



## “Newer Every Day”? Women’s Aging Revealed, Revised, and Reinvented

A Review of

*Women and Aging: An International, Intersectional Power Perspective*

by Varda Muhlbauer, Joan C. Chrisler, and Florence L. Denmark (Eds.)

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No discourse about aging can capture the reality of growing old in sexist, ageist cultures without acknowledging how the intersectionalities of age with gender, culture, economics, race/ethnicity, politics, religion, socialization, beautyism, able-bodiedness, and health produce privilege and power differentials that disadvantage women in their later years compared with younger women and men of all ages. Not only do these factors adversely affect women in their 60s and beyond, the cumulative effects of a lifetime of limited opportunities, subtle discrimination, and overt prejudice place them at greater risk for “suboptimal aging” (p. v). Worse still, because of huge within-group differences, older women who are non-White, lesbian/bisexual/transgender, socioeconomically at risk, and/or disabled become even more marginalized. Yet *Women and Aging: An International, Intersectional Power Perspective* is not so much a book devoted to cataloguing and chronicling the inequities but to highlighting the variety of “women’s aging experiences and offering insights and strategies for empowering women” (p. vi). It is with these two objectives in mind that the editors have compiled seven chapters from diverse, mostly female scholars. In Chapter 1, Chrisler, Rossini, and Newton review numerous studies that suggest that negative social judgments of *embodied* aging (the visible physical “ugly” changes coupled with negative stereotypes about old people’s mental deficits, incompetency, dependency, and weakness) cause people of all ages, elders included, to feel disempowered. Given that youthful women’s worth, when conflated with physical attractiveness and fitness, sometimes leads to empowerment at younger ages, aging women are particularly vulnerable to feeling powerless. Chrisler et al., however, cite opportunities wherein aging women can reclaim power using a strengths-based perspective. Utilizing their social networks, spirituality, emotion-focus coping, downward social comparison, and problem-focused coping skills, the authors claim, “the process of aging does not inevitably mean a decrease in empowerment; it might just mean a change in how and from where power is derived” (p. 25).

Since aging women are at greater risk than aging men for experiencing poverty in their later years, I applaud the editors for including a chapter on economics. In an interesting take, authors Schein and Haruvi tackle older women's economic *power*, and yet, wealth in the hands of certain aging females does not translate into the power to dictate the development, marketing, and selling of goods (the tweens and 20s still represent the targeted consumers of most industries). The authors point out that while some have declared this to be the "era of the Woopie" (i.e., the well-off older person)" (p. 43), in fact, among poor elders, women occupy two thirds of those living in poverty. After a lifetime of employment inequities (wage gap, glass ceiling, jobs rather than careers), older women simply do not have the financial assets that aged men do. Moreover, within-group comparisons demonstrate that women who were systematically underpaid due to prejudice, racism, sexism, and fewer opportunities throughout their working lives are forced, by economic necessity, to continue to seek employment in old age but have to settle for low-pay, part-time jobs. Somewhat less optimistic than the other authors in this volume, Schein and Haruvi admit that the economic well-being and power of older women have not yet materialized. They speculate, however, that with the ever-increasing numbers of aging women, some power will accrue to the privileged. Ironically, this subset of more powerful women will be composed of those "who have sufficient financial resources from *inherited wealth* [my italics] or from earning and/or pensions, and who are not burdened by large health expenses and/or caregiving expenses, to *potentially* [my italics again] influence the goods that are sold" (p. 47). "To whit, to woo, a merry note, while greasy Joan doth keel the pot" (Shakespeare, 1593/2011) is all I have to say to that less-than-sunny prediction for the majority of aging females. Or, in more recent vernacular, Billie Holiday (Holiday & Herzog, 1941) crooned, "Them that's got shall have, them that's not shall lose."

Kulik's contribution to the book examines research as to whether older women's multiple roles place a strain on or enrichment of females' well-being in later life. It could go either way. Meanwhile, leadership and "encore" careers for women are the subjects of the fourth chapter. In both of these units, the authors have chosen to offer more prescriptive than scholarly suggestions on how finding meaning, redefining success, and adopting new roles (mentoring, entrepreneur, volunteering) can enrich older women's lives. As a 66-year-old woman, I found little new here, let alone much of anything that sounded attractive. Much of it reminded me of how women have been socialized into adopting caring, nurturing roles for the well-being of others. Only by entirely reframing what was formerly known as gendered servitude into "leadership," "encore," or "multitasking roles" enrichment would I, and perhaps many other women age 50 and older, be happy with this prognosis for the future.

Betraying my own bias, the two chapters I most relished were those that examined older women's sexuality, desirability, and desire, including new data from the frontlines of age-60 and older lesbians. Recapitulating the fact that women in Western cultures are disciplined to maintain their appearance through any means necessary, McHugh and Interligi go on to report how aging females, regarded as repulsive, need to avoid looking old. A billion-dollar industry offers the spectrum from hair dye to *vaginal rejuvenation*! The authors note, "older women's bodies are devalued and seen as ugly, abnormal, and in need of repair or change" (p. 93). Condemned, then, as unappealing, aging women and their sexuality must also be medicalized. Overstating the "decay" that occurs throughout the biological system, society deems older women's sexual desire as inappropriate. In the face of institutionalized ageism, feminist scholars attempt to eschew these pro-youth and beauty norms. They assert that aging women have the agency to resist society's censure. Yet the authors admit that feminist scholars are more apt to espouse this resistance until they themselves are hit with

the bulwark of ageism in their later years. Perhaps most insidious of all is the mainstream (both public and scholarly) veneration of "successful aging." McHugh and Interligi explain why this approach tacitly dismisses the nonprivileged millions who, through the vicissitudes of fate, are "ill, poor, sad" (p. 92) or physically/mentally incapacitated. This perspective is also categorically ageist. "Often [younger] theorists fail to consider the possibility that older people could generate or maintain meaning in their own lives" (p. 92) not, like prescriptive activity theory and successful aging promulgators insist, a stage in life in which elders are required to maintain the "patterns of middle adulthood" lest these aging individuals be deemed "abnormal when they fail to meet others' expectations" (p. 92). The authors conclude that as female boomers, the first generation to have experienced more sexual liberations, grow into old age, they can adopt a "sex positive approach" wherein women can learn to be "comfortable with their own levels of desire and activity, whatever those may be" (p. 110).

Rose and Hospital's chapter on lesbians dovetails nicely with McHugh and Interligi's because all four authors acknowledge the ongoing struggle against older women's "social invisibility" (p. 119). If it is beyond challenging for women to navigate old age, consider the difficulties of lesbians awash in societal and scholarly "heteronormative assumptions" (p. 121) about what a woman's life course should entail. As the authors review—and critique—several theories, only one, the Stone Center model of relational development, appears to be "somewhat more embracing of lesbian experience" (p. 124). Even so, "with variation in sexual identification, sexual disclosure status, social class, race, ethnicity, immigration status, discrimination experiences, gender presentation, and family structures . . . [t]here remains a critical need for theories that can account for . . . plurality over the lifespan" (p. 124). Drawing on the latest national and international research on older lesbians, Rose and Hospital call for more research guided by intersectional theory inasmuch as this framework "will be more informative than studies of blacks, women, poor people, elders, or sexual minorities separately" (p. 137). The authors conclude that richer, more nuanced studies coupled with "historical cohort and social change" will inform public policy and legal protections such that "older lesbians are sure to become 'newer every day'" (Dickinson, 1874/2010, cited p. 138).

The volume concludes with a state-of-the-art literature review of mental health interventions using a "feminist lens" (p. 147) to evaluate traditional approaches to women's well-being in later life. Unfortunately, most practices continue to be "overly restrictive" (p. 151), fraught with barriers (p. 156), and steeped in marginalization because they fail "to incorporate social context, such as the economic challenges and discrimination faced by older individuals" (p. 151). Authors O'Brien and Whitbourne recommend a combination of macro and micro solutions. They advocate utilizing the "principles of feminist therapy" to create "evidence-based treatments" for aging women. Women are individually encouraged to seek out support groups, spirituality, artistic endeavors, and physical exercise to "promote their physical and cognitive functioning" (p. 156).

There is so much to praise in this book. The editors and chapter authors have gleaned past and very recent research (including 2014 publications) to compose an exhaustive review of what it is to be a woman aging in the United States (primarily) and internationally. I herald these scholars and the publisher (Springer) for crafting a volume that clearly fills a niche, not a chasm (i.e., a book on gender and aging would have broadened the scope). Yet given actuarial and demographic realities, the study of aging is, indeed, often a study of women (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Despite the need for such publications, a conversation with

Slevin (personal communication, February 2005) asking her why she and Calasanti were not updating their book revealed that a textbook about marginalizations (gender, inequities, and aging) was not in high demand. In a capitalistic, androcentric economy, we must seize every opportunity to purchase and promote such books as *Women and Aging*. With its extensive current literature reviews, its superior writing, and its attempt to offer suggestions for empowerment and agency of older women, it is a rare find. As such, I strongly recommend that feminist scholars, gerontologists, activists, advocates, and policy makers read and learn from this book. Professors teaching classes on sociology, psychology of women, gender, women's studies, and gerontology would do well to require *Women and Aging*, perhaps not as the sole textbook but as a primary source for students' reading assignments.

I have struggled for months writing this review—both elated at receiving such a current book and yet angry, furious, and frustrated that we have come to this: macro, systemic, institutionalized ageism and sexism so limit our options and opportunities that the authors are forced to offer micro, individualized agency, resistance, and, in some cases, capitulation to the current status quo (e.g., old [privileged] women are encouraged to become late-life entrepreneurs; elder females burdened with gendered multigenerational caregiving roles are urged to find satisfaction in their multiple obligations). Caught in this dilemma between what would be just and what is, I nevertheless press readers of my review to buy and flog this excellent book for two idealistic reasons. First, it will demonstrate to publishers that an audience exists for well-researched books on women and aging; second, so that when showing your great-granddaughters the tome they can be shocked and awed (*Mad Men*-like [Weiner, 2007]) by how much the world of older women has changed.

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