

# REDEFINING GENDERED OLD AGE: A FEMINIST AND POWER PERSPECTIVE

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We can't predict the future. We can't erase the past. (Internet, n.d.)

Two of the most prominent leaders on the world stage—Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany, and Hillary Clinton, former candidate for the U.S. presidency—are both older than age 60. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, an octogenarian justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, has become a feminist icon to millennials (Carmon & Knizhnik, 2015). Alongside world politicians and judicial liberals, there is a growing cadre of female actresses and other visible media presenters in their 60s and 70s who have captured the attention of wide audiences and attracted them to TV series and movies (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012). Is this the new face of older women? If it is, then something really serious is going on.

In a 1992 *Newsweek* article, baby boomers (presently in their 50s and 60s) were defined as trendsetters who tend to make their stage in life the hip stage to be in (Beck, 1992). Beyond its insinuation of the popular appeal of baby boomers (a term with flexible age boundaries), the article drew attention to cohort and period effects, as well as to the overall importance of the larger sociocultural context in understanding older women. Yet the emphasis on sociopolitical and cultural changes, though important to our understanding of today's older women, tends to obscure gender-related intersectionality issues within the same age group and the association between power relations and the resources (primarily, albeit not exclusively,

financial) available in later life. Political economists have stated very clearly that economic status and control over financial assets later in life are shaped by people's earlier location within the social structure, such as their class, racial, or ethnic position (Estes, 1999). The consequences of these interrelationships of gender, age, and additional social divisions are especially marked in today's neoliberal and consumerist society. Thus, a focus on the economy is needed in any feminist analysis of the aging process of older women. The relevant question is not whether there are extensive economic differences among older women but rather how extensive the effects of such differences are on the aging process.

A macrohistorical analytical frame tends to distance one from a more intimate, individual construction of meanings related to the aging process. It therefore leaves many gaps in the understanding of the ways in which older women engage with getting older. What themes and issues do older women articulate, and how do they reflect structured privilege as well as disadvantage?

In this chapter, we argue that the contemporary feminist perspective, with its insistence on power relations as the significant context for understanding the construction of group and individual gendered identities, is crucial for answering these questions and for widening understanding of today's older women. We assume that the feminist perspective is particularly useful in light of our emphasis on cohort and period effects, and the overall importance of the larger sociocultural context, in the construction of

group and individual identities. Clearly, our intention is not to investigate the great variety of feminist theories; instead, we wish to draw attention to major aspects of feminist perspectives that familiarize us with the notions that individual and collective identities are in continuous change and tend to be diverse and contextually produced. Thus, guided by feminist awareness and understanding that gendered old age is simultaneously a biological, sociopolitical, psychological, and cultural construct characterized by the larger sociopolitical context, it seems plausible to us to start with an overview of several basic aspects common to many contemporary feminist theories. We describe four core elements—collective identity, construction of gender, power relations and power structures, and gender-related intersectionality—from an economic perspective. Together, these four feminist elements make a solid conceptual backbone for an analysis of gendered age-related constructs.

The feminist perspective gives us a unique theoretical lens that highlights the social mechanisms at work in the construction of gendered identities. Because our focus in this chapter lies in widening the understanding of the present cohort of older women, it seems only logical to survey some past and present sociocultural structural developments and relate them to possible effects on emerging gendered identities of older women. In this respect, we follow in the footsteps of the gerontologists Bond, Briggs, and Colman (1990), who assumed that to understand people later in life, one has to see them in the context of their whole life history. Thus, although we do not assume a simple cause-and-effect relation (Bengtson, Burgess, & Parrott, 2006), we follow this understanding to examine several powerful macro changes that are significant to understanding today's older women. Specifically, these changes include (a) past shifts in gendered power relations (e.g., the reconstruction of gender roles on a more egalitarian basis) and additional contextual period effects (e.g., the liberal trends and sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s) and (b) the present expansion of the third age, which also reflects the growing preoccupation with consumerism and lifestyle.

The varied relations between macro sociopolitical changes and construction of identity are intriguing. Although these influential events are crucial to

the understanding of evolving identities, individual women experience aging differently. Thus, in the last part of this chapter we discuss the possible ways in which older women engage with issues related to this phase in their lives. As it turns out, quite surprisingly, many questions remain unanswered and await future research.

## FEMINIST-GUIDED ANALYSIS OF GENDERED OLD AGE

In this chapter we adhere to feminist theories for advancement of our understanding of today's older women. In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of four major constructs common in contemporary feminist theories: collective identity, construction of gender, power relations and power structures, and gender-related intersectionality.

### Collective Identity

Gender studies and feminist theory are intricately linked to the social movements of mid-20th century. The ongoing dialogue between these impressive political movements has resulted in productive ideological and power shifts within the social sciences. The especially meaningful connection between these sociopolitical movements and feminist theory is still discernable in present-day principles guiding the feminist perspective. An awareness of collective identity that grew out of the feminist movement is no doubt one of the major concepts at the heart of feminist studies.

Simon and Klandermans (2001) analyzed the evolution of collective identities and their politicization. In this interesting study, they referred to several antecedent stages, such as engagement, in the consolidation of collective identity as group members engage in a power struggle on behalf of their group. In addition, Simon and Klandermans maintained that a designation of collective identity starts from the stage in which persons share the source of their identity with other people. From the current vantage point, one can easily see the social mechanisms that were at work in the feminist movement to unveil women's shared collective identity.

The feminist movement made women aware of their common sociopolitical structural positioning and of their shared life experiences. This

understanding reverberated in many consciousness-raising workshops and other similar groups that flourished during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result of the dynamics of consciousness raising, women grew from an aggregate that shared common sex roles into one that shared a collective identity. A sense of solidarity often arose among women after they participated in these consciousness-raising groups. However, one has to keep in mind that this shared commonality also disguised major variations among women in social and cultural signifiers other than gender (Shields, 2008).

Constructs related to collective identity largely pervaded theoretical and empirical research in social sciences and took center stage in many studies. As is often the case with overburdened and frequently discussed and debated concepts, collective identity was imbued with a variety of theoretical inputs. Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) asserted that collective identity is “first and foremost a statement about categorical membership. A collective identity is one that is shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common” (p. 81). This shared similarity in real or attributed characteristics is applicable to many social groups, including those defined by gender and age. It has been emphasized that an important part in the evolution of a social category into a collective identity is the personal acceptance of the assortment of characteristics associated with the category as an accessible platform for self-definition.

Older women often share a sense of similarity with other women in the same age group. They tend to communicate shared, gendered age needs, interests, and concerns. As a result, basic issues resonate throughout many formal or informal encounters between women in the same age group. Often, a particular group of women is supported by other women in vocalizing their individual concerns. Thus, although older women do not speak in one voice, their personal experiences are embedded in a large gendered age collective identity.

### **Construction of Gendered Age Identity**

It has long been emphasized in feminist theories that the understanding of gender-related constructs

must be located in the dominant popular and political culture. This awareness followed from the institution of social constructionism (e.g., Foucault, 1973) within gender and feminist theories. One of the consequences of this new awareness was a theoretical and empirical attempt to reframe gender differences through an alternative set of meanings (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Evidently, such a postmodern line of thinking is not simple, because it overturns objective accounts of reality and replaces them with fragmentary knowledge, which is always context dependent and local (Hare-Mustin, 2004). It was, in fact, this replacement of “natural” or “essential” gender with “constructed” gender that helped transform gender, giving new meanings to everyday life experiences as they broadly relate to cultural, political, and other social structures.

Chrisler, Rossini, and Newton (2015), for example, described the disturbing results of sociocultural pressures placed on women to erase the signs of the aging body. Modern middle-aged women show great interest in cosmetic procedures and invest their efforts and financial assets in them (Chrisler, Gorman, Serra, & Chapman, 2012). These older women are actually responding to an almost relentless pressure in Western cultures to retain a youthful appearance or be marginalized and portrayed negatively. The construction of gender, then, affirms that there are no unmediated gender identities or, for that matter, real-life experiences, because both reflect and are shaped by contextual social mechanisms. Following the same line, the shared collective identity of older women cannot be understood as a simple insiders’ experience but rather as part of an inter-group conflict over meanings attached to gendered age.

### **Power Discourse**

Power is a pivotal concept in contemporary feminist theories. In a comprehensive analysis of a half-century of research on women and gender, Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger, and McHugh (2012) noted that feminist theories are easily recognizable via their emphasis on situational factors, such as salient gender role norms, sex attitudes, and power structures. The common understanding is that, together, they play a serious role in the subordination of women.

The immense interest in power-related constructs is also discernable in research across different domains in social psychology, because it is deemed to be the key to decoding situational structures that produce collective and individual identities (e.g., Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Santos & Umaña-Taylor, 2015).

Power-related constructs have attracted (and wisely so) great attention, especially because it has become clearer how such constructs produce and maintain prevalent power hierarchies in societies (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Similarly, Castells (2004) demonstrated how power is mobilized to prioritize the interests, values, and preferences of those of higher status. Therefore, a group's position in society, such as that of the group of older women, is actually a reflection of its relative position vis-à-vis other groups. Power struggles take place in a complex of social arenas (today, social media have also become a prolific ground for such struggles), and they are often described in terms of intergroup conflicts. Whenever a group succeeds in advancing its relative social positioning, its share in sociopolitical, cultural, and economic standing is enhanced. Thus, power is basically a relational phenomenon, that is, one that reveals more about the dynamics and relationships among groups of people than about the individual characteristics of the people involved (Ritzer & Ryan, 2011). As such, it contains the potential for both constraint and enablement in accessing social, economic, and psychological resources. In this respect, power—or the lack of it—can increase or decrease the boundaries of what is achievable (Mosedale, 2005). Langner, Epel, Matthews, Moskowitz, and Adler (2012), in their research on depression, related scarcity of power resources to higher rates of depression and emotional repression. Flaskerud and DeLilly (2012) also referred to the access to power resources as a possible explanation of poor physical health and shorter longevity, and they raised a very serious question about the risky effects of social discrimination and, to that effect, any repressive system of constraints.

Previous life experiences clearly influence the transition to old age because it is often defined by gerontologists in terms of change and continuity (Kaufman, 1986). Accordingly, past gender role and status in the family, work organizations, and

society at large are carried in to old age. Thus, the aging experience reflects widening within-gender inequalities: Whereas more privileged women have the benefits of extended boundaries in midlife and can expect healthy and active aging, underprivileged women face much grimmer prospects. Thus, the emphasis on the power resource perspective has made the question of whose aging more relevant than ever before.

### Issues of Gender-Related Intersectionality

There is probably no better way to demonstrate intersectionality-related issues in the aging process of women than through the use of an economic lens. It is important to bear in mind that the social and economic status of older women is shaped by their earlier life experiences, particularly their caregiving, employment, and marital status. Together, these experiences affect women's retirement—especially income and pension benefits—particularly during times when social benefits are low. Indeed, the economic difficulties experienced by many older women are a serious reminder that the positive changes affecting privileged women might distort the overall feminist understanding of the predicament of aging women as a group. This is why we chose to bring forward some findings related to women's retirement income because it has enormous influence on the aging process.

**Older women are poorer than older men, especially if they live alone.** The gendered nature of retirement stands out when discrepancies between men's and women's retirement income are examined. In 2012, the U.S. poverty rate for women ages 65 and older was 11.0%, compared with 6.6% for older men. About 18.9% of older women living alone lived in poverty, compared with 11.9% of older men (Entmacher, Robbins, Vogtman, & Morrison, 2014). Entmacher et al. (2014) pointed out that the rate of extreme poverty for women older than age 65 who live alone has increased, such that their income totals about \$5,550 a year, or \$458 a month. This extreme poverty has been caused both by cuts in Social Security benefits and by women's own lower retirement savings while still employed. Overall, among people ages 65 and older, more than twice as

many women (more than 2.6 million) as men lived in poverty in 2012.

Gender differences in the financial security of older adults in European Union countries demonstrate a similar disadvantage for women (Foster & Walker, 2013). The different structure of opportunities in the labor market for men and women results in differential levels of financial security during retirement (Calasanti, 2010). Because women earn less than men throughout their working lives, they are eligible for smaller retirement benefits, which in turn affects their financial security, living situation, and mental and physical health (Whitbourne & Bookwala, 2015). Compounding the problem is the elimination of survivor benefits in many European Union countries, causing women to lose yet another source of retirement income.

**Minority older women are the poorest.** Older women who are Black, Hispanic, or Native American are poorer than both nonminority women and men. In 2012, poverty rates for minority women age 65 years and older were as follows: Hispanic, 21.8%; Black, 21.2%; and Native American, 27.1%. In comparison, the rate for White non-Hispanic women was 8.6%; for White non-Hispanic men, it was 4.6% (Foster & Walker, 2013). Essentially, the poverty rates for older minority women were more than twice as high as they were for White non-Hispanic women and more than 4 times as high as for White men.

In addition, the salaries of minority women are relatively low. In 2012, the median earnings of White non-Hispanic, Black, and Hispanic women working full time were only 78%, 64%, and 54%, respectively, those of White non-Hispanic men working full time. Minority women earn 69% to 82% of what White women earn and only 54% to 64% of what White men earn. It is doubtful that minority women can retire successfully with the high level of poverty and these low earnings.

**Women work shorter periods of time and part time.** Women are also more likely to experience overlap between their work and family roles. Conflict is most likely to occur among mothers of young children, dual-career couples, and people who are highly involved with their jobs (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). Often, women join the

labor market after fulfilling the task of being mothers, or they take several breaks during their employment, such as when babies are born, when children are young and need more intensive care, or when child care alternatives are expensive relative to the mother's additional salary. Women may also prefer to work part time so that they are at home when children return from school. Research has indicated that women tend to plan their economic horizon according to their experiences in the labor market in tandem with being a member in the family unit. This labor participation trajectory explains their decreased cumulative earned income, which eventually affects their retirement payments.

**Employment rates of women are lower.** The employment rate among adults ages 55 to 64 is relatively low in European Union countries but, as Foster and Walker (2013) indicated, it is lower among women (41%) than among men (59%). Women in this age group are more likely to be employed on a part-time basis, either because work is unavailable or because they are also involved in caregiving. It seems as though gendered caretaking responsibilities are neverending. Again, because of their lower employment participation, women's retirement pensions are lower than those of their male counterparts.

**The average salary of women is lower than that of men.** Part of the reason for the gender gap is that women are less likely to be employed in high-paying sectors of the market (Whitbourne & Bookwala, 2015). Women are more likely to be employed in the lower paying fields of education and health care (69%) than are men (30%). Only 8% of professional women are employed in the higher paying computer and engineering fields, compared with 44% of men.

**The retirement age for women is lower than that for men.** In 2014, the average age of statutory retirement in the 34 countries comprising the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development was 65 years for men and 63.5 for women. Yet, the tendency worldwide is to increase the retirement age and to compare retirement age for women with men.

Against this worrisome economic analysis of a large section of older women, there are, fortunately,



some brighter aspects. The greater participation of women of all ages in the labor market, together with an increase in retirement age and additional retirement savings, is a positive change that will improve the economic situation of some sectors of older women when they reach retirement.

In sum, the feminist critique of “gender-blind” theories of gerontology and of the scarcity of power discourse (e.g., Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Ray & Fine, 1999) clearly involves much more than the four core elements (collective identity, construction of gender, power relations and power structures, and gender-related intersectionality) presented in this chapter. Together, however, these elements provide a solid conceptual basis against which bias and misperceptions regarding the aging experiences of the present cohort of older women come to light. It is also important to note that the implications of biased and damaging assumptions concerning gender are often exacerbated with age, and thus such implications should be carefully taken into account. Therefore, feminist theories and critique are also important from the perspective of applied psychology and the helping professions, as demonstrated by recent studies showing the beneficial effects of feminism on optimal mental health (Enns & Fischer, 2012).

### IMPRINT OF MAJOR SOCIOCULTURAL TRENDS ON GENDERED IDENTITIES OF OLDER WOMEN

Our world often is marked by a set of all-embracing sociocultural trends. In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of three such major trends that are related to the development of today’s gendered identities of older women: changes in gendered-power relations, the influence of period effect, and the evolution of the third age.

#### Power, Social Change, and Identities of Older Women

The prominence of power relations at work in constructing collective and individual identities, as justly emphasized in feminist theories, does not necessarily imply the same outcomes for all older women. Perhaps ironically, the same contextually adaptable mechanisms of power structures that oppress so

many women tend to give other women the necessary resources to utterly transform their lives. This double-edged and complex nature of power structures is, for example, well illustrated by lesbian–feminist politics. Rose and Hospital (2015) emphatically stated that lesbians older than age 60 might reasonably expect aging to be a joyful and empowering phase of life. They related this change to a shift in cultural values toward greater societal acceptance of lesbians and to the legal protections available to them in Westernized countries. Evidently, this outcome is the result of a politically active collection of lesbians (and gays) who persistently campaigned to alter social constraints and promote equality.

Lesbians, of course, are not the only group of change seekers (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970). Many other groups have managed to get onto the politicized stage and pursue shifts in the balance of power and reallocation of meanings and values in ways that favor their interests and needs. Because our focus is on the contemporaneous age group of older women and on the ways, past and present, in which sociopolitical and cultural contexts affect them, it is important to address their continuous struggle toward empowerment and toward greater social and political prominence.

Middle-class and upper-class women, often White and quite well educated, were undoubtedly among the great winners of the rise of liberal attitudes throughout the 1960s and 1970s. They established several women’s organizations, and later renewed the feminist movement, to mainstream and institutionalize the rhetoric of gender equality. They first spawned consciousness-raising groups that translated their individual feelings and thoughts on constraint and repression to collective consciousness and collective identities, and later they approached their problems as political ones to be solved by organizing and demanding change (Freeman, 2015). The women’s movement made major advances in the reconstruction of gender roles on a more egalitarian basis and a more equitable division of power overall. This influential development facilitated the empowerment of women mainly through educational and professional gains (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

The changed landscape of the opportunity structure in education and in the work environment,

together with an overall more equitable gendered power, benefited a cohort of women who are now older than age 60. Some have used their newly acquired opportunities to claim a greater share of political, academic, social, and economic power. Schein and Haruvi (2015) observed that today there is a growing subset of older women who have sufficient financial resources to have a substantial power in the economy. All these impressive changes have raised questions about whether today's women older than age 60 are the first generation of powerful older women (Muhlbauer, 2015).

### Age Cohort, Period Effect, and Gendered Identities of Older Women

Gendered age identities are not the same in all generations (Parker & Aldwin, 1997; Stewart & Healy, 1989). On the contrary, their connotations vary along historical periods and cultural shifts, potentially resulting in common effects that distinguish one generation from another (Kovach & Knapp, 1989). In a way, this realization diminishes the importance of the model of age stratification, because in and of itself chronological age does not offer much worthwhile information about people in any specific age group. Social gerontologists (e.g., McMullin, 2000) tend to emphasize additional concepts, such as age cohorts. The leading assumption is that an age cohort is an aggregate of individuals who experienced the same event within the same time interval (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). Blaikie (1999) drew attention to the notion of a time signature as useful for defining the specific mindset of each age cohort as "it moves through time carrying with it sets of values specific to the period of its own socialization" (p. 173). He branded aging baby boomers as a particularly large cohort whose firm cultural orientation toward youth encourages them to combat the signs of aging and to cultivate special lifestyles.

Although the influence of mass-scale events (e.g., the civil rights movement, the feminist movement) is usually felt by everyone around at the time, these events tend to have the greatest impression on younger people (Ryder, 1965). Women now in their 60s were adolescents or young adults when the feminist movement burst onto the scene, attracting immense interest and involvement. Many of them

experienced and absorbed the transformation of gender roles and the realignment of gendered power structures. Stewart and Healy (1989) argued that an individual's receptivity to the effect of social events is mediated by their life stage. In view of this model, they contended that the women who experienced the feminist movement while still in transition to adulthood (as did the present cohort of older women) were deeply caught up by it and forever affected because they incorporated its views in ways that have stayed with them for life.

Macro changes in the perception of gender roles and gender equality opened up opportunities for women to associate themselves with more liberal and diversified assemblies of gender roles. This enriched repertoire enabled a possibly better fit between personal inclinations and accessible gender roles, and, no less important, the more egalitarian perception of gender roles also opened up opportunities for women to try out less traditional gender roles, which bear greater similarity to what were, until then, exclusively male gender roles. This transformation—or more cautiously stated, this extension in the definition of gender roles—is important to the understanding of evolving new gendered identities. Cultural aspects and representations of gender roles are, in fact, the building blocks for the construction of individual gender identity. Castells (2004), who relates to the power of identity, emphasized that each person is involved in a (probably continuous) process "of constructing meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning" (p. 6). Paraphrasing this statement, women were allocated a larger and more diversified set of gendered cultural attributes wherein the egalitarian gendered meanings were prioritized, certainly more so than ever before. This possibly changed gendered identity is not only important for its own sake but also has implications for the well-being of the women involved in the process. Thoits (2003) argued that perceived identities affect the ways that individuals think and feel about themselves and others. In this respect, the acquisition and accumulation of diversified gendered role identities potentially fostered empowering resources for better well-being.

### Third Age and Gendered Identities of Older Women

Privileged older women are reaping the benefits of changes that took place in their younger years and the resultant changes in their individual lifestyles. Any quick Internet or other popular media search provides ample examples of what Laslett (1989) referred to as the rise of the third age. Broadly defined, this segment of life stretches from the early 60s until serious mental and physical deterioration sets in. It is important to note that the third age signifies much more than a chronological period, because it is mainly associated with the pursuit of rewarding activities. Women (and men) are eager to self-categorize themselves as belonging to the third age and thus insist on differentiating themselves from those who are “truly old” or elderly. The rhetoric of ageism is often used as part of an effort to confront confining stereotypes and limitations on their youthful lifestyles. The popularity of acronyms such as WOOPIE (i.e., well-off older person) or GLAM (i.e., gray, leisured, and moneyed), are additional indicators of the insistence on a new social category and lifestyles deemed as befitting today’s cohort of people older than age 60.

Third-age culture is particularly nuanced in today’s neoliberal, consumerist society. Businesses have become more alert to the needs as well as the whims and wishes of older women, and to the entire community of retiree customers more generally. The “lifestyle and leisure market” is all set to make the necessary distinctions between cohorts with supposedly common past experiences and a present structure of preferences, as in the case of today’s women in the over-60 age group. The emphasis, particularly in a consumerist society, on sales of great depositories of lifestyle and leisure merchandise is also interesting in view of the observation that “many of the movements that came after the 1960s were not about rights for oppressed groups, but about life styles and cultural meanings” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2015, p. 7). In this respect, it is also interesting to follow the distinction that Calasanti and Slevin (2001) made between *old* and *older*: *Old* is a well-defined social category with deeply set boundaries, whereas *older* is more amorphous and fluid. What they perhaps overlook is that the concept of older

reflects the feelings and thoughts (or, otherwise stated, the self-schema) of today’s women in the over-60 age group. It is this very fluidity and ability to blur—until lately—sealed borders between middle age and older age that attracts them as a feasible definition for the construction of current collective identity and opens up ways for the adoption of youthful lifestyles.

### MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN THE PRESENT COHORT OF OLDER WOMEN

Although the current social and cultural interest in contemporaneous older women (i.e., baby boomers) is great, not much is known about their attempts to make meaning of the process of aging. Van Mens-Verhulst and Radtke (2013) emphatically said that

as a discipline, psychology has not yet recognized the third age as a psychologically important time of life. This was evident in the results of our literature search, our analysis of the four approaches to women’s identity in later life, and our analysis of empirical studies. (p. 56)

This disappointing deficit is particularly nuanced when viewed against the feminist emphasis on the importance of contextual effects on construction of gendered roles and identities. This particular cohort of older women matured in a much more fluid, egalitarian, and liberal society than any previous generation of women. They also had access to a larger range of gendered identities than ever before. Thus, in this climate of growing awareness of the intricate relationship between the evolving cultural discourses of gender equality and the formation of collective and individual identities, it was only to be expected that this generation would forge new identities that resonate with their past experiences when engaged with the aging process.

Older women’s identities, evidently, cannot be squeezed into a standardized model of “one size fits all.” However, some prominent features can easily be traced as having an effect on their gendered age sense of identity. One such feature is heightened awareness of their younger selves. Older women,



in formal and informal encounters, often say their chronological age does not reflect the way they feel about themselves (e.g., “How is it that my daughter, now 40, has reached my age?”). They like to dress youthfully, or at least agelessly. They are as busy, or almost as busy, as in their younger years. They still struggle to balance different needs and various interests. It is interesting to reflect on this recurrent theme in light of what Arber and Ginn (2002) identified as the need to distinguish between meanings associated with chronological age, social age, and physiological age and the ways they interrelate, because each is associated with different meanings. Indeed, older women make these distinctions, cognitively and behaviorally, because they often report feeling a mismatch between their chronological age and their psychosocial age. It is as though they experience aging as a multilayered process, in which the different layers move along at a different pace or on a different timetable. There is a similarity among the different aging experiences but definitely no sameness. Kaufman (1986) described older people’s feelings as signaling a sense of “agelessness.” Her findings relate to a robust sense of continuity rather than disruption and change. In this respect, whenever contemporaneous older women relate their connection to their younger selves, they too tend to express a sense of continuity rather than of being cut off or of separation. The link to younger selves is particularly solidified in today’s global consumerist culture that centralizes ideas of extendible youth and rewrites older people’s representations and optional lifestyles (Blaikie, 1999).

Alongside the younger self, other selves are activated that tend to “provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of the self” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The relevance of each of the possible selves potentially lies in giving significant meaning to life events and to developmental changes. Thus, it is only feasible to assume that the “older woman” self is set off and comes to life as women grow older. Meanings, anxieties, hopes, and the like that are attached to the older woman self differ from sets of meanings that were salient and accessible in previous life stages. Some of the issues are pertinent to decline or loss (e.g., “the libido is not what it used to be”) and others to gains

(e.g., “more time for me”). Kulik (2015) referred to the continuity, disruption, and accumulation of gendered roles (or gendered identities) as women grow older. The convergence of multiple selves is an identity issue for older women, because many of these selves have conflicting roles that have very often been constructed in a relational context.

Doubts about where to locate the “I” in relationships continue throughout the aging process. Old conflicts regarding meanings attached to gendered roles and identities are often reopened, awakening questions and triggering unfinished business. Thus, feelings of confusion, ambiguity, disorientation, self-questioning, and indeterminacy can be part of many women’s experience. Whenever an older woman proclaims something such as “now it is time for me,” it raises feelings of tension and restlessness that can easily be traced in subtexts and often in blunt interventions in group work with older women.

Many serious questions related to the evolution of new identities of the present cohort of older women are left unanswered. It is as yet unclear whether there is a distinction in the ways privileged and underprivileged older women approach issues associated with the construction of their older selves. In addition, questions related to a possibly more harmonious assimilation of diverse gendered age identities (i.e., in ways that summon meanings from a joint collection of traditional and feministic possible selves) are also left unanswered. A possible clue to these important questions can perhaps be found in a study by Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman (2011), who suggested a new cultural gender frame dubbed *egalitarian essentialism*. According to their findings, this new cultural frame blends aspects of feminist equality and traditional motherhood. They also suggested that this construct can be examined in light of feminist rhetoric of choice and equality, wherein the heterogeneity of women’s preferences within contextual constraints and possibilities are underscored (see also Hakim, 2000; Stone, 2007). We were attracted to this concept primarily because so many older women are engaged in identity issues related to their close relations, either within or outside their families, and experience difficulties in locating their authentic voice. Thus, although their research was geared

toward younger women who were actively engaged in parenting roles, this new construct that assimilates different worldviews and personal perceptions might be an interesting platform to study ways in which older women search for meanings in constructing their older self-identities.

## CONCLUSION

The feminist perspective, with its emphasis on egalitarian values and power discourse, is essential to theorizing about gendered old age. The importance of feminist theory lies in the decisive affirmation that there is no unmediated gender identity—nor, for that matter, real-life experiences—because each reflects and is shaped by contextual social mechanisms. To some degree, then, it should come as a relief to note that feminist thinking is now, more than ever before, mainstreamed into major theories of gerontology and other relevant disciplines that study aging in general and women’s aging in particular.

The present cohort of older women matured in a very different gendered climate than any previous generation. Stewart and Healy (1989) contended that the women who experienced the feminist movement while still young (i.e., those who are now in their 60s and 70s) were particularly impressed by the rhetoric and the actual transformation in gender roles and liberal values. It was, in effect, a cohort-defining event that made an irreversible imprint on their mindset and experiences. It is, therefore, only reasonable to assume that within such a social framework of greater access to power structures and diversified gender roles (though limited to privileged members of this group), new gendered identities would be constructed.

The present cohort of older women has reached this phase of life with somewhat modified gendered identities. Currently, as in previous stages in their lives, they are charting new sociocultural territories and redefining meanings and lifestyles throughout the aging process. However, as van Mens-Verhulst and Radtke (2013) stated, they might have “other ways of ‘doing’ the third age” (p. 48) that we know little about. Undeniably, there is a need to study this

age group of older women to understand the aging process as they experience it.

One thing that stands out—maybe more than ever before—in listening to older women in formal or informal encounters is their difficulty in locating their personal or authentic voices within a complex net of relations. They find it difficult—again, maybe more now than ever before—to balance or prioritize their various (and sometimes powerful) selves and often become perplexed and uncertain about overlapping gender roles and lifestyles.

It is intriguing to study the issues and concerns raised by older women within the egalitarian discourse. A quite recent theoretical assumption that relates to the “rise of a new cultural frame that incorporates traditional roles without implying hierarchical power relations” (Cotter et al., 2011, p. 286) might prove to be a prolific platform to research the ongoing quest of older women to locate their authentic voices. In lieu of a dichotomous paradigm, this one suggests an inclusive frame of reference wherein multiple selves can be expressed. However, the following questions are worthy of consideration in future research:

1. Does the egalitarian essentialism cultural frame provide additional interpretative significance to older women’s accounts of life experiences?
2. Does it allow for a broader accumulation of possible selves for identity building (Giddens, 1991)?

Today’s older women are perhaps more fragmented than ever before because additional social signifiers such as ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic status are foregrounded as more crucial definers of the aging process. This is very clear whenever the aging process is viewed via the economic perspective. The findings that stand out are quite appalling. Thus, the diversity among older women is a feminist issue that has to be addressed in ways that also suggest steps to be taken to close the gaps. Overall, writing about older women feels like trying to square the circle, because there is no one consistent collective of older women. Rather, there are highly divided collectives whose identifiers are located elsewhere than age and gender.

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