

Anthropology Book Forum

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Language, Religion, and Learning to Embrace the Human Lifecourse

ANNA I. CORWIN, 2021, *Embracing Age: How Catholic Nuns Became Models of Aging Well*.
New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 180 pp., ISBN 978-1-9788-2227-6

Keywords: aging, religion, death, language, well-being

Embracing Age is a masterful ethnography of convent life illuminating the linguistic, psychological, and cultural processes that shape the late-life experiences of Franciscan sisters in the American Midwest. It is a 188-page, soft-cover volume in the *Global Perspectives on Aging* series, edited by Sarah Lamb. The author, Dr. Anna Corwin, a linguistic and psychological anthropologist, draws from a decade of ethnographic visits to the assisted living and infirmary halls of a Catholic convent to unveil the sociolinguistic and historical contexts that support nuns' well-being through the lifecourse. This synthetic work culminates Corwin's previous publications into a central claim that anthropological methods and theory illuminate the way nuns socially and linguistically embrace age to experience well-being despite age-related decline. The compelling applicability of Corwin's conclusions make *Embracing Age* a critical read for social scientists, clinicians, and thoughtful humans alike. In a society obsessed with "successful aging," but caught in a paradox that inhibits its realization, scholars like Corwin serve as trustworthy guides as they blend humanities and science into works of vital significance.

The book's introduction welcomes the reader with a clear and concise substantive foundation. Key bodies of anthropological scholarship include language socialization, especially the work of linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs, and on the anthropology of aging, the work of cultural anthropologist Sarah Lamb. David Snowden's epidemiological work with nuns' health, and medical anthropological scholarship on pain and healing are frequently referenced. Corwin's

commitment to clarity and accessibility is fully displayed in the introduction and consistently reinforced throughout the text. Her first-person perspective is reflective and sometimes vulnerable, transmitting the deep humanity and ultimate importance of her research questions.

The book's ethnographic content is organized into two parts and seven chapters. Part I describes the processes of life in the convent, particularly the social and spiritual, and connects these processes to the nuns' experience of aging and well-being. Part I is stylistically intimate and weaves the reader into rich dialog with the author and ethnographic interlocutors. Part II deploys a more scholarly style to expand analysis to the complex social and historical unfoldings through which the nuns have lived and aged. The chapters include carefully selected and analyzed linguistic transcriptions collected during the fieldwork to enliven the scholarship and scaffold the reader to participation in the analytic process. Each chapter concludes with a concise but comprehensive summary of the key points. Following Part II is a holistic conclusion connecting the scholarly concepts to sensible applications. This first edition is printed in small type-font with tight line spacing, making for light and easy handling, but difficult visual reading.

Part I includes four chapters that connect the nuns' ideologies and practices to their experience of aging by describing the ethnographic field and tenets of linguistic analysis. Chapter 1 outlines the physical, social, and temporal elements of the convent. Nuns' life history narratives and the author's own story of arrival and integration leads the reader to the space, the rhythms, and divine presence at the convent of The Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Chapter 2 explores cultural and scholarly discourses on aging and well-being, contrasting the dominant discourse on *successful* aging with the nuns' practice of *embracing* aging. Corwin concludes that Americans' cultural concept of successful aging is actually better described as an anti-aging model where value in old age is ascribed using the same neoliberal principles of independence and productivity that drive value throughout adult life. The nun's exceptional well-being in late life is attributed to the rejection of this anti-aging paradigm and an acceptance of inevitable declines in independence and productivity. Methods for assessing the nuns' well-being, including a quality of life questionnaire and the resulting score ranges, are also included in this chapter. Chapter 3 directs an anthropological lens to the prayer practices in the convent to show the multimodal functions of prayer. Public intercessions communicate the presence of God and social support of fellow sisters

while linguistically socializing attitudes on age, suffering, and death. These prayer practices serve as a way of both teaching and learning how to embrace age. Chapter 4 describes the communicative strategies used to uphold meaningful engagement in the convent as some sisters experience declines in cognitive and communication function. This chapter produces clinical and social applications by elucidating the importance of avoiding elderspeak and detailing how meaningful engagement is maintained with jokes, blessings, and narratives. These conversational forms limit communicative burdens on cognitively impaired interlocutors by eliminating the necessity of sophisticated responses. This chapter is insightful, complimenting therapeutic literature on cognitive-communication disorders to reveal the unique power of linguistic and cultural analysis through ethnography.

Part II includes three chapters to describe the social and historical changes in Catholic ideology and convent practices that shaped the nuns' life course and their experience of aging, suffering, and death. Catholic reformations in the 1960s, known as Vatican II, resulted in significant ideological, institutional, and habitual changes that impacted nearly all aspects of life in the convent. This historical restructuring in Catholicism, through which many of the ethnographic informants lived, is central to the sociohistorical analyses of part II. Chapter 5 analyzes nuns' narratives to track how habitual prayer practices have shaped their perspective on God and their own bodily vulnerabilities. Pre-Vatican II, God was interpreted as a distant authority who allocated pain. Transformed prayer practices reframed God as an intimate caregiver who exists within and in support of a suffering body. This non-punitive and amoralistic reevaluation of God's involvement in suffering casts painful aging as an opportunity for divine comfort and communion. Chapter 6 tracks the still-developing and sometimes conflicting understanding of healing within and between Catholic ideology and biomedicine. The aging nuns work to reconcile the contemporary medical model of pain as a problem-to-solve with the theological notion of pain as inevitable and spiritually opportunistic. Still a work in progress, the nuns balance conflicting biomedical and Catholic prescriptions by engaging with both medical and spiritual modes of healing to maximally respect their own bodily divinity. Chapter 7 explores the theological notion of *kenosis*, the emptying out of oneself, as central to the sisters' vows and practices of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Vatican II resulted in individually variable levels of change in the meaning and practice of these vows, which are shown to influence how the nuns relate to material goods

and self-determinism in later life. Corwin argues that kenosis and acceptance are linked and essential to nuns' ability to embrace age. Nuns who remained committed to kenotic practices throughout their lives are better prepared to accept the inevitable age-related losses in ability and independence.

A conclusion to the book emphasizes how anthropology reveals the interconnected cultural, historical, and habituated practices that shape the nuns' exceptional level of peace and joy in late-life. While noting the specificity of context in which the nuns enjoy a rich and connected aging experience, Corwin offers seven lessons to the reader that revolve around embracing age through social and linguistic habituated practices. Like a well-packed bag, *Embracing Age* thoughtfully includes all necessities without unwieldy intellectual distractions or jargonistic burdens. Corwin's writing maintains clarity and conciseness throughout, using minimal words to effectively carry great meaning. *Embracing Age* establishes Anna Corwin as a masterful writer and inspirational guide to a future of well-being.

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