

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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“Ageing societies” have become a main theme of political and academic discourses in the context of modern welfare states. In many accounts, however, the discussion is focused exclusively on elderly people as a strain on social security systems. The book *Valuing Older People: A Humanist Approach to Ageing* presents a convincing new argument for a concentration on elderly people’s lives. Being published in the *Ageing and the Lifecourse* series, the editors have brought together a wide range of contributors from various countries, all rejecting a simplified categorisation of “the elderly” in mainstream discourses. This excellent collection rather approaches themes such as culture, spirituality, religion, meaning, norms and values and makes them the starting point for any analysis of the lives of elderly people. In order to enable a broad perspective, the participants represent various epistemological and methodological approaches (such as discourse analysis, interviews, life stories and ethnographies), which means that the collection is building an interdisciplinary framework based on a broad understanding of the humanities

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(including perspectives such as sociology, political theory, psychology and philosophy).

In the introduction the editors present a very interesting dogma-historical account of the study of ageing. They demonstrate the enormous importance of the analysis of ideals, norms and values in the context of older people. Ricca Edmondson and Hans-Joachim von Kondratowitz argue for an approach to older people which allows "comprehending them *as* people, not treating them as strangers" (p. 1). The editors raise questions of the normative context of ageing and the contemporary expectations of later life. They want to promote perspectives in which political and economic forces are important, but in which the meaning of the human stands above all. With the focus of the book on ethics, moral obligations and normative perspectives, the editors also want to explicitly challenge postmodern trends of an absence of normativity and ethics in social discourses.

The chapters of the book are structured into three sections. In the first part the contributions explore the meaning of being old for elderly people themselves. Issues of religion and spirituality are of particular emphasis in this part. The second section, which the editors describe as the "central section" (p. 11), moves on to the social level of norms and values. This part also questions and challenges the perspectives of the discipline of gerontology itself. In the third part contributions explore particular perspectives on the lives and contributions of elderly people. The focus here lies on notions of wisdom and insight into the meaning of life. Two afterwords which should provide an idea of the possibility of a positive image of ageing complete this collection.

A strength of the book is that it identifies the many different ways through which people try to make sense of ageing and the experience of ageing in their own life. Edmondson's contribution, for example, discusses the idea and category of wisdom in giving meaning to old age. Peter Derkx, on the other hand, focuses on possible challenges to people's ways of an understanding of the meaning of life through biotechnical enhancement. The strong point of the book (its many different approaches and positions which all help to explore the idea and phenomenon of ageing) is unfortunately also sometimes its weakness. Several perspectives (see also the editors' proposal in the introduction to this collection) focus on the

invention and construction of categories in the context of older people. Von Kondratowitz describes veneration of old age as a myth, James Nichol writes about the invention of eldership, Adelina Cooney and Kathy Murphy discuss the perception of categories such as autonomy, choice and privacy in residential care settings and Lorna Warren and Amanda Clarke focus on how elderly people socially construct themselves in relation to health and "active ageing". Other contributions, however, seem to contradict the idea that categories in the context of ageing are social constructions and representations of values and norms in society. Svein Olav Daatland, for example, who analyses people's understandings of family norms and filial obligation, and Dina Frommert, Dirk Hofäcker, Thorsten Heien and Hans-Jürgen Andreß, who discuss the relationship between demographic developments, the idea of "ageing societies" and pension systems, use the very categories in a somewhat uncritical way. On the one hand, the collection clearly takes a standpoint in challenging and deconstructing the meaning of broadly used terms, ideas and categories, at the same time, however, some authors' contributions do not at all reflect on the construction of the terms.

A main focus relating the individual contributions to each other is the importance of religion or spirituality for giving significance and meaning to an individual's life. Michele Dillion's (for the USA) and Peter G. Coleman's (for the UK) analyses of religion can be compared with Monika Wohlrab-Sahr's description of agnostic spirituality in East Germany. While the combination of the individual contributions allows an all-encompassing perspective on older people, the structure of the book has also some shortcomings. In my opinion the book to some extent over-emphasises religion and spirituality and does not pick up on some other themes which emerge from these contributions. The notion of community, for example, appears in several chapters. Peter G. Coleman describes the significance of religious belonging; Kalyani K. Mehta discusses the importance of ethnic community ties in Singapore. Carmel Gallagher analyses the notion of place-based friendship in relation to religious practices in Ireland and describes a culture of friendship and positive neighbouring. In all of these stories religion and spirituality play an important role for elderly people. At the same time, however, a desire for some form of community which is sometimes combined with nostalgic

imaginings of communities is present. Notions of friendship, support and belonging are representations of a longing for social ties and links. While I do not doubt that religion plays an important role in giving meaning to people's (social) life, I would favour an approach that identifies the desire for community and relating as an emotion and an ideal, which reaches beyond religion, ethnic belonging or particular physical spaces.

The editors wanted this very interesting book to take up a life course perspective (which is manifested strongly in Outi Jolanki's account of biographical interviews and discourse analysis in relation to moral attitudes in the context of ageing), which focuses on older people not as a separate category but as inherently human beings. With that they want to make a contribution to the creation and strengthening of a "critical/humanistic gerontology". For this new perspective, they argue, a revolutionising of discourses and a creation of a new language are needed, with which the lives of older people, the process of ageing and the experiences of these processes can be described. In that sense the book represents a very interesting and successful contribution to a new understanding of the way academic, political and social discourses are complicit not only in the "making" of older people but in the construction of what it means to be human itself. It therefore clearly fulfils the editors' aim of "situating older people as equals in a human predicament we share" (p. 2).