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Book Review

Review of Goulding, Anna, Bruce Davenport and Andrew Newman, eds. Resilience and Ageing: creativity, culture and community. Bristol: Policy Press. 2018. pp 224. Price: \$98 (Hardcopy); \$39 (Paperback and eBook).

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Review of Goulding, Anna, Bruce Davenport and Andrew Newman, eds. Resilience and Ageing: creativity, culture and community. Bristol: Policy Press. 2018. pp 224. Price: \$98 (Hardcopy); \$39 (Paperback and eBook).

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Caveat: I am slightly suspicious of ‘resilience’, because I worry about the concept’s potential subtly to blame sufferers, for their failure to resist suffering. In the introduction to this edited volume, *Resilience and Ageing*, however, the editors allay my concern to a certain extent. “Resilience” here, is defined as a “combination of environmental factors and individual traits; a negotiated process,” rather than an intrinsic characteristic that one either can or cannot perform in the face of hardship (1-2). I continued reading with cautious enthusiasm, hoping to understand how this “negotiated process” intersects with creativity and ageing. Now we have gathered in the spirit of full disclosure, I can reveal my professional and personal subjectivity: I am myself an ageing anthropologist, who enjoys indulging her creative side.

In the Introduction, one of the editors, Anna Goulding, describes the book’s themes as: resilience, creativity, culture, and ageing. The projects covered in the eleven book chapters, show very different approaches to all of these themes, and cover various forms of creative activity, including storytelling, drama, mapping, lace-making and gardening. They converge, however, around a similar participatory methodology: all the projects the chapters describe rely on participatory means of creating, community-building and generating and analyzing data, so that both process and product are co-created by investigators and participants, in this case, older adults. Six of the eleven papers in this volume, describe projects based in England and Wales, and most of those, surprisingly, in the northern parts of those countries. All chapters bar two represent the English-speaking world: Canada, the United States, Australia, besides Chile and Poland. The editors grouped the papers into three rough categories that might be glossed as “arts” (Goulding; Bernard et al.; de Medeiros and Swinnen; Newman et al.), “community” (Schmidt et al.; Fang et al.; Bailey et al.) and “things” (Reynolds; Sznajder and Kosmala; Manchester; Miller et al.). References and responses to an article by Wild et al. (2013), “Resilience: thoughts on the value of the concept for critical gerontology,” are a thread through nearly all the chapters.

In the “arts” category, Goulding discusses a “cultural animation” workshop in northeast England, to gain understanding of older adults’ views of resilience and coping. This method involved workshops, following up on cultural experiences, like a museum visit or participation in a book group. The workshops explored ways in which social engagement in the activities might strengthen participants’ resilience in the face of loss (e.g. of a spouse) or distress (e.g. anxiety). Bernard et al. explored resilience among older adults through participatory research, that developed into a theatre performance in the English Midlands. De Medeiros and Swinnen, conducted a poetry intervention for people living with dementia in the United States. They defined resilience as involving “flourishing” rather than absence of symptoms, and indeed reported “more laughter and conversation and less boredom” during their intervention phase (80). Newman et al., also in England’s northeast, explored the ways in which visual art supported an ongoing “narrative identity” in people with dementia living in care homes.

The three papers focusing on the role of “community,” include an action research project conducted by Schmidt et al. on “rural-living elders” in central coastal Chile, during the episode after a

major earthquake. They used a communal creative project (collage) to spur dialogue and to support coping with anxiety and fear. Fang et al. captured the experiences of older adults from Western Canada, moving into a new, purpose-built housing complex, hereby using participatory methods and a transdisciplinary approach to understand community resilience. Bailey et al., in their engaging and well-written article, deploy an arts-based participatory research approach called “World Café,” in collaboration with the Elders Council of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, to foster “honest and messy public conversations” that draw in policy, historic, and community factors (158). They report that the conversations led participants to write and perform a play, and on the heels of that project, to take “small-scale action” in their own neighborhoods

In the final group of papers, “things,” Reynolds describes crafting activities amongst older adults in a pseudonymous Midlands English town. These activities (e.g. making textiles), did not only aim at creating objects, but also at generating social resilience. Interestingly, the author here introduces a dimension of class, and thus finds that, while it is popularly supposed that such crafting groups attract the ‘middle class,’ such an assumption may be unwarranted. Sznajder and Kosmala describe a similar dynamic interaction of the individual, the social, and the material for older adults involved in lace-making in Krakow, Poland. The authors argue that “resilience provides a framework for reflecting upon the ability of individuals to withstand adversities related to old age through engagement in creative craft activity and told through oral stories” (204). In the penultimate chapter, Manchester writes about the “Tangible Memories” project, which follows older adults in the west of England moving into care homes and of necessity shedding belongings. She argues that possessions affect resilience, because they make tangible attachment to memories and stories. Finally, Miller et al. discuss creativity and happiness generated through gardening in a retirement home near Brisbane, Australia. They reaffirm that gardening is good for you, and that the productivity, creativity, aesthetics, and sociality that come with gardening promote resilience.

While reading *Resilience and Aging*, my thoughts were often drawn to meditations on my own resilience and to the older adults I encounter through my work with AGE-WELL NCE, a Canadian network for innovation, technology and ageing. I especially thought of two women I know well, whom I will call Grandma A and Grandma B. Both women raised families; one had a career outside the home, one did not. Both enjoyed reading, traveling, walking, theatre, friendships, their grandchildren, maintaining their homes, feeding their husbands. Grandma A continued working into her mid-eighties and after retiring continued to travel, visit with friends, attend concerts and ballets, spend time with family. Grandma B deteriorated. She received a diagnosis of Parkinson’s Disease and managed the symptoms with drugs and exercise, but these diminished in effectiveness, leaving her in great difficulties and dependent on carers.

Goulding, referencing Wild et al. (2013), writes: “[T]he notion of resilience comes with an acceptance that older people will face adversity, and that such challenges are a normal part of life” and “cultural participation...can foster psychological, social and cultural resilience” (19). Although I fully endorse (and enact) engagement with creativity in older age, and appreciate its benefits, this volume reminds me of the undemocratic character of this philosophy: those who are unable to participate in arts- and community-based projects, those who do not model the superpower of resilience, disappear in the margins, of also this edited volume. When I think of Grandma A and Grandma B, I remain hesitant to label either the cause or the effect of cultural or creative engagement ‘resilience’. I believe I would instead call it ‘luck’.

References

Wild, Kirsty, Janine L. Wiles and Ruth E.S. Allen. 2013. “Resilience: Thoughts on the value of the concept for critical Gerontology;” *Aging and Society* 33(1): 137-158.