

Book Review

Ageing, Meaning and Social Structure: Connecting Critical and Humanistic Gerontology

Edited by Jan Baars, Joseph Dohmen, Amanda Grenier and Chris Phillipson
Policy Press, U.K., 2014, Pp 205, ISBN 978 1 44730 089 2

This book, a useful reading for those interested in studies of ageing, integrates critical and humanistic approaches, which are gaining ground in recent years as societies are ageing and facing social and ethical dilemmas. The ten chapters of the book by authors collaborating for long on ageing studies, written from an academic perspective make a significant contribution in analyzing different issues connected with understanding processes of human ageing. They bring attention to concerns on how to manage life in old age, on choices in later life, on various political and economic challenges that are being faced by different countries as they go through demographic transition. The articulation and interpretation of later life from a personal and autobiographical perspective provides interesting insights.

Rightly pointed out in the book 'the major problems that ageing people encounter are not the inevitable result of biological senescence, nor of unfortunate decisions, but are constructed through social institutions and through the operation of economic and political forces'. The emphasis on the growing field of critical gerontology brings focus on structural issues relevant to ageing societies, to the notions of autonomy and empowerment. It is linked to the political economy framework and to understand the

structural sources of difference in relating to ageing problems, in the context of inequalities in socioeconomic factors. From a humanistic perspective it takes the reader to the depths of existential meaning, that is, to the concerns about the absence of meaning in the lives of older people.

The introductory first chapter by Jan Baars and Chris Phillipson which provides the broad framework of the different chapters of the book also outlines the need for the interface between the rubric of critical gerontology as structural analysis and humanistic gerontology as articulations of interpersonal meaning in old age. The second chapter by Jan Baars and Chris Phillipson identifies the theoretical foundations for the interconnection of structural critiques and interpersonal meanings in ageing life. Joseph Dohmen in the third chapter provides an ethical perspective from a practical viewpoint to help more people attain a 'good old age'. The fourth chapter by Amanda Grenier and Chris Phillipson offers consideration of the concept of agency while reflecting on what it means to live in late old age, the 'fourth age'. In the fifth chapter Margreet Bruens takes up the topic of dementia from a structural and interpretive perspective stressing on the need to recognize people with dementia as human beings till their end and with all the changes they undergo

in their health conditions.

In the sixth chapter, Hanne Laceulle takes up the issue of self realisation in later life in the context of cultural and structural scripts embodying ageing lives. In chapter seven the authors Anja Machielse and Roelof Hortulanus discuss the relevance of social networks for enriching the lives of individuals in ageing well. In chapter eight, Mo Ray brings attention to marginalized older people and the need for developing social work practices in ageing societies. In chapter nine, Friederike Ziegler and Thomas Scharf restate the background from which critical gerontology evolved and how it challenges the way in which western societies construct ageing and shape the lives of older people. In the last chapter Dale Dannefer and Jielu Lin summarize briefly the contents of previous chapters within the distinction highlighted between 'contingent' and 'existential' ageing in the second chapter, thus linking the theoretical with empirical under-

standing of ageing process. The emphasis on practical aspects, adds to the strength of the concluding chapter.

The book has much to offer to theoretical and empirical understanding of growing old in changing societies, with its deep elaborations on theory and case studies to a large section of scholars and researchers, from the social science stream and health practice as well as administrators, policy makers and practitioners involved with the field of ageing. It is a rare collection as it combines intersection done seldom between critical and humanistic gerontology.

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