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book review

Julia Twigg, j.m.twigg@kent.ac.uk, University of Kent, UK
Pat Armstrong and Suzanne Day (2017)
Wash, wear and care: Clothing and laundry in long-term residential care
McGill-Queens University Press
206pps
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What could be more ordinary, mundane and neglected than laundry – the day-to-day
processes that turn wet and crumpled sheets, damp towels, grubby jumpers, stained
knickers, and worn and crumpled skirts into smooth clean piles of linen, fresh soft
garments neatly placed on hangers or in drawers? However, as the authors of this
insightful and imaginative study show, the activities that underlie this transformation
can reveal central truths about care, allowing us to explore its provision in new and
fruitful ways.
Interestingly, the authors did not initially embark on a study of laundry. It was,
rather, their commitment to feminist political economy that revealed the significance
of the topic to them. Feminist political economy, for them, is both a powerful
theoretical tool and a source of political critique, drawing attention to how gender
lies at the heart of care, across the formal–informal boundary of the economy and
the family.
The subject of laundry is not confined here to sheets and towels, but encompasses
clothing more widely, and the book picks up on arguments about the significance
of dress in the maintenance of identity – clothes matter. Dress is part of how we
perform and experience our identities at an embodied level, and these processes
persist even under conditions of considerable frailty and mental decline, allowing
us to endorse at the level of touch and feel the sense of who the person was, and
remains. Dress also matters for relatives, and the study recounts what the authors
rightly recognise as one of the ‘iconic’ moments of long-term care when bemused and
angry relatives encounter a family member in strange or poorly cared-for clothing.
For those operating at a higher managerial level, this can seem a minor matter, but,
as the study shows, this is not the case: such visible, material presences can seem signs
of larger neglect and loss.
The book is particularly strong in its recognition of the role of front-line care
workers, and – sadly and all too often – the potential for their exploitation. It
recounts the impact on the care system, particularly in North America but also
in the UK, of the neoliberal political project of the late 20th century, which has
resulted in the extensive transfer of care into the private, for-profit sector and, with
it, a material reduction in the terms and conditions of workers: usually female, often
from minority ethnic groups and increasingly living and working under insecure
and stressful conditions. It is not only the care workers who have been losers; the
book also describes some of the ways in which these developments have impacted
negatively on the lives of frail elders.
The study is cross-national in character and includes an analysis of different care
systems and their ideological underpinnings, drawing on a variety of ethnographic,
observational and textual techniques. Six countries are explored, chosen to reflect
Esping-Andersen’s familiar typology of welfare state regimes. Thus, Canada, the US
and the UK represent the liberal model, Norway and Sweden represent the social
democratic, and Germany represents the conservative. Enduring differences between
these models, and particularly their consequences for the workers providing care,
are explored in the study. Across all of them, however, there has been a significant
shift since the 1980s towards a more neoliberal political regime. This has been most
marked in countries like Canada and the UK, where neoliberalism has always had
a stronger political base.
This is a fascinating book that would be of interest to anyone with an involvement
– academic or political – with the field of long-term care. It also has considerable
potential to draw in students, showing them how care is both a practical, day-to-day
issue and also one that is embedded in politics, interwoven as it is with the central
issues of love, exploitation, gender, family responsibility and political theory. Finally,
the book is a welcome contribution to the growing emphasis on materiality in care
studies and more widely.