

Aging and Gender, Feminist Theory, and Social Work Practice Concerns

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According to the 2000 census, the median age of people in the United States had climbed to 35.3 in that year, the highest it has ever been (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In 2006, the vanguard of the American baby-boomer generation began to turn 60, with nearly 8,000 individuals turning 60 each day (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The average life expectancy in the United States is 77.8 years (Arias, 2007).

Intersectional theory highlights the limitations and risks of univariate analysis and argues for the consideration of multiple factors in explaining women's issues. Aging is a crucial variable. When it is viewed through the lens of gender and race, it provides more revealing information: Although the average life expectancy in the United States is 77.8 years, the average life expectancy for White men is 75.7 years; for African American men, 69.5 years; for White women, 80.8 years; and for African American women, 76.3 years. In contrast, men and women in Swaziland, Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Zambia, Central African Republic, Lesotho, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Rwanda, Nigeria, Somalia, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, and Malawi have life expectancies of fewer than 50 years, and men and women of Austria, Channel Islands, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Martinique, San Marino, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Spain, Australia, China-Hong Kong, China-Macao, Gibraltar, Israel, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Iceland all have longer life expectancies than those of the United States (United Nations Statistics Division, 2007). Aging is and needs to be an area of concern for both feminists and social workers.

Theories provide a framework within which we shape and focus the direction and scope of our analysis and understanding. Intersectional theory highlights the importance of multiple areas of attention, emphasizing the complexity of the intersecting facets of personal identities (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). Collins (1999a, 1999b) and hooks (1989) attended to a multitude of overlapping and mutually reinforcing oppressions that Black women face in addition to gender. We must now expand their work to include the concurrent and mutually reinforcing challenges of aging. Identity is woven within a web of intersecting threads that include gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and age.

The feminist ethic of care was first articulated within the context of mothering and the nature, strength, and enduring relationship of care between mothers and their children. As the realities of an aging population permeate our national and individual consciousnesses, we will need to attend more carefully to the character and qualities of caring relationships between aging women and their mothers, who are moving into the final years of their lives. Theories of care must be more finely articulated. And care is not enough. Theories of justice and human rights need to be drawn into our analyses and research. Feminist theorizing about aging must look carefully at a multiplicity of intersections and must address aspects of care, justice, and the dignity that are basic human rights. There is much work ahead of us, but it is work that has already begun.

There are a significant number of demographic studies on elderly women that provide statistics on numbers, longevity, and trends. That work needs to be further elaborated with qualitative research that describes and explains the complex social experience of aging through narratives and life histories. Research with older women has generally compared older women to older men (Russell, 2007). Research on parenting has focused on mothers of young children; work is needed that addresses the experiences of older women. Similarly, the well-discussed double jeopardy hypothesis, which was originally used with elderly immigrants (Dowd & Bengtson, 1978), portrays the aging of women as a problem. Although research has supported the hypothesis in examining the conditions of elderly women who are left vulnerable and in a weak economic position in old age (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003), I found in my qualitative research that the lives of elderly Muslim immigrants were more complex than this early research indicated. The women felt vulnerable because they were dependent, yet they were highly valued as a source of support to their adult children and their roles as grandparents (Ross-Sheriff, 1994). Ahmadi and Tornstam (1996) challenged the jeopardy on the basis of their research indicating that two minority positions result in a positive outcome for older immigrants.

Recent qualitative research has analyzed the assets of aging women in terms of their social networks, competence, independence, and various interests at home and in their neighborhoods (Petry, 2003; Russell, 2007). Davidson (2002) found that following widowhood, women desired companionship, rather than "a new relationship," thus making a choice in their lifestyle. Similarly, a study that investigated the "living apart together" relationships of Swedish elders found that women chose to establish multihousehold relationships, rather than married or unmarried cohabitation (Karlsson & Borell, 2002). The women's choice reflected a desire for autonomy. Karlsson and Borell's (2002) interpretation was that women's increasing choices may reflect "the gender revolution continuing into old age" (p. 4). Thus, unlike studies that cast older women as passive components of social worlds, the Swedish study found that women are actors with agency. Gubrium and Holstein (1995, quoted in Russell, 2007) noted, "We need to treat them as *active interpreters* who *construct their realities through talk and interactions, stories and narrative*" (p. 174). Thus, there is a need for qualitative research that can describe and analyze the nuanced experiences of older women and provide a knowledge base to inform policy and social work practice.

In summary, older women have been relatively less visible in gender theory, and their voices have not been heard in research. As social work professionals and feminist theorists, we need to conduct more research that examines elderly women's lives within the context of the women's diverse positions and further develop feminist theories that provide a more nuanced understanding of elderly women's complex conditions. Put more succinctly, in Krekula's (2007, p. 156) words, we need to consider "age and gender as intertwining systems" and develop theories that provide "a more complex understanding of the intersection of age," an understanding that is framed within a context of care, directing our actions toward goals that embody human rights and that advance social and economic justice.

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