

Oldenburger Universitätsreden

Nr. 93

Gail Wilson

Continuity and Chance in Gender  
Relations in Advanced Old Age



## VORWORT

Die demographischen Strukturen in den westeuropäischen Gesellschaften werden sich in den nächsten Jahrzehnten grundlegend verschieben. Der Anteil der älteren und der hochbetagten Menschen an der Gesamtbevölkerung nimmt kontinuierlich zu. Daraus resultieren nicht zuletzt neue Fragestellungen und Anforderungen an die Sozialwissenschaften. Wie wird dieser Lebensabschnitt gestaltet? Welche Rollenmodelle gibt es für das Leben jenseits von 75 oder 80 Jahren?

Der am 17. Dezember 1996 auf Einladung der Universität Oldenburg als 'British Council Science and Society Lecture' gehaltene Vortrag von Dr. Gail Wilson geht diesen Fragen auf der Basis ihrer empirischen Forschung in England nach. Er steht zugleich im Zusammenhang mit einem gemeinsamen Forschungsprojekt der London School of Economics und der Carl von Ossietzky Universität, das sich unter dem Titel "Ageing, Migration, Gender and Ethnicity: Cross-Cultural Theory Building Using Comparative Empirical Data" neben den geschlechtervergleichenden vor allem den interkulturellen Fragen des Alterns widmet.

Oldenburg, im Mai 1997

Hermann Havekost



**GAIL WILSON**

*Continuity and Change in Gender Relations  
in Advanced Old Age*

As populations age we are moving towards societies which have never been known before in the history of the world. Nearly one in two adults will be over 50 and children will be a small minority. This lecture is concerned with very old men and women and the way they live their lives. Once they were isolated survivors, but their numbers have grown and they are rapidly becoming a recognisable age group with a life stage of their own.

This new age group (men and women, but mostly women, over 75 or 80) have no socially accepted models of behaviour other than frailty and dependence. If they are active they are living without models. Relations between men and women which were appropriate in earlier life no longer make sense. Men have lost most of their social roles and much of their personal and social power. Women may have the opportunity to expand their social lives and reduce the amount of 'women's work' that they do. All have to maintain, consciously or unconsciously, a balance between continuity and change as they chart a new life stage.

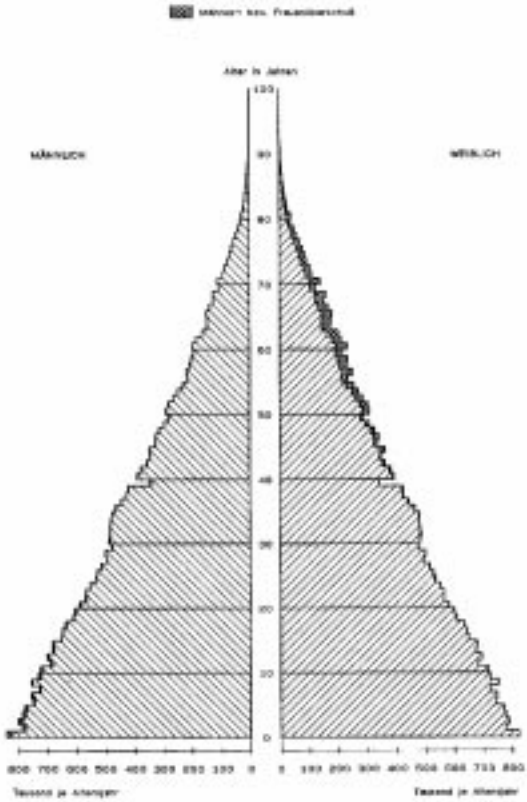
We will enter that life stage not as explorers but still as pioneers. What will we make of it?

**Demography**

We may ask does it matter. Old people and especially very old people are usually ignored except in the discussion of the burden of pensions and the burden of care. In the census it is hard

to find separate figures for age groups of over 70. However the answer is yes it does matter. Our older populations are growing all over Europe.

Figure 1: Altersaufbau der Bevölkerung Deutschlands am 31.12.1910



A brief look at the changes in population pyramids show how dramatic the changes have been. Fig 1 shows that the number of people over 75 was very low indeed in 1910. Few people survived past 70 but there was already a small surplus of women in the older age groups. Children filled out the base of the pyramid but their mortality rate was distressing to see. In many ways we still think of very old age in the terms of 1910 - a very few very old will live their lives of dependence quietly. Big changes can happen to populations but we, the participants find it hard to adapt. Generations need rehearsal time before they can see themselves as new and different.

So fig 2 shows how different things have become. By 1993 there was a huge increase in older people - too many to go on ignoring we might think. The low birthrates which marks periods of war can still be clearly seen 70 and 45 years later. The massive drop in the birthrate is accompanied by a complete change in child mortality and, most important of all for our purposes there is a huge increase in the number of people over 75.

Figure 2: Altersausbau der Bevölkerung Deutschlands am 31.12.1993

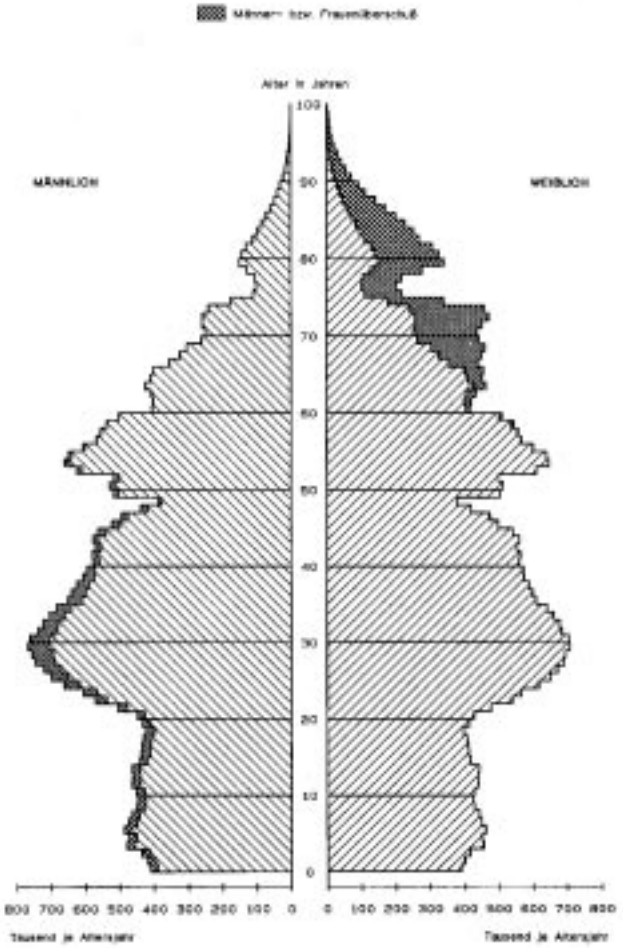


Figure 3: Niedersachsen 1987

Figure 3: Niedersachsen 1987

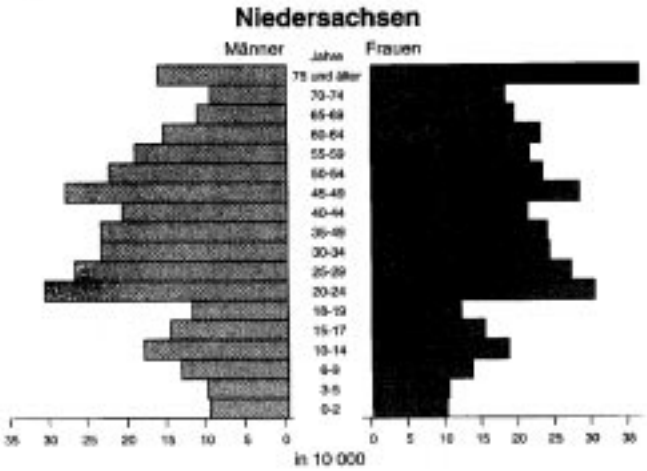
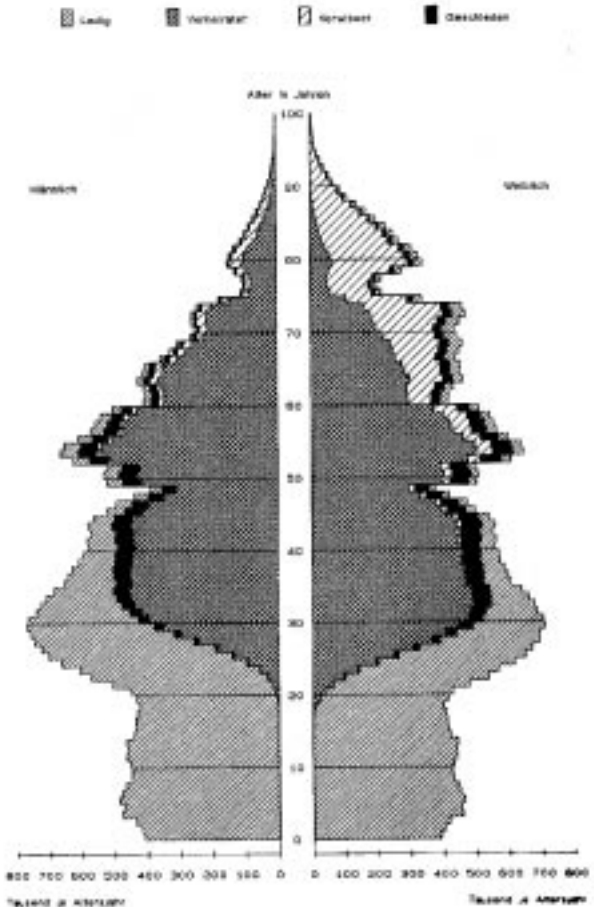


Figure 3 shows that Niedersachsen was no different from the rest of Germany - though as I said above, older people are either ignored or lumped together, so no one has thought it necessary to publish the numbers of over 80s separately.



Figure 4: Altersaufbau und Familienstandsgliederung der Bevölkerung am 31.12.1993



And who are these older people? Figure 4 shows that they are mainly widowed and single women. The men are fewer and mainly married. In the future there will be even more of both groups and they may pass from rehearsal to identifiable life stage. At the moment this is still a pioneering generation in the UK and our aim was to ask a sample how they managed gender relations in later life.

We asked the members of 98 households composed only of people over 75 how they lived and how they felt about their lives. Table 1 shows the marital status of those we interviewed.

*Table 1 Household composition of people interviewed*

Marital status					
Sex	Married	Widowed	Separated	Single	*Total
Men	31	8	2	1	42
Women	31	37	1	14	89
Total households	31	45	3	15	

\* includes two households with a married couple and single woman, two households with two widows, one household with two never married women and one household with a never married man and his mother.

So what are they doing and how are they living - these people with no role models. We asked men and women over 75 in a sample of 100 households how they lived their lives. They were drawn from two areas in London, one relatively prosperous and one poor. Only households with no one under 75 were chosen, though one man of 60 was found to be living with his mother after the interviews had begun. He appears in table 1.

The first point is that in any consideration of how people describe their lives we have to remember that the power of convention is still very strong. Both men and women are aware of 'proper' or socially acceptable way to behave. When

they speak to interviewers they may say they behave as social convention prescribes. It is hard then to know whether they genuinely do live their lives in wholly conventional ways, or whether they do not but like to say they do, or whether they see themselves as conventional and unconsciously ignore departures from the norm forced on them by old age. It is however certain that conventional stereotypes of 'proper' gender relations are very strong in later life for the majority. This was brought home to us most forcibly by two couples where the wife described her life in terms of being at home while the man was out, only to be corrected by the husbands, who pointed out that things were different since they had retired 15 to 20 years ago. In these interviews we found out that the presentation of life was different from the reality. In others we may not have. It is possible therefore that we underestimate the degree of change that occurs in later life.

However we know that perceptions of society take time to catch up with reality. In other words, generations need a rehearsal time. In this paper we present some of the findings of the study in terms of the ways that new roles and ways of living are created by a new generation of humanity. And here marginalisation has some benefits. If the spotlight is off, social controls may be relaxed. As one older woman said in a previous study:

'when you reach a certain age, if they don't like what you say, they think you're a bit batty anyway, so you get away with it', quoted in Nicholson (:228)

This relaxation over social control over those who are no longer seen as part of mainstream society offers opportunities. Here I would like to quote the poem by Jenny Joseph that was voted the most popular in the UK national poetry week 1996:

## Warning

*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me,  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've got no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops alarm bells  
And run my stick along the public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens  
And learn to spit*

*You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat  
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go  
Or only bread and pickle for a week  
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes  
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry  
And pay or rent and ot swear in the street  
And set a good example for the children.  
We will ave friends to dinner and read the papers.  
But maybe I ought to practise a little now?  
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am old and start to wear purple.*

(Jenny Joseph)

The popularity of the poem suggests that British people are beginning to realise that later life will be different from the old stereotypes of death and decrepitude.

So what are they doing and how are they living - these people with no role models

According to popular stereotypes of gender roles, men take paid work, (but very rarely when they are over 75). They have work related social lives or hobbies, (which they often find it

hard to continue when they retire). They paint and decorate their homes or do other similar work, (which they are forced to do less of as they age). They drive the car. Few women in the older generation learned to drive so the car is essentially male oriented. There are social and medical sanctions against older drivers and men in our sample who still drove said the care was 'only a shopping basket' or similar indications that they hardly used it. Women's roles have been essentially defined in terms of rearing children. Many of the mothers in our sample had brought up grandchildren. Some were still available for emergency childcare, but no one was bringing up great grandchildren as a full time activity. women also cook and clean and wash. These are activities that continue even in later life but women reported that they had to some extent lost their meaning. The other main stereotyped activity of women is building and maintaining family and social ties. This was still important but many relatives and friends had died or moved away so it was less possibly less salient than at earlier life stages.

So the main old roles are gone but no new ways of behaviour have been socially prescribed. I argue that the future lies with a greater development of women's roles and ways of living, but first it is important to consider men in later life. There are fewer of them and they appear less often in discussions of burden of care imposed on younger generations by the old, but this is because they are being cared for by their wives. For men the problem of care can be largely contained within the older generation itself so is of less concern to the young, However what of their social lives, or the quality of their lives generally.

The roles of men outside the home are greatly reduced in later life. Five men had part time jobs and one or two more were able to keep up a pattern of going out for large parts of the day but the majority either went out with their wives or stayed at home for long periods of time. Work related leisure activities were hard to maintain in later life. Any that involved standing

rounds in pub or club bar were prohibitively expensive for most of the sample. Even running a car was impossible on a state pension and those younger men (under 80) who worked part time did so in order to pay for the car. Giving up the car usually signalled a very great reduction in social activities, whether this was helping other elders with their shopping, visiting friends and relatives or simply driving to club and societies. Single sex bowling, ex servicemen's clubs and freemasonry were the only reported examples of single sex social activities. Many men spoke of the need to withdraw from social life, which Cumming and Henry (1961) saw as a characteristic of old age. It was not clear how far they actually felt that they were too old to hold office, or simply to take part, in clubs and societies, and how far they gave up because they felt that others saw them as 'too old'. Given an ageist society, the distinction is almost impossible to make objectively. Certainly those who had held office stated that they had stepped down because it seemed to be time that they stopped or made way for younger men.

Very few married men therefore had social lives that did not include their wives. However many did not feel able to accompany their wives on activities which they perceived as 'too feminine'. Give the high number of women in virtually all activities, this was a major limiting factor for men. While ageist views prevented both men and women from joining groups for older people, women were more likely to say that they did not like the company of old *people* while men specifically mentioned not liking old *women*.

Some men (few) avoided this problem by doing everything with their wives and having very few other social contacts. These couples were happy at the time of interview but were extremely vulnerable to ill health or death of either partner. A more normal pattern was for married men to rely substantially on their wives for their social contacts but not wholly. In most cases they had access to a wider range of activities outside the

home than those who were widowers. The exceptions to the general social isolation of older men were four widowers or divorcees who had relationships with women. They reported visits, foreign holidays, trips to visit their friends' relatives and cultural outings which they were able to do as a couple.

Men were much more likely to maintain forms of traditional gender roles within the home than outside it. Even so gender divisions were weakened in advanced old age. For example one former printer had decided to take over the housework soon after he retired (formerly they had employed a cleaner). As he said 'I'm the au pair'. Some husbands with disabled wives also took on fairly heavy loads of cooking, shopping or washing (mostly collecting clothes from the launderette). Shopping was frequently a male activity in later life. One man mentioned the company of seeing other pensioners at the supermarket check out.

Traditional male tasks within the home. Some still decorated and did repairs about the house but at a very much reduced level. This led to many regrets. As one said:

I used to do everything in the house but now of course the house needs repainting. It hurts me to give this sort of job to someone who wouldn't do such a good job as I would do myself and I would have to pay him.

The traditional working class divide over widow cleaning could no longer be maintained: men had cleaned the outside of windows while women did the inside. Men found they had to give up first the upper storey windows became too difficult or dangerous and then sometimes even the ground floor windows defeated them too.

Watching television could be seen as a gendered activity in terms of programme choice but this was very much an area where couples tended to report common tastes as in 'We don't like a lot of what's on television these days'. It was clear that

men watched or listened to more news and sports programmes. Even so life was relatively limited for the majority of men. As one said at interview, addressing first his wife and then the interviewer:

You've kept a lot of your friends, more than I have. She used to run the guides and has always helped with these sort of things. I'm more inclined to sit down and watch football on the television.

The important male domestic role of managing the money was class biased. Middle class men managed the money until they were disabled by stroke or some other catastrophe. The same was true of most working class women.

Gardening was possibly the only role where men and women were able to choose freely without reference to stereotypes. Traditionally men grew vegetables and women grew flowers but there was very little evidence of this division. Almost all households surveyed had a garden which contained a fruit tree but only one man still had his allotment. Men and women were flower gardeners and continued to work at their gardens even when severely disabled.

We can conclude therefore that men in later life were frequently dependent on their wives for social activities. It is however only fair to say that this is the researcher's interpretation of the information. Those very close couples who saw themselves as one would not have perceived their situation in such terms. Rawlins reported similar relationships in old age.

One man said 'Because we're so close, we're just one. We do everything together' (1992: 267). Other couples were concerned to maintain former gender stereotypes as intact as possible as this does not easily allow for a perception of men as feminised or dependent.



## **Women in later life**

A relatively high proportion of the women were unmarried (see table 1), either because they had never married or because they had been widowed. At this stage it is possible for widows to include the divorced but equally divorce was relatively uncommon before the 1976 reform in divorce law. These single women were in one way the pioneers of the new opportunities.

The interviews showed that in advanced old age the stereotypes of gender relations no longer applied over large areas of daily life. Childcare was of limited relevance in determining women's roles in advanced old age. Those with children had brought them up and had often made a large contribution to bringing up their grandchildren (who were nearly all adults), but no one recorded bringing up a third generation of children. This did not mean they had no contact with great grandchildren but rather that they were not taking responsibility for childcare at the time of the interviews.

Women continued to take most responsibility for domestic work for as long as they were able. The important change was that some reported that their attitudes to it had changed and they did less. This could be through choice or because of disability. The better off married women were able to employ cleaners. Husbands might complain but they had little choice if they did not want to do the housework themselves. Cooking was similarly an area of much greater choice than in earlier life. Some single women who had never been interested in cooking were glad to receive meals on wheels. Others who could afford the price bought frozen meals and heated them up. All ate and cooked less than they had in the past. Husband had become used to fewer cooked meals.

The women in the sample conformed to stereotype in being very much more closely involved with their families than men, even though they were not caring for children. Most had much

wider social lives. A similar finding has been recorded by Matthews (1986), Jerrome (1992), and Keith (1989).

Women, even married women, were able to go out by themselves, though given the presence of husbands in the home they were less able to entertain their own friends at home. They were not restricted to women only activities. As one husband said. 'She won't have any dirty thoughts at this age so it doesn't matter if she meets men'. Evening classes, Townswomen's Guild, Pensioner's Link and a range of activities at local clubs were among the activities mentioned by women. Single women, especially those with good pensions, normally had very full social lives unless poor health forced them to cut back.

### **Continuity and change as they affect gender relations in advanced old age**

Marital status is a key factor in any discussion of gender relations in advanced old age, particularly for men. Continuity was the dominant characteristic of most of marriages. The stress on continuity may be one reason why it could be important to both men and women to maintain life long gender distinctions. For example one couple where the wife had always managed the money and although nearly blind was still firmly in charge of most aspects of the marriage, explained how they shopped. The wife still paid for everything but her husband had to look over her shoulder to make sure she got the coins right. Changes in marital activities and relations did occur, as indicated above, but they were more likely to be identified by researchers than participants. As in close marriages, gendered issues of power had faded as issues of survival became increasingly important. Men were more likely to see co-operation as an aim than self assertion. In the few marriages which might have be characterised as

inharmonious, couples appeared to have settled for separate lifestyles rather than any form of conflict.

The lives of single women (there were no older men who had never married in the sample), were also characterised by a high degree of continuity from earlier to later life in most cases. Many had never been very interested in domestic activities and certainly did less as they got older. They had had well developed networks of friends and relatives which they had built up without the restraints on women's social life that often came from marriage.

These networks were shrinking and losses were hard to replace as contemporaries died or went into distant residential homes. Women who had been widowed early shared many of the characteristics of those who had never married. They had been in paid work and usually had relatively good pensions. Like most of the single women they visited a range of friends and could afford to hire cars when they needed transport - mostly to carry luggage to trains, coach stations or airports.

There was much less continuity for those who were widowed later in life. Widows and widowers had to cope with major change both in gendered roles and relationships and in their images of self. Often they were in poor health and debilitated by a period of caring or coping with insensitive services.

### **Problems of gender relations in advanced old age**

Men and women who did try to develop new ways of living or new activities in later life did not necessarily find that they were approved or encouraged. Other researchers have reported that any aspect of sexuality is liable to attract disapproval from other elders but more especially from children. (Hockey and James, 1993; Rawlins, 1992). In such a climate masculinity was hard to express. One man explained how he had not

known how to behave when beginning a friendship with a woman:

I was in the health centre and a lady said 'What about you getting home?' and she said 'You can use the phone in my house', and I said 'Oh no thank you'. I was frightened, terrified, but anyway I did visit her in the end and where she lives it's like a corner house and the garden is down the back quite a long way and you can see for miles. She said 'Come upstairs and have a look', and I thought what am I going upstairs for into her bedroom. I wasn't being dirty or anything but I was really afraid of her. When I talk about it now I have to laugh about it because it's true, I was frightened. The son is very nice, I get on well with him and I said to him 'I was terrified of your mother, I thought she was trying to get me on the bed to rape me but as old as I am I was terrified of her'. *To meet someone like that after 50 or 60 years, you don't know how to act. You don't what to do or say.* And the first time I went there strange to say, I just gave her a peck on the cheek. She didn't like it. She didn't think it was right. So we both were embarrassed about one another. [my emphasis]

His new relationship had worked well despite extreme frailty on both sides. It had also been accepted by both sets of children.

The most important change from the stereotype of their youth was that the women in the sample who had formed new relationships with men showed no desire to marry. Widowed men, on the other hand, were much more likely to want to marry. As one man said of his second marriage: 'We married for company and that, and its worked very well.' Women were less likely to see marriage as a way of getting company. In their relationships with male friends they exchanged services such as cooking and mending for gardening or home maintenance and went on trips together. The difference from marriage lay in the power relationships involved. As unmarried friends

women were more able to choose what to do and when. Companionship was appreciated by both men and women but their aims in later life were not symmetrical. Laslett (1989: 137) notes that historically widows who had some standing were less likely to marry again. This attitude appears to have become more widespread and to be in the process of becoming socially legitimated.

### **Constraints on a redefinition of gender identities**

Women, in general, had more choices in gender roles and in ways of expressing gendered identities in advanced old age, while men had fewer. Both faced constraints on their activities if they wished to change their gendered roles in any way (and of course many, possibly the majority, of the sample did not). Men or women who were frail or in poor health often explained that their aim was 'Just to keep going from day to day'. This could take up very large amounts of time and energy. They had little of either available to experiment with new lifestyles or emotions.

Women were especially constrained by their families. Children were recorded as disapproving of new relationships and constantly trying to reduce the risks involved in travel to visit friends or go on holiday. Individual women were requested not to do their own housework or become vegetarian. Although old people are thought to be conservative they presented a picture of children as still more conservative where parental behaviour was concerned. What is more children frequently tried and often succeeded in controlling the lives of their parents.

### **Conclusion**

Some of the observations noted above are specific to the two cohorts studied. In future there will be very few women who

have never married, but the place of single women will be taken by divorcees who are likely to share many of the characteristics of single women. They too are likely to develop new ways of expressing gendered identities in advanced old age. As the roles available to older women change married women may also be able to develop new gender relations in later life. Marriage was a site of control of women by men, even in advanced old age, but the study also showed that even within marriage, women were able to reduce many of the more burdensome aspects of the gendered division of labour and to achieve greater freedom in terms of their social lives.

With greater numbers and a greater proportion of people reaching advanced old age, it is possible that a socially approved life stage may develop which older people can accept as their own, rather than having to construct their lives without any positive models. Women's values would be likely to be more dominant than they are at earlier ages, if only because their numbers would be greater. On the evidence presented in this survey, men will need to become more like women if they are to improve the quality of their lives.

## References

- ARBER, S. and EVANDROU, M., (1993), *Ageing, Independence and the Life Course*, London, Jessica Kingsley
- BENGTSON, V.L., (1989), 'The Problem of Generations: Age groups, cohorts, continuities and social change' in Bengtson, V.L. and Schaie, K.W., (eds), *The Course of Later Life*, New York, Springer Publishing Co
- BOWLING, A., FARQUHAR, M., GRUNDY, E. and FORMBY, J., (1992), 'Psychiatric morbidity among people aged 85+: a follow up study', Working Paper No 1, Age Concern Institute of Gerontology, King's College London

- BYTHEWAY, B., (), *Ageism*, Buckingham, Open University Press
- CORNWELL, J., (1984), *Hard Earned Lives*, London, Tavistock
- CUMMING, E. and HENRY, W.E., (1961), *Growing Old*, New York, Basic Books
- EEKELAAR, J. and PEARL, D., (1989), *An Aging World*, Oxford, Clarendon Press
- FRIEDEN, B., (1993), *The Fountain of Age*, New York, Simon and Schuster
- GIDDENS, A., (1991), *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press
- HOCKEY, J. and JAMES, A., (1993), *Growing Up and Growing Old*, London, Sage
- ITZIN, C., (1990), in Thompson, P., *I don't feel old*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- JERROME, D., (1992) *Good Company*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press
- KEITH, P.M., (1989), *The Unmarried in Later Life*, New York, Praeger
- KEMSLEY, W.F.F., (1969), *Family Expenditure Survey Handbook on the Sample Fieldwork and Coding Procedures Government Social Survey*, London: HMSO
- LASLETT, P., (1989), *A Fresh Map of Life*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson
- MATTHEWS, S. H., (1986), *Friendship through the Life Course*, Beverly Hills, Sage
- NICHOLSON, J., (1980), *Seven Ages*, London, Fontana
- PEMBER REEVES, M., (1979), (first published 1939), *Round About a Pound a Week*, London Virago

- RAWLINS, W.K., (1992), *Friendship Matters: communication, dialectics and the life course*, New York, Aldine de Gruyter
- RILEY, M.W., (1985), 'Women, Men and the Lengthening Life Course', in Rossi, A. S., (ed.), *Gender and the life course*, New York, Aldine Publishing Co
- ROSENMAYR, L., (1982) 'Biography and Identity', in Hareven, T. K. and Adams, K. J., *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: an interdisciplinary perspective*, London, Tavistock
- SHAKESPEARE, W., *As You Like It* II.ii
- SPRING RICE, M., (1981), (first published 1913), *Working-class Wives: Their health and conditions*, London, Virago
- SCRUTTON, S., (1992), *Ageing, Healthy and in Control*, London Chapman and Hall
- STEARNS, P. (1977) *Old Age in European Society*. London: Croom Helm
- TOWNSEND, P., (1957), *The Family Life of Old People*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul
- WILSON, G., (1987), 'Money: patterns of responsibility and irresponsibility in marriage', in J. Brannen and G. Wilson, eds, *Give and Take in Families: studies in resource distribution*, London, Allen and Unwin
- STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, (1993), *Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit*, Fachserie 1, Reihe 1, Gebiet und Bevölkerung, Wiesbaden: Metzler Poeschel