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Book Review

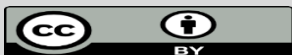
Review of Bildtgård, Törbjörn and Peter Öberg. Intimacy and Ageing: New Relationships in Later Life. Bristol: Policy Press. 2017. pp 224. Price: \$42,37 (Paperback).

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In *Intimacy and Aging: New Relationships in Later Life*, social gerontologists Törbjörn Bildtgård and Peter Öberg, focus on various forms of late-life intimate relationships among heterosexual couples. The book is a part of the *Ageing in a Global Context* series, and traces notions of intimacy among older adults against the backdrop of modernity. Whereas later life is usually associated with widowhood, loss and pain, this book attempts to debunk these stereotypes and highlight *that*, and *how* older adults deal with late-life intimacy. The authors draw from international research and data, and also use their own Swedish case studies to address older people's expectations and experiences of late-life repartnering.

Bildtgård and Öberg first and foremost address the existing knowledge gaps in the discipline of gerontology and family sociology concerning late-life intimacy, such as the lacunae in scientific research on late-life repartnering. The book uses a mixed methods approach and applies different theoretical models to counter the "data rich theory poor" (Birren, 1999: 459) challenge in the discipline of gerontology. Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, this book successfully covers vital dynamics at the intersections of culture, intimacy and aging.

In Chapter 1, the authors suggest this book is particularly relevant for gerontologists, family sociologists and sexologists, as it transcends the common sensical association of old age with loss and decline. From chapters 2 to 4, the authors outline the theoretical foundation of the book and establish the phenomenon of intimate relationships in later-life as "a historically and culturally dependent social institution" (7). Chapter 2 argues that it is in the emergence of the Third Age, based on consumer culture – which nurtures self-development and flexibility in relationships among older adults – and supported by digital technologies – which provide information and access to alternate lifestyles – that the rise of later-life intimacy can be understood. Additionally, the authors also trace the cultural context of Sweden as their case study and suggest that with the rise of modernity and "state supported individualism, which facilitates individual autonomy and equality in intimate relationships" (7), late-life intimacy has become a more accepted phenomenon in this country.

In Chapters 3 and 4 the authors draw from qualitative interviews and international demographic data. These show how Western societies are shifting from a culture of marriage, to a culture of divorce, thereby producing a "society of divorcees" (8), comprising largely older adults. These data also reveal that due to increased longevity, a large number of older divorcees have become available in the partnering market. Hence, it are these older adults, the authors argue, that, with the help of digital technologies, are forging new connections, and are exploring alternate forms of union than marriage. At the end of this chapter, the authors conclude that most older adults prefer living apart together (LAT) over marriage, and in this process shatter the myth that they are cultural carriers of tradition and values (49-50). They explicitly critique the official census, which only partially represents intimate lives of older adults, and leaves alternative later life romantic relationships or repartnering invisible.

Chapters 5 to 9, use survey data and individual biographies, to discern how intimate relationships are constructed in the lives of older adults in Sweden. In particular, these chapters illustrate the attitude of the older participants towards their romantic relationships in later life, show how a new late-life partner acts as a resource for social support and how intimacy goes beyond companionship. Sex appears to play a key role in these relationships. In Chapter 10 the authors use Heidegger's existential theory of time to address the paradox of time in late-life relationships: on the one hand older adults have ample free time to nurture a new relationship, on the other hand they have limited lifetime. Continuing their theme of time, in the final chapters, the authors summarize the major findings and elucidate how the older adults navigate between the two faces of time in their lives.

Overall the book reveals important, often marginalized facets of late-life intimacy, by indicating that older adults herein prefer living apart together over the traditional romantic ideal of marriage, and that sex is an important element in their lives. The book also draws from significant sociological theories to bridge the gap between empirical data and theory in the discipline of social gerontology. The language of the book is extremely lucid, and provides a theoretical as well as empirical understanding of late life intimacy.

Though the book makes important contributions, there are some shortcomings, for instance with regard to transparency on methodology and the research trajectory. The book would have benefitted from some sections on the experience of the authors in collecting data for such a private theme. For instance, one of the goals of the study was to understand expectations (socially, sexually, financially, emotionally and informal care) associated with later life intimacy. The responses indicate that the authors could gather fairly detailed information regarding the expectations of the respondents. However, how the authors gained trust or built rapport with their respondents, as to obtain this kind of data, is not discussed. Details regarding the process and approach of doing fieldwork would have added more methodological value to the book. Additionally, certain sections and themes of the book are quite repetitive and the length of the book could have been reduced by at least one or two chapters. The theme of chapters 8 (theme: a new partner as a resource for social support) and 9 (theme: the partner as the key to autonomy) is very similar and there is no added value in splitting them up, on the contrary. Finally, while the book highlights significant findings with regard to changing attitudes towards marriage, sex and re-partnering, with a focus on the cultural landscape of Sweden (modernity, rise of individuality and globalization) as explanatory framework (Chapter 2), it fails to establish a direct link between the empirical data and the social structures of Sweden.

This book is written largely for scholars of gerontology and policy makers, and findings empirically and theoretically add to the knowledge gap on later life and intimacy. In particular, this book will give gerontologists and policy makers a deeper understanding of the intersections between aging, individual autonomy and digital platforms among older adults in Sweden. Additionally, the book also provides a holistic account of how later life intimacy provides various forms of support (social, sexual, emotional, financial and informal care) to both partners. Overall, the book is a must read for academics conducting research on older adults, as it offers very important insights about growing old in a globalized and digital world.

References

Birren, James E. 1999. "Theories of aging: A personal perspective." In *Handbook of theories of aging* edited by V.L. Bengtson and K.W. Schaie, 459-471. New York: Springer.