

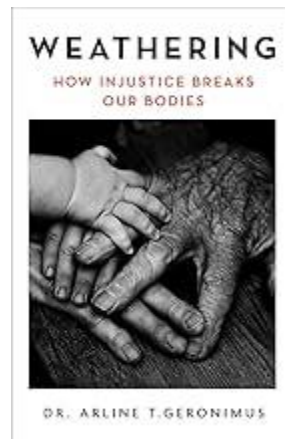
Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life on the Body in an Unjust Society

Arline T. Geronimus

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Why is it that, in the USA, so many poor, especially people of colour, suffer such poor health? Is it just because of the ruinously expensive and inefficient health service? To some extent that is a contributory factor but there are deeper factors at play. According to author Arline T. Geronimus, a good deal can be explained by a phenomenon she calls ‘weathering,’ which is “... a process that encompasses the physiological effects of living in marginalized communities that bear the brunt of racial, ethnic, religious, and class discrimination (p.3).” The constant stress of living in a country in which discrimination is endemic and relentless (it is not the only such country, of course) physically takes a toll on people and they succumb more commonly to heart disease, cancer hypertension and other chronic conditions. This is an argument that Geronimus supports scrupulously with data from the field of public health, wherein she has established a career as a formidable researcher. It makes for a compelling and persuasive piece of work.

People subject to persistent and traumatic stress are subject to negative effects both mentally and physically. Geronimus describes the impact of it on short-term memory and ability to learn, together with heightened vulnerability to anxiety and depression (p.42). Meanwhile, physically, stress triggers the presence of hormones, glucose and fatty acids in the bloodstream which leads to reduced flows of oxygen to other parts of the body and hence long-term risks of cardiovascular problems and higher risk of diabetes, obesity and other metabolic disorders emerge (pp.69-70). These are all objectively measurable phenomena which have been found to be valid in a wide range of contexts. What causes this stress? Toni Morrison said that one of the main problems of racism was the distraction it caused – all the time required to deal with slight and abuse that prevents people from getting on with the process of trying to achieve their goals. It can be seen in the way Donald Trump is attempting to focus on Kamala Harris’ identity as the main theme of his ad hominem attacks on her. So much time and effort will be expended on the scandalous claim that she is a diversity hire or that she is somehow not a real American that her ability to explain her policies and her approach to the various tribulations she is likely to face will be significantly constrained. Geronimus includes a telling detail from one of the many studies with which she has been involved that migrants to the USA who face discrimination become less happy and less healthy the longer they live there. This applies to people who a reasonable level of wealth just as much as it does to the working poor. This helps

demonstrate that no matter how used people can get to their circumstances and no matter how adroit they may become in developing strategies that help sidestep some of the worst excesses of bigotry, they are still subject to the constant stress that living such a life causes. Some of the effects are second order in nature. Marginalized people are paid less and their employment may be more precarious, which has direct results such as lack of sleep but also indirect results such as having to live further away from workplaces, schools and other public institutions and having to travel further and longer to get there. American culture, of course, fetishizes the car and people who have to rely on buses find even more of their time occupied in waiting, transferring from one mode of transport to another and so forth. This in turn means less time is available for fostering social and familial relations and in self-care. The low level of unionization in the country means that workplace conditions can be fraught and underpaid and so second or even third jobs are required to make ends meet. It is not surprising that people fall into poor health relatively early in life.

Living with families where people are unwell and who may die early leads to some unexpected outcomes. The author works with a number of women who have decided that they are better off having their children young, while they themselves are in their late teens, since if they wait any longer it is quite possible that they will not be around to take care of them or even to be able to watch them grow up. This situation she contrasts with her own children, who can see lives of opportunity and experience ahead of them and plan to have children much later in life if at all. It can be easily imagined which of the versions of a reasonable expectation of the future is regularly portrayed in all forms of cultural productions. The young women who do go for early pregnancies then face the opprobrium of society, which blames them for fecklessness and also looks askance at their family arrangements, misidentifying lack of care when what is really present is the pragmatic response to where work is available and to what extent can various family members provide care and support. Misidentification of this sort also contributes to the weathering process.

Even successful women – in terms of wealth and status – are subject to often outrageous ill-treatment. The tennis player Serena Williams, for example, who claims to be one of the greatest athletes ever, very nearly died because of neglect:

“Despite showing clear signs that she was haemorrhaging internally – which may have been partially facilitated by having blood vessels weakened by weathering – doctors let her lie helplessly for ten hours before getting her into surgery, even while her family was pleading for assistance (p.96).”

This comes from ignorance as well as malice. Black women are routinely believed to be stronger and less likely to be in pain or discomfort than is the case and, therefore, they are not offered the medical care they need. This is not just a one-off example but rather one in a long line of such events. Insofar as governmental action can mitigate these problems, it is the less likely to occur as the relentless attempts at voter suppression continue (and have been aided by the UK Conservative party in the 2024 election), then the voices of people wanting change are diminished and a consensus is based on those people like the author's children for whom the gardens are rosy. However, it is possible to make some small improvements in the world around us: actions that reduce “... stereotype threats to underrepresented group members in integrated settings such as schools lead to better life prospects for those individuals, while also paving the way for a better future for the people who follow in their footsteps (p.232).” So, there are some things that can be done.

This is a remarkable book that is properly based on a solid mass of carefully constructed data. There are obvious lessons for people in all parts of the world and an implicit call on each of us to try to limit the damage that inequality causes.

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