



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Review of Danely, Jason. *Fragile Resonance: Caring for Older Family Members in Japan and England*. New York: Cornell University Press. 2022. pp. 270. Price: \$125 (Hardcover); \$29,95 (Paperback); \$19,95 (eBook).

Shvat Eilat

Tel Aviv University
shvateilat@mail.tau.ac.il

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 44, No 2 (2023), pp. 97-99

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2023.489



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 Danely, Jason. *Fragile Resonance: Caring for Older Family Members in Japan and England*. New York: Cornell University Press. 2022. pp. 270. Price: \$125 (Hardcover); \$29,95 (Paperback); \$19,95 (eBook).

Shvat Eilat

Tel Aviv University
shvateilat@mail.tau.ac.il

Fragile Resonance is an ethnography of experiences of informal care in two different countries, Japan and England. This ethnography emerges from and feeds back into social and cultural histories of care, reproduced and re-imagined values, and cultural narratives. Anthropologist Jason Danely accompanies his interlocutors – family members who take care of their aging relatives in urban areas in Japan and England – in their everyday doing of care and documents their deliberations and reflections on this care work and its place in their life. In order to get a more complete picture of care cultures in each locality, he also takes part in neighborhood initiatives of care, starts up a discussion group for caretakers, and more.

In *Fragile Resonance*, Danely commends paying more attention to the ways in which care comes to matter and gives an in-depth sketch of the sociocultural conditions within which this mattering takes place. Through the central concept of "resonance," he attends to the specific affective and embodied nature of informal care. Resonance, according to Danely, offers an exploratory portal to the "ways people relate to each other and the world... it is what makes care possible" (4). He aspires to access the narratives and stories of carers – that is, "following this process of transformation" – while also making these stories matter by situating them within "broader social, historical, and political transformations that can enhance or dampen the resonance" (6).

Danely advocates for "a view from the path" (8) to accurately capture resonances in the work of care. Looking from the path rather than the summit is crucial, Danely asserts, as it enables us to think differently about care – both a theoretical focus and policy regime burdened with measurements and organizing ideologies that conceal the messy, mundane experiences of care. Danely evinces this resonance in his ethnographic commitment to carers' narratives as he attends to the minute gestures, silences, and hesitations as they unfold in narratives and experiences of care.

The first chapter, "Cultural Ecologies of Care," considers the specific ways in which 'care,' as a concept, evolved differently in the two locales. Shortages in care provision in both countries variously affect the carers' experiences. Danely commences by connecting the way care is experienced by carers and how this experience reflects more extensive social processes and values. Rather than hanging his argument on the much-cited distinction between individualist and collectivist societies, the author traces a genealogy of care culture in each locale and suggests two complementary focal points to better position care experiences, namely compassion in Japan and charity in England. While compassion in the Japanese sense holds the quality of "caring with mutual fragility" (24), caring through charity holds that

of "caring as a gift" (ibid), whereby the purpose of care is to satisfy God with religious practice. These two notions of care create different moral landscapes for navigating the care experience. Danely doesn't leave these cultural notions as dangling signifiers. The following chapters mobilize rich and vivid ethnography that instills life into abstract moral predicaments, thus grounding them in place, time, and everyday experience.

The second chapter, "Becoming a Carer," explores the specific ways in which carers become carers under policy restrictions and how they negotiate caregiving realities. Danely considers the spaces in which care is embodied and lived, both within the walls of the family home and outside the home, in local organizations and long-term care arrangements. He stresses the impossibility of caring well under the pressing realities of austerity policies in England and the burden of care being mainly on family members in Japan.

The third chapter, "Fatigue and Endurance," takes "endurance" as an embodied category of life and documents how fatigue and exhaustion become integral to care work. That care work entails endurance often remains unacknowledged. As long as one endures, care 'works,' but as fatigue takes over, carers might find themselves drifting towards points of exhaustion. The solution for the precarity of care work through endurance differs between the two locales: while in Japan, carers will try to endure through compassion towards the cared-for and practice an attitude of 'being in the world' following a Buddhist tradition, in England, the carer will seek paid help to overcome the exhaustion. As Danely dives into the embodied experience of endurance and fatigue in care, he also uses his own experiences to say something about the work of care and the corporeal networks of meaning in which care is embedded within the Japanese moral setting of discipline and selfless compassion. The reader witnesses the value of an embodied and affectively attuned ethnographer when the author, for example, shares the ambiguity of his own bodily experience when joining men in a Kyoto neighborhood carrying a portable shrine during a festive religious parade. Thickening his analysis, he shares how he felt, on the one hand, overwhelmed by the weight of the shrine and exhausted by the labor, while on the other hand, realizing that his endurance and that of his fellow carriers are essential for the success of this ritual. In contrast to resilience, Danely argues endurance is a state of being-with that this physical practice of carrying instantiates.

Chapter Four, "Dangerous Compassion," discusses how compassion creates a resonance between the carer and the one they care for. It is a delicate balance, ever on the verge of infringement. The central question is: what can prevent the carer from falling between the cracks? The author shows how cultural narratives and virtues of care can hinder or sustain meaning in caregiving relations in both locales. Also, detailed ethnographic descriptions of everyday care work show how things get more fragile when we become more attuned to others. Inspired by philosopher Immanuel Levinas, Danely argues that it is "the face" – or facing the other – that constitutes in us the idea of the other as a complete being and, in this formation, enables resonance between us, either through compassion (Japan) or charity (England).

The fifth chapter, "Counter-Worlds of Care," brings together evidence of what opens the carers' experiences into other possibilities to think about their situation and what haunts the worlds of care in which they dwell. Here, Danely brings both Western and Japanese philosophers into the conversation to explore care as a movement that includes turning the gaze towards the other and beyond to the possibility of an otherwise. Counter-worlds are "otherwise" in the sense that they are "other possible worlds or transcendent visions of possibility and aspiration" (114) that open up to imagining a different future. Counter-worlds are also, he proposes, en-counter-worlds "that produce new ways of meeting and integrating the world into relational experience" (120). In that sense, counter-worlds bolster the extension of compassion towards those one cares for and for larger circles of embeddedness (in Japan).

They enable a re-connection to the self that is different from a charitable sense of care that emphasizes that the care work is done "for god" (in England).

Chapter Six, "Living On," brings even more depth to the discussion that this book establishes, considering the ways care takes place after the loved one has passed away and the caregiver grows out of the relationship that existed before death in ways that feed into social and cultural meanings around death and relation with the deceased. Care continues, Danely argues—just in other ways.

In the last chapter, "The Politics of Care," Danely shows how care is influenced by political changes— austerity policies and conditions of market failure in care, for example. These changes impact the ethical positioning of family and paid caregivers and affect the possibility of resonance between carers and those they care for. Following the perspective from the path rather than from the summit on the work of care, as Danely suggests, allows us to notice how carers' subjectivity changes as the state redefines its obligations towards the ones who need care and their carers.

What does an ethnography of care like *Fragile Resonance* provide us within the current moment? It enables an understanding of the worlds of care – often missing in socio-gerontological research – not through the measurement of its successes and failures but through the entanglement of its unique locations, open-ended care histories, policies, local values, and cultures and the way these impact the possibility of informal care to endure. Danely's book, in particular, is compelling because it performs a work of care itself: the writing conveys Danely's unwavering attunement to the other and his willingness to embrace the joys, pleasures and pains of such "radical openness" (Danely 2021). I think this kind of attunement adds significantly to our ethnographic toolbox by performing an ethnographic sensibility that not only takes the 'otherwise' of marginalized and hidden 'social projects' (Povinelli 2011, 5-9) as its subject of research but also attaches to this a methodological otherwise that takes into consideration how we listen and engages with the difficult question of what we can know about our interlocutors' lifeworlds. Danely's suggestion to attune with openness in ethnography reminds us of a much-needed focus on forms of care that grow in the borderlands of charity and compassion, despite having less productive value or being hard to quantify.

Different audiences will benefit from reading this book. First and foremost, carers past and present will hear and feel their own stories resonate here and may find new perspectives on their journey and its entanglements. Secondly, as the book also deals with the ethnographic process of coming to know care and narrating it, it will be of interest to students of both gerontology and anthropology. Because the book also addresses an audience of carers, Danely makes sure not to overload it with academic jargon, which is appreciated. Those who look for philosophical, historical, and theoretical contexts can find this in the illuminating and in-depth footnotes.

References

- Danely, Jason. 2021. "'It Rips You to Bits!': Woundedness and Compassion in Carers' Narratives." In *Vulnerability and the Politics of Care: Transdisciplinary Dialogues*, edited by Victoria Browne, Jason Danely, and Doerthe Rosenow, 168–85. Abingdon: British Academy Press of Oxford University Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur. 2006. *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life amidst Uncertainty and Danger*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2011. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.