

a book, especially when it is one that is written with so much personal investment. And therefore the evaluation, just as when judging research, in Finlay's words 'depends on the beholder – whatever works for you.' And you don't really know this unless you try.

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The Psychology of Retirement: Coping With The Transition From Work

Derek Milne. (2013). UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Derek Milne's *The Psychology of Retirement* is described by its publishers, Wiley-Blackwell as 'the first text of its kind to draw on proven psychological coping strategies'. If gut feeling suggests this is an extravagant claim, I can tell you I would have been of the same mind until I began to study retirement literature myself some years ago, and was surprised at the paucity of specifically psychological application to retirement – so this is a welcome contribution to the much wider sociological and organizational canon. Milne applies tried and tested theories from psychology to the process of retirement (often an unexpectedly stressful transition to a very different life) employing case studies to illustrate his suggestions. He frames his book dexterously around the acronym RECIPE which he tells us is:

Resources (e.g. sufficient money)

Exercise

Coping Strategies

Intellectual activity

Purpose

Engagement (social support).

His book employs a 'self-help' approach, incorporating all that is useful and straightforward in such a method but also, inevitably, some

of what could be viewed as cursory.

Milne's most interesting central theme is that which concerns 'stress, stressors and coping' and although he never mentions the word 'existentialism', I'm assuming that readers of this publication will be with me in recognising common threads in the following analysis of 'stress':

First a word on definition, which is much needed in relation to the confused concept of 'stress'. Although the term is usually associated with unpleasant events [...] it is more accurate to view stress as a pressure, something that we feel we have to react to in some way.

(p 14)

He goes on to tell us that individuals show highly variable reactions to stressors, some people remain unaffected by stress, some are extremely distressed and 'ruminate' on their 'woes', while others '*appear to mature more rapidly as a result of managing difficult circumstances effectively...*' (p 15) In existential terms anxiety and stress are, of course, not equivalent: for Kierkegaard (1884/1970) anxiety is a general dread concerned with lack of meaning; for Sartre (1943/2003) anxiety acts as a kind of 'moral conscience' brought about by an inescapable sense of responsibility for one's own choices and actions. I would suggest that Milne is referring to 'stress' in the same way – i.e. if utilised, it provides a similar motivating force on people who are no longer 'distracted' by work, to combat emptiness, and to create more fulfilling lives for themselves.

We are then introduced to 'coping' beginning with Freud's spectrum of unconscious coping through denial, intellectualisation and repression, and its dangers (for Freud, of anxiety or depression); but Milne is more interested in the conscious coping he wishes his book to encourage. He points out that coping is more important at this stage in life, as loss of physical and mental capacities can be conceived as 'threatening' and that when lonely, as a significant proportion of retired people are, adopting an attitude of 'active solitude' can be a healthy form of coping. He cites Lazarus and Folkman (1984 p 141) as a source for one definition of modern psychology's view of 'coping':

'an ongoing process of personal adjustment that enables individuals to maintain their functioning during stressful periods, but also, a specific, deliberate and effortful process of thinking, feeling and behaving to reduce or remove stress (and the associated emotional or physical distress), leading us to maintain our wellbeing and to develop as a person.'

It is of course, open to question exactly what kind of 'deliberate and effortful process of thinking, feeling and behaving' is being referred to

(because as psychologists/psychotherapists we have all the way from CBT to Mindfulness at our disposal), and whether the word ‘feeling’ can legitimately be included in such a statement. These solutions which he refers to as ‘active coping’ are the subject of the central chapters in the book: ‘Reframing Retirement’, ‘Relating Retirement’ and ‘Supporting Retirement’, each neatly illustrated by a pertinent case-study.

There is a section in ‘Reframing Retirement’ entitled ‘The Good Life’ which suggests that *‘the familiar modern-day answer to the question about the most desirable life is perhaps often “to be rich and famous”’* (p 67); Milne also discusses the Socratic notion that *‘the good life cannot simply be characterized in terms of getting what you want, regardless of how this affects others’* (p 67). This brings me to the question: who is the book written for? On reading the above I wondered how many people reach their mid sixties with either of these attitudes intact. In the early chapters, the book gives us a very comprehensive review of retirement research, but thereafter it focuses (apart from addressing ageing and death, of which more later) on what makes for a good life at any age, and is very informative as such – it might serve those few sixty-somethings too whose busy former lives may not have given space for such musings, but for your average retiring person...? As I say, I wonder. I do feel that these three central chapters could just as easily have been called ‘Reframing’, ‘Relating’ and ‘Supporting’ and could have been put out as a (quite largely) Positive Psychology book for general use. ‘Re-framing’ is liberally illustrated by sports psychology anecdotes (Milne’s previous occupations include coach, sport and exercise psychologist) and although often apt and inspiring, there is always a danger in applying performance-related strategies to deep life-long psychological issues.

The confusion is compounded by some of the research samples used – in one study on couples and depression (Harris, Pistrang and Barker, 2006), the reader, deep in thoughts of retirement as the chapter is called ‘Relating in Retirement’, is suddenly confronted with a participant sample where the ages range from 28-57. This reader was disorientated. Whilst, of course, accepting that it is perfectly legitimate to use general research to illustrate aspects of retirement, I do note that this was a phenomenological study, and the experiences of retired couples coping with one depressed partner may (and probably would) have thrown up different issues.

However, there are interesting research findings related in this chapter: for instance a study conducted in Israel (2009) found that those older employees who worked the most approaching retirement experienced less *‘breadth and depth of emotional support from close family members’* (p 83), an effect which continued into retirement. It is the report authors’ speculation which ‘chimes’ for me – that those working longer hours saw the workplace as their main way of meeting their emotional needs – for personal accomplishment or meaning. So for this population retirement

may not only cause a great sense of loss but also an impression that the quality of their support has decreased, when in actuality they had never nurtured it – they had been looking in the opposite direction for it.

Existential-phenomenologists may be interested in Milne's passage on emigration or (as I understand it) any sort of uprooting in retirement. He warns:

'One can see that escaping abroad to an attractive climate (and far from an adverse social situation) has its appeals, and there may seem little to lose. However it is all too easy to underestimate the support we take for granted in the familiar location in which we live, not least the comforting effects of familiar surroundings, routines, and facilities.'

(p 104)

I am put in mind of Deurzen's four dimensions of existence, particularly the *umwelt* (physical world of the individual) and the *mitwelt* (social world). In their book on Existential therapy (2011 pp 17 & 18) Deurzen and Adams say this of the *umwelt*:

'This is the outside ring of our world relations and includes the body we have, the concrete surroundings we find ourselves in, the climate and weather, objects and material possessions...'

And of the *mitwelt* this:

'This dimension includes our response to the culture we live in, as well as to the class and race we belong to[...] we need others for our physical and emotional survival and all too often we miss them or feel lonely without them.'

Milne writes movingly about what he calls 'place attachment' which he says is usually based on a strong sense of belonging; he also refers to 'place identity' and reminds readers that tearing oneself away can produce '*a strange discomfort or even alienation*' (p 104). His book is at its most interesting in these original and considered moments.

Where the disparate strands do come together is undoubtedly in Milne's handling of ageing, death and dying, where we can see parallels with both life-span literature (Erikson 1959/80) and existential thinking in the following:

'...although you may be getting older this has enabled you to acquire wisdom along the way [...] One of the five aspects of this kind of wisdom is the capacity to recognize and manage uncertainty.'

(p 77)

Milne nowhere mentions Heidegger (1926/62), a rich source on death and dying whose central tenet is that we are all of us 'beings-towards-

death' who must accept our nature in order to be both authentic and truly alive, but in his chapter 'Learning from Life' he might just as well have:

Paradoxically, when we inhibit thoughts of our death, we can 'deadened' our lives, numbing anxious feelings through isolating activities [...] and the use of substances or fixed routines to control our feelings.

(p 128)

Milne goes on to say that acceptance of our death may carry sadness and anxiety with it, but also tends to foster '*spontaneity in social involvement, a realization that time is limited*' and '*flexible and genuine personal functioning*' (p 128). So no disagreement with the great man there.

Milne's book is comprehensive, covering all of retirement from pet-owning, allotments, tourism and grandparenting, through diet, exercise, ageing and challenging the brain, to loneliness, and finally reflection, regrets, religion, spirituality and, bravely I think, 'happiness'! Would it be of use to an existential practitioner? I would suggest not hugely for its insights, but as a reminder of the myriad psychological issues inherent in this, one of life's major transitions, it would serve as a very useful manual, not least for the opportunity to muse on the relevance to retirement of some of the central existential themes: meaning, purpose, freedom, choice, identity creation, alienation and a frontier crossed where the end of life is, perhaps for the first time, in clear view and needing to be acknowledged and addressed.

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Publications received for review

The following publications have been received for possible review. People who wish to be included in the list of book reviewers for *Existential Analysis* for these or other publications are requested to e-mail the Book Reviews Editor Martin Adams at adamsmc@regents.ac.uk

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