The dynamic nature of gender and aging bodies

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**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 androgyne” (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 them-
theselves 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 re-
searchers. 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 re-
forces 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
interact to shape later life (Calasanti, 2009). This framework provides
a view of gender embedded in social relations at all levels, from in-
formal interactions to more formal, institutional processes. Groups or-
ganize on the basis of gender such that what people take to be mas-
culine 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 organiza-
tion 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 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 ac-
complishments. 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 con-
form. Thus, to do age and gender includes overt deviation from or re-
vision 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 ad-
dition to being naturalized, bodies are thus cultural objects, to the ex-
tent 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 re-
spective 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
androgyyny 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 be-
tween 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 in-
equality could intersect with gender to reduce its salience.

As Laz (2003: 506) notes, age is just as much a group accom-
plishment 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 idea-
lize 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 in-
equality. 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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