Introduction to Part III

Aging and the Latter Years

Our goal in the final section of the volume is to illuminate the ways in which race and ethnic identities play a role in the latter years of one’s life. We argue that individuals in their latter years, having gone through the process of childhood, adolescence, and middle adulthood, continue to shape and are shaped by race or ethnicity in their lives. We go beyond the more stereotypical concerns of age-related issues pertaining solely to the health status of individuals of various race and ethnic groups in their latter years. Concerns regarding conditions of health are present. However, they are not all-encompassing. Thus, we bring to you a range of essays that show the ways in which adults in their latter years are influenced by the social structures of race and ethnicity, as well as how they interpret the social realities of race and ethnicity, including their own identity in which they are embedded. The lifecourse of this group, then, should be understood accordingly.

The first essay in this section is an autoethnography by Fred L. Pincus. It is called *Prejudice and Me: A Sociological Memoir*. Pincus, who identifies as a “white Jewish boy” writes about his racial and ethnic experiences and understandings beginning from his childhood until the later years of his life. His story is particularly compelling because he is able to show the reader his own process of moving from being prejudiced, to questioning those prejudices, to becoming a sociologist who taught and studied race and ethnic relations. And yet, he asserts that his knowledge of race and ethnic relations is anything but complete. As a retired professor, he notes that his knowledge on the topic is still evolving, and that is simply because he continues to “encounter” race and
Next is the story of Grandma written by Ynez Wilson Hirst and Belinda C. Lum. Their essay is called “I’m Not Indian”: Understanding Identity Construction through Grandma’s Life Story. Hirst and Lum show that Grandma continues to negotiate her multiracial identity. The authors argue that Grandma, who is Mexican American and Native American, struggles to acknowledge the Native American part of her identity. It goes back to her early childhood experiences when her father left her, along with her brother, at a boarding school for Native Americans. Experiences at the school and those subsequent to that were also important in Grandma’s understanding and negotiation of her racial self-concept. Very effectively, Hirst and Lum take us through Grandma’s life and show that she is not a passive recipient of her life. She makes sense of her life. At the same time, Hirst and Lum argue that how she makes sense must be connected to the larger society of which she is a part. More specifically, they emphasize that Grandma’s story demonstrates the importance of considering history, trauma, memory and social conditions in the construction of racial and ethnic identities.

Grandma’s story is followed by A. Nancy Mendoza and Joyce Weil’s essay “Pues a mi me da gusto, porque ando con mis nietos;” Latina Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren’s Reflections About Identity and the Caregiving Role over the Lifecourse. Mendoza and Weil continue with the ethnographic methodology that goes beyond the top-down trends of quantifying or romanticizing the familismo concept (of family-centeredness), which can create a one-dimensional fixed image of Latina grandmothers as ancianas or abuelas (matriarchs or grandmothers). As part of a larger study that builds on grounded theory, Mendoza and Weil present four case studies—two of self-identified Mexican grandmothers raising their grandchildren in Northern Colorado along with two counternarratives of non-Mexican grandmothers. They focus on the way each woman sees her caregiving role as part of the cultural role as well as the women’s evaluation of that role.

The section concludes with Laura Sullivan and Tatjana Meschede’s essay entitled, Retirement Security for Households of Color: Disparities During the Lifecourse Compounded in Old Age. Sullivan and Meschede point to the macro social forces of race and ethnicity and their adverse impact on the socioeconomic status of non-white elders. The essay
takes a macro approach to explore the multiple jeopardies of being older, non-white, and without financial security. The authors show that non-white elders are disadvantaged because they have poor access to credit and their homes are valued at much less. That they are more often targeted by illegal or fraudulent lenders adds to their socioeconomic disadvantage. By so doing, Sullivan and Meschede point to the significance of race and ethnicity throughout the life-course, including the latter years. They conclude with suggestions for policy making that they assert will help address the disadvantage in the lives of non-white elders.

Note

1. There are multiple influences on the lives of people throughout the life-course. We mention the structural forces of race and ethnicity here because that is the focus of this book. But, as the essays in this volume show, we also focus on the many ways in which race and ethnicity intersects with other categories of social differentiation and shapes the lifecourse.