

informal supporters happy in their work. This is an area of work into which the economics of altruism and of the family has been slow to enter.

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Social Policy

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Meredith Minkler. 'Generational equity' and the new victim blaming: an emerging public policy issue. *International Journal of Health Services*, 16, 4 (1986), 539–551.

Minkler considers the arguments made by a newly formed US national organisation – Americans for Generational Equity (AGE) – which have had considerable exposure in the mass media. AGE claims that the elderly in the USA, as a result of the successful 'gray' lobby, are now wealthy and powerful; that since they are no longer poor their demands on the nation's limited resources are unreasonable; that if a once-appropriate sympathy is extended indefinitely, their demands for great Social Security payments and more Medicare will undermine the national economy and the resources available to the more needful young poor; that inter-generational conflict is already occurring and is likely to be further exacerbated.

Minkler tackles these claims and their presumptive basis head on. She argues, first, that although the economic condition of the elderly *as a whole* has improved since the 1960s, deep pockets of poverty continue to exist, especially but not exclusively among the women of ethnic minorities. She foresees a disproportionate increase in the numbers of such people among the old, as well as of those who are over 85, who have greater needs for services. Second, she asserts, giving examples, that the redefinition of poverty which has recently taken place covers up the true financial status of substantial proportions of the elderly. She also shows that Medicare provides only 45% of the medical care bill of the elderly, and that recently health care costs have risen at roughly double the rate of the general consumer price index.

A third argument is that AGE makes no mention of the effects on younger age groups of the income transfers to the aged. Such transfers mean that the burden on the young of the medical and social care of their elderly kin is lightened, and Minkler produces evidence from public opinion surveys to show that this is welcomed by old and young alike. She points to inter-generational *consensus* not *conflict* on this score.

Minkler then deals with a more subtle and disturbing argument, namely that since whites are relatively more likely to survive into old age than blacks or Hispanics, the young of the last named ethnic minorities are being asked to bear a disproportionate part of the burden of the elderly, despite the fact that they are the least well-off among the young. Although recognising that it is impossible to forecast attitude changes consequent upon future shifts in the demographic composition of the population, she argues that, at present, young blacks and hispanics are more, not less likely than young whites to favour income transfer to and health care benefits for the elderly.

In concluding, Minkler argues that the proposition that social policy should be guided by considerations of generational equity is a red herring, designed to obscure alternative options, which do not call for choices between servicing the needs of the elderly or of the young. In particular, she calls on evidence from surveys to show that the majority of Americans would choose to reduce expenditures on defence in order to maintain or increase social security payments and health care to the elderly.

COMMENT

Although there is no formal lobby raising issues of inter-generational equity in social policy in Britain at present, the arguments used by AGE are sometimes to be found in the literature relating to social policy or heard in political debate. The analysis of the function which such arguments perform for governments anxious to reduce expenditure or overall commitment to the welfare of the disadvantaged is therefore useful and timely. Victim-blaming and scape-goating are time-honoured practices of governments. The plea for inter-generational equity, on the surface, appears rational and reasonable. Deeper examination of its assumptions and its logic, however, suggest that it can provide spurious support for policies which in essence encourage ageism, not equity.

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