

Book Review – The Short Guide to Ageing and Gerontology, Written by Kate de Medeiros. Policy Press, 2017, Paperback. ISBN 978-1-4473-2838-4

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The growth in population and international increase in average life expectancies have witnessed an unprecedentedly high percentage of the world's population ageing. As the proportion of older people and the length of life increase globally, it is predicted that "there will soon be more older people than children and more people at extreme old age than before." (NIH and WHO 2011: 2). Ageing is an inevitable and complex process (Longevity Science Panel 2014). In this interdisciplinary text, de Medeiros acquaints the reader with the field of gerontology and elucidates the phenomenon of ageing.

'The Short Guide to Aging and Gerontology' is a timely and comprehensive overview of issues and concepts in ageing and gerontology. This ambitious text explores a wide range of topics which include: historical perspectives on ageing in society; demographic trends; common assumptions about ageing; rethinking the concept of 'the family'; location and place in ageing; health and functional abilities; financing old age; death and loneliness; and 'growth' and creativity in later life. It brings together multidisciplinary perspectives and concepts in explaining ageing and gerontology from the social sciences, behavioural sciences, humanities, health sciences, policy studies as well as global

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viewpoints. In so doing, it provides a vital, practical framework to increase understanding of ageing and gerontology, “without disciplinary boundaries.” (de Medeiros 2017: ix). In this guide, de Medeiros sets out to provide a snapshot of ageing as defined, studied, experienced and contested over time.

Beginning with an historical and conceptual overview of gerontology and definitions of ‘old age’, de Medeiros discusses both pragmatic and philosophical concerns within the field, arguing in favour of the utility of constructs such as ‘productive ageing’, ‘active ageing’ and ‘successful ageing’ as valuable measurements of ageing, and the role of gerontology to continue the search for different ways to create meaning in later life. The problematisation of ‘later life’ is revisited later in the book (Chapter 7), from the perspective of social location (age, gender, socio-economic status, race and ethnicity et cetera) and place (neighbourhood, notions of ‘home’, institutional care et cetera). The author acknowledges access to resources in one’s social location and place as notably affecting the experience of ageing.

While going into detail about the implications of myths about ageing, the author addresses some of the prominent false assumptions that frame perspectives on ageing, suggesting that structures (such as access to finances, good health care and so on) have greater impact on experiences of later life for older people. Fears of decline in health and functional abilities are often linked to ageing, and the author explains that ‘ageing well’ includes consideration of physical (such as disease and frailty), psychological (such as emotional and cognitive health, and

depression) and social wellbeing in later life. The author explores how structures of families have changed over time, and the impact of this on understanding old age and care/carer expectations for older people in later life. Rather than the demise of the family, alternative (and sometimes multigenerational and even non-kin and non-spousal) structures have emerged (Harper 2006). Living alone in later life, comparatively common in Western countries, is a contributing factor to loneliness, often compounded by death of a loved one and grief. The author identifies death, suicide and eldercide as deserving of greater attention within gerontological literature in order that they might be better understood.

Worldwide demographic transitions in fertility, mortality and migration have highlighted issues in respect of financing old age. These include, pension systems, work/unemployment and their impact on ageing. The author deliberately deals with these issues towards the end of her work to discourage notions of 'generational conflict and older people as a drain on society' (de Medeiros 2017: 168). She views the ageing population as an opportunity for growth and improvement across sectors. The notion of 'growth' is explored further in respect of creativity in later life in Chapter 9, the final chapter in the book. The author explores how written, visual verbal and other narratives provide a way to focus on 'growth' and creativity as positive aspects of ageing.

The book is comprehensive and compact, covering a wide range of areas in only nine chapters, and 243 pages. The structure of the book is sensibly proportioned and informative. The work's clear communication makes comfortable reading for

a wide audience, including academics and the wider public. The book embraces a multi-perspective approach, with its well-organised chapters including a careful review of the material covered, a summary that pulls all the discussion together, and a list of suggested readings (in addition to well-cited references) that expand on the topics being discussed in areas such as the social and behavioural sciences, and policy studies. Gerontology integrates the biology of aging, the psychology of coping, and the social science of living one's unique environment (Vakalahi et al. 2014). This variability occurs both across and within populations. De Medeiros critically reviews factors impacting the process and results of ageing, emphasising the variability of the older population in terms of gender, ethnic, racial, cultural and other differences. The work also includes a glossary of key terms, as well as tables as simple reference points for the student or lay reader.

The main purpose of the work is to bring together multiple perspectives in explicating 'old age'. This 'guide to ageing and gerontology' meets these goals very well. The strengths of this book are its breadth of aging-related topics and its ability to provoke thought in the reader. Despite the book's strengths a few limitations are worth mentioning. What is presented in a number of instances is an emphasis on 'positive' ageing, which may not be the reality for many across the globe. This is evident in the final chapter on narrative and creativity, for example. De Medeiros acknowledges the paucity of information in respect of the ageing experience outside of the western world (where the majority of the world's older people are located), and its limitations on the scope of her work, but fails to recognise that her focus on a model of positive ageing may not be appropriate or

accurate given the diversity of the global ageing experience and its very varied circumstances. Perhaps the very well written chapter on narrative and creativity might have been better published elsewhere.

Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the value of the book. It is an informative, thought-provoking overview of key issues in the field of ageing and gerontology, which draws on a range of disciplines and standpoints. Students and those new to the field will find this a lucid, easy to read exposition of ageing and gerontology. This work is a welcomed addition to the field. It is very well written and organised. Both students and lay readers may well find this work an invaluable resource, rich in up to date information and integration of research materials from a wide range of perspectives.

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