

Reviews

doi:10.1017/S0144686X11000626

Janice E. Graham and Peter H. Stephenson (eds), *Contesting Aging & Loss*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2010, 209 pp., pbk \$32.95, ISBN 13: 978 1 4426 0100 0.

There has of late been a raft of new books in gerontology on ageing and loss. These have fallen into two main expositions: theory and practice; a demarcation between the ‘thinkers’ and the ‘doers’ of social research in relation to applied gerontology. It would be fair to say that there is a contradiction that lies at the heart of contemporary gerontology. On the one hand, there is research that is data rich on ageing and loss, but theory poor; while on the other, there is research which is theory rich but data poor. Overcoming this division is a difficult task, and *Contesting Aging & Loss* is the first book I have read in a very long time to overcome this duality, by presenting an impressive theoretically grounded understanding of rich empirical data drawn from occasional comparative research.

Graham and Stephenson’s innovative and powerful book deconstructs contemporary developments in understanding aging and loss. Rather than reinforce a convention of fatalistic language associated with loss of roles, or loss of people or loss of life, this book dramatically deconstructs long-held assumptions through consistent use of insights from Critical Gerontology. This is a breath of fresh air. The book is also very well written and the material is well packaged into a very detailed and thorough exposition.

The book has nine chapters that are of high quality, originality and authenticity. The first chapter navigates the conceptual complexity of ‘loss’ as a paradigm, illuminating dominant biological viewpoints that can be taken to task by alternative socio-cultural explanations of loss. Chapters Two, Three and Four focus on comparative material that adds great strength to the book. Respectively, these chapters explore what it means to be an older person living in the Netherlands; in Canada (as an Italian Canadian); and in South Africa. This is to be applauded. This book stands alone in this area.

Chapters Five and Six focus on case studies of illness, indignity and stigmatisation. Chapter Five focuses on the methodological use of biography and its application to examining gender, ageing and inequalities, and hedonistic lifestyles of the excessive drinking that has an impact of loss of roles in mainstream society. In a slightly different context, Chapter Six attempts to explore subjectivity and its role in understanding dignity and loss through examining the narratives of hospitalised older people.

In Chapters Seven and Eight, the authors take the discussion to a more methodological consideration. In Chapter Seven, Pia Kontos reflects on using ethnographic research to examine dementia, and how using this method helped to humanise the care of people with dementia.

In Chapter Eight, Graham takes a different stance by exploring the issues of science, politics and everyday recognition of providing treatment for dementia. Whilst the authors focus on research issues, it is also important to reflect with sensitivity on the use of language as a healthy corrective to the politics of negative labels so that older people are people first and older second.

The final chapter explores the fieldwork process in practice with people, families, social workers, health professionals, researchers, bereavement specialists, and friends. In a powerful final chapter, education about ageing and loss is aspired to, as a valuable tool for analysis and social change. Only by shattering taken-for-granted assumptions about ageing and loss across cultures, will new knowledge and ideas come to light and new research impact upon conceptual, methodological, experiential, theoretical, spiritual and ethical domains. This book is a giant step forward in that direction.

Overall, this book is methodologically robust and is a must-read for qualitative researchers interested in understanding and applying complex research methods to encounters with older people and professionals; as well as in the distances between what is said in health and social care policy for older people and what is found in actual day-to-day practice. The book is also a tour de force in terms of development of social theory. It provides the first account I am aware of that synthesises perspectives on embodiment and biography, situated within the paradigm of critical gerontology. This in itself was an eye opener for this reviewer. It is very rare that a book can combine complex social theory with very high-quality empirical research. Graham and Stephenson have been scrupulous about research and scholarship in terms of accuracy and imagination, both in their own work and in subsequent chapters by all contributors. I would suggest that *Contesting Aging & Loss* will be extensively cited and deserves to be.

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doi:10.1017/S0144686X11000638

Prem S. Fry and Corey L. M. Keyes (eds), *New Frontiers in Resilient Aging: Life-strengths and Well-being in Late Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 388 pp., hbk £65.00, ISBN 13: 978 0 521 50985 5.

This is a timely book, given the increasing concern about the ability of contemporary societies to provide adequate health care and welfare support to the rapidly growing numbers of older people throughout the world. The main message of the book is that the vast majority of older people have reserve capacities in all domains which enable them to not only cope with the inevitable challenges of older life but to thrive in the face of adversity and to experience ongoing developmental growth. The authors, leading figures in gerontological research over many years, have produced an accessible 'state of the art' review of the latest scientific research into what is possible for older