

Aging in Twentieth-Century Britain

Charlotte Greenhalgh, University of California Press, Oakland, CA, 2018, 262 pp., pbk £27.00, ISBN 13: 9780520298798

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This book provides gerontologists with a fresh perspective on their discipline and charts the interplay between social research on ageing and the development of health and social policy for older people in Britain across the 20th century. The author uses a series of different lens: research, policy, printed media and autobiographies, to build a complex picture of ageing in the 20th century. While in essence this is a history book, it contains insight and reflections relevant for present-day researchers and policy makers, and helps us place our work in the wider development of gerontology as a discipline as well as providing new insight into the lives of older people across the 20th century.

Chapter One reflects on how older people have been presented and represented within research, often noting how their own accounts and images were hidden within early research; something that this book addresses directly in the following chapters by revisiting data from different projects. Chapter Two digs deeper into influential studies of ageing from the 20th century, revisiting data collected by Peter Townsend and others to reveal the untold aspects of the lives of older people, and this process is continued in Chapter Three where the focus moves to data from studies of residential care. This new examination of old data is fascinating and provides a more complex and nuanced understanding of the lives of older people than was presented at the time the data were collected, highlighting the ways in which the voices of the older people themselves were often subsumed by those who cared for them and the researchers themselves. Across Chapters One to Three it is striking how much similarity is found between the key issues of interest to researchers and policy makers in the early parts of the 20th century and now; there is much learning here for us.

Chapter Four provides a fascinating insight into the presentation of older people in magazines and older people's own reflections on their appearance, clothes and cosmetics from the Mass Observation participants. This change in lens uncovers some surprising findings about how older people were celebrated within fashion and beauty in the mid-20th century. Chapter Five offers another viewpoint on ageing: that of autobiographies. While this chapter includes some interesting observations on how older people write about their own lives, I didn't feel this chapter was as effective in continuing the narrative of ageing in historical perspective as other parts of the book.

The book concludes with an epilogue that considers the findings of the book in light of discussions about ageing populations and apocalyptic demographics,

offering us a more positive understanding of the present and the future by looking to the past.

The strengths of the book are in the breadth of the discussion and the careful way that the author has re-examined data from seminal studies carried out in the 20th century alongside analyses of media, magazines and autobiographies to bring the voices of older people to the very forefront of this history. The book does include around 45 pages of notes to the chapters which I found a little cumbersome to navigate but overall it is a well-constructed, clearly written and engaging book that takes a huge topic and makes it accessible.

This book is an important read for gerontologists and social scientists more broadly as it provides us with a better understanding of the foundations of our current work and illuminates how research shapes policy, policy shapes research, and how both impact on the perceptions of ageing and the lives of older people. The book, particularly the earlier chapters, also provides vital lessons for policy makers.

doi:10.1017/S0144686X19000898