Harry Moody is one of the best known and most highly respected of American gerontologists. Much of his work centres on ideas and concepts of ageing, and the exposition of critical perspectives on everyday myths and beliefs about ageing and older people. This textbook is no exception, for as in the previous editions its approach is ‘to present key ideas and content from gerontology as an opportunity for critical thinking’ (p. xvii). This is done through a focus on concepts and controversies, and through raising questions rather than merely presenting ‘facts’.

The book has three parts that deal with different sets of ‘basic concepts’: ageing, healthcare and society, the social and economic outlook for an ageing society, and a life course perspective on ageing. Each part is introduced with an overview and is followed by a series of chapters called ‘controversies’. These are followed by readings, e.g. excerpts from key texts, and finally there are sections that focus on practice and the future. An Appendix gives advice to students on how to research a term paper in gerontology, and lists Internet resources. The ‘controversies’ of the chapter headings highlight central issues in gerontological policy and practice. The section on healthcare and society, for example, asks ‘should we ration health care for older people? Should families provide for their own? Should older people be protected from bad choices?’ Supplementing the author’s sensitive reflections on these issues, the selected readings represent different positions (e.g. of Daniel Callahan and his critics) and, for further stimulation, each section sets out questions ‘for writing, reflection and debate’. Throughout, the commentary, example tasks and case studies prompt engagement with important ethical and political dilemmas.

Whilst the first two parts of the book cover the usual range of policy issues in health and social care, retirement, pensions and inter-generational equity, the last part, ‘A life course perspective on aging’, presents a good introduction to key issues in ageing theory and research – covering biology, psychology and sociology. The ‘controversies’ around ‘Why do we grow old?’ include readings by Fries and his critics. A section on cognition presents some of the classic studies on the age association with creativity and, finally, a section on meaning in old age addresses issues of spirituality and ‘successful ageing’, with readings by among others Erikson and Rowe and Kahn.

As in many other books, the introduction, title and later sections of Moody’s book emphasise that the study of ageing is not just the study of old age. Some pages are devoted to the life course perspective, time and the social construction of life course stages, transitions over the life course, and the significance of life histories for an understanding of later life. This is more than presented in most
gerontology textbooks and, in my view, a welcome addition. The emphasis is nonetheless on old age. The topic of ‘ageing’ is still almost synonymous with the study of ‘old age or people’, a reflection of the interests of policymakers and practitioners that still dominate gerontology. This volume is no exception, for it highlights practical and professional impacts and implications. It is however a textbook that may encourage reflective practitioners, and I suspect meets the needs of many new students on American gerontology courses.

To a non-American readership, a limitation of this book is that the sections on policy issues, such as retirement, pensions and health and social care, focus exclusively on the US situation. This limited view is also evident in the lack of attention to global issues, ageing in the developing world, and different cultural perspectives on ageing. This is a serious limitation for a textbook which aims to stimulate students to think about this century’s pressing issues and controversies.

So, as with many textbooks in gerontology, I find it good in parts, but also better than most. Through the strong emphasis on issues and controversies, and the inclusion of extracts from key writers, the book has much to offer gerontology students of any country. I doubt whether it is suitable as the textbook for British students, although it can be recommended as an introductory reading. In the age of the Internet, web addresses have become essential. It is interesting that the book ends with a note alerting the reader to ‘an exhaustive annotated list of online resources on aging, available at www.pineforge.com’ (p. 427). Searching the site, Chapter 1 of the book is available online, but the list is not mentioned. Perhaps others will have more luck.

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Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin, Gender, Social Inequalities and Aging, AltaMira, Walnut Creek, California, 2001, 235 pp., pbk £17.95, ISBN 0 7591 0186 8.

Is there a gerontological feminism or a feminist gerontology, or perhaps neither? In this book, Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin travel a long way to unravel the paradox that the discourses of gerontology and feminism both fail to address adequately the issue of gender relations in old age. They argue that, given its focus on inequality for women in the public sphere of production, power and politics, the feminist movement can be accused of ageism, because they marginalise the experience of women older than the age of retirement. Social gerontology, on the other hand, can be accused of inadvertent ageism and sexism, since the lodestar that they follow is the life course experience of white, heterosexual, middle class men. At first reading, I thought the book was going to rework the ‘older woman’s lot’: as she outlives many of her contemporaries in poverty, poor health and isolation. I found however a refreshingly well-balanced account, in that it examines the experience of both men and women in later life and takes
The book has an introduction and eight chapters, and covers theoretical, temporal and societal perspectives on the experience of later life. Chapter 1 examines the social construction of age and to what extent this is influenced by complex social locations. There is an excellent discussion of ageism, and how it pervades society and is reflected in scholarship. The issue of ageism, in its overt and covert complex forms, weaves throughout the book, reminding the reader of its pervasiveness both in scholarship and in society. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which mainstream theoretical perspectives conceptualise gender and power inequalities, and finds them wanting. Chapters 3 and 4 examine notions of body image and sexuality, and open wider the debate on anti-ageing constructs and the widespread lack of awareness of the meanings of sex and sexuality to older people, especially women. They question the prevailing moral imperative to age ‘well’ or ‘successfully’, which raises the danger of classifying older men and women as ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’; very much as generations of people have been (and sadly persistently) labelled as ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. They stress the heterogeneity of later life experience, and argue for attention to the middle ground between active, youth-orientated early old age and problem-orientated late old age (in which most older people are situated and situate themselves).

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the diverse experiences of paid and unpaid labour and retirement, and how these are driven by power relations and the intersection of gender, race and class. Through a life course history of the ‘normal’ experience of white, middle-aged, middle class, men in paid employment, these chapters open up a discussion of old people as ‘deviant’ cases. Men and women beyond retirement age engage in a variety of paid and unpaid labour but the choices involved are mediated by social location and life history. The argument flows logically in Chapter 7, which examines the giving and receipt of informal care and how this is influenced in later life by changes in family and marital relationships. They highlight, for example, the increase in custodial grand-parenting among minority ethnic and working-class older women.

Chapter 8 provides an excellent overview of the preceding chapters. The authors elaborate a compelling case for theorising gender and age relations, rather than, as at present, ‘bolting on’ age to feminist discourse or gender to social gerontology. In this way, age becomes the focal dimension, and through this the authors give positive content and power to ‘old age’ and positive meanings of ageing, by contrast to social constructions of old as ‘not young’ and therefore deviant. They argue that a fundamental and pervasive societal ageism, which includes the internalised ageism of old people themselves, steers negative attitudes to getting old and being old. Calasanti and Slevin consolidate their argument in a highly readable, intelligent format, and have made a most valuable contribution to the understanding of later life. The book will add depth and strength to the reading lists of gender studies, gerontology and, importantly, mainstream sociology. I will certainly recommend it for the library.

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Late in the history of research into dementia, the academic community has acknowledged the importance of the subjective experience of people with dementia. This is leading to a refocusing of emphasis in dementia research and service provision. Dementia nonetheless remains a family affair, and it is important that the needs of caregivers continue to be taken into account. This book provides a welcome fillip to thinking on care-giver interventions. It is edited by three well-known American old-age psychologists, and draws together contributions from diverse professionals on fundamental issues and practical interventions pertinent to the provision of services for dementia care-givers. It is intended for ‘casual’ as well as specialist professional readers, but will probably only appeal to those caregivers who are already quite well read and informed.

The mission of the book is not entirely clear. It is neither a manual, as implied by the title, nor a scholarly review, as implied by a key statement in the preface: ‘we have sought to provide an overview of the current state of the art with respect to dementia caregiving intervention research’ (p. xii). On the whole, the book gives insufficient detail for the reader to implement the described interventions, though there are generous offers throughout of materials that are available through websites or by contacting the authors. Nor is the review comprehensive, for many up-to-date references are given but influential work from outside and inside the United States is not included. Two examples are the work by Nolan, Grant and Keady (1996) on understanding care-giving as a dynamic, longitudinal process, and the widely known, dementia-specific Caregiver Hassles Scale (Kinney and Stephens 1989).

Rather than being a clinical guide or a thorough review, this book instead promotes a new direction in care-giver interventions, that involves holistic understanding and comprehensive interventions tailored to the stage of the dementia journey. A major focus is the description of work in progress, much of it linked to a multi-centre, multi-faceted research initiative termed REACH (Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer’s Caregiver Health). The shift to not only intra-personal dynamics but also systemic, societal and political influences will be welcomed by many working in the field. One frustration from the many examples of current work is that their evaluation is incomplete, so effectiveness cannot be reported.

In addition to the emphasis on multi-pronged approaches, there is a strong and worthwhile message throughout the book on the need to be sensitive to cultural and individual differences in designing care-giver interventions. A strength of the book is its sensitive approach to several intimate issues that are rarely considered. Chapter 4 has a well handled discussion of how care-givers may cope with changes in sexual intimacy and urinary incontinence among spouses with dementia. In Chapter 13 on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender care-givers, professionals’ attitudes and service-users’ experiences are addressed carefully and thoroughly, while in Chapter 12 on the contribution on male caregivers, there is a
useful account of recent research and of specific considerations for service provision. For readers outside the United States, Chapters 3 and 11 on minority ethnic issues may feel alien in their description of a very segregated society.

Sometimes tensions creep into the book, probably a reflection of broader trends in health and social care, as between the effort to provide templates that will ensure thorough assessment and high quality service provision, and the exhortation to ensure that all interventions are individually tailored. As long as the provider uses systematically developed blueprints flexibly, they can be useful guides to assessment and intervention at particular stages for particular problems. The examples in Chapter 8 (p. 171 et sec.) on the ‘chronic care networks for Alzheimer’s disease’ are especially helpful.

Like many other edited books, this provides a varied mix. For me, the material was sometimes familiar and sometimes thought provoking, in parts not relevant to my context but in others pertinent and informative. The two most valuable chapters I found to be the first and the last, both of which provide considered commentaries from experienced and respected professionals on the state of the art and on ways forward in care-giver research and intervention.

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In 2000, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a British social research funding organisation, launched a timely and wide-ranging research programme on work and retirement in the United Kingdom. The ‘Transitions after 50’ initiative was designed to explore, firstly, the labour market experiences, decisions and constraints faced by older people and, secondly, the relevance and implications for social policy. So far, £800k has been committed to 14 research projects on a wide
range of subjects. The initiative is to be applauded, not only for devoting large funds to this important research field, but also for fostering research from many quarters. For those of us who have been active in this area for many years, it is heartening to find a major research funding body sponsoring policy-relevant research which addresses the challenges of an ageing labour force.

The three reports reviewed here approach the remit of understanding late-life employment transitions in contrasting ways. Elena Bardasi and Stephen Jenkins, of the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, use the British Household Panel Survey data to examine the relationship between people’s employment histories and their incomes in later life. They ask how trends have changed since the 1980s, how incomes vary between older age cohorts, and how finances fluctuate at and around the time of retirement. These are significant questions, given the decline in economic activity rates among older men since the late 1970s, the growing income disparities between rich and poor in retirement, and continued doubts about the capacity of state pensions to provide a decent income in old age.

Helen Barnes, Jane Parry and Jane Lakey, of the Policy Studies Institute in London, provide a very different perspective on late-life transitions, by focusing on the hopes and ambitions of people for whom work has partly or wholly ended. Their qualitative study examines the motivations and experiences of people aged 50–65 years in order to find ways of increasing their community involvement. The third research project, conducted by Stephen Lissenburgh and Deborah Smeaton, also of the Policy Studies Institute, investigated the relevance of flexible employment for people aged 50 or more years. The researchers use the longitudinal component of the United Kingdom Labour Force Survey to track movements into and out of employment over five quarters. Given the current concerns about the need to extend working lives and to encourage gradual transitions into retirement, such findings are critical to policy-makers.

Each of the studies provides a contemporary perspective on the work-retirement transition and is enhanced by the clear policy focus that is set out at the beginning or end of each report. Bardasi and Jenkins’s study reminds us that, despite the dramatic trends in early exit, the majority of men and women in Britain are still in paid employment when aged in the fifties. The effect is to provide the 50–59 years age group with much higher average income than the population as a whole. The authors point out, though, that this disguises substantial inequalities in income, and that these become more apparent after pension age. This is especially so for women in low-paid jobs and with broken employment service, and for men in some low-skilled occupations who prematurely exit the labour market. The report largely confirms the picture of income disadvantage that has emerged from other studies (e.g. Rake 2000; Ginn 2002), namely that those at higher risk of poverty in old age are women rather than men, older rather than younger, and those with relatively few educational qualifications and low earnings.

The complexity of the (early) retirement process is explored in detail by Barnes and colleagues’ study of people aged 50–65 years who negotiate a new identity in later life. Most of the 48 people interviewed for the research were no longer in paid employment. They believed that age discrimination in the workplace was a
fact of life, but that other factors were relevant to their decision to exit, such as their own or relatives’ health problems, disenchantment with the workplace, and an attractive early-retirement deal. Such influences have been widely documented (e.g. Thompson 1991; Taylor and Walker 1998; Cabinet Office 2000). Also well known is the importance of financial security and good health to a successful retirement. The study’s strength, instead, lies in the views expressed by its older research participants on the rewards of a new life after paid work.

Two interviewees are worth quoting for their expressive and infectious portrayals of their retirement roles. Looking after grandchildren, for one older woman, provided unexpected pleasures: ‘I would never have believed the joy a grandchild could bring … I loved being a mum, but being a gran is even more special, the love and the bonding, it’s so strong it’s incredible … it’s a different feeling from all the different feelings that you go through in your life’ (p. 13). For an older man who was ordained before retiring from teaching, his new experience had been ‘tremendous, something you can put your energy into and you also draw energy out of. And so for me, it has been a wonderful gift to be given … I adore it’ (p. 13).

In the summary, the authors suggest that flexible employment opportunities could provide a welcome bridgehead for those not yet willing to retire permanently. This is the central research concern of the third report, by Lissenburgh and Smeaton. They investigated the potential of flexible jobs (defined as self-employment, temporary jobs, part-time work and reduced working hours) to maintain labour market participation among the 50 or more years age group. They found that age and long-term health problems were the most significant reasons for older men and women leaving full-time permanent jobs. Importantly, these were also the biggest factors in preventing moves to flexible jobs. There was a strong tendency for those already well-endowed (as marked by income, occupational group and training provision) to move into flexible jobs rather than inactivity, although women in supervisory and managerial positions were more likely to stay in their full-time jobs.

This study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the ability of flexible jobs to extend working lives. Yet, there is much room for further investigation. It would be useful to carry out a study of flexible employment patterns over a much longer period, since the five quarters of the Labour Force Survey are too short. It would also be helpful for the three broad categories of self-employment, temporary and part-time working to be broken down, to reflect more fully the range of flexible jobs relevant to the workplace. Finally, it would be interesting to track the extent to which individuals are taking up flexible jobs with their existing employers or finding such jobs with other organisations, and whether in similar or alternative sectors or occupations.

These three reports provide readable and well-presented research findings of interest to students and policy-makers concerned with work-retirement transitions in the United Kingdom. The full set of 14 reports might be prohibitively expensive, however, given their price of around £13 each. Much would be gained by assembling a summary ‘Transitions After 50’ publication, which pulls together the most significant elements of the research findings. This would not only synthesise the many overlapping strands across the projects, but also provide an
affordable compendium for gerontologists and a launching pad for what one hopes will be another tranche of Rowntree projects.

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This report is a policy discussion paper on ways in which the adult education world, and other providers, can respond to the need for better financial knowledge and understanding among older people in the United Kingdom. It includes a review of the current position (including the great patchwork of different schemes and projects set up by the current British government for adult learners), reports from a series of focus groups and other research, and a set of policy recommendations addressed to official bodies and financial providers.

Over the past 30 years, as today’s older generation were becoming middle-aged and then older, there has been a steady increase in the availability and use of financial products of all kinds. In 1975, fewer than half of all adults held a bank account – today, around 85 per cent do. If the government gets its way, by shifting the payment of social security and old age benefits from post offices to direct bank credits, virtually everyone will have to have an account. Today, only seven per cent of households in Britain do not have any mainstream financial services, and 20 per cent have only one – but this still means that there are over two million adults with no financial services, and nearly three million with no bank or building society accounts.

Such ‘financial exclusion’ may be forced upon people by their circumstances, but there is also a justifiable mistrust of financial institutions and their salespeople, especially among older people. There also seems to be caution about taking on debts. Older people make up a very small proportion of the customers
of debt-advice agencies. No one really knows, however, whether this is because they do not get into debt or because they do not seek advice when they do. As people get older, however, the need for financial decisions within the modern framework does not go away – indeed, it looms larger because of life events like retirement, bereavement, and an increased need for help with daily living. The stinginess of British governments – whatever their political persuasion – towards contributory state pensions means that older people are increasingly having to navigate their way through complex private pension choices and through a morass of means-tested benefits.

The research found that many older people are interested in developing their financial understanding and skills, though only a few wanted sophisticated knowledge about such things as the stock market. Most people’s needs were more basic – understanding the small print of contracts, learning about financial planning and budgeting, knowing where to find understandable advice and information. In practice, older people have limited access to learning provision, though the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) has endeavoured to change this over the last ten years. In 2000 it embarked on a project with the Basic Skills Agency, Help the Aged and the Learning Freeway in Havering (a London Borough), to identify directly with older people what difficulties they encountered and what support they needed. They also worked with the Adult Financial Literacy Group, set up by the Department for Education and Science (DfES), to produce a briefing report on Financial Literacy for Older People (discouragingly shortened to FLOP). Since then, they have worked with the Halifax Bank plc, the Pre-Retirement Association and other agencies.

This policy document is one result of this work. Inevitably, many of its recommendations are that others should develop policies. The Cabinet Office and its Committee for Older People, it says, should undertake a strategic review of its policies in this area. The DfES should look at ways of bringing in the concerns of older adults on relevant learning programmes, and evaluate the use of a life-stages approach in adult ‘financial literacy’ programmes. The Department of Health should be looking at the promotion of financial literacy in its National Service Framework for Older People. The Learning and Skills Councils, the University for Industry, NIACE, the Basic Skills Agency and the Financial Services Authority should all look at promoting older people’s financial literacy through imaginative and accessible training programmes.

This is all most worthy, of course, and it is well explained and presented in the report. But in Britain we have a Secretary of State for Education who at times appears to believe that the fundamental purpose of education is to provide employers with better-equipped wage labourers. What are the chances of getting proper funding for a programme which might prevent older people being ripped off by banks, insurance companies and the utilities? Who would it benefit, except older people who don’t have the economic power that Whitehall cares about?

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