

C. P. Brearley with M. R. P. Hall, P. M. Jefferys, R. Jennings and S. Pritchard, *Risk and Ageing*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Henley-on-Thames, 1982, 149 pp., £3.95, ISBN 0 7100 9080 3.

The series on which this volume is a part is called *Hazards and Helping* and is described as 'texts for the helping professions... aimed at increased understanding of what the terms "risk", "hazard", "danger" and "emergency" mean for helpers and clients alike in social work contexts. The focus is upon decision-making and practical action in risky situations accompanied by discussions of the organisational contests and the legal restraints and demands placed upon practitioners.' Judged by this criterion this book is only a very partial success. The first half, written by Paul Brearley, is largely theoretical and not at all easy to follow, though including useful references and some interesting concepts, while the second half contains straightforward well-documented accounts of social work with the elderly (Steward Pritchard and Paul Brearley) and mental disorder and its treatment (Peter Jefferys and Rosemary Jennings) which really do not stand having 'risk' dragged into their titles but are in themselves valuable educational material at a thoroughly practical level. The third chapter in this second part entitled, 'Risk and health care' (Michael Hall) is a useful but unadorned factual account of the common symptoms of ill health in old age and their causes, with no discussion at all of service provision or the constructive side of health care. Indeed, the impression given by the whole book is that it suffers from being part of a series which inevitably emphasises the negative aspects of life, and although Brearley's avowed objective is to 'encourage optimism' his review of the literature on ageism and his listing of the hazards which may be encountered, without any corresponding discussion of 'strengths', does in fact give an overwhelmingly pessimistic view of ageing which must rub off on a student reader.

In his own contribution, Brearley is handicapped by having already written at some length on the subject of risk in his introduction to the series called *Risk and Social Work*. Having thus said everything he has to say about the analysis of risk in terms of hazards (the risky situation), dangers (the particular losses to be feared) and strengths (compensatory factors offsetting the hazards and dangers) he refers readers to the earlier volume and gives only the sketchiest account of these concepts in the introduction to this book. There follows a chapter called 'The study of age and ageing', which is intended to be an outline of 'explanations, models and propositions' in the field of social gerontology which 'throw some light on both the experience of ageing and being older'. This pot-pourri of theories of age and ageism is not easy to follow and would certainly be very hard going for a student, though useful as a source for references.

There follows a chapter on 'Ageing and vulnerability' which spells out in fairly straightforward terms some of the causes of vulnerability in old age such as poverty, social isolation, the effect of retirement, poor housing, loss of mobility and the prospect of death; together with more specific hazards such as family stress, bereavement, loneliness, accidental injury, hypothermia and sexual and racial discrimination. As was noted above this makes depressing

reading. The last chapter in Brearley's section of the book, entitled 'Acceptable risk, assessment and resources', is again a mixture. It starts with an interesting distinction between 'acceptable risks' which are within normally recognised limits of reasonableness, and risks which are 'tolerated' because there is no alternative: 'it is not only a question of what we consider to be a reasonable level of risk but also of what we can afford to regard as unfair or intolerable'. These concepts could usefully have been developed further, but Brearley goes on to a discussion of social assessment and evaluation of emergencies which would have been more appropriate to the chapter on 'Risk and social work', swings back to sketch a theoretical account of research relating to older people's attitudes to risk-taking and then takes up again the theme of the relationship between resources and needs. The final sections of this chapter are a relatively straightforward description of resources in terms of innovatory services, flexible care packages, the support of the informal sector and the 'team' approach.

In short, this book is, in its various parts, a useful practical introduction to social work with elderly people and a mine of interesting but confusing theoretical concepts. It is, however, a great pity that its presentation reinforces the stereotypes which it sets out to destroy.

Centre for Policy on Ageing

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Muriel Skeet, *The Third Age, a Guide for Elderly People, their Families and Friends*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 215 pp., £6.95, ISBN 0232 51484 4.

Before I read this book I had the advantage of attending a three-day pre-retirement course; this consisted of talks given by people from the Inland Revenue, banks, social services, Age Concern, and a G.P., followed by discussion groups. At the end of the course we were all given a very comprehensive file of pamphlets and books.

It is therefore not surprising that except in small matters of detail I found nothing that was new in the book; indeed, I think that the author has attempted to cram too much information into one book, and maybe if it had been published as a trilogy, and dealt with its contents under headings such as social, medical and legal, it would have been more readable. In my view it would also be more useful and accessible.

Moving on to the contents of the book, the author provides an enormous amount of information, this ranges from preparation for retirement to caring for the very ill and dying. In between those extremes she deals with such matters as pension rights, investment, and tax problems; she also discusses moving house, welfare rights, sheltered accommodation, and quite a lot of other subjects, about which the layman probably has little or no knowledge. On the whole, I found it a difficult book to read, and found her practice of constantly referring to this or that authority rather annoying. I realise that this is standard practice in academic texts, but I am not an academic and Muriel Skeet claims to be writing for a lay readership.

Finally, may I reiterate my plea for the separation of the subject matter,