

Abel, Emily & Subramanian, Saskia. *After the Cure: The Untold Stories of Breast Cancer Survivors*. New York University Press. 2008. ISBN 13: 978-0-814-0725-8. 183 Pages \$22.95 (Hardcover)

*After the Cure: The Untold Stories of Breast Cancer Survivors* is a collection of post cancer ethnographies of women who are breast cancer survivors. The book details the physical and emotional side effects of contemporary breast cancer treatment (surgery, radiation and chemotherapy). Central to these ethnographies is a chronicle of the lack of recognition by the biomedical community of post cancer treatment side effects. Abel and Subramanian make clear that there is an urgent need for post operative and post chemotherapy aftercare therapies for women otherwise "cured" of breast cancer. The book draws from a study of thirty-six African American and thirty-eight white women, both young and middle aged, who were interviewed from one to three hours (Abel and Subramanian 3). The stories reveal how unexpectedly life altering cancer treatments as well as the post treatment side effects (lymphedema, loss of short-term and long-term memory, other cognitive dysfunctions, and debilitating fatigue) can be, even after cancer recedes (Abel and Subramanian 33-34).

The authors are succinct in answering a difficult question: how can medical practitioners who treat hundreds of breast cancer patients annually fail to recognize a pattern in recurring post treatment complaints? The authors write, "Readers may wonder why symptoms with such profound implications for survivors' lives may lie in the way drugs are tested" (Abel and Subramanian 5). They suggest that this is, in part, motivated by pharmaceutical companies who wish to get Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval for drugs must first prove these drugs are both safe and effective. Clinical trials of chemotherapeutic agents tend to focus on survival rates rather than side effects (Abel and Subramanian 5). The book was written from a critical perspective, but also one that reflects the

personal life trajectories of its authors. Six months after breast cancer surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation in 1993, Abel experienced severe side effects from the treatments. When she shared her problems with other survivors, several expressed their own difficulties. When Abel, a historian of medicine and public health, met Subramanian, a medical sociologist and a women's studies scholar whose own mother had died of breast cancer, they began to converse about breast cancer, its treatments and side effects. Ultimately, Abel suggested they collaborate on a study to examine how women who have completed breast cancer chemotherapy and radiation cope with ongoing problems doctors failed to take seriously (Abel and Subramanian 2). Many of the women they talk to were never told of the possibility of chronic, life altering side effects – a problem that seemed unreal in the face of the medical community's obsession with informed consent.

The authors faced the challenge of epidemiologically describing the problem while simultaneously "legitimizing" individual women's complaints of side effects. The study, however, became unwieldy. The authors write, "even if a study identified a population, how could we know whether it was caused by the cancer in a particular case?" (Abel and Subramanian 3). Their attention turned towards the women's stories themselves. Abel and Subramanian are effective in conveying the suffering felt by individual women, however one weakness of the book is its lack of focus on the important role of the nursing profession in aftercare. For example, when one of the women in the study is given information from a doctor about lymphedema, the patient says, "he told me well you got to soak it [the arm] in warm water." The patient continues, "I stopped by to chat with the nurse, and thank goodness, she was there. Hearing the doctor's recommendation, the nurse exclaimed no, no, no!" (Abel and Subramanian 58). Given the centrality of the nursing role in the context of cancer aftercare, it seems something that needs even further careful analytical

consideration. The authors do point out the gendered aspects of care, and why it is important to think in-depth about how this dynamic matters in understanding this particular healthcare context.

Race and gender seem to be two (sometimes competing) axes in the book. Given this, sometimes the ethnographies in the book could benefit from longer engagement, and more in depth analyses. One story that stood out was a conversation with Ida Jaffe, a fifty-eight year old African American woman, who stated, "she did not know that black women got cancer." The statement by Jaffe shows how difficult it is to reconcile morbidity rates in African American women with the realities of being diagnosed with breast cancer. It did seem odd, however, with the detail (both physical and social) the authors offered to describe white women (eye color, dress, affect, etc.) and the lack of the same detail when describing African American women.

With these critiques in mind, it is important to point out that Abel and Subramanian have taken on an ambitious and important topic, and do so in a highly thoughtful manner. A few chapters that stand out as the most thought provoking are "Like Talking to a Wall" and "Narrowed Lives." Both chapters demonstrate the long haul that breast cancer treatment really is. In these chapters, the authors stress the need for repositioning the idea of a former cancer-free self with a new notion of the cancer survivor – a process that can be as grueling as the cancer therapies themselves. In *After the Cure: The Untold Stories of Breast Cancer Survivors*, Abel and Subramanian show us not only that breast cancer patients are surviving, but also what survival looks like far from public view. For those interested in anthropology and aging, the topic of how women deal with breast cancer and its side effects over time is highly relevant. As more women live longer and experience breast cancer and aging post breast cancer, this book has much new information to offer on that critical topic.

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## Book Reviews

Dagg Innis, Anne. *The Social Behavior of Older Animals*. The John Hopkins University Press. 2009. ISBN 13:978-0-8018-9050-5, 240 Pages, \$35 (Hardcover).

*The Social Behavior of Older Animals*, by Anne Innis Dagg, addresses the various effects of aging on older animals that live within social groups. Focusing on large mammals and birds, the book discusses the differing roles that older animals can play within their social groups. It considers how the remaining presence of these animals, after the age of reproduction, is probably due to their contribution to the survival of their species. Dagg makes the argument that older animals are, for some species, imperative to their survival, and for others they still play a significant role in their social groups. Dagg briefly mentions the difficulty in finding supportive information on older animals, attributing this to older animals being overlooked in past research studies. She also points out that older animals in the wild, either on land or in the water, were often poached or hunted out of existence. However, the older animals that do exist in the wild are considered to be "winners, because most of their peers have long since died" (Dagg 2009, 11). Dagg supports this statement with several reasons such as, genetic inheritance in terms of reproductive success and behavior within the social group, and a lifetime of knowledge about the environment they live in.

Other reasons that older animals may remain in a social group, when they have passed the age of reproduction and the purposes served are further explained. For example, Dagg discusses several ways that older animals participate in the success and survival of their species which include being leaders and teachers in behavior. They may act in important ways such as calming a group down, and serve as

a source of past knowledge therefore deciding where to best find resources. Interestingly, these points may seem quite familiar to those who are aware of the gerontological literature that has advanced similar ideas about the roles of older humans specifically. Dagg addresses the stages of older life looking at changes in reproductive success, social interactions, aggression and behavior, and death and dying. The arguments Dagg made for the role of older animals, certainly offer a possible explanation for their remaining in their social group long after reproductive age. In short, much documentation is offered throughout to show how older adults play an important role in the continuation of their species through their usefulness as leaders, owners of important knowledge and life lessons, and by lending a "helping hand" in their social groups.

Throughout this book, the examples given for older animals in social groups are very enlightening and it is hard to understand how we have truly overlooked such an important aspect of animal behavior. The many interesting and revealing stories of the complex nature of animals and also the similarities that we humans share with them are truly eye-opening. With so many other species on this planet, it is important to see the similarities that we have as a reminder that we are not all knowing about animals, and that they are, just as humans are, very diverse and complex. This book fits into the study of gerontology by covering important changes in older animals socially, physically, and mentally – as well as contemplating the roles they play in their social groups.

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