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Book Review

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Ashwin Tripathi

Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar
ashwin.tripathi@iitgn.ac.in

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Negotiating Ageing: Cultural Adaptation to the Prospect of a Long Life, authored by Simon Biggs, presents us with a quintessential reading of contemporary developments in the field of social gerontology. Interested in social identity and adult aging, Biggs advocates for a life course perspective, generational intelligence, and an analytical focus on cultural adaptation and negotiation in this book. He presents us with a nuanced understanding of aging and pragmatically embeds his analysis within contemporary societies. Furthermore, the discussion is enhanced with analytics at the intersection of psychosocial, politico-economic, and social-constructivist approaches.

It is a truism that the world is growing older. This increased longevity, induced by medical advancements and improved health care, has in itself caused structural shifts: growing commodification of bodies, increased social inequality among older adults as well as many other socio-cultural, biological, and ideological changes. This publication invites the reader to explore the aforementioned changes as they affect the aging demography across cultures. This becomes both interesting and exciting when generations are bearing an almost equal number of individuals. In examining the cultural negotiations of older adults, Biggs elucidates four major areas in the narratives of older adults: work, spirituality, body, and family. The book centers two questions: (i) What is the purpose of a long life? and (ii) How do we adapt to societies where generations are approximately the same size? Biggs asks these questions at the intersection of premature answers developed in contemporary policies related to older adults in an expanding anti-aging industry, in older adults market segments, and in critical approaches to family relationships. These developments destabilize the traditional imagination of old age as consisting of predominantly weak, feeble, and dependent adults. In 'aging' societies, multiple scripts for negotiating the life course emerge. This negotiation in the everyday lives and subjective experiences of older adults, is the focus of study throughout the book.

The initial chapters (1 and 2) set the background and identify the key tropes in contemporary thinking about aging, such as the rapid demographic changes that have marked the transition from 20th to 21st century, and concomitant cultural shifts in the meaning of a long life. These changes are a global phenomenon, across all rich and poor societies, which implies addressing global aging as primarily a process of cultural adaptation (World Economic Forum 2012). Thus, critical questions arise as to which adaptations suit which interests. Biggs mainly provides analytical (and pragmatic) tools from the field of gerontology, for exploring these negotiations. He argues that intergenerational competition with

regard to productivity and economic inequality, has distracted scholars from cultural uncertainties that come with the expectations of a long life. He also explores the cultural meanings attributed to aging and later life, and the possibilities for self-realization. Here, Biggs advocates for a more holistic discussion, that takes into account all aspects of life and calls for a more subjective understanding of personal experiences of aging, intergenerational negotiation and a re-evaluation of the contribution of older adults. Thus, he brings us to the crossroads of our structural and personal worlds, exactly where he suggests that gerontology can provide tools to understand the world and ultimately act upon it (8). The author prioritizes the negotiations and cultural adaptations on the level of everyday identities and experiences of aging, through which older adults give purpose to their lives in increasingly complex intergenerational networks. As the title reveals, he encourages readers to see how 'negotiation' requires creating critical distance between ourselves and the stories we are being encouraged to live by. Therefore, this work is premised on finding possibilities for the future, rather than immersing in or critiquing pre-existing assumptions.

Throughout the book, Biggs suggests to examine life trajectories of older adults within structural, social and cultural contexts, and in this regard brings to the fore "life-course specificity" and "generational intelligence" (15), as the nodes along which personal and social priorities are negotiated. The book moves back and forth between highlighting the different ways dominant narratives shape our expectations of aging, and the possibilities for personal expression at the margins of common sense. Simultaneously, the book elaborates on major themes, theories and discussions in gerontological scholarship.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the complex relations between work and aging, following two threads: a shift from active aging to productive aging, and a critique of the disempowerment of older adults through forcible exclusion from working life. According to Biggs, work here does not appear as an adaption to a longer life at all (41) but is nevertheless foundational to the emergence of the category of the 'Third age' that capitalizes the increased spending power of 'active agers' and consecutively relegates decline to the 'Fourth age.' However, although the exclusion of older adults from the job market can easily be diagnosed as ageist, at the same time, it has also provided them with opportunities for "positive discontinuities" (19), where they experience more time for leisure, for family, and for their overall wellbeing.

Chapters 5 and 6 thematize 'spirituality' in old age as an in-between or liminal phase. This dimension counters the common sensical Western perception of elders as predominantly feeble and weak, because integrating spirituality allows us to value how aging implies an awareness of oneself, in oneself and in relation to others. 'Spiritual aging,' relies heavily on the power of discontinuity. Both – changing perceptions of old-age and a growing focus on spirituality – have been explained in a broader ambit of late modernity characterized by uncertainty and insecurity, where all is susceptible to revision and renegotiation. Chapter 6 briefly discusses the influence of consumerism on changes in spiritual practice and on the renewed interest in humanism. These changes are characteristic of contemporary identity management, emphasizing interchangeability and choice. He further probes "gerotranscendence": a process in which self-conscious individuals in consumer driven societies can freely choose from a range of traditions to give meaning to a prolonged life. Both spirituality and gerotranscendence are here presented as an alternative cultural narrative, that fully integrates the prospect of a long life, that provides answers for what could be its purpose, and that supports the adaptation to changing intergenerational relationships.

Chapter 7 follows the 'somatic turn' (Gilleard and Higgs 2012) in social gerontology. This highlights the historical tensions between biological and social models of aging and the increasing interdependency

between biological, psychological, and social aspects of the aging process. As the body emancipated from the field of biomedicine (e.g., in cultural gerontology), a biopsychosocial lens now prevails and new and critical ways of asking questions about agency of older adults emerge. The growing commodification and successful aging paradigm tap into the anti-aging market, which presents itself as anti-establishment but tends to carry on the age-old discussion of “liberating oneself from old age” (Gilleard and Higgs 2005). The Successful Aging paradigm (Rowe and Kahn 1998) supports the neoliberal ideals of individuals to be blamed for their lack of health, leaving social and political institutions absolved of their responsibilities. In the end, the resource rich, who can afford this investment in life extension, are the beneficiaries of this ideology. Summarizing the aforementioned critiques, Biggs concludes that the purpose of life is beyond work and continued consumption of anti-aging products and life-styles (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 in turn provides evidence against the prolongivists (who argue for a bright future in extending life as long as possible), where he discusses the other side of aging that makes individuals socially and personally vulnerable, for example when considering dementia. He considers dementia as a threat to long life, making older adults increasingly at risk. The discussion throws light on the need for including older adults in mainstream societies and on the burden of emotional labor experienced by their informal carers, which in turn leads to commodification of care, time poverty, and social inequality.

This book brings together multiple discussions and provides early-stage scholars in the field of age studies – anthropology, sociology, public health – as well as policy makers, a holistic read. The book is easy to read and understand, although there were some typos, word repetition (112) and sentence formations that were difficult to understand at a couple of instances. The chapters are well-connected, with each chapter beginning with a key themes’ pointer. As the author himself suggests, some areas (e.g., gender, age-friendly cities, and unpaid labor) could have been developed further. A larger discussion of intersectionality might have helped in providing a better representation of negotiations taking place at multiple levels. At the same time, and surprisingly as Biggs discusses a global phenomenon, more culturally nuanced examples were missing. Nonetheless, I agree, in this case, it was outside the scope of the research aims of this book. Overall, the work is argumentative and opens up a range of diverse realities and negotiations. As an anthropologist, I look forward to more culture-specific narratives, which could benefit from this foundational research as a starting point.

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