The dynamic nature of gender and aging bodies

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Feminist gerontology
Ageism
Masculinity
Femininity

ABSTRACT

To test a popular belief that men and women become more alike with age, we ask whether and how bodily changes that accompany aging might influence the ways that people do gender. Drawing on theories that view both gender and age as ongoing accomplishments, we use interview data gathered from people aged 42–61 years to ask whether masculinity and femininity become less relevant with age, whether people feel themselves to be less gendered. Our analysis shows, first, that respondents see manhood and womanhood as rooted in the appearances of their bodies. Second, they see these gender ideals as based on youthful standards. Third, respondents see masculinity and femininity shifting, for good and for ill with age as bodies change. Fourth, the loss of status with age produces a struggle over the extent to which they can control their bodies. We conclude that, while popular ideals of gender are based on youthful bodies, older persons still see themselves as men and women. Further, these new gender ideals challenge neither gender nor age inequalities.

Introduction

Though all of social life is material, bodies may seem to matter more than most of the rest, to the extent that groups impute an especial facticity to them, naturalizing them as uniquely uncontained by social forces (Butler, 1993). This naturalization allows groups to reify inequalities, by explaining unequal outcomes in terms of laws of nature that govern bodies. Age relations, with their temporal slide into lower status in old age, are subject to such reification, as groups take bodies as markers of both proper status and natural force, and regard aging bodies as indices of natural decline into disease and death (Calasanti & King, 2015).

This study shows how middle-aged people maintain gender in ways that alter with age, and how the intersections of age and gender shape their senses of how their bodies change. We suggest that, when considering the salience of gender in later life, gerontologists explore not only the extent to which gender shapes outcomes but also how much aging people treat gender as salient to their lives. We find that aging bodies appear to be differently gendered but not less so in the ways aging people think of themselves.

Background

In the 1980s, Jan Sinnott (1984) administered the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) to 364 adults aged sixty and over. By that time, scholars of sex roles studied ways in which “the polarities of masculinity and femininity… [might] be combined into a complex dual role sometimes called androgy” (p. 847). Sinnott posited that such role complexity and “blurring” would increase with age over the life course; and, in her BSRI results, found that older men and women were indeed more alike than different in the sex-role attributes measured. Her respondents also perceived that others expected that they would be more androgynous. She concluded that, “the current older adult cohort is generally complex in sex role, or androgynous.” (p. 853). Given the age range of her sample, we know that she meant to apply her finding not only to the very old but to people in late middle age as well.

Although Sinnott (1984, p. 853) alluded to the possibility that the BSRI was modeled on experiences peculiar to youth, scholars have neglected to follow up on her methodological caution. In part, this may be because, in the contemporary U.S., popular notions of later life tend to lump men and women together into a genderless group. Findings such as Sinnott’s dovetail with a belief popular among the public and perhaps among scholars as well, that age-based bodily changes can blur gender, or even have the effect of “de-gendering” later life toward greater equality (Silver, 2003: 392).

However, research has yet to demonstrate significant movement toward equity in old age, even in the face of bodily decline. For example, Davidson, Arber, and Ginn (2000) found that old men who received care found ways to exert power over their wives, even when or indeed because they lacked their former physical abilities. They sought ways to maintain their dominant positions in their marriages, such as by controlling finances or becoming very demanding. Loss of physical power, even if correlated with age, need not result in equality. Indeed, Marshall and Katz (2006) have argued that any such movement toward
gender equality based on changing bodies is countered by the anti-aging industry’s emphasis on hormone replacement and re-inscribing “natural” (hormone-based) gender. It promises to preserve youthful, gendered bodies, in relations of heterosexuality that imply little equality (Calasanti, 2007; Marshall & Katz, 2006).

Further, little evidence supports the notion that gender becomes less salient with age. Though scholars have demonstrated that age can rise to a master status in particular contexts, and serve as the basis for stigma for old people (e.g., Hurd, 1999), this does not mean that gender comes to matter less in mundane activities, or that people see themselves as less masculine and feminine.

In any case, research on the persistence of gender has focused on outcomes of gender inequality over the life course as assessed by researchers. We still know little of how people view their own masculinity and femininity in their daily lives, in relation to their aging bodies, and how their views might differ from those of their younger years. What little research we have on aging people’s senses of their changing bodies and gender focuses largely on women (e.g., Brooks, 2017; Hurd Clarke, 2011). While not focused on aging bodies as such, Thompson and Langendoerfer’s (2016) meta-thematic analysis suggests that aspects of an idealized masculinity may persist as men age. Missing from these discussions are the voices of people middle-aged and older. Do they see themselves as less masculine or feminine, or as relatively genderless?

Doing gender and age

Study of how gender matters in later life pertains to inequality. To the extent that people are viewed as losing gender as they age, they face devaluation and exclusion. At the same time, maintaining gender reinforces the inequalities based on those categorizations (Marshall & Katz, 2006). Thus, we approach these questions from the perspective of feminist gerontology, which bears on how relations of gender and age intersect to shape later life (Calasanti, 2009). This framework provides a view of gender embedded in social relations at all levels, from informal interactions to more formal, institutional processes. Groups organize on the basis of gender such that what people take to be masculine and feminine shapes and reflects gendered divisions of labor (paid and unpaid, and occupations within each of these); and people reward performance of such labor differentially, with women’s work generally devalued relative to men’s. Such relations are embedded in taken-for-granted patterns of behavior that comprise the normal workings of such social institutions as family or paid work, and thus tend to remain invisible.

Age relations, like gender, also serve as a basis for social organization such that different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another (Calasanti, 2003). Being seen as “old” results in losses of power and authority to maintain control over one’s body, economic marginalization, stigma, cultural devaluation, and exclusion from full adulthood and citizenship. Old people find themselves barred from paid employment, dismissed as mere consumers of leisure and trivia if they have money to spend and derided as burdensome dependents if they do not. As with those of class, gender, race, ability, sexuality, and nation, relations of age are matters of political economy, in which old people suffer subordination to younger adults due to state laws and employer policies (Calasanti, 2009; King, 2006).

Within this framework, we can study gender in later life by focusing on how people “do” gender and age. This approach posits that such naturalized categorizations as male/female, old/young are joint accomplishments. Gender and age, like class and race, involve the often taken-for-granted management of behavior with category-specific ideals in mind (Laz, 2003; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Groups hold members to age and sex-specific standards whether or not they conform. Thus, to do age and gender includes overt deviation from or revision of ideals of behavior; the point is to keep those categories and informal rules salient, even in their breach. By accounting for activities with respect to such changing ideals, groups maintain the salience of those categories across diverse situations and contexts, including age. Such categorization maintains the relations of inequality, distributing resources and opportunities differently to the respective groups so distinguished and categorized.

Groups also naturalize much of that action, including the inequalities, by linking the categorical ideals to those of bodily health and natural function. Bodies are key components of gender and age definition, given the role groups accord them in marking naturalized identities. Bodies, like any other aspects of social life, are constructed matter (Laz, 2003); but groups tend to use their materiality to indicate forces of nature untainted by human intervention instead (Butler, 1993). In addition to being naturalized, bodies are thus cultural objects, to the extent that groups treat them as markers of group membership, expecting different groups’ bodies to look different. Such use of bodies as culture allows people not only to distinguish groups from others but also to include or exclude groups and thereby justify and maintain inequalities (Calasanti & King, 2015).

Within this framework, gender comprises the activities by which groups produce masculinity and femininity, which in turn are the respective ways groups distinguish those who are manly and womanly from others around them. Any region or institution likely features multiple masculinities and femininities, in competition with each other for hegemony as various groups affirm or contest the dominance of the most elite, and vie for status and other resources (Connell, 1992: 767).

For the sake of this discussion and following from the literature on androgyny reviewed above, we note two ways in which the specificity or distinctiveness of gender may vary: in terms of clarity and salience. That is, gender is cultural in that different groups do it differently; for instance, old groups do gender differently than younger groups do. And groups can do more or less to keep gender distinctions clear. Sinnott (1984) showed that, by the measure of gender differences observed among youth, old people appear to have muddied the distinction between women and men. To the extent that manly and womanly people behave in similar ways, gender distinctions blur, losing their clarity.

Salience refers to the extent to which gender differences matter. Distinctiveness may lose salience if the assignment of tasks, rights, and responsibilities do not adhere to gender categories. For instance, an assisted living facility that maintained gender-neutral public restrooms would reduce gender’s salience. In principle, any other relation of inequality could intersect with gender to reduce its salience.

As Laz (2003: 506) notes, age is just as much a group accomplishment as gender is: “We all accomplish age; we perform our own age constantly, but we also give meaning to other ages and to age in general in our actions and interactions, our beliefs and words and feelings, and our social policies.”

Within this paradigm, we expect people to do age just as they do gender, and to do these at the same time in mutually constitutive ways. People do gender and age by managing their behavior mindful of both category-specific ideals and of the potential need to explain it. Drawing on these literatures, we ask, does aging alter the doing of gender, by altering its clarity or its salience? Does aging reshape gender without reducing its clarity, by shifting to a different set of ideals but keeping them gender specific? Do people respond to moving into new age groups by becoming more androgynous, in a manner that reduces gender clarity, or by de-gendering, in a way that might reduce gender’s salience and thus potentially the inequality between women and men? Or does the salience of gender endure, even as it varies by clarity and social location?

Such questions imply a comparison that people draw as they idealize gender and hold themselves and each other to those ideals. Many such standards are likely to be rooted in youth, as Thompson and Langendoerfer (2016) found by examining studies of aging men. They refer to this idealization of youth as “hegemony,” a matter of age inequality. Dominant groups maintain hegemony to the extent that they convince those they subordinate to accept lowly status as a matter of biological necessity or personal failing. To the extent that middle-aged
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