

Ageing and intergenerational relationships in rural Germany¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a range of secondary data sources to analyse key elements of intergenerational relationships in Germany. Within the context of a discussion of regional differences in Germany's population structure and aspects of socio-economic conditions in rural areas, the paper focuses on the following aspects of intergenerational relationships: household structures, proximity of the generations, frequency and intensity of contacts between the generations, intergenerational transfers and non-kin relationships. Where appropriate, comparisons are made between East and West Germany and between rural and urban areas. The analysis of data on intergenerational relationships highlights several difficulties associated with research on older people living in rural areas. It is suggested that these difficulties contribute to the distorted and contradictory views that are often associated with rural ageing.

KEY WORDS – Intergenerational relationships, rural areas, Germany, social integration.

Introduction

One of the major achievements linked to the development of a critical approach to social gerontology has been to raise awareness of the increasing heterogeneity of old age in advanced industrial societies (Minkler and Estes 1998; Phillipson 1998). Changing demographic and family structures, and variations in lifestyles and access to life chances, have served to differentiate the older population much more along the lines of the key social divisions identified within modern society. Thus research in social gerontology commonly acknowledges the influence of variables such as social class, gender, ethnicity, and health and disability. By contrast, regional divisions, especially those relating to urban-rural differences within the older population, have been neglected. Despite the early work of American gerontologists and

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a renewed interest in recent years in community and environmental aspects of ageing, there continues to be an absence of empirical data relating to the situation of older people living in specific residential contexts. While this applies to both urban and rural areas, it is of particular concern in the latter since older people living in the countryside represent a minority group in many advanced industrial societies.

Against this background, this paper seeks to report on the (relatively limited) empirical data available concerning ageing and inter-generational relationships in rural areas of Germany. Particular attention is paid to the following dimensions of such relationships: household structures, proximity of the generations, frequency and intensity of contacts between the generations, intergenerational transfers and non-kin relationships. The degree to which established patterns of intergenerational relationships, commonly associated with Rosenmayr and Köckeis' (1965) notion of 'intimacy at a distance', continue to apply in rural areas is explored. This is important within the context of contemporary discussions about the impact upon rural areas of changes identified within advanced industrial societies linked to postmodernity and risk. In particular, the question arises of the extent to which intergenerational relationships in rural Germany are characterised by a shift towards individualisation.

In the absence of a nationally representative survey of older people living in rural areas, the paper uses secondary data from a series of research studies conducted at different times and in different rural locations across Germany. Some of the main weaknesses of past empirical research have been acknowledged elsewhere (Schulz-Nieswandt 2000; Schweppe 2000) and are discussed in a subsequent part of the paper. However, selected findings from these studies are still relevant and are reported here, albeit with qualifications where these are judged necessary. The main sources utilised include:

- Bröschen's (1983) survey of 800 people aged 65 and over living in four rural districts of West Germany, conducted in 1980;
- the Arbeitsgruppe Gesundheitsanalysen (1991) survey of 470 people aged 60 and over living in three communities of one rural district of West Germany, conducted in 1987;
- the 1989 survey by Asam *et al.* (1990) of 2165 people aged 60 and over in three rural districts of the Saarland;
- the German component of the six-nation OPERA (Older People in Europe's Rural Areas) study involving 236 interviews in eight West German communities, and 214 interviews in nine East German communities with people aged 65 and over, conducted in 1989

before German unification (van Deenen and Graßkemper 1993; Scharf and Wenger 2000).

- A survey undertaken in 1999 by Wahl *et al.* (2000b) of 412 people aged 55 and over living in rural areas of two regions of East and West Germany.

Where appropriate, comparisons are made with findings generated through national representative surveys, such as the regular Socio-Economic Panel Survey (SOEP), and also through studies of urban older people. Discussion of past research on rural ageing highlights a range of difficulties. This paper demonstrates how such difficulties can combine to produce contradictory research findings.

Rural contexts: population structure and socio-economic conditions

The starting point for an analysis of intergenerational relationships in rural areas of Germany is provided by an examination of regional variations in demographic structure. The age structure of Germany's population, as in other nations, varies significantly along regional lines (Table 1). Regional variations exist not only between East and West, deriving from 40 years of separate development between 1949 and 1989, but also within Germany's old and new federal states. There are two main elements of such variation (Stolarz *et al.* 1993: 290).

First the proportion of older people is generally greater in the western than the eastern states. This can be illustrated by comparing age structures in the geographically proximate regions of Schleswig-Holstein in the West and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in the East. While people aged 65 and over represented 16 per cent of the population in the former in 1997, they accounted for just 13 per cent in the latter. Secondly, in the western states there are greater proportions of people aged 65 and over in the North (Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein) than in the South (Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg). In the eastern states this situation is reversed. Here, the older population tends to be concentrated more in the South (Saxony) than in the North (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern).

Lying at the heart of regional variations in age structure are differences in fertility and mortality, significantly bolstered by long-established patterns of migration, especially amongst younger people. Traditionally, fertility has been higher in rural than urban areas, and was historically higher in the East than in the West. In the East, this situation changed after unification, especially in the rural areas of

TABLE 1. *Regional Distribution of Population, Germany, 1999*

Federal state	Population (in 1,000s)	Population density (persons/km ²)	Population aged 65+ (in %)
<i>Western states</i>			
Schleswig-Holstein	2,777	175	16.0
Hamburg	1,705	2,251	16.8
Lower Saxony	7,899	165	16.2
Bremen	663	1,652	17.7
North Rhine-Westphalia	18,000	527	16.2
Hesse	6,052	286	15.9
Rhineland Palatinate	4,031	203	16.6
Baden-Württemberg	10,476	292	15.1
Bavaria	12,155	171	15.7
Saarland	1,072	418	17.3
<i>Eastern states</i>			
Berlin (East and West)	3,387	3,818	13.7
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	1,789	78	13.3
Brandenburg	2,601	88	14.0
Sachsen-Anhalt	2,649	131	16.0
Saxony	4,460	244	17.2
Thüringen	2,449	152	15.5
Federal Republic	82,163	230	15.8

Note: Population at 31.12.1999; Population density at 31.12.1998; Population aged 65+ at 31.12.1997 (calculations by author).

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt 2000; Statistische Ämter der Länder und des Bundes (2000).

north-eastern Germany where the drop in fertility, brought about by economic uncertainty and an unprecedented decline in agriculture, has been most dramatic (Demographischer Wandel 1998: 65). Life expectancy was significantly lower in the East than the West, with western men living on average 2.5 years longer and women 2.8 years longer than their eastern counterparts at the time of unification (Demographischer Wandel 1994: 47).

However, differences in fertility and mortality have not been as significant in explaining variations in regional population structures as have been the effects of migration. In Germany, it has traditionally been the movement of younger people that has accounted for regional diversity in age structure. In the past, young people tended to leave the countryside to exploit the better educational and employment opportunities to be found in the urban areas. At the same time, increasing wealth and mobility have led many younger families to leave declining inner city areas (*e.g.* Bremen and Hamburg) in order to enjoy the perceived advantages of life in the suburbs. The effect of these dual processes of migration has been to increase the proportions of older people in both inner city areas and the more remote rural areas.

Recently, considerable attention has been paid to the effects of the out-migration from eastern Germany of significant numbers of younger people during the years leading up to and immediately following unification. Between 1989 and 1995, over 1.7 million people left the new federal states to set up home in the West. The overwhelming majority of the out-migrants were below the age of 45, predominantly male and better educated than those who stayed behind (Seniorenreport 1994: 54). The fact that this migration is spread unevenly across Germany's five eastern states means that some regions, particularly those areas of Saxony and Sachsen-Anhalt previously associated with heavy and extractive industries, are ageing more rapidly than others (Demographischer Wandel 1994: 77; Scharf 1995; Scharf 1998a). Migration serves, if anything, to exaggerate long-established regional variations in the age structure of the East German population, with higher proportions of older people being found in small (rural) communities and the largest cities (Seniorenreport 1994: 57).

Recent research suggests that past trends in migration are likely to produce a different regional population profile in Germany in the decades ahead. The continuing trend towards suburbanisation will result in an ageing of districts on the edges of Germany's major towns and cities. This phenomenon has been referred to by Bucher *et al.* (1998) as a process of 'ageing into the countryside'. In the East, dramatic predictions point to a continued out-migration of younger people from the most peripheral and economically disadvantaged rural communities. This will lead to a rapid increase in the proportions of older people in some rural villages, especially in remoter parts of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (see *e.g.* Kuhlmeier 2000; Schubert 1998: 126f.). The perceived negative impacts of these migration patterns, with some fearing a permanent depopulation of areas of the (rural) East, are often overstated. In many respects, eastern Germany – characterised for the lifetime of the German Democratic Republic by a lack of population mobility – has simply been engaged in a process of catching up with demographic developments that have long been a feature of other advanced industrial societies (Scharf 1998b). The ethnic diversity that now characterises urban, western Germany has traditionally been underdeveloped in rural areas, especially in the East, but is likely to become more pronounced.

Older people themselves are much less likely to move from one area to another. Although some retirement migration occurs in Germany, it is not nearly as pronounced as in other European nations, such as the United Kingdom or France. Socio-economic Panel (SOEP) data for

1994/5 showed that only four per cent of West German households headed by a person aged 65 and over moved home in the 12 months before interview compared with 22 per cent of those headed by someone aged under 40 (Datenreport 1997: 535). In similar vein, Bucher *et al.* (1998: 18) report that only five per cent of people who migrated across district boundaries in the wake of German unification were aged 65 and over. Where retirement migration does occur, it tends to be concentrated in regions such as the Alps of southern Germany or along the coastline of Schleswig-Holstein (Demographischer Wandel 1994: 80).

Retirement migrants are more likely to belong to the middle than the working class and to have been mobile during their working lives. Nevertheless, migration based on a desire to live in a more picturesque setting accounts for only a relatively small proportion of all moves in older age in Germany (Demographischer Wandel 1994: 435f.). Less than one-fifth of moves can be attributed to the desire to change one's place of residence. Much more important as factors explaining migration in later life are the older person's state of health, a desire to be near family members and a need to overcome poor housing conditions (Friedrich 1994: 416). The limited scale of retirement movement in older age in Germany, especially amongst owner-occupiers and those living in the East, confirms the tendency for the overwhelming majority of people to 'age in place' (Wahl *et al.* 2000a, 2000b).

Also important in relation to ageing and intergenerational relationships in rural Germany is the broader socio-economic context. In the absence of reliable data relating to the incomes of older people in rural Germany (Scharf 1998a: 65), this may be illustrated by tenure and housing conditions. In terms of tenure, rural areas of Germany, both East and West, are characterised by higher rates of owner-occupation than urban areas (Arbeitsgruppe Gesundheitsanalysen 1991: 16; Garms-Homolová and Korte 1993: 220; Scharf 1998a: 98f.). However, rates of owner-occupation vary considerably from area to area. In the west German component of the OPERA study, for example, van Deenen and Graßkemper (1993: 58) report that 92 per cent of people aged 60 and over living in the eight study villages owned their own homes. These proportions are significantly higher than those found elsewhere. For example a study conducted in the Rhineland-Palatinate in 1992 found that the proportion of older home-owners in communities with populations below 5,000 people was 75 per cent (Rhineland-Palatinate 1993: 13). Similar proportions of property ownership have been reported in the rural component of the Arbeitsgruppe Gesundheits-

analysen (1991) study and in a more recent study (Wahl *et al.* 2000b). Owner occupation in rural areas of the East tends to be much lower, with around 37 per cent of people aged 55–74 and 28 per cent of those aged 75 and over owning their own homes in the study of Wahl *et al.* (2000b). To the extent that owner occupation reflects a person's commitment to the local community, these findings represent a useful indicator of older people's integration within rural society.

Alongside tenure, housing conditions are often regarded to be a useful socio-economic indicator. The most up-to-date analysis of urban-rural differences in older people's (aged 65+) housing conditions has been undertaken by Wahl *et al.* (2000a) with reference to selected waves of the Socio-Economic Panel Survey. In terms of the presence of basic amenities in households, with central heating being the key indicator, little difference was found between urban and rural areas in either East or West Germany. The main difference is between East and West. Thus, while 88 per cent of urban households and 87 per cent of rural households of people aged 65 and over had central heating in the western states, the respective proportions in the East were 47 per cent and 43 per cent. Older people in the East are also more likely to live in housing that is in need of repair. While this applies to 26 per cent of older West Germans, the figure for the East is 56 per cent. For both East and West, however, rural elders are less likely to live in housing in need of repair than those living in urban areas. This is also reflected in the expression of higher levels of satisfaction with their housing amongst rural than urban older people (Wahl *et al.* 2000a: 258). With reference to both tenure and housing conditions, there is little evidence to support the notion that older people living in rural areas are disadvantaged when compared with their urban counterparts.

In terms of the broad context that structures intergenerational relationships in rural Germany, the evidence presented here tends to suggest that research on rural aspects of ageing must increasingly acknowledge the existing diversity and increasing heterogeneity of rural areas. In Germany, the evidence discussed here indicates that the rural context differs not only between East and West, but also within East and West. While unification has been associated with a levelling off of East-West differences in relation to socio-economic conditions, the signs are that differences within the regions in terms of population structures are likely to become even more pronounced.

Intergenerational relationships

Having established the context within which intergenerational relationships in rural Germany are structured, it is now possible to examine research findings that relate to specific characteristics of such relationships. The key dimensions of intergenerational relationships to be reviewed here are: household structures; the residential proximity of the generations; the frequency of contacts between the generations; intergenerational transfers; and, non-kin relationships.

Household structures

A key source of difference between urban and rural areas is represented by the structure of households occupied by older people. In Germany, as in other European nations, it is largely in rural areas that older people continue to share households with their children (and grandchildren). In Germany as a whole, multi-generational households represent only a small proportion of all households. In western Germany in 1991, fewer than three per cent of people aged 60 and over lived in three-generation households and a further 14 per cent lived in two-generation households (Kohli *et al.* 2000: 176). However, a number of rural studies show that the proportions of such households can be considerably higher in some communities. For example, the OPERA study reported proportions of people aged 65 and over living in three-generation households as 27 per cent in the former German Democratic Republic and 30 per cent in West Germany. In addition, significant minorities also lived with their adult children in two-generation households. In the OPERA study, single-generation households accounted for just 61 per cent of older people's households in the East and 50 per cent in the West (Wenger *et al.* 1999). Relatively high rates of multi-generational living have been reported in other studies, although data are not always directly comparable (AG Gesundheitsanalysen 1991: 82; Bröschen 1983: 92; Kossen-Knirim 1992: 41).

At the level of individual rural communities, however, there is a wide range of variation in the prevalence of multi-generational households that makes generalisation difficult. For example, in Bröschen's (1983: 91) study of four rural districts of western Germany, the proportion of people aged 65 and over living in three-generation households varied between eight per cent and 44 per cent. According to Bertram (2000), official statistics on households tend to underestimate the extent of multi-generational living since they fail to take account of generations

that live under the same roof, whilst also including people who have never had children. This is a view supported by Kohli *et al.* (2000: 177) who show that while seven per cent of people aged 70 and over in a national study conducted in 1996 shared a household with their children, this proportion rose to 27 per cent when people who had never had children were removed from the calculation and those living under the same roof were included in the calculation.

A similar situation inevitably applies in studies of older people in rural Germany. Thus, in Bröschen's (1983: 92) study, 35 per cent of older people (65+) living in rural districts in western Germany shared a household with at least one child, but around 50 per cent actually lived under the same roof with an adult child (see also Kossen-Knirim 1992: 45). These findings distinguish rural areas of Germany from those of other north European nations such as the United Kingdom or the Netherlands, where multi-generational households and living under the same roof tend to be much less prevalent (Wenger *et al.* 1999).

While rural areas of Germany have relatively high proportions of multi-generational households, there is still considerable diversity in household structures and living arrangements of older people. Diversity is evident in Germany's different regions and also at the level of individual communities. Household structures also vary significantly according to a person's age, gender and marital status.

Proximity of the generations

A key role in research on intergenerational relationships has been played by the notion that such relationships are characterised by what Rosenmayr and Köckeis (1965) have referred to as 'intimacy at a distance'. Building upon earlier work by Tartler (1961) which suggested that good intergenerational relationships in Germany are related to the maintenance of a physical distance between the generations, Rosenmayr and Köckeis (1965) argued that the intimacy of family relationships is supported by separate living arrangements. The empirical evidence suggests that both notions still hold true in contemporary German society (Fooker 1999). This reflects not only the desire of younger people to be independent of their parents, but also the wish of most older people to live independently of their adult children (Hörl and Rosenmayr 1994: 87f.).

Despite a steady decline in the proportion of older Germans co-residing with their adult children, numerous studies confirm that for most families the generations do not live very far apart (Kohli *et al.*

2000). In this respect, the tendency within Germany has been towards the development of what Bertram (2000) has referred to as ‘multi-local multi-generational families’. Criticising research that focuses upon the individualisation of old age within the context of shifts towards a postmodern society, Bertram (2000: 103) shows that families do not need to co-reside in order to have close and intimate relationships. This view is backed up by a considerable body of empirical data, and applies to both urban and rural areas. For example, a national survey conducted by the German Youth Institute in the early 1990s, showed that four-fifths of multi-generational families lived within one hour’s travelling distance of one another (cited in *Demographischer Wandel* 1998: 617). Kohli *et al.* (2000) show that 68 per cent of older Germans have a child living within the same community, and 91 per cent have a child within two hours’ travelling distance.

Nevertheless, the spatial distances that support intimate family relations tend to vary significantly between urban and rural areas. Using Bertram’s terms, rural families appear to be rather less ‘multi-local’ than urban families. As might be expected when linked to the discussion of household structures, the proximity of the generations can be pronounced in rural areas. In the OPERA study, for example, only 13 per cent of West German respondents and 19 per cent of East German respondents lived beyond walking distance of their nearest child (Wenger *et al.* 1999; see also Bröschen 1983: 92). The desire to maintain a physical distance between the generations, as implied by the notion of ‘intimacy at a distance’, is less pronounced in rural than urban areas, and has in part been attributed to the difficulties of finding suitable, close accommodation in rural villages (Reimann 1994: 117). Nevertheless, in summing up the evidence on proximity, it is clear that while there has been a shift towards individualisation in relation to the generations’ living arrangements in rural areas, it broadly matches the shift that has occurred in towns and cities and is often referred to in debates about postmodern societies, there is no evidence to suggest that the generations are becoming disengaged from one another.

Older people’s contacts with their children

Multi-generational living and having proximate children significantly influences the extent to which older people have contact with their children. Just over three-fifths of people aged 60 and over in West Germany have at least weekly face-to-face contact with their children (Reichenwallner *et al.* 1991: 24). This proportion rose to around three-quarters in a study conducted in East Germany before unification

(Michel 1989: 69). Using a broader definition of contact, Kohli *et al.* (2000: 186) found that 86 per cent of older people in Germany as a whole had contact with an adult child each week. In rural areas, the closer proximity of children to their older parents is conducive to more frequent face-to-face contacts. Thus Kossen-Knirim's (1992: 218) rural-urban study reported more frequent contacts in rural than urban areas. Similarly, in the OPERA study, around four-fifths of older people in rural areas of both East and West Germany had at least weekly contact with their eldest child (Wenger *et al.* 1999). Frequent contacts between the generations are characteristic of intergenerational relationships in both urban and rural areas of Germany.

Intergenerational transfers

While the frequency of contacts between older people and their families and the proximity in which they live represent useful indicators of the persisting strength of intergenerational relationships in Germany, they tell us little about the quality of such relationships. Several studies point to the constant exchange of goods and services between and across the generations (Diewald 1993; Kohli *et al.* 2000; Künemund and Motel 2000; Reichenwallner *et al.* 1991: 46f.). With increasing attention being paid in recent years to transfers from older to younger generations of the same family, it is evident that the reciprocal nature of family support applies regardless of residential location or the socio-structural characteristics of families. As a result, similar findings are reported in both eastern and western Germany, and in both urban and rural areas (Arbeitsgruppe Gesundheitsanalysen 1991: 59f.; Garms-Homolová and Korte 1993: 221; Kossen-Knirim 1992: 218f.).

One very clear expression of the nature of this exchange can be witnessed in the role played by families in providing care and support to older relatives. Thus, in Germany as elsewhere in Europe, the overwhelming majority of older people with health and social care needs are looked after in their own homes by members of the family. This is particularly the case in rural areas (Arbeitsgruppe Gesundheitsanalysen 1991; Bröschen 1983; Schubert and Sauermann 1992). It can be argued that the structure of rural families and the nature of generations' living arrangements make family care more likely in rural areas than in urban areas. For example, one study conducted in rural areas of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 1994 found that only four per cent of older men and three per cent of older women lacked a person they could rely on as a source of help or support (Kuhlmey 2000: 196).

The introduction in Germany in 1994 of a long-term care insurance system, which offers financial or in-kind support to people assessed as being in need of care, serves to strengthen reliance of older people upon their families (Evers 1997). It is argued that in rural areas in particular, reliance upon family care is perpetuated by traditional views concerning the obligations of families to provide care and support to ageing parents (Kossen-Knirim 1992). Indeed, Langen and Schlichting (1990) suggest that family care is the only acceptable form of care in rural parts of Germany. Thus, while the family is also the most pronounced source of care and support in urban areas, the level of support tends to be even more pronounced in rural communities. Schweppe (2000: 100) cites research conducted by Schwartz (1992) showing that in rural areas 95 per cent of people aged 80 and over requiring care were cared for at home rather than in an institution. In urban areas, the respective proportions were 70 per cent and 30 per cent. With cultural patterns emphasising the role of family care, and the state offering financial rewards to informal carers, the scope for developing professional care services is likely to be restricted. This is especially evident in Germany's more remote rural areas where the service infrastructure has traditionally been weak.

While higher levels of co-residence and proximate living suggest that older people living in rural areas are generally able to rely on family support, this view requires some qualification. Rural older people's subjective view of their social contacts, including those with family members, produces rather mixed findings. Bröschen (1983) and Asam *et al.* (1990) point to relatively high proportions of rural older people who would like to have greater contact with family and friends. Schweppe (2000: 97) cites these studies as evidence that traditional, idyllic images of older people in rural areas being well integrated within their local community and devoid of feelings of loneliness and isolation are misplaced. Loneliness amongst older people appears to be just as prevalent in Germany's rural areas as in its urban areas, affecting between six per cent and 11 per cent of people, according to different studies (Schweppe 2000: 98; see also Bröschen 1983: 131f.). Moreover, intergenerational relationships based upon co-residence of the generations or on proximate living may be characterised by conflict or stress (Kossen-Knirim 1992; Schweppe 2000: 92; Wahl *et al.* 2000a: 250f.) or by the expression of ambivalent feelings about family relationships (Lüscher 2000). In this respect, Lang (2000) suggests that enduring friendships are more important in determining older people's quality of life than family relationships that may be characterised by conflict or burden. In the rural context, Kossen-Knirim (1992) shows

that while older people may receive more support from their families in rural than in urban areas, this reflects rural social norms and is an indicator of the greater dependency of rural elders upon their children. However, findings relating to perceived differences in older people's social support networks between urban and rural areas in Germany should be treated cautiously. Borchers (1998: 197) points to conflicting findings relating to the closeness of social networks in rural and urban areas, and suggests that different methodological approaches may be responsible for reported variations.

Discussion: difficulties associated with rural studies of ageing

Having summarised the key findings from past research that discusses the context and nature of intergenerational relationships in rural Germany, it is now possible to return to some of the issues raised earlier in this article. The data presented here in relation to rural Germany point to a number of difficulties that might also apply to research conducted in other nations. Specific problems identified in the German context can be summarised as follows:

- *Lack of clarity concerning definitions of rurality* (Schulz-Nieswandt 2000: 22; Scharf *et al.* 1999a). Researchers seeking to report on data collected within the context of rural studies are often obliged to take for granted that the research group responsible for collecting the primary data had a robust means of distinguishing 'urban' from 'rural'. Many 'rural' ageing studies pay little attention to issues of definition, while others seek to operationalise rurality in an idiosyncratic manner. This point is borne out by the diversity of rural studies reported on here in the German context. In this respect, social gerontology needs to build upon knowledge generated by rural geographers and planners.
- *A tendency to rely upon findings arising from disparate, and often non-comparable, past studies of ageing in rural areas.* Thus, research on intergenerational relationships in rural Germany still draws upon evidence generated in studies conducted in the early 1980s (*e.g.* Bröschen 1983). It is unlikely that research into urban older populations would rely so heavily upon such sources, considering the significant changes that have been acknowledged in Europe's cities over the past two decades. Reliance in rural studies on data generated almost 20 years ago tends to reinforce the impression that rural areas have remained unchanged during the ensuing period.

Non-comparability of data also extends to differences in research design, including different definitions of older people. Thus, some studies focus on people aged 50 and over, while others look at those aged 65 and more. Some studies place a ceiling of either 75 or 80 years on their study populations.

- *A tendency to compare the situations of older people living in rural and urban areas.* While such research is important, and draws warranted attention to the urban-rural divisions that operate within society, it has been weakened by a tendency to regard the situation in urban areas as being the ‘destination’ of rural areas. Thus debates in relation to rural ageing have been heavily influenced by the idea, drawn from modernisation theory and refined by Tews (1987) in the German context, that rural areas are engaged in a process of catching up with urban areas, of being somehow ‘delayed’ in their socio-economic development. Linked to this has been a tendency to overemphasise differences between urban and rural areas in terms of infrastructural aspects, including housing conditions and service provision for older people, again with urban areas identified as the model to which rural areas should aspire (Garms-Homolová and Korte 1993; Schulz-Nieswandt 2000; Schweppe 2000). Similarities between key elements of the ageing process in urban and rural areas, for example in relation to normative aspects of intergenerational relationships, tend to be underplayed.
- *An absence of qualitative research on rural ageing.* In terms of research methodology, it has been acknowledged that those few empirical studies of rural ageing that have been conducted have been characterised by the adoption of quantitative approaches. There is a significant under-representation of qualitative studies that are capable, for example, of generating important life-history or observational data concerning people’s experiences of ageing in the countryside (Schweppe 2000).
- *A failure to acknowledge adequately the significant impact upon rural areas of the fundamental changes that are occurring in advanced industrial societies.* Since such changes, broadly linked to the shift towards postmodern society, impact upon geographic areas in very distinctive ways, attempts to generalise on the basis of a homogeneous view of rural society are prone to criticism. In terms of past research on rural ageing, it is not only difficult to distinguish between the experiences of older people living in different types of rural communities but, crucially for a critical approach to gerontology, it is also generally difficult to differentiate systematically according to key social divisions that operate within rural society. In seeking to move

beyond a homogenous view of rural areas, it is increasingly important to explore the distinctive roles played, for example, by gender and ethnicity in shaping the lives of rural older people.

These difficulties often combine to produce the unsatisfactory outcome that allows distorted views of rural ageing to persist. For example, depending upon the topic under analysis, and the subjective interpretation of the researcher, older people living in rural areas may be regarded simplistically as being either 'favoured' or 'disadvantaged', either 'well-integrated' or 'socially isolated'. A good example of this would be Ritter and Hohmeier's (1999: 39f.) attempt to draw attention to the 'problem' of rural ageing. Without reference to any empirical evidence, they suggest that: 'The situation of the elderly in rural areas is also made more difficult by the weakening of family networks, because the stability of families is declining and the number of small families and single people is increasing' (1999: 39)². Other researchers have noted the often contradictory nature of research findings relating to rural ageing (see, for example, Schweppe 2000: 89f.; Wahl *et al.* 2000a: 25of.). Thus, one of the major challenges currently facing rural gerontology is to generate the empirical base that could serve to overcome such difficulties.

Summary

In exploring intergenerational relationships in rural Germany, this paper has drawn attention to a number of difficulties that characterise past research on older people in rural areas. There is clearly a need for further empirical work in order to address problems relating to inconsistencies in the definition of rurality, in the selection of study populations, and in study designs. The result of weaknesses in the empirical base of much research on rural ageing in Germany, and probably in other advanced industrial nations, has been to allow a persistence of stereotypical images of ageing in rural areas. In the context of critical approaches to social gerontology, there is also a need to investigate the manner in which key social divisions operate within rural society, and to focus more upon the variability of rural contexts (Schulz-Nieswandt 2000).

Elements of this variability are evident in respect of population structures in rural areas and in socio-economic structures. This was exemplified here with reference, for example, to past differences in migration patterns that have produced very different age profiles for rural communities between East and West Germany. Rural com-

munities in western Germany, particularly those on the edges of major conurbations, tend to have a younger age-structure, than rural areas in the East. This variation has been brought about by the movement of younger rather than older people, and retirement migration in Germany is rather limited. In terms of socio-economic conditions, discussed in relation to tenure and housing conditions, the key difference is not between urban and rural areas, but between East and West Germany. This lends weight to one of the important points made by Garms-Homolová and Korte (1993), namely that urban-rural differences are often overplayed by social gerontologists. In key respects, similarities can far outweigh any differences.

The findings on intergenerational relationships in rural Germany presented here suggest that the following general characteristics apply. Rural older people tend to live in larger households than their urban counterparts, with a significant minority sharing households with their adult children and grandchildren. Generations of the same family appear to live in close proximity and to maintain frequent and close contacts with one another. Contemporary studies of rural ageing tend to support the notion that intergenerational relationships continue to be characterised by 'intimacy at a distance'. There is also a growing body of evidence that highlights the regular flow of transfers both from the older to the younger generation and vice-versa. For the majority of older people, close family ties are supported by a range of non-kin relationships. However, while this is the general pattern, empirical evidence also points to variation within the rural older population. Considerable variability in the specific aspects of intergenerational relationships appears to exist between rural communities in Germany. This has not been adequately addressed in studies conducted to date. Also, at the level of individuals, past research on rural ageing has tended to overlook those older people who do not fit into the general pattern outlined above. Thus, research has tended to ignore people whose family networks are limited or who express feelings of loneliness. In addition, there is scope for future research to examine further the way in which intergenerational relationships, including caring relationships, may be characterised by conflict or ambivalence. Such research is important in order to move away from persisting stereotypical images of ageing in rural areas.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Rural Aging: A Global Challenge' conference, 7–11 June 2000, Charleston, West Virginia, USA.

² Translation from German by the author.

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Accepted 12 September 2001

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