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### Review of *Social Identities Across the Life Course*. Jenny Hockey and Alison James. Reviewed by Marvin D. Feit.

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individual level by applying a human rights framework to social work practice. However, I am more sceptical about human rights in the hands of nations bent on war. But the political character of rights, that is, recognition of the relationship between individual actions and broader political decisions is ignored when it is this broader political understanding embodied in discourse on social justice which shows how rights are inextricably bound up with the way in which society is ordered and its goods distributed and how individuals are affected by these arrangements. The idea that political morality should be based wholly or partly on the notion of human rights is a familiar theme in liberal theories and Western politics as Ignatieff recognises and other writers on human rights have clearly acknowledged this link. By overlooking the moral and political nature of rights, Reichert fails to see the inextricable link between human rights and social justice.

Mel Gray

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Jenny Hockey and Alison James, *Social Identities across the Life Course*. New York: Pgrave Macmillan, 2003. \$75 hardcover, \$24.95 papercover.

Social identification across the life course examines the concept of social identities by reframing our perceived notion of aging. The task is to explain life processes and their impact on peoples' everyday lives that consider age as integral to one's identity and note that surprisingly little is known about age based identification. They explore research within the social sciences from two separate areas, social identity and aging across the life cycle. They contend that one cannot develop a frame of reference as how we come to age unless these areas of social sciences are integrated.

Many disciplines, such as sociology, economics, psychology, and so forth have produced theorists who have provided an understanding of aging from rather traditional dichotomous perspectives. We now expect specific age related categories to delineate the processes of aging. For example, in every aging category there are very distinct behaviors which make up and accompany

each age category such as child, teen, young adult, senior citizen and so forth.

The major problem with age related categories is that they are not mutually exclusive, therefore people may take on behaviors generally thought to be in one age category while chronologically being in another age, or they may lack distinguishing characteristics in one category as their age increases. The issue becomes what benchmarks does one use to identify "their age". The authors note that the social sciences have generally not explained aging as both an experiential and situated process. Basically, while we know something about what it is like to be a child, to be maturely aged or elderly, the complex process and experiences involved in becoming a small child, in becoming older is relatively unchallenged.

In the first part of their book, the authors critically analyze classical theories of the life course and have pointed up their limitations and strengths. They then use a historical account of the citizen life course for discussing the range of theorists approaches to aging. They then move on to reframe the traditional approach to aging by incorporating the literature on aging and identity. In the latter part of their book, they illustrate their approach through three case studies of gender and sexuality, the family and work.

The opening question, how do we know we are aging, and how old one is, is interesting and thought provoking. On one hand we can age according to "societal" arrangements—retirement, senior citizens discounts, increasing health/medical problems, and other benchmarks, or we can "age" in comparison to others and how others see us. In other words, one can "defy" age categorization by doing things not usually expected nor identified with growing old—for example, playing basketball in one's 50's with young adults or continuing to work, travel, or educate oneself, volunteering, etc.—all are activities which are not consistent with society's view of an aged person.

The authors make their point in each chapter, so one gets reinforcement throughout. They illustrate that no matter one's perception, one's age is very much a function of social interaction. This is how one comes to understand much about him/her self. One point often overlooked but which must be reinforced is that the usual categories child, adult, or old person do not map easily

onto the experience. One cannot fulfill all the expectations or levels of accomplishments identified by theorists in each category.

The authors emphasize that one's identity is continually shaped by the interaction between an individual and society. For example, they note that a critical dimension of this interaction is "to explore the cumulative effect of earlier life events on later ones and to investigate how the timing of one event—child birth for example—might shape the subsequent life trajectory of any one individual" (pg. 91). Placing the catastrophic events of 9/11/01 in this context should make their point abundantly clear. It is not presumptuous to state that the course of human behavior has been significantly altered from that day forward.

The book requires a solid background in theories of human behavior and the usual description within each category from which to reflect, compare, and contrast how these differ between categories. There is much to be learned from their approach to the life cycle in the context of establishing one's identity. Indeed, no longer should we see or think of the course of human behavior in theoretical constructs and how close and individual fits the pattern, but rather to understand how social forces and events work in concert with an individual's makeup and societal expectations to help shape an individual's identity. As the authors note, in a casual manner, that an individual's development and growth is likely to be uneven and not fit easily into mutually exclusive theoretical categories.

This is a book that will encourage one to recast the framework for how one thinks about and understands aging itself, the process of aging, and the continuing unfolding of one's identity. It is thought provoking and readers should find it stimulating, as in a contrast to the usual and traditional thinking of the categorization of aging across the life cycle.

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