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Verzorgd of zelfstandig. Ouderen en de levensloop in Amsterdam in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw

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Summary

Supported or Independent. Elderly People and Life Course in Amsterdam in the second half of the Nineteenth Century

This thesis centers around the question whether elderly people in the second half of the nineteenth century could lead an independent life and whether they could retain this independence as they got older. In order to answer this question, the image and self-image of the elderly were studied. Elderly people and their contemporaries formed an image of (in)dependence which may or may not correspond with day-to-day reality. This was examined by looking at the ideas of both nineteenth-century literators and the elderly themselves. Subsequently, these ideas were compared with day-to-day reality.

The image of the elderly was dominated for a long time by a double tradition: there is the wise and dignified elderly person as well as the old fool. Nineteenth-century literature mentions these two stereotypes. Poetry describes old age as a period of maturity and resignation. The idea of wise elderly people is also reflected in texts about grandparents who impart wisdom to their grandchildren. On the other hand, there is the image of the old fool. Literature often pokes fun at old spinsters, who try hard to stay young as long as possible. 'Old spinsters' are depicted as morose and gossipy. At best these unmarried women are pitied.

In addition to this twofold view, a third approach arose in the course of the nineteenth century. Literators started to pay more attention to the social needs of the lower-class elderly. They describe the working life of the elderly and life in institutions. The demand of the elderly for independence also emerges. Works by Hildebrand and Justus van Maurik show that the elderly in institutions have little autonomy. In Van Maurik the subject of reciprocity is discussed repeatedly.

The self-image of the elderly differs in many ways from the image found in the literature. Personal documents show that old age was not as blessed as expressed in the literature. Apparently, ageing was especially a difficult process. However, old age also includes happiness, especially the relationship with children and grandchildren adds to this. Besides, a good health of the elderly person and the spouse was important for a pleasant old age. Personal documents describe unmarried women as hard-working and loving people. They do not resemble the stereotype old spinster of the literature at all. Poverty and financial dependence are not mentioned in the personal documents, because they are written by middle-class and upper-class elderly.

Compared with nineteenth-century literature, personal documents are closer to the daily experience of the elderly. A disadvantage of this source, however, is that it is produced by the middle class and upper class. Personal documents present middle-class and upper-class elderly as independent people. It is highly doubtful whether the same applies to the elderly of lower social classes, who are often described in 'social literature'. These texts show that it was difficult for the elderly to build up an independent life. The literature, however, is not as close to day-to-day reality as the personal documents. Indeed, literary conventions always have an impact on the literature.

In order to answer the question whether elderly people in the second half of the nineteenth century were independent or not, the daily life of the elderly in all social classes had to be studied. This was accomplished by investigating co-residential behaviour and the income situation. Three aspects were studied: household, labour and poor relief.

These aspects can only be examined if the source used does not only provide an image of the elderly, but also insight in their daily lives. This source was found in the population registers of Amsterdam. Random samples were taken from the register for 1861, 1876 and 1891. Data from the register were completed with data on labour and poor relief, thus providing a representative picture of the income situation and co-residential behaviour of the elderly in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The data demonstrated that almost 50 per cent of the elderly lived in a household with children. In connection with the main question of this thesis, it is important to know that most elderly lived in their own families with unmarried children, not in the families of their married children. This applies to the entire second half of the nineteenth century. Similar research abroad also established that the elderly were more often co-residing with their unmarried children than in the families of their married children. That extended families occurred on a large scale also appears to be a myth in nineteenth-century Amsterdam.

The life course approach showed that it was a frequent co-residential pattern also over a longer period of time to live with unmarried children. The households of elderly people were followed over periods of ten years. At the beginning of these periods, half of them lived in their own family. As they got older this number decreased, although living with unmarried children remained one of the most common co-residential patterns throughout the research periods of ten years. The number of elderly people living in institutions, alone, or with their married children increased over these periods of ten years. The main causes for this, like the death of the spouse, departure of children, and the increased need of care, are closely related to ageing.

The co-residential behaviour of the elderly differs both according to their sex and marital status. Men were more often married and therefore lived more often with their wives and their own family. Women, however, were more often widowed and therefore lived more often alone or in incomplete families. Co-residence with the children also occurred more frequently in women than in men. Besides, the majority of elderly women co-residing in families of their married children were widowed. As widows found themselves in a financially difficult position, they were more dependent on support from others. Unmarried people usually had no relatives to appeal to. They looked for different forms of co-residence, such as living with other unmarried people.

Considering the question of this thesis, it is important to know the position of the elderly within a household. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the majority of the elderly headed their own household or were wives of the head. Men more often headed a household than women, and married or widowed people more often than the unmarried. This last group often shared a house with relatives or non-relatives on a basis of reciprocal dependence. After the death of their spouse, widows could become head of their household. It rarely happened that widows moved in with their children or with other people immediately after their partner's death. Over a period of ten years, the number of elderly heading a household slightly increased, although most of the elderly remained head until they died.

Whether elderly people could continue living independently was also closely related to their income. If the support for old age was insufficient, they had to work as long as possible. As for men, approximately eighty per cent still practiced a profession at the beginning of the research periods of ten years. Most men were employed in construction work, traffic or business, i.e. the most important sectors to the entire working population of Amsterdam. Shortly before they died, fifty to sixty per cent of the men was

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still working. Whether the elderly were still able to support themselves also depended on their social background. It is obvious that especially to the working-class elderly old age could be financially difficult.

Wages of elderly workers were often too low to support a family. It depended on specific conditions whether these workers could manage. Elderly workers with working spouses or children thus enlarged their family income. Married couples who had no children living with them could live on a smaller income. However, the couple's situation deteriorated if one of them lost their income. The death of a spouse could drastically affect the financial situation. In these cases, the elderly became increasingly dependent on other sources of income, such as family support or poor relief.

Sex differences had a large impact on the income situation. In the nineteenth century, the nature of women's labour differed from that of men. Upper-class women usually did not work at all and the job opportunity for other women was limited. Elderly women of the lower classes worked as cleaning women, seamstresses, or in business. Married working women often helped in their husbands' companies. Widows continued their husbands' business or tried to earn a living as seamstress or cleaning woman. Unmarried women were employed in those professions too. The wages of elderly seamstresses and cleaning women were low. This implied that the women who had no other sources of income could hardly if at all support themselves.

People who did not earn enough money could appeal to poor relief. Studying the theme of poor relief illustrated both the income situation and the co-residential behaviour of elderly people. Apparently, poor relief was an important form of support to the elderly. The minimum age for poor relief was fifty years. However, widows and abandoned women with children were entitled to poor relief at the age of forty or forty-five. These conditions also applied to the so-called permanent poor relief, i.e. financial support or help in kind that was supplied for a longer period. Poor relief also included free medical help, admission to hospital, a free funeral, and admission to special institutions for the elderly, like almshouses and old people's homes. The minimum age for admission to an almshouse was usually fifty years and to an old people's home sixty.

Material difficulties were one of the main reasons to apply for admission to an institution. There were more women than men in both almshouses and old people's homes. Besides, the majority of these women was widowed or unmarried. Married women were rarely found in institutions. Most widows and unmarried women had worked as seamstresses or cleaning women, jobs that did not pay enough to live on. If these elderly had no other sources of income, they had to share a house or apply for a supplementary income from poor relief. As a last resort, admission to an institution guaranteed a relatively decent existence.

The question whether elderly people in the second half of the nineteenth century could retain their independence is related to both their income situation and co-residential conditions. The elderly who lived alone, with their spouse, or their own family were more independent than those who lived in with one of their children, or who lived in institutions. Besides, the majority of the elderly headed their own household. It can therefore be concluded that they led an independent existence. It was also shown that the income situation of many elderly people in the nineteenth century balanced on the verge of poverty. The balance tipped if they were unable to perform their work, had no pension rights, or lost their spouse. The elderly people in institutions can be considered less independent. The number of elderly people in institutions was in fact very small in terms

of percentage: in the second half of the nineteenth century, ninety per cent of the elderly lived outside institutions.

Vertaling/Translation: Paulien Copper

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In het register zijn zo vermeld worden auteurs die voorkomen.

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