

Abstracts

Sociology and Social Policy

John Bond

Much of the social science literature on ageing concentrates on old age, and usually focuses on old age as a social problem. The approach is often static and emphasises the homogeneity of old people. A recent volume of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* provides another, perhaps more rewarding perspective on ageing. Entitled *Middle and Late Life Transitions*, this volume brings together a number of articles in which ageing is viewed as a dynamic process linking a number of stages of the life cycle. A common theme of the articles is the infinite variety of human experiences of ageing, and their focus is not usually on ageing as a social problem. As always my selection is rather idiosyncratic but attempts to link together those articles which focus on the family and ageing.

L. E. Troll. Family life in middle and old age: the generation gap. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 464 (1982), 38-46.

The theme of this article concerns the importance of understanding the ageing process in the context of an individual's previous life history. The author notes that differences between generations are usually highlighted by studies of adolescent children and their parents. Little attention has been paid to relationships between older parents and their adult and perhaps not so young children. The author argues that studies which have focused on parent-child relationships among younger age-groups have been family orientated while those concerned with older people have been individual orientated.

Studies of parent-child relations in later life have focused on geographical proximity, help, communication and feelings. Data from the cross-national study¹ indicate the close proximity of parents to their children in later life. A variety of studies have reported the extent to which children help their parents, but few report the help that parents continue to give their children throughout their lifetime. Communication between parents and their children has been measured in terms of frequency of visiting but, as Troll points out, the telephone has probably revolutionised this aspect of child-parent relationships. However, data

about feelings are less clear cut. The feelings felt by individuals toward their children or parents are unlikely to be openly reported in societies which place value on positive feelings between parent and child. Meaningful data are rather sparse.

Troll suggests that the patterns of communication and feelings established during the early years of life will probably be maintained throughout life. Thus the generation gap so openly talked about at the time of adolescence does not close with time, since each generation develops within a different set of values and beliefs about the taken-for-granted acts of everyday life. However, real differences in values between the two generations are ignored by each. Conflict between generations within individuals' families focuses on the trivia of everyday life. Parents who disapprove of important aspects of their children's lives such as the choice of a marriage partner will suppress their feelings and complain about the way the grandchildren are dressed. Children who are annoyed by the life-style of their parents will similarly ignore these beliefs and focus on the way that the grandchildren are spoiled.

COMMENT

Without corroborative primary data the ideas clearly presented in this short paper can only be described as working hypotheses. Given the suggestion, however, that people suppress the major differences between the generations it is difficult to envisage how these ideas might be reliably tested. Optimistically Troll suggests that respondents might be more frank to the survey interviewer than they would be to family members. The family is a very private area of life and it is difficult to imagine such openness with interviewers.

L. M. Tamir. Men at middle age: developmental transitions. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 464, 47-56.

This article looks at men at middle age and highlights the psychological and social transitions which occur at that time. Middle age can be seen as the time when the individual starts counting forward to retirement and eventual death and stops counting backwards from birth. During this transition the individual will be concerned with five specific psychological tasks. He must deal with health issues, his imminent death, self-assessment, his sex role, and his responsibilities to future generations. In middle age men will not suddenly experience ill health but they will become increasingly aware of various symptoms of

physical decline. Of course, related to the emotional reactions to physical decline is the realisation that men are not immortal. The middle-aged man must make peace with himself in order to survive the years leading up to death. Self-assessment would appear to be the central task of middle age. It involves the individual in an examination of his life and the recognition of life's contradictions. Middle age is also characterised by changes in the family life cycle which may be accompanied by subtle changes in the role of father, husband and wage earner. The final psychological task of middle age involves taking responsibility for future generations by offering guidance to the young or by making a personal imprint on the world.

Tamir examines these five psychological tasks in relation to the three central spheres of life: at work, in the family and with social relations. At work middle-aged man reaches a plateau. At best a lateral shift in occupation is possible. He must assess whether or not he has achieved his life work goals, and if he has, whether he is satisfied. Either way an assessment of where to go now is required. Tamir reviews a variety of research, including her own,² and concludes that during middle age there is no relationship between work and an individual's general well-being. This leads her to conclude that during middle age there is a move towards disengagement from the work environment.

Disengagement from work has implications for both the family and social relationships. Other family members may also be experiencing life-cycle changes: children may be leaving home and wives may be exploring other avenues from that of housewife. Tamir establishes from her review that at this time changes occur in the relationship between husbands and wives. Middle age is the catalyst which brings about the change of focus from a mutual concern with the care of children to a mutual concern with their own marital relationship. The outcome of this shift may be increased interpersonal tension leading to a breakdown in the relationship and marriage or to increased personal understanding and a closer marital relationship. In the latter case marital contentment replaces work satisfaction as a major source of well-being during middle age.

Little is known about the social relationships of middle-aged men. Research findings are contradictory. Some indicates a renewed interest in friends and the community; other research indicates a lull in friendship patterns. Tamir concludes from her own research³ that it is only during middle age that a sense of well-being is influenced by social network patterns; the social side of life plays a major contribution to the middle-aged man's sense of well-being.

Thus, Tamir suggests that during middle age a man's sense of

well-being is no longer maintained by occupational satisfaction but by personal fulfilment. This conclusion has implications for social policy. Opportunities for an individual to reassess himself and his life could improve the quality of life not only for a given individual but for his whole family, especially his wife. To facilitate this policy makers, commercial enterprises and counselling services should promote a psychological sense of balance for middle-aged men.

COMMENT

The ideas expressed in this article are probably better documented in the author's recent book,⁴ and the article has certainly given me an incentive to go and read it! My major doubt concerns the policy implications of these ideas. I am unable to envisage, for example, how a better sense of well-being can be facilitated by policy makers, commercial enterprises or counselling services. However, perhaps the point of the article is to sensitise us all to these ideas.

A. M. O'Rand and J. C. Henretta. Women at middle age: developmental transitions. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **464**, 57–64.

The similarity between the present article and the previous one by Tamir is in the title only. O'Rand and Henretta take a totally sociological perspective on the development transitions of middle-aged women. The emphasis is on the dual effects of a woman's biography and the historical experiences of her age cohort. The authors argue that transitions in a woman's middle years can only be understood in relation to what she has experienced in the earlier years of her life. A secondary focus is the diversity of life careers among women which lead up to midlife transitions.

The twentieth century has found a large number of social changes which have affected the lives of women in different age cohorts. Declining fertility and extended longevity means that women now spend a smaller proportion of their lives on child rearing and a larger proportion in the labour force. New life styles in marriage and family formation have led to a diversity of experiences among women. Late marriage and pregnancy, an increase in the proportion of single-parent families and serial marriage, all imply quite different life experiences. Increased labour-force participation interrelates with these other trends to produce a wide variation in experience and potential for middle-aged women.

The authors argue that family and work patterns are interwoven in women's lives. They describe a diverse group but show that isolation is common to most middle-aged women whatever their life experiences. Two categories of women are described: the career woman who has her first child in her mid thirties and the non-working wife of the same age whose first child is about to leave school. Both women's experiences exemplify the effects of low fertility and extended predicted longevity of their generation. These patterns suggest that both women will participate in the labour force in the second part of their lives.

The first woman has a lifetime pattern of labour force participation and commitment to a particular career. To achieve this she will depend heavily on a variety of child-care support systems which will absorb a sizeable proportion of her earnings. She may find herself supporting both her children and her elderly parents by the time she reaches late middle age. She will probably retire at the normal retirement age with sufficient contributions toward a pension which will maintain her in old age.

The second woman will experience the same kinds of life cycle patterns but will have a poorer wage and pension structure that may lead her to work later in life than the first woman. A number of trends will put her at a serious disadvantage: age discrimination, lower assets, sex-segregated occupations and industries and inflation. These disadvantages will be exacerbated by widowhood or divorce.

COMMENT

Again the paucity of data in this article is rather disappointing. The emphasis on the diversity of experiences in an individual's life is well illustrated, and the arguments as rehearsed do fit the available national data.

J. Sprey and S. H. Matthews. Contemporary grandparenthood: a systematic transition. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 464, 91–103.

Like the previous article the present one emphasises the importance of a person's biography and the historical experience of her age cohort in the transition to grandparenthood. The authors review a number of writers who see grandparenthood as a static phenomenon and one which is not a significant life event. Sprey and Matthews condemn this approach, arguing that to some individuals becoming a grandparent is a significant middle-age transition. But the timing of this transition

will of course be dependent on the age of first child for both parent and grandparent. The same kinds of factors that we saw influencing the transition of women to middle age will also influence the transition to grandparenthood. Like the transition for middle-aged women, the transition to grandparenthood represents a diversity of life cycle experiences.

The authors are also concerned with a common focus of grandparent research which suggests that relationships between grandparent and grandchild are influenced by the personal choice of the grandparent. They illustrate clearly how the family structure encourages parents to be mediators between grandparents and grandchildren. To take an extreme example, grandchildren who are not geographically close must rely on parents to facilitate a relationship with their grandparents.

Much of the work about grandparents focuses on *the* role of grandparents. Sprey and Matthews emphasise the narrowness of this approach. As indicated, the grandparent role is extremely diverse. Taking a grandparent-role perspective fails to explain the part grandparents play within the extended family network of the family. There is no evidence to suggest that interaction between grandchildren and grandparents is unstructured or reflects personal choices. Rather it suggests that there is a diversity in the quality of structuring in these relationships.

COMMENT

In each of the four articles included in this selection a number of useful ideas have been clearly expressed. However, all suffer from a lack of substantive data, and the present article is no exception. Without data it is difficult to persuade somebody who subscribes to the stereotype of grandparenthood that it will not necessarily be like that for them. The subjects discussed in these articles fail to face up to the difficulties of challenging facts about things we not only all take for granted, but with which we are intimately related.

The message of these articles is quite clear. In middle age there are a variety of experiences for both men and women. The way it will affect us, is affecting us, or affected us will depend on our own biographies. Since these vary so will our personal experiences of middle age.

NOTES

- 1 Shanas, E., Townsend, P., Wedderburn, D. *et al.* *Old People in Three Industrial Societies*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1968.

2 Tamir, L. M. *Men in their Forties: the Transition to Middle Age*, Springer, New York, 1982.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

Health Care Research Unit
The University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Psychology and Psychiatry

Jeffrey Garland

T. C. Twining. 'Social skill, psychological disorder, and aging.'
International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 17, 1 (1983), 7-13.

With this brief and thought-provoking paper Charles Twining sets out 'to examine, in the context of the few reported studies, the utility of the social skill model in psychological disorder among the elderly, and to consider the possible development in the application of this model to problem analysis and therapy' (p. 8).

This is a worthwhile ambition indeed: social interaction can pose major problems for such old people. Contacts, when they do occur, can be relatively unrewarding for all concerned, or even downright aversive, and the sharpest difficulties are often found between old people and the crucial immediate caregivers. With a few fortunate exceptions, the social atmosphere within a family maintaining an old person with major psychological problems usually can be located on a continuum of disturbance ranging from strained, insincere goodness, through barely controlled hysteria, to pitched battle.

It is sad, therefore, that the author promises more than he performs, pointing out a way but never arriving at his declared destination. An early hazard en route is that the context he describes is not complete: recent books by Roger Patterson¹ and by Eyde & Rich² (which could have appeared after this paper was written) indicate that there has been a greater depth of studies using a social skills approach with the elderly than Twining suggests, and a number of those which he does not take into account appeared before 1982. It would have been more than a brief exercise to have reviewed this area thoroughly, and without a careful review it appears premature to propose, as he does here, that a *revised* social skill model needs to be developed to deal with the particular problems confronting old people.

As Twining reminds us, the best-documented model of social performance, by Argyle and his co-workers, stresses the importance of serial motor skills, co-ordinating speaking, listening, and a wide variety of