

An Essential Title on Meaning and the Lifecourse

Ricca Edmondson: *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom. Meaning and Practice Across the Lifecourse*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2015, 244 pp.
ISBN 978-1-84742-559-1.

Ageing, Insight and Wisdom has already been described as “tremendously learned”, “deeply reflected” and “eminently valuable”. After being immersed in Ricca Edmondson’s work during the summer months, I want to add a forthright, Finnish voice to the choir by calling the book simply “wise”. The volume is a very timely take on the scholarly discussion on ageing. Moreover, it approaches the topic from a firm ethical stance, against the exclusion of older people – or any other group, for that matter.

The book explores meaning and insight in later life from the perspectives of religion and spirituality, developmental and positive psychology, and social and political crisis. It combs through analyses of stereotypes and discourses, introducing and dissecting three different types of meaning, and offers a significant, elaborate contribution to theories and research on

wisdom. Through and through, the volume stresses meaning and wisdom in the lived context: in everyday life and social interaction, without imposing a univocal language on research subjects, nor presupposing that they have had the opportunity and readiness for complete analytical thought processes on these matters. For the research process, this means examining the indirect modes of communication that people use, instead of just asking questions.

The chapter on wisdom is of particular interest and importance – also when viewed in connection with ongoing discussions on positive psychology on the one hand, and discussions of “good ageing” on the other. Edmondson states that wisdom and meaning are found, cultivated and lived out in a social context. Wisdom, cumulative in this sense, can sum up the aims, values and culture of an entire society – also to the extent of defining it as a “wise society”. This is a different emphasis from that of positive psychology, which highlights individuals’ capabilities, and other lines of thought which emphasize independence and self-sufficiency as focal to “good ageing”. *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom* states that such views are but one side of the coin, providing plenty of food for thought. In this sense also,

Ageing, Insight and Wisdom is an apt crown to Edmondson's career thus far.

This is not a flip-through and find-the-facts textbook – although you *could* use it as a textbook, thanks to the wide scope and extensive knowledge the writer applies when leading the reader through perspectives on meaning and ageing. Rather, however, Edmondson's work is profoundly thought-provoking, inspiring, warm and heartfelt. What is left for other volumes is the operationalization of wisdom, especially in the quantitative sense, and in this process the definition of wisdom in relation to neighbouring concepts like compassion, virtues or human capital.

Perhaps the most imposing observation of the book is that meaning is also a political matter. "Ignoring the importance of meaning in relation to ageing", Edmondson states, "is in many ways the most exclusionary habit of all." (pp. 1) Politics and culture contribute to shaping preconditions of meaning: what can be meaningful and to whom. Both in politics and research, the absence of a discourse valid for meaning-making, together with ignorance of issues of meaning, "support the view that older people's lives lack intrinsic meaning" (pp. 204). This is a point taken

seriously by many contemporary researchers. But how to translate this concern into the language of politics and policy? Now that Edmondson and others have brought a discussion of meaning back into gerontology – according to H. R. Moody and Thomas Cole (1986, *Ageing and Meaning*), perhaps "the very thing we wanted to understand in the first place" – how could the themes of meaning, in relation to ageing, be brought back into politics, also and especially in times of economical instability?

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