

## **Mental Health in Later Life: Taking a life course approach**

Alisoun Milne

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There is an important time and place within academic conferences for socialising and non-academic events. At the 2001 World Congress of the International Association of Gerontology one such event was a retrospective on the printmaking of Rembrandt at the Vancouver Museum of Art. Rembrandt's visual record of himself as a physical, ageing man has offered a window to the 'soul' of a human being, a psychosocial portrayal of experience and existence. The images were inspiring and seemed to capture the imagination of a young academic, Alisoun Milne, as she enjoyed the exhibition. These works of art almost presage this culmination of her work on later life, mental health and psycho-social-structural impacts of lived experience on the individual.

It was a pleasure to review this book. Some books are simply of their time and Milne's *Mental Health in Later Life* is one such work. Published during the first year of almost global lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (on what would, poignantly, have been my father's 99<sup>th</sup> birthday!), it addresses the *zeitgeist* of mental health, maintaining which was a prominent concern for many during that year, especially in respect of people in later life who may have been isolated, cut off from friends and family. What makes Milne's work original and significant, however, is the focus on conceptualising growing older and later life within a life course approach.

It is the lens of the life course that presents real importance for social workers, policy-makers, educators and researchers. It recognises the significant impact that experiences in life can have on mental health, susceptibility to mental ill-health and well-being in later life. The central place of structural and social issues on the interpersonal and intra-psychic functioning of people, as we age, is clearly identified throughout the book's ten chapters.

The first three chapters lay the bedrock for the discussion, placing ageing populations in context, and drawing attention to specific concerns relating to mental health and ill-health in later life before expatiating on the socio-structural ramifications of a life course approach to mental health. Subsequent chapters explore specific risk factors and ensure that structural factors are considered alongside the ways in which individuals experience and internalise varied life events from poverty and socio-economic hardships to abuse and neglect. Dementia is, quite rightly given the demographic concerns and global policy developments, accorded significant focus in later chapters. Milne acknowledges that she has concentrated on some areas to the exclusion of others and this is important in allowing her the chance to go into appropriate depth. It also allows her to achieve the central aim of her book – to usher in a paradigm shift in which the life course takes centre stage in our thinking, research and practice.

The book is a *tour de force* of many years academic scholarship and research. It is destined to become a classic in the field and a reference point for scholars. This book will be accorded respect by a disparate group of readers from practitioners to educators and researchers but also offers much to the general, lay reader who seeks to be more informed. It is a must for social work students and practitioners, however, working with people in later life.

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