

Reviews

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John Bond, Sheila Peace, Freya Dittmann-Kohli and Gerben Westerhof (eds), *Ageing in Society: European Perspectives on Gerontology*, third edition, Sage, London, 2007, 384 pp., pbk £20.99, ISBN 13: 978 1 4129 0020 1.

This third edition of *Ageing in Society* is a welcome update and radical revision of the earlier edition. As the title suggests, it has become European. Two of the previous editors, Bond and Peace, have teamed up with two colleagues from Nijmegen and have assembled a collection of important and interesting contributions. The authorship of each chapter includes at least one non-British author, most of them Dutch and German and others from Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain and Italy. The structure and approach are similar to the previous edition. Thus it has a series of chapters each of which takes a particular disciplinary perspective – biological, psychological and social – highlighting the multi-disciplinary nature of gerontology. These are followed by chapters which focus on more topic-based social or psychological issues, many of them taking inter-disciplinary approaches. Linking the two parts is a chapter on methodologies (Victor, Westerhof and Bond), and framing all the contributions are the editors' introductory chapter, 'The ageing world', and concluding chapter, 'Ageing into the future'.

Westendorp and Kirkwood explain the complexities of biological ageing in a lucid and fascinating way, apt for readers who will be predominantly non-biologists. The authors argue that there is potential to increase the human life span well beyond what is currently the case. Yet they do not share the optimism of Fries, who more than 30 years ago put forward the thesis of the 'compression of morbidity'. Against what they see as growing evidence of 'de-compression of morbidity', a key question for them is: how do we optimise the population's health 'such that we don't simply spend more years in misery before we die?' (p. 36). Of course not all older people experience years in misery, and even if they do, these are still likely to constitute a relatively short period of what we refer to as later life. Marcoen, Coleman and O'Hanlon, in a review of psycho-gerontology, highlight the developmental perspective of ageing, and its potential gains as well as losses. The chapter on 'Social theory and social ageing' by Phillipson and Baars presents a useful overview to newcomers in gerontology, but as they themselves suggest, there has not been much progress in social gerontological theory. There has been a the tendency in social approaches to ageing either to focus on practical policy issues of social protection and care, or towards 'microfication', a focus on the individual and their immediate context. I wonder if it is perhaps futile to seek grand theories of old age or ageing in society. Clearly,

as the authors stress, social gerontology must draw on the mainstream social sciences, including sociology and social anthropology. The growing relevance of the environmental perspective is apparent in the chapter by Peace, Wahl, Mollenkopf and Oswald. If anything is missing from this excellent volume, I would say it is a contribution from historians, who have added a great deal to our understanding of the social aspects of ageing.

Several of the contributions in this volume go out of their way to avoid the 'microfication' tendency. The chapter by Askham, Ferring and Lamura on 'Personal relationships in later life', while clearly focusing on micro-relations, provides an interesting analysis of these in the wider context of the community, the economy and cultural and political institutions. This is also the case for the chapter by Westerhof and Tulle entitled 'Meaning of ageing and old age: discursive contexts, social attitudes and personal identities'. Using a Foucauldian type discourse analysis, the authors combine the social and the individual levels of analysis, recognising the close relation between 'agency' and 'structure'. I found their exploration of meanings and identities within a wider social context illuminating. An understanding of individual ageing is nevertheless important in its own right, and can be significant for policy considerations. The chapter on 'Competence and cognition' by Krampe and McInnes provides insight on the learning potentials of older people. The chapter by two non-British authors, Freya Dittmann-Kohli and Jopp, 'Self and life management', focuses on development in later life and creativity and wisdom in the third age, through the concept of 'wholesome knowledge'. These as well as many other contributions to this volume, help us take a more positive and optimistic perspective on ageing and older people.

Of course no volume on ageing would be complete without paying some attention to issues of health and dependency (chapter by Bond and Rodriguez Cabrero); social protection (Naegele and Walker); and work and retirement (Kunemund and Kolland). All three chapters present informative overviews of issues from a comparative European perspective. Oddly, there is little in the chapter on work and retirement about the European legislation on age discrimination and its possible future implications. It is difficult in a short review to do justice to each of the contributions to this superb book. The collaboration between some of the foremost gerontologists across Europe has clearly paid off, adding to the theoretical perspectives, providing an insight into new important empirically-based research findings, and moving us beyond an Anglo-centric perspective on policy issues. It shows the strength of European gerontology and how it appears to be succeeding in moving beyond the dominant 'ageing as a problem' paradigm. It is to be strongly recommended both to newcomers to the subject – students and researchers – and to those wishing to update themselves and seeking some new inspiration.

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