

Reviews

Erdman Palmore, *Social Patterns in Normal Aging*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1981, 135 pp., no price, ISBN 0 8223 0458 9.

This ought to be an important book for social gerontology. For as long as social scientists have attempted to investigate age and ageing empirically they have been aware of the special methodological problems which arise. Briefly, for those not familiar with the arguments, the problem is this: if we measure the attributes of two different age groups at any point in time the differences we observe may be due to two quite separate effects. On the one hand they may be due to the differences in age and the ageing process experienced by the older group and not yet by the younger, but on the other hand differences may be due to the fact that they belong to different cohorts, each having lived through quite different sets of historical experiences at equivalent points in their lives. Observed differences are composed of the universal features of ageing and the specific elements unique to each cohort.

Scientists, of course, are keen to identify these two elements in the ageing population, but unless there are *a priori* grounds for ruling out age or cohort their separate contributions cannot be determined in cross-sectional data. This is not only of academic interest. Consider, for example, the well-documented tendency for the elderly to utilise services less frequently relative to their needs than younger groups. It is tempting to ascribe this to the process of growing old, it might be due to some process of disengagement, or to the decline in experienced pain with ageing. Equally, and perhaps more plausibly, it might be interpreted as an effect of growing old in a particular cohort. It has been suggested that the present generation of the elderly are the last to share the values and generally lowered expectations of those born in the depression years, and observers have warned of the arrival of a new generation of elderly individuals demanding a high standard of living and a high level of service provision. The social implications of each interpretation are fundamentally different.

For these reasons it has long been argued that what we need are more longitudinal studies following the same individuals over time, so as to control for the effects of cohort differences. Of course, longitudinal studies are expensive, time consuming, and violate the normal assumptions of research funding; they are in fact *rara avis*.

The Duke Centre for the Study of Aging and Human Development has been one of the very few places where genuine longitudinal research has been possible, and in *Social Patterns in Normal Aging* we have a summarising report on the findings of longitudinal studies stretching over a period of twenty years.

The book then must be important both for its substantive findings and for what it tells us about the value of longitudinal research.

The data are drawn from two separate but related studies. The first began in 1950 and consisted of 270 non-institutionalised, elderly persons over 60 years of age who were followed up on eleven separate visits between 1955 and 1976. The second, consisting of 502 subjects over the age of 45, began in 1968 and ended in 1976, with four visits in all. The studies were conceived of as multi-disciplinary, and researchers spanned a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology and statistics. There have been two previous major publications reporting on these studies, both edited by Erdman Palmore and published by Duke University Press.¹ In this the most recent volume the author has chosen to restrict himself to reporting on that part of the data which is specifically identified as sociological, but we are promised further volumes covering other disciplinary aspects of the data.

The first lesson we learn is that nothing in research is simple. Longitudinal research alone will not uniquely identify ageing effects. Just as cross-sectional data confounded age and cohort, longitudinal data on the same persons over time combines elements due to ageing with elements due to period. In other words, changes over time are due both to ageing and to the impact of a changing social environment at the different measurement points. The Duke researchers have attempted to resolve these difficulties by the use of a 'cross-sequential' design in which measurements are made cross-sectionally at successive points in time. The overall pattern of comparisons of cohorts at one point in time, the same cohort at successive points in time, and successive cohorts at the same point in their life span can, under some conditions, allow inferences about the effects of age, period and cohort.

The volume begins by outlining five 'major issues'. These are, first, disengagement versus activity versus continuity theories; secondly, age stratification, attempting to disentangle ageing, period and cohort effects; thirdly, minority group theory, analysing the elderly as an underprivileged and unfavourably stereotyped minority; fourthly, life events and stress, the impact of life events on adjustment; and finally, homogeneity versus heterogeneity, an examination of the extent to which the elderly become more or less like one another than the population at large.

After this introduction the bulk of the book consists of chapters organised around a substantive theme, the topics covered being socio-economic status, retirement, social activity, social networks, sexual behaviour and life satisfaction. The chapters are organised in a broadly similar fashion; in each case there are three sections, the first discusses age differences in the substantive topic while the second examines the antecedents and the third the consequences of the differences which exist. Within each section existing evidence is discussed before the results from the Duke longitudinal studies are introduced to confirm, disconfirm or clarify. For the most part, then, we have a rather dense empirical analysis drawing on a range of statistical procedures, some familiar and others – like change graphs and residual change analysis – less familiar, since they were evolved by the researchers to meet the particular problems of analysing longitudinal data. Each chapter also has a convenient summary of the main empirical findings.

Undoubtedly, we have here a rich source of factual information. Anyone who needs a clear picture of the relation of ageing to any of the substantive areas covered might well turn to *Social Patterns in Normal Aging* as a first resort and find little need to look further. Existing data are adeptly summarised and supplemented by what must undoubtedly be one of the best data sources available. It is only when we stop to consider the presentation as a whole that uncomfortable questions begin to form.

The theoretical topics are linked to the substantive in a fairly desultory fashion. The issue of age, period and cohort is necessarily the most persistent theme since it underpins the longitudinal design; the remaining topics receive attention where relevant data arise.

The logic of arguments on the advantages of longitudinal or, more precisely, 'cross-sequential' research designs seem incontrovertible, and the Duke team's research effort over twenty years is astronomic and has generated quite unique data. We may approach this report, then, expecting to be surprised by the findings, to have our erroneous conclusions based on flawed cross-sectional data challenged, and we might also expect that at the theoretical level a new understanding of general processes of ageing might have emerged.

In a real sense the biggest surprise is the lack of surprises, the frequent acknowledgements in the text that the Duke findings broadly confirm existing findings. In his concluding chapter Dr Palmore briefly deals with this issue when he acknowledges that 'the issue is whether longitudinal research or cross-sequential studies are worth their greater cost...'. In a brief page he details the 'major types of findings which were possible only with a...longitudinal design'. Some are frankly trivial. For example, we are told that the educational differences between age groups are primarily a cohort effect; who would have doubted it? Others are more valuable in helping to resolve outstanding debates within the literature. For example, the general decline in activities with ageing is confirmed, but within that general trend sub-groups showing maintenance or even increase in activities are identified, casting doubt on the applicability of any general theory of disengagement or continuity. Overall, it does seem rather a disappointing catch for all these years of effort.

When we look at the theoretical content similar doubts arise. The 'major issues' which the book begins with seem to be a rather oddly assorted bunch, rather unconnected and not, I suspect, on every social gerontologist's shopping list. Some are theoretical, for example disengagement versus activity, others have a more pragmatic ring, for example minority group theory and the issue of homogeneity are not widely debated and not easily integrated with any existing body of research. To an extent that is true of this book; the emphasis on disengagement theory certainly has an archaic ring.

In all, then, a frustrating book, useful as a data source but liable to be condemned for what it doesn't do. Whether the apparent blandness is due to specific features of the research and the style of the author, or whether it resides more fundamentally in the longitudinal method ought to be pondered seriously by all of us interested in the future of longitudinal research.

GRAEME FORD

MRC Medical Sociology Unit, Aberdeen

NOTE

- 1 Erdman Palmore (ed.), *Normal Aging I: Reports from the Duke Longitudinal Studies, 1955–1969*, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1971; *Normal Aging II: Reports from the Duke Longitudinal Studies, 1970–1973*, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1975.

Janet Zollinger Giele, *Women in the Middle Years*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1982, 283 pp., no price, ISBN 0 471 09611 3.

The theme of Giele's book is best stated in the opening paragraph of the final chapter. She refers to Thomas Kuhn's thesis that science is not simply an accumulation of facts but is governed by central organising paradigms by which discrepant facts are either ignored or explained away. It is only when these facts become too numerous that a new paradigm replaces the old. Thus Giele argues that the organising paradigm that women's place is in the home can no longer be assumed. The book is organised to present the 'new' facts as well as hypotheses developed from them, all towards a new theory of women's adult development.

Themes for the book were originally developed from a series of seminars held in Boston, Massachusetts on the major dimensions of women's midlife experience. From those meetings emerged the content chapters of the book – women's health, psychological development and social roles – and a chapter on women's experience in a socialist country, the German Democratic Republic. As well, Giele has written introductory and concluding chapters suggesting in the former the basis for the new paradigm and in the latter directions for social policy and research.

Giele's first chapter is an excellent example of her thesis that scientific pursuits are organised by one's assumptions. In this case she presents the life span perspective as an appropriate framework for the understanding of the life experiences of adult women. None the less, her bias is explicit and the chapter provides a comprehensive review of the life span perspective. She argues that a general theory of adult development must include elements of both stage theories and timing theories. The former, in the mode of Erikson and Levinson, emphasise a progression through a series of stages marked by transition points. The latter are based on the idea that change is triggered by personal or environmental events and that general transitions are rare. Giele also makes a case for considering that adult development progresses differently for women than men, although she contends that such a case is risky in the present ideological climate. Finally she says that any new set of explanations about women's development is by necessity bound within the historical context in which it occurs.

In the first chapter the framework is set for the evaluation of the new research facts. The subsequent three chapters contain reviews of the physical and psychological dimensions and social roles. Each of these three chapters is written by different authors who perform have different styles of presentation,