

Jaco Hoffman and Katrien Pype (eds.) (2016).  
*Ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa. Spaces and  
Practices of Care*. Bristol: Policy Press, 248 pp.  
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Ageing studies in general, and gerontology in particular, have been rightly criticised for reliance on and emphasis of Western conceptions and imaginaries of ageing and old age. This is changing and contributions such as the book edited by Jaco Hoffman and Katrien Pype are at the forefront of this transformation. Included in the *Ageing in a Global Context* Polity Press series, the book raises to the challenge of advancing knowledge on global diversity and local complexities shaping the experience of ageing and old age worldwide. It offers an essential engagement with discourses, experiences and realities of care in old age in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to foreground new ways of thinking and conceptualising care in that region.

The focal point of this edited volume is old age care as a practiced, organised and emplaced social phenomenon that is deeply embedded in the sociopolitical and cultural context and embodied in the everyday lives of care receivers and care providers. With this, as editors emphasise in the *Introduction*, the book offers important insights into the realities of care practices and relationships in SSA that merit both research and policy attention. Furthermore, it attempts to develop a new vocabulary

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to conceptualise this phenomenon. In his *Afterword*, Andries Baart differentiates between six discourses of care based on the motives for providing as emergent from the stories narrated in the book. Ranging from tradition-based to market-oriented mechanisms, those discourses coexist in the region creating unique combinations in each setting examined.

What unites the book's various discourses of care in SSA is the underlying story of lack of political interest in issues regarding older women and men's health and welfare. The contributing authors identify this as a key challenge and dilemma awaiting old age care in SSA. This in turn results from presumed and unquestioned ideas regarding the primacy of family care to cater for the needs of older people. Sjaak van der Geest's case study of political discourses regarding care of older people in Ghana (Chapter 1), exemplifies that point very well. His critical reading emphasises the lack of political imagination and understanding of the changing socioeconomic reality that influences family structures and relationships as well as care practices. In a similar vein, Jaco Hoffman discusses the plethora of ways in which younger and older generations of South Africans approach the concept of family care (Chapter 7). Although those different generations speak about the same phenomenon, their motivations and understanding diverge, which may potentially lead to a disparity between care expectation and actual care practices. Above all else, Hoffman's chapter demonstrates that family care is not a concept to be taken for granted, especially in political discourses.

The contributing authors are far from approaching care of older people as a problem. On the contrary, thanks to deep and engaged research, they beautifully narrate complex stories and perspectives on care and ageing in SSA. One common perspective that emerges from the chapters is agency. Difficult sociopolitical and economic situations set the background for the whole book, but not a single chapter is affected by a victim perspective. Instead, the volume is a mesmerising collection of research stories built on prolonged engagement with the field, and it emanates with authentic voices of people who are actively involved in *doing care* regardless of their social status and health condition.

For example, Emily Freeman with her study of old age identities in rural Malawi adeptly introduces the reader to the immense amount of identity work that older women and men perform to adjust to changing social

and corporeal realities (Chapter 5). Against the background of physical work as a social imperative, the interviewees who were unable to work creatively built new identities that allowed them to navigate through their lives. In doing so, they also attest to the importance of bodily experience in mitigating ageing and old age. Brigit Obrist writes about a similar phenomenon in her study of home care for older people that acquired physical disability (Chapter 4). The physical changes in the body were used to determine not only how care should be provided but also where and by whom. This is also reflected in Josien de Klerk's study of neglect in Tanzania (Chapter 6). This chapter demonstrates how changes in physical and mental conditions transform care and care relations, and simultaneously reveals the various vulnerabilities of care providers and care receivers who may neither be ready nor willing to deal with the new circumstances. Negotiation and fluidity become accurate descriptions of family care practices in that context.

Traditionally, family care in old age is about children providing for their older parents. However, elder-to-elder care – for example, caring for a spouse or sibling – is an increasingly recognised everyday practice of care in SSA. Chapter 3 is informative in this respect. Peter van Eeuwijk, in his study of elder-to-elder care in Tanzania, emphasises the adaptive aspect of care relations and practices that are affected by the changing socioeconomic context (Chapter 3). This points to a more collective response to older people's needs that is distributed among different family members if a need arises. Nevertheless, family care is not always available. Katrien Pype in her study of retirement homes in the Democratic Republic of Congo sheds light on the lives of older people *without value* – mainly older women with no children (Chapter 2). Her in-depth analysis leaves no doubt about the agential strength of residents who engage with the surrounding community, in order to create new relationships and – more importantly – to redeem their social status.

One of the greatest challenges of cross-cultural research on ageing is the development and practice of critical and reflexive approaches, not only towards sociocultural contexts but also with regard to conceptual and theoretical frames (Wilińska et al. 2017). The edited volume, written by Europe- and Africa-based researchers about ageing and care in SSA, raises to that challenge. It also makes an important step towards establishing a

firm foundation for the highly sought-for family gerontology in Africa that with its interpretive, critical and global character would question common myths about family care and open a space for discussions emphasising heterogeneity and complexity (Aboderin & Hoffman 2016). The explorative character of the book introduces readers to some of the most important aspects of care in SSA. It does not exhaust them though, but it competently hints on the unexplored questions, encouraging further investigations.

## References

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