

Kathrin Komp & Stina Johansson (eds.) (2015). *Population Ageing from a Lifecourse Perspective. Critical and International Approaches*. Bristol: Policy Press, 258 pp. ISBN 978 1 44731 071 6 (hardcover)

REVIEWED by MARY McCALL*

In an increasingly shrinking global world, students and researchers alike need to expand their thinking on how concepts from different fields can complexify our understanding of social issues, finding similarities, while honoring differences. *Population ageing from a lifecourse perspective: Critical and international perspectives*, edited by Kathrin Komp and Stina Johansson, offers a wide range of international examples to illustrate that demographers need to understand lifecourse perspectives, while lifecourse scholars also need to understand demographic changes so that both groups can plan and implement social policies effectively. Overall, the book makes this argument clear, with examples in different arenas of life that can benefit from this dual and integrated perspective. Fortunately, most of the authors also take a critical perspective by focusing on ideas such as cumulative advantage and disadvantage, and the notion of “de-standardizing” lifecourse models. They also integrate the complexities of gender, class and ethno-racial identity, as well as major demographic changes due to birth rates, death rates and immigration. Some overarching themes throughout

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the 14 chapters include micro-, meso- and macro-level analyses of demographic and lifecourse changes and how they impact each other; the challenges to welfare nations to deal with an increasingly diverse population; the difficulty in creating age-based versus lifecourse social policies; and how a sense of personal agency can influence one's aging experience. I would find this book helpful in an upper division undergraduate or first-year graduate course in a variety of fields to introduce concepts that both demographers and lifecourse scholars use and apply in research.

Chapter 2 on demography identifies the key components to population changes. It is the only chapter in the book that focuses specifically on macro-level demography, while the rest of the book utilizes demographic perspectives on micro-level experiences of individuals and groups. Chapter 3 specifically tackles the connection between demography and lifecourse in an insightful manner by discussing how changing social conditions influence lifecourses and, in turn, how changes in lifecourses have an impact on demographic patterns of society (p. 31).

The next chapters address country-specific topics that constitute a variety of common points, while demonstrating differing cultural contexts for aging societies. In Chapter 4, the authors challenge the notions of "active aging" and "third age," since even "similar" generations – for example, Baby Boomers – will be different in different countries. The authors utilize Allardt's sense of well-being with its four domains: *having* (material things), *loving* (relationships), *being* (self-actualization) and *doing* (productive activity). These are reminiscent of Freud's notions of issues of love and work as fundamental tasks, as well as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I must point out, though, that the notion of self-actualization, along with autonomy and independence, which is repeatedly pointed to as a lifecourse goal, is a perspective of developed countries. As long as older people in some countries still struggle to cover basic needs, it is questionable whether self-actualization is a universal goal we should all be aiming for.

Chapter 5 gives us insight into gender, work lives and aging in Portugal. The authors have an incisive analysis, claiming that democratization, decolonization and the development of the welfare state post WWII gave those who were in middle age at that time completely different perspectives on work, and planning for old age, than those who were much younger when those major changes occurred. Chapter 6 discusses

cumulative advantages and disadvantages in socioeconomic status in Poland. The authors critique the notion of common “lifecourse regimes” and its potential (non)relevance to non-Western nations given major global changes affecting societies and individuals such as mass migration or natural disasters. Chapter 9 also echoes these critiques in the analysis of the retirement planning of self-employed persons in Germany.

Chapter 7 discusses ethnicity and aging in the United States, identifying Bonilla-Silva’s overarching categories of “white,” “honorary whites” and the “collective black” describing underlying attitudes to others. The history of racism in the United States is addressed, and the difference between individual-level *prejudice* and the meso- and macro-level *racism* and *discrimination* is delineated, all of which impact the lifecourse chances of people of color. Given that the current US minorities will become the majority in 2044, I believe the United States needs to consider the impact of this on many key aspects of social life and social policy. For instance, for many years to come, the majority of older persons will still be white, which will have an effect on care and who gets care from whom. Given the lower ages of most immigrants, they will likely be the care providers.

In Chapter 8, the examination of rural and urban lifecourses in Australia provides insight into the role of geography and its impact on life chances, linking environmental gerontology and lifecourse theory. The notions of “place attachment” and “place identity” are important, especially with regard to the impact that migration and mobility have on older people and their sense of attachment and self. Intergenerational relationships and obligations are also taken up in the book, particularly in Chapter 10, comparing the Netherlands with China. This chapter provides an interesting analysis of the concepts of family solidarity and demographic shifts in both countries, speculating on the kinds of lifecourse changes that might be coming down the road, specifically in terms of grandparenting.

Social care in Sweden is examined in Chapter 11 through interviews with women who have come to Sweden at different ages and from different circumstances in their home country. The interviews reveal perceived difficulties as an immigrant in personal adaptations, in care and support, and in personal and social needs, in contrast to social policies. In Chapter 12, the Swedish labor market is explored, posing the important question of how to adjust working life and conditions to the needs of an aging workforce.

A discussion of how to move from “old-age social policies” to “lifecourse social policies” is presented in Chapter 13. The authors distinguish between policies according to who the target group is, what the mode of intervention is, the time horizon adopted and the consideration of social inequality. Initiatives such as Age-Friendly Cities and Active Ageing initiatives by the World Health Organization illustrate some ways to move to lifecourse policies. However, they also note that these changes are challenged by the nature of politics – where the time horizon is the next election, not someone’s lifespan.

In terms of applications to social policy, Johansson quotes Antonnen in asking “whether universalism might mean uniformity instead of diversity, conformity instead of pluralism and absolutism instead of relativism” (p. 185). Examples from Sweden and Finland (as well as Japan, although not included here) illustrate this set of dilemmas. In all aging countries, we can see a trend toward a shift in focus from either government-based or family-based care, to increasingly diversified care systems, with all nations beginning to expect and provide more private, market-based options. These raise the following questions: 1) how do we maintain services and supports for those who need them, even as these needs become more diversified? and 2) what, if any, is an ideal balance between the roles of the individual, the family and civil society, and the national government in providing services for its older citizens?

Most countries are also moving toward a model of more individual (and thus family) responsibility for old-age care. This most likely will continue to exacerbate lifelong inequities based on class, race/ethnicity, gender and citizenship status. We can see clearly where that can lead if we look at the United States and how its largely market-based care system perpetuates longstanding inequalities in education, health status, health care and longevity.

In their concluding chapter, Johansson and Komp note that, across the chapters, it seems education has been a key factor in providing opportunities for individuals, especially women, to adapt their lifecourse to, or to break free from, traditional lifestyles. They also note that cumulative disadvantage might be the most powerful theoretical explanation for ethnic variation in economic resources, health and well-being in old age.

Unfortunately, I find that this stops short of analyzing the underlying structures of white privilege and capitalism as the fundamental systems that keep poor and minority groups in a situation where the odds of them moving up are very low. We need to not only understand these systems but also work to dismantle them if we are ever to reach a point where *all* people in *all* countries have a chance to have a decent lifestyle with reasonable social and health support. Critical gerontology analyses, such as those by Carol Estes, Meredith Minkler and Harry “Rick” Moody are essential to expose the underlying assumptions about older people and the systems that maintain inequities across the lifespan. For example, how we fundamentally view older people – as needy or autonomous – lays the foundation for policies and expectations. To assume any stereotype of all older persons is dangerous. It obscures true variations and true needs that a society could meet. There are many references to human agency in this book, which I think overstates the ability of individuals to rise above the demographic, social and historical circumstances they grow up and grow old in. As the editors of this anthology also propose, there is a need for an overall flexibilization, pluralization and individualization of welfare services in most aging nations to guarantee a late life experience of respect and dignity for all.