

Book review

Bytheway, B. 2011: *Unmasking age: the significance of age for social research*. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press. 243 pp, paperback edition. ISBN 978 1 84742 617 8.

Do you prefer your appearance to be age-appropriate or age-defying? Do you really consider age difference to be of no consequence? Do you find reports on the 'ageing population' alarming or exaggerated? These are just some of the questions that the researcher is invited to consider in this book about measuring, conceptualising and theorising age and ageing, from the viewpoint of a social gerontologist shaped by his early training as a statistician.

Alternative research methods and a broader range of longitudinal data sources are promoted here (Chapter 2: Researching age) to overcome the predominant view of ageing as a staged process of inexorable decline. These may include correspondence and diaries of both real people and fictional characters to grasp age, not through discrete categories or a sum of co-morbidities but the *lived experience* of it. A complete list of people –including the author – is presented in the appendix, whose biographical experience of ageing is convincingly drawn on throughout the book. How the researcher's personal experience can and should inform research is developed in the penultimate chapter (Chapter 9: Gerontologists and older people).

Moreover, to grasp the process of growing older rather than the state of being old calls for age to be reconceptualised beyond the limits of linear and socially constructed time (Chapter 3: Age and time). The author builds here on the notion of timescapes in refining his concept of 'circular time', that is, by considering the routines

of everyday life, the passing of seasons through the year and the experience of return in later life.

Chapters 4 through 6 are devoted to the representational, experiential and relational aspects of age. The author draws here, as elsewhere, on case studies pulled from research that he has been centrally involved in over the past 40 years and supported with funds from the UK bodies, including the Social Science Research Council (*The use of the concept of old age*), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (*Early retirement and the care of older relatives*), the Department of Health (*The long-term medication and older people*) and the Economic and Social Research Council (*The oldest generation*).

These conceptual and operational tools allow us to finally reconsider the 'oldest old' beyond their 'frailty' (Chapter 7: A great age) and the 'ageing population' beyond their 'dependency' (Chapter 8: The ageing population). In other words, to grasp age as it is actively experienced by the individual, and the subsequent heterogeneity of experience within a generation. In summary, this is an important book for every one of us engaged in the study of age and ageing and concerned with how age is being constructed to become a powerful predictor of life circumstances, or indeed any researcher concerned with overcoming the methodological limitations that may lead us to perpetuate prejudice and discrimination and undermine our ability to question received wisdom and dominant stereotypes.

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