

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BARRY D. McPHERSON and ANDREW WISTER, *Aging as a Social Process: Canadian Perspectives*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2008, 399 + 74 p., index

Aging as a Social Process: Canadian Perspectives aims to be a comprehensive survey of the social, cultural, historical and structural alignments which bear on the later years in the lives of individuals; the variations in how that period of life is experienced in different contexts; and the causes, contours and consequences of an “aging population” in Canada. The textbook meets many of these objectives, and at times provides the kind of insight sociologists depend on for instilling a sociological imagination in their students. It excels where it presents interview data and biographical vignettes, often presenting the voices of older people verbatim. It delivers frequent opportunities for readers – ostensibly younger students – to reflect on stereotypical representations of older people; to see many of their own beliefs as misconceptions; and to come to grips with a picture of “old people,” “seniors” or “the elderly,” as heterogeneous and fluid social categories rather than static groups with common interests and experiences. It also assails the idea, popularized in the media, that an aging population is potentially catastrophic for governments and societies if not addressed properly. Finally, it could serve as an inspirational base upon which to build an engaging course, given the thought-provoking and well-crafted questions offered at the end of each chapter.

In its fifth edition, the text has taken on an ambitious range of topics pertinent to aging as it relates to older people and aging populations. It incorporates a broad range of up-to-date Canadian data from governmental and independent academic studies. The authors also profess to, and indeed do, approach their topic from multiple theoretical perspectives, although the life course perspective can be traced throughout. It also addresses an impressive list of salient topics sure to spur discussion in the classroom, including elder abuse, mobility, technology and discrimination. Gender as an analytical focus is woven throughout, as is class and ethnicity, and all three are afforded a deeper focus in chapter six. Beyond this, the text covers the ins and outs of Canada’s pension plans alongside the mechanics of population aging, fertility and mortality rates, qualitative interview data, questions of subjectivity and identity, the historical, geographical and cultural contingency of age and aging, and still many more topics. As such, the text affords instructors a wide range of topics to choose from.

The authors mention that the “Canadian Perspectives” part of the title is a recent addition, and it is, overall, an appropriate one. The demographic data used to flesh out the discussions in each chapter are Canadian, and care is taken to refer to economic and social policies specific to the country’s government. However,

the Canadian perspective could be further strengthened by an analysis and discussion of Quebec as subject to often distinct political, cultural, demographic and, perhaps most importantly, historical forces when compared to much of English-speaking Canada. Similarly, in sections dealing with Canada's aboriginal populations, analyses and explanations could be strengthened by more explicit attention to well-documented historical events and relationships, and the links between these and aging. The application of the language of "subcultures" to Aboriginal people might require further clarification and exploration.

Beyond these important notes, there is one very specific point for potential readers to consider: although the point is repeatedly and convincingly made that aging is a lifelong process, the book's twelve chapters focus exclusively on "older people." Thus readers looking to explore aging as a lifelong process may find this text more useful as a supplementary source, alongside texts which focus on other points and passages in the life course.

In sum, taken as an indication of how sociological knowledge has penetrated the human sciences, *Aging as a Social Process* bears testament to the impacts of the social constructionist perspective, symbolic interactionism, and the poignant sociological distinction between private troubles and public issues. The text shows how seeing aging as a process which takes place on numerous, dialectically related planes (biological, social, psychological, historical, etc.) is powerfully transformative in professions which deal with people in often medically-focused environments on a daily basis. At the same time, sociological understandings of aging processes are complemented and strengthened when they are confronted with the embodied, biological and psychological perspectives on growing old; these perspectives are woven beautifully throughout the book. As a primary textbook, *Aging as a Social Process* is geared toward gerontology and nursing first, but the scope of coverage, and its comprehensive, informed overview of old age and population aging, make it a strong supplementary text for teaching sociology.

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