

An ageing population and apocalyptic demography

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Mullan (2000) has demonstrated how much is blamed on the fact that the population is ageing. In this paper we consider how this happens and how the presentation of the relevant demographic statistics can generate a moral panic in government and the media.

Our interest dates back to the 1970s when Bytheway analysed how pre-retirement manuals of that time used demographic statistics to portray later life as a time of both opportunity and risk (Bytheway, 1981). What was evident from these manuals was not just the ways in which statistics can be used to achieve particular purposes in informing retirees, but also how the form of the statistics – large numbers, small percentages and phrases such as ‘at least’ and ‘many more’ – can help to underpin and dramatise the reasoning of the authors.

In the early 1980s, the Open University produced and presented a successful course on ageing (*An Ageing Society*, K256). One of the units (Johnson, 1994) includes a discussion of how alarm and hope featured in an analysis of the Alzheimer’s movement in the US (Gubrium, 1986): how alarm over demographic predictions, coupled with hope based on prospective treatments, can attract public and financial support, and forge the kind of successful campaign that has been achieved by the movement, both in the US and in the UK.

More recently, developing an argument forwarded in a book on ageism (Bytheway, 1995), Bytheway (2005) discusses how, paradoxically, the use of chronological age to define age groups can expose evidence of age discrimination whilst at the same time consolidating ageist prejudice. In particular, he criticises the widespread use of open-ended upper age categories and how this homogenises all who are included. He argues that labelling such categories or life stages as the ‘oldest’, ‘last’ or ‘final’, can appear to deny older people any kind of future.

Finally, in setting the context for an ESRC-funded project based on Peter Townsend’s famous study, *The Last Refuge* (Townsend, 1961), Johnson et al (2010) consider how post-war concerns over ‘the ageing population’ of the UK affected policy and the provision of residential care in the 1950s, and in the decades that have followed.

As an example of how statistics are used to inform policy, the opening paragraph of the 1981 White Paper, *Growing Older* (DHSS, 1981), reads:

We are all growing older. So this White Paper concerns everyone. What is more, a larger number of us can in future expect to live longer. There will be many more very old people.

This illustrates well the tension between lifelong individual perspectives on ageing – we are all growing older – and the concerns of government regarding the national population – there will be many more very old people. What the quote invokes is an image of ‘us’, all in convoy, growing older and becoming very old people, no one dying, no one being born, and our world being undisturbed by pandemics or any other unexpected developments.

Nearly 30 years later, the Department of Works and Pensions discussion document, *Preparing for our Ageing Society* (DWP, 2008) begins:

Within 20 years half of the adult UK population will be over 50. One in four children born today will live beyond 100. These are dramatic shifts that have far-reaching consequences for us all, and our ageing population will change our society in many ways.

Although similar to the opening paragraph of *Growing Older*, it is more statistical and more predictive. Note in particular:

- the open-ended upper age categories: ‘over 50’ and ‘beyond 100’,
- how the statistic ‘half’ is achieved by limiting it to the adult, not the whole, population,
- the personalisation implicit in the claim that one child (in four) born ‘today’ will live to reach 100, and how this overlooks the future of the other three,
- the tension implicit in the idea that ‘our ageing population’ is changing ‘our society’: is the former something ‘we’ are of?
- how, again, there is no qualification regarding the predictions being made. These things will happen.

These two examples illustrate how demographic statistics and, more particularly, the form in which they are presented, have been and still are used by government to gain the attention and concern of the wider public. How effective is government in achieving this? To what extent can statistics generate interest and influence popular opinion?

Consider the impact of the Press Release that the Office of National Statistics issued on 21st August 2008. The headline, ‘UK population approaches 61 million in 2007’, is evidence that the ONS demographers were primarily concerned to feature overall population growth: a rise of 0.6 per cent over the previous twelve months. Statistical details followed: net migration accounted for 52% of

population growth and ‘natural change’ – the difference between births and deaths – 48%. Only on the third page of the Press Release, under the heading ‘Other key points’, did journalists come to matters to do with age:

For the first time ever, there are more people of state pensionable age than under-16s. This reflects a decline in the number of under-16s, which fell to 18.9 per cent of the population, compared with rising numbers of men aged 65+ and women aged 60+, who accounted for 19.0 per cent of the population at mid-2007.

It was these statistics, not the growth of the overall population, that caught the attention of the media. Whilst we would not dispute the claim that this was ‘the first time ever’, this phrase seems designed to appeal to the sensationalist impulses of journalists. By comparing these 2007 estimates with figures for 1981, the Press Release went on to describe the ‘oldest age group’ – those aged 80 and over – as ‘the fastest growing’ age group, another somewhat dramatic phrase.

The reaction of some newspapers to the Press Release was striking:

Britain is now home to more pensioners than children for the first time in the country’s history, official population figures have disclosed

... The data re-ignited the debate over whether the Government is sufficiently prepared to deal with the long-term effects of an ageing population.

Ministers are grappling with the problem of how to fund the growing costs of social and nursing home care for the elderly. The NHS is also restricting access to drugs that could benefit sufferers of Alzheimer’s and other conditions amid fears that the costs could cripple the health service. ... (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 August 2008)

Ancient Britain: For the first time in history, there are more OAPs than children

... The astonishing milestone follows years of steadily rising life expectancy and a significant fall in the number of children and young teenagers.

Experts described the watershed moment as a ‘wake-up call’, warning of grave implications for many aspects of national life including the Health Service, social care for the elderly, pensions and housing. ... (*Daily Mail*, 22 August 2008)

Grey Britain has more pensioners than children

... The long-term implications ... will affect housing, health and education in the years to come. As soon as the preliminary figures emerged, officials of the ONS were called in by ministers to discuss the policy implications. ... (*The Times*, 22 August 2008)

More recently, *The Guardian* has included a feature headed 'Dependency Time-bomb' (4 February 2009) written by George Magnus (Magnus, 2008). This cites the ONS statistics as evidence that baby boomers are 'spearheading the march towards an ageing society'.

Many might ask the simple question: so what if there are now more people over 60/65 than under 16? Is this not simply evidence that the population is ageing? The press answer the question not in terms of the balance between young and old but rather by reminding the government that an ageing population implies increased costs in providing care, treatment, pensions and housing for increasing numbers of 'the elderly' and urging instant action.

The age of 16 and pensionable age (60 for women, 65 for men) have been used over the years to mark the boundaries of 'working age'. The ratio of the number of people of working age to the combined number of those under 16 and those of pensionable age, is widely called 'the dependency ratio'. It has been used extensively to monitor employment statistics in relation to trends in national populations.

Given the way it is calculated, the ratio is nothing more than a rather odd indicator of the ageing of the population. It is the word 'dependency' which gives it a political charge. What the ONS Press Release is implying, and what the press appreciated, is that 'for the first time in recorded history' there are more old people than children 'depending' on people of working age. In real life of course, the reverse is often true: people of working age depending on the unpaid work undertaken by pensioners and children.

The images conjured up by *The Daily Telegraph* of ministers 'grappling with the problem' and by *The Times* of ONS officials being 'called in' as soon as 'the preliminary figures emerged', symbolises the sort of panic reactions that are now well-known to gerontologists and, no doubt, to demographers and statisticians. In reading these reactions to the ONS Press Release, we are reminded of the comment of the American gerontologist, John Myles:

It is politics, not demography, which now determines the size of the elderly population and the material conditions of its existence. (Myles, 1984: 175)

The term 'apocalyptic demography' was introduced by Anne Robertson. She was reporting a study of the politics of Alzheimer's disease in Canada, and her article began: 'Catastrophic projections of

the burden to society of an increasing aging population abound'. The 'prevailing belief' was that 'an increasing aging population with its multitude of health problems means increasing demands on the resources of society' (1990: 429), and that 'the increasing numbers of elders will bankrupt us' (p. 439). In the article (p. 437) she showed how apocalyptic demography:

- scapegoats older people by blaming them for rising costs,
- fuels intergenerational inequity arguments, and
- provides the rationale for age-based rationing of health care.

She concluded that the 'problems' of old age have been located in individual pathology rather than in the way the health and other services are organised. Echoing Townsend's theory of 'structured dependency' (Townsend, 1981), she argued that, through the development of early diagnosis of Alzheimer's, the needs of older people can be interpreted as 'provider-induced demand', and that:

... the response of the health care system itself to the increasing older population is, in part, responsible for this catastrophic view of ageing. (p. 439)

It is interesting to note that although she does not cite any demographic statistics, she implies that what is apocalyptic is simply the response of the authorities to demographic evidence of the increasing size of 'the older population' rather than the changing age structure of the overall population. This reflects of course, the rhetoric of the Alzheimer's movement which, on the basis of a predicted increase in the number of old people (defined by an open-ended upper age category), predicts an increased number of people with the disease. Nor does she elaborate upon the connotations of words that are popularly used such as 'apocalyptic', 'bankruptcy', 'catastrophe' and 'time-bomb'. Taken literally, these all imply unambiguously an 'end of society as we know it' – with major consequences, let it be noted, for the age distribution of mortality.

In summary, Robertson's argument is that:

- notwithstanding the biological facts of ageing, the biomedicalization of old age has led to people over a specific chronological age being constructed as a needy category, 'the elderly', within the wider population,
- this categorisation has led to the development of the ageing enterprise (Estes, 1979),
- the ageing enterprise has focused its gaze on 'the ageing population'; in practice, a population unambiguously defined by chronological age and, in particular, by open-ended upper age categories,

- this population has been shown to be characterised by high rates of pathology, such as dementia,
- the size of this population and its relationship with the wider political economy has been monitored, and issues of equity regularly debated and hotly contested.

What we would add to this is that:

- in the uncritical use of open-ended upper age categories, demographic statistics have helped to reinforce age divisions, casting 'the elderly' as a growing, seemingly alien, population that threatens to exhaust the limited resources of the wider society,
- when words such as 'elderly' and 'dependent' are attached to these age groups, stereotyped images follow, people of these ages feel stigmatised, and ageist prejudice and discrimination is fostered, and
- unconstrained demographic predictions, accompanied by seemingly appropriate descriptive phrases, are likely to generate a moral panic in which ageism flourishes and the lives and well-being of older people put at risk (Thane, 2000).

It is not difficult to see the kinds of governmental and media panic that Robertson documents as a direct consequence of the publication of demographic projections. In conclusion, like Robertson, we hope that a more critical approach to the use of demographic statistics 'will help shift future policy initiatives away from elders themselves and toward the context within which people grow old' (Robertson, 1990: 439).

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