Reviews


This fascinating study of grandparents is the most detailed published output yet from the important intergenerational survey carried out early in the 1990s in France by the Caisse Nationale d’Assurance Vieillesse. The overall analysis uses a ‘double circuit’ model. The basis of this approach is the argument that exchanges between generations take place simultaneously in the public and private spheres. In order to understand intergenerational relations in the round it is therefore essential to juxtapose what is going on collectively, in the form of flows of public resources between categories of citizens at state level, against the content of interpersonal transfers inside families. Other outputs from the study (for example, Attias-Donfut and Wolff 2000) focus on theoretical and quantitative demonstrations of ways in which this ‘double circuit’ may balance out. The present book concentrates on the relationships within families which contemporary circuitry entails, and in particular on the nature of grandparenting.

The design of the survey as a whole reflects this desire to integrate public and private domain data. The main quantitative study was a sample of families where three adult members from different generations were interviewed in 1992. This was achieved by randomly selecting more than 10,000 individuals aged 49 to 53 from census files, and then identifying via a telephone ‘pre-survey’ whether these individuals had at least one parent and one adult child alive, and whether they would agree to take part in the survey. About two thousand members of this ‘pivot’ generation were interviewed, together with 1200 of their parents (aged 68 to 92) and 1500 children (aged 19 to 32), making a total of 995 families for whom interviews with each of the three different generations were carried out. Over half of the youngest generation were themselves parents, making 46 per cent of the pivot generation grandparents, and 67 per cent of the oldest generation great-grandparents. A more detailed follow-up study, involving around 100 in-depth interviews, was carried out later among 30 of these lineages.

This structure straddles the domains very neatly. The age-span chosen for pivots defines a main cohort which is ‘sandwiched’ within a complex framework of layered family obligations. At the same time members of this group occupy a very strategic position in the national political economy, and have witnessed a very significant re-balancing of realms during their own lifetimes. Born at the beginning of the war, and growing up with the new welfare state, they have spent effectively all their lives inside a collectivist environment where personal security has been provided or underwritten by the community. Families have become less important. Individual rights of citizens have been in the ascendant, especially for women. The traditional
association of private realm activities and interests with women’s lives, and of
the public realm with men’s, has steadily weakened for this cohort as they have
grown older. By focusing our attention on these pivots as they become
grandparents and enter senior roles in family life, this research design offers
data which are extremely germane to the great transformations which have
taken place, and are still unfolding, in the relations between families and the
state. All manner of speculation is prompted; for example, over how radical
veterans of 1968 will respond as they become figures of authority themselves?

Within this monograph the emphasis is primarily on relationships between
grandparents and grandchildren. Drawing on a wide range of other materials
as well as data from their own survey, the authors argue that relations have
changed out of recognition. Improved public health and welfare systems have
helped to intensify long-term decreases in fertility and increases in life-
expectancy. These demographic shifts mean that more people now become
grandparents, then live longer in this role, are fit and energetic enough to play
a more active part and remain numerous enough (in relation to their
descendants) to perform a useful family service. Their greater availability, plus
the improvement in quality of intergenerational relationships generally
(which the authors put down to adequate pension provisions giving financial
independence to retired people) have above all led to more companionate, less
authoritarian, styles of grandparenting. Choice rather than necessity now
governs intergenerational contacts. Today’s young grandparents (in the pivot
generation) have a closer and easier-going personal relationship with both
children and grandchildren – as reflected, for example, in the movement away
from use of formal titles towards more intimate modes of address – than is found
in preceding generations.

Exploration of the psychological dimensions of the relationship suggests how
important these can be to the identity of both partners, at both ends of life, and
hence to the unity of lineages. Children value their grandparents because
through them they can see that they do have a place in society, and already
belong. Older people are reassured in their turn, through grandchildren, that
although they will die there will be a future, and continuity. That is why they
love looking at family photographs. They are reflecting on family likenesses.

Not all current trends enhance grandparenting. The relative youth and
vitality of modern grandparents also means that some feel that they have
better things to do than spend time with their descendants. And the growing
fragility of conjugal ties in all generations, which is an aspect of modern
libertarianism, has mixed results. It increases the value of some grandparents,
especially maternal, and in particular where parenting breakdown increases
the need for childcare. But for others it disrupts lines of contact and prompts
family splits. Some of the most intriguing findings in this study are those
suggesting that where grandparents are separated or divorced then grand-
children are less likely to see much of either of them. Lineage ties are not
necessarily an alternative to marriage and affinity, but may be complementary
to them.

All this is riveting stuff, presented clearly and with verve. And it is largely
convincing. But as the authors agree, there are limits to the conclusions that
can be drawn from an isolated study of this sort, and it is good to be aware of
them and cautious. The first and most general limitation arises out of its pioneering status. As pointed out in the introductory chapter, there has been a lamentable neglect of extended family relationships by sociologists during the last third of the 20th century. Grandparents in particular have become les grands oubliés of sociology. All this makes the CNAV study, which was planned and fought for a decade ago, all the more remarkable as an achievement. But it also means that it may have greater authority as a benchmark against which future transformations can be assessed, than as a basis for commentary on those which may have already occurred. For we simply do not know what a study like this carried out a generation ago might have found.

Thus, the least telling judgements in the book are those dealing with the ‘new intimacy’ of grandparenting, and which assume a contrast with the formality and authoritarianism of ages past. The evidence of the past – coming from informants, literature and historical research – draws mainly on the testimonies of grandchildren about their grandparents, and hardly at all on records of grandparents’ experience. Against this, the evidence of the present is mainly that from grandparents. This makes it hard to unscramble historical changes in manners and lifestyles from altered perceptions related to the lifecourse. We cannot be sure how much of the apparent shift from authority to companionship is to do with changing mores, and how much with the passing of commentator’s baton from the child, who will always be somewhat in awe of elders, to the mature observer, for whom grandchildren are a gift and delight.

This difficulty is added to by the fact that the study was not specifically designed to produce a representative sample of grandparents. The authors acknowledge this, but perhaps not fully enough. There are two cohorts of grandparents within the sample – pivots aged 49 to 53 and pivots’ parents who are grandparents to the pivots’ children. The older group are treated in the analysis either as great-grandparents or as members of a (growing) category of ancient grandparents. Although materials from other studies are brought in too, the ideas about current trends in grandparenting are heavily based on the 49–53-year-olds. These are bound to be new grandparents, in many cases still in early stages of ecstatic bonding. Around half of their peers are not yet grandparents at all, and may not become so for many years. So the young and active ‘papy-boomers’ portrayed for us are surely not the only face of modern (and future) grandparenting. The grandparenting of the pivot generation is only just beginning, and there is insufficient analysis, for Anglo-Saxon tastes, of the response-differences between those pivots who are already grandparents, and those who are not. Social class is a good case in point. It is surely linked to age at becoming a grandparent, and would be a potent influence on emerging parenting styles. But most of the ‘hard’ findings on factors like this are segregated into a statistical appendix, rather than being brought fully into the argument.

In addition to this, and making it all the more hazardous to generalise, several of the factors linked to new grandparenting styles may not prove very durable. Take for example a demographic variable like age at becoming a grandparent. Because of high rates of early childbearing in the 1970s, there are more young grandparents around at the moment than can be expected in the
long term – especially if present trends towards later childbearing continue. On top of this, there are other factors like high rates of early retirement, and the low French retirement age of 60, which are seen as encouraging high levels of grandparental activity. Both of these depend however on dirigiste systems of redistribution to pensioners from generations in employment which may prove difficult to sustain at present levels, if older people continue to increase in number. Existing double circuits could soon blow. The pattern of leisureed middle-age which appears to underpin current family lifestyles may not mark the beginning of a new era of younger grandparenting, so much as a brief postwar high point of collective security.

But these questions make the study all the more interesting rather than less so. They underline the importance of further work to carry on the enquiry, and also of parallel studies in other countries, especially where demographic and structural shifts are similar, but where there are salient differences in social policy. As the authors point out, Britain offers a good comparative case here, not least because the voluntary thrust of its pensions schemes offer such contrasting messages and options to families. Notwithstanding the lack of interest in family among leading politicians, there is a sympathy towards family life informing postwar French government and the social policy system which has no parallel in Britain. Compulsory membership of a generous pension scheme represents part of this protection of family life. At one level, the public policy emphasis on pensions is to do with rewarding older people for their service to the community, redistributing resources between generations to this end, and publicly reminding everyone of their collective interdependence. But it is also understood as a means of promoting internal family solidarities. It is widely recognised that a sizeable proportion of resources owned by or transmitted to old people trickle down to younger members of their families. So the promotion of adequate pensions provisions offers the state a means of using family networks to channel resources to the most needy, while bolstering family ties at the same time. The ‘double circuit’ is already part of official French thinking in a way (and for reasons) which simply would not apply in contemporary Britain.

This highly original and imaginative analysis buzzes with suggestive ideas which cry out for comparative replication in the UK. It gives a strong lead within its field, and I believe that it also offers a very positive wider example. In its fine understanding of the unity of human experience, and sensitive interweaving of political, economic, moral and psychological themes, it does much to restore faith in the validity and relevance of social science generally.

References


This publication includes comprehensive information on older people and on what national care provisions exist in seven European countries. It builds on considerations common to each country, including trends in response to an overall ageing population. It also provides a useful insight into innovations in home and other care services and how costs are met.

It acknowledges the shortcomings of trying to make direct comparisons without understanding the contexts (for example, social service in one country may be compensated for as a cash benefit in another). The information is presented in such a way that the reader can draw on the information provided and better understand the relative contexts in different countries.

Recognising the scarcity of comparative data, the report draws together what is available in each country and presents it in a helpful way for the benefit of those not necessarily familiar with the country in question. It also provides information that will assist policy makers, researchers, NGOs and service providers in better understanding issues in a broader European context.

The publication is well-timed, appearing as policy makers look further afield in considering different approaches to meeting the care needs of the so-called ageing population, and as the EU policy makers move towards a pan-European approach to the debate on social protection, of which care systems must surely be a part.

Given the complexity of systems and of regional differences, the report does not attempt to cover local political and cultural specificities, but serves as an invaluable starting point for those wishing to find out more. The selection of local case studies at the end of national chapters illustrate the roles of local players, within national contexts.

It is hoped that a future issue of the report will include countries from Southern Europe; similarly in the future, there is likely to be growing interest in the care systems of Central and Eastern European countries.

Eurolink Age, London


This text is primarily the revised, paperback edition of the hardback *Handbook of Clinical Psychology of Ageing* published by Wiley in 1996. It is most welcome as an affordable general text for the growing field of the applied psychology of ageing. It is an essential reference for all clinicians working with older people and seems particularly suited to the needs of Clinical Psychologists in training. It is essentially a single volume guide to psychological practice with
older people. It is competitively priced, convenient in length and digestible in style. The structure of the book allows one to move from the consideration of general psychological issues to do with the processes involved in ageing to specific assessment and interventions.

The book itself can be divided into three main sections. First, there is the establishment of a scientific basis of an applied psychology of ageing in which gerontological and social processes involved in ageing are discussed. Here are the standard topics of texts on ageing – the cognitive and biological processes involved, the social aspects of ageing in a modern society and the mental health problems that this ageing may bring. All of the contributions are by recognised authorities in their areas. There is a particularly useful one on Identity Management in Later Life by Peter Coleman, which combines sound academic roots with very relevant clinical material. It is in old age that the individual's identity is under review in the same way as in adolescence, and it is a crucial issue for practitioners to comprehend and take into account when offering services. Secondly, there are the contributions which deal with the clinical problems of ageing such as dementia and other mental health problems, and the care environments in which older people find themselves. Woods provides a very clear and informative chapter on institutional care. Finally, there is a section on the psychological assessment of older people and psychological interventions undertaken with this group. The book is well constructed to lead the reader through from the general issues of psychological ageing to professional clinical work with older people.

I would regard the Woods text as a very useful standard one, the only one which covers all areas in sufficient depth to be of use to both the clinician and the researcher. However, it is primarily a clinical text and thus is particularly suitable for mental health professionals, both in training and qualified, working with older people. It is an up-to-date summary of the principal clinical and gerontological issues in the field. It is a text which provides sufficient academic information to ground its applied focus in what is known scientifically about the psychological processes of ageing. For quality of content and affordability, a book to be thoroughly recommended for the bookshelf of all mental health professionals working with older people.

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The publication details of these two reports conceal an impressive European collaboration over three years amongst groups of academics in seven countries.
Led by Dr Prue Chamberlayne and Professor Mike Rustin of the University of East London, these are two of the eight sets of working papers produced by the SOSTRIS project (Social Strategy in Risk Society) which formed part of the European Commission’s Fourth Framework TSER (Targeted Socio-Economic Research) programme concerning Social Exclusion and Social Inclusion in Europe. The unique feature of the SOSTRIS project is the major challenge it took on, namely to describe and explain meanings of social exclusion in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece and Sweden, by working with concepts and constructs derived at both the individual and the social levels, and to investigate the links between these levels. The key to this research was the use of biography and in particular the use of the socio-biographical (biographical interpretive) method developed by Gabriele Rosenthal and others in Germany (1991, 1993), and to test the usefulness of this approach in studying disadvantage and exclusion. Ultimately, the project aimed to determine whether understandings generated from biographical accounts could lead to recommendations for social policy. At the outset, the project identified six categories of risk: the early retired, single parents, ethnic minorities and migrants, unqualified youth, and ex-traditional workers. Working with a concept of risk derived from the work of Beck (1992) the researchers looked for ways to explain social disadvantage and exclusion in terms of broad societal determinants – unemployment, early retirement, enforced migration – but acknowledging that variations in the experience of such risk was likely to be determined by individual and personal experience, as well as by the cultural and historical milieux which people inhabit.

In their final report of the project, Chamberlayne and Rustin explain why they chose the socio-biographical method (1999: 20–21). They point out that to evaluate the impact and consequences of broad social change we need to be able to identify its significance for individual lives. To understand the complexity of exclusion and risk, the researcher might be aided by comparative case-studies forming the basis of broader generalisations. The socio-biographical method brings into focus an appreciation of agency and the strategies with which individuals successfully or unsuccessfully tackle risk over time. Solutions to inequality and disadvantage need to take into consideration the ways in which people deal with and respond to the circumstances in which they live and require an appreciation of the reflexivity with which they shape and determine their lives. The socio-biographical method has a distinctive approach to interviewing and to the analysis of the interview text. All participants in the SOSTRIS project were trained in the method, and their interview transcripts were analysed according to principles which differentiated between the ‘told story’ and the identification of different forms of presenting the self. These different forms are distinguished in terms of: argumentation, narration and description. Further stages in text analysis are also undertaken in order to identify possible silences, points of stress and finally to follow a grounded theory strategy to generate sociological hypotheses outlining and explaining the differences between typical life stories in these seven European national settings. The two reports reviewed here, on early retirement and ex-traditional workers, include profiles and case studies which are all derived from the socio-biographical method. While all the risk
categories identified have relevance for ageing across life stages, perhaps these
two are most relevant to the interests of readers of this journal. Having applied
the method, what are the results reported and how should they be regarded?

In her ‘composite report’ on the cases of the early retired (Working Paper 2)
Dr Antonella Spanó of Centro Ricerche e Servizi in Naples, Italy, draws out
a number of generalisations in which she identifies the risk attached to the
status of early retired. While some of these might be familiar to readers of
this journal, for example the continued centrality of work as a defining
characteristic, and the retreat into the private sphere, comparison across the
different nations enables her to draw out some requirements for the early
retired. These are, the need for activity, for ‘social roots’ and for a ‘sense of
usefulness’ (p. 7). These she argues cannot be guaranteed only by economic
measures but by the promotion of policies which support and maintain social
networks which enable people to maintain access to work, to maintain social
esteem and to engage in a reflexivity which can ward off the ‘paralysis of
identity’ (p. 6) which early retirement risks. However, national politics may
determine the circumstances under which early retirement is experienced. So,
for example, Greek people interviewed tended to have a positive attitude
towards a life stage which, if it was not always within their choosing seemed
to offer opportunities for continuity and the identification of opportunities for
further development in the personal and public or work spheres. This more
positive orientation seems likely to have a basis in the rather generous
provision being made for early retired people at the time the interviews were
conducted. This was not true of the seven English men who had more mixed
experiences. However, their contrasting working class and middle class
backgrounds were no predictors of early retirement as risk. In fact the success
of their transitions into what Chamberlayne and King describe as ‘de-
standardised society’ away from the certainties of stable and long-standing
employment opportunities seem to depend on the extent to which they were
able to absorb such biographical complexities as family reconstitution, their
own and partner’s long-term illness and more instrumental attitudes towards
work at earlier points in their lives. The impact of industrial, and agricultural,
re-structuring has been felt right across Europe and the biographies of those
people who had once worked in jobs and industries which no longer exist,
testify to the effect of the loss of collective support, and the vulnerability of
workers who make transitions into labour markets which are fluctuating and
marginal. This ‘risk’ group contrasts with the early retired in that their
options tend to be restricted by the need to earn and a consequent depend-
ence on the least regulated areas of the labour market and on social wel-
fare payments. For these workers, loss of work identity is compounded by
expressions of fear, humiliation and personal and social precariousness. Lack
of choice at all stages in their lives, originating in limited options for work,
meant that survival of events such as early death of parents, abandonment
by parents, migration by parents, family illness and violence and alcoholism
in the family, frequently led to long-term disadvantage both psychological and
social. The research of which these reports are only a small part (and of which
I have only been able to give a brief account here), has played a major role
in opening up biographical analysis for debate and discussion. Here we can see
the steps in data analysis laid out, the working through from method to theory
and back, and the construction of case studies from interview transcripts.
Anyone interested in the move towards biography in the social sciences should
find much of interest in these reports.

Working Paper 6 includes two useful chapters from Tom Wengraf and Mike
Rustin, which respectively consider methodological and theoretical debates.
Wengraf confronts questions of subjectivity and representativeness in a
method which, in this case, depends on not more than ten interviews in relation
to each topic. Rustin follows with a consideration of ‘the turn to biography’
in which he draws on sociological literatures which have centred on the
individual while pointing to the contribution of the psychoanalytic method. In
both disciplines, he argues, the frame of reference is critical in grounding the
significance of individual experience. The frameworks of sociology, evidence of
social structures and the processes which determine them, can only be known
from observations and knowledge of ‘individual life stories’ (p. 69). Similarly,
in psychoanalysis, particular case studies are explained in relation to a specific
theoretical frame of reference. It is this continuing association of broad theory
with the recording and explaining of individual told experience which makes
the work of the SOSTRIS project so interesting. For gerontologists there is the
possibility of seeing in close up a method which has explanatory potential for
decision-taking, network construction and meaning, with obvious relevance
for critical analysis of late-life circumstance and choice. There are obvious
implications for the elaboration of more responsive and personally aware
social policies too. Undoubtedly this is a method which depends on generous
amounts of time for the analysis of few cases, and it may therefore not appeal
to most funders. The question inevitably arises to what extent might we expect
to see biographical methods featuring in successful funding bids? A few
months ago I might have answered that this would be unlikely, but with
increased interest in narrative approaches to research in the typically
qualitative-resistant domain of medicine, I wonder if we are about to see the
incorporation of stories, telling and experience, alongside other forms of
evidence in the repertoire of acceptable research methods.

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