

Julia Johnson, Sheena Rolph and Randall Smith (2010). *Residential Care Transformed: Revisiting 'The Last Refuge'*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 272 pp. ISBN: 978 0 230 0242 9 (hardback)

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Residential care for older people has for many decades been a symbol for vulnerability, passivity and the last resort. In understanding the institution of care homes, Peter Townsend's book *The Last Refuge* has been a landmark study for both the academic world and the social and political commentators and decision makers. Julia Johnson, Sheena Rolph and Randall Smith manage with the help of 100 volunteers to not only revitalise the groundbreaking work of Townsend but also produce an inspiring and challenging document on the study of the lives of a large group of society. The book gives insights into the changing nature and the changing context of care for elderly people, and, as I would argue, more importantly, provides insights into the potentials, the specifics, the joys and difficulties of empirical social inquiry.

This book is based on a "revisiting study" of Townsend's empirical materials collected in the 1950s. The authors manage to combine their deep appreciation and gratefulness to Peter Townsend and his work, with the expression of curiosity and rigour of social scientific and historical exploration. When they lay out their motivations for the revisiting study

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in the first chapter, the reader (students and experienced academics alike) is clearly called to (re)read Townsend's work as one of the most significant grand scale empirical works of the social sciences. Through archive work they start out to revisit the still existing care homes of Townsend's study and to trace the history of those who ceased to exist.

Particularly the attention to methodological conceptualisations of research deserves positive recognition. The authors to a large extent replicate the methods used by Townsend and his colleagues and reflect on their own use of methods in the light of recent debates on doing research. In their attempt "to replicate as far as possible his method of inquiry" (p. 39) they employ voluntary researchers, carry out interviews with managers, staff and residents of care homes, ask some of the respondents to keep a diary for one week, analyse building and facilities schedules, brochures, menus and home reports and, as Townsend did, they take and analyse photographs from the homes they visit. Particular attention is given in the book to the involvement of older people as volunteers in the collection of data, information and materials. The authors' reflections on the use of volunteer researchers not only focus on the gains for the volunteers and the research process, but also include a consideration of this methodological attempt for many possible strands of empirical work. The use of visual means, such as photographs, is explored but here a stronger focus on the development of visual sociology would have strengthened the discussion. When it comes to the development of social scientific (and/or historical) research over time, the book mainly introduces the need for reflection on the research process; it only marginally, however, reflects critically on the own considerations of research methods and the historical development of research. While the authors present a strong case for the analysis of the historical and social context of care in the periods of research they do not apply the same rigour in their reflection on social inquiry.

The revisiting study provides an illuminating account of the changes that care for the elderly has undergone. Important aspects, from the shift in ownership of care homes from public to private to large scale welfare state developments involving privatisation and corporatisation of care, are discussed and put into context of the lives of care home residents at different times. The authors argue that the comparison of two periods demonstrates the change that care for the elderly has undergone but they

also identify a recurrence of political/academic discourses (e.g. the ageing timebomb) as framing the empirical situation. The overall quality of care, they argue, has substantially improved but, as the standards and expectations have changed significantly, the contrasts and inequalities have persisted. In the light of political developments, local authorities are not the owners or providers of care anymore but purchase care from the voluntary or private sector.

While *The Last Refuge* was part of the “anti-institutional literature”, this book demonstrates that care homes now often have a more institutional feel than in the past (p. 108) due to the regulations and laws governing them. The “privatization of the care home market and the predominance of the hotel model of care” (p. 163) have led to a situation in which legislation and regulation have taken the place of direct control and execution of power in limiting people’s autonomy. The authors also place some emphasis on the fact that the move to the market has worsened the situation for elderly people. The voluntary sector has proven to be the most stable one (most surviving homes) which also delivers the best quality of care. The link between national (and international) political developments and its manifestation in the provision of residential care is an outstanding example for the relationship between ideological conceptualisation and the empirical experience of people.

Due to the objectives of the book and its broad focus some aspects are unfortunately only explored marginally. The authors for example emphasise the persistence of the ideology of “home-making” in the 1950s and now and the relationship with the ideology what “home” means in society. The book mentions the inherent contradiction of creating a “home from home”, and the authors argue that the “negative image of residential care is perhaps the most striking continuity of all” (p. 210). While the care home is thus still constructed as the “last resort”, the book does not explore this ideology and persistence of discourses any further.

In identifying the differences and continuities between residential care in the 1950s and now, the authors succeed in emphasising the broad historical developments in the conceptualisation of welfare states and care while avoiding oversimplification. This book is important for any social scientist, empirical researcher and student of any social science discipline, and the fact that the data are recorded and stored promises a new revisiting

study and studies which can, on the basis of historical developments, analyse the ideological persistence of the stigma of institutional care. The research approach demonstrates the “simple point that care homes comprise a combination of people (staff and residents) and bricks and mortar (the building)” (p. 42) but also allows the embedding of research within particular ideological, social, political and cultural circumstances.