The Caring Relationship

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Elderly People and their Families

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*To the elderly people and
their relatives who gave
us their time so generously*

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Preface

This book is about elderly people and their families. Although it has a particular focus upon the care given to elderly people in case of disability or other need, and is thus perforce largely about family care, it will be obvious that we would disown any inference that disability and dependency is the inevitable lot of those who achieve old age, or that becoming a 'burden' is the most likely consequence. The majority of people aged over 74 in the study we report led full and independent lives, and many others were better seen as interdependent than dependent.

The book begins with a description of the overall sample of elderly people, and goes on to discuss the patterns of contact which they have with their relatives and the variety of needs and sources of help which are identified. The second half of the book focuses upon those who receive regular assistance with practical tasks and discusses how choices are made about who will help within the family, what effects increasing disability and dependency are seen to have on relationships, and how statutory help is seen in relation to family help. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which our improved knowledge of the informal sector might be better taken into account in the policy and practice of the formal sector of care. The policies of central and local government on pensions, benefits, housing, transport, health and social services all set the context in which exchanges of care within the family take place, but it is the services provided by the last of these which seem most often to be considered to be a possible substitute for family care.

The evidence we advance is based on a survey of around 300 people aged 75 or more, living in the community in Sheffield in 1982/3, and follow-up interviews with some informal carers. The

elderly people interviewed were a representative sample drawn with the help of the Sheffield Family Practitioner Committee's central age/sex register. We are grateful to the staff of the Family Practitioner Committee (FPC) and to the Sheffield GPs who co-operated with us.

We are aware that the restriction to one geographical area places limits upon the generalisability of the detail of our results. However, we see no reason to believe that families in Sheffield are greatly unlike families in other British cities. Readers will be aware that Sheffield has a reputation for a prevailing political commitment to collectively provided services coupled, as will become clear, with a widespread traditional view of family responsibilities.

Many people contributed to the successful implementation of the research. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the other individuals who were at various times members of the research team: Josephine Green and Ken Simons who played important parts in the study of carers and in computing and data processing; Eileen Austin, Barbara Bell, Jean Bloor, Margaret Harrison and Nancy Pavey who undertook much of the interviewing of elderly people; and Margaret Jaram and Gloria Walton who were project secretaries. Margaret Jaram was primarily responsible for preparing the manuscript for publication. Nigel Johnson (on an Economic and Social Research Council linked studentship) and Mick Bond (on placement from the University of Surrey) also contributed to the research effort.

The research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust and a special debt of thanks is owed to the then Director of the Trust, Robin Guthrie, who provided help and support considerably beyond that normally expected from funding agencies. Valuable advice and support were also received from Michael Bayley, Ron Middlestorb and Eric Sainsbury.

The research on which this book is based represented the fulfilment of a long-standing personal ambition for Alan Walker. His desire to conduct an enquiry into the family system of care stemmed both from his practical experiences in working with elderly people as part of his secondary school task force and the early years of his research career spent analysing data on elderly people from Peter Townsend's survey of household resources and living standards. This commitment was reinforced by

his subsequent disappointment with the lack of penetration of sociological research on elderly people into the field of social policy (with the notable exception of the pioneering work of Peter Townsend). Hazel Qureshi came to the project, as Research Officer, from a background in social work and research into the community care of elderly people.

Alan Walker thanks Carol, Alison and Christopher for bearing so stoically the sacrifices necessary for the completion of this book. Hazel Qureshi thanks Martin and Imran for emotional support and distraction.

Our final and warmest thanks go to the elderly people and their carers who gave up their time to be interviewed and received us with such courtesy and friendliness. We hope that this book is a worthy reflection of their views.

Manchester
Sheffield

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