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Book Review

Aging, the Individual, and Society, 10th Edition. Susan M. Hillier and Georgia M. Barrow. Cengage Learning. 2015. ISBN: 1-285-74661-9, 496 pp. College BookstoreWholesale \$182.50, Student List Price \$245.95

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The Instructor's Edition of *Aging, the Individual, and Society* provides a comprehensive introduction to the multidisciplinary field of aging studies, particularly for college students interested in pursuing Gerontology. Instructors of advanced high school courses may also find this text appropriate.

Situating Gerontology among Psychology, Biology, and Sociology, the textbook considers all lenses to be critical to understanding aging in social context. On balance, it owes much of its theoretical underpinnings to Sociology, as it "uses a social problems approach" to examine how social forces impact older adults (31). The text introduces topics as diverse as mental disorders and socio-economic inequality in its 15 chapters.

Aging, the Individual, and Society surveys its vast subject area to perfunctory satisfaction, with ample citation of key texts for those overachievers who wish to delve deeper into the many topics considered. The learning objectives within each chapter are limited to the necessarily truncated treatment of complex topics. One hopes that this text would be used in concert with a few of the primary sources it dutifully cites. By privileging regurgitation of its presented subject matter, the textbook implicitly trusts the instructor to expand students' horizons with regard to alternate sources and critical thinking.

To its credit, *Aging, the Individual, and Society* doesn't masquerade as anything other than what it is, while simultaneously making valiant attempts to assist instructors in their aforementioned horizon-broadening pursuits. The back matter includes an extensive bibliography, topic index, as well as internet resources for further research. Designed to assist the instructor in constructing lessons plans, each chapter includes a summary, key learning concepts, learning objectives, discussion questions, fieldwork suggestions, and internet-based research activities. Keywords and vocabulary terms are presented in bold, which will delight anyone nostalgic for their elementary school textbooks.

Public policy is a dominant theme, the authors often positioning gerontologists as agents of social change. "The need to address the issues of an aging nation is upon us" they importune (31). This rallying cry can be read as an assurance to gerontology students that they've chosen the right field, not like those misguided suckers in [insert esoteric field here] who won't be able to find a job once they graduate. The authors of this textbook have at once more idealistic and more pragmatic aims for their readers.

“Policy has the unfortunate pattern of following far behind demographic changes, regardless of how certain those looming changes are,” they caution (413). But do not mistake this lament for the book’s attitude toward its subject. Optimism prevails! With a robust new cohort of gerontologist, the authors believe that real social change is actually possible. Their unwavering hope that the power of shifting social attitudes will influence public policy comes in the form of Chapter 14 (on death and dying), which is immediately followed by the capstone chapter on “Politics, Policies, and Programs.”

If dismantling ageism is the endgame, this introduction focuses on broad trends in dominant U.S. cultural groups while paying lip service to difference. The textbook assumes a middle-class, straight, white, American reader, and takes its primary subjects to be of similar ilk. There are diversions from these unmarked categories, often to reductive effect, which reinforces the mainstream’s dominant cultural status.

Perhaps the idea is to ease the mainstream reader into the strange new world of cultural relativism. Attempts are made to be inclusive, to varying rates of success. A chapter devoted to ethnic “Others” (non-white Americans) calls for “correcting inequalities for ethnic minorities and women,” and a few additional considerations of marginalized communities pop up (377). There’s a notable Western bias in its brief historical overview of social attitudes toward aging and the authors routinely simplify the complexities of cultural shifts. Arguably, the strategy of eschewing the cross-cultural for the familiarity of the United States is a wise one. Already unwieldy in scope, to expand it would have weakened this already strained overview of critical aging issues.

In short, this is an approachable, engaging text with the potential to enlighten many students, even those for whom this course fulfills an obscure requirement. The authors are banking on rallying some of those initially disinterested students to the cause, and they may well succeed. After all, the book has an abundance of pictures.

Final Note: This reviewer is ill-equipped to judge the text on its pedagogical merits, as she is not an educator, much less a Professor of Gerontology. Rather, she comes at this text from the perspective of a former student of anthropology and current non-profit professional immersed in the aging field. Gerontology professors would do well to take the above review with a grain of salt.