

## Book Review / Compte rendu

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Amanda Grenier. *Late-Life Homelessness: Experiences of Disadvantage and Unequal Aging*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's Press, 2021.

In *Late-Life Homelessness*, Amanda Grenier brilliantly offers a multi-level analysis of a four-year critical ethnographic study on the “forces, histories and unanticipated events that accumulate through disadvantage” (p. 15) from the perspective of older people experiencing homelessness and community stakeholders working in the shelter system and long-term care. Grenier’s examination was complemented by studies and approaches from social gerontology, sociology, social work, labour and policy studies, and geography. While the book is reliant upon an eclectic collection of studies and scholarship, Grenier’s theoretical commitment to critical gerontology is clear. The interdisciplinary approach reflects the complexities of late-life homelessness and the need for radically contextual, multi-level responses.

Despite the complex nature of the problems explored, the research questions appeal to a variety of readers, and address: How do we understand and define late-life homelessness? What happens at the intersections of aging and homelessness? What needs to be done? Through a careful focus on these three poignant and concise questions, which are helpfully highlighted throughout the book, Grenier extends the scholarship on late-life homelessness from a first-person perspective and, in doing so, exposes unequal aging as the consequence of disadvantage, exclusion, and inequality. Unequal aging is explored in-depth throughout the nine interrelated chapters, organized into three sections.

The first section (chapters 1, 2, and 3) establishes the context for the study and broader theoretical and methodological approaches employed throughout the research and articulated within the book. Chapter 1 situates late-life homelessness within a major Canadian city, Montreal, in relation to broader global trends. Chapter 2 overviews the state of the knowledge on late-life homelessness, identifying three key trends in the literature that established the direction of critical ethnographic research: a) individual pathways and trajectories into homelessness; b) focus on older people’s health, co-morbidities, and unique needs; and c) possibilities for policy and practice. Chapter 3 describes the theoretical (critical gerontology) and methodological (critical ethnography) foundations for the research.


The second section (chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7) shares key findings from the research. The first one, explored in chapter 4, is that an emphasis on “chronological age” fails to account for the various ways aging is socially and culturally constructed, perhaps most egregiously evidenced in data on the susceptibility to premature death for people experiencing homelessness in Canada. As Grenier explains, it is very likely that a person experiencing chronic homelessness will die before the age of 40 (especially the case for Indigenous peoples, more fully explored in chapter 6), and, so, services designed and offered to the unhoused older population (defined as age 65 and older) are entirely too late. In chapter 5, late-life homelessness is examined in relation to place to argue that spaces and places of homelessness—street, shelter, and long-term care—differently impact the experiences of late-life and unequal aging. To extend the argument from chapter 4, the social and cultural construction of aging is not limited to policies and processes; it also informs (access to) the built environment, which equally structures experiences of aging within and across different places. Chapter 6 builds on the earlier analysis of age and place to focus on late-life homelessness as an experience of accumulated disadvantage *over time* (rather than chronological age). This is an important contribution of the book as it is relevant to all studies that explore health (or so-called “successful” aging) as a manifestation of more than mere biological processes but also political, economic, and socio-cultural priorities that intervene on the human body. Chapter 7 discusses the major theme of social exclusion and abandonment from interview data to argue that late-life homelessness is social exclusion, perpetually lived and experienced in everyday life, and that policies and responses (intended to aid unhoused older people) exacerbate experiences of social neglect, geographic expulsion, and political abandonment.

The third section (chapters 8 and 9) uses the critical analyses and findings explored to offer suggestions for future change. In chapter 8, Grenier suggests a range of immediate, mid-term, and long-term interventions to prevent disadvantage and eliminate homelessness across the lifespan. This encapsulates some preventive policy approaches (i.e., better integrate an age-lens into public policy responses to account for the different needs of people throughout their lifespan; design mechanisms to support people at critical moments, e.g., loss of work, intimate partner violence, eviction; prevent inequality and disadvantage; and maintain a commitment to principles of social justice) as well as practical strategies for the future. Most important was the focus on tri-government support and funding. Chapter 9 then emphasizes the moral imperative to develop political and more socially just responses that do more than focus on the individual, and instead recognize the influence of political and economic priorities that contribute to unequal aging.

The book is an incredibly timely and important political intervention, particularly within the context of population aging and its intersections with the Canadian housing affordability crisis,

continued crises of social care, exponential inflation, and a breakdown of private pension schemes. The connection to political and economic priorities is most closely attended to in chapter 7 in the discussion of displacement, punishment, and expulsion. Due to this broader context of crises of contemporary capitalism and ongoing colonization, reference to the political economy and built environment is maybe the most crucial site for future intervention. The strength of the critical ethnographic work adds new theoretical and practical angles of analysis to understand homelessness, particularly later in life. As such, Grenier provides the foundation for future scholarship to examine neoliberal economic and political priorities and related policies that permit suffering and allow (older) people with experiences of homelessness to be

effectively abandoned. Ultimately, the success of the book, and overall research project, is the detailed insights on policies, programs, and practices that need to be transformed to better mitigate homelessness from the perspective of older people and community stakeholders experiencing and navigating these very systems in everyday life. It is a must read for anyone interested in social justice, particularly those striving to create a radically different, more equitable world for current and future older people.

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