



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Review of Clack, Beverley and Michele Paule, eds. *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle: The Limits of Success*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2019. pp. 268. Price: \$112.02 (Hardcover); \$102.43 (Kindle Edition).

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Anthropology & Aging, Vol 42, No 1 (2021), pp. 186-188

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2021.344



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In this edited volume, Beverley Clack and Michele Paule interrogate the conceptualization and realization of the “good life” (6) across the life course under the gambit of neoliberalism. Exploring the intersections between success and failure, this volume illustrates how “the successful self is achieved at the cost of the failing other” (6). Throughout the essays, which cover different stages of the life course, the capital importance of paid work and career orientation is highlighted and explored: it is argued that ‘work’ is the cornerstone of processes of individuation and is the indicator for the “successful life” (6) in a neoliberal era.

Based on the life cycle, this volume is divided into four major thematic segments: “Childhood, Youth and Schooling,” “The University under Neoliberalism,” “Work, Success and Failure,” and “Death and Dying.” The book brings together contributors from a range of disciplines such as philosophy, theology, sociology, criminology, gerontology, anthropology, education, psychology, and psychotherapy. Apart from having contributors from different disciplinary backgrounds, this volume has contributions from academics as well as practitioners and regional government officials

In the introductory chapter, through a discourse analysis, the editors scrutinize how the neoliberal framework in school and educational policies formulates the ‘self’ among children and younger adults. Across the chapters in Part I, the contributing authors establish that values such as individual responsibility, agency, autonomy, and choice are inculcated as cultural ideals throughout school education. Critiquing these ideals of “selfhood, choice and rationality” (19), Philippa Donald, (Chapter 2) argues that the neoliberal paradigm pushes the autonomous self to make the right choices, namely those that foster one’s own mental well-being. As a result, Donald asserts, children and young adults are burdened with this task and face mental health concerns (anxiety and stress) over making the right choice from the very beginning to guarantee a happy and successful life. In Chapter 3, Patrick Alexander draws from ethnographic research conducted in a public high school in the Bronx, New York City, to explore how the articulation of aspirations for adult life among boys at the end of secondary schooling is permeated with ideals of masculinity. The author demonstrates how the students considered The Bronx to be a “dead-end” (61) and felt that their dreams could only be realized in “The City” (61). In particular, the imaginary of masculinity for these students is shaped by ideals of competition, self-actualization, and self-improvement. For them, the only way to materialize these aspirations is to escape their school environment. In the final Chapter of this section (Chapter 4), Michele Paule analyzes the

figure of the “successful girl” (67) as she is constructed in the “gifted and talented policy of the English educational system in the early twenty first century” (67). This chapter relies on interviews conducted among 46 girls (aged 13 to 15), drawing from the “gifted and talented” registers across a range of state comprehensive schools in England. Based on this study, the author highlights how “parenting, class backgrounds and self-responsibility” (80), become key determinants in developing the “hard-working girl” (81) identity.

The next section (Part II) examines how neoliberal discourses shape academic institutions. Louise Livesey (Chapter 5) highlights how academia is tailored to “fit white, male, heterosexual, abled-bodied and middle-class existences” (117). Bob Brecher (Chapter 6) relies on media reports to explain how universities, instead of disseminating knowledge, focus more on preparing students for the job market. In particular, the author argues that in the neoliberal era, universities aim to provide an “educational experience beyond excellence” (128) that will prepare students for a successful future.

The third section (Part III) is dedicated to certain determinants (gender and age) that risk correlating negatively with working lives and concomitant successes under the flag of neoliberalism. Louise Grisoni and Sonia Ruiz (Chapter 7) illustrate how austerity policies have negatively affected gender equality in Spain. The authors suggest that, economic crises in Spain often lead to setbacks in gender equality and anti-discrimination policies. Sharing her own experiences from within the academic world, Susan Crozier (Chapter 8) depicts how she has come to love and accept failure. Crozier highlights that she rejected the normative path of having a full time job and traditional marriage bonds to retain her freedom. The author demonstrates how important it is to maintain strength and resilience when failing the demands of the neoliberal ecology because of these choices. Jason Danely (Chapter 9) closes this section with an account of the everyday navigations by Japanese older adults to “achieve a successful old age” coping with “their anxious sense of failure for living too long” (189). Danely demonstrates how home visits by doctors, nurses, therapists, and care managers, as well as tracking technologies, help older people retain their independence. The author’s conversations with older women, however, also show that these amenities have facilitated a self-sufficient life but have not correspondingly enriched their lives.

The final section of this book analyzes how very old age and death are constructed under a neoliberal regime. In Chapter 10, Susan Pickard, in line with the works of Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2011), highlights how neoliberalism has led to the development of the “third age” (222) and has pushed frailty and bodily decline to the “fourth age” (225). Emphasizing the need to move away from a model which primarily constructs aging as a medical condition, Pickard urges for an alternative framework of old age, which acknowledges frailty as part of the aging process, and is more inclusive of diverse experiences of aging and of the inevitability of death. In the final chapter (10), co-editor Beverley Clack draws from the death manuals of Philip Gould and Kate Gross who were involved with the New Labor Project of the Labor Party under the leadership of Tony Blair (236) and both urge their readers to go beyond the neoliberal framework and to locate meaning within their families and social network. Drawing from these memoirs, the author suggests that, we as individuals cannot control the inevitability of death, hence instead of focusing on self-sufficiency, success, and rationality (ideals of neoliberalism), it is important for us to nurture individual bonds and connections that lead to more solidarity among human beings.

This book makes for an important read as it urges readers to look beyond global neoliberalism and remember more humane inspirations and aspirations—such as solidarity and collectivism—throughout the life course and thus reconsider the meaning of success and failure. Though this edited volume makes for an important contribution in the fields of gerontology, sociology, philosophy, and psychology, the

main focus of this volume was the first world. As the authors identify neoliberalism as a global phenomenon, an analysis of neoliberalism in third world countries would add to this intellectual conversation. However, this volume would benefit both academics as well as policymakers from a range of disciplines as it provides various alternative perspectives to the “good and successful life” (259).

References

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