

Mike Hepworth & Mike Featherstone, *Surviving Middle Age*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982. 204 pp. £3.50 (paperback), £9.95 (library edition). ISBN 0 631 12955 3.

When a publisher as reputable as Blackwell puts out a series it is reasonable to look to the title of the series and of the individual books to give some indication of orientation and content. This book is in a series entitled 'Understanding Everyday Experience' and it seems to me to fail in its implied objective because it does not carry its analyses far enough and it takes a very limited view of its subject.

Admittedly 'understanding' and 'solving' are not the same thing but they are not unrelated and so it is perhaps surprising to find the jacket blurb declaring: 'It isn't guaranteed to solve your problems but it should make you laugh at them'. The book is, in fact, not unamusing but I am not sure what else it is, or indeed, is intended to be. I am not even sure that it manages to identify the problems of middle age, the understanding of which it purports to promote. Moreover 'surviving' in the title has some suggestion of a discussion of practical strategies, but there is none, merely a description of some.

The book appears to be preoccupied with images: images in the direct sense of those produced by corsets and make-up and diet and sun and also in the less tangible sense of those constructed by the image makers of the media. But it does not explore the extent to which these emerging images of middle age are incorporated into the self-concepts of actual middle aged people, nor how they are related to the other experiences of being middle aged.

It may well be the case that middle-aged people may now expect to be, if they so wish, trimmer, fitter, smarter and more generally with that ephemeral 'it' than they were 30 or even 10 years ago. But what does this struggle to present a more youthful image (and it is not made clear just how widespread the struggle is) mean to the individual engaged in it? How does it fit in, for instance, with changing views of adolescence, changing patterns of employment and retirement and with the increasing plurality of value systems, all of which are part of the externally structured experience of being middle aged? And what of its relationship to age-related changes in physiological functioning and their possible bearing on personality development? These topics are left almost entirely unexplored, yet any attempt to understand middle age without giving some consideration to them seems too partial to be of much value.

The book's strong point is the authors' skill in describing the patterns of change in the ways in which the popular media have viewed middle age, and the ways in which expectations about appearance, health and behaviour have been modified in some people. As the blurb once more says, the authors delve into 'a wealth of material from mail order catalogues to lonely hearts ads'. Well, 'wealth' is always a relative concept and it is perfectly in order to use it to cover extension rather than depth, but understanding generally requires more probing than is apparent here: the delving is more to do with sinking shafts than with open-cast gleaning. Charlie Drake, Diana Dors and Roger Moore may all be middle aged and, as such, valid 'sources': but so, surely, are Jung and Buhler and Lowenthal, but whereas the former appear in the

index the latter do not. Jung, admittedly, is cited in the text; a page is devoted to his views along with those of Erikson and Freud (a page between them, that is, not one each). Even if you happen to think that much of Jung is mystical nonsense it is the sort of nonsense that you cannot reasonably leave out of consideration in an attempt to understand the experience of being middle-aged, if only because of the influence his ideas have had on later researchers.

Perhaps it is in conformity with the emphasis on images, but a chapter on menopause, which concentrates almost exclusively on the potential for continuing sexual attractiveness and enjoyment, seems rather unbalanced, particularly when it excludes any consideration of the depression that a fair proportion of women report feeling at this stage. After all, this appears to be one of the experiences of middle age which many people do have to survive. And a chapter on 'male menopause' which does not examine the often complex aetiology of impotence is inadequate when aimed at promoting understanding.

The authors are amusing and justifiably sceptical about the various 'awareness' movements that have grown up in the past couple of decades, but they do not really attempt to explain what needs in the middle-aged individual they may be seeking to meet, or why this particular form of provision has come to the fore recently – reference to Jung may have helped to throw some light on this.

In sending the book the Reviews Editor commented that he thought it raised some important issues. Indeed it does: but is it sufficient in a book aimed at the popular market and with presumably some practical intent (*pace* 'understanding' and 'survival') simply to raise issues without exploring their implications? Neugarten's views on the significance of the changes in the way time is perceived are important, as are Jacques' views on death and Freud's concept of '*torschlusspanik*': they are all mentioned but in much the same tone as Ettie Rout's reflections on corsets and views from the *Sun's* 'Likeliest Letters' page.

Perhaps I expected too much of a book that is intended to be essentially light-hearted in its approach, and had it come under a different rubric (and, perhaps, imprint) I might have thoroughly enjoyed it: but I'm not sure – it was a bit like biting into a meringue-textured steak, and that's always likely to be disappointing.

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Joyce Lishman (ed.), *Research Highlights no. 3 – Developing Services for the Elderly*, Department of Social Work, University of Aberdeen 1982, 173 pp., £2.50, ISBN 0 9505999 2 1.

'A series produced for policy makers and practitioners, drawing together research on important topics in the social work services.' For this statement from the cover to be appropriate, I would constructively suggest that a more critical eye be cast over the presentation, readability and balance of the papers