

Book Review

Ellen Cole & Mary Gergen, Eds. *Retiring but Not Shy: Feminist Psychologists Create Their Post-Careers*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications, 2012. 410 pp. ISBN 978-0984865666 (pbk).

Michelle N. Lafrance
St. Thomas University

Picture this:

A silver-haired woman looks up lovingly at her husband in front of a large and meticulously well-kept suburban home. She is angled toward her husband, both arms wrapped around him. His posture is square on to the viewer, one arm around her, his other hand casually resting in his pocket. Both are smiling.

This image, taken from the first link to appear from a Google search of “retirement,” depicts the master narrative—this is what retirement is supposed to look like. The picture is white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and (upper) middle-class. The man, as the primary breadwinner, has presumably ensured a happy and leisurely retirement through good financial planning and investment. Retirement is joyful and relaxing—the reward for a productive life in a capitalist economy.

The edited book *Retiring but Not Shy: Feminist Psychologists Create Their Post-Careers* serves as an important counter-point to this master narrative, disrupting and expanding the fundamental assumptions about what retirement is typically understood to entail. The book brings together a collection of personal essays from leading voices in feminist psychology, both in practice and academe. In her introduction to the book, Michelle Fine aptly describes it as:

a textual pajama party of essays by the very women who pioneered feminist psychology through Division 35 of the APA

[Society for the Psychology of Women, American Psychological Association]; the very women whose writings disrupted and transformed the discipline of psychology insisting that gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality be central to psychological analyses; the very women whose shoulders (and minds and hearts) we all stand upon. (p. 19)

As could be expected, given the collection of eminent feminist authors in this volume, this is a refreshingly transgressive book in a number of overlapping ways.

First, retirement is re-storied from the perspective of women who, having forged some of the first inroads in professional psychology in the United States, describe their experiences as central, sole, or primary wage-earners. As many of the contributors note, little is known about women's experiences of retirement, and this book fills this notable gap in the literature. Further, the book serves to continue these women's legacies of mentorship by providing guidance and wisdom for next generations. As a feminist scholar looking ahead many years to my own retirement, I hungrily devoured the information, personal reflections, and practical advice provided by women whose work I have known and admired for years. What Paula Caplan's *Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World* was to me as a graduate student, *Retiring but Not Shy: Feminist Psychologists Create Their Post-Careers* is to me mid-career: insightful, wise, and practical guidance for women negotiating professional careers. I am grateful for the generosity of contributors who share candid reflections, both painful and joyful, about their experiences of life in transition. Having read this important book, I feel better equipped to prepare for my own journey ahead and reinvigorated in my commitment to continue the tradition of mentorship set out by these trailblazers.

Second, the book disrupts the master narrative of retirement by exploring the subject from a range of perspectives and social locations including racial, ethnic and cultural background, sexualities, health and disabilities, income, and spiritual traditions. As such, it represents a collage of voices who explore issues and experiences typically left unheard in the retirement literature. The book provides inroads into understanding the intersectionality of power relations in relation to retirement experiences.

Third, while many stories describe freedom, renewal, and pleasure in retirement, many also expose the challenges that are so often rendered

invisible in mainstream representations. Instead of the third-age fairytale where man and woman walk together into the sunset of retirement (often depicted in gauzy white clothing kicking in the surf on a remote beach), these stories also tell of divorce, illness, loneliness, financial strain, doubt, sadness, worries, and boredom. Contributors candidly and generously share how they managed the struggles that inevitably present in life in general, and times of transition in particular. It was refreshing and normalizing to hear of these pioneering and iconic feminist figures discussing struggles with division of household labour, self-doubts, and challenges in work and interpersonal relations. Contributors' human and honest reflections supported my own, and enabled me to learn as much about myself as a feminist and a scholar as about retirement.

Following a forward by Ellen Cole and Mary Gergen, and Fine's introduction, the book begins with reflections from those considering retirement, collected in a section entitled, "Poised on the Diving Board." This section of the book also includes informative essays by Asuncion Miteria Austria and Janet Sanchez-Hucles summarizing the research on women in retirement, particularly in relation to the experiences of minority women. The book proceeds with a second section of essays by women in the early stages of having left paid employment ("The Mid-Air Plunge") and the final set ("Splash Down and Re-Entry") written by women who took the leap years ago and who are experienced in swimming in new waters.

I also appreciated the wealth of practical advice offered by contributors. Given that, as Asuncion Miteria Austria notes, "25% of one's adulthood can be spent in retirement" (p. 25), careful attention to and planning for this phase of life is essential. Many contributors describe having underestimated the savings required to retire comfortably, and discuss the importance of learning about financial planning early (e.g., Sanchez-Hucles; Henderson Daniel; Saarni; Josefowitz Siegel; Weiss). Hill also offers practical advice for private practitioners in terms of financial planning, including calculating overhead and billing practices. In a unique and inspiring chapter, Kimmel offers detailed suggestions for those considering adventures in co-housing. Repeated throughout many of the essays is the importance of nurturing relationships with family and friends and finding meaningful ways to invest one's energy. Several contributors warn against "living to work" in ways that reminded me of Mark Freeman's (2000) concept of "narrative foreclosure," in which, essentially, the self dies when one's story dies. Instead, Weiss passionately urges readers to "Get a life before you retire. . . . If your

entire life revolves around work, then your life stops when your work does” (p. 355). In a similar vein, the term *retirement*, itself, is troubled in its suggestion of finality hinging on a date: “Retirement is a series of transitions and not a date” (Schlossberg, p. 207); “Retirement is a shift, not an end” (Banks, p. 265). As Fine reflects in introducing the book, given that these are the very women who led the way in challenging and troubling mainstream psychology, is it any wonder that these same women are now “queering” the definition of retirement (p. 20)?

This book will be an invaluable resource for women and men from across a range of academic disciplines and career stages. It will also be useful for students and practitioners working with individuals in transition, especially around issues of career. It is an engaging, thought-provoking, and highly readable resource that, in true feminist form, pushes back on hegemony while deepening and expanding understandings of women’s experiences. As Mary Gergen victoriously proclaims in describing the contributions of the authors to the book, “We are pioneers, and through our stories, new ways of creating post-careers are produced” (p. 14).

References

- Caplan, P. (1994). *Lifting a ton of feathers: A woman's guide to surviving in the academic world*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Freeman, M. (2000). When the story's over: Narrative foreclosure and the possibility of self-renewal. In M. Andrews, S. Slater, C. Squire, & A. Treacher (Eds.), *Lines of narrative: Psychosocial perspectives* (pp.245-250). Toronto, Canada: Captus University Publications.

Michelle Lafrance, PhD, is Professor of Psychology at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. Her research and teaching interests are rooted in critical, postmodern, and feminist approaches, exploring the social construction of distress and wellbeing. Her book, *Women and Depression: Recovery and Resistance* was published by Routledge and she is currently co-editing a second book with Dr. Sue McKenzie-Mohr, provisionally entitled *Creating Counterstories: Women Resisting Dominant Discourses in Speaking their Lives*. She is a founding member of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative and an executive member of the International Society of Critical Health Psychology.