

Ageing and the Care of Older People in Europe

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Richard Hugman

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For my parents
who are pleased to say they are
learning to grow older disgracefully

Contents

List of Tables	viii
Preface and Acknowledgements	ix
1 Ageing in European Society	1
2 Polarities and Similarities: An Outline Framework	21
3 History, Economy and Culture	46
4 Respect and Abuse	73
5 Older People and the Welfare Response	97
6 Institution and Community	125
7 Europe: An Ageing Society	152
Bibliography	174
Index	192

List of Tables

1.1	Life expectancy at birth, EC countries, 1990	7
3.1	Proportions of total populations aged over 65 years, EC countries, 1990	48
3.2	The age at which women and men may obtain retirement pensions, EC countries, 1990	54
5.1	Degrees of communality in residence and level of care, by service type	102
5.2	Two spectra of welfare provision compared	112
6.1	Approximate percentage of people aged over 65 years using institutional or home-care services, late 1980s	125

Preface and Acknowledgements

As we approach the end of the twentieth century one of the most noticeable features of advanced industrial society is that of an increase in the numbers of older people, as well as of the proportions of older people within the overall population. This phenomenon has generated both a growing general interest in ageing and old age and the development of gerontology, bringing together a variety of disciplines in an applied field of enquiry. There has been an accompanying increase in the number of research reports and other texts dealing with different aspects of ageing. For the student of old age there is now a wealth of material, especially that published in English. So, why another book about older people?

The main reason for writing this book is that, although much work has now been done with regard to ageing and old age, for the most part it tends to concentrate on specific national contexts. At a time when Europe increasingly (and however falteringly at times) is becoming an integrated society in which economic, political, cultural and social exchange across national boundaries is ever more important, it becomes necessary to find ways of crossing frontiers in respect of all issues. Ageing, the place of older people in our societies and the care provided for those older people who require it raise important questions for all European countries. Gerontological work from North America has tended to dominate discussions and there is still a relative lack of dialogue between European countries on this topic, although this is now being addressed in developments such as the European Community (EC) Observatory on Ageing, Eurolink Age, and work undertaken by both the Council of Europe and the Commission of the European Community.

This book concentrates on comparative perspectives within Europe and considers the implications of the social construction of and responses to old age in the various European countries. Both the diversities and the commonalities between the different parts of Europe provide a rich background against which to further develop the distinctively European contributions to understanding old age and the place of older people in society. One example of this is the theoretical approach based on political economy,

grounding social gerontology in a structural analysis of the context in which old age is perceived and experienced. Indeed, as I argue in some detail, this approach provides a cogent underpinning to such debates, and, moreover, it is one which derives from the traditions of European social science. For this reason, in the early chapters I focus on more theoretical aspects, of how ageing and old age may be understood socially, before proceeding in the later chapters to examine historical and contemporary evidence about the types of response which have been made to older people in the fields of health and welfare.

In writing this study I have been encouraged by contact with a range of colleagues who share an interest in a European perspective on ageing. In particular, fellow members of the research group on the family care of older 'elderly people' funded by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (co-ordinated by Robert Anderson) have provided much inspiration, most especially my colleagues at the Lancaster University, Janet Finch and Joy Carter, who formed the United Kingdom group on the project. This book, however, is much broader than that specific topic and seeks to develop an understanding of ageing and old age along several dimensions, placing questions of the care provided for older people within a wider context.

The completion of this text has benefited also from the critical scrutiny of Joy Carter, Jennifer Mason, Liz Mestheneos and Judith Triantafyllou, each of whom have read and commented on sections of drafts, and Susan Tester who read it all. Undoubtedly it is the better for their advice, and any remaining weaknesses are entirely my own responsibility. Iirini Charitou gave invaluable assistance with translation and my own struggling grasp of Greek; John Sawkins also helped with some translation. Finally, I owe thanks to Frances Arnold and Jo Campling for their encouragement and support, without which this book would not even have been started.

RICHARD HUGMAN