

# Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Torbjörn Bildtgård and Peter Öberg. *Intimacy and Ageing: New Relationships in Later Life*, by Bristol, ENG: University of Bristol Policy Press. Distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2017

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As I write, the task of checking the page proofs for the third edition of *Family Ties & Aging* (Connidis & Barnett, 2019) awaits, the end of a 2-year process of revising the second edition which has included reading a broad array of research and writing. As before, I am impressed by the broader and more inclusive range of questions that have been explored since the last edition. And yet the study of family ties and aging continues to pay disproportionate attention to the relationships of older persons with their children and grandchildren (the age range of most researchers) and to the impact of losing a spouse through divorce or death, with marked concern for the subsequent place of children and grandchildren in the lives of their now unattached elders. Despite increased attention to the intimate lives of older persons beyond long-term marriage among different-sex spouses, divorce, and widowhood, the topic of intimacy in later life has received relatively short shrift.

In their highly readable and well organized book, *Intimacy and Ageing: New Relationships in Later Life*, Torbjörn Bildtgård and Peter Öberg present a compelling historical and theoretical framework for understanding their empirically backed observation that old people are leading increasingly diverse and active intimate lives initiated later in life. As prior creators of the changes they are now negotiating, old people are far more accurately portrayed as major players in transforming intimacy than as conservative traditionalists who oppose it. The authors show that the move away from marriage, the appeal of staying single, the draw of cohabiting and living apart together (LAT), the importance of sex combined with love to intimate ties begun in later life, and the heterogeneity and complexity of relationships – past and present – are current realities of intimacy in older age.

Bildtgård and Öberg present a perspective designed to address the structural pre-conditions for late-life, cross-sex intimate relationships in Western societies, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of multiple approaches and their unique applicability to the intimate ties of older persons. The authors skillfully combine elements of the life course perspective, the emergence of the third age made possible by longer

healthier lives, the impact of consumer society, the transformation of intimacy that followed separating sex and procreation from marriage, the individualisation promoted by women earning their own incomes and by individual-based welfare state policies, and the changing nature of time in older age. Older persons negotiate intimate ties at a life stage with distinctive features including the absence of paid work and children, and the paradoxical nature of time—there is more free time and less time left— influences the choices they make about whether to have an intimate relationship and about how to engage in that relationship once chosen.

For those who get to experience the sweet spot of time after retirement and launching children but before debilitating frailty or illness, there is new latitude in the options for intimacy. Bildtgård and Öberg fill a void regarding the sources and implications of divorce culture for later life intimacy, and highlight two of its effects: divorce creates two single persons but widowhood produces only one, and divorce results in a less gender-skewed pool of older unattached persons. After an absorbing discussion of international data and research on intimate ties in older age, Bildtgård and Öberg focus on the experience of Swedes 60–90 years of age. With survey data from a national sample of 1,225 persons and interview data from 28 persons who were interested in or (mostly) already engaged in a new relationship at the age of 60 or older, the authors weave together quantitative and qualitative results, and use case studies to bring findings, concepts, and insights to life.

Applying the concept of linked lives, the authors explore the implications of other family ties, particularly adult children, for engaging in new intimate relationships and, in turn, the implications of new intimate ties for relationships with other family members, especially children. Although, like others, they find that adult children are not big fans of their parents remarrying because of its impact on living arrangements (in the case of co-resident children) and inheritance, adult children emerge as important relationship coaches to their parents, for example, by introducing them to online dating sites, and they tend to include their

parents' cohabiting and LAT partners in their family lives. Bildtgård and Öberg also uncover the significance of new intimate ties in older age to fostering a sense of autonomy for both generations. Older persons tend to define autonomy in terms of not relying on children, other family members, or friends; relying on a partner however does not threaten feelings of independence. In turn, the intimate ties of parents enhance the autonomy of adult children who feel less responsible for supporting their parents now that a partner can do so.

As well as encouraging more attention to intimate ties that emerge later in life, the authors' observations suggest other important research topics; for example, very long-term marriage. Bildtgård and Öberg document the staggering increase in the number of old people who celebrate their Golden Anniversary largely as a consequence of living longer, healthier lives. In Canada in 2016, among those 65 years of age and over, 75 percent of men and 49 percent of women were married (Connidis & Barnett, 2019), mostly to a long-term spouse. I believe that we should explore the continuing common experience of staying married into old age and what it means to stay married that long for the relationship and for the individuals in it. What enhances marriage for those who stay married in today's social and cultural milieu, one quite different from that of cohorts studied in earlier research on long-term marriage and from the times when today's old couples married?

Elsewhere I have urged social scientists to present our research as "good stories," accessible to a broader audience. Bildtgård and Öberg have told us an inspiring story about the changing realities of intimacy in later life, of older persons as key change makers, and of children as love coaches to their older parents—unless marriage is in the works. Maintaining a good story line sometimes requires having to simplify. Discussions of the third age and consumerism generally risk focusing

on the experience of older persons with resources. Although the authors note this weakness and periodically insert the significance of inequality among older persons, this is a part of the story that could be extended. At the same time, Bildtgård and Öberg make excellent links between the macro and micro levels, for example, in raising the significance of state support for individual choices and in highlighting secular and welfare state variations among societies that create different trends in intimate ties.

The authors end by asking whether today's Swedish experience is an anomaly or a harbinger of what is to come in other countries. I concur with their conclusion that Sweden provides a glimpse into the future of other Western societies. Although more commonplace in Sweden, we already see changes such as more cohabiting and LAT relationships in other countries, including Canada, especially Québec. Do I agree with every point that the authors make? No. Do I think that this is a thoughtful and engaging book with good ideas and data that move our understanding of intimate ties in later life forward? Absolutely. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the changing landscape of intimacy in old age, particularly to those teaching and doing research in the area. Indeed, I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the various family and personal ties of older persons, because core ideas are transferable to other relationships. Bildtgård and Öberg demonstrate the value of hearing the voices of old people and working beyond stereotypes of what is possible later in life using a clear and refreshing writing style. Finally a shout-out to Polity Press for continuing to publish research monographs as well as textbooks. This book shows us why it matters.

## Reference

Connidis, I. A., & Barnett, A. E. (2019). *Family ties & aging* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Keith A. Anderson, Holly I. Dabelko-Schoeny, and Noelle L. Fields. *Home- and Community-Based Services for Older Adults: Aging in Context*

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Home- and community-based care is frequently touted as a key solution to the many ills of the current health care system as it serves, or doesn't serve, our elderly patients and citizens. Lack of access to timely and appropriate home- and community-based care is often identified as a key bottleneck in many health care settings, contributing to overcrowding in the emergency

departments and bed shortages in hospitals. Risks associated with institutionalized care such as pressure ulcers, falls, polypharmacy, and even a decreased quality of life that can come from depersonalized care and lack of purpose are increasingly viewed as troublesome. The proffered solution to this situation is often person-centred services in a home- or community-based setting.