

Book review

Old age in global perspective: cross-cultural and cross-national views

by Steven M. Albert and Maria G. Cattell

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This book brings together information derived from many different sources to broaden our perspective on ageing. It presents ethnographic case studies and evidence from cross-national surveys to assess variation in the experience of ageing and old age. The ethnographic detail adds "thickness" to the general trends discerned in the cross-national survey evidence. The result is a kaleidoscope of broad-brush pictures of global ageing interspersed with in-depth insights – the camera constantly swoops from satellite heights to ground level. What initially appears to be familiar ground is challenged in the light of the landscapes we find in other parts of the world. During our journey we are introduced to new concepts and given the opportunity to see familiar ones from a different angle. Obviously this is a rich learning experience.

The book by Albert and Cattell demonstrates the need not only for cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives but also for a multidisciplinary approach. The book draws on literature in gerontology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, human biology, medicine, demography and economics, and will therefore appeal to audiences from many different backgrounds. For those who are used to antagonism between proponents of the qualitative method and the quantitative method, this marriage of the anthropological/case history orientation and the sociological or survey-based programme of research will come as a most welcome change.

The authors admit that there has been a price to pay for seeking to combine the cross-cultural and cross-national approaches. They were forced to be selective in summarizing the ethnographic literature. A lot of sleuthing was called for to find cross-national survey materials on ageing among documentation, for example, on fertility trends and general prevalence of disability. The authors state they have sought to steer clear of the Scylla of emphasizing variability and the unique quality of the ageing experience across societies, and the Charybdis of stressing regularities and universal qualities of ageing. In this reader's view they have been successful in this endeavour.

Three parts

The book is divided in three parts. The **first part** gives the broader picture of ageing worldwide. We are introduced to three alternative approaches to the temporal component of ageing corresponding to three versions of time: the biologic, chronologic, and social dimensions of ageing. The first chapter in this part provides the demographic backdrop which draws on cross-national survey materials. We are confronted with life tables along with intriguing questions on human

evolution such as why humans live so long beyond the reproduction period. The second chapter looks at demographic trends in ageing around the world. We hear about life expectancy, age-sex pyramids and dependency ratios. The third chapter introduces the concept of the life course and discusses how different cultures perceive the passing of time and life-course transitions. Although many Western societies tend to link old age with the number of years lived, other societies use different markers of time.

The **second part** deals with four dimensions of old age in detail. Selected topics include living arrangements, inter-generational transactions, intragenerational relationships, and succession to seniority and control over resources. We learn that solutions to living arrangements and family relationships are intricately linked to cultural expectations and ideals. What is considered right and proper in one society may be regarded as unacceptable in another. Audiences in Southern African faced with the problems and challenges of rapid urbanization and industrialization will find illuminating the excellent discussion of the debate on modernization and its impact on quality of life in old age and policy implications. We learn that the ethic of filial care is generally found in agrarian societies (p. 77). The collected evidence suggests that to the extent that modernization has impoverished the rural sector of many developing countries, it has led to poorer outcomes for elders.

The **third part** of the book focusses on senescence, the process by which bodily systems are inevitably compromised with increasing age, and death. We learn that it is possible to die of old age, and that at least part of the morbidity or "frailty" typical of late life appears to be distinct from identifiable disease conditions. This section introduces a new perspective on the well-known activity and disengagement theories and discusses the link between self-rated health and physical disability. We learn that local conditions influence the impact that disability will have on the experience of ageing. Chapters 9 and 10 deal with topics which are not widely aired; there is often discomfort on the part of researchers when they are required to discuss issues relating to health decline and dying. The authors inform us that there is also a dearth of comparative materials in these areas. Comparison is made difficult because impairment is diagnosed differently across cultures due to the fact that elders do not perform uniform roles. Although there is more cross-cultural evidence on geronticide, very little is known about the quality of life in the last year of life. Tellingly, some of the data presented in this section are from unpublished sources.

In the concluding chapter the authors, noting that cross-cultural data on old age are uneven, seek to identify under-researched areas "in the hope of spurring investigators to undertake the relevant research" (p. 238). The cross-national and cross-cultural evidence is summarized briefly and 23 hypotheses are developed to guide prospective researchers to fill these gaps. The authors single out aspects of living arrangements, reciprocity and caregiving in family relationships, death and death-hastening, and health and social participation as important topics for further systematic research.

Reading this book

Reading in this book is a humbling experience. We witness the struggle worldwide to find workable solutions to dignified ageing and death under a variety of social circumstances. From an academic viewpoint, the book provides an introduction to key concepts in the literature on ageing, updates on classical debate, and insight into the meaning and policy implications of quantitative and qualitative findings on ageing.

The book covers a lot of ground, much of which may be new to some readers. However, very little previous knowledge is assumed and the discussion carefully builds on common wisdom and our everyday experiences (e.g. have you ever wondered why different members of the same family behave so differently at table?). The many subheadings make for easier reading. There are biographical references and a subject index to assist with review, and references to further classical and contemporary readings are on offer.

In a work as ambitious as this there will have to be some compromises. The discussion is perforce superficial in some sections. Some readers may find the rapid succession from the macrolevel to the microlevel of discussion difficult to follow. To illustrate trends and their contradictions the authors have chosen striking examples but also the ones to which they have personal affinities: certain spots on the globe which they have personally researched. The frequent references to these examples provide a familiar thread throughout the book. Although the book primarily addresses a US audience, the large number of illustrative examples drawn from the record on ageing in Africa will hold particular appeal to local readers.

I have one quibble towards the end of the book: Following immediately on the intimacy and intensely human scene at the deathbed in Chapter 11, the cold clinical lights switch on when the authors go on to develop scientific hypotheses for testing in future research. The transition to the final chapter, or the lack of one, is jarring to this reader's sensitivities.

What does the book have to offer Southern African readers? The answer is plenty. There is very limited anthropological and survey evidence on ageing in Southern Africa. In South Africa, Brindley (1982), Malan (1990) and van Eeden (1991) are examples of the former; Ferreira, Møller, Prinsloo and Gillis (1992) of the latter. *Old age in global perspective* will provide a better understanding of the slight information we do have. The global perspective advocated by Albert and Cattell is vital because South African society is culturally and economically diverse. It features both young and old populations, agricultural and industrial lifestyles, and wide income disparities. The lessons learnt from this book will sharpen the tools of analysis and interpretation applied to the limited South African database.

This reader found the chapter on living arrangements particularly useful for a balanced view of South African household formation and its significance for income support and caregiving policy. Albert and Cattell inquire whether living arrangements (i.e. living with family or independently) indicate social isolation among elders and family support. We know from baseline research among South Africans conducted by Ferreira *et al.* (1992) that the majority of white elders live independently and black, Indian and coloured elders live with family. What should we make of this stark contrast? According to Albert and Cattell the cross-national record shows that the most striking variation in family relationships of the elderly is visible in the case of living arrangements. In developing countries, clear majorities of the elderly co-reside with children; in more developed countries, sharing a household with a child is the exception. We surmise that vastly different living arrangements for elders are to be expected in South Africa given its cultural and income diversity. Reading on we are also informed that there are many variations on these two major themes around the world and the meanings embedded in living arrangements may differ from one context to the next. Shared living arrangements are often a function of demography and economics as well as of culture. For example, a recent ethnographic study indicates that the "by-turns" living arrangement common in China – elders are cared for by children in rotation – is more likely to occur in poor than in rich villages. This finding will ring familiar to regular readers of *SAJG* who recall an article by Chen (1993) writing on living arrangements in Taiwan. The finding reviewed by Albert and Cattell concurs with Chen's observation that the choice of living arrangement is primarily circumscribed by economic feasibility and that the "meal-rotation" solution is on the decline in affluent Taiwan.

One of the reasons for collecting cross-cultural evidence is to learn more about ourselves and our own society. There is no doubt that Southern African readers will gain many new insights from Albert and Cattell's *Old age in global perspective* to better understand the complexities of ageing in their own society.

References

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