



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Review of Hafford-Letchfield, Trish, Paul Simpson, and Paul Reynolds, eds. *Sex and Diversity in Later Life: Critical Perspectives*. Bristol: Policy Press. 2021. pp. 238. Price: \$83.96 (Hardcopy); \$39.15 (Paperback).

Monika Singh

Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi
monikasi@iiitd.ac.in

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 44, No 1 (2023), pp. 125-127

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2023.474



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Book Review

Review of Hafford-Letchfield, Trish, Paul Simpson, and Paul Reynolds, eds. *Sex and Diversity in Later Life: Critical Perspectives*. Bristol: Policy Press. 2021. pp. 238. Price: \$83.96 (Hardcopy); \$39.15 (Paperback).

Monika Singh

Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi
monikasi@iiitd.ac.in

In *Sex and Diversity in Later Life: Critical Perspectives*, Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Paul Simpson, and Paul Reynolds bring together a wide range of critical issues concerning stereotypes on sexuality and aging as they play out in diverse aspects of later life. The volume is the first issue of the book series *Sex and Intimacy in Later Life* and focuses on aging and sexuality in varied regions as well as different sociocultural contexts. It highlights critical issues concerning age, sex, and sexuality as they emerge in different social, cultural, economic, and geographical settings. Contributing authors from Europe, North America, and Australia from diverse scholarly backgrounds provide important insights into prominent issues concerning diversity in later-life sexuality. As such, this volume also assembles different theoretical lenses on aging, including a feminist lens (Chapter 7 explores the complexities of older lesbians' lives in northwest England using a feminist methodology), a post-structuralist lens (Chapter 8 provides a literature review to reflect on the repression and surveillance experienced by older bisexuals in later life using Foucault's 'heterotopia'), an intersectional lens (Chapter 2 explores and analyzes the experiences of US and African American women and the impact of prejudices and constraints on their sexuality) and other prominent theories. The authors use methods as varied as literature reviews, case studies, life histories, surveys, and interview methods to highlight the relationship between age, sex, and sexuality and bust the myths around later-life sexuality and intimacy.

In Chapter 1, the editors of this volume introduce the significant themes and concepts of the book to explore diversity in sex in later life for further discussion in subsequent chapters. The chapter aims to put sex back into sexuality by emphasizing the need for more empirical studies on older people's desire, love, and intimacy. The authors also discuss the importance of setting an agenda for future policy making to validate sexual desires of older people. Chapter 2 brings a critical perspective on older Black minority ethnic (BME) women's sexuality, sexual rights, and reveals how they are affected by different cultural and social stigmas. Debra A. Harley uses an intersectional lens and draws from different international studies to argue that sexual desires and sexuality of older black women is stigmatized and contested. They are subject to socio-cultural and religious myths and experience multiple oppressions of gender, race, class and ethnicity. This is also observable in the fact that discussions around older BME women's sexual rights are mainly absent in debates on later-life sexuality.

In Chapter 3, Karen Rennie presents a systematic literature review on the importance of sex and intimacy in the life of older persons and considers both bio-psychological and social perspectives. The author focuses on the positive impacts of sexual and intimate acts of touch for older adults to stay or become emotionally connected when coping with illness and finds that the need for physical intimacy

and sexual contact does not diminish in later life. In Chapter 4, Trish Hafford-Letchfield draws on her already published research articles and elaborates on themes around heterosexual love and desire based on views of older heterosexual women from different ethnographic case studies, including women aging alone. The author highlights the importance of deconstructing heterosexual aging stereotypes that inhibit heterosexual older women's sexual expression, and advocates for the resexualization of sexualities in later life by giving importance to women's agency and their experiences (73).

In Chapter 5, "Sex and Ageing in Older Heterosexual Men," authors David M. Lee and Josephine Tetley use a mixed-method approach to explore challenges faced by older heterosexual men in England in communication with medical practitioners concerning sexual health and well-being in later life. Lee and Tetley go beyond the medicalized perspective of sexual activity in later life to discuss physiological and psychological factors associated with the aging bodies of heterosexual men. Findings based on qualitative and quantitative data reveal that health, relationships, and physical changes affect the sexual activity of heterosexual older men. They show that erection and orgasm difficulties were key sexual difficulty issues reported by these men and that also 'not sharing sexual preferences' is a major issue affecting older heterosexual men's romantic and sexual relationships.

In Chapter 6, Peter Robinson discusses how gay sexual identities are predominantly scripted as youth identities. Drawing from the life stories of 11 older gay men from different regions of Auckland, London, Los Angeles, Melbourne, and New York, the author outlines the socio-cultural constraints posed to gay men as they age and how they embrace these challenges. Findings of the study reveal that older gay men associate sexual attractiveness with youthfulness and tend to make sexual activity central to their life. Chapter 7 critically analyzes sexual abuse between older lesbian couples based on survey data and interviews of LGBT+ community members in northwest England. In this chapter, Megan Todd laments the absence of discussion around older lesbians and sexual abuse and emphasizes the importance of this topic. She critiques the stereotypes of gender, sexuality, age, and sexual violence and argues that older lesbians also experience violence and sexual abuse. In Chapter 8, "Foucault's 'heterotopia': Bisexuality in Later Life," Christopher Wells gives a systematic literature review to recognize complexities of bisexuality and sexual practices in later life, invoking the Foucauldian idea of 'heterotopia' and examines the causes of socio-cultural and institutionalised inclusion and exclusion of older bisexual intimacies from older lesbian and gay communities.

In Chapter 9, Laura Scarrone Bonhomme highlights the debates around the transition process in later life and labels it 'second adolescence,' which is described as a revival of teenage physical, social, and psychological battles (168). The author explores the trajectories of physical and psychological changes experienced by individuals transitioning after age 50 across different sociocultural constraints through narratives of the trans community members (165). Throughout Chapter 10, Ela Przybylo takes a different approach to late-life sexuality. She focuses on asexual identities and experiences of individuals criticizing the obsessive association of compulsory sexuality with 'successful aging.' Chapter 11, titled "Older people, sex and social class," provides an analysis of experiences of sexuality and intimate relationships in later life across class hierarchies drawing on the concept of "social class" by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Here, Paul Simpson argues that social stratification produces differences in perceptions and experiences of intimacy and sexuality in later life, as availability and access to resources are unevenly distributed in society. To conclude, Chapter 12 provides a comprehensive discussion by the editors on significant themes and issues reflected in the volume.

Overall, this volume offers a combination of theoretical and empirical work that makes for an insightful read and an essential contribution to the anthropology of aging, gerontology, gender studies, and other social scientific disciplines by offering new perspectives on sexual and intimate experiences in later life.

Although the authors discuss different sociocultural contexts, the contributors fail to decentralize western conceptualizations of aging and sexuality and mainly focus on studies of the Global North. As a result, they extend a tradition in cultural gerontology that has been critiqued by other scholars in the field (Lamb 2015). Including discussions around aging in the context of the Global South would have added a comparative understanding of sexuality in later life. Moreover, the editors do assert they do not provide a comprehensive overview of different gendered and sexual identities, but disability and related constraints of sexuality are notably lacking from the discussions. This book will capture the interest of academics studying older adults. For teaching and researching, it is a good starting point for social scientists with a particular interest in aging and gerontology. It is also likely to inspire new research agendas for healthcare policymakers and practitioners.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lamb, Sarah. 2015. "Beyond the View of the West: Ageing and Anthropology." In *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, edited by Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, 59-66. New York: Routledge.