

Editorial

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The 1997 conference of the International Association of Gerontology, to be held in Adelaide, Australia, is the first to be held in the southern hemisphere. If this issue of *Ageing and Society* is seen as a microcosm of the World Congress, this editorial provides an opportunity to bring an antipodean perspective to bear on our attempts to understand ageing and society.

Malcolm Johnson, in his editorial in the first issue of *Ageing and Society*, published in 1981, identified developing a greater understanding of human ageing as the primary concern of the journal. He went on to stress that the international character of the journal had to be reflected in the origins of the authors and in a truly universal interest in the diversity of cultural influences on ageing processes. These aims have been well met in the intervening years and the contents of this issue is further evidence. Not only are the authors from geographically diverse locations, but the topics they canvass demonstrate how phenomena that have a level of general interest also have a degree of specificity in different societies.

Each of the papers in this issue demonstrates, in very different ways, that better understanding of ageing requires better understanding of the societies in which people grow old, and how change in those societies affects the experience of growing old. Here, Australia finds itself one of the youngest countries of the OECD, but one of the oldest of the Asia Pacific region. But not for long. In demographic terms, Japan is already older than Australia, and the rapidly industrialising countries of north Asia are catching up fast. The size of the older populations of many Asian countries also warrants note; the number of people aged 65 years and over in Japan exceeds the whole Australian population. These differences in demography are more easily comprehended than the complex differences in society and culture. Ageing is already under scrutiny in many of the countries of the Asia Pacific region, and ageing is starting to attract attention elsewhere in the southern hemisphere. This diversity is evident in the papers by Choi on Korea and by Moller on South Africa, presented at the 1993 IAG

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Congress in Budapest, and subsequently published in *Ageing and Society* (Choi 1996; Moller 1994).

A major task for those involved in organising the Adelaide Congress and for those attending it – as for the editors and readers of this journal – will be to derive some levels of general understanding from the diversity of presentations. It is to be hoped that the long distance view will bring contrasts into sharper focus rather obscuring them in overgeneralisations about the globalisation of ageing.

The World Congress is, above all, a meeting of national gerontology associations. Their gathering together prompts a second set of questions about the role of these associations in furthering our understanding of ageing. The response of many national associations is to publish a journal; the British Society of Gerontology has cast its international net much more widely and more purposefully than most with its support of *Ageing and Society*. The internationalisation of national journals has otherwise been mainly through incidental inclusion of papers submitted by authors from other countries, or through the occasional publication of special issues. A case in point here is the special issue of the *Australian Journal on Ageing* (Volume 15, No. 2, 1996), published in conjunction with the Hong Kong Journal of Gerontology, following the IAG Asia Oceania Regional Congress held in Hong Kong in late 1995. Another is the special issue of the *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue Canadienne du Vieillessement* (Vol. 15, Supp. 1, 1996). This was given over to papers reporting elements of a comparative study on the outcomes of long term care, and undertaken as part of an International Collaborating Effort on Ageing sponsored by the US National Centre for Health Statistics. To the extent that this trend continues, the distinction between ‘local’ and ‘international’ journals may become more than ever an academic one.

Taking an antipodean view of international journals and conferences, a particular concern is the limited access that most of us have to material in languages other than English. This concern takes on added dimensions in the Asia Pacific region where English is far less widely spoken and where the Japanese and Chinese languages are more dominant than any of the European languages. One cannot help but wonder about the rapid convergence with Western paths that is claimed in studies of ageing in Asia that are reported in English. Is this in part a reflection of the overseas educational experience of these researchers, with the link to western trends being further enhanced by the lens of familiarity in the readers’ eye? To open our eyes, it would be invaluable if there were occasional symposia reviewing literature that had appeared in languages other than English. In the longer term, the

development of gerontology *within* different countries will be both a means to, and a signal that they are, developing their own identity as ageing societies.

A third feature of this issue of *Ageing and Society* demonstrates what is likely to be a conspicuous feature of the 1997 IAG Congress in Adelaide: the increasing methodological diversity in the studying of ageing. Of particular relevance to comparative studies is the paper by George Maddox which extends the recent series of five papers on the subject of the internet published in *The Gerontologist* (Post 1996). While computer technology has vastly increased the breadth of information we can access and the scale of data we can exchange, there is a very real risk that this material can become removed from the context to which it applies. The interpretation of findings that can be made without reference to such context seems unlikely to add to the depth of our understanding of ageing.

Like this journal, the IAG Congress will need to present ageing in a global context, but at the same time make us aware that ageing occurs in particular ways, in particular places, at particular times. The internet has enabled us, like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'to put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes'. If we are not to lose the real world to the virtual, we need, as did Theseus' poet, to 'give to airy nothing, a local habitation and a name'.

References

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