

Colleen L. Johnson and Barbara M. Barer. *Life Beyond 85 Years: The Aura of Survivorship*. Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1997, 267 pp., \$33.95, ISBN 0 826 19540 7.

This book is based on in-depth interviews with 150 people aged 85 years and over living in San Francisco, and it focuses on their health, physical functioning, social support and quality of life. They were sampled from voting records (sampling details not given), and then a snowballing technique was used with respondents to locate more eligible interviewees (20% of sample members were obtained by snowballing). They were interviewed five times, at 14–16 month intervals. Three-quarters of the 150 respondents at baseline were women, and their mean age at the first interview was 88.9 years. By the time of the fifth follow-up there were just 48 survivors. The writing style of the authors, who are anthropologists, is slightly wordy although lively, but this does mean the reader has to hunt for the methodological details, rather than finding them presented in a structured format all together at the beginning. However, they include valuable observations about the difficulties of locating the oldest-old section of the population. The authors provide some gems throughout. In the middle of the methodological section they inform us that the San Francisco earthquake occurred during the second phase of the interviewing, so they were able to document the effects of this major event on respondents' lives.

The book contains rich data on a section of the elderly population we know little about, because they are not represented in sufficient numbers for analysis in large, random, sample-based population surveys. As the authors point out, most of the literature on very elderly people is dominated by analyses of their physical functioning which, while extremely relevant given their high levels of disability, has led to a narrow focus. While their sample is relatively small, it does show the dramatic decline in the respondents' levels of functioning over the six year study period. The authors present simple graphics and use case studies in illustrations (as is the style of the other chapters). The chapter on family relationships clearly shows the declining importance of friends in old age, and the increasing importance of children. New friendships are rare in very old age because there is a less equitable pattern of reciprocity. It was found, consistent with other research, that while children may not enhance their parents' morale or emotional well-being, they do play an important instrumental role and are their primary supporters.

The research presents rich insights into older people's well-being and its impediments. The authors point out that most respondents, despite their many problems, become less emotionally reactive with increasing age, or use cognitive processes to moderate negative effects, *e.g.* forgetting unpleasant events, or manipulating meanings – they had 'outlived their worries about the past'. However, in line with survey research, while they reported worrying less about finances and their families, they reported that their declining health and functional ability was the most difficult aspect of their lives. Apart from this, the examples clearly illustrate why very elderly people score better on scales of life satisfaction and well-being. Apart from the problem of the healthiest survivors, old people appear to transcend those factors that undermine well-being.

As the authors conclude, the very old are the 'heros and heroines of our time. They have beaten the odds'. Their respondents appeared to be satisfied by their accomplishment of surviving whilst admitting that it is 'tough'. The book is largely descriptive, rather than theoretical, although it includes the relevant references in the field. It is highly readable and insightful, and is particularly valuable in view of the limited research data about this group of people. It is aimed at academics, students and policy makers.

University College London Medical School,  
University of London

ANN BOWLING