

## Reviews

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Robert Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care*, Radcliffe Medical Press, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 4th edition, 2003, 190 pp., pbk £21.95, ISBN 1 85775 915 X.

Keri Thomas, *Caring for the Dying at Home: Companions on the Journey*, Radcliffe Medical Press, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2003, 298 pp., pbk £27.95 ISBN 1 85775 946 X.

*Introducing Palliative Care* has established an international reputation as an authoritative set-book for introductory courses in the field. It focuses on the process of dying from cancer, but the principles it outlines have wider application. New material for this edition includes sections on ‘the withdrawn patient’ and ‘the difficult patient’. The references throughout the book have been updated.

In contrast to this established text, Keri Thomas’s book is a newly-minted resource for those caring for people who are dying at home. She brings 20 years’ experience as a general practitioner (GP) to her task, latterly as a regional advisor for the Macmillan Cancer Relief Charity. While emphasising the importance of evidence-based practice, this is a practical resource book rather than a conventional textbook. Chapters on palliative care for patients with the common cancers, and ‘trip-wires in palliative care’ (both by Susan Salt), are embedded in diverse resources, from a summary of government policies that promote clinical governance in England, to a selection of poems on death and dying. The last third of the book is devoted to nine chapters on the Macmillan Gold Standards Framework, an approach developed by the author and now adopted across the UK, which provides a conceptual basis for community-based palliative care. The seven Gold Standards cover communication, co-ordination, control of symptoms, continuity of care (out-of-hours), continued learning, carer support, and care of the dying (terminal phase).

Both volumes are worthy additions to any library catering for the needs of those engaged in palliative care, but it is difficult to avoid a consideration of the broader questions that thoughts of ageing and dying provoke: for example, what of the needs of those older people dying from diseases other than cancer? Different trajectories of dying are just beginning to receive appropriate consideration in the professional literature, but the lag before they are assimilated into normal clinical practice remains considerable. The current emphasis on the training and support needs of GPs and community nurses, exemplified by Thomas’s book, represents a welcome dissemination of the knowledge and skills originally developed within hospice services. But how can staff working in care homes, to give one example, be helped to access these vital skills and incorporate them into their own philosophy of care? There are still numerous lessons to be learned from the palliative care movement for application to many aspects of current UK clinical

provision for older people. These two books provide resources in abundance to promote that project.

School of Health Studies,  
Homerton College, Cambridge

JOHN ADAMS

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Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (eds), *Ways of Aging*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2003, 229 pp., pbk £17.99, ISBN 0 631 23059 9.

The main message of this book, that people age differently, is not a new one. In fact it would be hard to find a gerontological textbook, monograph or journal article which does not subscribe to this view. Can it still really be the case, as Gubrium and Holstein argue in their introduction, that ‘We’re inclined to figure that “old age” is pretty much the same for everyone’ (p. 3)? Given that the eminent editors have already influenced thinking and research through their advocacy of the need to integrate social and individual experiences of what it means to grow old in a biographical framework, it is not at first clear why this collection has been assembled and what it presents that is new. The introduction states that the target is the demeaning stereotype which depicts old age as only a state of mental and physical frailty. Distinguishing the sense-making function of categorisation, they argue that with their extreme and exaggerated views, stereotypes hide what is individual and contextual about the experience of ageing. Context, they argue, is being multi-faceted, historical, cultural and biographical. The contributors included in this volume provide evidence, they suggest, that ‘later life is a configuration of experiences that transcends stereotypes’ (p. 7).

Not unsurprisingly, the chapters which make up this collection support their argument, grouped as they are under the headings of ‘persistence’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘change’. And although the focus doesn’t appear original, the selected research outputs and accounts of the lives and perspectives of the older people who took part in the projects makes worthwhile reading. However, given the book’s focus there is one puzzling exception which I’ll discuss later.

The chapters fall into two groups: those which highlight what is particular to some people’s experience of becoming old, and those which provide evidence to evaluate emerging stereotypes of late life, such as a claimed propensity for forgiveness, solidarity and a continuum of identity. As an example of the first, Joan Weibel-Orlando’s study of ‘Elderhood in contemporary Lakota society’ uses a life story approach to argue that to grow old in North America’s ‘tribal societies’ is to take up ageing as ‘a career’. The need to pass on knowledge and meaning through ritual and community is compelling, she suggests, and challenges assumptions about disengagement and withdrawal from community and society.

Tanya Koropecj-Cox focuses on the life histories of three men whose entry into old age is distinctive for being childless. As she argues, this counters the stereotype of normal ageing which is built around the generativity of parenthood. She draws on their accounts of adjustment and decision-making in relation to opportunities for parenting to discuss the demographic and social policy implications, while identifying gender-specific features. Colleen Johnson and

Barbara Barer's three biographical case studies are based on interviews with ageing Black Americans, and provide another particularistic perspective. Their interviewees were distinguished by their poverty and diversity, which they argue counter two prevalent and polarised assumptions of black families as either 'problem-oriented' or 'resilient'. In contrast, they found a greater diversity which they explore using five themes. Dana Rosefield examines the identity careers of older gay men and lesbians through oral history accounts of oppression during the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. While all had shared this history, they had followed diverse paths and in old age had heterogeneous attitudes and life-styles. While some regretted a lack of family support, others felt liberated from the demands and responsibilities of family relations. One chapter, by Deborah Kestin van den Hoonaard, provides a non-American example, of widows in New Brunswick, Canada. She describes responses to widowhood which are shaped as much by the women's individual expectations as by the low status of widowhood in many societies. The stories of how these women worked their way through the challenges raised by their changed status reveal how they dealt with their own and broader social expectations of widowhood.

All these particular experiences of ageing provide insights and, with the authors' analyses and interpretations of what they have heard or read (at least two draw on other's research), there is much to be learned here about the diversity of growing old in north America. It was in the chapters that in addition considered critically some emergent positive stereotypes, which are no less restrictive in their pressure towards conformity, that were found most original. Helen Black examined the assumption that forgiveness of self and others 'should or must occur towards the end of life' (p. 13). Drawing on interviews with 40 people aged 70 or more years, she argues that whether or not someone adopts a 'narrative of forgiveness' will depend on how forgiveness is dealt with in recall. For most people it is a troubling concept with its implications of wrongdoing by or against the person. Debora Paterniti's participant observation in a nursing home showed that frail residents persisted with their biographically-based identities in the face of undifferentiated, and sometimes value-laden, individualising practice by care staff. Christopher Faircloth's interviews and observation in a senior public housing complex led him to construct an idea of community-building which drew as much on divisions and conflict as it did on any form of cohort-solidarity.

It is their focus on diversity and on critical understandings of what are commonly understood to be positive experiences in late life, often in the face of adversity, that unifies these chapters and, as a result, makes the final chapter, by Mary and Kenneth Gergen, with its emphasis on 'positive aging', appear misplaced. They also challenge the assumption that late life is a story of decline into ill-health, and argue for a perspective of fulfilment and adventure. They suggest, that these qualities are open to the 90 per cent of Americans aged 60 years or more who will by 2010, 'have had some college education and will be in better condition economically and physically than in any preceding generations in history' (p. 204). I found this rather conformist and optimistic stereotype of 'successful ageing' to be unrealistically grounded in an assumption about the power of 'cultural transformation' over the 'essentializing tendencies of naturalism' (p. 205). More attention to the distribution of income and material advantage in

the United States would encourage greater realism about the prevalence of frailty and poverty in old age. This reflection was prompted by Michael Moore's latest book, *Dude, Where's my Country?* In a withering attack on the US pensions' industry, Moore asks if Americans are, with their commitment to the notion of a constantly ameliorating future, 'addicted to the Horatio Alger fantasy drug'. His recommendation is to 'Forget about a pension, forget about social security, forget about your kids taking care of you when you get old because they are barely going to have the money to take care of themselves' (*The Guardian*, 2003: 7). Given the incompatibility of this premonition with the Gergens's vision of a future of 'positive ageing', how on earth will gerontologists (let alone older people) make sense of it all in a generation's time? Can we share Gubrium and Holstein's conviction that, in searching for explanations, the historical, cultural and biographical contexts are all?

## References

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School of Health and Social Welfare,  
The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

JOANNA BORNAT

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Roger Watson, Jill Manthorpe and Joy Ann Andrews, *Nurses Over 50: Options, Decisions and Outcomes*, Policy, Bristol, 2003, 30 pp., pbk £11.95, ISBN 1 86134 544 5.

This is a timely and important publication which will be a useful resource for those hoping to influence the development and implementation of policies that affect the experience of nurses aged 50 and more years in Britain. The work was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of its 'Transitions after 50' research programme, which seeks to address issues that society faces, not least those employers who make decisions about full-time employment for those aged 50 years and beyond. This study of the options, decisions and outcomes for nurses over 50 was undertaken at a time of 'crisis' in nurse staffing of the UK National Health Service (NHS). My one criticism of this study is that its remit did not include nurses working in the independent sector.

The project was conducted by researchers from the University of Hull and took a four country (UK) perspective on nurses aged 50 and over. It set out to establish issues specific to nursing but also to highlight areas of concern and relevance to employment transitions in general. It involved nurses in three categories: those currently employed within the NHS; those either not working or employed outside of the NHS; and those who had returned to nursing or were considering doing so. Many other key stakeholders were interviewed by the research team including pension advisers, trade union representatives, employers, policy makers and senior nurses.

The book has seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the study and set the context. They point to the centrality of the study given that nurses form the greatest occupational group in the NHS, which is the UK's largest employer. The research explores older nurses' choices and decisions with particular reference to three options: retirement, re-entry to nursing, and remaining in nursing. Such an approach facilitates the exploration of 'return to work options' alongside the more traditional work or retirement options. This is, as the author's highlight, particularly helpful because nursing is an occupation where there is a need to encourage nurses to return to and stay.

Employment issues are explored in Chapter 3, which highlights the continuing under-estimation of the value of older workers and the impact of ageism. Of central concern is the ageing of the nursing workforce at a time when nursing shortages are increasing. The chapter reviews selected literature relating to particular issues for nurses and nursing, the key concern being that over the next decade the nursing profession is likely to lose, as a result of retirement, a large number of its most experienced nurses (Buchan 2000).

Chapters 4 and 5 consider the needs of nurses returning to work and equal opportunities factors. It is argued that these are linked to 'social policy and employment contexts' (p. 7). The articulated needs do not come as a surprise. Nurses continue to state that they need flexible work patterns, want to be able to deliver 'hands-on nursing', need better resources to enable them to nurse, and, crucially, ongoing development and return-to-practice courses. I would suggest that nurses want and need such return-to-practice courses to be funded as well. Black and minority ethnic groups, gender and ageism are all key themes in Chapter 5.

The outcomes of the study interviews are featured in Chapter 6. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including older nurses, employers and policy makers. Details of the interview sample and questions are included along with the distribution of the interviews. Whilst a range of factors that influence nurses working beyond 50 years are highlighted in this chapter, a common issue is stress. Among the nurses interviewed, 'stress and associated burnout were major influences on decision making with regard to employment over the age of 50' (p. 17). Clearly this key issue needs to be addressed if nursing shortages are to be overcome. As this study shows, much can be done to encourage older nurses to return to or stay in the NHS. If the aim is to ensure that age discrimination is eradicated within the NHS, then focusing on the value of older nurses is essential. Those who can influence recruitment and retention of nurses over 50 should read this publication and develop strategies to implement dynamic and creative local and national approaches.

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Gerontological Nursing Advisor,  
Royal College of Nursing, London

PAULINE FORD

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Judith Davey, Jenny Neale and Kay Morris Matthews, *Living and Learning: Experiences of University after Age 40*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand, 2003, 192 pp., pbk \$39.95, ISBN 0 86473 461 1.

As someone who recently completed a doctoral thesis after the age of 60 years, I approached this text in anticipation that I would learn more about the experiences of post-midlife students. Lifelong learning is widely promoted in contemporary societies. Many people regularly update their knowledge to keep up-to-date in their occupation. Many will make a significant change in occupation at least once in a lifetime, a change facilitated by education, and many turn to education as a way of compensating for being occupationally deprived, under-employed, redundant or retired. This book addresses the experiences of post-midlife students who entered Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. Although the pattern of later life education in New Zealand may not be typical, for adult education provision is not well developed, the accounts of post-midlife educational experience have wide relevance. The project findings would, for example, inform the policies of organisations that deal with older people entering or returning to formal learning, including both educational and non-educational (e.g. work placement) agencies.

The contributors have diverse academic backgrounds, including sociology, teacher and nurse education, and women's and inter-cultural studies. Following a survey of all post-midlife students enrolled at Victoria University in 1999 (under- and post-graduate), the researchers conducted nine studies of specific groups using qualitative methodologies. The typical student was female, a part-timer, aged between 40 and 59 years (only a minority were older than 60) and from high income households. Through the qualitative studies, a rich description of the world of the post-midlife student is built up. The groups included early school leavers, older men (many with histories of drug or alcohol abuse and periods in prison), Maoris, teachers and nurses updating qualifications, and people who had been compulsorily or voluntarily retired. A chapter on how ageism and sexism shape the experiences of older women in management education was of special interest, but there are riches in every chapter. For example, the chapter on Maori students' experiences included a thought provoking discussion of how an indigenous group painfully learns about their own culture in a *Pakeha* (white, colonial-descent) institution.

The motives for mature-age education were complex. Some are related to professional development, whether imposed or self-selected, and others to personal development, as in seeking a sense of self-worth. The students who expressed personal goals often also had hopes for future or better employment. Those engaged for more pragmatic purposes found gains in self confidence. It is good to be reminded of the multiplicity of goals that older students bring to their learning. One of the joys of reading this book is the clarity of the writing and the accessible presentation which includes extracts from the participants' narratives. An informative chapter dwells on reasons for attrition and raises issues that older students might well reflect on before enrolling in higher education. For academic

and administrative university staff, there is much that is relevant to improving the access to and delivery of higher education to post-midlife students. Universities need to respond more effectively than many do at present to mature age learners. It is shown, for example, that the quality of responses to initial enquiries from older students is crucial. Special measures aimed at older students are also advocated in the text.

The book is scholarly and the arguments are well founded in the data. However, some references cited in the text are missing from the bibliography and an index would have been useful. The title is also somewhat misleading as one might infer that the book also deals with the experience of post-midlife academics. These minor criticisms aside, the book will be valuable for those interested in the educational experience of older students whether they are engaged in educational practice, educational policy or the study of ageing.

Charles Sturt University,  
New South Wales, Australia

SUZY GATTUSO