Book Review

Review of Garvey, Pauline, and Daniel Miller. *Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland: When Life Becomes Craft.* London: UCL Press. 2021.pp. 240 pages. Price: $55 (Hardcover); $30 (Paperback); Open Access (PDF).

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Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland is one of the monographs that comes out of the project The Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA), a 5-year comparative project which investigated the impact of the smartphone on the experience of mid-life and considered the implications of smartphone use on the health and well-being of aging people in ten fieldsites across nine countries: Ireland, Chile, Uganda, Israel, Japan, Brazil, Cameroon, Italy, and China.

The authors are Pauline Garvey, an Irish anthropologist, and renowned anthropologist Daniel Miller who both work within the fields of material cultural studies and digital anthropology. Drawing on ethnographic research, mainly participant observation, they present case studies from Ireland regarding different experiences of aging in general and the role of smartphones in particular. In this book the authors closely examine the impact of the smartphone as a technology on experiences of aging. In their analysis, they depart from the popular understanding that smartphones are a technology designed for the younger population but used by older adults to feel younger. At the same time, they document how acquiring new skills such as using a smartphone helps some older adults feel younger, even as they lose some other abilities in their older age.

The volume is well organized in seven thematic chapters that are strongly interconnected. Chapter 2, "Ageing and Retirement," focuses on the impact of retirement upon couples. The authors document the considerable challenges that come after retirement, such as being housebound due to the loss of a work routine; social invisibility; low self-confidence due to changes in physical appearance; losing partners; lack of physical care as well as emotional support; financial problems; and frailty. At the same time, retiring also comes with its own set of new possibilities such as freedom from duties (mainly work and family); freedom from social judgements (e.g., women start dressing up for themselves and not for others); and exploring life around them (e.g., socializing, traveling). The authors found that for older people who were housebound and lacked social activities after retirement, the smartphone and other technologies helped expand their possibilities of engagement with the world, and continuing activities and interests.

Chapter 3, "Everyday Life: Achievements and Routine," the authors explore "crafting activities" of older adults, which are activities that allow older adults to make new friends, find new hobbies, and offer a social setting in which they can cast aside any fear of judgment and learn new skills. These activities offer older adults a continuity of routine after retirement and engagement with the social

world around them. Garvey and Miller show that, for most of the people in their study, the thing being crafted is time. They argue that for people post-retirement, "[t]here is a vast block of time standing there – if they do not attempt to sculpt it, this can become an oppressive and intimidating monolith, a 'nothingness' as one participant called it" (72). Crafting activities thus add shape to routine time, punctuating the days and weeks within a long stretch of old age.

"Ageing and Social Life" (Chapter 4) further explores the crafting of time and discusses different dimensions of people's social lives after retirement. The authors provide compelling case studies of relationships older adults have with partners, parents, neighbors, siblings, grandchildren, and other kin. The chapter also includes a discussion on friendships and loneliness and presents a complex picture of ups and downs in old age. For example, older adults with reduced mobility might become friends with their neighbors, with whom they can have a chat, but at the same time also maintain a friendly distance from them to avoid any quarrels over small issues like borrowed garden tools or noisy pets. The chapter "Smartphones and Ageing" (Chapter 5) revolves around the relationship between the smartphone and associations of youth or feeling youthful. The authors find that, while the older population is experiencing positive gains from smartphone usage (maintaining their social circle, finding new interests, keeping up with the pace of the younger generation, all which help them feel 'young'), they also express a negative attitude toward smartphones. There are various reasons for this negative attitude. For example, most older adults feel that young people waste their time with smartphones and that these are harmful for young people because they become fixated on screens and thus lose the ability to communicate properly face to face.

Chapter 6 on "Health and Care" begins with an outline of the Irish health system and its mix of private insurance and state health services. The authors discuss aspects of health and health services such as 'complementary therapies' and 'menopause,' and how smartphone apps are being used to deliver services and manage individual health. Examples of how technology and smartphones influence the health of older people are googling information regarding symptoms or treatment; using Whatsapp for organizing care for elderly parents; specialist apps such as Fitbit or step-counters; health insurance apps; wayfinding apps for locating clinics or health sites; and YouTube to look up exercises. In the next chapter, "Downsizing," Garvey and Miller draw heavily on their background in material culture studies to document how older adults craft lives through housing. "Downsizing" as a title is a provocation: ethnographic evidence of older adults' growth through the process of moving houses is here set against state policies and conventional approaches of aging as the gradual shrinking of a life world. The authors discuss new strategies for assisted and supported living as alternatives to people moving directly into a care home, but they also provide more playful examples of "downsizing" such as older adults aligning with a younger population through the ways they divest of their possessions. For a book titled *Ageing with Smartphones*, a discussion of the smartphone's role in this process is notably absent.

The last thematic chapter of this book, "Life Purpose," builds upon the previous chapters in this volume. Here the authors analyse the relationship between religion (or lack thereof) and life purpose, and discuss how older adults find purpose in life beyond religion. They bring together discussions on aging experiences in Irish society with a focus on life purpose which is strongly linked to the drive towards crafting activities, the maintenance of strong social relations, as well as the pursuit of good health and fitness. Perhaps most surprisingly, the authors argue, is that life purpose is also strongly influenced by the way in which Irish people have integrated technologies into their lives. For example, older adults might use virtual reality to have a travel experience or smartphones might be an accessible tool to engage in activities like photography, composing and uploading music.

Overall this book presents a fair share of constraints and possibilities of aging in Ireland. It beautifully explores how people adjust to new life situations such as those that come with aging. A shortfall of the book is that the authors do not explore the role of culture in the adoption and use   of smartphones and other technologies. I feel that the conclusion could have been done better by including possibilities for future research and a list of themes left undiscussed in the book. These include care arrangements and generational contracts within Irish families; maintaining transnational family relations; the role of culture in shaping and re-shaping the patterns of smartphone usage; and re-partnership possibilities and grandparenting roles, as they are influenced by digital technologies. Still, the work emerges as an essential contribution to the field of aging research and sets the stage for researchers in the social sciences and humanities working on Ireland. Overall, it is a good read, written and organized in an uncomplicated yet enriching manner. It provides the reader with a detailed understanding of the role of smartphones in the experiences and practices of aging in Ireland.