


REVIEWS

## Disability and Ageing – Towards a Critical Perspective

Ann Leahy, Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 2023, 240 pp., pbk £26.99, ISBN 13: 978-1-4473-5716-2

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Part of the Ageing in a Global Context book series and based on the author's PhD thesis, *Disability and Ageing – Towards a Critical Perspective* examines the under-researched topic of older people's experiences of disability, including the process of disablement and the meanings made of these experiences. One of the key strengths of this work is its inter-disciplinary approach, investigating the disparate experiences of people from the perspectives of social gerontology, lifecourse studies, medical sociology and disability studies. This book should be widely read by researchers, policy makers and activists from both ageing and disability fields, inspiring fruitful new conversations, collaborations and policies.

Chapter 1, 'Introduction', presents the two central paradoxes forming the background to this work. The first paradox is that despite the acknowledged importance of the impact of advanced older age, the social sciences have largely neglected the meaning made by older peoples' experiences of disablement. Secondly, because the nature of how 'disability' has been approached within separate fields, physical or sensory impairment in older ages has rarely been seen as a form of disability. Leahy seeks to examine these paradoxes through an empirical qualitative study of older people living with disability, drawing from those ageing with longstanding disability (AwithD) and those first experiencing disability with ageing (DwithA).

Following the introductory chapter, the book is structured in two parts, the first providing background and context to the empirical research that is presented in Part II. Part I, 'The Context for Disablement in Older Age', consists of three chapters, the first of which, Chapter 2, 'Defining Disability', navigates the construct of disability, from various academic perspectives and languages, revealing how closer inter-disciplinary working has often been impeded by these differences. Chapter 3, 'Literature: Ageing, Disability and Lifecourse', engages in depth with theoretical perspectives on disability and ageing, concluding that critical studies from disability and ageing fields have largely failed to consider disability and ageing together. Whilst Leahy discusses the theoretical framework of intersectionality, no single theoretical approach is taken by Leahy who, using constructivist grounded theory methods, seeks to investigate the meaning made by older disabled people of their

impairments. In Chapter 4, 'Public Policies on Ageing and Disability', Leahy discusses the effects of separate public policy frameworks for ageing and disability, so that in policy terms one is either treated as disabled or older, with assumptions and stereotypes underpinning the differential treatment. The author critiques this as a form of institutional ageism, which can disadvantage older disabled people, for example, leading them to be excluded from certain disability enablement programmes or rehabilitation services.

Part II of the book presents the empirical findings across four chapters, each addressing a different theme. The findings result from the author's analysis of interviews with 42 participants aged 55–90. In Chapter 5, 'Disabling Bodies', participants expressed resistance to being defined by what their bodies could not do. For older disabled people, 'experiencing disability was no bar to identifying with "positive" or "active" ageing approaches' (p. 89), highlighting the need for a more holistic and integrated approach to disability and ageing. In Chapter 6, 'Disabling or Enabling Contexts', financial and social resources were found to be crucial in the older person's experience of disablement. People living with greater material disadvantage generally experienced their impairments as a greater disability. Ableist social norms were also important contextually, *e.g.* for some AwthD participants, ageing led to greater inclusion and a sense of having 're-entered the standardised lifecourse' (p. 117). Chapter 7, 'Responding to Challenges', demonstrates how older disabled people were engaged in efforts to forge connections with others and find purposeful activities despite the challenges of disablement. The author describes personal and humanising accounts of participants that are far from 'the stereotype of a passive older person, experiencing "decline" in [their] "fourth age"' (p. 130). In Chapter 8, 'Comparison: Disability with Ageing and Ageing with Disability', the author compares the two participant groups across each of the three themes presented in the previous chapters, revealing both the heterogeneity and shared aspects of their experiences of disability over the long term. The Chapter 9 'Conclusion' summarises the key findings and suggests future directions for academic research and policy. The final supplemental 'Methodological Annexe' describes the methodological detail of the empirical study and is essential in critically evaluating and interpreting the research findings.

This ambitious and timely piece of work grapples with the paradoxes and complexity raised by the intersection of ageing and disability. One key finding is that the dominant 'positive' and 'active ageing' discourse is challenged by this work, in favour of a research-based narrative of ageing with value. This work has started an important conversation about what it means to live a fulfilling life with disability in older age.

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