



palgrave▶pivot

Inside the World of Older Spouse Carers

Elaine Argyle

palgrave
macmillan

Inside the World of Older Spouse Carers

Elaine Argyle

Inside the World of Older Spouse Carers

palgrave
macmillan

Elaine Argyle
Nottingham, UK

ISBN 978-3-031-61577-1 ISBN 978-3-031-61578-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-61578-8>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Paper in this product is recyclable.

PREFACE

Due to demographic and policy trends around the world, the incidence and intensity of unpaid care is growing, particularly amongst older people who are increasingly expected to assume responsibility for the care of themselves and their contemporaries. However, in spite of the widespread recognition in research, policy and practice of the significant role played by unpaid carers, this recognition rarely extends to older spouse carers who form the vast majority of the older carer population. As such, older people tend to be regarded as the passive recipients of care rather than the active providers of it. While care between older spouses is commonly seen as being normal, unencumbered by other commitments and not worthy of special attention, a view sometimes shared by older spouse carers themselves. This neglect is both reflected and reinforced by the fragmentation of research into unpaid care and older age. This has led to a lack of integration of knowledge between these two areas as well as the prevalence of a one dimensional approach to the topics being explored. Drawing on interviews with older spouse carers as well as relevant literature and statistics, it will be the purpose of this book to help to redress these omissions.

Nottingham, UK

Elaine Argyle

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the assistance of a number of individuals and organisations. These include the Economic and Social Research Council who helped to fund the research into older spouse carers, which is drawn upon in subsequent chapters [grant numbers R00429814265, PTA026270447]. Also playing a vital role is the information gained from organisations such as the British Society of Gerontology, the Office for National Statistics, Carers UK, Age UK, the International Alliance of Carer Organisations and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Others who have helped in various ways and at different times include Lorna Warren for her research guidance, the peer reviewers who provided valuable feedback on the book proposal and Tony Kelly and the staff at Palgrave Macmillan for their advice on manuscript drafts. Finally, thanks must go to the older spouse carers whose experiences and perspectives are central to this book.

CONTENTS

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| | 1.1 <i>The World of Older Spouse Carers</i> | 1 |
| | 1.2 <i>Aims and Outline</i> | 3 |
| | <i>References</i> | 5 |
| 2 | An Overview of Unpaid Caring in Older Age | 7 |
| | 2.1 <i>A Unique and Hidden World</i> | 8 |
| | 2.2 <i>Diverse Approaches</i> | 15 |
| | <i>References</i> | 23 |
| 3 | Entering the World of Older Spouse Carers | 27 |
| | 3.1 <i>Policy and Practice Trends</i> | 28 |
| | 3.2 <i>The Study</i> | 33 |
| | <i>References</i> | 41 |
| 4 | The Experiences of Older Spouse Carers | 45 |
| | 4.1 <i>Impacts</i> | 46 |
| | 4.2 <i>Perceptions</i> | 52 |
| | <i>References</i> | 59 |
| 5 | Context, Resources and Older Spouse Carers | 61 |
| | 5.1 <i>Household Assets</i> | 62 |
| | 5.2 <i>The Wider Environment</i> | 68 |
| | <i>References</i> | 75 |

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 6 | The Management Strategies of Older Spouse Carers | 77 |
| | 6.1 <i>Adaptations and Transformations</i> | 78 |
| | 6.2 <i>A Culture of Coping</i> | 84 |
| | <i>References</i> | 91 |
| 7 | External Support for Older Spouse Carers | 93 |
| | 7.1 <i>Access to Informal Support</i> | 94 |
| | 7.2 <i>Access to Formal Support</i> | 99 |
| | <i>References</i> | 108 |
| 8 | Overcoming the Marginalisation of Older Spouse Carers | 111 |
| | 8.1 <i>Transcending Divides and Disconnections</i> | 112 |
| | 8.2 <i>Inclusive Approaches</i> | 119 |
| | 8.3 <i>Conclusion</i> | 127 |
| | <i>References</i> | 128 |



Introduction

Abstract It will be the purpose of this introductory chapter to provide an overview of the book. It will begin with an introduction to the world of older spouse carers and the different perspectives that have engaged in its exploration. This will be followed by an outline of subsequent chapters, their aims and content.

Keywords Unpaid care • Spouse carer • Older age • Older people • Structure • Action

1.1 THE WORLD OF OLDER SPOUSE CARERS

As a result of demographic and policy trends around the world, older people are being expected to assume increasing responsibility for the care of themselves and their contemporaries with the number of carers aged 65 and over rising much more rapidly than younger counterparts (Greenwood & Smith, 2016). These older carers currently make up around a third of the overall carer population and the incidence of caring progressively increases over the later life course with around one in five UK residents aged 85 and over performing a caring role (Greenwood & Smith, 2016; Larkin, 2017). The majority of these older carers will be caring for a spouse (Carers Trust, 2015; Greenwood & Smith, 2016) and the decreasing popularity of marriage is unlikely to diminish the significance of this

dyadic caring role with the proportion of older people living in couples projected to increase due primarily to improved life expectancy (Office for National Statistics, 2023).

Not only do older spouse carers form an increasingly significant proportion of unpaid carers but they are also likely to provide more intensive levels of care than other groups of carers (Greenwood & Smith, 2016), often while dealing with health problems of their own (Morgan et al., 2020). A further feature of the caring relationship between older spouses is the high level of interdependence commonly found within this relationship and a subsequent reluctance to seek outside help. This view is often shared by service providers themselves who may see spousal caring in older age as normal, natural and unencumbered by other commitments such as work or childcare and therefore not in need of support or intervention. This is reflected in the noticeable lack of service provision specifically aimed at older carers as compared to younger carers and is compounded by the low priority given to older people's services more generally (Larkin, 2017).

A similar neglect of the experiences and needs of older spouse carers has been apparent in research, in spite of the increasingly significant role that they play and the unique nature of this role. For when caring literature has focused specifically on older people, this is usually in their role as care receivers rather than as care givers, reflecting the perception of older people as the passive recipients of care rather than as the active providers of it. Furthermore, although some attention has been given to spouse carers, this has usually focused on couples who are below retirement age or of an indeterminate age and defined by the characteristics of the cared for person (Morgan et al., 2020). It can be argued that this neglect of older spouse carers is ideologically bound originating in the cultural and structural aspects of ageism and corresponding assumptions that older people are burdens and marginal to society (Phillipson, 1982, 2013).

Contrasting ideological and theoretical perspectives have also given rise to a fragmentation of research into unpaid caring on older age. This has led to a lack of integration of research in these two areas and the predominance of a one dimensional approach to the topics being explored. Thus, research into unpaid care has tended to be characterised by methodological divides, aiming to either 'describe and quantify' or to 'conceptualise and theorise' this experience for different groups of unpaid carers (Larkin et al., 2019). These divides have undermined a full understanding of the complexities of unpaid care and have been compounded by the

individualised focus of much of this research. This has led to a neglect of the impact of the economic, social and cultural context on this caring and the social risks and the shared experiences that can arise from this (Morgan, 2018).

Similar divides have been apparent in gerontological research with different generations of thought, leading to a changing perspective rather than to an elaboration and consolidation of existing knowledge. Thus, first generations have tended to adopt individualised and medicalised approaches to older age, which attributes the disadvantage experienced in older age to an inevitable process of bodily decline. This has been challenged by second generation approaches which regard this disadvantage as being largely socially constructed. In contrast, third generation approaches emphasise the increasing incidence of diversity and agency in the third age of life, thus helping to counter to the perception of older people as the passive victims of adverse circumstances as preceding generations of thought tend to imply. As Twigg and Martin (2015) observe, these theoretical and ideological divides have begun to be challenged by perspectives which recognise the interplay between bodily decline, structure and action in the lives of older people. However, possibly due to the lack of integration between research on older age and unpaid care, this recognition has not yet been fully extended to the experiences of older carers.

1.2 AIMS AND OUTLINE

This book will aim to counter the neglect of older spouse carers by recognising the unique and significant role that they play and by transcending the divided approaches that have formed a barrier to this recognition. Thus it will be argued that an integrated approach is required to understand their lives which includes consideration of activity and meaning on one hand and structure and constraint on the other. This approach should also incorporate elements of all three generations of gerontological thought and explore the multiple dimensions of unpaid care provision which have henceforth remained largely disconnected (Larkin et al., 2019). With this goal in mind, this book will present the experiences and perspectives of 26 older spouse carers. These were originally captured through in-depth interviews which were conducted as part of a UK-based ESRC-funded study (Argyle, 2003). They were then revisited in subsequent research including a further ESRC funded study (Argyle & Warren, 2005) as well as in the process of writing this book. This has allowed for

the further pursuit of emerging themes with direct quotations from the original interviews featuring prominently throughout Chaps. 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the book.

The benefits of reusing qualitative research data in this way is being increasingly recognised (Hughes & Tarrant, 2019). For not only does it save time and resources, minimises respondent burden and maximises research visibility, it also allows for new interpretations and perspectives to be drawn upon. As such, since the interviews originally took place, the changing context of caring has led to ever greater demands on the role of unpaid carers and yet older spouse carers continue to be largely overlooked by research, policy and practice (Morgan et al., 2020). New perspectives have also emerged both relating to older age and to unpaid care which promote greater levels of understanding and insight into the lives, needs and experiences of older spouse carers and the influence of material, attitudinal and physical issues on these experiences.

In addition to the critical review of relevant literature and the use of carer quotes and vignettes, relevant statistics will also be drawn upon which will help to provide an international perspective, contextualise qualitative findings and uncover the generality of these findings. For, as Larkin et al. (2019) observe, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can help to transcend the long standing methodological divides apparent in research into unpaid care and take account of the dual nature of human experience. As it is not possible to give detailed coverage of all caring contexts, the main focus of this book will be on the UK but with some international reach and relevance. Indeed, as it will be shown, there are many similarities in the experiences of older spouse carers around the world, regardless of varying demographic, policy and practice contexts (Murray et al., 1999). There are also likely to be some overlaps in this context between the UK and other countries making it a useful point of comparison for international readers. The wide ranging focus of the book will also facilitate its breadth of appeal. For it is likely to be relevant to those with an interest in both older age and unpaid care as well as to policy makers, practitioners and researchers more generally.

Chapter 2 will provide an introduction to the topic of unpaid caring and the increasing significance of older spouse carers in performing this role. It will also review the development of research into older age and unpaid caring, helping to overcome the lack of integration between these two areas and locating them within contrasting perspectives on society and the state. Chapter 3 will begin with a review of developments in policy and

practice and their implications for older spouse carers. It will thus be argued that in spite of rhetoric towards responsive and culturally sensitive service provision, their unique needs have not been recognised. This will be followed in the second part of Chap. 3 with an overview of the study which will be presented in Chaps. 4, 5, 6, and 7 and which will aim to further explore and illuminate the world of older spouse carers from the perspectives of carers themselves. The focus of these four chapters will broadly reflect the predominant themes of the successive generations of thought outlined in Chap. 2.

Chapter 4 will focus on the experience of caring thus reflecting the emphasis on ‘caring costs’ and later life decline apparent in early research into unpaid care and older age. In accordance with second generation approaches, Chap. 5 will explore context, resources and caring, examining the way in which the incidence and experience of unpaid caring can be socially constructed. This will be followed in Chap. 6 by a discussion of the way in which the caring role of older spouses is actively managed. Implicit in this discussion will be the recognition by third generation and postmodern approaches that older age can be characterised by activity and agency rather than by passivity and victimhood. A combination of themes will be drawn upon in Chap. 7, which focuses on respondent’s access to support from outside the household. Chapter 8 will summarise preceding findings and will recommend the adoption of an integrated and eclectic approach to research, policy and practice. Drawing on examples of good practice from around the world, it will thus be suggested that, rather than ‘reinventing the wheel’, existing perspectives and approaches can be drawn upon in order to achieve this goal.

REFERENCES

- Argyle, E. (2003). *Caring and resources in older age*. PhD thesis, University of Sheffield. Retrieved May 24, 2023, from <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/5445/>
- Argyle, E., & Warren, L. (2005). *Older people and their money: Issues for policy and participation*, Cash and Care Conference, University of York. Retrieved May 24, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.13295.23209>
- Carers Trust. (2015). *Caring about older carers: Providing support for people caring in later life*. Carers Trust.
- Greenwood, N., & Smith, R. (2016). The oldest carers: A narrative review and synthesis of the experiences of carers aged over 75 years. *Maturitas*, 94, 161–172.