

Ricca Edmondson and Hans-Joachim von Kondratowitz (eds.) (2009). *Valuing Older People. A Humanist Approach to Ageing*. Bristol: The Policy Press, Ageing and the Lifecourse Series, 312 pp. incl. comprehensive 10 pp. index. ISBN 978 1 84742 291 0 (paperback)

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*Valuing Older People* is key reading for those working or intending to work with older people in any capacity, and has become a set text in my course on Issues in Educating and Training Mature Adults (50+). A short review cannot do justice to the richness of ideas, knowledge and inspiration that the volume provides.

This important book makes a much needed fervent and effective case for a humanist approach to older people. It is a pivotal work because of its contribution to the very concept of later life. The humanist vision goes beyond simplistic calls for more “personalized” approaches that focus merely on the different conditions and predilections of older persons. Edmondson and von Kondratowitz have put together a set of essays that provide a deeper rationale. Humanism encompasses spiritual and moral needs. It is fundamental to this viewpoint that there is no cut-off point at which we can be herded into a decaying older generation, however kindly; our lives are a continuous process of human development where we retain

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the element of striving towards a meaningful life, as well as a meaningful understanding of our past and future.

This is a positive view of older people, and the essays emphasise strongly that older people have developed great resources during their earlier lives, especially various forms of wisdom. In the terms of the brief *Afterwords* by Eileen Fairhurst, Sue Baines and Ronald J. Manheimer, the book explores positive images of ageing and is thus a gateway to a more humanistic gerontology than has been evident heretofore.

Therefore, the editors' opening introduction addresses *ageing* rather than gerontology or old age, and thus sets the scene for an exploration of debates about what is meant by our social understandings of the later part of the life course. They present a broad definition of what the book's title refers to, i.e. what it means to value older people: "comprehending them *as* people, not treating them as strangers whose predicaments are foreign to those of others" (p. 1). This implies making good the "deficit in attention to norms and values pursued by older people ... situating (them) as equals in a human predicament we share" (p. 2). Further, "if ageing is to involve a process of continual negotiation about ways in which capacities and world views are bound together, this negotiation needs to be shaped by humanistic standards ... and by a commitment to older people as *co-equal members of society*" (p. 2, reviewer's italics). Above all, we need to remember that the later years do not entail losing our spiritual search for the significance of life: "Questions of meaning associated with the life course are not additions to gerontology, but should lie at its heart" (p. 3).

The book argues for serious change in public policy and private attitudes, towards accepting ageing as an integral part of the life course. It is not enough to recognise that older people are as diverse as younger people (which seems to be all that personalisation asserts), but that they continue to be as spiritual and goal-directed in their individual ways as they were when younger. Their psycho-spiritual well-being is as crucial for them as personalised care. The introduction ranges very widely over common approaches to older people. One of the most significant sections describes the failure of *critical gerontology* to move beyond critique of how older people are treated by mistaken cultural-historical or politico-economic polities. Thus it fails to acknowledge "ageing as a process of creating meaning, one carried out by older people but affecting those

around them, and affected by the norms and values of societies in which they live" (p. 13).

After the Introduction, the book falls into three parts that take up a variety of approaches to the humanist theme, illustrating their case with numerous instances from their research. All chapters have a common thread running through them, emphasising the need for more humanist social theory and principles for engagement with older people.

Part One – **Religion, spirituality, cultural resources and creating meaning** – contrasts Western European religious perspectives on ageing and religion (Peter G. Coleman) with the role of spirituality in "an ageing Singapore" that is multicultural and multi-religious (Kalyani K. Mehta). The third chapter gives a revealing insight into the findings of a longitudinal California study, describing how "the sacred" is integrated into "creative ageing" for some Americans (Michele Dillon). This is followed by a strong counterpoint with the overview of secularisation in the former East Germany, where a reawakening to "agnostic spirituality" has been taking place, especially among younger family members, while the older generations have largely held on to more traditional views (Monika Wohlrab-Sahr). The final essay in this section (Haim Hazan) is a passionate denunciation of the "continuous process of constructing ageing, highlighted by landmarks such as retirement, resignation to sociopsychological disengagement, the rise in structural dependency and the growing awareness of ageist exclusionary messages...shifting the linearly narrated plot of a meaning-driven life course to a lateral, present-bound world, governed by activities of daily risk management" (p. 96). Baudrillard's suggestion (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 1993, p. 163) that the Third Age is like the "economically parasitised" Third World is accepted with the proviso that we need to add to it a perception of "the colonizing condition where boundaries are blurred, but domination prevails" (p. 97).

Part Two – **Norms, values and gerontology** – opens with von Kondratowitz' superb historical account of how old age has become "increasingly generalized" by "an implicitly dominant normative agenda (that) consists in the invention of the category of 'generation'" (p. 115). The new category has "its foundation in ageing, mortality and reproduction" (p. 115) and obviously underlies the principles and practices of our

educational system. Although von Kondratowitz does not make this inference, it seems evident that the age-driven educational hierarchy directly leads to the current hold-all category “adult education” that fails to differentiate meaningfully beyond post-school learning. However, von Kondratowitz sees hope in today’s “emergence of new normative frameworks such as ‘successful ageing’ and ... ‘active ageing’” (p. 120).

The other chapters take up various humanistic themes related to generational treatment of older people. Intergenerational balances, contacts and relationships in Europe show the current ambivalences towards responsibilities for family care (Svein Olav Daatland) while the “double crisis” of pension systems and the challenge of reform is discussed in the light of European public opinion surveys that point to far more support for raising contributions than policy makers expected (Dina Frommert, Dirk Hofäcker, Thorsten Heien and Hans-Jürgen Andreß). A recent study of “residents’ and staff’s perceptions of quality-of-life issues in residential care settings” (p. 161) presents evidence related to a range of significant issues: autonomy, personalisation, sense of self, personal appearance, individuality, privacy and self-respect (Adeline Cooney and Kathy Murphy). In the penetrating final chapter here, Peter Derkx discusses the moral dilemma of extending the human lifespan in the light of clinical advances and asks us to consider that a “technological fix for existential problems will not work and might make matters worse” (p. 190). This whole set of chapters can be seen as a humanist contribution to publications such as those of the *Journal of Population Ageing* where, for instance, different ways of forecasting future demographic patterns can lead to different economic strategies.

Part Three – **Ageing and wisdom? Conflicts and contested developments** – brings to the fore the dominant achievement that all societies value in older people: a higher degree of wisdom. Starting from the wonderful insight that “the idea that it is *possible* to become wiser today than yesterday could offer meaning and purpose to personal survival, to the presence in society of older people in general and to the practice of respecting them” (p. 201), Edmondson explores the topic of wisdom with its implications for policy and behaviour, and shows what a fundamental role it has played in many if not all cultures. Regrettably, it is too often ignored or played down in western societies, and is not acknowledged in

the literature and discussions of ageing. A humanist approach to valuing older people would recognise the success of wise individuals or interactions “in moving others to positions in which they can see, feel or act in new ways” (p. 211). Edmondson points out that wisdom should be understood as a more strongly social phenomenon than has been imagined heretofore – a claim with considerable social and political consequences.

The opening chapter is followed by an outline of “wise social practices” (p. 217) and moral frameworks with religious values in the lives of older people in Ireland. It investigates the role of churchgoing in developing strong communal values and in maintaining spirituality, quite often without religious beliefs (Carmel Gallagher). In a particularly revealing essay on active ageing, Lorna Warren and Amanda Clarke analyse older individuals’ views in comparison with those implicit in policy slogans, and conclude that “active ageing as it is thought about by our interviewees actually depends on a perceived sense of freedom that older people may subsequently choose to use in helping others” (pp. 234–235), particularly through passing on their experience and wisdom (p. 242). James Nichol deals with issues of wisdom while investigating the question: “Does eldership mean anything in the contemporary West?” The term is not commonly used in discussions of ageing, having its origins principally in contexts where an elder is an older, influential member of a family, tribe, or community, e.g. “an elder of the Church”, though generally indicating an experienced, wiser person. Interestingly, the participant interviewees (British people aged 65 to 81) rejected eldership as an identification, preferring “a conception of ‘mature’ peership and of mature peer groups as potential spaces for mutual recognition, reflection and a sense of shared experience, yet also affirming a belief in later-life development and contribution” (p. 249). It was clear that “they believed ... that they had something distinctive to offer” (p. 258).

For some readers, the final chapter might well have come earlier, since it describes how a situated discourse analysis can unpack ambivalent attitudes held by and towards older people. Real life discourse about ageing is often self-contradictory, thus showing up the confusion that talk about old age, health and morality reveals. This method of analysis looks as closely at the “ways in which people converse” (p. 261) as at the

meaning they seem to convey. The findings were that the older people interviewed were not confident about their own wisdom, but this might be because their social milieu did not reinforce it. The chapter is a useful introduction to the special edition of *Ageing and Society* (2009) Volume 29 Issue 6, where all papers analyse spoken discourse (Outi Jolanki).

To conclude, the humanist enterprise heralded by this book is an ongoing project. If it tells us anything, it is that all of us, both as sociologists of ageing and as members of society, need to pursue such an approach.