Book review

The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing

Edited by M. L. Johnson, V. L. Bengtson, P. G. Coleman and T. B. L. Kirkwood


With 7 parts, 72 chapters, 110 contributors and 744 pages, The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing is a mighty tome. Reading it primes awareness of Miller’s classic observation: we can, at best, store 7 ± 2 bits of information in working memory (Miller, 1956). The facts about human development continue to accumulate at a rapid, accelerating pace. We do the best we can with what we have.

Thomas Kirkwood (Chapter 1.5) argues that, although there are no specific genes for ageing, a number of genes regulate the ‘durability’ and ‘maintenance’ of the soma. Ultimately, evolution has not prepared us well for ageing. Paul Baltes and colleagues (Chapter 1.4) note that, because biological plasticity decreases with age, the ‘efficiency’ of cultural interventions designed to optimise successful ageing naturally decreases.

From a social, economic, political and cultural perspective, successful ageing is a major challenge. Many factors block efficient and effective movement in this sphere. For example, aggressive capitalism tends to reinforce ageist thinking patterns (Chapter 6.2) and the cynical view that ‘older people are a selfish welfare generation’.

At the same time, from a subjective, emotional perspective, old age is often experienced as a period of great resilience and positive growth (Chapters 3.6, 3.7 and 4.1). Theories of ageing and adaptation are unveiling the mechanisms whereby older adults remain resilient and happy in the face of loss (Chapter 3.1).

History marches forward towards a period of unprecedented demographic change—the long-defended, religiously ingrained beliefs promoting respect and care for older adults are less stable (Chapter 7.1). Nonetheless, scholars now recognise the economic and social value of ageing and longevity (Chapter 6.7), and the thinkers contributing to The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing offer us substantial hope that the ‘incomplete biocultural architecture of lifespan development’ (Chapter 1.4) can grow-and-defend in a positive direction.

Gerontology is a young science, largely a science of description (Chapter 1.1)—systems thinking and theory does not yet support optimisation of personal and social development. ‘Integrated complexity’ (Chapter 3.6) is a challenge for those who aim to ‘think big’ in the field of gerontology.

Twentieth-century history, science and culture have opened up a new sphere of thinking. Globalisation is a reality but not one that we have necessarily assimilated, accommodated and equilibrated. The acts of solidarity and conflict that influence adaptive success are played out by up to five generations simultaneously (Chapters 5.1–5.3). We see new dynamics for the experience of personal and relational history (Chapter 5.6), for the quality of family care (Chapter, 5.7) and for social relations more generally (Chapters 6.3 and 6.4).

The thinkers contributing to The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing remind us that adaptation is contextualised—development is always a balancing act, a journey to optimise action in the current field of affordances and constraints (Chapter 1.4).

Importantly, the scientists who see the big picture and who wish to work with the big picture must also recognise that the grand problems and solutions they envisage do not imply that all aspects of our well being necessarily pivot upon our science, or our capacity for ‘outsight’. As described by Marcoen (Chapter 4.11), the spiritual path—the path of insight—is a path towards self-realisation, where everything connected with the self—time, space, life and death, good and evil, the rational and irrational dimensions of the mind, and so on—crystallise in an ego-transcendent state. Here, a new sense of uniqueness, inspiration, creative receptivity and equilibrium between the internal and external worlds of experience opens and allows for a new ethic of compassion, of giving of oneself to others.

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