Book Reviews
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Perspectives on Friendship (Blieszner), Studying Workplace Intimacy (Marks), The Family Division of Labour: All Work is not Created Equal (Perry-Jenkins), Reclaiming Public Voice and the Study of Black Woman’s Work (Harley), Reflections of a Feminist Family Violence Researcher (Yllo) and Women Who Use Aggression in Close Relationships (Emery & Lloyd).

This book is certainly very useful for anyone wishing to familiarize herself or himself with feminist research in the area of close relationships. Furthermore, anyone working in any of the topic areas would do well to read the chapters in her/his area.

Although the book contains much research that reflects diverse (and under-studied) populations, my one caveat is that the book is American centred. All the authors are affiliated with American universities and, furthermore, no cross-cultural research is presented. Research on children is not included — the editors themselves note that there is a lack of feminist research on children. That aside, I found this book to be exciting and hope that it is the first of many editions.

R.C.B.

REFERENCES


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The Handbook of Aging and the Family integrates perspectives from two disciplines, family studies and gerontology, in response to the growing awareness of the importance of the family in later life. With this Handbook the editors aim to provide ‘a major reference book that includes a review, synthesis and critique of the existing body of literature and suggestions for research to advance knowledge about families and aging’ (p. xxi). Most authors of the 23 chapters have successfully completed the editors’ assignment to write a thorough review of the literature on their specific topic. They all provided a large number of up-to-date references. The editors included a bibliography of the most important works on family and aging. Thanks to the thematic ordering of the chapters by the editors, the handbook turned out to be a comprehensive and logically structured reference book.

The book opens with a foreword by Lilian Troll in which she highlights the common themes in the Handbook as, for example, the life-span view on aging families, and the perspective that older family members are ‘active individuals who work, retire, have leisure occupations, and who have reciprocal interest with others’. The book is divided in five sections. The first section provides general background information on older families and serves as a backdrop to the rest of the book. In this first section, Blieszner & Bedford describe the trends and challenges of the family context of aging. They summarize the content of the chapters and provide new directions for research on families and aging. Next, Hareven gives a comprehensive historical overview of family
relations in old age, and Kinsella describes demographic and epidemiological trends in both developed and developing countries that affect family structure and functioning. The second section combines four chapters dealing with various theoretical frameworks concerning the functioning of older families. Cohler & Altegott discuss general family theories and theories of aging and consider their potential to explain the functioning of late life families; Ryff & Seltzner use social psychology theories in order to understand family dynamics; Lopata provides a feminist approach to later life families; and Mancini & Sandifer apply theories of relationship functions, symbolic interaction and family development to the leisure activities of older adults. This section also holds the only chapter on methodological issues, in which Mangen discusses research methodology in general and the applications in family research in particular. The third section comprises four chapters devoted to different types of family relations. Huyck describes different types of couple relationships, Bedford reviews sibling relationships, Suitor, Pillemer, Keeton & Robison explore the quality of the relationship between old parents and adult children, and Robertson presents a review on grandparenting. The fourth section deals with the broader societal context of family life with the US and includes chapters on US-policy issues for the aged (Harrington-Meyer & Bellas), legal issues in old age (Wacker), cultural diversity among old age-groups (Johnson), aging in a rural context (McCulloch) and the larger networks of extended family and friends (Antonucci & Akiyama). Within the fifth section, chapters on major transitions in old age are combined with chapters on intervention strategies in older families. Retirement (Szinovacz & Ekerdt), illness (Dwyer), death of older family members (Moss & Moss) and widowhood (O’Bryant & Hansson) are chosen to be discussed as major turning points in later life. Travis provides a chapter on the combination of formal and informal care to older adults and in the final chapter, Qualls describes several therapy interventions to be used with older families.

The strength of this Handbook lies in the joint venture between two disciplines, family studies and gerontology. Throughout all chapters it is acknowledged that aging occurs in interaction with members of the nuclear and extended family and that family functioning changes when members reach old age. Yet, joining two disciplines implicates also the integration of the various theoretical frameworks from both fields. The Handbook makes it very clear that there is still a lot of work to be done in this respect. Not one of the four chapters on theoretical frameworks succeeds in presenting a new and integrative theory on family functioning in later life. This lack of theoretical integration arises from the broadness and complexity of the field; there are so many different aspects of late life families that one may study. One can focus on the older individual being the central person in the family, and study intergenerational or intragenerational relationships. One can also choose to study all members within one family and relate their individual behavior to the functioning of the family as a whole. As Lilian Troll also observed, most authors treat family systems as dyadic relationships, while the family system is very complex and consists of several actors that affect each other in their decisions and behavior. It is obviously difficult to theoretically model the complexity of the family systems, in which the aging of the members is also taken into account.

An important shortcoming of the Handbook is the limited discussion of methodological issues in family research. Mangen provides several examples of
connecting data from several family members at dyad level, but in general his
text is applicable to all types of research populations. I missed a second chapter
on methodology which could have dealt with collecting and analyzing data at
different levels—individuals, relationships, families. Since a family may also
be pictured as a small network, family researchers will benefit from methods
used in network analysis. It is a pity that Mangen did not go into problems of
data collection with family members, maintaining large response on all partici-
pating members over several times of measurement and so on. In particular
because this Handbook provides numerous new research questions, it is a pity
that it fails to provide a comprehensive overview of the research methods that
should accompany these questions.

Despite the lack of integrative theory and the limited methodological issues,
the Handbook is a major contribution to the fields of family studies and
gerontology. Due to its large potential as a reference book the Handbook is a
necessary requisite for every scientist and scholar interested in either one of
the many topics in family gerontology. It will challenge every researcher of
aging families and will certainly serve him or her with the necessary state of the
art on all kinds of topics. Hopefully, the Handbook will also challenge some
scholars to integrate theories from both disciplines and provide a theoretical
framework that is applicable to the functioning of all members of aging
families.

M.B.G