Ageing Update

Social gerontology in Germany: historical trends and recent developments

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Introduction

Mirroring the development in the social sciences as a whole, social gerontology has been characterised by an increasing internationalisation in recent years. While the English language remains the prime medium for communication, there is a rapidly expanding research literature published in other major world languages. This raises practical difficulties for researchers lacking the relevant linguistic skills to engage with the findings of research published in languages other than English. It is within this context that this Ageing Update addresses the current state of social gerontology in Germany. Drawing primarily upon sources published in the German language between 1997 and 2000, the article provides an overview of the historical development of research on social and behavioural aspects of ageing in Germany. It then proceeds to address some of the main themes and trends associated with what, by any measure, is a substantial amount of recent research. This analysis offers a basis for illustrating, in a short concluding section, the significant strengths and some areas of apparent weaknesses in the current state of German social gerontology.

Information sources

Increasingly important in the development of an appropriate research infrastructure for German gerontology is the easy availability of relevant information sources. In this respect, three key bibliographic sources are particularly relevant. First, Real's (2000) guide to German language books on ageing has grown significantly since a first edition appeared in 1991 and now includes bibliographic information on almost 7,000 texts. Though not especially user-friendly, since it lacks a

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proper author and subject index, the guide has nevertheless become an indispensable source for gerontologists, listing both well-known and less well-known publications. These are grouped according to broad topic areas, such as 'sociology and social psychology' or 'leisure, tourism and the mass media'. Second, the German Centre of Gerontology has published an annual bibliography of journal articles since 1977 (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen 2000). Based on the GeroLit database, the bibliography is a well-structured and accessible source, listing articles published in around 130 journals relevant to gerontology. It usefully reaches beyond sources published in the German language, has a good index and an alphabetical list of authors. The third important bibliographic source is the online version of the GeroLit database itself, incorporating information on more than 90,000 publications. Updated every two months this database is now freely available to anyone with internet access (through http://www.dza.de). GeroLit's inclusion of a comprehensive range of German language publications, alongside many articles published in English, renders it a significant extension to other widely-used electronic information sources in gerontology.

The development of social gerontology in Germany

The emergence and subsequent development of social gerontology in Germany is now well documented (Lehr and Brandenburg 1993; Dieck 1993; Clemens 1999; Karl 1999; Lehr 2000). In key ways the experience in Germany mirrors that of other advanced industrial nations. While pioneering attempts to engage in the study of ageing populations occurred during the 1930s (*e.g.* Gruhle 1938), it was during the post-war period that social aspects of ageing became the subject of significant research effort. The initial domination of the gerontology agenda by medical and natural scientists gradually gave way from the late 1950s to research that drew upon an ever-increasing range of social science and humanities perspectives (Karl 1999: 29). Initially, the main challenge to the pre-eminence of bio-medical approaches to ageing came from psychologists such as Thomae (1968) and Lehr (1972). Ironically, this led in turn to a relatively lengthy period in which psychological perspectives dominated ageing research in Germany. While German social gerontology continues to be heavily influenced by psychologists, from the end of the 1970s on, social policy and sociology perspectives have become much more influential. In recent years, there has also been a marked shift towards multi- and

inter-disciplinary approaches that seek to combine a range of social science perspectives, often with those from the natural sciences (Karl 1999: 31f.; Schneider 2000).

This growth in Germany has gone hand-in-hand with the development of the necessary academic and policy infrastructure to support research on ageing. Separate organisations existed in East and West Germany following the nation's division in 1949, although the Journal of Ageing Research (*Zeitschrift für Alternsforschung*) continued to be the main publication of both East and West German gerontologists until the 1960s (Karl 1999: 33). In 1992, the German Society for Gerontology and Geriatrics (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Gerontologie und Geriatrie*) was formed from the merged gerontological societies of the recently unified parts of Germany. Its forerunner organisations can be traced back to pre-war Germany (Lehr 2000). A key feature of the German societies has been the institutional link between social and behavioural gerontology, and medical and biological perspectives on ageing (mirroring the structure of the International Association of Gerontology). This is reflected in the multi-disciplinary nature of the society's current journal: the Journal of Gerontology and Geriatrics (*Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie*). However, the extent to which the society operates in a truly inter-disciplinary manner is still a topic for debate. In practice, the society's four sub-sections remain relatively independent of one another so that inter-disciplinarity reflects more a hope than a reality (Karl 1999: 37f; Kruse 1997).

Despite this, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a significant consolidation of the status of social gerontology in Germany. This has occurred through its academic institutions, the policy-making process and the emergence of a strong grey lobby. A growing number of universities and independent research and policy institutes now conduct research on social aspects of ageing. Especially influential, albeit with varying disciplinary perspectives, are the German Centre of Gerontology (*Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen*) in Berlin, the German Centre for Research on Ageing (*Deutsches Zentrum für Alternsforschung*) in Heidelberg, the Interdisciplinary Working Group for Applied Social Gerontology (*Interdisziplinäre Arbeitsgruppe für angewandte Soziale Gerontologie*) in Kassel, and the Institute of Gerontology in Dortmund. In Berlin, researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and at the Free University's Institute of Sociology, have been responsible for some of the most authoritative recent research on ageing.

While the capacity to conduct social gerontological research has flourished in recent years, progress relating to the development of

taught courses addressing social aspects of ageing has been relatively slow in Germany when compared to the USA or UK. Meyer's (2000) detailed analysis of gerontology courses in Europe identifies five higher education institutions spread across Germany offering mainly post-graduate programmes leading to formal qualifications in gerontology. Of the eight courses on offer, only two emphasise mainly social aspects of ageing, while a third is more interdisciplinary in character.

Social gerontology in Germany has always maintained a close link with the policy-making process. Such links have strengthened since the mid-1980s, not least as a result of growing public awareness of the potential impacts upon society associated with population ageing. In this respect, the demands of the policy-making process have also contributed significantly to the enhanced status of German social gerontology (Niederfranke 2000). Within Germany's federal political system, responsibility for framing aspects of ageing policy is spread across the national, regional and local levels of government (Geiser 1996; Scharf 1998; Strüder 1999). In recent years, considerable effort has been devoted by policy-makers at all levels of the system to the preparation of ageing plans, ageing reports and other similar documents. The point to emphasise here is that such documents are based, at least in part, upon the research input of social gerontologists.

At federal level, debate has become more focused since the mid-1990s and now targets particular aspects of older people's lives. For example, the second federal government ageing report (Altenbericht 1998) generated five supporting volumes of expert reports containing a wealth of data on different aspects of older people's housing (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen 1998*a*, 1998*b*, 1998*c*, 1998*d*, 1998*e*). A third report addressing active and productive ageing was published in early 2001 (Altenbericht 2001). Useful research has also arisen from a parliamentary commission on demographic change which has sought to chart the potential impacts of population ageing on a wide range of areas of German society (Demographischer Wandel 1994, 1998). The demands of the policy-making process for relevant up-to-date information has supported the development of a substantial empirical base relevant to social gerontology (addressed below).

Running in parallel with the growing academic interest in social gerontology has been an expansion in the range of groups representing the disparate interests of Germany's older population or seeking to provide independent advice on ageing issues. This development has been significant in terms of the capacity of such interest groups to generate their own research. Thus, there are a range of bodies supporting research into aspects of the pensions system, the housing

needs of older people or broad features of welfare rights. The long-established Kuratorium Deutsche Altershilfe (KDA) is especially influential in highlighting emerging issues and furthering practical solutions to key elements of German ageing policy. In this context, the emerging political strength of Germany's grey lobby has also been important (Klose 1993; Kohli *et al.* 1999; Verheugen 1994). Older people are now represented in a variety of ways by both traditional forms of interest group representation (such as political parties and trade unions), and by more non-conventional forms (including direct action groups and a 'grey' party) (Naegele 1999*a*). A significant step forward in terms of consolidating the broad range of interest groups that are relevant to ageing was achieved through the creation of a Federal Working Group of Senior Citizens' Organisations (BAGSO) in 1989 (Scharf 1998: 164).

Social gerontology – recent scientific developments

In this section, attention shifts towards some of the main scientific trends that have characterised research on social aspects of ageing in recent years. Amongst the important developments to be noted is a strengthening of social gerontology's empirical foundations, the production of significant textbooks, and the pursuit of innovative research within the disciplines associated with gerontology.

As has been the case in other advanced industrialised nations, **the empirical foundations** of social gerontology in Germany have been significantly strengthened in recent years. This has occurred within the context of a series of important inter- and multi-disciplinary studies, designed to extend the capacity of researchers to address key ageing questions in a more robust fashion. In this respect, two longitudinal studies and a large-scale representative survey deserve particular mention. The Berlin Ageing Study (BASE) has run since 1988 and effectively combines perspectives from the social and natural sciences. The first major book to emerge from BASE represents an essential addition to any gerontology library (Mayer and Baltes 1999). The Interdisciplinary Longitudinal Study of Adult Development (ILSE), conducted at a number of sites though based in Heidelberg, is perhaps less well known internationally. However, it has also yielded important insights into processes that contribute to successful and healthy ageing (Lehr and Schmitt 1997; Martin *et al.* 2000*a*; Martin *et al.* 2000*b*). The third study worth noting is the Ageing Survey (*Alters-Survey*): a nationally representative sample of 5,000 people aged between 40 and

85 years, which has yielded important insights into the social circumstances of people in mid- and later life (Kohli and Künemund 2000; Kohli and Szydlik 2000). Particular emphasis has been placed upon the analysis of intergenerational relationships and social networks (Kohli *et al.* 2000; Künemund and Hollstein 2000).

A second significant development in the period under review has been the publication of a number of **important gerontology texts.** These are likely to make gerontology more accessible to a broader audience in the German-speaking countries than has hitherto been the case. Such texts range from relatively wide-ranging overviews (Backes and Clemens 1998; Lenz *et al.* 1999; Niederfranke *et al.* 1999*a*, 1999*b*; Ritter and Hohmeier 1999; Scharf 1998) to all-encompassing edited handbooks that include specially prepared contributions from leading authors (Jansen *et al.* 1999*a*; Wahl and Tesch-Römer 2000). The handbooks are particularly useful and effectively illustrate the multi- and inter-disciplinary nature of German gerontology. Contributors to the edited collection of Jansen *et al.* (1999*a*) span the entire range of disciplinary perspectives on ageing, embracing the social and natural sciences whilst also giving space to the humanities. Separate sections are devoted to interdisciplinary and life-world perspectives, along with a short collection of chapters on practical uses of gerontological knowledge. This latter theme is developed more comprehensively by Wahl and Tesch-Römer (2000) who draw upon an impressive variety of approaches in a handbook that focuses on the practical applications of gerontology research. Social gerontology has also made significant inroads in recent years into the wider political debate through the publication of accessible, short texts. Often adopting provocative titles, a good example of this practice is Wehling's (1998) 'Society needs old people' (*Die Gesellschaft braucht die Alten*) which draws together a range of distinguished authors to explore such issues as the 'burden' of ageing, retirement ages, and the political representation of older people.

While multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives are evident in much recent research, there is also a healthy research agenda within relevant **gerontological sub-disciplines**. Given limitations of space, it is not possible to give adequate coverage to all relevant themes. In particular, given the specific history of social gerontology in Germany referred to above, psychological perspectives would warrant a review of their own (see Kruse and Lehr 1999; Lehr 2000). Instead, emphasis is to be given here to selected developments in relation to social policy, sociology and environmental research on ageing.

In the German context, there is now a substantial body of research

that examines the place of older people in society, as expressed through the historical development of social policies and cultural aspects of ageing (Ehmer 1990; Rosenmayr 1999). Increasing attention is also directed towards an analysis of ageing at particular points of German history (Conrad 1994; Hockerts 1985; Tennstedt 1999) with Borscheid's (1989) study of ageing between the 16th and 18th centuries continuing to be influential. A useful contribution to this strand of research is Tölle's (1996) cultural history of ageing in 19th and early 20th century Germany. Tölle (1996) charts changes in the way older people are represented in art and literature against the background of fundamental socio-economic and political change, culminating in an analysis of the way in which ageing and older people were portrayed under National Socialism.

Contemporary concerns are necessarily broadly conceived, with studies ranging from the more general to the highly specific. In their wide-ranging analysis, Ritter and Hohmeier (1999) argue for a paradigmatic shift in the nature of social policy in relation to older people, pointing towards the need to reintegrate older people into mainstream social policy programmes at the expense of policies aimed solely at this age group. Such arguments reflect the piecemeal and uncoordinated development of ageing policy in a strongly federal system, a theme taken up by Geiser (1996). Drawing upon case studies in two federal states, Geiser suggests practical ways in which policy fragmentation might be overcome through better planning.

Work and retirement represent important themes within a welfare system whose social security benefits are mainly derived from (past) employment. This has given rise to a number of studies that address the organisation and operation of labour markets. Especially noteworthy in recent years has been research that examines the role of older employees and the need for changes within the labour market to accommodate an ageing workforce (Bäcker 1999*a*; Behrend 2000; Rössel *et al.* 1999; von Rothkirch 2000). There is also a substantial literature on the broad social impacts of (anticipated and actual) pension reform (Ehrenheim 1999; Hauser 1998, 1999; Schmähl 1998, 1999*a*, 1999*b*). After a lengthy absence, there is now renewed academic interest in the connection between poverty and old age (Bäcker 1999*b*; Kölling 1999; Naegele 1999*b*; Neumann 1999; Schmähl and Fachinger 1999). This issue largely disappeared from the research agenda during the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting the success of Germany's system of social insurance pensions. Its return to prominence is an indication of the increasingly precarious financial status of many older people who have experienced insecure employment from the mid-1970s.

The introduction of long-term care insurance legislation in Germany in 1995 has also inspired much research (see Schneider 1999). Alongside empirical work exploring care-giving relationships (*e.g.* Künemund 2000; Schneekloth *et al.* 1996), countless studies examine practical impacts associated with the care legislation. Relevant themes are summarised in the collection edited by Entzian *et al.* (2000) and tend to mirror developments in other countries. Thus, there is concern about the quality of care provided to older people both in institutions and in community settings, the impact of care legislation upon informal carers, the organisation and operation of community-based health and social care services, and the difficulties of arranging an appropriate balance between professional and nonprofessional care. Effective 'case management' of individuals' care needs has yet to become the norm in Germany (Rückert 1999: 418).

While social policy research has flourished, not least as a result of a continuous string of (often minor) reforms in aspects of ageing policy, a slightly different picture emerges in relation to sociological perspectives on ageing. Despite the existence of some useful overview studies (Backes and Clemens 1998; Prahl and Schroeter 1996; Voges 1993), the point has been repeatedly made that until recently social gerontology has failed to make a substantial contribution to the development of social theory in relation to old age and ageing (Clemens 1999: 354; Kohli 1992; Schroeter 2006: 32f.). This argument is made most forcefully by Backes and Clemens (1998: 170f.) who argue that the most important theoretical debates relevant to old age and ageing are taking place amongst sociologists rather than amongst social gerontologists. The multi-disciplinarity of German gerontology is viewed as a distraction that has diverted attention away from the need to develop social theory. Given this critique, it is not surprising that Backes (1997) has sought to draw together key threads from contemporary debates in social theory and apply these to the gerontological context. Her work is important in that it develops ideas around the social construction of later life in their German context.

Also influential is the research of Kohli (1978, 1986 and 1992) whose substantial contribution to the development of lifecourse perspectives in social gerontology is emphasised in recent empirical analyses of data generated through the Ageing Survey (Kohli and Künemund 2000; Kohli and Szydlik 2000). One of the more interesting contributions to sociological debates is Saake's (1998) critique of conventional theories of ageing. Focusing on the work of mainly German and North American social gerontologists, Saake carefully identifies the limitations of traditional theoretical approaches and shows how long-established

theories tell us more about the context in which they were developed than about the nature of ageing. For sociologists interested in the inequalities associated with old age, the conceptual refinement of the notion of 'Lebenslagen' (life situations) in old age has provided a useful device for developing their research. Relevant studies draw attention to the heterogeneity of people's experiences of old age, arguing that these are both socially structured yet dynamic and amenable to the influence of individual characteristics (Amann 2000; Backes and Clemens 2000; Clemens 1994; Geiser 1996; Naegele and Tews 1993). Spatial inequalities represent the basis for Ipsen's (1999) review of the complex relationship between older people and the modern city. Ipsen argues effectively that the widespread resistance of individual older people to change might, when pooled together, represent the basis for urban innovation. Inevitably, there is continuing sociological interest in the institution of the family and the nature of intergenerational relationships (Bertram 2000; Kohli and Szydlik 2000; Krappmann and Lepenies 1997). Such research emphasises that the changing structure of families has done little to diminish the enduring strength of intergenerational ties (Szydlik 2000).

An important recent development in German social gerontology has been the emergence of a significant research literature that addresses environmental aspects of ageing. Following on the footsteps of North American and British research, the focus is upon the impact of spatial rather than social environments upon the ageing process (Saup 1993; Wahl 2000). Related research tackles a wide array of themes, addressed most comprehensively in the collection of papers edited by Wahl *et al.* (1999). Within the home, environmental perspectives address such issues as the meaning of home, the impact of the home's design upon social contacts, or technological adaptations to personal living space. Outside the home, research focuses upon the movement patterns of older people in their residential neighbourhoods, the use of public and private transport, and patterns of social interaction. An important extension of such research links it to a long-standing, though often neglected, interest among social gerontologists in the experience of ageing in rural environments. Rural ageing has received a significant boost through the recent publication of several texts (Schulz-Nieswandt 2000; Schweppe 2000; Walter and Altgeld 2000).

Lastly, in terms of theory, a significant contribution to environmental perspectives on ageing is represented by Strüder's (1999) study of the way in which the experiences of everyday life for older women in both East and West Germany are socially constructed. In a book that deserves wider international recognition, Strüder develops Giddens'

structuration theory as a means of addressing key aspects of older women's lives, looking particularly at housing, social networks and incomes. An important outcome is a critique of the manner in which social policy emphasises the benefits of community-based care whilst underplaying the potential of institutional care. The book is rounded off with case studies of older people in two German cities that illustrate the importance of environmental conditions in the maintenance of a person's everyday life and social identity.

Summary and conclusion

An examination of recent research suggests that the state of German gerontology at the beginning of the 21st Century is extremely healthy. As a rapidly developing area of research, gerontology in Germany has a number of strengths, not least its very strong empirical base. The development of multi- and inter-disciplinary perspectives has been encouraged by strategic thinking on the part of research funding agencies and of governments at all levels of the federal system. The buoyant state of gerontology research has generated an array of handbooks and texts that are likely to introduce new researchers to the field.

Alongside such strengths, there are also some areas that might require further thought within the gerontology community. A broader range of issues than those raised here is the topic for the self-reflexive view of the state of German gerontology prepared by Jansen *et al.* (1999*b*). One important issue concerns a perceptible lack of engagement with other European researchers. Where researchers do look beyond the German-speaking world, their gaze tends to be concentrated upon North America. For example, those researchers whose work has been most influential in the development of critical gerontology perspectives in Britain and the United States (such as Townsend, Phillipson, Walker, Minkler and Estes) barely rate a mention in relevant German research. There is obvious scope to promote closer links within European social gerontology. This is already occurring through institutional structures and funding mechanisms, such as the EU's framework programmes, but should not be left to chance, and might usefully be explored through other routes (joint academic workshops and conferences or a new European gerontology journal, for example).

A further area in which there is scope for significant development would be through the more widespread adoption of qualitative

approaches to research. The rapid development of biographical and life-history techniques in the US and Britain, for example, has not been widely mirrored in German research on ageing. This has been a notable gap in the Berlin Ageing Study, which relies on reconstructed biographies of individual research participants to illustrate selected life histories (Schütze *et al.* 1999). In this respect, it should be noted that some of the most innovative recent work undertaken by German social gerontologists has been of a qualitative nature (*e.g.* the studies of Strüder 1999 and Schweppe 2000). Part of the difficulty in this respect may be the enduring legacy of psychological perspectives that tend to emphasise quantification, while sociologists in particular might wish to approach their subject matter in a different way in future research. In this context, the absence of German language methods texts relating to the study of older people is particularly noticeable.

Finally, in terms of the subject matter of social gerontology, alongside the noted requirement further to develop social theory, there is ample scope in the German context to explore the range of social divisions of ageing. While gendered aspects of old age and ageing have been relatively well documented in relation to social policy and sociology (*e.g.* Backes 1993, 2000; Clemens 1997; Niederfranke 1999; Rudinger and Minnemann 1997) and there is continuing interest in regional inequalities associated with German unification in 1990 (Backes 2000; Lenz *et al.* 1999; Schwitzer 1999; Stephan 1999), there is a significant need to develop research in relation to such themes as ethnicity, health and disability. This can best be illustrated by reference to ageing and ethnicity. To the outside eye, German gerontology has tended to adopt a rather narrow view of ethnicity that underplays the extent of diversity in the Federal Republic. The ageing of different ethnic minority groups and of people classed as ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) has yet to be the subject of systematic analysis (von Kondratowitz, 1999: 123f.). While there are a number of relevant studies (Dietzel-Papakyriakou, 1993; Dietzel-Papakyriakou and Olbermann 1996; Geiger and Brandenburg 2000), these tend to exist in isolation from the main body of gerontology research and reveal important gaps. To emphasise this point, older people belonging to minority groups are still routinely excluded from major social surveys (including the Ageing Survey). This practice would be unacceptable to many gerontology researchers working elsewhere in the advanced industrial world.

Notwithstanding the identification of areas that might be explored in greater depth by social gerontologists in Germany, it is evident, on the basis of this review, that substantial progress has been made in the

pursuit of ageing research in recent years. Given the obvious relevance of much of the research reviewed here to current international debates in social gerontology, effort should be devoted to making the findings of this work available to a broader international audience.

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