

Complex Change and The Older Household's Food Consumption Practices

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Our study raises the importance of a holistic social system to support the older people household as they engage in everyday food acquisition and consumption practices. Aging is a natural, inevitable process that presents challenges to independence (Bernoth et al. 2014), so there is a need to acknowledge the move from independence to interdependence. Adopting an ethnographic approach, our study was framed around 25 households aged 60+ in the East of England – some with agency, able to adapt, while on the other hand, others were found to have weak (or in the process of losing) agency and unable to completely adapt to the changes within their environment needs. These households reflected a diverse demographic mix, with a cross-section of ages, gender, living status (alone, co-habiting, sheltered housing) and residential area (urban, rural).

This study empirically confirms the work on two social imaginaries for later years theorised by Gillearn and Higgs (2013) and demonstrates how these concepts are reflected in the everyday practices of later years households. Our findings are in line with the concepts of third (hail) and fourth (frail) age which are seen as complex social imaginaries rather than simple stages based on chronological and demographic terms. How individuals adapt to those factors that trigger

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vulnerability (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005) is what is crucial in determining vulnerability as opportunities to marshal support (agentic third age) or as a problem that overwhelm and cause a decline into dependency - fourth age (Bernoth et al. 2014). This is where theoretical conceptualisation can frame practical action.

This empirical development and construction of two social imaginaries provides a dynamic context for marketing, organisation and policy responses to issues raised by our findings.

An important finding is that the lack of adaptability was linked not only to mental health issues, emotional vulnerability, and being anti-social but also to anti-interdependence. The key conclusion to be drawn is that it is not the passing of time but the adaptive resources in the face of adversity that prevents or delays the fourth age. This insight provides a focus on the meaning of the practices older people engaged in and supports Schatzki's (2012) theorisation of sites as spaces held and filled with meaning.

Marketing theory is advanced by seeing that the role for organizations in reducing vulnerability in later life is to mesh their goals with the teleoaffective elements above all while meeting needs and emotions with products and especially services. This is the way to meet the ethical challenge of an aging population with an increase in potentially vulnerable older people to create structures that can serve to counter their decline into vulnerability (Bernoth et al. 2014). There are sets of food acquisition and consumption practices that could usefully be much better supported by wider societal and marketing resources. These can enable older people to remain in the agentic third age. At the same time, these practices will facilitate resistance to decline into the fourth age. There is also an influx of resources that could be structured into care to enable those in the dependent frail stage to exit and return to the third age.

Our research shows that older people are exposed to many factors that can lead to vulnerability, as they get, prepare and consume food. Failure to adapt to adverse changes can lead them to entering the fourth age. However, they can and do adapt by employing practices that include the use of social networks, planning for the future and using tools to remain independent and in the agentic third age. Those who work with older people, such as carers, GPs, social enterprises, community food services and charities, could be re-organised in ways to better provide for them and their family/carers.

Marketing responses are also vital to support older people in remaining or returning to the third age when their food well-being is compromised. For example, supermarket in-store offers and sales promotions that serve older consumers' needs could usefully be introduced. Wider aisles, times with assistance and slower checkout lanes for those who enjoy the social aspect of shopping, or need to spend more time in the checkout due to physicality constraints. Moreover, accessible and clean supportive facilities, such as toilets, are beneficial to all, but really vital for those more at risk of an impending spiral of decline.

Finally, services that deliver food at home could include different meal sizes to help older people meet their appetite and nutritional needs. Indeed, the spectrum of independence through to dependence via interdependences can now be the focus of organisational interaction with food practices in later life, thereby reducing vulnerability. Thus, practical conclusions that flow from this significant study are linked to assets reinforcement and obstacles elimination to ensure that older people have the resources to positively adapt and avoid entering the frail fourth age leaving the hale third age.

This can be theorized as our contribution to researching older households' food acquisition practices. We effectively researched the agentic third age and how decline into the fourth age happens, can be resisted and delayed and even reversed. We have explained an element of the phenomenon of the lived experience of the older household and these two social imaginaries which leaves room for further research into this pressing theoretical and practical management and societal challenge.

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