



---

Broken down by Age and Gender: "The Problem of Old Women" Redefined

Author(s): Diane Gibson

Source: *Gender and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Aug., 1996), pp. 433-448

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189680>

Accessed: 15/01/2009 16:18

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=sage>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Sage Publications, Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Gender and Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# ***BROKEN DOWN BY AGE AND GENDER “The Problem of Old Women” Redefined***

**DIANE GIBSON**

*Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*

*The last decade has seen the emergence of a feminist awareness of old age and, in particular, a growing awareness of what has come to be seen as “the problem of old women.” Old women, it has been consistently demonstrated, are disadvantaged in a variety of ways in relation to old men. They are poorer, older, and sicker; they have less adequate housing and less access to private transport; they are more likely to experience widowhood, severe disability, and institutionalization. Taking “the problem of old women” as its starting point, this article argues for a less phallogocentric analysis of women in old age, which is less reliant on men as a relational category to define the conditions, experiences, and resources of older women.*

**F**or those working in the fields of social gerontology or feminist studies, one of the recognized academic growth areas of the 1980s must surely have been the study of old women. As the previous feminist preoccupation with the reproductive phase of the life cycle gave way to an emerging awareness of postmenopausal and aged women, so, too, did at least some areas of social gerontology recognize the relevance of gender to the aging process. This is not to suggest that old age became a central area of feminist analysis or that a feminist revolution occurred within social gerontology; rather, a small group of researchers with interests in both camps began to explore the coincidence of age and gender.

The earliest contributions were generally a direct response to the androcentrism underlying much gerontological work, taking as their starting point the tendency to ignore old women (most commonly) or else to regard them as of interest only insofar as they differed from the dominant male pattern. Sex was certainly employed as an independent variable in empirical work, but even that was by no means commonplace, as Payne and Whittington (1976) made clear in an early analysis of the popular stereotypes and the available data concerning older women. What was

---

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I am grateful to Margaret L. Andersen, Dorothy Broom, Toni Calasanti, and Robert Goodin for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.*

**REPRINT REQUESTS:** *Diane Gibson, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, GPO Box 570, Canberra, ACT 2601, AUSTRALIA.*

**GENDER & SOCIETY**, Vol. 10 No. 4, August 1996 433-448  
© 1996 Sociologists for Women in Society

certainly absent was a coherent recognition of how sex and gender, in terms of both biological bases and social constructions, inflected the experience and the institution of old age.

So, in *The Coming of Age*, de Beauvoir (1972, 7, 89) could simultaneously call on her readers to join her in breaking the conspiracy of silence surrounding old age and confidently assert that the problem of old age was predominantly a male problem; the central problem of old age, she argued, was a struggle for power, which necessarily concerned only the stronger sex. She thus moved beyond one dominant social and intellectual paradigm—that old age was a fit subject for pity but not interest—only to remain captured by another: a male dominated intellectual tradition defining what was a relevant and central issue for social analysis.

De Beauvoir was not alone in the view that aging is predominantly a male problem, as Beeson's (1975) review of the positions held by several leading gerontologists demonstrates. It is hardly surprising, then, that authors such as Sommers (1978) and Sontag (1975) have sought to draw attention to the compounding impact of age on sex and the double standard of aging. Feminist analyses in the 1960s and 1970s were more generally preoccupied with the problems of inequality that confronted women in comparison to men—whether in schools, workplaces, or families. The coincidence of this feminist preoccupation with gender-based disadvantage and social gerontologists' focus on aging as a social problem led almost inevitably to the emergence of the *double jeopardy* approach to the analysis of being old and female.

A veritable deluge of material concerning the difficulties associated with being old and female has emerged from these preliminary efforts to recognize the particular circumstances confronting old women. Ranging from the polemical to the heavily empirical, the disadvantages that accrue to older women have now been extensively documented and analyzed.

At least among a subset of gerontological researchers, then, aging has come to be regarded as a gendered issue. I wish neither to take issue with the relevance of gender to the study of aging nor to disagree with the particular disadvantages likely to be encountered by old women. It is, rather, the extent to which this unremitting negativity has come to characterize the study of old women and its reflection and reinforcement of pervasive images of old women in society at large that constitute the central issue in this article.<sup>1</sup>

It is my contention that the particular lens through which old women have come to be viewed is one that selectively includes only certain elements of the experience of being old and female. The "problem of old women" referred to in the title of this article has thus a dual significance. The problems likely to be encountered by particular old women in particular social and historical contexts have become so central to scholarly discourse on this topic that there is a danger of viewing old women only in terms of those problems, and hence, there is a danger of taking the short step to constructing old women as a problem for society. The problems that society poses for old women may thus disappear, as the problems that old women pose for society take hold.

By focusing on issues of disadvantage, feminist analyses of old age have tended to obscure not only the heterogeneity of old women but also the aspects of being old and female that are a source of both celebration and strength. While there is no doubt that women face a number of adverse physical, emotional, mental, social, and economic eventualities in their old age, such eventualities do not adequately represent the totality of their experiences.

All too frequently, older women have been constructed and viewed from a social problems perspective. By reflecting genuine problems and difficulties in the absence of equally genuine capacities and strengths, we run the risk of reinventing and reenforcing a self-concept and a societal concept of old women as a dependent group with little to offer society and much to demand. It does not take a large intellectual leap to consider some of the consequences of such a creation, particularly with the plight of "welfare mothers" in the United States readily at hand as an example.

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF DISADVANTAGE

Documentation of the disadvantages confronting older women proceeded apace during the 1980s across a wide variety of difficulties and problems. Some took heterosexual relationships as a starting point. The combination of men tending to marry younger women and the greater longevity of women leads to a greater incidence of widowhood among women. The same factors, combined with the perceived lesser sexual attractiveness of older women, lead to a lower likelihood of remarriage for old women. The absence of a spouse in old age is associated with a range of potentially negative domestic, psychological, social, and financial consequences. Spouses often act as a significant source of assistance in the case of serious illness or disability; provide social and emotional support, sexual fulfillment, physical contact, and financial security; and are people with whom to share caring and domestic labor; moreover, the loss of perceived sexual attractiveness and reproductive function experienced by old women has been related to poor self-concept and how they are devalued by society at large (Allen 1988; Arber and Ginn 1991a; Gee and Kimball 1987; Russell 1987; Sontag 1975).

Other analysts have focused more on the adequacy of public provisions. Elsewhere, I have argued that much social provision for the aged may be characterized as both phallogentric and parasitic upon the labor of old women (Gibson and Allen 1993). Writing from a political economic perspective, a number of authors have emphasized the disadvantaged position of old women with regard to income and housing (Coleman and Watson 1987; Estes, Gerarg, and Clarke 1984; Hess 1985; Minkler and Stone 1985; Peace 1986; Rodeheaver 1987; Rosenman 1986; Woerness 1987). Attention has also focused on measures of disability and health status, use of medical and hospital services, and rates of institutionalization (Arber and Ginn 1991a; Gee and Kimball 1987; Hess 1980). There is now a considerable body of literature to document the fact that the problem of aging is really a problem

of and for old women; we have come a long way from de Beauvoir's (1972) confident assertion that the problem of old age is really the problem of old men.

The personal and socioeconomic disadvantages suffered by old women should not have come as much of a surprise; it is, after all, the same finding that would be revealed by any comparative analysis of young and middle-aged men and women. Women's poorer health, lower income, less adequate housing, and so forth do not suddenly appear in old age; it is continuous with and contingent upon a lifetime of cumulative disadvantage.

Research on old women, particularly policy-oriented research, must take this into account. A review of the evidence in the fields of health, income, housing, living arrangements, social provisions, and personal relationships makes compelling reading: The disadvantaged position of older women emerges as beyond dispute; yet, such analyses fail to take account of the advantages that may accrue to old women by virtue of the same lifelong patterns of sex-specific behavior. In attempting to redress the balance and identify the peculiar difficulties faced by women in old age, good earlier insights may well have been pushed beyond the limits of maximum utility. The relatively recent preoccupation with the particular disadvantages associated with being old and female that dominates current debate threatens to see all evidence through the one interpretive lens—the unfortunate life circumstances of older women.

Despite its emergence from a feminist perspective, this preoccupation with “the problem of old women” is, in some curious sense, predicated on both a male and a midlife perspective. While the importance of the adversities described above should not be minimized, there are a number of positive elements pertinent to women's experience of old age that either remain unaddressed or, if considered, are elided, reconstructed, or misconstrued in the dominant discourses of both social gerontology and social policy. By reconstruction, I refer to how aspects of women's lives that could be seen as advantages appear more as disadvantages. This is illustrated below in relation to women's longevity, their social networks, and their coping skills. Other elements are simply not there or, at best, are dealt with in a peripheral way; these are the areas of silence in our understanding of the circumstances of old women—their greater experience of and investment in the private sphere, their involvement in the informal economy, and their more frequent experience in moving between formal and informal sectors, and the public and private spheres, over the life course. Finally, there are the misconstructions, or the areas in which the evidence fails to support our taken-for-granted truths about gender differences in old age.

### **The Reconstructions**

Women's greater longevity has been acknowledged for some decades but, as Friedan (1993) observed, has curiously not been subjected to sustained critical scrutiny until quite recently. Perhaps more curiously, although attention has focused on the explanation of the observed difference, there has been a continuing tendency

not to incorporate the advantages of greater longevity for women into analyses of their position.

Gee and Kimball (1987), in an analysis of older women's health, demonstrate this preoccupation with "the problem of old women" in a lengthy discussion of the competing explanations offered for older women's higher rates of morbidity, psychotropic drug use, prescription drug use more generally, medical services, and so on. Their conclusion, however, is of particular interest:

as we have seen, the theoretical concern in studies focussing on sex differentials in morbidity has been on why women are more likely than men to be sick with minor, less life-threatening illnesses. An equally important, perhaps more important, question is why *are women less likely to contract major illnesses and diseases?* (p. 40)

To rephrase the question somewhat, Why is it men are more likely to contract major diseases and die from them? The point is not the wording of the comparison but, rather, that women appear so firmly entrenched in their category of "other" that even here, where the questions for men are of life-threatening significance, theoretical analysis has focused on women's difference from the (male) norm pertaining to minor morbidity, rather than on explaining male divergences in terms of major illnesses.

A more diffuse example of this preoccupation with the negative is the frequent tendency to construct women's greater longevity as a disadvantage and the consequent "surplus of women" as a social problem:

Women live longer than men, they are usually poorer than men, and because their husbands die earlier, they are more likely to live alone and, in extreme old age, to be institutionalised. (Gee and Kimball 1987, 40)

Women are given the dubious privilege of living longer than men, after years of financial and psychological dependency—ill-prepared to survive on their own, much less to use their added years with enjoyment and fulfillment. (Lewis and Butler 1984, 203)

The "dubious privilege" referred to by Lewis and Butler (1984, 203) is used to underline their argument concerning women's social and economic disadvantage. Although as a rhetorical device it undoubtedly illustrates the adverse financial and other circumstances confronting older women, the suggestion that life itself becomes a burden and a dubious privilege is perhaps to take the argument too far and certainly illustrates the lack of balance characteristic of this literature. It is also this "problem" for which Gee and Kimball (1987) propose a solution in terms of improving men's health as a key policy direction. While the logic of such a conclusion is inescapable, it is curious indeed that it should be proposed as a solution to the "problem" of women's greater longevity (and the associated disadvantages) rather than as a solution to the problem of men's shorter life spans.

Such arguments may appear to be cheap shots. These authors were, after all, concerned with something else: the social construction of disadvantage in old age as it affects old women. But it is the dominance of a paradigm that can construct greater longevity, even in passing, as a social problem that is at issue here. While

women in any birth cohort are indeed considerably more likely to experience high levels of disability and low levels of income than are men, they are also more likely to be alive. Few older women are likely to view their own longevity in quite the terms that characterize this literature. Indeed, the literature on morale in old age is redolent with examples of relatively high subjective perceptions of well-being in relatively poor objective circumstances (from the standpoint of the social scientist; Herzog and Rodgers 1981; Rudinger and Thomae 1990).

It is worth considering that the lack of fit between objective and subjective indicators of well-being in old age may be at least influenced by the midlife perspective of most researchers. Calasanti and Zajicek (1993), among others, have argued that when women are analyzed within a conceptual model derived from men's experiences, anomalies are explained as sex differences; research that purports to be gender neutral actually reinforces gender hierarchies. If the argument is applied to age, rather than gender, it is possible that research on old age, when conducted from one dominant (midlife) perspective, may not be age neutral in its consequences. The perceived disparity between objective circumstances and subjective well-being may be more a disparity from the perspective of the researchers than from that of the researched.

Another area in which the positive aspects of being female in old age tend to disappear from academic view is that of social networks and social support. Much is made of the greater propensity of old women to widowhood, which is readily associated with a range of financial, social, psychological, and sexual difficulties. Comparatively little is made, however, of the closer instrumental and affective ties the women experience with family and friends.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, there is ample empirical evidence that these stronger networks do exist. Gibson and Mugford (1986) reported on the higher levels of emotional and social support experienced by old women, and Peace (1986) and Demetrakopoulos (1983) reported on the greater social contacts and friendship bonds of elderly women. Rossi (1986, 168) argued more broadly that women maintain the communal and social bonds; men without spouses are thus particularly at risk of isolation from the social collectivity. Despite this knowledge, widowhood and the associated social isolation dominates more general analyses of older women's position in society.

So, it is widowhood, and not network strength, that is used as an independent variable in the analysis of service use, institutionalization, patterns of volunteering, health status, paid work patterns, and so on. Where the focus is on one element of the private sphere, such as friendship, women's advantageous or at least more liberally endowed position is generally recognized. When the focus broadens, the picture tends to revert, with variables such as widowhood (the absence of a male partner) assigned a more central role than, for example, the strength of female friendships, in explaining various aspects of social and public life.<sup>3</sup>

These elements of women's lives, however, have important consequences for their old age. Women, with a lifetime of experience in maintaining and establishing social bonds within families, friendship networks, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, school associations, and so forth, are simply better equipped to maintain

and redevelop their social networks when confronted with the vicissitudes frequently attendant on old age. Death of spouses, family, and friends is undisputedly a more frequent experience as one ages, the erosion of established networks an unavoidable corollary. The very interruptedness of the traditional woman's life course tends to provide a context in which the reestablishment or replacement of network members is not a new experience.

The importance of social networks, and particularly emotional and social support, has been demonstrated in connection with quality-of-life issues, the capacity to cope with stressful life events, and health and longevity (Antonucci 1990; House and Kahn 1985). Better social network support has been positively associated in the literature with coping capacity in the face of stressful life events (George 1989; Krause 1987). There is some direct evidence that women generally have better coping capacities than men; this is a quality that becomes more rather than less critical with the onset of old age. Men, for example, are much more likely than women to become sick or die in the period following widowhood.<sup>4</sup> Women are more likely to experience widowhood than men, but as Rossi (1986, 160) comments, "it is perhaps fortunate that it is elderly women rather than men who tend to outlive their spouses."

Women's greater longevity, stronger social networks, and personal coping capacities are recognized in existing literature; yet, these very strengths tend to appear only in relation to their problems—the loss of a spouse, their greater caring responsibilities, and so on. The capacity of older women to deal successfully with these changing life circumstances is subject to a peculiar eclipsing; it is the changing life circumstances and their problematic nature that remain paramount.

### **The Silences**

Other potential areas of advantage remain largely uninvestigated in relation to women in old age. Women, particularly the current generation of old women, have by and large spent much of their time in the so-called private sphere. It appears to have gone largely unremarked that women's life-course experiences may well advantage them in old age—a life phase that essentially involves exclusion from the world of paid work. Given the low labor force participation rates of women in late midlife and old age, the structure and organization of their lives is most likely to be premised on private sphere activities. It is virtually certain that for many women, the transition from midlife to late life will contain significantly more continuities in terms of interests, activities, and social participation than it does for men.

Recently, studies of retirement have begun to explore some of these issues. Young and Schuller (1991), for example, although predominantly concerned with men in retirement, consider the positive implications of women's greater involvement in a variety of paid and unpaid, formal and informal activities. Interestingly, this broadening of focus in the retirement literature appears to coincide with the acceleration of early retirement among men in their 50s and early 60s (Jacobs, Kohli, and Rein 1991, 63-6). Retirement is now a much less clear-cut event; it may,



for example, be an alternative to unemployment or signal the beginning of a second career. As older men's labor market attachment becomes more tenuous and varied, it is more like that typically experienced by women. The changing nature of male retirement, therefore, coincides with an increasing willingness to consider the construction and definition of retirement within the aging literature (Adelmann, Antonucci, and Jackson 1993; Rosenman 1995).

Another area of silence is old women's involvement in the domestic (informal) and unofficial economies. Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the size and relevance of the domestic and unofficial economic sectors, particularly among analysts in the social policy and labor force fields (Baxter and Gibson 1990; Offe and Heinze 1992; Waring 1988). There is, moreover, some evidence that the extent of unofficial economic activities is linked to economic downturns and to the availability of leisure hours (Rose 1985). If Rose is correct, it is realistic to argue that as both are likely to be present in the lives of many old women (and, indeed, a number of old men), they may well be heavily involved in a range of nonmarket activities. The current generation of aged people grew to maturity through the most severe economic downturn of the century and may well be predisposed toward a system of exchanging goods and services.

While such activities may well be relevant to both sexes, there are some indications to suggest that they may be particularly so for women. Women are likely to be poorer than men and less able to maintain themselves comfortably within the official economic sector. Given that the majority of old women would have less experience in paid work than do old men, this is an area in which women may have had more opportunity to be involved over their life course; moreover, the processes of barter and exchange characteristic of the unofficial economy may be facilitated by the larger and more active networks characteristic of old women. Some support is indeed offered for such a hypothesis by Herzog et al. (1989) in their account of the continuing differences in both the amount and the nature of productive work that men and women undertake in old age, and the hypothesis is further supported by Danigelis and McIntosh's (1993) finding that among Whites, women spend more time in unpaid activity in the home, more time in unpaid activity outside the home, and more time in productive activity over all. Such statements remain largely in the realm of conjecture at the present time; yet, these and other as yet unspecified areas of investigation may tell us a great deal about the lives of older women.

### **The Inaccuracies**

We do not know as much about the lives of old women and how their lives differ from those of old men as is often believed. Our knowledge is partial, and we have failed to recognize some of the more obvious anomalies and inadequacies. It is possible to illustrate this using both qualitative and quantitative material.

Let me start with the general construction of "the problem of old women"; this preoccupation with women's comparative disadvantage in old age is not one necessarily shared by old women themselves. While much reported qualitative

research has been redolent with difficulties experienced by old women (Coleman and Watson 1987; Russell 1987), the comments of old women when explicitly asked about the relative positions of men and women in old age are instructive. In a qualitative study I undertook, responses to this question generally favored women over men, with the main thrust of their comments concerning the continuities in the experiences and life skills accrued by women.<sup>5</sup> This view is exemplified by two excerpts from these interviews, one from a 67-year-old married woman and the other from a 76-year-old unmarried woman:

Well, I think women, like in every other sphere of life, can cope better than men. . . . Men, especially married men who've had women to care for them for many years, are inclined to lean on their wives and have things done for them. And if there's anything wrong with them men are always bad patients. I think women can cope with things better because they're more strong willed than men. (Mrs. H.)

I went to a Retirement course. They advocated that women learn the "business side" of things, and men learn to look after themselves. (Miss H.)

Blieszner's (1993) recent work offers some quantitative evidence in support of this argument. Although she does not address the more general absence of attention to various positive aspects of women's experiences of old age, she does provide a useful illustration of the argument. Her article notes the lack of attention focused on the capacity to manage everyday living in previous work on adaptation to widowhood; she finds that women are more likely than men to manage in this regard. Other qualitative studies concerned with women's competence and capacity to survive can also be found (Day 1991). This perspective has yet, however, to acquire the status of a dominant paradigm.

The second example offered here involving the misconstruction of available evidence is more quantitatively grounded and focuses on a brief critical appraisal of one of the more common explanations of women's greater likelihood of institutionalization. The received wisdom is that it is women's (and particularly wives') care that keeps men out of nursing homes in old age. Women, in comparison, are less likely to have husbands because of their greater likelihood of widowhood and hence are more likely, in the absence of a caring spouse, to be institutionalized. There are, however, difficulties with that interpretation. Rates of institutionalization are in fact almost identical for men and women until age 70 and quite similar (albeit higher for women) until age 80; yet, women are markedly more likely to be widowed than men throughout that age range. While rates of widowhood do increase with advancing age, they do not increase at the same rate as does that of institutionalization. Perhaps it is women's better networks that compensate for the absence of a spouse, but why then are women so much more likely than men to be admitted to institutions from 80 onward? Admittedly, this informal network is more likely to be eroded in very old age, but so, too, are older-than-80-year-old men more likely to be widowed. Perhaps illness and disability affect women and men older than age 80 in different ways, with severity of disability dominating other factors such as the availability of informal care in old age. If this is so, why do

severely disabled very old women have twice the institutionalization rates of very old severely disabled men? We really do not know the answers to these questions. The "comfortable wisdom" can be shown to have some uncomfortable inadequacies.<sup>6</sup>

### TOWARD AN EXPLANATION

The recent preoccupation with "the problem of old women," then, can legitimately be said to have rendered invisible some more positive aspects of aging for old women. This has occurred through a variety of processes, including the reconstruction of positive qualities such as women's greater longevity, the academic silence that surrounds certain favorable aspects of old women's lives, and the failure to identify inaccuracies, or at least conflicting pieces of evidence, underlying what has become conventional wisdom.

Such arguments are gaining increasing legitimacy with regard to race, class, and gender. In particular, recent feminist analyses of race have explored the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups from formal scholarship and the distortions and incomplete information that result (Andersen and Collins 1995); yet, the notion that age is just such a powerful agent in processes of inclusion and exclusion has been oddly missing. It seems that just as traditional *malestream* scholars have difficulty in considering, let alone accepting, the notion that their system of knowledge excludes female perspectives, so, too, have feminist scholars who easily apply such insights to divisions of race and class resisted the claim that age can function as a selective filter on the social world.

This argument would remain incomplete without some attempt at a more detailed explanation of the emergence of "the problem of old women." The problem is a multifaceted one; what is offered here is not one but four explanations, each in its own way true, each more compelling in convergence than in isolation. The first, most obvious, and most quickly dealt with explanation is that there is more than an element of truth in the construction: Old women really do have a number of problems.

The second, and perhaps most powerful, explanation may be found in intellectual history. The study of old women emerged at the coincidence of social gerontology and women's studies, both of which have a traditional concern with social problems and the social construction of disadvantage. It is hardly surprising that those social scientists interested in both social gerontology and feminism would be preoccupied with questions of inequality and social disadvantage as they have an impact on old women. Their intellectual history predisposed a focus on what was wrong with older women, how they were socially disadvantaged, and what could be done to correct that disadvantage.

Women's studies more generally quickly moved beyond a stage in which women's position is understood in relation to men—the so-called androgynous phase referred to by Eisenstein (1984); yet, while the 1970s and 1980s in mainstream women's studies was characterized by a growing interest in women-centered issues (such as housework, motherhood, and incest), there was no equivalent shift

in work on gender and aging. In the 1990s, debates rage at a theoretical level concerning the politics of difference versus the politics of equality, but the field of gender and aging remains relatively untouched.

It has been argued that the sociological preoccupation with paid productive work, dating from the founding fathers of the discipline, led to a theoretical incapacity to successfully interrogate questions of both gender and age, as these were groups outside the paid workforce (Arber and Ginn 1991b; Roberts 1981; Stacey and Thorne 1985). So, too, it can be argued that similar difficulties emerged in relation to the feminist preoccupation with women's reproductive and sexual functions. Old women, culturally divorced from paid productive labor, reproductive labor, or sexual services, could not be easily incorporated into any feminist framework—be it Marxist, socialist, or radical in orientation. It is thus surprising that our understanding and analysis of old women should “stall” at the more traditional level of a preoccupation with social problems and the social construction of inequality.

We are only now seeing some coherent moves beyond this position. Calasanti and her colleagues (Calasanti 1993a, 1993b; Calasanti and Zajicek 1993), for example, have begun to develop a feminist perspective on old age that incorporates differences associated with the intertwinings of class, race, and gender into the conceptual analysis itself. Even in these more sophisticated accounts, however, resistance to age as a source of bias appears. In a special journal issue on socialist feminist approaches to aging, Hendricks (1993, 114) argues that to apply a feminist perspective to the study of aging means that all findings “must be closely scrutinized for any possible ‘centeredness’”—whether this be “male bias, class bias, or racial/ethnic bias.”<sup>7</sup> While this list is not held by its author to be complete, the failure to include age as a source of potential centeredness is quite striking in a piece on the relativity of gender in aging research.

A third explanation emerges from methodological limitations inherent in much of the quantitative work underpinning the gerontological literature. A decade ago, Hess (1985, 320) observed that “most gerontologists were slow to realize that this young-old distinction was in most respects a gender difference,” and the confusion of age- and gender-based distinctions continues to adversely affect analytic work in this area. The high correlations between age, gender, disability, and marital status alone confound many bivariate analyses, and there is a paucity of theoretically informed (and particularly informed by feminism) multivariate analysis in this literature. When multivariate work has been undertaken, gender is frequently taken into account as just another variable. When the effects of variables such as lower income, greater disability, better social support, widowhood, and extreme old age are taken into account, we find reports that gender does not account for any additional variance (Edwards and Klemmack 1973; Leonard 1981). The fact that the experience of being old and female is one characterized by lower income, greater disability, better social support, higher social participation, greater continuities, widowhood, and extreme old age—or, in other words, some coherent sense of what it means to be old and female as distinct from old and male—somehow disappears from such analyses.

Finally, and in a sense underlying what has gone before, we may look for explanations in the standpoint from which such research has been undertaken. In some odd way, social gerontology and the policy analysis work associated with it, even that undertaken from a feminist perspective, have failed to fully escape from a male, midlife standpoint.

Social gerontologists cannot be accused of gerontophobia—the charge that Arber and Ginn (1991b) lay against sociology in pointing to its failure as a discipline to engage with later stages of the life cycle, and which others have similarly laid against feminism (Allen 1988; Reinharz 1986; Russell 1987). Nor are feminists who choose to work on questions of old age particularly vulnerable to that criticism. Social gerontologists are, however, subject to dominant paradigms and high- and low-status areas of interest within their discipline. In social gerontology, as elsewhere, work on public sphere issues (retirement, income security, etc.) retains more prestige than that on the private sphere (friendship networks, the informal economy). Ironically, perhaps, some would classify social gerontology in its entirety as something of an intellectual ghetto for these same reasons.

The arguments made in this article may be seen to vary in the intensity with which they can be applied to particular subfields within gerontology. Women's superior network strength is generally well recognized; the advantages that it might confer in transitions such as retirement are only beginning to be recognized. While social gerontologists have successfully stepped outside certain disciplinary traditions in terms of their substantive preoccupation with a group by and large excluded from the public sphere, they have yet remained in some senses implicitly embedded in those intellectual histories.

## CONCLUSION

In 1987, Smith wrote of the "peculiar eclipsing" of women in academic discourse (p. 17). In some curious way, there has been a peculiar eclipsing of old women in much of the work undertaken to date. The study of old women has been defined by a preoccupation with male and midlife perspectives. A moment's reflection will reveal that it is certainly the case that we tend to refer to gender differences most often in terms of women's difference—women live longer, are higher users of prescription drugs, have higher rates of institutional care, and so on. We do not generally refer to men living shorter lives, being lower users of prescription drugs, having lower rates of institutional care, and so on.

This in and of itself is not important. The comparisons are valid in either direction. It becomes an issue in my view when the orientation of the research—the questions asked and the research strategies employed—reflect that presumption of men as the dominant group. Compare, as another example, the amount of research done on the discontinuities associated with moving out of the paid workforce in old age (a predominantly male experience) with that on the continuities that women experience by virtue of not leaving the paid workforce.

If we wish to account for women's greater longevity, we may need to examine, for example, the things that women do and that men do not do, in addition to the more traditional approach of focusing on things that women do not do (or do less of), such as working in dangerous physical environments, smoking, and drinking. I have in mind a number of things that we already know about old women, as well as those that as yet we do not know. These are characteristics such as readily providing and receiving social and emotional support, and engaging in a more complex and often diffuse range of activities and responsibilities throughout their life cycle. There is also the frequent cultivation of interests and activities that fit with the competing demands of those activities and responsibilities and are thus more amenable to the processes of selection and compensation that have been recognized in contemporary psychological literature as critical elements in successful aging (Baltes and Baltes 1990).

Disabled feminists have recently initiated an autocritique of the feminist literature on caring, pointing to its preoccupation with the needs and perspectives of carers to the virtual exclusion of those being cared for (Graham 1993; Morris 1993). It is possible to argue, in a similar vein, that there is a need to recognize the ageism, and to a lesser extent the androcentrism, that continues to influence our studies of gender and aging.

We have come, in a sense, full circle to a more general version of points raised throughout this article. There is a need to focus on not only how women differ from men but also what is unique about them, on not only what their problems and disadvantages are but also what they do well and what they can contribute.

## NOTES

1. Within the constraints imposed by a single article, it has frequently been necessary to focus on what is common among older women rather than on their specificities and differences. It is important to recognize at the outset, however, that old women are a heterogeneous population—by virtue of race, class, sexuality, and, not least of all, the cumulative consequences of a lifetime of diverse experiences and opportunities.

2. In the context of a society and a gerontological literature that tends to assume heterosexual couples as a basic unit, it is worthwhile to note that such arguments could be applied even more strongly for lesbian and/or never-married women.

3. This is not to suggest that attempts, such as the recent article by Nelson (1993), are not made to explore the impact of social support more generally on other variables. Part of the explanation may also lie in measurement difficulty; good network measures are not as easily acquired as a single indicator on marital status. It should be noted, however, that such technical difficulties have not prevented the emergence of a massive and increasingly complex empirical literature on the correlates of, for example, social class.

4. This finding seems to be generally supported in the literature, although some age-related differences appear. For a recent review article, see Mendes de Leon, Kasl, and Jacobs (1993).

5. These data were collected in a study undertaken jointly with Judith Allen and Frances Boyle. Forty qualitative interviews covering a broad range of issues were conducted. The interviews took place in a major Australian city, Brisbane, between 1985 and 1986.

6. These Australian data on disability and institutionalization are drawn from a national survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1988. See Gibson and Liu (1993).
7. An issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* (1993, Vol. 7, No. 2) is devoted to this topic.

## REFERENCES

- Adelmann, Pamela K., Toni C. Antonucci, and James S. Jackson. 1993. Retired or homemaker: How older women define their roles. *Journal of Women & Aging* 5:67-78.
- Allen, Isobel. 1988. Ageing as a feminist issue. *Policy Studies* 9:35-50.
- Andersen, Margaret L., and Patricia Hill Collins. 1995. Reconstructing knowledge: Toward inclusive thinking. In *Race, class, and gender*, edited by Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Antonucci, Toni C. 1990. Social supports and social relationships. In *Handbook of aging and social sciences*, 3d ed, edited by Robert H. Binstock and Linda K. George. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Arber, Sara, and Jay Ginn. 1991a. *Gender and later life*. London: Sage.
- . 1991b. The invisibility of age: Gender and class in later life. *Sociological Review* 39:260-91.
- Baltes, Paul B., and Margaret M. Baltes. 1990. Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization and compensation. In *Successful aging*, edited by Paul B. Baltes and Margaret M. Baltes. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Baxter, Janeen, and Diane Gibson, with Mark Lynch-Blosse. 1990. *Double take: The links between paid and unpaid work*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service Press.
- Beeson, Diane. 1975. Women in studies of aging: A critique and suggestion. *Social Problems* 23:52-9.
- Blieszner, Rosemary. 1993. A socialist-feminist perspective on widowhood. *Journal of Aging Studies* 7:171-82.
- Calasanti, Toni M. 1993a. Bringing in diversity: Toward an inclusive theory of retirement. *Journal of Aging Studies* 7:122-50.
- . 1993b. Introduction: A socialist-feminist approach to aging. *Journal of Aging Studies* 7:107-10.
- Calasanti, Toni M., and Anna M. Zajicek. 1993. A socialist-feminist approach to aging: Embracing diversity. *Journal of Aging Studies* 7:117-32.
- Coleman, Lisa, and Sophie Watson. 1987. *Women over sixty*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Urban Studies.
- Danigelis, Nicholas L., and Barbara R. McIntosh. 1993. Resources and the productive activity of elders: Race and gender as contexts. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 48:S192-S203.
- Day, Alice T. 1991. *Remarkable survivors: Insights into successful aging among women*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. 1972. *The coming of age*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian. New York: Putnam.
- Demetropoulos, Stephanie. 1983. *Listening to our bodies: The rebirth of feminine wisdom*. Boston: Beacon.
- Edwards, John N., and David L. Klemmack. 1973. Correlates of life satisfaction: A re-examination. *Journal of Gerontology* 28:437-502.
- Eisenstein, Hester. 1984. *Contemporary feminist thought*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Estes, Carroll L., Lenore E. Gerarg, and Adele Clarke. 1984. Women and the economics of aging. In *Readings in the political economy of aging*, edited by Meredith Minkler and Carroll L. Estes. New York: Baywood.
- Friedan, Betty. 1993. *The fountain of age*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ge, Ellen, and Meredith Kimball. 1987. *Women and aging*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- George, Linda K. 1989. Stress, social support, and depression over the life-course. In *Aging, stress and health*, edited by S. Kyriakos, S. Markides, and Charles L. Cooper. New York: John Wiley.
- Gibson, Diane, and Judith Allen. 1993. Phallogentrism and parasitism: Social provision for the aged. *Policy Sciences* 26:79-98.

- Gibson, Diane, and Zhibin Liu. 1993. Aged care. In *Australia's welfare, 1993: Services and assistance*, edited by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service for Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
- Gibson, Diane, and Stephen Mugford. 1986. Expressive relations and social support. In *Ageing and families: A support networks perspective*, edited by H. L. Kendig. Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Graham, Hilary. 1993. Social divisions in caring. *Women's Studies International Forum* 16:461-70.
- Hendricks, Joh. 1993. Recognizing the relativity of gender in aging research. *Journal of Aging Studies* 7:111-6.
- Herzog, A. Regula, Robert L. Kahn, James N. Morgan, James S. Jackson, and Toni C. Antonucci. 1989. Age difference in productive activities. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 44:S129-S138.
- Herzog, A. Regula, and Willard L. Rodgers. 1981. Age and satisfaction: Data from several large surveys. *Research on Aging* 3:142-65.
- Hess, Beth. 1980. Old women: Problems, potential, and policy implications. In *Public policies for an aging population*, edited by E. Markson and G. Batra. Lexington, MA: Lexington.
- . 1985. Aging policies and old women: The hidden agenda. In *Gender and the life course*, edited by Alice S. Rossi. New York: Polity.
- House, James S., and Robert L. Kahn. 1985. Measures and concepts of social support. In *Social support and health*, edited by Sheldon Cohen and S. Leonard Syme. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Jacobs, Klaus, Martin Kohli, and Martin Rein. 1991. The evolution of early exit: A comparative analysis of labor force participation patterns. In *Time for retirement*, edited by Martin Kohli, Martin Rein, Anne-Marie Guillemard, and Herman van Gunsteren. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Krause, Neal. 1987. Life stress, social support, and self-esteem in an elderly population. *Psychology and Aging* 2:340-56.
- Leonard, Wilbert M. 1981. Successful aging: An elaboration of social and psychological factors. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 14:223-32.
- Lewis, Myrna I., and Robert N. Butler. 1984. Why is women's lib ignoring old women? In *Readings in the political economy of aging*, edited by Meredith Minkler and Carroll L. Estes. New York: Baywood.
- Mendes de Leon, Carlos F., Stanislav V. Kasl, and Selby Jacobs. 1993. Widowhood and mortality risk in a community sample of the elderly. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 46:519-27.
- Minkler, Meredith, and Robyn Stone. 1985. The feminization of poverty and older women. *The Gerontologist* 25:351-7.
- Morris, Jenny. 1993. Feminism and disability. *Feminist Review* 43:57-70.
- Nelson, Martha A. 1993. Race, gender, and the effect of social supports on the use of health services by elderly individuals. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 37:227-46.
- Offe, Claus, and Rolf G. Heinze. 1992. *Beyond employment: Time, work and the informal economy*. Oxford: Polity.
- Payne, Barbara, and Frank Whittington. 1976. Older women: An examination of popular stereotypes and research evidence. *Social Problems* 23:488-504.
- Peace, Sheila. 1986. The forgotten female: Social policy and older women. In *Ageing and social policy: A critical assessment*, edited by C. Phillipson and A. Walker. Aldershot, UK: Gower.
- Reinharz, S. 1986. Friends or foes: Gerontological and feminist theory. *Women's Studies International Forum* 9:503-14.
- Roberts, Helen. 1981. Some of the boys won't play any more: The impact of feminism on sociology. In *Men's studies modified: The impact of feminism on the academic disciplines*, edited by Dale Spender. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Rodeheaver, Dean. 1987. When old age became a social problem, women were left behind. *The Gerontologist* 27:741-6.
- Rose, Richard. 1985. Getting by in three economies: The resources of the official, unofficial and domestic economies. In *State and market*, edited by Jan-Erik Lane. London: Sage.
- Rosenman, Linda. 1986. Women and retirement age income security. In *Finance in old age*, edited by Ronald Mendelsohn. Canberra: Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations, Australian National University.



- . 1995. Restructuring retirement policies: Changing patterns of work and retirement in later life. Paper presented at the International Sociological Association Research on Ageing Intercongress Meeting, April, Melbourne.
- Rossi, Alice. 1986. Sex and gender in an aging society. *Daedalus* 111:141-69.
- Rudinger, Georg, and Hans Thomae. 1990. The Bonn longitudinal study of aging: Coping, life adjustment and life satisfaction. In *Successful aging*, edited by Paul B. Baltes and Margaret M. Baltes. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Russell, Cherry. 1987. Aging as a feminist issue. *Women's Studies International Forum* 10:125-32.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1987. *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Sommers, Tish. 1978. The compounding impact of age on sex. In *The new old: Struggling for decent aging*, edited by R. Gross, B. Gross, and S. Seidman. New York: Anchor.
- Sontag, Susan. 1975. The double standard of aging. In *Humanness: An exploration into the mythologies about women and men*, edited by E. Lasky. New York: MSS Information Corporation.
- Stacey, Judith, and Barrie Thorne. 1985. The missing feminist revolution in sociology. *Social Problems* 32:301-17.
- Waring, Marilyn. 1988. *Counting for nothing*. Wellington, New Zealand: Allen & Unwin.
- Woerness, Kari. 1987. A feminist perspective on the new ideology of "community care" for the elderly. *Acta Sociologica* 30:133-50.
- Young, Michael, and Tom Schuller. 1991. *Life after work: The arrival of the ageless society*. London: HarperCollins.

*Diane Gibson is Head of the Aged Care Unit at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and was Senior Lecturer of Sociology at the University of Queensland. She is coauthor of Double Take: The Links Between Paid and Unpaid Work (Australian Government Publishing Service Press, 1990) and is currently working on a book entitled Aged Care: Old Policies, New Problems (Cambridge University Press).*