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Book Review

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Anthropologist Sarah Lamb's edited volume skillfully highlights ethnographic explorations of what it means to "age successfully" in a variety of cultural contexts. The beauty of this collection is certainly to be found in the contributors' aim to dismantle commonly held gerontological notions of "successful aging," while similarly engaging with possible futures. Already in the Introduction of the volume, Lamb, Robbins-Ruszkowski, and Corwin challenge the reader to confront definitions of "successful aging" commonly accepted in the gerontological literature: "The successful aging paradigm...says that *you* can be the crafter of your own successful aging—through diet, exercise, productive activities, attitude, self-control, and choice" (2). However, as Lamb and contributors clarify at length, these hegemonic and hence normative and normalizing assumptions on old age, most frequently contrast sharply with the real opportunities for self-realization for individuals aging in communities across the globe, all the while producing 'failed' elderly citizens.

Decades ago, anthropologist Sharon Kaufman (1986) already emphasized the importance of including the voices and experiences of elders in gerontological research. It is symptomatic of the persistence of ageism, that over thirty years later, *Successful Aging as a Contemporary Obsession* still needs to re-emphasize this motivation. It does so, successfully, not only by highlighting the diverse experiences of elders from locations such as Poland, China, India, Brazil and the United States, but also by actively calling into question the successful aging paradigm itself, that has only gained power since Kaufman's publication three decades ago.

Lamb's volume is particularly valuable to gerontologists because it probes four strongly held "cultural-historic values upon which the successful aging paradigm rests" (7), namely: individual agency and control (7); the ideal of independence (9); active aging (10) and agelessness and permanent personhood (11). These issues are then again discussed throughout the four sections of the volume, that address different aspects of successful aging, with each of these four sections including stand-out chapters that are particularly thought-provoking.

In the first section ("Gender, Sexuality and the Allure of Anti-Aging"), Emily Wentzell's article, "Erectile Dysfunction as Successful Aging in Mexico," challenges the values of both "active aging" and "agelessness," as described in the introduction to the volume. Wentzell's anthropological research reveals that many men in her study found their erectile dysfunction to be a natural element in their lives "signaling that their youth had ended" (75). The respondents also stated that their ED served as a catalyst for their emotional maturity and progression to being a "better man" (75). Counterintuitively within the "successful aging"-paradigm, such changes were not found to represent failure for them as cultural subjects, but instead "helped them to live out good masculinity in older age" (78).

The second section of this book shifts to "Ideals of Independence, Interdependence, and Intimate Sociality in Later Life." For example, Janelle Taylor's contribution examines the impact of dementia on close

friendships in the U.S., the UK, and the Netherlands. Taylor's research critically analyzes commonly held notions of "personhood" which challenge the value of "agelessness and permanent personhood" that is central to many definitions of successful aging. Taylor examines the maintenance of friendships when one individual has dementia and finds that, while these friendship may transform over time, cognitively intact individuals find mutual benefit in the maintenance of these relationships. Taylor's study reveals that, when the friend with dementia can no longer maintain his/her previous sense of self, friends can and do help maintain the personhood of their friend by "holding the person in personhood" - creating a cocoon of sorts for a declining friend (132). Whereas cognitive impairment is generally not addressed in most models of successful aging, with this chapter Taylor powerfully challenges us to acknowledge the fact that "if the discourse of successful aging contributes to nudging people toward disconnecting from friends when they begin to show signs of dementia, then it may do very real harm to real people living among us" (136).

The third section of the book shifts to examining individual and collective aspects of aging well through both national policies and collective projects. Jane McIntosh's chapter, "Depreciating Age, Disintegrating Ties," examines cultural shifts in the roles of elders in sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya. Previously, elders in Kenya were the source of authority and wisdom and intergenerational interdependence was strong. However, as Kenya has 'westernized' and youth has moved to cities for perceived new opportunities, social structures among various cultural groups have changed. Elders have lost many of their previously held roles within their communities. McIntosh sums up the experience for many Kenyan elders in her conclusion: "many aging people wish most fervently not to be young again but to be properly treated as *elders*: revered and desirably interdependent" (197).

Finally, the last section of this impressive volume focuses on lessons from the end of life. Meika Loe shares her findings from a 3-year study of older adults age 85+ in Upstate New York. Her research focuses on the concept of "comfortable" rather than successful aging. The elders in Loe's study "emphasize ease and subjective health, as opposed to external signs of success and functionality" (228). While these values contradict those undergirding models of "successful aging", her study participants are elders in their 90s and 100s who feel content in their lives against all odds. Many studies examining "successful aging" note that the majority of older adults who hold to this model do not readily discuss decline or death (Feng and Straughan, 2017; Kim et al., 2015; Lamb, 2014). This indicates the analytical validity of the more realistic concept of "comfortable aging," which "requires personal acceptance of vulnerability, disability and mortality" as well as "listening to elders and their desires" (229).

Successful Aging as a Contemporary Obsession, reminds us that the contributions of anthropology to the field of gerontology are invaluable for an international examination of the ideal of "successful aging" and the ageist assumptions that ingenuously hold it together. Lamb's compilation urges us to consider the usefulness of this term, while simultaneously highlighting the need for more studies that give a stronger voice to elders' lay perceptions of the realities of old age, rather than reconsider the abstract paradigm of what it means to age "successfully."

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