

Book review

Precarity and Ageing: Understanding Insecurity and Risk in Later Life

*Edited by Grenier, A. Phillipson, C. and
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This book is part of a themed series of volumes on Ageing in Social Context from the publisher. The overall purpose of the series is to reconsider current perspectives on ageing through interdisciplinary perspectives. This volume consists of 14 contributions from Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA and is broadly grounded in a critical gerontology/critical theory perspective. The predominant focus of the book is on how ageing is experienced within democracies that are economically stable, and mostly found in the northern hemisphere. There are three thematic sections of the volume; these are life-course perspectives on precarity, precarity across situations and the further theme of austerity, care and social responses to precarity. The structure is logical, with the book commencing with more general discussion about how precarity could be an important lens for use within gerontology before moving to application of the concept to topics in later life such as employment, frailty and migration and then ending with discussion of societal responses to precarity as it affects older adults – in particular those who need care and support from others.

This is therefore an edited volume, which applies the concepts of precarity and precariousness (or precarity) to a number of specific topics in ageing. The rationale is to examine the usefulness of these concepts within ageing studies, to expand and extend the current scope

of such studies and also to link current economic and political trends more closely to the potential vulnerabilities that many people face in later life. For the purposes of the book and this particular context, precarity is defined as the risk, vulnerabilities and insecurities that arise due to changing economic and/or social conditions, and which particularly affect individuals who are in vulnerable situations and at risk from the actions and decisions of others.

Precariousness is discussed as having implications in personal, political and social spheres, with insecurity and risk unevenly divided/split both between and within societies, based on the resources that are available to influence each sphere. The editors suggest that although precarity appears to be a well-understood concept within the field of labour and employment studies, it is generally used in relation to experiences in early life (e.g. employment stability for young adults who enter the labour market) rather than any consideration of how such earlier experiences of precarity might affect ageing processes – or even how ageing itself might be seen as a form of precariousness.

Despite the coverage of multiple topics in the book, there is much overlap between many of the chapters. Indeed, all the contributors endorse the apparent usefulness of precarity as a concept within gerontology – with virtually no disagreement or contention that inclusion of precarity within studies on ageing is or might be unsound. The movement between and across topics throughout the volume is useful in helping to reframe some of the existing tenets of gerontology as a discipline.

This might perhaps be usefully developed further in considering the relevance of the precarity lens to explore such topics as violence and abuse in later life as well as quality of life and well-being within ageing, as these areas are not really adequately covered. The book also provides a timely reminder that overarching explanatory frameworks such as that which precarity offers are needed in order that we can fully appreciate and understand individual experiences in later life.

One of the key themes in the volume is interdependence. In Chapter 2, Settersten uses the concept of “linked lives” (Elder, 1994) to emphasise that as individuals grow older and encounter the unknown and inherent risks involved in ageing, they can often be quite dependant on the decisions of others within their close personal networks. This runs somewhat against accepted and promoted notions of independence as a key outcome measure in healthy (and even successful) ageing. Even for those who have relatively stable resources, loss or an increased risk of loss of independence can lead to precariousness for individuals. Later in the book, in Chapter 5 by Lain *et al.*, inclusion of case studies illustrates that the interdependence that occurs within personal networks is an example of precarity as an intersection of dependence on various social structures, including the insecurity (or even insecurities) that can occur for older workers in late-life employment. And in Chapter 6 Kobayashi and Khan extend the discussion to explore the interdependencies that many older migrants experience, which may result in very precarious situations for older individuals.

Another central theme revolves around the conflict between individual responsibility for the outcomes of ageing and situational/societal influences on ageing. It is generally understood that access to choices and options relating to such factors as

healthy ageing is unequal across cultures – but those who do not have such options throughout the life course may experience ageing as a time of increased risk (of adverse outcomes). The chapter by Katz (Chapter 3) usefully examines multiple transitions across the life course and the utility (or otherwise) of frameworks that emphasise resilience. This then situates precarity in ageing within the framework of risk within the transitions that take place throughout life, but perhaps particularly in the latter part (s) of the life course. Other contributors also touch on the distinctions and likely conflict of values between accountability at a personal level and social and societal responsibility, particularly in relation to policy decisions and the moves seen in a number of countries towards and encompassing austerity measures.

Perhaps particularly for health and social care professionals, the discussions around frailty, the use of deficit and decline models to conceptualise and define ageing and theories of care are likely to be of particular interest and relevance. Chapters by Grenier (Chapter 4) and Fine (Chapter 8) provide in-depth and useful discussions about what it means to be in need of care, the implications, especially at societal level of limitations in physical ability and the varying impacts of care and caring across different sections of a population. For those who need, or wish to re-consider conceptualisations of caring, within their professional practice, or area of study, perhaps particularly in the context of concepts of dependency, decline and suffering, these are likely to be parts of the book of specific relevance.

The book is thought-provoking, as texts that challenge accepted and orthodox tenets within a discipline often are. However, due to the economic and social challenges and changes that have been and are being seen and experienced in many countries, new approaches to our

understanding of ageing are evidently necessary. Across the range of contributions, the book amply delivers this for our further consideration.

Overall, this thorough, cross-national and multi-tiered book offers important insights into precarity, risk and inequality as experienced by older persons. It represents a valuable contribution to the academic literature; it is clearly relevant to researchers as well as academics and students, but

should also be read by professional practitioners, policymakers and politicians.

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Reference

Elder, G. (1994), "The life course as developmental theory", *Child Development*, Vol. 69 No. 1, pp. 1-12.