

Older people, ageing and social work: Knowledge for practice

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At a time when the older population in Aotearoa New Zealand (and the rest of the world) is growing, and predicted to increase significantly in coming decades (Statistics NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2020) social work practice with this demographic is set to reach an unprecedented need. Coupled with a slower growth rate in the younger population, the resulting disproportionate growth of our older generations has led to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declaring 2021–2030 the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (World Health Organisation, 2023). With strategies implemented by WHO, the aims include reducing health inequities, challenging and addressing ageism, ensuring services are centred on older people, and providing appropriate care and support.

Therefore, the republishing of Hughes and Heycox's book in 2020 is timely for social workers as the need to enhance function and wellbeing of older adults in their social context becomes increasingly important for our communities, support systems and policies. Originally published in 2010, this book provides a comprehensive guide to the issues social workers will face when working with older adults. Being Australian based, the socio-political context does not always exactly reflect that of practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, but the issues, concepts and practice models for working with older people are relevant.

The authors are seeking to explore not only the issues that older people face, but

also the impact of the wider political and societal context, and models and strategies of practice for social workers.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of working with older people, the underlying psychosocial and health issues faced and the scope of this field of work. Hughes and Heycox rightly point out the diversity of the older population, not only in the span of chronological age, but also function and ability, as well as different demographics. The broader social issues of ageism and stereotyping of older people are raised (including in media and social media), as well as the current types of service provision for older people.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the scope of social work practice with older people, and place this speciality in familiar social work contexts, such as life-span development, practice models and frameworks. Of note is the point that services for older people are often task based, or centred around provision of practical support and services. The authors remind us to consider the use of other methods of social work practice, including those that may not be traditionally associated with older people, such as counselling or group work. They consider the demographics of the aging populations and the representation in, and influence of, government policy and strategies.

In Chapter 4 the authors explore various approaches to working with older people—

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this includes non-social-work approaches that may impact on the social work role, e.g., medical models. The benefits of a multidisciplinary approach to working with older people are addressed but it is generally considered that there is a lack of connection between research and practice in this field, and that an multi-perspective approach is beneficial to gerontological practice, including social work. The impact of these approaches on ageism, oppression and disadvantage on older people is subsequently addressed in Chapter 5, which brings to our attention the broad scope and diversity of our ageing populations. While raising issues for often marginalised groups within the ageing population (such as gender identity and refugees), I believe this chapter missed the opportunity to consider in more depth the inequity and disadvantage faced by indigenous populations. It does, however, address various societal values and stereotypes which affect this age group individually and within services and care provision.

Chapter 6 feels more relevant to Aotearoa New Zealand practice as it discusses the setting of social work for older people in a health and disability system similar to our own. Here the authors consider health, social and disability models and the context in which services and support for older people may fit, plus the pros and cons of this. The role of the social worker as an advocate vs that of case manager is also considered here. It leads nicely into Chapter 7 in which the role of family and community are discussed as both informal and formal care settings. Given this chapter's focus on care in the community and the resources required to enable this, again I felt there was a lack of consideration of cultural difference in provision of informal care.

Chapter 8 provides a broad overview of dementia and the stages and therapeutic models utilised for older people with this diagnosis and their carers. This chapter provided a helpful subtopic in its own right.

The provision of housing and residential care described in Chapter 9 was relevant in terms of the issues faced in this sector for older people, the solutions were based very much on the services provided in Australia, therefore of less direct practical relevance to Aotearoa New Zealand practice.

Chapters 10-13 provide a strong overview of topics specific to ageing and older people such as elder abuse, risk, and end of life. The chapter on intimacy and sexual relations is a positive inclusion of an aspect of life that is often overlooked for this group—part of the ageist stereotypes about older people and relationships. This brings the conversation back to the premise on which social work practice with this age group is based—empowering independent function and wellbeing.

Summary

In general, each chapter provides an introduction to potential impact of socio-political factors on the aging population, but also practice tools and strategies for social workers. I particularly enjoyed the activities throughout the book which provide the opportunity for reflection on the reader's practice.

I did think there was some recent context lacking given that the original text was released over 10 years ago. However, this does not detract from the comprehensive and readable content about social work with older people.

Working with older people covers a wide scope of practice dependent on the age, health, and other socio-economic factors that influence this client group. Hughes and Hancox have provided an extremely comprehensive introduction in this book—covering a range of perspectives including individual, interpersonal, systemic and political. I felt that indigenous cultural perspectives was the one area in which this text was somewhat limited. However, I also recognise that to try and go much further in

depth in any of these areas would have likely become unwieldy.

As it stands, I thought this book was an excellent introduction to social work with the ageing population, providing a combination of theoretical approaches in exploring this demographic within the (Australian) socio-political context, plus practice and therapeutic options, as well as the opportunity for reflection by the reader. Overall, the Australian system for social work with older adults is similar enough to that of Aotearoa New Zealand to make the content familiar and of use in our learning

and practice. Finally, what I really enjoyed about this text is that the authors recognise the specialist knowledge, complexity and challenge within the scope of practice when working with older adults, and shed light on the global need for development of social work practice in this often overlooked field.

References

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