

## Reviews

doi:10.1017/S0144686X11000444

Sheila Peace and Jonathan Hughes (eds), *Reflecting on User-involvement and Participatory Research*, Centre for Policy on Ageing, London, 2010, 84 pp., pbk £10.00, ISBN 13: 978 1 901097 26 9.

The subject of this book is considerably narrower than its title suggests. It is actually about older people as non-professional researchers, primarily in the United Kingdom. The book originated in a 2008 seminar arranged by the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA) and the Open University's Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies (CABS), and is tenth in The Representation of Older People in Ageing Research Series. The seminar papers have been revised for publication.

As Sheila Peace points out in Chapter 1, there has been increasing stress in recent years on involving people – including older people – in decisions about their lives. In Chapter 6, Josie Tetley describes as ‘relentless’ the current demand for active user involvement in all aspects of health and social care. In the case of older people, involvement was initially limited to asking for views about services they were receiving or those they would like to receive. Involvement is now defined much more broadly, and the focus in this book is on a particularly interesting aspect of the expansion: encouraging older people's participation in research projects in a variety of roles. Among those mentioned are initiators of research, contributors to research project planning, devisers of questions, members of research advisory committees, voluntary or paid interviewers or observers, ‘co-researchers’, and contributors to briefing or debriefing sessions and to final reports.

Once older people are not just sources of information, but actively involved in the research process, what issues arise and how can these be managed? The book discusses such questions, from initial selection of participants to power imbalances between professional and lay researchers. Many of the authors give particular attention to how older people are prepared for research roles through careful briefing or training, with cost and time implications.

The individual chapters relate to diverse situations. After Sheila Peace's introductory chapter setting out some of the dilemmas, Chapter 2 (Anthony Gough, with Jonathan Hughes) draws on a range of research projects which involved older people, considering the advantages and disadvantages experienced. Chapter 3 (Sandra Vegeris, adapted by Jonathan Hughes) reports on an evaluation of the government initiative Better Government for Older People: one part of the evaluation used older people to collect case study material. Chapter 4 (Sam Taylor, adapted by Sheila Peace and Jonathan Hughes) brings in a European perspective, discussing the good

practice guide on involving older people in research developed by European Research Area in Ageing (ERA-AGE), a consortium of 14 countries. In Chapter 5, Ethna Parker (with Joseph Allen and Eeva Beveridge) gives a detailed account of planning and carrying out research about older carers, with the carers treated as ‘co-researchers’. In Chapter 6, Josie Tetley draws on her experience of involving older people in a number of different research projects to suggest ‘pearls, perils and pitfalls’. Jonathan Hughes’s concluding chapter reflects on issues raised by seminar participants. He stresses that although these new ways of working with older people are valuable, problems remain, not least about translating research into change.

Anthony Gough ‘only interviewed people aged over 50’ (p. 10); Ethna Parker’s ‘co-researchers’ were ‘older adults over the age of 55’ (p. 41). These are the only attempts to indicate what might be meant by ‘older people’, a phrase used throughout the book. CPA, CABS and others involved in the seminar may use this as shorthand, taking for granted that their colleagues understand the complexities, and the danger of assuming homogeneity. For those coming new to the subject, however, it would have been good to say something about this at the beginning. Another surprising omission is any suggestion that professional researchers may themselves be ‘older people’ – of particular relevance when older people’s advantage as lay researchers is seen as the ability to relate to the experience of older subjects. Could it be class or status rather than age which is really at issue here?

If there are further volumes in the series, I hope that more attention will be paid to final proof-reading. Some chapters have many typographical errors, and in a few cases it is unclear whether a view expressed is that of the presenter of the seminar paper or the editor. Overall, the book gives a thoughtful and realistic picture of the practicalities and potential of using older people as lay researchers. The reference lists at the end of most chapters provide further opportunities to explore the subject. To a reader in the United Kingdom in 2011, the question must be whether such involvement will continue to develop, and will be valued sufficiently to withstand cutbacks in public expenditure and research funding.

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doi:10.1017/S0144686X11000456

Courtney C. Coile and Phillip B. Levine, *Reconsidering Retirement: How Losses and Layoffs Affect Older Workers*, The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 2010, 156 pp., hbk £19.99, ISBN 13: 978 0 8157 0499 7.

This unusual and interesting book investigates the influence of both the financial and housing markets together with labour market conditions on retirement decisions and subsequent retiree wellbeing. The discussion is narrowly located focusing on the United States of America (USA), where the economic downturn since 2008 has hit older Americans the hardest. Its underpinning theme is that Americans are poorly prepared for retirement