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Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging (review)

Neena L. Chappell

The Canadian Journal of Sociology, Volume 29, Number 1, Winter 2004,
pp. 147-149 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cjs.2004.0003>



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the contemporary metropolis, as evidenced by the recent development of such major leisure destinations as the “new” Times Square (New York), Hollywood & Highland (Los Angeles) and Navy Pier (Chicago). Despite spending 10 months in residence at the UCLA Planning Program, Abu Lughod all but ignores the work of the “LA School” of urban theory, although she confesses (p. 363) to sharing geographer Allen Scott’s view of what constitutes the “new economy.” It says something, perhaps, that after over 400 pages of disciplined socio-historical analysis, the author concludes by relating her impressions of life in each of the three cities (she seems to prefer the “spectacle of the streets” in New York City). For me, this personal reflection constitutes the highlight of the book.

University of Toronto

John Hannigan

Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin, *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging*. N.Y.: AltaMira Press, 2001, 235 pp.

The aim of this book, as expressed by the authors, is to bring a feminist framework to gerontology, exploring old age as it intersects with gender as well as other systems of inequality including race and ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. The book begins with emphases on both the body as a key site for judgments about age, and ageism within society. The body receives fuller attention in Chapter 3 with a discussion of the conflict between our aging bodies and our forever youthful spirits, and the marketing of forever youthful bodies. Chapter 2 argues for the inadvertent perpetuation of ageism by gerontology itself. Chapter 4 moves onto a discussion of sex, sexuality and old age, exposing the myths that elderly persons have no interest in sex, and the male domination that pervades our notions of sex. Chapter 5 and 6 discuss gender, social inequalities and retirement, focusing on the greater earning power of men, the two jobs occupying many women’s lives, and the male bias within pensions schemes. Chapter 7, on gender, care work, and family in old age, examines gender differences when men and women provide care, some ethnic variation, and concern with the care recipient as well as the carer. The final chapter argues that the women’s movement also ignores age relations; and, citing Rose and Bruce (1995:115) “feminism, unaware of its own ‘race,’ able bodiedness and age, had in its desire to cease to be the Other constructed Other Others.”

This book is a welcome addition to the still small but growing body of literature on old age from a feminist perspective. Students new to gerontology and/or feminism could benefit from this book. It succeeds in explaining what each of the perspectives has to offer and in arguing the relevance of each for the

other. It makes admirable efforts to remain true to the multiple oppressions perspective, regularly reminding the reader that many intersections affect our lives, and by relating research on men, not just women, on ethnic minorities especially blacks, and on those living in poverty as well as gays and lesbians. There is a nice discussion of cultural differences in how the ideal body (and thinness) is viewed, of differences between men and women, and of differing views of those with different sexual orientations.

Many important points are made, including: productive aging tends to be equated with paid work; ageism is unique from all other oppressions because we shall all become old; feminists, in valuing women's unpaid work, maintain the assumption that "productive" aging is best and inadvertently argue that old women must "care"; by focusing on the care worker feminists facilitate the dependency of the care receiver rather than acknowledging the relationship between the care giver and the care recipient; dependency in old age may not be bad, provided one has control over their own care; and the old will have achieved equality when to be old is positive and seniors stop trying to be younger than they are.

However, for those well versed in either feminist or gerontological perspectives, especially both, the book has less to offer. Despite the recognition of human agency and a plea that we explore the strengths of seniors, how they overcome barriers and how disadvantages can serve as advantages in certain contexts, the book says little about such positive aspects of older age. Despite the call to recognize Others, there is no recognition of differences among whites, especially middle class whites. While men's perspective is discussed in this book, the need to understand their perceptions of society's demands on them is not recognized. There is no recognition of varying perspectives among men including those who feel an inordinate pressure to be "breadwinner" and object to having their attractiveness to women defined in terms of their monetary and occupational role.

In many instances, an in-depth understanding of much of the gerontological literature is absent. For example, we are told that among the older old, Black Americans report both worse economic and health situations compared with Whites yet they express higher morale. This is true of seniors generally, including White seniors compared with those who are younger.

This phenomenon is not particular to Blacks or to minority groups. Despite the many pleas to draw on ethnic differences, there is no in-depth discussion of what ethnicity, subculture or minority status means. Indeed, the claim (p153) that Asian men are almost as likely to be a carer as Asian women, explained here by the lack of differentiation between primary and secondary care workers in the study cited, shows a lack of understanding of traditional Asian culture where sons are so valued but daughters are viewed as "shibun" (goods of lost

value); seniors turn to their sons in old age. There is no discussion of the confounding of ethnicity and social class and what this means for our research with these seniors. On pp.155–156 Calasanti and Slevin claim we can learn from old gays and lesbians about the building of fictive kin, yet Chappell (1991) demonstrated that it is living arrangements and not marital status that is of prime importance for support in old age, a decade ago.

There are, in addition, some interesting ideas that warrant further exploration although they are presented by these authors only in skeletal form. For example, by presenting seniors as fit and active, gerontologists are interpreted as denying aging since they are comparing them to a middle age standard — an interesting idea and perhaps sometimes true but surely activity and even productivity need not necessarily be ageist. The authors criticize “socialization” yet themselves frequently invoke how people define and experience care working relationships as their explanation (Chapter 7 including pp.148-150). Strangely, the authors rely heavily on Matthews and Campbell’s, 1995 article on working caregivers to speak about all caregivers, with little reference to the vast amount of research on caregivers generally, not just those who work for pay.

Finally, this is an American book, written by American authors. The Canadian reader should be aware that statistics and facts on, for example, pensions and the health care system are often different from Canada. The heavy focus on blacks as the ethnic minority, is considerably less relevant to Canada than would be for example a focus on Asians. Nevertheless, Calasanti and Slevin have added to our literature which brings feminism and gerontology together. They highlight many important points and make many interesting interpretations that can fuel our thinking. Especially for students, this book could be an important read.

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