Informal Care-givers for Elderly People

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The highlighting of 'carers' as a social group sharing a common problem and a common interest was born out of feminist writing on the domestic labour of women. Caring for elderly people and other dependants was seen as an instance of unpaid work. Because of this, the dominant concern of the literature on care-giving has been the burden faced by women caring for frail elderly relatives (Biegel and Blum, 1990), rather than the preferences, needs and contributions of elderly people themselves. The focus of Equal Opportunities Commission research (EOC, 1980; 1982) and feminist writing (Finch and Groves, 1983; Dalley, 1988) has been on how caring responsibilities disadvantage women, with less attention devoted to gender inequalities among elderly people themselves. On both sides of the Atlantic, caring has been portrayed primarily as work done by daughters for parents (Land, 1978; Finch and Groves, 1980, 1982, 1983; Brody, 1981; Graham, 1983), while care by spouses or other relatives has received less attention (Parker, 1989). There has been little examination of the concept of caring, or questioning of the stereotype of 'carers' as middle-aged women.

Literature on the burdens of care falling on daughters has tended to give a one-sided account, objectifying elderly people as a social problem 'to be cared for', and fuelling the alarmism and moral panic over the growth in the proportion of elderly people in the population. British terminology reflects this orientation in the use of the value-laden term 'dependant'. We follow American practice

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(Biegel and Blum, 1990) in using ‘care-recipient’ to signify a potentially more equal relationship. While acknowledging the constraint of care-giving on individuals’ lives, elderly people should also be conceptualised as a resource.

Elderly people have been marginalised as a dependent and unproductive group, partly because of the invisibility of informal work as a contribution to society. Elderly people are givers as well as receivers, through their caring for other elderly people, their unpaid domestic work, care for grandchildren, and voluntary work. Caring is generally only one part of a complex dynamic of reciprocity (Finch, 1987; 1989a; 1989b). We reanalyse data from the OPCS Informal Carers Survey to study the characteristics of carers for elderly people – their gender and age – as well as whether the ‘caring capacity of the community’ extends beyond the immediate family.

The OPCS Informal Carers Survey

The OPCS Informal Carers Survey, a nationally representative government survey of carers of sick, handicapped and elderly people (Green, 1988), was conducted as an integral part of the 1985 GHS. It provides an invaluable complement to the large number of small surveys and qualitative studies which have been based on localised samples (EOC, 1980; Charlesworth et al., 1984; Wenger, 1984; Qureshi and Walker, 1989) or specific subgroups of carers (Nissel and Bonnerjea, 1982; Wright, 1983; Marsden and Abrams, 1987; Lewis and Meredith, 1988).

Our knowledge about the characteristics of informal carers depends on the questions used to identify them, and how these questions are interpreted by different respondents. The phrasing of the OPCS questions distinguishes ‘caring’ from ‘normal’ family care and domestic provisioning work; this may introduce some gender bias because the latter is performed more often by women. The first screening question refers to ‘extra family responsibilities’: see Table 1. Men may include shopping and cooking for their disabled wife as ‘extra family responsibilities’, but a woman caring for her disabled husband may not. It may be particularly difficult for a woman to separate time devoted to ‘normal’ domestic provisioning from the ‘extra’ care categorised in the survey as ‘caring’.