

Book Review

The Golden Years Are Not so Golden for Some

Patricia A. Thomas, PhD*

Department of Sociology and Center on Aging and the Life Course, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

*Address correspondence to: Patricia A. Thomas, PhD, Department of Sociology and Center on Aging and the Life Course, Purdue University, 700 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2059. E-mail: pthomas4@purdue.edu

Deborah Carr. (2019). *Golden Years? Social Inequality in Later Life*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, NY, 376 pp., \$35.00 (paper).

With the population aging, the growing number of older adults has been accompanied by growing concerns about its impact on society and on older adults themselves, prompting important research on this timely topic. In many ways, the overall picture of older adults is that they are doing quite well today compared to the past: the average older adult lives a longer and healthier life than they did a hundred years ago. However, one of the major themes Deborah Carr discusses in her book, *Golden Years? Social Inequality in Later Life*, is that this aggregate picture masks the tremendous variation in older adults' experiences and outcomes, and much of this variation is rooted in structural inequality across the life course, especially as it pertains to socioeconomic status, race, and gender. She juxtaposes these divergent paths in chapter titles such as "The Fit and the Frail," "The Satisfied and the Sorrowful," and "The Loved and the Lonely," encompassing topics of physical health, mental health, and social relationships/isolation, respectively, among adults in later life. She shows how those who are disadvantaged in socially patterned ways are also more likely to be disadvantaged in terms of worse physical and mental health, a greater risk of social isolation, and worse living conditions, compounding their disadvantages. On the other end of that spectrum, those who are most advantaged are more likely to benefit from experiencing fewer stressors, having greater resources to cope with stress, living in safer neighborhoods that offer greater access to exercise opportunities and nutritional foods, having greater access to health care and medical advances, and being able to afford better residential options and better long-term care options in late life. Although death is inevitable for everyone, Carr discusses how even the likelihood of a "good" death is often more within reach of those who are already more advantaged.

This constellation of advantages and disadvantages does not simply begin in older adulthood. Although this book focuses on later life, Carr also discusses the lead-up to these golden, or not so golden, years in terms of accumulating advantages or disadvantages, and inequality across the life course. Carr provides particular attention to the impact of stress exposures throughout an individual's life. Carr points out that those who are disadvantaged are more likely to experience greater exposure to stressors, experience more severe stressors, and have fewer resources to cope with the stress they experience. She shows that these stressors typically do not occur at just a single time point, but rather accumulate and compound across the life span, further widening inequalities between those who were advantaged or disadvantaged early in life. Socioeconomic status, race, and gender can shape the experiences individuals have in childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and midlife, which all accumulate and influence the ways in which people age in divergent paths. The life-course perspective also helps us understand the ways in which historical contexts, the timing of events in a person's life, social relationships, and individual choices within historical and social constraints impact an individual's life chances and outcomes. Carr discusses these unique circumstances for the aging Baby Boom cohort and suggests ways in which those belonging to Generation X, Millennials, and beyond may have similar or different experiences as they age into older adulthood.

In addition to a thorough synthesis of the literature, one of the things that stands out about this book is its focus on policy. Carr discusses policies that impact older adults, such as Medicare and Social Security. These have helped increase the standard of living of older adults, reduced poverty, and reduced inequality, but Carr demonstrates that a large amount

of inequality persists. She discusses a variety of other policies that could benefit the quality of life of older adults, from health-care issues, such as expanding the access to and quality of long-term care and hospice care, to policies that facilitate caregiving and end-of-life planning, to policies that address structural inequalities from early childhood to older adulthood.

Carr's book is an excellent examination of the lives of older adults and the impact of social inequality throughout the life course, which shapes the experiences and outcomes of adults in later life. Her discussion of both current and potential policies and strategies to reduce inequality and improve the lives of older adults is timely and relevant. Carr weaves in stories of

specific older adults' experiences, which humanizes the broader social patterns she describes. She cites rigorous research to demonstrate these patterns, with writing that is engaging and accessible both to academics and broader audiences.

doi:10.1093/geront/gnaa017

Patricia A. Thomas is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and a Faculty Associate in the Center on Aging and the Life Course at Purdue University. She studies the impact of social relationships and social position on health across the life course.