

Susan McDaniel and Zachary Zimmer (eds.)
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Challenges, Opportunities and Implications.*
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The ageing of the world's population is no longer a phenomenon restricted to wealthy or developed nations, but is evident in all continents, including Africa and all regions, including the Middle East. Clearly the time has come for us to take stock of the demographic transition at the global level to understand what population ageing on this unprecedented scale will mean for society, the economy, policy and the countless other things that are likely to be affected. This volume boldly confronts the issue, with some regard for the many who have gone before, but also with a refreshing energy that suggests that in the 21st century and with the benefit of some experience, perhaps we can see the shape of things to come more clearly.

To address ageing on a planetary scale, the collection draws together a few truly global chapters with a larger number of individual chapters that present local or regionally based studies from an interesting variety of countries. The edited collection began as the proceedings of a conference held at the University of Utah in 2009 and soon grew larger to accommodate additional chapters, commensurate with the ambition expressed in its title. Yet it quickly becomes apparent, to the reader as well as the editors, that the

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enterprise is simply too extensive at the current point in time to be examined in a single, relatively short volume. Hence, the editors lament in the Introduction as well as in the concluding chapter that “no single volume, of course, can be comprehensively global . . . no volume, no matter how lengthy, can include all dimensions of a topic as large as global ageing” (pp. 309–315). When ambition is this large, how do we measure success?

One of the key lessons that the editors draw out of this impressive – if incomplete – survey of global ageing is that what we lack is a “theoretical framing” that could serve to organise, direct and integrate the analysis. As they point out, age is a structural yet changing feature of all societies. It has been subject to theorising and sociological analysis in both classic social theory and more social–psychological accounts of life and the life course such as disengagement and activity theories. Yet nowhere, except in the popular and the public political imagination, is population ageing seen as central to understanding the way that history operates. It would have been impressive if the volume had been able to advance the search, but alas, readers seeking such a framework will not find it in this volume. Is the absence of theory to be one of the ongoing features of global ageing in this century – a legacy of the failure and disappointment of theory in the preceding century?

The lack of a theoretical framework is presented as an important finding in the conclusion of the volume. In its place, the editors crafted out a rough-and-ready common-sense framework that covers a good number of the most important issues. Following a general introductory chapter in which the editors point out that ageing is now a global phenomenon, the reader is treated to a truly engaging and enlightening demographic analysis by the French demographer François Heran. The remainder of the work is then divided into three key topics: healthy ageing and health care; the ageing workforce, retirement and the provision of pensions; and shifting inter-generational relations. This loose framework enables the volume to draw together an impressive set of papers from a number of prominent and internationally well-respected scholars in the field. This is enough to ensure that a careful reading will reward most of those – academics, policy makers, practitioners and the general public – who are searching for a better understanding of this massive, but incompletely understood, social transformation that is taking place around us.

Heran's chapter on demography is succinct and masterful, an exposition worthy of inclusion in the readings of any tertiary-level course on ageing. So, too, are a number of other chapters in the collection. Codrina Rada, for example, presents a decisive analysis of the impact of ageing on the workforce and economy, demonstrating that demographic pessimism based on arguments about dependency ratios and the need to increase retirement age simply miss the point about productivity and the existing labour surplus. Sara Arber, too, provides a convincing examination of the demography of age, gender, marital status and intergenerational relations, demonstrating the power of a clear analysis of demographic statistics published by the United Nations. She shows the significance of gender for understanding the diversity of developments across a range of different nations. Focussing on the question of whether intergenerational relationships can support the increasing needs for financial support and care required by rapidly increasing ageing populations, she demonstrates how four social changes have different impacts in different international settings. The four changes she highlights are transnational and rural–urban migration, the increasing participation of women in paid work, the decreasing use of multigenerational households and the reduction in fertility and the impact of increases in childlessness. The final chapter by George Leeson and Hafiz Khan, using data from 26 quite diverse countries drawn from the Global Ageing Survey, is also interesting in the way that it challenges assumptions about the displacement of family support by state services.

A chapter by Eileen Crimmins and five others is an interesting but rather oddly fitting chapter in this collection. It is the only chapter based on medical analysis, comparing the physiological changes associated with ageing in seven diverse nations (United States, United Kingdom, Japan, China, Taiwan, Mexico and Indonesia) and among the Tsimane, a traditional tribal people from Bolivia with a life expectancy of just 42 years. The chapter presents measures from large national surveys in each country, demonstrating that many of the supposed health markers of ageing vary widely between countries. The body mass index, for example, is shown to vary considerably between countries, with inter-country variation being greater than the effect of age.

Between the chapters providing comparative international analyses are a number of much more focussed studies. Dorly Deeg's exposure of

“new myths of ageing” is refreshing to read and surprisingly liberating. It is based on detailed data from the Netherlands, including the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam. Although using data from just one small country, her conclusions undermine a number of new, generally overly optimistic myths about ageing that have taken hold well beyond the Dutch borders. Neena Chappell’s account of filial caregiving amongst Hong Kong Chinese, Canadian Chinese and Caucasian Canadians, too, is powerful in that she links her analysis both to an exploration of the cultural and normative dimensions of familial caregiving and to theories of social cohesion and social capital.

Other chapters present accounts of topics and national settings not generally encountered in discussions of ageing. Alam’s chapter on ageing in India demonstrates that here, too, the impact of population ageing is significant, contrasting with Kathrin Komp’s paper on retirement and changing work patterns in Europe. Also interesting is an analysis of the impact of religious practice in Taiwan by Mira Hidajat and colleagues, as it explores questions about the link between religious affiliation and longevity in a very different, more spiritual and less communal context as compared to that of religion in the West. Perhaps most chilling is Kim Korinek’s exploration of increasing loneliness and ageing in Russia and Bulgaria. She argues that there are several quality-of-life disadvantages facing older adults in Eastern Europe as these countries go through the transition from “red to grey”. In Russia, the life expectancy of males has actually fallen quite dramatically, while in Bulgaria, the out-migration of younger generations adds to other facts to help produce significant isolation, loneliness and deprivation for many older people. Once again, gender is a key feature – in both countries studied, older men appear to be significantly more disadvantaged than women.

This is an interesting, although not definitive, collection on the topic of global ageing. It has a number of chapters worthy of further study. The need for theory, which the volume does little to remedy, is likely to be a vacuum which soon will see new contenders vying with old for attention. What the absence of theory can do is open up the space for such an eclectic collection as this.