

[Review] David Prendergast & Chiara Garattini (2015) Aging and the digital life course

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Aging and the Digital Life Course, Edited by David Prendergast and Chiara Garattini, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015 289pp. ISBN 798-1-78238-691-9 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-78238-692-6 (ebook)

Aging and the Digital Life Course provides an interesting and often thought-provoking read. Part 1 covers technologically-mediated ways of connecting and interacting with people. In Part 2, a potpourri of topics is explained by reference to technologies that support a healthy lifestyle and wellbeing. These include reports of empirical studies (assistive technology in self-management and behavioural change, living well with dementia and hands-on tech care) alongside theoretical and conceptual analysis and discussion (co-designed technology with older people and the process of normalisation and system-level change in home telehealth). This part, for this gerontological social work reader, was much the most compelling section overall. Part 3 is given over to four original chapters on life course transition for caregivers, retirees, older migrants and older gamers and addresses digital traces at the end of the life course and beyond.

Overall, the book includes a mix of up-to-date internationally funded research and commentaries on developments in core digital technology and service fields in ageing and ageing care with more specific, issue-based, chapters, e.g. combating social isolation (Singh; Wherton et al.), dementia care (Neven and Leeson; Astell). The editors have succeeded in assembling an engaging and effective compilation from amidst the range of material that might have been included. The authors write clearly and accessibly about their subjects, allowing a wide range of readers (e.g. policymakers, practitioners and academics in engineering, health and social care) to get quickly to grips with a huge diversity of facts and concepts. They include an international group of research students, practitioners and campaigners, whose work is as fluent and coherent as the more familiar academic names. However, the absence of authorship grounded in what is now sometimes called *expertise from experience*, rather than in academic study alone, seems a little odd given the paradigmatic shift in digital, social and healthcare policy as a discipline and practice (e.g. client-centred and patient-centred in social- and health-care respectively) toward the revalorization of the *users*.

The chapters are factually well-informed and also theoretically articulated, although some stand out. The life course transition discourse in Part 3 is arguably more uneven in breadth of description and depth of analysis because of the very wide fields some authors are attempting to cover. The most successful – notably Singh’s ‘life course’ analysis and López and Sánchez-Criado’s ‘hands-on-tech care’ – combine an immediacy and freshness in capturing the particular dynamic of contemporary ageing issues and strategies with a depth of understanding and a grasp of the wider historical, political or organisational significances of contemporary conjunctions. In Part 2, the health and wellbeing chapters are particularly effective because they not only provide an excellent complementary set of accounts that link wider debates about conceptual frameworks in research into digital care for older people, but also make excellent use of ethnographic evidence to contribute to the knowledge base.

Overall, the book successfully challenges the stereotypical perception of older people’s incapability of engaging with technology. It shows, through critical thinking and demonstration, how either healthy or frail older people could develop resilience in adopting digital and technologically-mediated ways to develop their normality and to maintain or improve their quality of life. Furthermore, the book provides some exemplary anthropological approaches to *biographical interviews* and *observation* which care practitioners and researchers could learn from in order to gain a more holistic understanding of older people and their families and, most importantly, to work with an increasing number of older people who have cognitive impairments.

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