

THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LIFE OF OLDER PEOPLE: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THREE URBAN COMMUNITIES

*by Chris Phillipson, Miriam Bernard, Judith Phillips and Jim Ogg
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This book addresses the question of how social change across the post-war to present-day period has affected the ageing experience of people living in urban communities in Britain. It will be relevant to those interested in a community studies approach to research on older persons' needs. Findings on the positive and negative dimensions to the urban experience of "ageing in place" and of the increasing importance for older persons of kin, neighbours and friends as networks of support are also relevant to New Zealand, given the current policy focus on "positive ageing" and on the notion of "social connectedness", as outlined by the Ministry of Social Development.

The main purpose of the study reported in this book has been to examine changes occurring since the post-war period to the support networks and social relationships of older persons living in Britain during the 1990s in three urban localities. The rationale for the research emerges from the findings of the well known urban community studies of Sheldon (1948), Townsend (1957) and Young and Willmott (1957) completed during Britain's post-war years, which focused on the changing nature of the family and community lives of older persons. Phillipson and his colleagues set themselves the task of returning to the same communities of Bethnal Green, Woodford and Wolverhampton 50 years later in order to explore how the social and family networks of the elderly may have altered.

An introductory chapter documents the key socio-economic and cultural changes characterising the period of the 1950s through to the 1990s. A second chapter sets out a key postulate: the authors suggest that today, in contrast to the 1950s, the elderly will enjoy a wide range of close and active ties which they maintain with kin and local community, but also with friends. The notion of social network provides the conceptual framework within which to examine the postulate. The third chapter describes key changes in the three localities since the 1950s.

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Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present empirical findings on the role played by family and neighbours in providing social support to the elderly. The most significant and supportive relationships recognised by the elderly today include two-generational networks of peers or children, a contrast to the composition of support networks identified in the 1950s which included three if not four generations. Even with increasing age, older persons remain part of support networks, referred to by the authors as “convoys” of intimate relationships. These networks do vary, however, in terms of their size (the number of people involved), their proximity (geographic distance from the older person) and their accessibility (how readily available they are when needed). Findings show that friends play an important role in maintaining social relationships and support networks.

Chapter 5 focuses on the ties older persons have with neighbours, and their views of life in their localities. It reveals that despite long-term residential attachment to their neighbourhoods, many elderly people now express a growing fear of the insecurity of the local environment, and a feeling of isolation or a sense of loss of community life, even though contacts with neighbours generally remain frequent. Chapter 6 confirms that when in need, older persons will turn to their partner, and to daughters and friends, the latter group representing an importance source of emotional support. In comparison with the baseline studies, there has been a shift towards care within couples. Older persons are also key providers of emotional and, to a lesser extent, practical support. In all three localities the authors note that exchanges of support across generations show how interdependent, rather than isolated, individuals are, and how help is reciprocal rather than one-sided. Patterns of support do, however, vary between daughters and sons and across localities.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 offer qualitative insights into family life and processes of support for older persons. Kin continue to provide support in times of hardship or grief, although they may live further apart than in the past, and there may be periods when contact is not always kept up between kin members. Interviews with younger relatives in Chapter 8 provide insights into different generational perspectives on the ageing experience. The strength of the mother–daughter relationship – a central aspect of kin relations in the 1950s – has remained, but with a greater recognition of the need for independence between the two generational groups. Chapter 9 investigates the lives of older persons in two ethnic groups: Bengalis of Bethnal Green and Indians in Wolverhampton. Qualitative findings in these communities indicate the continuity of strong family links of solidarity in the 1990s. Kin members still live within close geographic distance of each other, and several generations may share living arrangements or live very close by. Daughters continue to play a key role as support providers.

The social lives of the elderly, their experience of retirement and leisure activities are the subjects of Chapter 10. The baseline studies had depicted retirement as a period of crisis and

loss of identity for men. In the 1990s, although retirement has become a more structured and organised phase of the life course, certain continuities with the baseline studies persist: a feeling of loneliness, financial difficulties, excessive spare time and isolation from broader networks of work or community. However, the 1990s symbolise changing lifestyles during retirement, with elderly respondents reporting that they are involved in a wide range of activities.

In their concluding chapter the authors note that the most prominent change from the baseline studies is that the experience of ageing is now lived in a family environment restricted to immediate members, spanning only one or two generations. Giving and receiving support is still a strong characteristic of the family networks of the elderly, particularly among couples, but their social relationships now encompass friends and neighbours. These changes are taken to signify the better “management” of relationships in older age in the 1990s, where a variety of social relationships and involvement in “personal communities” are maintained, despite a climate of dispersion and fragmentation of kin networks.

The key contribution the study makes in understanding how processes of social change in urban contexts influence the ageing experience stems from its methodological perspective, which has been anchored at the micro-social level of the community. Despite the impact of long-term demographic changes on each of the community’s populations – improvements to life expectancies, inward and outward migration, contracting family and household size – the highly localised historical trajectories of economic development, religious and class influences made apparent by the community-based perspective clearly illustrate how varied the ageing experience may be.

The authors clearly highlight the need for a policy orientation that reflects the diversity of support needs the elderly have. The book also draws attention to the fact that even if the family is still taken by policy makers to be the lynchpin in the support networks of the elderly, it is now increasingly composed of a restricted nucleus of close kin, some of whom may themselves be dealing with the challenges of ageing. Rejecting the image of old age as one of imminent dependency, the authors remind us that older persons are often providers of support. The book thus makes a significant contribution to the wealth of sociological literature that has sprung up over the last few decades illustrating the capacity of family and kinship networks to adapt to change, and the fundamental role they play in maintaining and strengthening intergenerational links of solidarity or “social connectedness”. Finally, the book reinforces the need for policy makers and public alike to view the ageing experience as one not necessarily dogged by dependency, but where older members of society maintain active links with others as both providers and receivers of support.

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