

REVIEW

Ageing, the Body and the Gender Regime: Health, Illness and Disease Across the Life Course

Susan Pickard and Jude Robinson (eds), Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2019, 193 pp., hbk £120.00, ISBN 13: 978-1-138-35192-9

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Though the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact on all our lives, gender and age disparities in relation to, *inter alia*, fatalities and the psychological distress associated with lockdown are reported (Xiong *et al.*, 2020). This edited text, exploring gendered inequalities across the lifecourse, through the lens of health, wellbeing, illness and disease, is therefore timely. Part of the Routledge ‘Studies in the Sociology of Health and Illness’ series, the collection of ten chapters, authored by new and well-established researchers from diverse disciplines, endeavours to address limitations in current scholarship relating to health inequalities. The editors argue that ‘recognition that the contemporary life course carries a number of challenges, especially for women, *at all stages*’ is at the ‘heart’ of the book (p. 2). With chapters exploring the effects of gendered inequalities in youth, mid-life and old age, this is evident, and addresses the tendency in gendered health inequalities research to focus on women of reproductive age.

The first eight chapters are organised sequentially, leading the reader from adolescence to old age, while the final two adopt a lifecourse perspective. Drawing on both theoretical work and empirical study, the chapters examine the intersections of gendered and age-based inequalities. As noted by Calasanti and King in Chapter Eight, this approach illuminates differences in both health conditions and health behaviours, in a way that would not be possible through a solely gendered lens. The focus in this chapter on the intersections of gendered inequalities *with* old age, as opposed to intersections *within* old age, more common in research, was welcome.

Chapters Two and Nine explore how public health measures are heavily influenced by gendered views, at the expense of women and girls. While Chapter Two considers Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), Chapter Nine examines smoking and smoking cessation campaigns. In the case of HPV, although the vaccine could be beneficial to boys, efforts to vaccinate are targeted at girls, placing on them (and their parents) the burden of being responsible social agents. In Chapter Nine, Robinson explores gendered patterns of smoking, and their role in smoking cessation campaigns. Both contributions show the (often negative) impact of gender-based views in public health interventions. Nonetheless, the image of

smoking cessation campaigns portrayed by Robinson, in which mothers are seen as the main target and on whose shoulders the burden for protecting children from the effects of passive smoking falls, seem somewhat dated. Recent anti-smoking campaigns, in the United Kingdom (UK) at least, appear equally targeted at men.

In Chapter Four, Lian examines the changing medical view of long-term chronic fatigue syndrome. Seen in the 19th century as a condition indexical of intrinsic qualities, when it was mainly attributed to men, it morphed – in the 20th century – into one indicating how overexcitable women’s minds are. Lian traces the trajectory of the illness from ‘high status’ to ‘low status’ as it transitions from being associated first with men and subsequently with women. Lian points out that the condition is not only debated but also contested, placing an additional burden on women: that of being disbelieved, resulting in delegitimised suffering.

Moving away from illness, in Chapter Five, de Salis draws on her UK-based ethnographic research to argue for better recognition of the diverse experiences of menopause. Focusing on one of three interrelated narratives identified in her data – menopause as a time of liberation and rebirth – she champions the reclaiming of menopause as a positive and powerful process in women’s lives. Both this chapter and Chapter Three, in which Nielsen draws on her longitudinal generational study of young people’s relationships with their bodies, offer numerous direct quotations from study participants, giving voice to the women (and men) involved. This serves to address a gap in health inequalities scholarship observed by the text’s editors: its predominant use of large-scale surveys and statistically based analysis.

Dementia, a condition more prevalent in later life and one affecting more women than men, is explored by Boyle in Chapter Six. Analysing discourses and practices around dementia, she observes their disregard of gender as a relevant factor. One such factor is men’s reluctance to accept a dementia diagnosis. Boyle reveals how, when in a (heterosexual) couple one partner is diagnosed with dementia, men still tend to show a propensity to make decisions in the context of care, despite being the one diagnosed. In Chapter Seven, Marshall highlights the way in which UK and North American media presented being married as a way to avoid dementia, after research revealed an association between healthier lifestyles and married life. This, she contends, reflects a dimension of successful ageing she terms ‘late life hetero-happiness’, and is one aspect of the chapter’s exploration of biomedicine’s approach to ageing bodies as *hetero*-sexualised. Though Marshall notes the use of heterosexual imagery in the media, similar to Robinson’s portrayal of smoking cessation campaigns, the view of marriage as reflective of *hetero*-happiness seems dated, since the legalisation of same-sex marriage in various countries.

Pickard and Robinson assert that this book will be of interest to academics and students in the fields of medical sociology and anthropology, gender studies, gerontology and health care and nursing, with which we undoubtedly agree. Nevertheless, with its attention to structural and cultural inequalities, and examination of the intersections of inequalities (not identities), it will also be of interest to those in social work and social care.

Reference

Xiong J, Lipsitz O, Nasri F, Lui LW, Gill H, Phan L, Chen-Li D, Iacobucci M, Ho R, Majeed A and McIntyre R (2020) Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in the general population: a systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 277, 55-64.

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