

1. Dictionary

Lifestyle

By Luca Pattaroni (Sociologue)
29 October 2013

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

Lifestyle refers to the full range of people's aspirations and capacities, established both from a person's characteristics (linked to his/her past experience, his/her resources and his/her learning) and environmental influences. It is made up of the entirety of the experiences and activities through which a person seeks to live a life that is worth living (Sen, 1999). There are many ways of life but they are always shared collectively, whereas the question of "lifestyle" points to individual variations.

We can identify three main fields of experience underlying all ways of life (Pattaroni et al, 2009).

1. The experiences and activities linked to dwelling, i.e., all the elements that constitute a person's ease going about the world and his/her ontological security (cf. dwelling). In contemporary society the experience of dwelling goes well beyond being 'alone at home' and a person's 'comfort zone' can extend to places as diverse as the train (where people rest, read or work), or even some public and commercial places (cafés, etc.).
2. Experiences and activities involving the relationship with others and more broadly the development of a satisfying social life. Here too there are wide variations both in the idea of what constitutes a satisfactory relationship with other people (anonymity, conviviality, desire for otherness or for homogeneity) and also in the way social and family relationships are maintained (frequent home visits, outside activities, the use of internet and social networks, etc.).
3. Experiences and activities that reflect a functional relationship with the built environment, where the practical aspects of daily life are carried out. This last facet of our lifestyle includes choices, about modal practices, for example.

Looking at these three main fields of contemporary ways of life, what's obvious is that they are all concerned both with what motivates people to act (seeking comfort, pleasure, effectiveness, friendship, etc.) and with giving time and space to activities that give substance to experiences that matter. This definition, both broad and precise, allows us to go from approaches that are more concerned – like Bourdieu – with the reproduction of ways of life and their place within power relations, to those concerned with the ecology of ways of life and, more fundamentally, their share of reflexivity and uncertainty (Beck, 1986; Thévenot, 2006).

Details and the historical perspective

The lifestyle as a subject of discussion reflects an issue at the heart of the social sciences: that of analysing individual and collective regularities in human behaviour. More specifically, it points to two areas of examination. The first is that of the description and identification of specific forms of life. From which features or ranges of behaviour can we typify a "way" of life? The second is that of the explanation – or even the understanding – of these ways of life. What generates or induces these observable regularities? In this regard, the lifestyle issue doesn't refer to a specific social-science approach but on the contrary, it reflects the major theoretical perspectives that cut across it. In any case this concept has evolved over time. Thus, even if it's to be found in studies at the beginning of the 20th

century, either by Halbwachs (1913) or in the writings of the Chicago School, it has regained popularity since the end of the 1970s, linked to the acknowledgement of a diversification of the ways of life within apparently homogenous groups (Beck, 1986).

As ideas of individualisation and diversity gained in importance – calling into question one of the main tools in identifying and analysing social regularities: that of social class – it became important to give more credence to the analysis of “ways of life”. The evolution of this idea also reflects major societal changes and the different ways of interpreting them.

Historically, two major uses of the idea can be identified. The first arises from a tradition that can be termed “ecological”. In this view, identification of a lifestyle is closely linked to a specific living environment. A famous article by Wirth comes to mind here: “Urbanism as a lifestyle”, in which he describes the specificities of a manner of living that apply particularly to the city, to the urban environment (Wirth, 1939). In this article, he summarises and builds on studies already produced at the turn of the century by Simmel when he was trying to characterise the “mentality” of the inhabitants of the big city (Simmel, 2013 [1902]).

In this interactionist view, ways of life reflect a raft of psychological traits and ways of relating to others and to the built environment, accompanying and partly led by the living conditions of a given environment. To this first view should also be added studies by ethnologists who were concerned with the living conditions of a particular ethnicity, linking the socio-spatial description of their daily activities to the economy of their symbolic system (Evans-Pritchard, 1940).

In contrast to this ecological approach, there is a second view, concerned not with linking ways of life principally to people’s living environments but to their social and economic position. This Marxist-inspired view comes particularly from studies of the ways of life of the different social classes. Thus in his original study, Halbwachs emphasises the fact that “men belong to separate [social] classes; even though they live in the same environment at the same time, they give the impression that they belong to different species” (Halbwachs, 1912). Here then it’s the position in the economic structure – determining the standard of living – that is mainly responsible for the diversity of lifestyle within the same environment (urban, for example).

Bourdieu’s work contributes to this understanding of ways of life through social position, although his analysis is more complex. In fact he distinguishes two kinds of “capital” – economic and cultural – which allows him to identify different “lifestyles” even within the three main social classes that he analyses (ruling class, middle class and working class) (Bourdieu, 1979). Thus his analysis confronts the question that was to become more and more significant during the 1980s: that of the diversification of lifestyle within populations that were hitherto grouped in the same class, especially the middle classes, who seemed less and less homogenous in their practices and preferences (Savage et al, 1992).

So the notion of lifestyle gained currency in the 1980s (proceedings of the Dourdan symposium, 1982). It found a particular resonance in Germany, where an important body of research on “Lebensstile” developed and continues today. It is concerned with the upstream emergence of important inter-individual variations and with the downstream impact of lifestyle on sustainable development (Zapf, 1987; Rink, 2002). More broadly, these ways of life approaches sought to highlight a range of underlying factors that were different from traditional structural indicators (income, age, gender) that no longer seemed to be able to chart the different practices and values that were observed within a population (Thomas, 2011). These approaches became part of attempts to take account of new values and practices – and the continuation of the old ones – on the way towards a so-called “post-industrial” society (Inglehart, 1993).

Thus the concept of lifestyle has the benefit of revealing quite a diverse picture while remaining within the framework of analysing social regularities. It allows for more versatility in forms of life while also limiting it. The question of describing ways of life and what made them possible, however, is still not settled, and the Marxist and ecological views on lifestyle are still continuing in quite specific forms.

Thus, influenced particularly by the work of Bourdieu but also by the importance placed on consumption since the 1990s (Zukin, 1998), the majority of studies on lifestyle gradually began to focus on variations in tastes and cultural practices. Bourdieu argued that preferences in cultural practices reflected a person's social position. More fundamentally, it is the habitus, as a set of incorporated cognitive patterns, that puts him/her in a specific consumption category. In this view, for example, the residential choices an agent makes are less a reflection of a calculation that is rational (price and distance from work) or ecological (the need for space based on family size) than of specific tastes linked to "strategies" of social distinction (Aero, 2005). Thus, someone with meagre resources choosing to become a home-owner is usually seen as a desire of "distancing oneself from one's roots", those of social housing, instead of a desire for a "comfortable home" (Cartier et al., 2008).

Aimed at analysing – and revealing – the socio-structural dynamics at work in reproducing lifestyles, these views can sometimes have the effect of reducing the complex dynamic of ways of life and their inclusion in time and space to a purely symbolic and cognitive level.

In this respect the preceding example seems to offer a rather impoverished idea of lifestyle. It tends to overlook a whole range of reasons behind the choice regarding the very ecology of housing and the relationship between form and usage. This is the case, for example, on the subject of private appropriation of space for play and leisure (private garden) or the importance of organising one's environment (choice of fittings, etc.). And yet these are two reasons that come up regularly when people are questioned for studies on home-ownership, regardless of their social status (Thalmann and Favarger, 2002). What is at work here are fundamental anthropological issues that cut across the different "habitus" and the search for social distinction.

It's clear that within these two reasons there can be an element of "social construction" but it seems important to have a more systematic analysis of the link between ways of life and environmental characteristics, without reducing it neither to a symbolic relationship nor to a mechanical determination. Studies on gentrification reveal the importance of this link when they describe how the appearance of new ways of life in a neighbourhood influences its social and material reconfiguration (Knox, 1991; Pattaroni et al, 2009). This impact is linked to the fact that ways of life affect all levels of our relationship with the world, whether it's in terms of mobility, personal life, aesthetic judgement or even purchasing power.

Therefore we need to return at the earlier stages of explaining ways of life in order to reconsider how to describe it. What elements should be taken into consideration when defining "ways" of life? In this context the preceding statements suggest that we should go beyond a view of ways of life that is based merely on the cognitive and expressive aspects (preferences, tastes, judgements) or cultural practices (Birkelund and Lemel, 2013) to take in the full experiential scope of ways of life. The idea is to be able to link the most expressive aspects, possibilities and usages involved in the determination of a lifestyle, in space and time.

The definition suggested here must ultimately be seen as a tool offering a comprehensive description of contemporary ways of life. Its starting point is that the most expressive and cognitive aspects of ways of life are closely linked to their practical dimension. The lifestyle doesn't take shape from abstract values that would direct consumption habits but is based in daily life, where the various experiences that matter to a person are played out. Here the inspiration comes from studies of American Pragmatism (Dewey), theories of Situated Activity (Conein and Jacopin, 1994) and also of French Pragmatic Sociology (Thévenot, 2006).

Research perspectives: the personal and historical evolution of ways of life

One of the important issues relating to ways of life research is how it has evolved with time, both at the level of an individual life and in terms of societal structures.

On the individual level, we generally observe that manners of living change during the course of a life. Studies on the course of life usually explain this change by pointing to a number of socio-demographic factors, such as, for example, changes in income, becoming part of a couple or the arrival of a child. Even though it's clear that these different elements have an impact on people's daily organisation, social position and purchasing power, we must be careful not to make hasty judgments about the effect of these changes on lifestyle.

Because if we associate lifestyle with fundamental options in our manner of dealing with others, with functioning on a daily basis or with having a significant presence in the world, it's not obvious that the life events described above would profoundly alter our ways of doing things. Thus, even after the arrival of a child, a couple might continue to organise their daily life without using a car. Similarly, all the commentaries on the new middle classes – dubbed “bo-bo” (bohemian-bourgeoisie, aka “fauxhemian”) in the press – is based on the idea that the rise in purchasing power of people whose values and daily habits are critical of the consumer society is reflected not in them changing those habits but in continuing them in more stable, framed by the market forms (for example, going from an old second-hand bicycle to a new reproduction of a vintage bicycle).

These observations suggest that it would be interesting to understand more systematically exactly what constitutes a person changing their lifestyle and what factors should be taken into account (change of values, life-changing experiences, a change in social network, etc.).

Evoking the new middle classes, who we imagine – as mentioned earlier – are characterised by new kinds of living, finally raises the fundamental question of the historical evolution of ways of life. Since ways of life are closely linked to the way the economic and social system is organised (production methods, transport systems, etc.), as well as to the range of approaches to defining good ways of living in society (anthropological and political models), it is therefore clear that society's evolution, both technological and in terms of ideas, is opening up new possibilities. Therefore, as the decades pass, we are witnessing the emergence of new ways of life, led both by practical opportunities and their attached value system (soft mobility, participation, sexual liberation, etc.). As the work of Marie-Paule Thomas suggests, these new ways of life are not replacing the old ones but are increasing the diversity of the manners of living already mentioned above (Thomas, 2011; Thomas and Pattaroni, 2012).

The continued existence of the old ways of life is partly due to the inertia of societal models. As sociology teaches us, this inertia is due in large measure to the fact that ways of life are not purely dependant on an individual's psychological makeup but on an entire scope of material and institutional devices that guide and channel ways of life (Thévenot, 2006; Rose and Miller, 2008). Therefore, as long as the traditional infrastructures and models remain in place (road systems and individual housing, the ideal of development through consumption, social distinction, etc.), the ways of life they make possible will remain in place as well.

Therefore it would be interesting if we could better identify the manner in which some ways of life gradually become obsolete – even excluded – as they no longer have the necessary connections in the host society. Finally, this question opens up a field that is fundamental in order to understand the individual's quest for a good life and how to organise from a social, economic, moral and political point of view the way that we live together.

Luca Pattaroni, Laboratory of Urban Sociology, EPFL

Aero, T. (2005). "Residential Choice from a Lifestyle Perspective." *Housing, Theory and Society* 22: 109-130.

Beck U., 1986, *Risikogesellschaft: auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Suhrkamp,

Birkelund G.E., Lemel Y., 2013, « Lifestyles and Social Stratification: An Explorative Study of France and Norway », in Gunn Elisabeth Birkelund (ed.) *Class and Stratification Analysis (Comparative Social Research, Volume 30)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.189-220

- Bourdieu P., 1979, *La distinction : critique sociale du jugement. Le sens commun*, Paris, éditions de minuit
- Cartier M., Coutant I., Masclet O., Siblot Y., 2008, *La France des "petits-moyens" Enquêtes sur la banlieue pavillonnaire*, Paris, La Découverte
- Conein B., Jacopin E., 1994, "Action située et cognition : le savoir en place", *Sociologie du travail*, 4, 475-500.
- Evans-Pritchard E. E., 1940, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Halbwachs M., 1913, *Les classes ouvrières et les niveaux de vie*, Paris, Alcan.
- Inglehart R., 1993, *La Transition culturelle dans les sociétés industrielles avancées*, Paris, Editions Economica.
- Knox, P., 1991. *Capital, Material Culture and Spatial Differentiation*, Blacksburg : Center for Urban & Regional Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- Pattaroni L., Thomas M.-P., Kaufmann V., 2009. « habitat urbain durable pour les familles », *Les cahiers du Lasur*, Lausanne.
- Rink D., (Hrsg.), 2002, *Lebensstile und Nachhaltigkeit. Konzepte, Befunde und Potentiale*, Opladen.
- Rose N., Miller, 2008, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life*, London, Polity Press.
- Savage, M., Barlow J., Dickens P., Fielding A., 1992, *Property, bureaucracy and culture: middle class formation in contemporary Britain*. Routledge, London.
- Sen A., 1999, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Simmel G. 2013 [1902], *Les grandes villes et la vie de l'esprit*, Paris, Payot.
- Thalmann P., Favarger P. (éds.), 2002, *Locataire ou propriétaire ? : enjeux et mythes de l'accession à la propriété en Suisse*, Lausanne, Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes
- Thomas M.P., 2011, *En quête d'habitat : choix résidentiels et différenciation des modes de vie familiaux en Suisse*, Thèse EPFL (5010). Lausanne, EPFL.
- Thomas M.-P., Pattaroni L., « Différenciation des aspirations résidentielles des familles de classes moyennes en Suisse : une approche par les modes de vie », *Espaces et Société*, 1 (148-149), 111-127
- Thévenot L., 2006, *L'Action au pluriel. Sociologie des régimes d'engagement*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Zapf, Wolfgang, 1987, *Individualisierung und Sicherheit. Untersuchungen zur Lebensqualität in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Munich, Heck.
- Zukin Sh., 1998 « Urban Lifestyles_Diversity and Standardisation in Spaces of Consumption », *Urban Studies*, vol. 35, n° 5-6, 825-839.
- Wirth, L. (1938). «Urbanism as a Way of Life.» *American Journal of Sociology*, vol XLIV, n° 1.

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

En savoir plus x

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Aspirations
- Diversity of lifestyles

Theories

- Concepts
- History



Luca Pattaroni

Sociologue

Luca Pattaroni is a sociologist (laboratoire de Sociologie Urbaine (LaSUR) de l'École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL)).

To cite this publication :

Luca Pattaroni (29 October 2013), « Lifestyle », Préparer la transition mobilière. Consulté le 16 November 2024, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/dictionary/1754/lifestyle>

Other publications



Slowing down: Yes, but why, what and how?

Jean-Yves Boulin



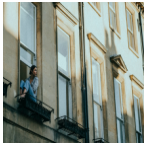
Mobility trajectories: a key notion for conceptualizing and shaping changes in the way people travel

Laurent Cailly, Marie Huyghe, Nicolas Oppenheim



Digital Nomads

Maurie Cohen, Laura Stanik



The lockdown is revealing the limits of our lifestyles, pace of life and environments

Mobile Lives Forum