

Reviews

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Caitrin Lynch and Jason Danely (eds), *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspectives on Ageing and the Life Course*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2015, 280 pp., pbk £22.00, ISBN 13: 978-1-78238-906-4.

Transitions and Transformations explores global demographic and social shifts or *transformations*, such as growth of ageing populations, migration, changes in family dynamics and integrational role expectations, among others, and rearticulates these shifts in local cultural contexts. Vivid stories illustrate how individuals must actively engage in their developmental *transitions* in order to make sense of their lifecourses and assess the past and future of their communities, and strive to navigate the larger scale *transformations* they are confronted with.

The 13 chapters of the book are organised in five sections. In the *frameworks* section, Jason Danely and Caitrin Lynch pose questions about the relationships between longevity, identity, shifts in the composition of social environment, social cohesion and institutional responses to population ageing. Mary Catherine Bateson reviews and discusses Erikson's developmental stages, and introduces the stage Adulthood II between Adulthood I and Older Age, accounting for distinct social and developmental dynamics in individuals' lifecourses. Bateson also clarifies aspects about the flexibility of the model in terms of acknowledging varying cultural manifestations, as well as explaining continuity in individual developmental processes during the lifecourse.

Section 2, 'Bodies', comprises chapters about experiences of chronic pain in the United States of America (USA) (Lindsey Martin), *Gengniaqui* (mid-life change) among Beijing women (Jeanne L. Shea) and erectile dysfunction in Mexico (Emily Wentzell). This section portrays sense-making narratives of disruptions of the body. Bodily transitions are mapped on to past and present self-conceptions and role identities. Traces of rapid historical and cultural transformation are communicated as trade-offs between burdening and liberating practices (*e.g.* past sacrifices are purged through controlled expressions of anger, or youthful excesses leave way to temperance and compassion). Transition itself becomes a form of identity connected to narratives of national processes of modernisation.

The porous quality of *spatiality and temporality* is highlighted in Polish older people's efforts to reconcile institutional living with their ideas of home, family and the nation (Jessica C. Robbins), in the semi-public space of Dutch homes' life and end of life (Frances Norwood), and in the imagined communities of the living and the spirits inhabited by Japanese older people (Jason Danely). These chapters reflect on what is considered

a good end of life in each of the described cultural settings, and how the historical past as well as childhood memories shape the physical and narrative spaces that sustain end-of-life identities: home and homeland, the ground floor bedroom and euthanasia talk, cemeteries and speech iterations.

Governmental agencies, place and gender are central to the insights on *families* offered in the chapters on popular class women that co-ordinate and mobilise family networks providing care for the elderly in Brazil (Diana De G. Brown), low-income Puerto Rican mothers/grandmothers raising grandchildren in individual-oriented welfare systems in the USA (Marta B. Rodríguez-Galán) and on the shortage of care-giving for rapidly ageing Sri Lankan communities (Michele Ruth Gamburd). The increased dependency on state services due to migration patterns and welfare system designs, and weakening family and community care-giving networks is contrasted with fulfilling but highly prescriptive gender roles in traditional communities.

The section on *economies* brings to the fore notions of self-worth and inter-generational solidarity and conflict. Positive experiences of care and peer support in care homes in India are contrasted with the unease caused by taboos on commoditised care (Sarah Lamb); older workers in a Boston needle factory re-signify work as they strive to maintain social visibility in a productivity-oriented culture (Caitrin Lynch), and increased expenses in farming lead young Nigerians to prefer short-term revenue occupations over longer cycles of pooling and retribution that supported their parents' farming economies (Jane I. Guyer and Kabiru K. Salami).

Each chapter of the book tells a story beautifully woven in a style that flows throughout the volume. Written in an intimate tone, ethnographers deploy constant reflexivity about their experiences of moving in the field whilst conducting ethnographic work. The merit of this book does not only lie in providing multicultural perspectives on ageing transitions, but most of all in its cross-cultural approach. Authors situate their work by commenting and comparing their findings with those of other authors in the book (*e.g.* the value of sacrifice and vitality among low-income women care-givers in Brazil and Puerto Rican mothers/grandmothers). Authors also provide continuous feedback on the meanings of ageing transitions in their sites of study against the background of core cultural values of ageing in the USA (*e.g.* the interpenetration of westernisation and *seva* during the emergence of Indian care homes). These elements contribute to overcoming what Jennifer Cole calls in the afterword the *synoptic illusion* of later life, referring to the challenge of mobilising narratives of older age where later life precedes the end of life. The book is a contribution to any scholar of cross-cultural gerontology as well as a valuable collection of contemporary ethnology.

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