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## Book Review

Review of Degnen, Cathrine. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Personhood and the Life Course*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 2018. pp. 261. Price: \$119.99 (Hardcover); \$89.00 (eBook).

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When Cathrine Degnen's research on older persons in northern England led her to wonder if personhood is more secure at certain points in the life course than at others, she became "entirely captivated by the question of personhood" (1). Pulling together her various research interests – aging selves, intersectionality, relationality, and others – Degnen wondered: Who and what counts as a person? Does personhood shift over the life course? Is it for the dead as well as for the living? This book is the result of her exploration of these and other questions pertaining to how and when personhood is acquired, maintained, changed and lost; how some people (e.g., slaves, women) in some times and places are excluded from personhood; the role of place in personhood; and personhood attributed to other-than-human beings. Overall, Degnen makes a strong case for the view that "personhood is intrinsically connected to – and changes with – the various phases of the life course" (3).

Chapter 1 is introductory, providing an overview of ideas and practices of personhood worldwide and relevant discussions in anthropology. Degnen does not propose a new definition of 'the person' or 'personhood' – rather, she offers multiple attributes of personhood through her ethnographic examples and through a review of anthropological debates about personhood from Mauss and Radcliffe-Brown to the present. "Personhood," she says, "is not identity . . . [and is] not always equivalent to being human. But personhood does entail a capacity for action in the world of social relations, and it also arguably extends a moral value to persons that non-persons are excluded from" (7). Furthermore, personhood matters because it has "deep pertinence . . . to being, experience, and sociality cross-culturally" (10).

Here, and throughout the book, Degnen contrasts the normative "Western" conception of a person, which emphasizes individuality and valorizes "autonomy, agency, independence, cognition, rationality" (153), with personhood that is brought into being and maintained through reciprocal fields of social interaction, including relations with place and an animated universe. While academic discourse initially differentiated the latter as "dividuals" rather than individuals, current thinking is that people everywhere exist as both dividuals and individuals.

The first chapter also deals with Degnen's methodology, qualitative cross-cultural comparison, which usually reveals great cultural variability, as it does in her work. Degnen discusses three issues with the method: the "curio-cabinet" effect, using 'Western' as a touchstone, and problems with time and historical contingency in using material written in the ethnographic present about times which now are

historical. On the whole, her fine-grained summaries of ethnographic materials from others' research minimize these effects, which probably can't be entirely eliminated.

In some ways the remaining seven chapters are stand-alone pieces, each with its own introduction, discussion and conclusions, with the exception of Chapters 2 and 3 on the beginnings of personhood, which need to be considered together.

Four chapters are organized by broad life stages: the beginning of personhood, older age, and death. These life stages are culturally malleable and historically contingent, as Degnen amply demonstrates. Childhood, adolescence and adulthood prior to old age are not covered, though surely there are issues of personhood in those life stages as well (e.g., initiation rites or the creation of new categories such as "tweens" in the US). Three other chapters discuss place and personhood, other-than-human persons, and threats to personhood.

Chapters 2 and 3 together deal with the beginning of personhood, which varies cross-culturally across the early life stages of conception, pregnancy and babyhood/early childhood. Here Degnen takes into consideration the importance of shared substances and practices such as feeding and naming in the articulation of personhood, as well as, in the US, the ways that ultrasound technology contributed to the concept of the fetus as an autonomous individual, a view prominent in current abortion debates.

Chapters 4 and 5 consider place and other-than-human people in the constitution of human personhood. Humans alter places to express social relations and imbue places with meaning, but places also act upon humans and gather humans, other beings, ancestors, experiences, memories, and much else. In many societies animals, plants, spirits and material objects are regarded as persons. This contrasts to Western binary modes of thinking that discourage such ideas, though companion animals may move us in that direction, along with the growth in recent years of multispecies anthropology and the ontological turn.

Readers of this journal likely will find the last three chapters of particular interest. Chapter 6 deals with the significance of loss of personhood, with various cultural phases of old age (such as young-old/old-old and healthy/frail), with the tensions between cultural stereotypes and the lived experiences of old people, and with the impacts of gender, socioeconomic status and sexuality on personhood in old age. Degnen's ethnographic examples include explorations of the "frail elder" life stage as a time of diminishing personhood among the people of Niue Island by Judith Barker and among the Tuareg of Niger by Susan Rasmussen. She discusses Elana Buch's study of Chicago caregivers' embodied care practices that help maintain their clients' personhood and Emily Wentzell's work among older Mexican men who redefine manliness and personhood as caring for one's family rather than as sexual conquest. Degnen also takes up Sarah Lamb's analysis of India's Bengalis, who, as they age, are concerned with loosening *maya*, the web of attachment with others, by physically moving to the periphery of their household and devolving household responsibilities to younger family members. This processual detachment diminishes personhood and allows the person to age and die well. The final two chapters deal with personhood endangered by such things as brain death and dementia, and the effects of death on personhood and relations of the living with the dead.

Life course approaches have figured in research on aging for the past half century. Early research on age-set societies depicted the life course as a series of culturally defined life stages, though with some flexibility. Today it is clear that life course experiences are shaped not only by social settings and cultural expectations, but also by the historical contingencies of rapid political, economic and sociocultural transformations in a globalizing world. What this book adds is a culturally relevant understanding of

personhood across the life course and openness to the fact that persons shape and reshape the life course through their experiences of the world in which they are embedded, and by interactions within and across generations, the latter an idea thoroughly explored in Lynch and Danely's *Transitions and Transformations* (2013).

Degnen's book will be of most value to graduate students and professional anthropologists. Readers should appreciate the ethnographic richness of Degnen's discussions, though they tend to be repetitive across the chapters. Also, a concluding chapter summarizing the materials and their implications for research would have added to this book's analytical value. Nevertheless, I can't help but wonder how my understandings about aging and the life course in western Kenya might have developed differently had I read Degnen's book before I wrote my dissertation (Cattell 1989). I expect it would have inspired me to include a consideration of personhood in my analysis.

## References

- Cattell, Maria G. 1989. *Old Age in Rural Kenya: Gender, the Life Course and Social Change*. PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College.
- Lynch, Caitrin, and Jason Danely, eds. 2013. *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspectives on Aging and the Life Course*. New York: Berghahn.