Book Review

Pride and Prejudice: Breaking Down Socially Constructed Attitudes and Moving Towards a “Convergence” in Aging and Disability Studies

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Jeffrey and Eva Kahana, a mother and son team from different academic positions, tackle the critical issue of how the disability and aging fields could learn from one and other by sharing compelling personal family experiences as an enriching accompaniment to the data driven facts and theories presented throughout the book. Eva Kahana is a distinguished gerontologist who has spent her career researching issues that impact older adults and Jeffrey Kahana is lawyer who holds a PhD in policy history. Both authors have exemplar credentials and are experts in their fields, yet nothing has prepared them to write such a powerful book more than their own lived experiences of taking care of loved ones who are aging and who have a disability. In particular, Jeffrey has a child who was born with a disability and Eva shares her experiences in taking care of her mother, a Holocaust survivor, who travels into new territory as she becomes increasingly disabled as she ages. Eva also shares her own experiences in getting older with her husband and some of the challenges they have faced; in particular, she describes through an autoethnographic method their international journey and some of the stressors encountered as they traveled. The authors are successful in the difficult job of balancing the sharing of private, revealing stories about their lives while bolstering this with applicable theories and discussing pertinent policies and research that are tackling ways to advance both the aging and disability fields.

This book’s focus is on the effects of acquiring a disability later in life, it is not about aging with a disability; although, this is an important area that needs further exploration and has garnered more research in the recent past. This book tackles the issue of how older adults perceive themselves as they age and how disability that comes on in older age is conceptualized for the person in a very different way than for those who are born or who become disabled earlier in life. In fact, the authors argue that older adults who become disabled in late life often will never self-identify as a person with a disability: older adults will often embrace a culture that includes a “denial of disability” or “reluctance” to identify or call out their disability. This is a very different experience from those who have had a lifelong disability who are often part of a larger community of people with disabilities and who have crusaded for equal rights and feel pride in being part of such a strong group of activists fighting for inclusion and independent living. This is not the case for older adults who may have lived a life without a disability and who now have to face their greatest fear: living a life with declining mental or physical health—in essence a failure of the mind and body to age productively or gracefully. The authors frame this perspective through some of the dominant theories that have reigned in aging, such as productive aging or activity theory that focus on successful aging and remaining disability free. Kahana and Kahana offer adaptations to existing theories and frameworks throughout their book in an effort to embrace groups of all people living with disabilities regardless of age. Their goal is to “normalize” or “embrace” adults who acquire a disability later in life and to expand upon the definition of “productive aging”.

Kahana and Kahana discuss how older adults can “opt out” of a disability identity in a way that those who acquire a disability at a younger onset are not afforded that option.
They refer to this as “disability cognizance”, which is an
awareness that the older person might have a disability, but
an unwillingness to be categorized as such. This is the case
even though 63% of older adults have at least one func-
tional limitation. The authors offer a life course matrix to
onset of disability that could be very helpful to academics,
researchers, and policy makers to consider when envision-
ating how to redesign and deliver services to people who have
disabilities. They present three periods of disability onset—
childhood, young to middle adult, and late-life onset—bro-
ken down by disability type, trajectory, identity, model, and
support, just to name a few of the characteristics. What is
important in this matrix for professionals and researchers
in aging to consider is that there are stark differences in
opinion or approach between young/middle adult onset and
late-life onset of disability. For example, pride most often
characterizes identity for those with an early onset disa-
bility compared to an identity of rejection for later onset.
Another important distinction in the life course matrix falls
under the model, or guiding principle, for how services are
delivered. Specifically, people who have an early onset of
disability likely follow a social model (or an independent
living model) for service delivery whereas a medical model
of service delivery is more dominant for those with a later
onset of disability.

The authors dedicate a chapter to “Managing the
Physical Environment” to show us once again how the
goals of older adults and people with disabilities con-
verge—whether referred to as “aging in place” or “living in
the most integrated setting”—it is the desire across the ages
to live independently. DeJong (1979) published a seminal
article on moving from a medical model to the independ-
ent living paradigm and the differences within each model.
DeJong describes that the root of the problem lies within
society, professionals, and the environment in that barriers
are put up that prohibit successful independent living for
people with disabilities. This is at the crux of the independ-
ent living movement—to break down these barriers and
put the control back in the lives of the people who have
the disability. This chapter concludes that consumer voice
across the lifespan inclusive of age and disability is criti-
cal to developing policies and programs to help people live
independently. Historically, this is a place where the voice
of older adults have been less vocal and where we can learn
much from disability studies and advocates. Although, it
does seem that this trend is turning as Age Friendly ini-
tiatives across the country hold listening sessions and gain
critical consumer input from older adults about ways in
which the community they live in can support (or hinder)
independent living.

This in-depth book explores how aging and disability
fields can learn from each other and spans many disci-
plines as the authors bring in salient research and theories
from the fields of aging, sociology, and disability studies.
Relevant policies and historical contexts are also covered
throughout. Academics and professionals from many fields
will find this book an asset. It would also be a wonder-
ful contribution to a class reading list as the authors share
their personal stories through their professional lens in an
authentic yet scholarly manner.

This book makes a contribution to an area that is still
understudied and where additional scholarship is needed.
As stated, “although disability is part of the lives of a num-
ber of older adults, advocates for the elderly and those
concerned with disability have seldom combined forces”
(p. 26). We are seeing more of this through federal, state,
and local initiatives that are building upon the mission
promulgated by the Administration for Community Living
of community living and independence for both older
adults and people with disabilities across the lifespan, yet
there is still much work left for academics, policy makers,
and practitioners. This book offers insight into how we can
continue to move towards stronger programs for both older
adult and people with disabilities and that the “promise of
convergence in aging and disability studies” heavily relies
on learning from each other and breaking down silos so we
can become a more unified voice dedicated to strengthening
the lives of all people.

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and program and training evaluation.

Reference

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