Reviews

Denise Tanner and John Harris, *Working with Older People*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2008, 288 pp., pbk £21.99, ISBN 13: 978 0 415 35421 9.

Compared to other areas of social work, that with older people has tended to generate few specialist texts over the years. The challenges for any such text is that it is an important but often overlooked area of practice, and to bridge the gap between aspiration (what we would like to see happening) and reality (what is actually achievable in the current resource constrained and hugely bureaucratised climate). In the Introduction, Tanner and Harris suggest that working with older people appears to be 'at the cutting edge of the "McDonaldization" of social work', but balance this with a story from someone (a son) whose experiences of social work with an older person had been very positive (p. 1). This leads the authors to observe that 'the social worker had salvaged the possibility of good practice, despite being in the midst of difficult conditions' (p. 3). This is very much the spirit in which the book was written. This optimistic but pragmatic approach makes the book particularly useful, not just for social work students or beginner practitioners, but also for experienced practitioners seeking inspiration and guidance amongst the frustrations of working in adult social care in the early 21st century.

The target readership of the book is British students on social work qualifying courses and those studying for the post-qualifying award in Social Work with Adults, and there is no attempt to appeal to a non-UK audience. Within this well-defined context, the authors manage to offer a lot of relevant content. The chapter headings are: 'Understanding later life'; 'The policy context of work with older people'; 'Assessing the needs of older people'; 'Planning and providing support services'; 'Skills in working with older people'; and 'Working in partnership to plan and deliver services and values-based practice'. There is also a useful final chapter with pointers to the issues in the various activities that are embedded in the chapters. These activities are generally of a high quality, well thought out and stimulate genuine reflection.

The book is an effective primer in that it manages to be both easily digestible and authoritative. Tanner and Harris encapsulate well different theoretical perspectives and provide useful references for those wanting further reading. The authors also encourage the reader to be both critical and reflexive in their approach to the subject matter. For example, in Chapter 1, 'Understanding later life', they argue that no 'magic' theory provides all the answers (p. 23) and they advocate the adoption of 'a position of uncertainty' (p. 25). Using the 'five theoretical maps' idea, as developed by Milner and O'Byrne (2002: 26), to help social workers make connections between theory and practice, the authors then provide a series of potted 'Theoretical perspectives on later life' (pp. 29–35). These

are: 'Biological theories'; 'Erikson's life cycle'; 'Disengagement theory'; 'Activity theory'; 'Continuity theory'; 'Life course theory'; 'Structured dependency theory'; and 'Identity management theory'. A case study activity is then provided to allow readers to apply and evaluate the usefulness of the theories outlined. The authors' own commentary on this activity in the final chapter in which they say that 'there are no "off the peg" practice implications that can be read off from theory' (p. 218), illustrates their overall approach. It is an approach which encourages engagement with theory, but the theory should fit the older person and not the other way round.

If there is a dimension that is obviously missing, it is in the area of abuse and the protection of vulnerable adults. By any criterion today, this is a critical area for those working with older people. The authors include a section on 'Risk and protection', but justify the omission of a more detailed discussion of abuse and related practice and policy issues by signposting the reader to the companion volume, *Working with Vulnerable Adults* (Penhale and Parker 2007). Whether an editorial or the authors' decision, I think it slightly detracts from the overall authority and completeness of the text. *Social Work with Older People* deserves to be on reading lists on social work courses because it successfully combines discussion of relevant theory, legislation, policy and practice issues in ways that are accessible without being simplistic. It also presents a view of social work that is in touch with the real world of resource constraints, bureaucracy and conflicting agendas. Above all it enables the reader to be reasonably positive about what can be achieved by working *with* older people.

References

Milner, J. and O'Byrne, P. 2002. *Assessment in Social Work*. Second edition, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire.
Penhale, B. and Parker, J. 2007. *Working with Vulnerable Adults*. Routledge, London.

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David Hamerman, *Geriatric Bioscience: The Link between Aging and Disease*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 2007, 316 pp., hbk £30.00, ISBN 13: 978 0 8018 8692 8.

Dr Hamerman is one of a handful of physicians trained in another field who took on the daunting task of developing geriatric medicine in the United States during the 1980s. He stood out as a leader who stressed the importance of maintaining a scientific basis to the emerging field of geriatrics if it was going to succeed in gaining the respect of physicians in other fields. This book represents his personal view of how much science exists for the basis of geriatric clinical practice. As he states in the preface 'there is no intension of "completeness", but rather