

BOOKS REVIEWED

THINKING ABOUT DEMENTIA: CULTURE, LOSS, AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SENILITY. 2006. Edited by Annette Leibing, Lawrence Cohen. Published by Rutgers University Press. 299 pages. Price C\$40.

Are these tourists in an unfamiliar land or bearers of unique perspectives and insights? You decide!

This publication brings a view to the field of dementia research that will be unfamiliar to many readers. Edited by Annette Leibing, a researcher at the Institute of Social Gerontology of Quebec and MEOS/Université de Montreal, and Lawrence Cohen, director of Medical Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, this soft-cover book contains 12 chapters on topics that range from a discussion of the sociomedical considerations of end-of-life issues in dementia care, to a description of self-actualization and senility in Japan. The scope is ambitious and proposes to address questions that relate to “age, mind, voice, self, loss, temporality, memory, and affect”. The majority of the 19 contributing authors are either medical anthropologists or sociologists, several are social gerontologists, and one is associated with an academic department of theatre and dance. Not surprisingly, the methodologies represented by the contributions to this text are varied and relatively nontraditional, ranging from ethnographic fieldwork and cross-cultural descriptive analyses to qualitative studies of single cases and phenomenological perspectives.

Although necessarily simplified here, the stated goals of the volume, as presented in the introduction, are to explore aging and dementia using the range of research strategies and methodological perspectives of medical and cultural anthropology, and to articulate how this understanding of dementia can contribute to broader questions related to psychology, personhood, and the structure of care.

The chapters are loosely organized according to three themes. Part One contains essays that relate to changing clinical practice in dementia. For example, several contributors effectively use case studies to describe how dementia diagnosis impacts our views on death and the ethics of end-of-life care, challenges the skills and resources of primary care clinicians, and, in some cases, provides a more acceptable alternative to the stigma of being labeled with a psychiatric condition such as depression. In a particularly intelligent and illuminating chapter, Janice Graham uses the database generated by the Canadian Study on Health and Aging as a back-drop for her exploration of the biopolitics of medical classification, the epidemiology of dementia, and the rich potential inherent in the “plurality” of an interprofessional approach to clinical diagnosis and the decision-making process. In the final chapter of Part One, Jesse Ballenger provides a historical perspective and reminds us that “the biomedical deconstruction” of dementia, and in particular, the blurred boundary between normal and clinical aging, has contributed to the persisting stigmatization of older adults.

Part Two on the role of genomics in Alzheimer’s research contains one chapter. These authors conclude that the “uptake” and “penetrance” of genetic knowledge about Alzheimer’s disease is minimal in the general public, has little relevance to lay understanding about disease causation or the pragmatics of the lived experience, and has limited influence on the care provided by health professionals.

Part Three, is entitled *The organization of voice, self, or personhood* and contains six chapters that describe ethnographic fieldwork and narrative analyses in a locked special care unit for severely impaired elders, an Orthodox Jewish long-term care facility, a creative story-telling technique to facilitate self-expression among people with dementia attending day programming, ward activity and organizational structure in a Dutch nursing home, and in a cooking class designed to enhance self-actualization for seniors in Northern Japan. Perhaps the most interesting and optimistic chapter in this book is authored by Annette Leibing, a co-editor, who begins her observations in a psychogeriatric outpatient clinic in Brazil. In an apparent nod to dualism, she challenges the trend towards the “total medicalization of dementia” in support of an enduring “personhood”, which she defines as the “reflexive, immaterial, communicable essence of a person”.

If you are interested in the topics summarized above, and, admittedly, many of these are very important ones, then I encourage you to read this book. But be forewarned - if you, like me, are coming to the task with relatively traditional clinical or reductionist scientific expectations and training, then the language of medical anthropology and post-modernism might pose a challenge to your enjoyment and understanding. In addition to the unfamiliar language, occasionally you will be stopped in your tracks by conclusions that do not appear to be informed by the traditionally scientific approach to understanding dementia. It took me many months of “picking it up – and putting it down” to finish reading this book.

My background is in clinical psychology and geriatric neuropsychology; for many years I have researched normal and clinical aging and provided assessment, diagnostic, and consultation services to individuals with dementia and to their family members. Together with my students, I am currently struggling to develop appropriate neuropsychological approaches and tools for cross-cultural dementia assessment. I anticipated that this book might contribute importantly to our work, especially to our work with Aboriginal seniors. Although, in general, I found the content to be far-reaching, interesting, and at times, provocative, I did not find the illumination I had hoped might be there. Nevertheless, if you have the interest and the time to reflect on the social and cultural aspects of aging and the evolving role of dementia in our modern world, then this is the book for you.

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ADRENALINE AND THE INNER WORLD: AN INTRODUCTION TO SCIENTIFIC INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE. 2006. By David S. Goldstein. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press. 309 pages. Price C\$40.

As the title suggests, this book deals with the myriad roles that catecholamines and the autonomic nervous system play in health and disease. It begins with an enjoyable review of basic autonomic neurophysiology, proceeds to a discussion of several dysautonomias