

Editorial

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Gerontology in and out of Africa

Some of the most exciting new gerontology globally is coming out of Africa. African gerontology has reached a stage in its development to earn it a respected and unique place in the global ageing arena. It is apt that it should be a part of the African renaissance, and is attracting a surge of interest and curiosity from gerontologists in numerous countries.

Priority, or focus areas of research on ageing in Africa remain the family, household structures, social support, poverty, income security, gender, the impact of AIDS and social forces such as urbanization, migration and modernization, and seniority respect norms. All of these areas were subthemes of sessions at the Third Global Conference of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA), held in Durban, South Africa on 19-23 October 1997.

The theme of the conference was "Ageing and diversity: towards empowerment and fulfilment." The main programmatic thrust was older individuals' democratic right, in both First World and Third World countries, to opportunities for self-actualization and to be recognized for their contribution to society.

Held in a country with a proud new democracy (South Africa is celebrating a peaceful transition from apartheid to multi-racial democracy), the conference celebrated the diversity of older people, ageing, nationhood and multiculturalism, and the heterogeneity of people's ways and the ways in which they are cared for and are integrated in societies (Ferreira, 1997).

A strong strand running through the conference programme content was the concept of ubuntu. Ubuntu is the spirit and ethos of caring and sharing, or mutual support in Africa. Conference delegates were well versed in several plenary and workshop sessions in the indigenous lessons of ubuntu, which may offer solutions for meeting some of the challenges of ageing in their own countries.

A second strong strand in the conference deliberations was the increasing fragility of the family in the face of social change and its continued capacity to care for its elders – now and in the future. It was nevertheless concluded that whatever new forms the family takes, in Africa and elsewhere, it will indubitably remain a source of support to elders but will need to be assisted. Here again, the concept of ubuntu was deemed to have an important function in ensuring the sustainability of the African family and its ability to care for its elderly.

The conference was an important meeting-ground for gerontologists from both developed and developing countries. It also represented the largest gathering of gerontologists from African countries ever. However, although anglophone African countries were strongly represented at the conference, francophone African countries were less well represented. It would behove the IFA well to encourage a large number of gerontologists from French-speaking West African countries

to participate in its Fourth Global Conference on Ageing, to be held in Montreal, Canada in 1999.

This Special Issue

This Special Issue of the Journal comprises a selection of papers based on research on ageing in African countries, which were read at the Third Global Conference. The papers were revised and peer reviewed prior to acceptance by the Journal. The theme of the Special Issue is "Ageing in urban and rural Africa." Each of the papers included in the issue deals with a situation of ageing-in-place, a late-life migratory pattern, or the impact, or implications of social forces and social change on older Africans, in either an urban and/or a rural setting, or in both types of settings in Africa. The papers also draw together the main subthemes and strands of the conference, particularly those relating to the family, ubuntu, urbanization, AIDS, and income security and poverty.

The spectre of AIDS and its devastating effects on victims, families, older carers, children and African societies are considered in the first two papers. First, **Myslik, Freeman and Slawski** estimate the effects that the epidemic will have on the South African population age profile, based on experience in other sub-Saharan African countries, particularly how it will impact on individuals in the older section of the population.

In turn, **Mupedziswa** describes the effects of AIDS in Zimbabwe, where the epidemic is at a more advanced stage than in South Africa, with particular reference to changes in household and family structures. He notes that in households where middle-generation adults have succumbed to the disease, grandparents are obliged to care for orphaned grandchildren with little or no financial and social support. The author poses the vexing and relevant question: Who, in turn, must care for the carers (grandparents) when they need care?¹

In a paper on urbanization, ageing and migration of older residents of African settlements in the Metropolitan Cape Town area, **Sagner** notes that older in-migrants commonly regard their new home at their urban place of destination as their permanent home, and no longer their homestead in their rural place of origin. He interprets the pronounced maintenance of rural roots by older Africans and their periodic visits to the former independent states of Transkei and Ciskei, as poverty-related survival strategies. The author concludes by calling for further research into the interplay of ageing and migration, as this late-life migratory pattern, or the urbanization process in Africa generally, has profound implications for the planning and provision of social services.

Moving north-westwards up the continent to Ghana, **Van der Geest** in his paper considers the importance of respect and reciprocity in Akan society, in managing old age in rural Ghana. Once again, the essence of ubuntu is seen to be contained in the values of respect and reciprocity, as it is also

apparent in notions of recognition, concern, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, understanding, cordiality, sincerity, generosity and sharing, evident in the social behaviour and attitudes of his subjects.

From a rural Ghanaian setting we move to an urban Nigerian setting, namely three towns in south-western Nigeria. In their paper, **Togonu-Bickersteth, Akinnawo, Akinyele and Ayeni** describe the findings of a study on public alms solicitation (begging) among elderly Yoruba. The authors identify patterns of begging as a means of income generation in old age and factors which contribute to this practice in their sample population, which include destitution and a breakdown in family support.

Consideration is also given to the income security of older Africans by **Darkwa**, in his review of retirement policies and social-security programmes in sub-Saharan African countries. The author proposes several macro and meso level schemes through which governments may address the economic fragility of older persons on the sub-continent and thereby ensure, or at least enhance their well-being in old age.

Cattell gives us an opinion piece in which she draws together two main strands of the conference – the African family and ubuntu – and personalises the meaning of ubuntu as a grandmother. She draws on her long-term research among older Abaluyia in western Kenya. Cattell is of the opinion, in line with authors of other papers in this issue, that African families will not cease to take care of elderly members, as far as this is possible for them, and that the family as an institution will not disappear. She reminds us that inter-generational conflict, some neglect and the abandonment of elders are neither new phenomena nor prophetic of disaster – but simply reflections of wider struggles on the continent to deal with a rapidly changing world. Cattell also perceptively points out that governments of African countries should not rely on the magnanimity of ubuntu to absolve them of welfare obligations to older citizens who are in need of assistance.

Finally, **Wilson and Adamchak**, who conducted large-scale multidimensional surveys in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, present a forum in which they identify and substantiate a need for the establishment of several gerontology training and research centres, and mechanisms to forge linkages between training, research and policy development in regions of sub-Saharan Africa.² Readers are invited to respond to the authors' proposals outlined in the forum.

Editorial Advisory Panel

The three-year term of office of the Editorial Advisory Panel ends with this number of the Journal. Valerie Møller, the Associate Editor, and I should like to take this opportunity to thank the panel members for their sterling contribution during the triennium. Each member responded willingly, generously and constructively when approached to review a manuscript, to complete a panel survey schedule, and to give guidance to the Editorial Committee on the direction that the Journal should take, or on the contents of a particular number. Several of the panel members have served two three-year terms – and their immeasurably valuable contributions to the development and growth of the Journal are gratefully acknowledged.

We also acknowledge and thank numerous individuals in several countries who were invited during the past three years to comment on manuscripts under consideration for publication in the Journal. A list of their names and affiliations will be published in Volume 7, Number 2 (April 1998) of *SAJG*.

A new Editorial Advisory Panel for the Journal is to be appointed early in 1998, to serve until the end of 2000 – and thus to herald in the new millennium. Given the present surge of interest in multidisciplinary gerontology in and out of Africa, it is apposite that the new panel should be more representative of the African sub-continent and African gerontologists than it has been up to now. Nominations of individuals for consideration for appointment to the panel are again invited in this number of the Journal.

Notes

1. The paper of Mupedziswa on AIDS in Zimbabwe and grandparents as caregivers to grandchildren orphaned by the disease was not read at the Third Global Conference of the IFA but is included in the selection of papers in the Special Issue as it aptly follows on the paper of Myslik, Freeman and Slawski. Specifically, it illustrates the impact of the epidemic on the population of an African country, and the practical implications of AIDS-related demographic changes for household structures and grandparents as caregivers.
2. The forum of Wilson and Adamchak was neither held at the Third Global Conference but is included in the issue as the authors outline and substantiate an important need and opportunity at this stage of the development of gerontology in Africa, as evidenced in the volume and standard of papers emanating from African countries which were read at the Third Global Conference, to establish research and training centres and policy linkages, and thereby to promote and build gerontology capacity on the sub-continent.

Reference

- Ferreira, M. 1997. Synthesis report. Third Global Conference of the International Federation on Ageing, Durban, South Africa, October 19-23.