Editorial: The silver anniversary of *Ageing & Society*

This issue achieves 25 years of publication of *Ageing & Society* and, you might wish to know, the 15,000th page. The silver anniversary will be celebrated in several modest ways. To begin with the beginning, *Cambridge University Press* has established an electronic version of the first issue on the journal's web pages, and made it accessible free-of-charge to all. Volume 1 included several notable and still-cited papers: those most often remembered are the foundation essays in 'critical gerontology' by Peter Townsend and Alan Walker, but there were many other strong and original contributions.[1]

The anniversary will also be celebrated by several commissioned papers from authors who have had a long association with the journal, including previous editors and some who wrote in the inaugural volume. No rigid template has been set, but I have requested contributions that in some way take a long-term, reflective and critical view of the development and current state of social gerontology, or of the transforming political, material and social situations of older people. The papers will be published not as a special collection but throughout the volume's six issues. The series is launched in this issue with characteristic verve and historical acumen by Eric Midwinter, Chairman and formerly Director of the *Centre for Policy on Ageing*. He has written an interesting analysis and commentary on the changing relative size of the First, Second and Third Age populations in Britain. Among its merits, the paper is an affectionate, understated homage to Peter Laslett, one of the principal progenitors of the journal and a constant supporter.

There will also be celebratory events at the annual conference of the *British Society of Gerontology* to be held during 14–16 July 2005 at the University of Keele.[2] Peter Townsend has agreed to give a reflective plenary address that will be sponsored by the journal. I will encourage the other prestigious invited speakers, Meredith Minkler and Harry Moody, to submit papers based on their presentations. A proposal has been made for a symposium at the conference on the implications of the fragmentation and disciplinary exclusiveness of gerontology journals. The social gerontology project is necessarily multi-disciplinary, but what are the consequences of most of its researchers being strongly aligned to the academic disciplines that formed them? The mass media will keenly report their

understanding of the latest achievements and claims of biomedical science, whether grounded in the best research or the wilder fancies of anti-ageing medicine, but few social gerontologists attempt to keep up with these developments. Their grasp of social realities cannot then inform either forecasts or speculation. Come to the conference and join the debates.

As an overture for these celebrations, I add a very brief report of the state of the journal, and an analysis of change in the character of the main papers since the initial volumes. The intellectual and publishing aims that have defined the journal since inception continue.[3] Jean Wilkinson and I expect a record 120 submissions during 2004, and although more papers are being published than ever before (40 in Volume 24), the acceptance rate has declined. The contributors are setting ever-higher standards, new topics are being covered and, another healthy sign, astute authors increasingly realise that, to improve their chances of both acceptance and prompt publication, it is wise to submit a very well organised, concise paper that conforms diligently to the journal's style conventions. If one feature of the last three volumes is singled out for praise, my nomination would be the sustained, original and ambitious ethnographic reports on topics as diverse as social dance, inter-generational support in rural Indonesia, the innovative and pragmatic private solutions to the provision of care for frail older people in Greece and Ghana, the power of social norms and etiquette in regulating the interactions among people with dementia in care-homes, and identify-formation and neighbours' interactions in retirement communities in the United States and Spain.

The changed character of the main papers

The approaches and methodologies of the first 50 main papers to be published in the journal have been compared with the most recent 100. Twenty years separates the two sets, the respective publication dates being March 1981 to March 1985, and March 2002 to December 2004. The predominant approach of each paper has been described by reading the abstract, conclusions and selectively *passim*. This elementary categorisation has not been entirely straightforward, and a few of the papers might have been differently allocated by another classifier. To illustrate, one required distinction was between a 'policy critique' and a 'practice review'. Papers dealing with pensions or long-term care funding were not a problem, but in which category does one place a critical commentary on primary health care reforms founded on the development of the nurse-practitioner role?

The exercise has nonetheless revealed one undoubted change: there has been a strong shift from critical and review essays to empirical research

TABLE 1. *The approaches and methodologies of main papers, early 1980s and early 2000s*

Approach and methodology	1981–85[1]	2002–04	Ratio 2002–4 : 1981–5
Critiques and reviews	50	23	0.5
Policy critiques	16	7	0.4
Conceptual and methodological reviews	22	8	0.4
Practice/service reviews	8	5	0.6
Literature reviews	4	3	0.8
Contemporary empirical studies	46	76	1.7
Quantitative: older people's experience or characteristics:	24	41	1.7
Quantitative: services/staff/informal carers	6	12	2.0
Quantitative: perceptions of older people by others	2	0	0.0
Qualitative: case studies/ethnography	12	13	1.1
Qualitative and quantitative methods combined	2	10	5.0
Historical and humanities studies	4	1	0.3
Number of papers[1]	100	100	

Note: 1. For the earlier period, 50 papers were reviewed: the given frequencies are double the actual.

reports (Table 1). During the early 1980s, every other paper was an evaluative or critical review (in their many forms), but by the early 2000s the relative frequency had halved. The shift in subject matter and approach has been accompanied by a change in the 'mode of production'. The 60 papers published in the first four volumes had on average 1.5 authors, and exactly three-fifths were single-authored. Twenty years later, the average number of authors for the 77 main papers in Volumes 23 and 24 was 2.4, and little more than one-fifth (23%) were single-authored. The dominant mode has definitely changed, from the single scholarly author to the research team.

Many will regard the greater emphasis on primary, empirical research as a positive development but, as Bill Bytheway noted in a 1996 editorial, it does not necessarily follow that there is increasing direct observation of, or involvement with, older people.[4] Some of the most original and authoritative papers in recent years have employed large datasets drawn from 'continuous' national social surveys or bespoke longitudinal study panels. More generally, it is probably true that the larger the research team and the larger the research grant, the more likely that the data collection is sub-contracted or handled by the least experienced staff. Armchair scholars may be slumping, but the odds of an author being a screen-tied modeller are increasing.

For perhaps a decade, my impression has been that many undergraduates and trainee researchers, when designing a dissertation study, have a firm

T A B L E 2. *The topics of main papers, early 1980s and early 2000s*

Topic[1]	1981–85[2]	2002–04	Ratio 2002–4:1981–5
Policy debate and critique	28	11	0.4
Social policy (macro and financial)	16	5	0.3
Health care, social service and housing policies	12	6	0.5
Psychology	16	19	1.2
Developmental	8	2	0.3
Identity and quality of life	8	17	2.1
Sociology of ageing and later life	44	54	1.2
Conditions of old age and inter-generational relations	30	44	1.5
Medical sociology	6	8	1.3
Cultural and societal attitudes	6	2	0.3
Educational gerontology	2	0	0.0
Human services	10	10	1.0
Health and social care management and economics	6	5	0.8
Medical, social care and specialist housing practice[3]	4	5	1.3
Other	2	6	3.0
Research policy, methods and epistemology[4]	2	5	2.5
Creative arts	0	1	
Number of papers[2]	100	100	

Notes: 1. Including historical, retrospective, cross-sectional and prospective studies. 2. For the earlier period, 50 papers were reviewed: the given frequencies are double the actual. 3. Including one on safety features of car design. 4. Including one on the involvement of older people.

preference for qualitative methods long before they settle upon a topic. I thought that this inversion of best practice as taught to me, *viz.* choose methods appropriate to the problem, was widespread among social science and health services researchers and that qualitative approaches had spread at the expense of quantitative analysis. The papers in *Ageing & Society* suggest, however, that social gerontologists practise a more sophisticated epistemology. Undiluted case studies and in-depth and qualitative methods were as common during the early 1980s as now. Exclusively quantitative studies have grown somewhat, but the greater change has been the rise of investigations that use both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The disciplinary and subject fields of the two sets of main papers have also been classified. It is recognised that the contents of a journal are a complex function of its editorial policies and reputation along with the author's or authors' publication strategies, and that these processes particularly mould the balance of submissions from different academic disciplines. The decline of policy critiques and the rise of empirical research reports are again shown, but the relative frequencies of psychological, sociological and service delivery subjects have not radically changed (Table 2). Even within the main disciplinary fields, only one strong shift is apparent, from 'developmental psychology' to 'quality of life' studies. But

is this a change of substance or of presentation in the work of psychologists of ageing? Only a more thorough content analysis would provide the answer. There has been an analogous change with the papers on socio-logical topics, towards studies of the experience of being old and the self-perceptions of older people. Finally, it was a little surprising to discover that, counter to the journal's aims and occasional reputation, papers with a clear humanities provenance or topic have been exceedingly rare. Of particular surprise is that so few papers on the history of old age and of age-related social policies have been published.

About 10 years ago, but not much before, a signifier of a trained social gerontological outlook was denigration of the appellation 'the elderly'.[5] For a few years, much fun was had checking its unthinking use by clinical and practitioner colleagues. There was a parallel unease about the use of chronological age when describing the subgroup characteristics of older people, from morbidity and functioning to social roles and self-concepts. Still today, many authors feel obliged to state that 'older people are di-verse'. Do not the pages of recent volumes demonstrate that this phrase is now a tired cliché? Social gerontology research is specifying and evalu-ating change, development, attitudes, aspirations, compensation, adap-tation and accommodation *through* later life as well as several inequalities at its successive stages. Of course, the coverage is partial and much more needs to be done, but once official or statutorily-defined retirement ages are dispensed with, describing 'the elderly' as a social group will not be far away from total uselessness. This is a mark of 25 years' achievement.

NOTES

1 The main papers in Volume 1 (1981) were:

2 For details, visit www.britishgerontology.org/index.asp
3 The original and continuing aims of the journal, along with trends in the topics
   and provenance of the main papers were last reviewed in a recent Editorial. See *Ageing
   & Society*, **22**, 1, (2002) 3–6.
4 Bytheway, B. 2001. Editorial. *Ageing & Society*, **21**, 6, 679–80.
5 The descriptive label was not suppressed during the early 1980s: see the titles of the
   main papers published in Volume 1 (note 1).