

Ulla Kriebner, Roberta Maierhofer,
Barabara Ratzenböck (eds.) (2014).
*Alive and Kicking at All Ages: Cultural
Constructions of Health and Life Course
Identity*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag,
324 pp. ISBN 978 3 8376 2582 0 (paperback)

REVIEWED by DORA TADIC*

Alive and Kicking at All Ages is a book for all who are interested in ageing studies, from experts in gerontology and sociology, to people who just want to know more. It is easy to follow, written in accessible language that allows everyone to understand it and yet it does not lack in academic content. The editors excellently link 17 contributions together to form a cohesive piece of writing, which is the product of the biennial conference of the European Association of American Studies (EAAS) in Izmir, Turkey, in 2012.

The book focuses on contemporary topics, such as health, policy, culture, personal narratives and discrimination, that surround old age and physical or mental disability. The organisation of the book allows insight into real-life narratives of ageing, personal experiences and policy changes, as well as how these are reflected in society through literature, theatre and TV programmes. The book comprises two parts, divided by theme, “Material Realities” and “Cultural Representations,” each containing contributions on age and disability.

* Dora Tadic, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

“Material Realities” includes seven chapters that focus on age and disability in contemporary society. For instance, in her contribution, Marshall analyses “ageility studies” (p. 21), an area of studies on age and disability. She argues that both disability and old age are viewed as medical conditions and, as such, need treatment through either rehabilitation or the use of rejuvenating products available on the market. The goal of ageility studies, however, is to accept one’s disability and old age and to strive for conscious ageility. Another contribution that examines old age as a problem that needs fixing is by Bendien. She explores a variety of standardised methods of treatment applied to the entire older population, creating what she terms “kwik-fit” (p. 81). The main issue here is that every person has a different perception of time, that is, of how slowly or quickly life goes by. In the fast-paced world of the young, the old often return to their memories in order to make sense of the accelerating changes happening all around them. Bendien argues that instead of applying a “one size fits all” (p. 83) model, we should take a person-centred approach and focus more on individual needs and interests of older people and allow them to grow old at their own pace. Adding to that, Boulot provides another example of generalisation about older people. She analyses ageism, that is, discrimination based on one’s age, in the workplace. Ageism is a type of discrimination to which no one is immune and as such needs to be addressed more thoroughly. In her contribution, Boulot explores the passing of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). ADEA protects older workers from losing their job on the basis of their age. However, it has not yet eradicated ageism from the workplace, and older employees are often considered “less productive, enthusiastic or creative” (p. 136), making it clear that there is still room for improvement.

“Cultural Representations” offers ten contributions, which show how old age is portrayed in theatre, movies and literature and how these portrayals shape our images of older adults. Wilson’s contribution, for instance, focuses on madness and memory. Based on the BBC TV drama *She’s Been Away*, Wilson provides an account of a mind of an older woman, appearing to be mad, and her young cousin who is unconsciously allowing patriarchy to dictate her life. The story follows the two women on their journey to self-empowerment and, through her analysis, Wilson questions well-established gender norms and the erroneous connection between ageing and madness.

Moving from TV to literature, Dackweiler investigates the topics rarely discussed when talking about old age – love and sexuality. She uses examples from two works of literature, both following women who suffered the death or institutionalisation of their husbands. In a situation when people are left without a partner after a long life together, they need to reconfigure their lives and create a new routine. The stories Dackweiler uses offer two different narratives of ageing alone, that of decline and progress, and leave us thinking about how we will construct our own later years.

Even though a number of relevant topics on old age and disability are addressed, one area is nevertheless absent from this otherwise excellent collection: non-heterosexual ageing. As a research area that has started rapidly developing in the past couple of years, there is more and more research focusing on how older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) experience ageing and deal with legal and personal problems they encounter during that process. Understandably, the issue of LGBT ageing is extremely broad, and as such would probably require the inclusion of 17 additional papers. And yet its absence is a missed opportunity for introducing readers to the gendered complexity of ageing studies.

Alive and Kicking at All Ages is not just an overview of narratives that surround ageing and old age. It is, in the editors' own words, a "product and mission at the same time" (p. 17). Its mission is to change the way we look at older people in our society and imagine their lives and to challenge the stereotypes that surround later life. The book shows us that old people are a crucial part of society just like any other age group, supporting that claim with various examples of legal, medical and cultural narratives. It also teaches us not to think about ageing as a progress marked by the absence of good health. Rather, it offers a new outlook on old age and calls for more awareness on the variety of people's experiences in later life. Instead of accepting that ageing is an inevitable process of decline, we need to support the concept of individual experience and do our best to move forward towards a society that provides means for "optimal ageing" (Minkler & Fadem 2002).

Reference

Minkler, M. & Fadem, P. (2002). "Successful ageing": A disability perspective. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 12(4): 229–235.