

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Leonard W. Poon and Jiska Cohen-Mansfield, Eds. *Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011

Reviewed by Theodore D. Cosco, University of Cambridge

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With the unprecedented expansion of the proportion of oldest old and the inherent subjectivity of well-being, Poon and Cohen-Mansfield have taken on a difficult, albeit important, task in *Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old*. Fortunately for the reader, these topics are articulated in an accessible and engaging manner, while providing valuable insights into these burgeoning research topics.

Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old is the product of a four-day workshop examining “novel and traditional paradigms that could extend our knowledge and understanding of the oldest old” (p. i). To this end, delegates from the United States and Israel were present to provide a variety of perspectives and insights into these important issues. Work by the binational representatives at the workshop adds a unique flair to the book, and some incredibly poignant examples and case studies.

Carol Ryff’s foreword captures the reader’s interest early on and highlights the many and varied perspectives/issues covered in the subsequent chapters. The questions posited in the foreword set the stage for the analysis of issues of well-being from a range of angles, and from diverse theoretical and ethnic backgrounds. Ryff ignites the reader’s interest while highlighting the inherent difficulties in operationalizing, defining, and addressing subjective issues such as well-being.

The book is divided into four broad sections. Part I presents “Theory: New Horizons in Well-Being Research”; Part II, “Paradise Lost: Between Trauma and Happiness”; Part III, “Pathways and Gatekeepers: Moderating, Mediating, and Proximal Processes”; and Part IV, “Signposting Paradise: Measurement of Well-Being”. These sections lay out theoretical underpinnings of well-being research, the mechanisms through which well-being can be attained, and explains how we can measure changes in well-being. The sections are well laid out and thoroughly articulate these important issues in a logical format.

Setting the stage with a variety of theoretical perspectives on both well-being and the oldest old is an absolutely necessary aspect of framing the rest of the text. Well-being is a much debated topic, with as many conceptualisations as there are pathways. As such,

unpacking the subtle nuances associated with well-being is integral to the understanding of the rest of the book. Furthermore, stressing the importance of well-being in the oldest old furthers the readers’ engagement in the topic. Through the first five chapters, perspectives on well-being are articulated within the framework of the oldest old. Given the complexity of the topic, one must submit to the density of Part I to fully grasp the subsequent chapters. That said, the prose is delightfully intriguing.

Part II is a powerful read. Working within the holocaust experience as a paradigm, Israeli researchers examine the effects of trauma on the oldest old. I found these models of trauma survival and their manifestations in later life to be incredibly thought provoking. This section, perhaps more than any other, is worth a read.

The ways in which one moderates and/or mediates well-being is approached from a variety of perspectives in Part III, ranging from nutrition to religiosity. The diversity of these perspectives is, however, a double-edged sword. Covering a variety of areas is prudent, especially given the multidimensional nature of well-being, but it tends to open a Pandora’s box of perspectives. I felt as though the cohesiveness of previous chapters had been compromised to a certain degree. Nevertheless, the editors have done a masterful job of taking incredibly disparate subject areas and weaving them together.

I waited with bated breath for the final section addressing the measurement of well-being. The subjectivity of well-being makes for immense difficulties in operationalization, quantification, and reaching consensus in these pursuits. The authors, well aware of these limitations, articulate and acknowledge many of the shortcomings in the measuring of well-being, with a particularly interesting section on cultural influences. Accordingly, I was not surprised to find that the section on measuring well-being was afforded the largest word count. Compared with Part II, this section is much less accessible to the layperson; however, from the perspective of a researcher, this section is an invaluable resource in the understanding of well-being in the oldest old.

Poon and Cohen-Mansfield should be commended for their valiant foray into addressing a slippery topic in an understudied demographic. *Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old* progresses logically, chapter to chapter, from foundation to processes to measurement.

I found the chapters on early life trauma to be the most intriguing read while the latter section on measurement was the most practical. *Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old* provides a well-thought out and balanced text for well-being researchers.

Suzanne R. Kunkel, J. Scott Brown, and Frank J. Whittington. *Global Aging: Comparative Perspectives on Aging and the Life Course*. New York, NY: Springer, 2014

Reviewed by Kerstin Roger, University of Manitoba
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Global Aging is a necessary book that offers novice learners a thorough introduction to aging as well as offering experienced researchers an important expansion of the field on the topic of global aging. One of the main messages that the editors want to convey, and do so early and often, is that while older adults are individuals with unique habits, perspectives, and behaviors, these adults are also deeply influenced by culture and country. This book sets the stage for much-needed research on the international diversity of aging whether read by policy makers, educators, or researchers.

Although the editors acknowledge and do a good job of exploring individual aging processes, they primarily explore cultural and national issues that affect aging individuals. One of the key issues that they discuss is in the book's final chapter on the way in which family is linked to the aging process, and that the notion of family as a unit is changing within the international context of aging. The editors discuss the fact that while citizens of developing countries tend to view older adult family members as individuals to be respected and revered, Western nations tend to see less of a familial obligation to care for one's older family members as they age. The editors reflect on the growing trend to adopt a more Western (and perhaps individualized) approach to familial responsibility and care of older family members. Although many older adults can live productive and independent lives well into their later years without the assistance of family, many older adults globally will inevitably require some kind of assistance as they approach their final years. In this context, the editors discuss the various ways in which long-term support services are provided around the world, giving the reader a good understanding of what different cultures and countries prefer and why that is their preference. The editors point out that people often have outdated ideas about aging around the world, and to an extent, some aspects of research and policy on this topic may also be outdated.

Chapter 2 is devoted to providing readers with an overview of research methods that contemporary researchers use to study aging and older adults. The editors' main focus is the difference between descriptive and comparative research methods, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using either of these methods in the context of research centering on older adults. They argue that comparative research is gaining in popularity but that it has inherent challenges: identifying the unit of measurement, conceptualizing and measuring the selected unit, ensuring that valid data are collected, and respecting research participants especially in the context of comparative, international research.

The editors do well to focus on the shifting focus of policy issues around the world. They point out that although some policy issues affect countries differently, there are prominent issues that affect all older adults. One of these issues is health care, which is the topic of chapter 6. The discussion centers on the current health care needs of older adults within the global health care system but, even more importantly, on the growing need for health care services, which will only continue to expand exponentially as the global population ages. The chapter's focus is on the growing health care needs of older adults in the developing world, and this development is contrasted against these countries' increasing populations and lack of formal health care infrastructure. Although the problem is less severe in the developed world, the editors point out that the percentage of older adults using the health care system overall is set to increase dramatically, which could have dire consequences unless policy changes are made to address this global problem.

Chapter 8, which discusses the notions of work and retirement, provides many excellent examples of the individual nature of growing older. Although for several decades now it has been the case that individuals