

Editorial: Introduction to Special Issue on “Comparative Aging”

Jason L. Powell

Published online: 17 November 2009
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

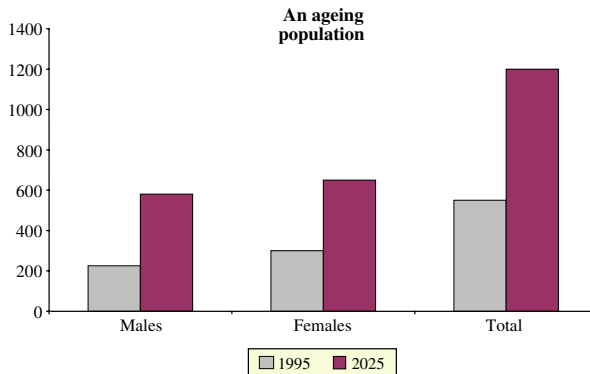
Population aging processes throughout the world will have critically important social and economic consequences, including a potential shortage of working-age individuals, heightened demand for costly health care services, adequate housing accommodations and pensions for older adults, and a growing number of older adults relying on their children and grandchildren for social and economic support. The rapid increase in population ageing across the globe signals one of the most important demographic changes in human history. In the latter half of the last century, the world's developed nations completed a long process of demographic transition. Between 2006 and 2030, the increasing number of older people in less developed countries is projected to escalate by 140% as compared to an increase of 51% in more developed countries. A key feature of population aging is the progressive aging of the older population itself. Policy makers contrast the “old” (65+) with the “oldest old” (85+) and that the oldest old population is growing at an even more rapid pace than the overall old population. Around the world, the 85-and-over population is projected to increase 151% between 2005 and 2030, compared to a 104% increase for the population age 65 and over and a 21% increase for the population under age 65. The most striking increase will occur in Japan: by 2030, nearly 24% of all older Japanese are expected to be at least 85 years old (Kim and Lee 2007). As life expectancy increases and people aged 85 and over increase in number, four-generation families may become more common. This special edition attempts to ground a critical understanding of issues of population aging in particular nation states: Australia, Africa, Canada, US and China.

Indeed, in every society in the world, there is concern about population ageing and its consequences for nation states, for sovereign governments and for individuals. The global population is ageing.

J. L. Powell (✉)

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Sociology and Social Policy,
University of Liverpool, Eleanor Rathbone Building, Bedford Road South, Liverpool, UK L69 7ZA
e-mail: J.L.Powell@liverpool.ac.uk

The United Nations (UN) estimates that by the year 2025, the global population of those over 60 years will double, from 542 million in 1995 to around 1.2 billion people (Krug 2002:125).



The global population age 65 or older was estimated at 461 million in 2004, an increase of 10.3 million just since 2003. Projections suggest that the annual net gain will continue to exceed 10 million over the next decade—more than 850,000 each month. In 1990, 26 nations had sizeable older populations of at least 2 million, and by 2000, older populations in 31 countries had reached the 2 million mark. UN projections to 2030 indicate that more than 60 countries will have at least 2 million people age 65 or older. By 2030 the world is likely to have one billion older people, accounting for 13% of the total global population today (Krug 2002).

This special edition of *Aging International* puts the spotlight on comparative aging by examining the underlying assumptions of these systems and how social forces are affecting them. Every society in the global world are shaped by inward forces of social welfare policies for older people as well as outward forces of economic globalisation impinging on public resources and flows to older people as welfare recipients; each conspiring to make welfare states uncertain in modern times. Macroscopic, global trends will be highlighted as undoubtedly powerful, yet their influence will be traced and rivalled by domestic institutional traditions in nation states. Hence, to grasp better what drives today's populational ageing, it is necessary to explore the relationship of population aging to social welfare practices. This special issue seeks to meet this challenge head on with rich variety of topics and case studies of nation states' relationship to ageing and welfare in the light of powerful global trends. The papers in the special issue of *Ageing International* capture commonalities and differences from diverse countries, namely, Australia, South Africa, Canada, United States of America and China.

Structure of Articles

To set the scene of the comparative assessment of aging, the first article provides a theoretical critique of social welfare in Australia by analysing the issues of caring for

older people. It critically explores the effect of caring relation to older people by drawing on conceptual insights from Feminist theory. The second article explores ageing in South Africa. It outlines the legislative and policy framework for public services to old age. The paper analyses a number of thematic issues relating to housing; family structure and care; income and old age pension and health status. The third paper introduces some of the key features of ageing in Canada. It first considers the development of gerontology and relates it to the focus on health care and clinical practice in Canada. The fourth paper powerfully debunks dominant perceptions of older people in the United States. In particular, the paper analyses the levels of participation of older adults in volunteering activities in the USA. It boldly explores the social issues for the ‘third age’ and the possibilities of civic engagement in volunteering. The fifth and final paper reflects on the meaning of ageing in China. It suggests that any advancement of active aging in China must take into consideration public policy and its impact on old age.

All these papers raise global and comparative implications of human ageing. All the papers are important and significant to social researchers and policy makers. It is for this reason that the special edition provides critical assessment and reflection for facilitating the experiences of older people in global society.

References

- Kim, S., & Lee, J.-W. (2007). Demographic changes, saving and current account in East Asia. *Asian Economic Papers*, 6, 2.
- Krug, E. G. (2002). *World report on violence and health*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

Jason L. Powell is Reader in Sociology & Social Policy and Associate Dean at the University of Liverpool, UK. He also holds several Visiting Professorships in Social Gerontology: United States, Canada and Australia. Dr Powell’s research on aging has recently focused on: comparative and global aging and third sector studies. He has over 150 publications worldwide. His books include *Social Theory and Aging* (2006) (Rowman and Littlefield: New York) which was part of Professor Charles Lemert’s distinguished book series on *New Social Formations; Rethinking Social Theory and Later Life* (2007) (Nova Science: New York); *Situating Social Theory* (with T May) (2008) (McGraw Hill: London); *Aging in Asia* (with I Cook) (2009); *The Welfare State in Post-Industrial Society: A Global Perspective* (Springer Publishers, New York) (with J Hendricks) (2009). In 2008, Dr Powell and associates won ‘Highly Commended Article for the Year’ award by Emerald Publishers for an article on risk and old age in *International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy*. He is Series Editor of “Social Perspectives on Aging” series for Nova Science Publishers in New York.