

Reviews

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Jan Baars, Joseph Dohmen, Amanda Grenier and Chris Phillipson (eds), *Ageing, Meaning and Social Structure: Connecting Critical and Humanistic Gerontology*, Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 2013, 216 pp., hbk £70.00, ISBN 13: 978 1 4473 0090 8.

Academic texts on the intersection between critical and humanistic gerontology are sparse in academia. Most of the literature in contemporary ageing studies oscillates either towards the social and the structural or towards the personal and the autobiographical. This collection of papers is an exception. All chapters seek to integrate the analysis of structural mechanisms such as social inequality, on one hand, and the interpretation and articulation of the meaning of later life, on the other, focusing on that interface between the rubric of political economic perspectives on ageing and humanistic ageing studies.

The title of the book struck me as a compelling one since many gerontologists tend to discuss critical aspects of later life whilst overlooking its existential process. In many ways, *Ageing, Meaning and Social Structure* builds upon the excellent collection of essays found in the special issue of *Journal of Aging Studies* (Ray and Cole 2008) which provided exceptional reflection on the intersection between the theoretical and the autobiographical, the personal and the social, and the generalised and the closely corporeal experiences of ageing. This collection of chapters emerged from two interrelated symposia which focused on a confrontation and integration of structural and meaning-oriented approaches at the Annual Meeting of the British Society for Gerontology in 2010 that highlighted the need for the so-called ‘more structurally oriented researchers to include dimensions of personal meaning and the need of more existentially oriented researchers to include structural dimensions in their work’ (p. 4).

The book lacks a strong preface/foreword that garners a precise understanding of the editors’/authors’ standpoint, one that relates the historical perspectives of the critical–humanistic divide in ageing studies. This would have been a beneficial starting point for undergraduate and other novice readers in this specialised area of studies, as it would have provided a robust backdrop to the dialectical relationship between ‘structuralist’ and ‘individualist’ discourses that are so prevalent in both past and contemporary gerontological texts and articles. However, such a deficiency is remedied in the book’s second chapter, ‘Connecting Meaning with Social Structure’ (Jan Baars and Chris Phillipson), which strongly identifies the key theoretical foundations for the interconnection of structural critiques and interpersonal meanings in terms of changing relationships between constitutive life worlds and systemic domains. This chapter is extremely useful in

highlighting how one-sided approaches – which underestimate either the capacity to overcome difficulties or the finitude of life – distort the reality of human ageing.

The consequent seven chapters view critical and humanistic dimensions of ageing through various lenses: personal ethics, ageing and lifestyle (Joseph Dohmen, Chapter 3); structural and cultural approaches in rethinking agency in later life (Amanda Grenier and Chris Phillipson, Chapter 4); beyond the structures of medication and cultural neglect in dementia care (Margaret Th. Bruens, Chapter 5); a spiritual perspective on self-realisation and ageing (Hanne Laceulle, Chapter 6); the balance between autonomy and connectedness in the lives of older people as regards social ability and social frailty (Anja Machielse and Roelof Hortulanus, Chapter 7); critical perspectives on social work with older persons (Mo Ray, Chapter 8); and the opportunities and challenges for critical gerontology through community-based participatory action research (Friederike Ziegler and Thomas Scharf, Chapter 9). All these chapters make a major contribution to understanding key social and ethical dilemmas facing ageing societies. Academics are best advised to read these chapters first hand to grapple with how *Ageing, Meaning and Social Structure* confronts and integrates approaches that have been relatively isolated from each other, whilst also interrelating two key strands of thought within critical gerontology, namely analysis of structural issues in the context of political economy and humanistic perspectives on issues of existential meaning.

The final chapter includes a fitting commentary on the preceding chapters, succeeding admirably to locate their perspective within the distinction between ‘contingent’ and ‘existential’ ageing as especially elaborated upon by Jan Baars and Chris Phillipson in the book’s second chapter. The authors of this final chapter, Dale Dannefer and Jieliu Lin, explore the importance of structural inequalities affecting older people for the themes discussed in this book, notably in terms of the achievement of empowerment and autonomy, yet without underestimating the various approaches for understanding human needs, and the implications for considering issues relating to spirituality in later life. Their illustrations of a number of examples drawn from work with older people in settings such as long-term care was also commendable to enable the reader situate the various theoretical strands in the foregoing chapters in a praxeological framework.

I certainly recommend this book at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study within the wide variety of social scientific disciplines, as well as for students following health-care degrees or modules with an interest in ageing studies. This publication has much to offer to contemporary theorising and empirical understanding of what it means to grow old in societies experiencing a transition to a ‘late’ modern stage of capitalism.

Reference

- Ray, R. E. and Cole, T. R. (Guest Editors) 2008. Coming of age: critical gerontologists reflect on their own aging, age research and the making of critical gerontology

[Special issue in memory of Mike Hepworth]. *Journal of Aging Studies*, **22**, 2, 97–209.

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Nick Hubble and Philip Tew, *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK, 2013, 232 pp., hbk £55.00, ISBN 13: 978 0 230 39093 5.

Given the centrality of the ‘demographic time bomb’ to the policy agendas of the current UK government (as well as internationally), a book adding to current debates that challenge social stereotypes of citizens in later life is welcomed. The book’s main purpose is to outline the methodology and results of the Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP) and ‘in investigating how older people resist stereotypical cultural representations of ageing, the study demonstrates the importance of narrative understandings to social agency’ (p. 4).

The authors offer a framework for a new narrative studies, through the concept of narrative identity (as dialogue), building on the premise that an individual’s (written) narrative also reflects the social identities within contemporary society as ‘narrative is a process that is less individualistic than it appears to many people because of their mix of social and visceral patterning’ (p. 25). The authors’ reflective findings, while interesting and exceptionally thoughtful, do not read as groundbreaking; and as such, this book adds to an existing body of work, by offering perspectives from within literary studies to challenge current stereotypes of ageing.

The project builds on two separate ‘longitudinal’ data sources. Firstly, the Mass Observation (MO) project, set up in 1937 to offer a glimpse into the everyday lives of ‘ordinary people’, through participants responding to annual ‘directives’ in the form of diaries, and made famous by Victoria Wood’s award-winning screenplay *Housewife*, 49. The authors consider MO to be essential in the study of ageing as it has ‘a unique capacity to document the intersubjectivity nature of everyday social experiences . . . and to bridge the gap between policy makers and other such activators and “ordinary people”’ (p. 57). The second data source is participants’ diaries from a series of book groups, over ten months, attended by 80 volunteers from the University of the Third Age (U3A).

The book is structured into three parts. Part I (Contexts and Methodologies), Part II (Mass Observation and Ageing) and Part III (Readers, Writers and Ageing). Chapter 1, ‘The Fiction and Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project – FCMAP’, introduces Part I and outlines the nuts and bolts of the project. Chapter 2, ‘Everyday Life, Self-narration and Identity’, presents their ‘bricolage’ theoretical framework, interwoven with excerpts from participants’ diaries. Discussions around narrative identity as dialogue and intersubjectivity are clear and concise, although the authors seem to offer a naissence form of dynamic hybrid identity theory with little