Ethnic Minority Elderly People   Judith Phillips

Colette Brown and Alice Broderick, Asian and Pacific Island elders: issues for social work practice and education. *Social Work*, **39**, 3 (1994), 252–259.

Reg Walker and Waquar Ahmed, Asian and black elders and community care: a survey of care providers. *New Community*, **20**, 4 (1994), 635–646.

Addressing the needs of elderly people of ethnic minorities has received relatively little attention in either practice or academic literature. The dearth of research on the situation of older people from minority groups is, however, being redressed by authors such as Atkin and Rollings (1993) and Blakemore and Boneham (1994) who argue that family roles and responsibilities, among Asian communities in particular, are on the brink of major change. The first significant group of British-born Asians have come of age and are now rearing their own children. Associated with these developments have come, it is suggested, revised attitudes toward the extended family, with the possibility of a rejection of the need for close ties.

The articles by Brown and Broderick and by Walker and Ahmed are therefore timely in their contribution to the debate, both in the United Kingdom and in America, and have relevance for the future direction of thinking on community care as well as gerontological social work practice and teaching in Britain. The marginalisation of Black and Asian elders in community care planning and provision in the United Kingdom is the major theme of the article by Walker and Ahmed, which reports on a survey of care providers' perspectives on the implications of community care policy for Asian and Black elders in Bradford. The second article from the United States complements the first by addressing the specific challenges for social workers in practice settings, to design and provide culturally relevant services and programmes. It is relevant to compare the experiences in the two countries, as in many respects the discrimination and marginalisation faced by Asian and Black elders are similar. Both articles draw attention to two lines of thinking which contribute to the marginalisation of these groups. First, there is a perception that there are few people in the older age groups among Asian and Black populations. Secondly, there is a notion that such communities 'look after their own'.

These perspectives are however radically changing because in the United States the Asian and Pacific Island origin populations are the

fastest growing minority groups, having doubled in a decade. In Britain, too, there are increasing numbers of older people who have 'experienced the hardships of migration and racialised deprivation' (p. 636), and increasing numbers who will require attention from policy and practice in relation to community care provision. As Walker and Ahmed point out, increasingly it cannot be taken for granted that immediate family is on hand to provide care when needed. Changing roles and responsibilities akin to those taking place among the White indigenous population can be seen and restrictive immigration policies have left many without support. Where it exists, it is mainly from women, yet their needs are compounded by reduced entitlements, lack of knowledge of services and problems of access, particularly by the many women who are excluded from the labour market.

These two factors have implications for social work practice and planning. Taking the British scene first, Walker and Ahmed acknowledge that the recent community care legislation makes little mention of ethnic minorities and any references are token. Against this background, service providers interviewed in the research (half of whom were of minority backgrounds), voiced worries about the lack of resources, fearing that carers and voluntary organisations would be subject to intolerable strain in making up the shortfall in provision. Day and residential care set up for Asian elderly people is one example explored in order to illustrate these worries. A limited resource, largely provided by men for men, failing to cater for the dietary needs of ethnic elderly people, and with inadequate interpreting services, fosters the conclusion that mainstream services are not geared to the population they are meant to serve. In addition, many older people are bewildered about community care in general.

The consensus among respondents, that the statutory services were ill equipped to meet the needs of ethnic elderly people, was seen as a reflection of the stereotypes and of the fear of social services of unearthing demands for services which they could not meet. In order to cater for those needs the Black voluntary sector is developing, but as the authors point out, they too lack the resources and expertise to manage the new contract culture. The response to this by some is to campaign for multiple social provision, allowing for different cultural, linguistic and religious differences as well as providing different facilities for men and women: others see this as discriminatory and a barrier to the development of mainstream services.

Similar themes are recorded in the article by Browne and Broderick, who discuss the identification of barriers to service use and the design and adoption of strategies for the delivery of ethnically sensitive

programmes. It is to the latter that we now turn. Agencies identified through their research that were successful in serving minority elderly people had the following characteristics: a location close to where minority elderly people lived, the use of Asian staff and board members, active outreach programmes and the opportunity for staff education to ensure sensitivity to values and variations within Asian and Pacific Island origin elderly populations. The diversity among the older population was important to recognise and reflect in the design and delivery of social and health services. (In the United States the Asian and Pacific Island populations have more than 30 cultures.) They also comment that social workers should make efforts to include such groups in evaluating needs and planning services.

In the final section of the article, the authors point to the importance of developing an ethnogerontological social work curriculum, which should address the heterogeneity among elders within communities, through topics such as historical background, levels of acculturation and assimilation, nativity, and the role of ethnicity in ageing. Several points are worth stressing from these sections:

- students should be made aware not only of the heterogeneity within cultures, but also of different levels of acculturation and assimilation within families. Those who have low levels of acculturation and assimilation may still embrace non-traditional or Asian health practices and may hesitate to use Western health facilities until acutely ill.
- social work students need to appreciate both perspectives, neither to romanticise the ethnic elderly population nor see them only as victims. 'Knowledge of the role of ethnicity in ageing would allow social workers to understand the ways in which problems are culturally defined and identify help seeking behaviours that are culturally acceptable' (p. 257).
- a curriculum that stresses family involvement, respect for the elderly population, and patience and openness to a culture different from one's own will be a first step towards culturally sensitive practice.

Both articles call finally for the need for more descriptive studies on minority ethnic elderly people and on multicultural ageing as there are many gaps in our understanding.

COMMENT

These articles contribute to the increasing literature on ethnic elderly people which addresses the problems that such older people face in societies where discrimination still needs to be tackled on several fronts.

Although many social work and gerontology courses concern themselves with issues of ethnicity and race, there has been little specific teaching on ethnic minority elderly people. Both these articles provide a good starting point in planning the content for such courses and in raising issues for discussion with practitioners and with Asian and Black elderly people and their carers. It is important that Asian and Black users and carers share the experience not only in the classroom but in the design of the curriculum. From the United States it is clear how much more research and practice guidance we need in Britain to establish the needs of ethnic elderly people. One of the important aspects highlighted by both articles relates to the need for research on the differences within communities. The stereotypical view of self reliance needs to be challenged, as many older Asian and Black people live isolated and lonely lives. It is in this area that more research is needed if services are to be tailored to needs and if community care is to become effective.

References

Atkin, K. and Rollings, J. (1993). *Community Care in a Multi-Racial Britain: A Critical Review of the Literature*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London.
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