

Boomers, Boomerangs, and Bedpans

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INTRODUCTION

A baby boomer is defined as anyone between the age of 44 and 64. According to Cohn (2008), 76 million children were born between 1945 and 1964 representing almost 28% of the US population, quite a significant cohort. Baby boomers, in a unique situation from previous generations, are labeled as the 'sandwich generation'. They are sandwiched between their children and their elderly parents. Their children, little echo boomers, are taking a long time to grow up and are staying at home for extended periods of time or even leaving and returning home (boomerangs). Boomerangs may be getting college degrees or working; while the boomers' elderly parents require attention as well. Elders are living longer but may need help to stay independent. This paper addresses baby boomer couples and three issue areas that stem out of this situation for boomers: work, family and self. Solutions to these areas are then proposed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Baby boomers are divided into two cohorts: cohort one are referred to as the core boomers and were born between 1945 and 1955. Cohort two are referred to as Generation Jones. These boomers were born between 1956 and 1964. One famous Generation 'Joneser' in the news lately is President Barack Obama. The Pew Research Center (Cohn, 2008) reported that though baby boomers make up the largest generation, that they are the unhappiest generation when life satisfaction is measured (see Table 1).

(See Table 1)

Perhaps some of the reasons for the unhappiness of the boomers have to do with their unique situation in terms of sandwich generation issues. Janzen, et al. (2006) and Collins, et al. (2009) review the literature in three areas of interest: work, family and self. The complexity of the workplace for couples involves negotiating dual careers. For example what if the couple has job offers in different cities? Whose job offer takes precedence? Family issues have to do with sharing responsibilities of caring for the family. Who takes time off from work to take the elderly parent to the doctor? Sometimes these responsibilities overlap into work. Self time sometimes gets overlooked in this busy sandwich generation existence. No time for hobbies, friends, vacations, or self-improvement projects.

Theoretical Framework

Since many of the caretaker responsibilities fall to the woman of a couple, baby boomer women may be more likely to experience stress in all three areas than are men. We approach this area from a feminist perspective framework. The feminist perspective has been described as "an attitude, a lens, a body of ideas about gender hierarchy and its impact rather than a specific model or a grab-bag of clinical techniques" (Carter, 1992, p. 66, cited in Collins, et al. 2009). Historically men have held more public and private power than have women in work and family life. This has played out in baby boomer life in women bearing more of the responsibility of home and family tasks and in women experiencing stressful situations in the workplace as well.

Work

Work can be complicated for baby boomer couples, especially women, revolving around issues of job demands, organizational demands and social demands at work.

Job Demands. Women get caught at work in a man's world according to Mendel (1996). He claims that business is a boy's game that women are required to play by rules made by men. The advantage in this type of system, then, is for men who learn these rules from childhood. Some of these rules are:

- You are expected to know the rules
- Stretching the rules is part of the game
- The object is to win
- Concentrate only on the game while playing it
- Forget the game when you go home
- When the game is over, befriend your opponent (p. 20).

Organizational Demands. Collins, et al. (2009) suggests that agency policies are not always supportive of families who must care for children or elderly relatives. Lack of availability of high quality child or elder care facilities can put a huge strain on family life and overlap into work time. Agencies which provide no leave time for baby boomers to deal with family issues create stress for the family. Availability of flex-time, jobs where the worker may set their own hours at a convenient time, are not often an option but would alleviate many problems of sandwich generation stress.

Dual-career couples may experience stress of trying to find jobs in the same location; nepotism policies may present obstacles for couples attempting to work for the same organization. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment are unfortunate consequences of agency life that boomers may experience.

Social Demands at Work. There is gender role confusion in the work environment, for example who makes the coffee at work (Collins, et al., 2009)? It is no longer exclusively the woman's job, but whose job is it? With gender discrimination and sexual harassment still alive and well in the agency environment, women especially, but men as well may experience conflicts at work involving boundary issues. Even though women's salaries are still only 78% of men's, women are gaining stature in the work world and this confuses the roles. Women are susceptible to the same temptations as men at work, as well, putting a strain on relationships. A recent internet article spoke about "The Work Spouse: How to Tell if the Relationship is Innocent".

Family

After work, boomers have another full time job at home with child and extended family responsibilities. Housekeeping responsibilities can also be quite overwhelming as can joint overlapping and spouse responsibilities (Collins, et al., 2009).

Children. Child care poses both a practical and qualitative issue for sandwiched boomers. Time taken by caregiving for an elder can be time lost to a child. However, there are also situations in which addition of an elder to the household may enhance child care. If the elder has the capacity to care for their grandchild, their contribution to child care may be both an economic and a qualitative enhancement when compared with commercial child care.

Child discipline may pose special issues for the sandwiched boomer families. Unresolved issues between boomer parents and elders now in the household can surface. Children may opportunistically exploit these differences.

Children require significant investment of a family's resources if positive outcomes are to be achieved. Child support becomes an issue if families break up. For boomer families this can mean significant stress. Economic stability can be enhanced when there is an extended family invested in the child's welfare, court-ordered maintenance payments are made, or a remarriage allows economic independence. In situations where families lack access to these resources, problems compound.

Extended Family. The presence or absence of extended family has significant implications for the sandwich generation family, particularly in regard to elder care. Lack of extended family resources can mean that the sandwiched boomer has fewer resources on which to draw, assuming a functional family system. Extended family may also pose added pressure by exerting expectations that may or may not be reality-based. For example, a single working mother may face culturally influenced expectations from

extended family to take in an elder in need of care, while her more economically able brothers can be seen as exempt from this responsibility.

Absence of extended family poses a different set of challenges for the sandwiched boomer family. The emotional support to make difficult caregiving or end-of-life decisions can be lacking. Fewer resources mean fewer options.

Housekeeping/Maintenance. Making beds, emptying trash, cooking and cleaning are daily realities for all families. When the double bind of childcare and eldercare responsibilities descend on a family, societal expectations may exert pressures that extend them to their limits, increasing tensions and precipitating breakdowns. Successful role-sharing can mitigate this by providing manageable workloads for stressed caregivers. Research shows that couples start their marriages aiming to be egalitarian but when the first child is born, this goal breaks down. Someone must stay home with the baby, and this usually means the wife takes on the traditional role with the husband assuming the traditional breadwinner role. From that point on, the couple has a difficult time breaking out of this traditional pattern.

Joint, Overlapping Responsibilities. Career demands that overlap into family time are particularly prevalent in U.S. society. Two-career families may face a forced competition between spouses to determine whose career will dictate the family's relocation or staying in place. Absence of mandated sick and vacation days (which are prevalent in nearly all other economically advanced nations, Moberg, 2007) place additional strain on families faced with increased time away from work in order to fulfill caregiver responsibilities. Personal activities also suffer, with time for recreational hobbies and leisure activities in short supply. Other health-enhancing activities, such as exercise, or meditation, become too time consuming. Growth activities (computer skills, enrichment) drop in priority or disappear.

Spouse or partner. Jordan, et al. (1989) reviewed spouse or partner issues. Role overload can cause the caregiver to neglect functions vital to their own well-being, as noted above. Boomers just have too many things to do. It may also affect the marital or partner relationship through perceived neglect or disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. Environmental-philosophical clashes may occur in regard to generational differences, for example the value of recycling versus the time-saving convenience of disposable items. Personal identity problems may occur when one partner does not feel appreciated. For example, a woman chooses to stay home with the baby but misses work and does not feel like her spouse appreciates her contribution to the family.

Insufficient time for social networks is fairly self explanatory. Busy baby boomer couples miss out on interactions with other couples, busy connections and other networking opportunities. Finally, role cycling is the switching back and forth between multiple roles—mother, wife, daughter, attorney, neighbor and so forth. This can be confusing and stressful, though it has its rewards as well.

Self

Baby boomers lead such busy lives that personal time for self often gets left by the wayside. Personal time is taken up by work and family, and growth activities are pushed aside as are other non-work activities.

Personal. Baby boomer couples take little time for hobbies or leisure including vacation time. Moberg (2007) reports America is one of the richest nations, but it requires no mandated sick or vacation time for its workers, unlike other industrialized nations. Moberg claims one-fourth of Americans have no paid holiday or vacation time, while one-half have no paid sick time.

Health. Boomers' busy schedules leave them little time for health activities such as exercise, meditation, and vacations as mentioned above. Moberg (2007) cites Harvard economist Alberto Alesina, who points out that Europeans who have mandated vacations of 4-6 weeks are happier, and have less stress, which is good for health and longevity. Moberg goes on to claim that U.S. studies correlate increased vacation time with decreased heart attack risk in men. Studies in other countries show that increased vacation time results in increased labor productivity according to Moberg.

Growth. Similar to limited time for activities in other areas, baby boomers find limited time for growth activities such as job or personal classes. However an Australian paper from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Ball, et al., 2000) gives pause for thought as to how this might

change for baby boomers in the near future. With older, healthy workers staying in the job force longer, job retraining may become mandatory as job environments require new technologies and skills.

Non-Work. Other non-work activities, such as participation in community or social groups, may be diminished. This can be particularly problematic when religious activities are compromised, since these may also be one of the most effective countervailing forces to bring resources into the struggling family. The spiritual component for sandwich boomers may be a source of strength and resilience in meeting their caregiver responsibilities. When the social networking aspects of a faith-based community are mobilized in support of a stressed family, respite becomes achievable and affordable.

SOLUTIONS

Strategies for addressing these areas include a range of solutions including time and stress management, making use of technology, and policy recommendations for businesses and agencies where baby boomers work.

Time Management

Jordan, et al. (1989) reviewed some of the ways to manage time. Efficiently managing time can help baby boomers to get through their many chores and have some time left over for themselves. Four time management strategies are reviewed next.

Examination of Goals and Values. It is recommended that baby boomers review their goals and values to decide what is most important to them. This will give their life some direction. For instance if it is decided that the couple values living in the country over the city, and more emphasis on spending time with their children and elderly parents then on commuting to a high powered job, this will guide them to make appropriate decisions.

Planning and Prioritization. This time management strategy relates to looking at all the tasks that the couple has to do in a planful way and prioritizing them. Some even assign a priority letter to them such as A's to the most important tasks that must be done that day, B's to the ones that must be done that week, and C's to the ones that might be done if you have extra time.

Obstacles Identified. Obstacles to time management, such as worry or perfectionism, are identified and purposely set aside. If the boomer is unable to deal with these issues on his or her own, then a counselor or therapist may be able to help.

Delegation and Hiring Outside Helpers. All family members, including children, may be assigned chores and outside helpers may be enlisted to do some jobs such as housekeeping or yard work.

Stress Management

Jordan et al. (1989) reviewed a few strategies for managing a stressful environment which are shared below.

Relaxation Training. Several ways of doing relaxation training are available. Perhaps one of the easiest ways is to buy a tape (either audio or video) and settle in to follow the instructions. Some methods have you visualize a relaxing place while listening to a soothing voice. Other methods involve listening to a calm voice take you through a step by step relaxation of each body part starting at the top of the head. You might try several of these until you find the one that suits you the best.

Arranging Smooth Transitions from Work to Home. Some boomers might find it helpful to have a few minutes to relax before jumping into the hectic home life that they find awaiting them for the night's activities of soccer practice, parent-teacher night, or nursing home visits. One example of a smooth transition time might be to stop in for a few minutes at the local gym to exercise before traveling on to the home front.

Cognitive Work. The stress reduction strategy might require professional intervention and is most helpful for those who find themselves ruminating about work when at home or worrying excessively. Cognitive work involves cognitive therapy where one is able to learn to identify those cognitive distortions of thinking that hold one back from clear and healthy thinking.

Healthy Living. Healthy living involves nutrition, exercise, seeing the doctor for regular checkups; it is essentially doing what is right to have a healthy mind and body.

Guarding Personal Space. Finally, guarding personal space refers to boundaries. Our boundaries are those limits that we put on situations and people around us to make sure we have healthy relationships

with people. Caregivers are particularly vulnerable to allowing their obligations to override their personal needs for recreation and renewal. For example, a daughter may isolate herself from friends and family, believing that only she can provide the care that her elder requires.

Making Use of Technology

Technology is exploding in today's world and everybody is jumping on the bandwagon.

Goals. Mindel (1996) was the author who pointed out that it is a man's world and that women have to learn how to survive in that world. He suggested a few things women can do to increase their chances of surviving in a potentially alien environment. First increase your visibility, make sure people know you are there. Be seen. Second, develop an effective network. Hang out, go to lunch, play golf, get a mentor. Do what it takes to get yourself into the network. Third, communicate effectively. If you need to take a speech class or a writing class to upgrade your skills, do it!

Older boomers might require upgrading their skills to advance in their jobs. In Australia, it was found that older individuals targeted courses that offer basic education, business management and information technology (Ball, et al., 2000).

Tools. More and more, baby boomers are making use of social networking programs like Facebook and Twitter (Jordan & Cory, in preparation). Once the playground of teens, these now provide excellent networking opportunities for older baby boomers and even their senior parents.

Policy Recommendations for Agencies

Zimmerman (1995) recommended policies for agencies were baby boomers are likely to work.

Flextime. Flextime, sometimes called variable work schedule, offers employees the opportunity to meet the appointment demands often associated with caregiving while still maintaining their job performance.

Part-Time Work. Likewise part-time work, particularly when inclusive of healthcare benefits, may allow caregivers to maintain the social and economic benefits of holding a job, while they are also offering care.

Job Sharing. Job sharing is another progressive option that employers could offer that would provide similar benefits.

Compressed Work Weeks. Compressed work weeks also can provide caregivers with the opportunity to meet both their economic needs and what they may see as their moral obligations.

Telecommuting. Telecommuting is yet another option that employers could offer in some jobs. Benefits that accrue to employers willing to offer the flexible options mentioned above are numerous. Training costs for replacement employees and lost productivity while filling vacancies are two significant areas of saving. Coupled with these tangible benefits are the intangibles of gaining an employee-friendly reputation and increased employee loyalty for the enterprise.

SUMMARY

A feminist theoretical perspective has informed our analysis of baby boomer life. Historically men have held more public and private power than have women in work and family life. This has played out in baby boomer life in women bearing more of the responsibility of home and family tasks and in women experiencing stressful situations in the workplace as well. Strategies for addressing these areas include recommendations for businesses and agencies where baby boomers work.

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Table1. Life satisfaction rated lowest in boomers

Self-Rating of Life Quality: Boomers Trail Older and Younger Adults				
Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. Suppose the top represents the best possible life for you and the bottom, the worst. On which step do you feel you stand at the present time?				
	All	Younger adults (18-42)	Boomers (43-62)	Older adults (63+)
Mean rating	6.4	6.5	6.2	6.7
No. of respondents	2413	942	872	527

PewResearchCenter