

The changing life-course, adult ageing and social policy

Professor Simon Biggs, BSL Professorial Fellow in Social Policy & Gerontology, University of Melbourne

While both international and national policies have tended to view adult ageing as problem of demography or economics, it is also a question of culture. These policies have arisen predominantly in the West, with concern that older people risk exclusion unless they are productive in a restrictive sense of work and work-like activity. In China, rapid changes in work and demography have brought calls for increased services and pension rights. Internationally, it has also been argued that societies risk intergenerational conflict and different age-groups will not age well together if questions of work and retirement are not re-examined. Australian society is facing a situation that is historically unprecedented, and that there will be larger numbers of older adults and fewer younger ones as the 21st C progresses is becoming a commonplace anxiety for policy makers. This raises the question of what sort of life-course we want for mature adults and for ourselves as we age? A number of alternative models for exploring what is happening to the adult life-course are explored, as a consequence of the combined effect of increased longevity and changing demography, each of which has different implications for public policy. The impact of 'decline', 'leisured', 'productive' and 'stretched' life-course models will be examined with examples being drawn from international, European and Australian policy. Economic approaches will be compared with what can be learned from humanistic and dynamic psychology. Alternative life-priorities will be explored as a basis for a sustainable national policy in this area.