Reviews


It is rare in gerontology that a project’s findings are anticipated so eagerly as those of the Berlin Aging Study (BASE). Readers of *The Berlin Aging Study: Aging from 70 to 100* will not be disappointed. In presenting initial, cross-sectional results from what is set to become a major longitudinal study, Paul B. Baltes and Karl Ulrich Mayer are to be congratulated on their success in meeting the high expectations held by the gerontological community. The book, a substantially extended and revised English-language version of a study initially published in German in 1996, is an empirical study which gerontologists from all disciplinary backgrounds, and all nations, will find very difficult to ignore in their future research endeavours.

A key strength of BASE lies in three aspects of its design. First, the study is truly interdisciplinary, drawing upon the combined endeavours of a large number of researchers with skills in medical, psychiatric, psychological and social approaches to ageing. The emphasis upon interdisciplinarity is reflected in the collection of data from research participants on (at least) 14 separate occasions. Secondly, the research focuses on a population that is older than is usual in gerontological research, spanning the full age range from 70 to over 100 years. This breadth is achieved by the sampling of equal numbers of men and women in each of six age groups (70–74, 75–79, 80–84, 85–89, 90–94 and 95+ years). This approach means that it is possible to address age and gender effects more accurately than in studies based on ordinary population samples.

Thirdly, BASE draws upon a heterogeneous and representative older population, albeit one living in the western half of a particular German city. While the authors acknowledge some weaknesses with the sampling frame (the city’s population register), the 516 people ultimately interviewed provide as accurate a representation of an urban older population as it is probably possible to achieve in an advanced industrial nation.

The book is divided into four major parts. Significant attention is paid in the first part to methodology and to BASE’s potential contribution to the development of gerontological theory. This leads into a discussion in Part Two of the main results from the four discipline-based research groups, established by the overall co-ordinating team (internal medicine and geriatrics, psychiatry, psychology and sociology). The largest part of the book is devoted, appropriately, to the presentation of interdisciplinary research findings. The individual chapters are usefully cross-referenced with one another and cover a broad range of interests and topics. The study concludes with a short assessment of BASE’s contribution to gerontological debates, rather modestly headed ‘What do we know about old age and aging?’ Within the confines of a short review it is not possible to do justice to the wealth of information
presented in *The Berlin Aging Study*. Most gerontologists will probably seek to develop their own impressions based upon a reading of the entire text. Nevertheless, there are some important findings which deserve attention.

In respect of social approaches to the study of old age, several chapters challenge views that are commonplace in gerontological research. For example, the analysis of cohort differences within the BASE sample (Maas *et al.*), suggests that younger cohorts of older people (born 1911–1922) did not generally have better experience of the workplace than older ones. Despite improved access to education, both men and women belonging to younger cohorts suffered more acutely from a disruption to their careers, brought about by historical events, than did older cohorts. As a result, it is argued that differences in material wellbeing in old age are more likely to arise from changes in social policy than from cohort differences in occupational careers. In similar vein, Mayer *et al.* provide compelling evidence to show that illness and frailty in old age are only partially related to socio-economic disadvantages. A threefold explanation is offered for this. First, healthy people from socially disadvantaged groups are more likely to survive into old age. Secondly, it is argued that the German health care system allows unrestricted access for all social groups to medical treatment, thereby guaranteeing good-quality health care for less well-off older people. Thirdly, health problems in old age may be explained by genetic factors that are independent of socio-economic conditions. Also worthy of note is the discussion of ‘well-being’ in old age (Smith *et al.*). This is likely to become a key reference source for gerontological debates about ‘quality of life’. There are countless further examples of findings in *The Berlin Aging Study* which are likely to prove thought-provoking and will encourage further academic debate.

What about weaknesses? In a work of this magnitude there are bound to be several points with which readers will wish to disagree or which they may find frustrating. Indeed, the contributing authors are refreshingly open about some of the study’s potential weaknesses. An initial point worth making is that some readers might find the study overly quantitative. Although the collection of representative empirical data is crucial to BASE, there are limits to what can be achieved with mainly quantitative data. For example, the presentation of six typical biographies (Schütze *et al.*) might have been more convincing had a more qualitative approach been adopted. Instead, this particular chapter almost invites the reader to interpret some of the loose ends left by the researchers’ attempts to reconstruct individuals’ biographies from the wealth of interview and survey data available. References to the impact of historical events (National Socialism, the post-war European settlement, including the division of Germany) upon individuals’ biographies are understated. Another, related area which might have been addressed more systematically within the study concerns the impact of research participants’ migration histories upon their social and material situation (only 36 per cent of the sample were born in Berlin). Although ethnic minority groups are significantly underrepresented within Germany’s older population, the issue of ethnicity and ageing is barely raised at all. While the study is truly interdisciplinary, there are still several disciplines which appear to be underrepresented with BASE. Perspectives from (urban) geography, political science and history would have
strengthened particular aspects of the analysis. A final point, which one might also regard as a weakness of European gerontology as a whole, is the focus within most of the chapters upon issues and theories generated by the North American research literature. When reading this book, one becomes acutely aware of (and somewhat embarrassed about) the fact that Europe’s gerontologists are still not routinely engaging with one another in important research debates.

However, in discussing several sources of weakness, it is necessary to emphasise that any limitations are more than outweighed by the strengths of the Berlin Aging Study. In this respect, the publication of findings from BASE should come to represent a significant landmark in the study of ageing populations. Here, for the first time, empirical data are presented which adequately address the complexities of old age in modern society from a truly interdisciplinary perspective. It will be very difficult indeed for future studies of ageing, whatever the perspective chosen by its authors, to ignore the findings of the Berlin study.

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THOMAS SCARF


This is a useful, accessible book, explaining sometimes difficult ideas in simple terms, aimed at sufferers of chronic pain. It is useful also for those who work or live with sufferers of chronic pain, and for researchers in related areas who need to grasp quickly the basics of how pain is felt, how chronic pain differs from acute pain, and how intractable pain can be ‘managed’.

The book contains chapters on how we feel pain and its psychology, and medical therapies including information on how and why different pain-killers may be needed or tried; side-effects, secondary analgesics and nerve blocks. The longest chapter deals with the importance of exercise, the problems of maintaining mobility and flexibility, and the techniques of goal-setting and pacing. There is a lot of practical information about devising an exercise programme (although the authors are careful to stress that this needs to be done with backing from the sufferer’s medical practitioner), and also much sound advice about caring for the body in daily living: good sitting, standing, lying, lifting and walking practices. The chapter on relaxation techniques again contains instructions for basic techniques as well as explanations about why these skills are worth acquiring – it is very difficult to relax when your life is bounded by pain. The final chapters are on complementary therapies and self-help. Self-help is the message of the book, but it is not unaided. The authors stress that there should be doctors, physiotherapists, and/or psychologists there to advise and encourage the sufferer towards the goal of a more fulfilling life. They also point out here and in other sections the
importance of involving family and perhaps friends and colleagues. Those
around the sufferer will suffer too, albeit in other ways. This chapter sums up
the advice and encouragement that the authors give.

The chapter on complementary therapies is the weakest. Given the care
taken in the book as a whole, I was surprised to find ultrasound and
interferential electrotherapy mentioned twice, and short wave diathermy
once, without any further explanation of what they are or how they may be
expected to help. In general the short sections devoted to complementary
therapies (such as Alexander Technique, aromatherapy) are too cursory to
give a reader lacking in prior knowledge much sense of whether they would
want to explore them further or not. For example, the half page on the
Feldenkrais Technique gives no clear idea how this differs from standard
physiotherapy, and why one might wish to seek out (or avoid!) a Feldenkrais
trained physiotherapist.

The book concludes with six pages of stretches and exercises, with clear
instructions, helpful line drawings and cautionary advice, designed to be used
in conjunction with the chapter on exercise. Then follow short sections
containing useful addresses, recommended further reading, and an index. In
all, it is a well-planned book which I can foresee many sufferers of chronic pain
finding extremely helpful.

One topic the authors do not give much space to is the importance of finding
a means of taking pleasure in and from one’s body. This is mentioned in the
concluding chapter, but it is something that could have been brought in to the
discussion, perhaps, in the chapter on the psychology of pain, or under
complementary therapies. It is important when one is experiencing one’s body
as a source of pain and frustration, to find ways of allowing it also to be a
source of pleasure. Apart from the healing aspects of physical pleasure as a
temporary relief from pain, finding a source of pleasure in one’s body is helpful
in overcoming the divisiveness of chronic pain – the ways in which one is torn
apart as a person. The hedonistic aspects of some complementary therapies in
particular, e.g. massage with essential oils, but exercise too, where this is
possible, are a well-deserved counterpoise to the burden of pain.

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Marion Smith

Bazo, María Teresa (ed), Envejecimiento y Sociedad: Una Perspectiva
Internacional (Aging and Society: An International Perspective). Editorial

This book makes a significant contribution to the sociology of ageing, a field
of recent development and, currently, growing importance in Spain. Aging
and Society: An International Perspective is published in a series on Social
Gerontology and is currently only available in Spanish. The book explores
themes that will interest social gerontology students, researchers and, more
generally, people interested in the field of the sociology of ageing.
The volume is well researched and presents a wide range of data drawn mainly from Spanish sources, but also encompasses work undertaken in other European countries, especially in Great Britain. María Teresa Bazo has succeeded in drawing together and elaborating upon three important aspects of the ageing process: demographic considerations, sociological issues and, finally, social and health policies within the field of caring for older people. In each chapter, the situation in Spain is outlined and evaluated in relation to its broader European context. In this sense, the book extends beyond a descriptive portrayal of well-known facts and figures concerning population ageing, to produce a more analytical account of the consequences of demographic change for Spain. For example, the thorough presentation of material relating to demography in the EU is well complemented by a sociological analysis of relevant demographic indicators. European nations differ widely in their historical, cultural, political and economic contexts and hence differ in their approach to social protection. Therefore, the consequences that the ageing process may have on individuals will vary on the basis of such factors.

The book is a technical one, although written in an accessible style. There is only one minor limitation to the book, and this applies to a number of comparable English language texts – the quantity of statistics presented makes reading rather slow in certain parts of the book.

The book is divided into three main chapters, supported by a comprehensive introduction. In the introduction, María Teresa Bazo reviews the major theoretical trends that have shaped the development of the sociology of ageing. Using this perspective, the author also outlines the development of gerontology in Spain.

This leads into the first chapter, which addresses the demography of old age. It is argued that the EU presents its own demographic model that demands new approaches to reformulate the classic model of demographic transition. Furthermore, new units of analysis that go beyond the concept of the nation state are needed. The chapter ends with a useful discussion of ageing trends in Spain.

The second chapter concentrates on the sociology of ageing. After reviewing the main social theories on ageing, the author considers the key variables of the ageing process, examining factors such as the economic and health status of older people, formal and informal care provision, and social images of the older population. In this respect, the text produces some useful material. For example, it is shown that the common profile of an informal carer in Spain would be a 52-year-old housewife with low literacy. In the current social and economic situation, new policies are needed to reconcile paid work and social care tasks, undertaken primarily by women.

The final substantive chapter deals with health and social policy. Although the issues faced by European nations are similar, different countries have produced a variety of social policy responses to the real problems experienced by older people. In this sense, it is acknowledged that a failure to develop a European Welfare State may undermine the strength of the common economic system that has been established in the EU. New solutions must be sought for the market and the informal sector to share responsibility for the
Reviews

provision of services within a mixed economy of welfare that is conceptualised as the next crisis of the welfare state. The book finishes with a select bibliography that is commented on by Concepción Maiztegui Oñate.

This book brings together an important range of themes concerning the sociology of ageing and, in particular, provides valuable information about the circumstances in Spain. Research efforts like this are essential and should stimulate the development of joint projects that, at a European level, may serve to promote the convergence of social and welfare structures.

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This book is the result of an American multi-disciplinary research project on the ethical and clinical issues raised by the developments in our understanding of Alzheimer disease (AD) genetics. The book contains 16 chapters written by an impressive range of experts, including some of the researchers who are presently developing new genetic tests for AD. Equally impressive as the list of authors, is the comprehensive coverage of almost all the important ethical and legal problems raised by AD genetic testing. It is impossible to mention all the chapters, but apart from the editors who have each contributed interesting chapters, there is a well written chapter on prenatal testing for AD by Bonnie Steinbock; an intriguing chapter on the patent problems and market prediction for AD genetic tests by Robert Mullan Cook-Degan; and two very comprehensive chapters on counselling for early-onset autosomal dominant AD and ‘normal’ AD respectively by Harry Karlinsky and Kimberley A. Quaid.

If one should criticise some aspects of the book there are three issues to mention. The first is that, seen from a European point of view, the book sorely lacks an analysis of the impact of AD genetic testing in a context of public health care and public nursing home provision. It contains much discussion of the adverse effects on insurability of a positive AD genetic test, but a lot of this discussion is more or less irrelevant in a number of European countries. The second problem is that a number of the authors seem to be too attracted to a frankly paternalistic type of argument. They argue from the fact that people who get AD genetic tests (especially susceptibility tests like Apo-lipoprotein E typing) run a risk of being harmed in various ways, to the conclusion that this in itself is sufficient to prohibit the introduction of these tests. This conclusion only follows on some very strong presumptions about our duty to protect people from their own choices, and their own balancing of benefits and burdens. The third problem is that the book is very technical in places. In their introduction, the editors claim that ‘Our intent is to contribute to public literacy and critical thinking about AD genetics, especially in the many families of people with AD…..’ Many of the chapters, especially the ones on
the genetics and neurobiology of AD are, however, probably far beyond the reach of most people. Even this reviewer, who has a past studying the functional neurophysiology of the prefrontal cortex before he turned to ethics, found some sections of these chapters hard going.

Despite these three problems the book is a must for anybody who is involved in decisions concerning genetic tests for AD, whether it is at the policy level, or in clinical medicine or counselling.

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Søren Holm


'I left home as a child because my mother didn't want me ... I would cover myself with blankets at night and think of the warmth of the fires in people's houses' (Harry, aged 58).

'I never thought I'd end my days in a doorway' (Martin, aged 70).

We owe Maureen Crane a huge debt for producing this book, for it does exactly what the title suggests. Anyone who reads it will emerge with a deeper, wider and more balanced understanding of the causes of homelessness amongst all age groups, and consequently of the remedies required. Her major contribution to the theoretical debates as to whether the roots of homelessness are pathological or socially constructed, is not just to present the arguments but to provide evidence which allows readers to make their own judgement.

This makes the book valuable to readers along a broad spectrum of knowledge and expertise, because the material can be assessed in different ways at different levels.

Maureen Crane spent 1,500 hours on field work for the ‘Four Cities’ study which is at the core of this book, interviewing a total of 225 older men and women, sometimes up to 10 times. She did this in the streets, in hostels, soup kitchens and hideaways, by day and by night. She draws, too, on field trips to American cities; on research carried out at the day centre in London she helped to found; and on other British and American studies. There is also a very useful chapter on counts and homelessness statistics.

The book begins with theories and causes of homelessness. How is it that a person who has owned a house, brought up a family, been employed for 30 years and in general has been part of mainstream society, may face the prospect in old age of ending their days in a doorway? Using the life histories of those who have talked to her, the author considers in turn the breakdown of family relationships, the problems of itinerant working lives, mental illness and alcohol-abuse, and the role of stressful events such as the death of parent or wife. Her synthesis of all these components shows how dangerous it is to generalise or fail to understand the difference between predisposing factors and inevitability. In many cases, proper support at the right time could have prevented tragedy.
In part two, the reader will find details about the daily lives of older homeless people: how they eat, sleep and wash; their physical and psychological health needs; the difficulties they have getting care; and how inappropriate rehousing has actually caused mental illness and alcoholism in some cases. Current British policies and services are presented and the final chapter looks at what needs to be done to resettle older homeless people successfully, taking into account the different typologies.

There are some omissions from this book. In particular, the contribution of housing policies to the problem are underplayed. The evidence is there in the case histories, but is not collected and analysed. Thus we read that one person let a tenancy slip because he felt the council wanted the house for a family; another because, while suffering depression following bereavement, they failed to pay rent (after 25 years in the property). In other cases eviction followed failure to keep up mortgage payments. These are individual examples of the consequences of the housing policies of the last 20 years, but the patterns are not made explicit. There has been, for example, a massive growth in repossessions since 1979. In the rented sector, the ‘Right to Buy’ has led to a reduction of available family housing to rent, to the concept of ‘under-occupation’ and great pressure on many older tenants. Targets for rent arrears and the separation of the functions of rent collection and housing management in many authorities mean a greater likelihood of insensitive evictions. These are some of the housing policy causes of older people’s homelessness that are not systematically assembled in the book, although some others (such as the general discrimination against childless single people) are included.

History is also not the author’s strong point. The dissolution of the monasteries is put into the 14th century. Figures for how many of the men had formerly been in the armed forces are not accompanied by a reminder that for most British males in this age group there was compulsory national service!

Such omissions are peripheral, however. The essential value of the book, as a rich, deep and powerful source of information, and as a source for teaching and training is unaffected. No one who has read it could ever again believe that policies of offering a tenancy and a few months support will have any reasonable chance of success. Nor, however, will they believe that nothing can be done, and that older homeless people are a race apart who must just be left to their inevitable fate of premature death.


This book is a collection of essays arising from papers presented at a conference hosted by the Ethics Center of the University of South Florida, and funded by the Commission on Aging with Dignity and the Pettus-Crowe Foundation. It
Reviews 243

divides into four sections: Looks, Lives, Looking at Health Care, and Living Arrangements.

For me, it is a book addressing issues which are not part of my everyday professional life, but which hold something of a personal fascination. As an edited collection, it is perhaps inevitable that some chapters hold more appeal than others. Overall, I found the book very readable although well rooted in the American culture. Some parts do not adapt comfortably to British experiences. The first chapter, for example, reports on an ethnographic study of a neighbourhood beauty shop. It sounds like an archetypal setting for an American sixties film and is somehow unrelated to real life. And yet, there was an ‘un-put-down-ability’ to this chapter.

There is also an emphasis, in some of the chapters, on only the physical aspects of ageing, and especially on how they affect a woman’s attractiveness to men. I would have liked to read more about other aspects of women’s ageing. On the other hand, it was pleasing to see a very wide definition of ageing. One chapter, in particular, takes a critical look at the construction of the menopause as a sign of ageing in women.

Although the book claims to address issues of women and ageing, some of the chapters address concerns common to both genders and is not female specific. I began to wonder, too, if Americans have the same understanding of the word ‘ethics’ as the British do. I would have described much of the writing as concerned with moral philosophy, rather than ethical considerations. Many of the chapters also conclude with acknowledgements, which mostly refer to the conference organisers and other contributors to the book. Indeed, one sometimes feels as if one has stumbled into a private party of some mutual admiration society!

It is unlikely that this book will find its way onto the shelves of the Dementia Voice library. However, it would be a useful addition to a gerontology library.

Dementia Voice
Jane Gilliard
Bristol


This comprehensive volume begins by arguing that contemporary social psychology often makes the assumption that theory and research may be freely generalised across the life-span, thus failing to account for age-related changes. Despite this trend, research accounting for life-span effects has started to burgeon in the last decade, with the National Institute on Aging (NIA) acting as chief stoker to this process. Subsequently, several barriers to the successful application of social cognition to research on ageing were identified, including issues related to self-identity, social interaction, and social perception. Moreover, through the commissioning of appropriate research by the NIA, these barriers are now beginning to be surpassed. The purpose of this volume therefore, is to provide a broad overview of research pertinent to these
domains, with the offshoot that this may help to raise the profile of life-span perspectives in the field of social psychology as a whole. These colours are firmly nailed to the mast with a competent exposition of the relevance of life-span to social cognition in the opening chapter. Thereafter, this volume splits into three main sections: Focus on Self, Focus on Others, and Focus on the Social Context.

The first of these sections, Focus on Self, considers several themes including chapters examining how perceptions of control and memory affect cognitive performance, and the relevance of ‘self’ to personal goal setting and resilience. Of particular interest are the chapters on memory which provide evidence in support of the idea that older adults fall into two camps, those who believe in the inevitable decline of memory functioning and those who do not. However, less support was found for the hypothesis that individuals who believe in the inherent controllability of memory use more effective encoding strategies, or indeed perform better in memory tests. Evidence is also presented to show that older adults perform similarly to younger adults with regard to the encoding of life experiences. Here, the discussion on the ‘bump phenomena’ may be of particular interest to reminiscence therapists. This phenomena is described as a proliferation of ‘flashbulb’ memories from late adolescence and early adulthood which are considered to provide reference points in the organisation of our life records.

The section Focus on Others considers developmental perspectives associated with such issues as stereotyping, perceptions of forgetfulness, attributional processing, and social representations. Particularly noteworthy is the chapter by Hess, which presents a framework for understanding the nature of developmental changes associated with social representational processes in adulthood. It is argued that cognitive decline in elderly people may lead to the formulation of inaccurate social representations, leaving older people vulnerable to social manipulation such as might occur during interactions with salespersons. This may culminate in them becoming more dependent on the opinions of younger family and friends. It is also argued that age-related changes in cognitive performance should not merely be seen in terms of deficit-related explanations, but also in terms of changing goals and knowledge bases.

The third and final section of this volume, Focus on Social Context, includes chapters on cognition in interactive situations, moral development, and the setting of social goals across the life-span. Of these, Charles and Carstensen’s chapter regarding social goals is particularly interesting in its exploration of the relationship between the theories of ‘disengagement’ and ‘activity’ and social cognition in late adulthood.

This volume relays a literature base with which many readers will be familiar, but then extends upon it through the presentation of original papers (some of which have yet to be published), exploring new theoretical relationships, and clearly outlining directions for future research. Throughout, it highlights how the generalisation of social cognitive theory across the life-span is over-simplistic and negates the richness of knowledge which may be achieved through the incorporation of this perspective into the field. Principally a volume for academics, little consideration has been given to the ramifications of findings to practitioners in the field. This however, is more an
This is, at first sight, an eclectic collection of eight papers by different authors from Finland, Sweden and the UK. The authors originally came together in 1997 and the collected papers, arranged into eight chapters, are one of the visible outputs of the cross-European network they are involved in.

Themes covered in the collection compare practice and policy in the three countries on:

- Welfare change;
- Housing, planning and community care;
- Transport, and its importance for balanced communities;
- ‘Activity’ centred models for dementia sufferers involving volunteers, professionals and carers;
- Developing an older person friendly instrument for choosing housing options;
- Exercise programmes for older people.

The diversity of themes covered in the papers is the reason why this seemed to be such an eclectic mix. But it is an effective mixture, given that the authors’ purpose was to demonstrate why a broader vision of housing and community care for older people is necessary using examples from different countries. A final, thoughtful and incisive chapter by Robin Means and Judith Phillips points out that achieving such a vision rests on changing professional, public and policy perspectives on the way services, the built environment and people can fit together.

Looking at each of the chapters, some key aspects are worth mentioning. Chapter One by Louise Russell gives a good concise overview of the broad policy frameworks in Finland, Sweden and the UK on housing, community care and transport and the relationships between these and older people. The chapter encompasses broad trends towards de-institutionalisation in Western European countries and indicates how the continued devolution of services to a community level is progressing. Chapter Two, by Owe Åhlund et al., refers to a longitudinal planning partnership between academics, practitioners, politicians and the local community in Anderslov, a municipality in southern Sweden. Planning partnerships such as this are rare, and it provides a useful indication of what can be achieved. However, I take issue with the comment that similar planning partnerships do not occur in the UK. They do. The University of Birmingham for example, has a longstanding Public Policy partnership with Birmingham City Council covering themes such as
regeneration, bringing services closer to citizens and community safety (see *Living in the City*, School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham/City of Birmingham, 1999).

Chapters Three and Four draw on the Swedish approach to transport and a Finnish study on the challenges that working in ordinary homes presents to community-based staff. What is striking about Chapter Three is the degree of attention that has been given to good, accessible transport for older and disabled people in Sweden. Its importance in older people’s lives has been highlighted in countless studies. The Swedish model considers how a different perspective can make transport services better for all. Chapter Four looks at issues that should be fundamental in new housing design but which I have never come across before. The issues concern sufficient space for the equipment needed to enable someone to age in place in advanced old age, for example, hoists and other adaptations. Space for staff to carry out personal care functions safely and comfortably is also pursued.

Chapter Five by Kirsti Persola on an activities centre for dementia sufferers in Helsinki, is the weakest contribution in the collection. While the involvement of volunteers in Finland may be unusual, it is less so in other countries. In any case it is not clear why this approach produces a qualitatively better outcome than other approaches. Chapter Six by Frances Heywood and Robin Means refers to HOOP, a tool devised by them to assist older people, and relevant agencies, to choose appropriate housing options. The HOOP tool is a welcome addition to a scant literature on enabling people to make good choices about where they will live in older age. The chapter will hopefully encourage readers to use HOOP.

Chapter Seven by Lyn Goodliffe on exercise in later life refers to a specific exercise programme run by the University of Bristol. Explanations are given on why exercise is beneficial. These are interesting, but the rather tedious guidance on how to run a programme is likely to be of less interest to a broad audience. Chapter Eight by Robin Means and Judith Phillips draws the contributions together admirably.

Overall, this is an interesting collection with useful insights into policy and practice on key themes that should interest a housing, social care and health audience. Most of the examples are useful and they work well. Above all they illustrate that an imaginative approach by practitioners and policy makers is appropriate and highly necessary if people-shaped services are ever going to be truly available.

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MOYRA RISEBOROUGH

This publication reports on the findings of a research project concerned with the issue of whether or not owner-occupiers see ownership as an advantage since, as its authors argue, there is comparatively little research in this field. It complements another recently published report by Hancock et al. (1999): *Home Ownership in Later Life: Financial Burden or Benefit*.

The objectives of this research were to discern if owner-occupation is perceived and experienced as an advantage by older people and their adult children. Three issues were examined: perceptions about home-ownership by older people and their children; the impact of owner-occupation in later life on relationships between older people and their children; and the consequences of illhealth or changes in household membership in later life. Children are included on the basis that they have received little research attention previously. Most research into decision-making by families has focused on the husband and wife roles and their influence, whereas children, particularly adult children, have not received much attention.

The findings are based on interviews with 102 owner-occupiers and 17 of their children. Quotas were set to ensure that the sample reflected the older population in gender, marital status and age. These personal characteristics should be of interest in their own right since women may process information differently from men; family members may differ in their influence on various kinds of decisions; and older consumers may have more difficulty in remembering information and making more complex decisions. Unfortunately, these variables could not be explored in any depth within the survey objectives. Moreover, the findings would have been of even greater benefit if former occupations, and the types and capital values of properties occupied, had been established. This approach would have provided a wealth of information pertaining to social class, roles and status, and enabled comparisons among them, and the different housing sectors, to be made. Different social classes show product and brand preferences that are quite distinct and, in addition, it is evident that people choose products, including homes, that communicate their role and status in society.

Older owner-occupiers were encouraged to talk about their homes in their own way, but some overriding themes were detected. The major findings identified the way people distinguished between the burdens and benefits of home ownership: independence (burdensome or beneficial); financial matters; and the status and identity conferred by home ownership. Beneficial ownership was seen as providing older people with more freedom and control over their situation than rented accommodation; being independent of others such as landlords; and being able to move house. It is interesting to note that respondents had chosen to compare their lot with that of tenants. However, a certain lack of independence was perceived to arise from the need to maintain properties, a concern for what others may think if they failed to do so, and the need to pay the mortgage and to comply with government regulations.
The report then goes on to examine the financial benefits and burdens of ownership from both capital and income perspectives. Three themes were detected when considering the financial advantages: investment; financial security; and ownership being cheaper than renting. Property was seen to appreciate in value and to be an achievement, in that something of value was owned when the mortgage was eventually repaid, whereas there was nothing to show for paying rent for years. Home ownership was also perceived to offer financial security, providing an option in the future to trade down to something smaller in order to release equity, to be sold to pay for institutional care or, for part or all of the equity, to be sold in return for the right to remain in the property and receive an income.

Owning was also regarded as being less expensive than renting for a variety of reasons. There was a general impression gained by the authors of a lack of knowledge about relative cost which, they rightly argue, may result in rented property not being seen as a viable option. Lack of knowledge resulting from a limited search for pertinent information is a serious issue that must be addressed if satisfaction with a chosen housing option is to be maximised.

Not unexpectedly, examples of financial disadvantages are the costs of repairs and maintenance, any continuing mortgage repayments, and the prospect of having to sell the home to pay for care. Policymakers should note the resentment voiced in relation to the last point because owners felt penalised by virtue of having a valuable asset, unlike tenants who, of course, have no equity in their home to sell to pay for care and so get it free. Moreover, owners appreciated that, in this situation, they would have nothing to leave their children either.

Finally, the research identified considerable variations in both the extent and nature of children’s involvement with their parents’ home. Children no longer living at home, perhaps surprisingly, were usually seen as treating it as though they were residents rather than visitors. Not unnaturally, one of the benefits of ownership was being able to bequeath the home. The small number of children who were interviewed were not anxious to benefit from their parents’ generosity. The authors suggest that this was probably because children did not want to be reminded of their parents’ mortality, or because of their own emotional attachment to the home. A continuum was identified in respect of children’s influence over their parents’ housing decisions, although few were responsible for making decisions for their parents. The relevance of children’s views is more likely, of course, to be the case with the divorced or bereaved than with married individuals, the majority of whom are likely to regard their spouse as the most important advisor.

Some fascinating findings were also highlighted in respect of the personal identity conferred by home ownership. Many respondents were proud of having achieved something. Some saw themselves as responsible, morally worthy people, as hardworking, and as people who were financially secure. Not entirely unexpectedly, the articulation by some of self-concept/image entailed express or implied criticisms of tenants. This, incidentally, is not unique to housing.

Also briefly considered are changing perceptions of home ownership resulting from illness or disability and bereavement. The authors are no doubt
right to argue that illness or disability can affect the balance of supposed advantages or disadvantages of ownership. Maintenance and repair became more problematical, although alteration and adaptation could be carried out without a landlord’s permission. Divorce or death of a spouse might also lead some to worry increasingly about repairs and maintenance, and/or to move closer to their children or other relatives. But, for some, the emotional attachment to the home increased rather than the associations being too painful to bear by staying put. A particularly noteworthy finding is that widows spoke of their new-found independence in making decisions about the home.

This publication serves a very useful purpose in that it fills a gap in previous research: not only does it address older people’s perceptions of owner-occupation, relationships with children, and the consequences of ill health or bereavement, but it also embraces a much neglected field of study – the effect of children upon their parents’ housing decisions. The report endeavours successfully to put the findings into a policy context because owner-occupation is a key aspect of many lives and is implicated in public policies concerning older people. The policies identified should be of concern to policymakers everywhere.

Reference


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