

***Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice across the Lifecourse.* By Ricca Edmondson. Bristol: Policy Press, 2015. Pp. 224. \$116 (hardcover); \$46.95 (paperback).**

Reviewed by Julia Velten

In her monograph *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom*, Ricca Edmondson negotiates the “crises of meaning” in old age that has often been discussed among gerontologists. In doing so, she makes a compelling argument for redefining the discourses surrounding the period of “later life” in terms of meaning and wisdom, concepts that, she argues, have lost their prominence in postmodern societies. Drawing from methodologies and theories of philosophy, behavioral science, anthropology, and cultural gerontology, the author “tries to make some implicit conceptions more explicit” (23). Thus, Edmondson claims that in social gerontology the importance of lifecourse meaning has always been implicitly addressed, yet, it remains unclear how this meaning is produced, how it can be given or taken away in certain situations in life, and how a lack of meaning might affect a human being. In her book, she sets out to fill this gap. Hereby, she offers an approach to aging and old age that tries to break up the binaries between young and old, successful and unsuccessful aging, and progress and decline by offering a perspective leading away from ability, independence, and economic worth toward the question of how to give meaning to a life at any stage.

In order to bring forth her argument, Edmondson uses interview material from other scholars’ work as well as her own. The great advantage of this mixture is that the examples chosen provide insight not only on the people of Western Ireland, where Edmondson herself works, but also about Germany, the U.S., and the U.K. Here, the author demonstrates that her methodological concepts can be applied to different settings in the Western world. Besides being transnational in that sense, the book includes views on meaning and the lifecourse from a wide range of temporal examples. Starting with the ancient philosophers Aristotle, Isocrates, and Cicero, the author draws on work by scholars from different historical periods, not

only in order to provide an insightful history of meaning in old age, but foremost in order to reintroduce ancient concepts and outline the value these concepts may still have for our discussion of old age today.

In her first chapter Edmondson lays the groundwork for her argument by retracing the negotiation of meaning across the lifecourse within the work of leading gerontologists. She explores meanings induced by religion or spirituality, as discussed by Michele Dillon (Edmondson 34-35). Furthermore, she analyzes theories of insight, wisdom, and purpose in old age posited by thinkers such as Viktor Frankel and Erik Erikson (37). Especially in connection to life meaning that is established through a purpose, she draws on Frankel's example of unemployment as a trigger for the loss of meaning in life. Here Edmondson questions the binary of youth and old age, since unemployment is not restricted to being old. Loss of meaning can thus occur at all stages in life and can in turn be regained in every life-stage. In a last subchapter, Edmondson then discusses how meaning in old age is subject to the cultural discourses of a given society and demonstrates that those discourses have been developing throughout history, giving old age in the Western world connotations of failure and uselessness (53). Even though leading gerontologists such as H.R. Moody and Thomas Cole argue that "creating meaning is a central project in aging, and that people in later life have significant views to offer" (52), negative cultural images of old age seem to prevail.

In the second chapter of the book, Edmondson proceeds to untangle the above mentioned theories of meaning and the lifecourse. She begins by suggesting that the negative imagery of the elderly not only in public media but also in medical discourse are too strong to give rise to a positively connoted language of old age. The absence of a meaningful language, conversely, has negative effects on the ways old people view themselves and their role in life. It is thus that Edmondson stresses the importance of language and discourse in the production of meaning. In a very insightful argument, the author connects the "crisis

in meaning” to a crisis of ethics and wisdom in general (88). In a society that is used to answering to facts rather than values, an uncertain concept such as meaning becomes unimportant. We are thus more attuned to the fact that the demographic change challenges our economy than to the value the elderly can have in society. Therefore, we are inclined to deny the elderly the notions of wisdom and insight that were historically assigned to old age. By taking into account aging studies, cultural studies, linguistics, and ethics, this second chapter of the book turns the reader’s attention to an interdisciplinary approach to old age that offers suggestions about how ageism is created through a lack of meaning and how it can be countered through an emphasis on insight and wisdom.

The main chapter of the book (chapter 3) deals with the key concept of Edmondson’s argument: meaning. She points to three different definitions of life-course meaning: connectedness with other people, development through time, and insight into the human condition (102). These three types of meaning are then again subdivided into three sub-groups each, leaving the reader with nine different approaches to meaning. Given this number of different approaches to the matter, Edmondson argues that what gives meaning to a person’s life is to a large extent determined by the culture a person lives in and the personal history he or she has experienced. It is one of the many strengths of the monograph that the author constantly raises awareness not only for the ever-changing nature of the concepts she is using but that she also explains how these concepts are being altered through the social and cultural environment they are used in. Thus, she not only hints at the cultural environment but also at the temporal setting. What is meaningful to a life changes over time and is in need of constant redefinition. The concepts Edmondson provides us with therefore cover a wide range of possible aspects that could make a life within a certain culture meaningful at a certain point in time. Reading old age through meaningfulness could hence provide a positive discourse of old age. It is thus that the book suggests a model for gerontological research that should make us sensitive

to cultural backgrounds and temporal differences and enable us to investigate the meaningfulness of the lifecourse.

The author seems well aware of the fact that wisdom, as she advocated it in chapter 2, is a concept in need of discussion. She thus spends an entire chapter (Chapter 4) on discussing several definitions of the term and what she means by arguing for a redefinition of old age in terms of wisdom. She explores how it is often argued that insight and wisdom are learned throughout a life (156) or how it is defined in terms of tolerance and a sense of justice (158). In her discussion of wisdom, the author calls for a “hermeneutically sensitive ethnographic approach” (164) that, as in her discussion of meaning, considers the cultural specificities that are involved in determining what is wise. In order to make this point even stronger, she traces notions of wisdom in works of literature and popular culture, showing how literary texts and films influence our notions of such fluent concepts. With narrative examples ranging from the works of Shakespeare to German television films, she ultimately shows that wisdom is not what a person knows but how a person acts. She thus advocates a “transactional” approach to wisdom, arguing that wisdom reveals itself in everyday transactions between individuals (204). In this sense, the author manages to steer her discussion of wisdom in old age away from stereotypical depictions of the elderly towards an approach that highlights value in old age without falling into the pitfall of opposing “positive” and “negative” aging.

Through its interdisciplinary approach, *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice across the Lifecourse* opens up a new perspective on the study of aging and old age. By being ever aware of the necessity to keep cultural and temporal differences in mind, Edmondson establishes a model for looking at processes of aging that can be used in different cultural backgrounds. Further, she takes concepts that are frequently used within the study of aging, such as meaning, wisdom, and insight, and redefines them

in a way that makes it possible for them to become a part of a new discourse of aging. She thus provides new tools for discussions in social gerontology and aging studies by suggesting that we ask for a sense of meaningfulness in life rather than repeating widely critiqued discourses of decline or positive aging.