

## Reviews

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Ricca Edmondson, *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice Across the Life Course*, Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 2015, 244 pp., pbk £25.99, ISBN 13: 978-1-184742-559-1.

It is almost ironic to think about this – we as a field have extensively studied virtually every aspect of later life, but too often we shy away from meaning in the lived context, which, according to Ricca Edmondson, effectively ‘advances the ideology of work as the be-all and end-all of life’ (p. 15). This is a book that takes up the difficult task of tackling issues and debates surrounding meaning and meaning-making in later life; both of which, as demonstrated throughout the book, are constantly dismissed and discouraged by social, political and cultural practices. Many scholars in humanity and social sciences have written on this topic, and yet the most remarkable contribution of this book is to extend the inquiry beyond the dominant paradigm and ask: What are the approaches that gerontologists have taken to understand meaning and insight? And where do we go from there? This book does not intend to come up with a grand theory about the meaning of life or the meaning in life; rather, its entire thesis sets out to explore the character, depth and possibilities of meaning in its own right.

Edmondson begins with a sociology of science perspective on how gerontological views of ageing are influenced by ideology. Drilling down into the work of Eric Erikson, Glen Elder and Thompson *et al.*, Edmondson demonstrates the symbolic interaction tradition that this line of work has followed, and contrasts these ideas with more critical perspectives taken by Cole, Moody and others. This line of work from a perspective of critical gerontology shows that the ideologies of science systematically prohibit finding meanings in old age. The criticism of a developmental paradigm in gerontology is not entirely new, but Edmondson brings in a body of literature on morality and ethics, drawing the readers’ attention to the interconnectedness of ideology, methodology, policy and practice. Such a view is urgently needed, as it leads to the question of what gerontological theory should offer in terms of taking a moral stance and resisting widely accepted yet humanly destructive social practices. The book’s thesis then evolves around how the lived experience of older people is defined and how personhood is constituted, highlighting the irreducible influence of broader social circumstances on these processes. Discussions of ageist stereotypes and prejudice are indeed abundant, but again Edmondson goes beyond what are typically discussed as the reason for older people to ‘fade out’. Drawing from ideas such as communicative power, habits, and commodification, Edmondson argues that ‘the social construction of ageing is more

complex than can be described simply as a concatenation of prejudice' (p. 83). For Edmondson, it is not just the predicaments themselves that are important. Ideology comes in when the human predicaments – limitations, misery and negativity – are viewed as existential. Structurally produced and socially organised phenomena are, under such a process, obscured and legitimated, resulting in age consciousness, chronologisation and, most prominently, the limits being placed on older people's linguistic freedom. Here Edmondson touches upon a most fundamental issue in the mainstream gerontology research agenda: there is a lack of language for older people to describe their experiences, when these experiences do not fall into existing categories. As a result, no matter what methodology we employ to try to capture and understand meaning and insights in the life-course – qualitative, quantitative or ethnographic – the conceptual foundation for such endeavour is solely lacking in the gerontological discourse.

In the chapter on wisdom, Edmondson first traces the accounts of wisdom to the work by ancient philosophers, but the intention is not to say that contemporary research should build directly upon these ideas or be a linear development of them; rather, it is to bring back 'the debate about the human condition and the subtleties of communication' (p. 159). Correspondingly, Edmondson offers a comparison of various theories of wisdom proposed by contemporary scholars across disciplines. Here I especially appreciate the chapter's call for more attention to the social distribution of wisdom. One key criticism of the psychological work on wisdom is its inattention (or at least inadequate attention) to its structural contingencies. While it is important to understand, at the interpretive level, the hermeneutic dynamics involved in the construction of wisdom, a social structural perspective is essential to understand the conditions that give rise to wisdom.

Given the major thesis, this book is definitely relevant to humanity scholars interested in the studies of the lifecourse. At the same time, it is an elegantly written piece that draws from scholarly work across a wide range of disciplines and organises a wealth of ideas into a rather succinct narrative. Therefore, it can be an inspiring text for scholars in social sciences and other disciplines who are interested in the social construction of age and ageing.

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Ann Burack-Weiss, *The Lioness in Winter: Writing an Old Woman's Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, 185 pp., hbk £22.00, ISBN 13: 978-0-231-15184-9

'Once upon a time' begins the book and thereby sets the scene for a book of stories. Ann Burack-Weiss began writing this book in 2006 when she was in her seventies and starts with descriptions of interactions with clients during her career as a young social worker. When visiting ageing clients in