Disability Through the Life Course

By Tamar Heller and Sarah Parker Harris. Published 2012 by SAGE Publications, Inc. (293 pages, $80.00, ISBN: 978-1-4129-8767-7)

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Disability Through the Life Course provides an opportunity to appreciate the many years of disability grass-roots level work, disability-related studies, and education and research related to the field of disability. This book presents a new paradigm from the medical model to the social model of disability that drastically changed this field and the perception of disability as interpreted by many in the American society.

This book explores topics central to the lives of people with disabilities across the life course which has always been an interesting topic for discussion, and, at the same time, lacks updated and innovated research studies and outcomes to match the society that we live today. In this book, the life course approach assumes that, beginning prenatally, events occurring early in life affect later periods in one’s life. There is no argument on this since it has been repeatedly demonstrated. It recognizes that development does not necessarily proceed in well-ordered stages and that impairments interact with social determinants such as culture and socioeconomic status and environmental aspects like services and formal/informal supports across the life course, resulting in differing outcomes for individuals with disabilities, their families, and society.

The authors utilized a disability studies approach to a life course perspective by bringing in the concepts of disability identity, social attitudes, the lived experience of individuals with disabilities, and the social and political context affecting their lives. Also, highlighting an overall theoretical and historical background, this book addresses disability across the life course through a delineation of various age phases from prenatal to end-of-life. Important issues identified are: family, health policy, legislation, support services, self-determination, and participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society. The authors also addressed topics for key debates within the field of disabilities that center around the challenges people with disabilities face, the worth and value of human life, and ways to promote and respect human rights for all people. The book encompasses seven chapters that can be adapted to a diverse academic field.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the life course approach. It introduces the key concepts, life stages, and important historical development in approaches to disability. This chapter also introduces the cross-cutting issues that affect the lives of people with disabilities throughout the life course, including the role of families, age-related health changes, federal legislation that has had a major impact on this population, and the importance of promoting self-determination and community participation as valued goals.
Chapter 2 probes into challenges, debates, policies, and practices that address issues faced by people with disabilities and their families across each generational stage. From the prenatal period to the end-of-life, debates center on the value of life and ways to obtain and maintain a high quality of life. A key to reducing the challenges and barriers discussed in this chapter is the enactment of effective legislative policies, services, and supports that promote the health, education, employment, and community participation of people with disabilities and their families.

Chapter 3 provides a chronology of events (from 1900 to 2010) that pertain to disabilities across the life course. These events illustrate historical developments from the eugenics movement that sought to prevent the procreation of people with disabilities to the enactment of legislations that provided independent living and self-determination of people with disabilities.

Chapter 4 provides biographies of individuals who have made significant contributions to the study of disability issues. Many of these advocates have focused on the cross-cutting issues addressed in this book.

Chapter 5 presents annotated data, statistics, tables, and graphs pertinent to disabilities across the life course. In adulthood and aging, the data address employment, parenting, retirement, long-term care and support, end-of-life issues, and spirituality.

Chapter 6 provides a listing and description of key governmental and non-governmental organizations that impact the lives of people with disabilities. These include key organizations responsible for funding and administering support services and research regarding people with disabilities and their families. Key providers, agencies, and university centers also are listed as important organizations in the disability field and for other interested entities.

Chapter 7 provides an annotated list of print and electronic resources. The selected resources reflect written publications that have been seminal in articulating various aspects of the life course and disability studies perspectives on the lives of people with disabilities. Some publications address specific age phases, and others address the cross-cutting issues detailed in chapters 1 and 2.

This book offers a balance of history, theory research, and application for specialists interested in findings and implications of research and practice for others whose current or future work involves the care of and/or study of those with disabilities, as well as for people with disabilities. The concise and engaging presentation style of related compiled data and information emphasizes accessibility and easy adjustment for various academic disciplines to use. There is a list of resources provided to enhance an ideal introduction platform and entry for further study of disability and its impact on the person, the family, society, and the direction of disability research across disciplines. As in many other disability-related books, one limitation of this book may be that it presents little information on health, physical activity, and fitness, and their relationships to the life course and quality of life.

Adapted physical activity researchers, instructors, and students definitely can benefit from this book and apply the educational purpose of this book to their instruction and research. This book is written in an engaging style and in a succinct, consistent, and accessible format designed to stimulate the reader and provoke discussion. In this sense, the book can serve as a springboard for adapted physical activity educators and students for further exploration via annotated recommendations, readings, and extensive compiled resources. This book can be included easily into undergraduate or graduate courses of various academic disciplines providing the
students with an opportunity to expand their view of disability and the possibility to identify abilities where one thought there were none. The knowledge that can be derived from this book can fulfill the goal of any human services practice in enhancing the quality of life of persons with disabilities through their life course.

This reviewer concludes that this book “Disability Through the Life Course” is an excellent resource for university professors and students of any of the many human services disciplines, including adapted physical activity professionals, and a valuable addition to a university library collection.