political commitment to care for the elderly is replaced by privatized and individualized solutions through personal financial management through selling the ‘elderly as investor’ model. This functions in conjunction with the commodification of leisure itself through the ‘elderly as world traveler.’ The example of cross-cultural gerontological research (Torres, 2004) which we cited reveals an entrenched modernist tendency to construct aging as inherently problematic and fraught with conflicting ideals of activity vs. inactivity, empowerment vs. disempowerment. If we accept that aging is as much a construction of social class and cultural discourse as it is a biological process, then we as educators can engage with those cultural forms and hopefully facilitate the creation of new and alternative definitions of “positive aging.”

We believe that adult educators working with diverse groups of learners need to develop a better understanding of the types of informal learning that are an integral part of the aging process. When we study what motivates and inspires adults to learn and create meaningful lives, we better understand how to research and facilitate learning in a range of educational contexts. We can wonder: Does consumerism help one age well? How well is the wisdom of the elderly passed down in a consumer society? Such questions are not only unanswered in a consumer society, but increasingly unasked.

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