Who are the "Yuppies"? A Popular View

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ABSTRACT

Yuppies (Young Urban Professionals) are the "darlings" of the media and the marketers in the 1980's. From a sociological perspective, they are a minority—but as trendsetters and risk-takers, with more political clout, education, and affluence—they may be considered the aspiring "New Elites" for this generation. This article suggests a "Lifestyle Profile" of the YUPPIES identifying their more interesting (and potentially significant) social and behavioral attributes.

Introduction

It is interesting to observe that from 1980-1984 there was nothing published in either the Sociological Abstracts, Psychological Abstracts, or the Social Science Citation Index about the subject of "Yuppies" per se. Although Young Urban Professionals (sometimes referred to as "baby boomers," i.e., born between 1946-1964), have been around for sometime, they have recently created a stir in the popular press with their lifestyle, career pursuits, consumer habits, social values, etc. Most of the observations to date have been based on "verstehen" (gut-level intuition) or market research. One can easily argue that if the YUPPIES make up a significant sociological group, with projections ranging from approximately 4-20 million depending upon how stringent one is in defining urban, then empirical validation of this phenomena would be both welcome and scientifically noteworthy.

This paper will offer neither complete nor specific validation of this particular group, but rather will attempt to summarize some of the more interesting (and potentially significant) sociological and behavioral attributes that have been suggested in the popular media as reflective of the YUPPIE experience. No one seems to know if this popular definition represents a "constant" in the life cycle, since it is too early yet to talk about "drop-out Yuppies."

Methodology

Like any serious sociological investigation, the correct place to begin a research project like this would be with an extensive review of the professional literature. This was accomplished, but with virtually no substantive results. Since one can argue that the so-called "baby boomers" are just now making their professional presence felt in the job market (and as consumers), then most of the writing on this subject may appear later during this decade.

With a shortage of legitimate published research, i.e., written by those with appropriate expertise to discuss YUPPIES, this researcher thought it might be a serious challenge to develop a "life style profile" of the YUPPIES (using the limited data base presently available.) Obviously, this is not ideal for research, but it may create a dialogue that can lead us in more productive directions.
Yuppies: A Definition and A Beginning

According to Marisa Piesman and Marilee Hartley, authors of *The Yuppie Handbook*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), “Yuppie” is the new name for Young Urban Professional. This would include a person of either gender who meets the following criteria: “(1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money or any and all combinations of the above…” (Piesman and Hartley, 1984: 12).

The term “Yuppie” crosses most demographic lines, i.e., they can be found in all ethnic, sexual, geographic, religious, and class groupings. Consequently, the fascination with this group may have more to do with the “profit” motive (since Yuppies tend to be both trendsetters and conspicuous consumers) than with their demographic uniqueness. Since Yuppies and Non-yuppies often live in the same locale and share some psychosocial traits, then one might assume that behavioral traits (i.e., lifestyle, spending habits, etc.) are more predictive of the impact of Yuppies in our society than the discreet variables of age, race, social class, etc.

Yuppies tend to be young (born after World War II and before Vietnam emerged as a major war effort), usually well-educated (often with dual-careers for married couples), highly mobile and adventuresome, and elitist in their attitudes (i.e., only the best will do). They tend to be status-strivers (i.e., yearning for a salary in six figures), and show a definite smugness regarding their social background.

Yuppies tend to be self-centered and self-absorbed, having been born into that generation which accepted the message of “self-actualization” as their social religion. Indeed, some might argue that Yuppies are addicted to their own adrenaline and self-indulgence. They exhibit Gidding’s “consciousness-of-kind”; Veblen’s “conspicuous consumer,” Mill’s “Power Elite,” and Stern’s “Narcissistic American”—all rolled into one human being. Basically, Yuppies are extremely aware of their quest for upward mobility (preferably as soon as possible), however, their search is somewhat atypical, since they have rejected many of the suburban values of their parents in order to live and work where the action is (Adler, et. al., 1984:16-17.)

A considerable portion of the waking day of the Yuppie is inner-focused (using Riesman’s concept of innerdirected) on their lives, careers, travel, unique experiences, and entertainment. They assume control of their lives and their fate, without question. Adequate effort and enough time to make “it” happen are the only things which seem to separate fantasy from reality for the Yuppiesque definition of the “good life.”

Yuppies: Living Life to the Limit

Yuppies are strivers by any social yardstick, but their loyalty and devotion are more personal (inner-directed) in their effort to attain wealth and power, rather than investing their mental energy and hard work in the goals of an employer—whose aims may differ from their own. They are more likely to “network” with other “Yuppies” with similar aspirations, rather than become the epitomy of the “Organization Man (or Woman).”

To the Yuppie, money means choices, and a flexibility to improve their search for success. They are quick to emphasize the virtues of “Imagination, daring, and entrepreneurship.” Since they have not accepted the popular notion of their parents that hard work and ingenuity alone can guarantee everything they want out of life, they substitute an image of self-reliance, slickness, i.e., a kind of psychological one-upmanship, and articulateness—where “image” is next to godliness.