

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

NEENA CHAPPELL, ELLEN GEE, LYNN McDONALD and MICHAEL STONES, *Aging in Contemporary Canada*. Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2003, xii + 508 p.

Four social scientists have written a book on aging from a social psychology perspective. It is an ambitious project which not only covers the main concepts and debates in gerontology, but at the same time focuses on the specific situation in Canada. This text provides a useful "introduction for students", as the authors describe their target audience. I am not a student, but the book was still of great interest to me. However, as is almost inevitable with such broad projects, the book has some limitations.

Interest in aging is growing worldwide and gerontology, the flagship of the "social perspective", has been incorporated into various academic disciplines and is orienting a number of professionals in the so-called "helping professions". Although far from homogeneous, there is a way of "thinking gerontologically", generally described (but rarely defined) as the "bio-psycho-social approach" or sometimes simply as "holistic". Several scholars have questioned some of these models and their underlying assumptions, revealing a general need for rethinking theory. This is why it is important to have a book like this, one which provides the reader with a critical discussion of basic approaches, building a base for further reflections. Both junior and senior scholars engaged in the study of the elderly, will be grateful for the author's patience in assembling the scholarship necessary for this reference work.

The book is divided into five parts: *Introduction to Gerontology*, which discusses the main theories and approaches in the field (a part that is especially well written); *Commonalities and Diversity*, which discusses gender, ethnicity and culture; *Health and Well Being*, focusing on physical, mental and lay perceptions of health; *Social Institutions*, which provides information on family, work and retirement, social support and care-giving; and, lastly, *Policy* which examines economic factors, health care systems and end-of-life issues. A major strength of this book lies in its central premise – that aging is part of the wider life course and not an isolated period. The focus on Canadian data also distinguishes the book from other similar volumes (although there is already the excellent Canadian perspective written by Novak and Campbell 2001). The general discussion on social gerontology makes the book also relevant for readers who are not specifically interested in the Canadian context.

What remains unclear, however, is what the authors refer to as a "social psychology" perspective, given that they also describe their focus as "social gerontology". Delimitating disciplinary boundaries is always interesting (but difficult when applying to one's own discipline). On several occasions, while reading some of the chapters, I had to reflect on the limitations of the approach used in the book. It would have benefited from a broader discussion of other social science perspectives on gerontology. Some of the concepts used seem dated and simplistic as expressed, for example, in the general assumption that in the "old times" the elderly were more respected (p. x).

The unquestioned distinction between illness and disease or the general discussion of lay perspectives versus a "reductionist" biomedicine perspective are also problematic. These concepts are more complex, interdependent and historically situated (Lynn Payer's classic book on lay "beliefs" in biomedicine comes to mind). Some chapters, in my view, are unnecessary because they are too general. Two examples are the one on methodology and parts of the chapter on the gendered life course. In addition, greater attention should have been devoted to the specific use in social gerontology.

I have placed this book within reach from my desk. It certainly will be of good use for future research. It also leaves some space for a second volume which focuses more explicitly on the Canadian data and more clearly delineates the foundations for a "new gerontology", a direction the authors envision.

Annette Leibing *McGill University*

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie