Firming the Floppy Penis

Age, Class, and Gender Relations in the Lives of Old Men

Toni Calasanti and Neal King

The rise of a consumer market that targets old people and their desire to remain young brings into sharp relief the problems that old age poses to manhood. This article proposes an expansion of research approaches to the lives of old men so that they may enrich our understandings of masculinities at a time when scientific breakthroughs and high-priced regimens sell visions of manhood renewed. We begin with a brief review of the (relative lack of) research on old men, continue with a look at the mass marketing of "successful aging," and conclude with an overview of the potential rewards that sustained scholarship on the old, and a theorizing of age relations as a dimension of inequality, can offer the studies of men and masculinities.

(Young) Men's Studies

Studies of old men are common in the gerontological literature, but those that theorize masculinity remain rare. As in many academic endeavors, men's experiences have formed the basis for much research, but this androcentric foundation goes largely unexplored because manhood has served as invisible norm rather than as explicit focus of theory. Men's lives have formed the standard for scholarship on retirement, for example, to such an extent that even the *Retirement History Study,* a longitudinal study conducted by the Social Security Administration, excluded married women as primary respondents (Calasanti 1993). In recent years, feminist gerontologists have urged that scholars examine not only women but gender relations as well, and a handful of scholars such as Woodward (1999), Cruikshank (2003), and Davidson (2001) have done so. Despite the proliferation of feminist theorizing, however, most mainstream gerontological studies of women still ignore gender (Hooyman 1999), and research on men lags further. Few studies examine old men *as men* or attend to masculinity as a research topic.

At the same time, profeminist studies of masculinity have studied neither old men nor the age relations that subordinate them. Ageism, often inadvertent, permeates this research, stemming

From Calasanti, Toni and King, Neal. 2005. "Firming the Floppy Penis: Age, Class, and Gender Relations in the Lives of Old Men." *Men and Masculinities.* 8(1), p. 3.

like. Nevertheless, a theory of the age relations underlying this movement must recognize their interrelations with class, sexual, and racial inequalities. The relevant standards for health and happy lifestyles have been based on leisure activities accessible only to the more well-to-do and middle-aged: tennis, traveling, sipping wine in front of sunsets, and strolls on the beaches of tony resorts that appear in the advertising campaigns for such lifestyles.

The dictate to age successfully by remaining active is both ageist and ignorant of the lives of the working classes. Spurred by the new anti-aging industry, the promotional images of the "active elder" are bound by gender, race, class, and sexuality. The sort of consumption and lifestyles implicated in ads for posh retirement communities with their depiction of "'imagineered' landscapes of consumptions marked by 'compulsively tidy lawns' and populated by 'tanned golfers'" (McHugh 2000, 110) assumes a sort of "active" lifestyle available only to a select group: men whose race and class make them most likely to be able to afford it, and their spouses.

Regimens of successful aging also encourage consumers to define any old person in terms of "what she or he is no longer: a mature productive adult" (McHugh 2000, 104). One strives to remain active to show that one is not really old. In this sense, successful aging means not aging and not being old because our constructions of old age contain no positive content. Signs of old age continue to operate as stigma, even in this currently popular model with its many academic adherents. The successful aging movement disapproves implicitly of much about the lives of the old, pressuring those whose bodies are changing to work hard to preserve their "youth" so that they will not be seen as old. As a result, the old and their bodies have become subject to a kind of disciplinary *activity*. This emphasis on productive activity means that those who are chronically impaired, or who prefer to be contemplative, become "problem" old people, far too comfortable just being "old" (Katz 2000; Holstein 1999).

This underlying bias concerning successful aging and "agelessness" is analogous to what many white feminists have had to learn about race relations, or indeed many men have had to learn about gender relations. Many whites began with the notion that nonwhites were doing fine as long as they acted like whites (just as women in many workplaces were deemed OK to the extent that they acted like men). That actual diversity would benefit our society was news to many, its recognition hard-won by activists of color who championed an awareness of the structuring effects of race relations. Only when we can acknowledge and validate these constructed differences do we join the fights against racism and sexism. The same is true of age relations and the old. We must see the old as legitimately different from the middle-aged, separated by a systematic inequality—built on some set of biological factors—that affects all of our lives. To theorize this complex and ever-changing construction is to understand age relations.

The experience of ageism itself varies by gender and other social inequalities (just as the experience of manhood varies by age and the like). Others have already pointed to the double standard of aging whereby women are seen to be old sooner than men (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). But the experience of ageism varies among different social hierarchies. Women with the appropriate class background, for instance, can afford to use various technologies to "hide" signs of aging bodies (such as gray hair and wrinkles) that will postpone their experiences of ageism. Some women of color, such as African Americans, accept more readily the superficial bodily signs of aging that might bother middle-class white women. Within their communities, signs of aging may confer a status not affirmed in the wider culture (Slevin and Wingrove 1998). By failing to reflect on our own ageism and its sources, we have left age relations and its intersections with such other inequalities unquestioned and misunderstood. We have given lip service to age relations by placing it on a list of oppressions, but we have only begun to theorize them. And so we have left unexplored one of the most important systems shaping manhood.

Examining age relations and its intersections with other inequalities will allow us to address ageism in its deepest form and address the structural inequities that deny power to subgroups of the old. It involves breaking the ethical hold that successful, active aging has on our views of aging. Just as feminists have argued for women's emancipation from stigmatizing pressure to avoid the paths that they might like to take, so too must the old be free to choose ways to be old that suit them without having to feel like slackards or sick people. Old age should include acceptance of inactivity as well as activity, contemplation as well as exertion, and sexual assertiveness as well as a well-earned break. Old people will have achieved greater equality with the young when they feel free not to try to be young, when they need not be "exceptional," and when they can be frail, or flabby, or have "age spots" without feeling ugly. *Old* will have positive content and not be defined mainly by disease, mortality, or the absence of economic value.

Old Men in Popular Culture

The study of masculinity benefits from a look at mass-produced images of old men, because they suggest much about the changing definitions of their problems and the solutions offered. Viewed in context of the experiences of diverse old men as well as the structural constraints on various groups, these popular images illustrate the pressures to be masculine and ways in which men respond to accomplish old manhood. On one hand, the goal of consumer images is to convince others to buy products that will help them better their lives. What is instructive about such images is what they reveal about how people—in this case, aging men—should go about improving their lives (i.e., what it is that they should strive for). On the other hand, images of powerful older men—such as CEOs and politicians—periodically appear in the news media, demonstrating what old men should be striving for in the consumer ads: money, power, and the like. We use mass-produced images of old men, then, to explore the ways that men and masculinities intersect with other systems of inequality—including age relations—to influence various experiences of manhood.

Current Images: New Manhood in Old Age

The recent demographic shift toward an aged population has inspired consumer marketers to address the old with promises of "positive" or successful aging. A massive ad campaign sells anti-aging—the belief that one should deny or defy the signs and even the fact of aging, and treat the looks and recreation of middle-aged as the appropriate standards for beauty, health, and all around success. As Katz (2001–2002) recently put it, "The ideals of positive aging and anti-ageism have come to be used to promote a widespread anti-aging culture, one that translates their radical appeal into commercial capital" (27). These ads present a paradox for old men, whom ads depict as masculine but unable by virtue of infirmity and retirement to achieve the hegemonic ideals rooted in the lives of the young. Thus, old masculinity is always wanting, ever in need of strenuous affirmation. Even when blessed with the privileges of money and whiteness, old men lack two of hegemonic masculinity's fundamentals: hard-charging careers and robust physical strength. The most current ads promise successful aging with interesting implications for these forms of male privilege.

"Playing Hard"

The first image in this "new masculinity" shows men "playing hard," which differs from previous ads in important ways. It emphasizes activities modeled after the experiences of middle-aged, white, middle-class men. Men pursue leisure but not in terms of grandparenting, reading, or other familial and relaxing pastimes. Instead, they propel themselves into hard play as consumers of expensive sports and travel. Having maintained achievement orientations during their paid-work years, they now intensify their involvement in the expanding consumerist

realm, trading production or administration for activity-based consumption. They compete not against other men for salaries and promotions but against their own and nature's incursions into their health as they defy old age to hobble them.

Katz (2001–2002) noted that many ads portray the "older person as an independent, healthy, flexi-retired 'citizen'; who bridges middle age and old age without suffering the time-related constraints of either. In this model . . . 'retirement is not old age'" (29). For instance, McHugh observed that the marketing of sunbelt retirement communities includes the admonition to seniors to busy themselves in the consumption of leisure, to "rush about as if their very lives depended upon it" (McHugh 2000, 112). Similarly, Aetna advertisements selling retirement financial planning show pictures of retired men in exotic places, engaging in such activities as surfing or communing with penguins. Captions offer such invitations as

> Who decided that at the age of 65 it was time to hit the brakes, start acting your age, and smile sweetly as the world spins by? . . . [W]hen you turn 65, the concept of retirement will be the only thing that's old and tired. (*Newsweek* January 5, 1998, 9)

This active consumer image reinforces a construction of old age that benefits elite men in two ways. First, it favors the young in that the old men pictured do nothing that would entitle them to pay. Instead, they purchase expensive forms of leisure. Readers can infer that old men neither need money nor deserve it. Retired, their roles center around spending their money (implicitly transferring it to the younger generations who do need and deserve it). Such ads affirm younger men's right to a cushion from competition with senior men for salaried positions, power, and status. Second, this active consumer image favors the monied classes by avoiding any mention of old men's financial struggles or (varied) dependence on the state. Indeed, age relations work to heighten economic inequalities, such that the greatest differences in income and wealth appear among the old (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). This polarization of income and wealth creates a demographic situation in which only the most privileged men—white, middle-class or better, and physically similar to middle-aged men—can engage in the recreation marketed.

There, we see an additional benefit to the young of such images of men—the emphasis on the physical abilities that the young are more likely to have. Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) noted that the consumer images of "positive aging" found in publications for those of retirement age or planning retirement ultimately have "serious shortcomings" because they do not counter the ageist meanings that adhere to "other" images of the old, that is, "decay and dependency." In other words, we look more kindly on those old persons engaged in "an extended plateau of active middle age typified in the imagery of positive aging as a period of youthfulness and active consumer lifestyles" (46). In this sense, the new, "positive," and consumer-based view of the old is one steeped in middle-aged, middle-class views and resources. The wide variety of retirement and other magazines—and, more recently, a large and expanding number of Web sites—convey the idea that the body can be "serviced and repaired, and . . . cultivate the hope that the period of active life can be extended and controlled" through the use of a wide range of advertised products (44). This image does not recognize or impute value to those more often viewed to be physically dependent, for example. As a result, those men who are able to achieve this masculine version of "successful aging" appear acceptable within this paradigm, but this new form of acceptance does not mitigate the ways in which we view the old. It denies the physical realities of aging and is thus doomed to failure. Not only are the majority of old men left out of this image of new masculinity for old men, but also the depiction is in itself illusory and transitory. Note the gender inequality in these depictions of aging denied through consumption. Most women participate in the lifestyles of the well-to-do as parts of married couples, dependent on men. Old men may lose

from failures to study the lives of old men, to base questions on old men's accounts of their lives, or to theorize age the way we have theorized relations of gender, race, and class. Mentions of age inequality arise as afterthoughts, usually at the ends of lists of oppressions, but they remain unexamined. As a result, our understanding and concepts of manhood fall short because they assume, as standards of normalcy, men of middle age or younger. Aging scholars' inattention to old *men,* combined with men's studies' lack of concern with *old* men, not only renders old men virtually invisible but also reproduces our own present and future oppression. This article examines a range of popular representations of old men in the context of research about their lives to outline some ways in which the vital work on men and masculinity might benefit by taking age relations into account as a form of inequality that intersects with gender, race, sexuality, and class.

Denial of Aging

Our ageism—both our exclusion of the old and our ignorance of age relations as an inequality affecting us all—surfaces not only in our choices of what (not) to study but also in how we theorize men and masculinities. Listening to the old and theorizing the inequality that subordinates them require that we begin with elementary observations. People treat signs of old age as stigma and avoid notice of them in both personal and professional lives. For instance, we often write or say "older" rather than "old," usually in our attempts to avoid negative labels. But rather than accept this stigma attached to the old and help people to pass as younger than that, we should ask what seems so wrong with that stage of life. In a more aggregate version of this ageism, one theorizes old age as social construction and then suggests that people do not automatically become old at a particular age. One continues to treat "old age" as demeaning and merely seeks to eradicate recognition of it by granting reprieves from inclusion in the group. As well intended as such a theoretical move may be, it exacts a high price. It maintains the stigma rather than examining or removing it. As Andrews (1999) observed, all life cycle stages are social constructions, but "there is not much serious discussion about eliminating infancy, adolescence, or adulthood from the developmental landscape. It is only old age which comes under the scalpel" (302). Emphasis on the socially constructed status of this age category does nothing to eliminate its real-world consequences.

Old age has material dimensions, the consequences of actors both social and biological: bodies *do* age, even if at variable rates, just as groups categorize and apportion resources accordingly. Emphasizing their subjective nature makes age categories no less real. Bodies matter; and the old are not, in fact, just like the middle-aged but only older. They are different, even though cultures and people within them define the differences in divergent ways. We need to consider the social construction of old age in conjunction with the aging of bodies (which, in a vexing irony, we understand only through social constructions).

Successful Aging

A more refined form of ageism attempts to portray old age in a positive light but retains the use of middle age as an implicit standard of goodness and health, in contrast to which the old remain deviant. One may see this ageism in the popular notion that men should "age successfully." From this "anti-aging" perspective, some of the changes that occur with age might seem acceptable—gray hair and even, on occasion, wrinkles—but other age-related changes do not, such as losses of libido, income, or mobility. Aging successfully requires that the old maintain the activities popular among the middle-aged. Successful aging, in effect, requires well-funded resistance to culturally designated markers of old age, including relaxation. Within this paradigm, those signs of seniority remain thoroughly stigmatized.

To be sure, a research focus on men who have aged "successfully" flows from good intentions. Study of successful agers helps us negate stereotypes of the old as "useless," unhappy, and the

status relative to younger men but still maintain privilege in relation to old women.

However hollow such promises of expensive recreation might be for most men, the study of men's physical aggression and self-care suggests that illusions drive many indeed and that men will often sacrifice health and even their lives to accomplish this exaggerated sense of physical superiority to women and resistance to the forces of nature. Researchers of health, violence, and manhood have already documented the harms that men do to themselves. Whether disenfranchised men of color in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Franklin 1987; Lee 2000; Staples 1995), athletes desperate to perform as champions (Dworkin and Messner 1999; Klein 1995; White, Young, and McTeer 1995), or ordinary men expressing rage through violence (Harris 2000) and refusing to consult physicians when ill (Courtenay 2000), all manner of men undercut themselves and endanger their lives in the pursuit of their ideals. Harris (2000, 782), for instance, referred to the violence as part of the "doing" of manhood, in line with the sociological theory of gender as accomplishment (Fenstermaker and West 2002). Injury in the pursuit of masculinity extends to social networks, which men more often than women neglect to the point of near isolation and desolation (Courtenay 2000). For those not killed outright, the accumulated damage results in debilitating injury and chronic disease leading to depression (White, Young, and McTeer 1995; Charmaz 1995), fatal heart disease (Helgeson 1995), and high rates of suicide born of lonely despair (Stack 2000). The effect of all of this on old manhood is tremendous, with men experiencing higher death rates than women at every age except after age ninety-five (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics 2000), at which point few men remain alive.

More important to this discussion, however, than the results of such self-abuse on old age are the effects of age relations on this doing of manhood. To be sure, criminal combat and bone-crunching sports decline with age (much earlier in life, actually) such that old men commit few assaults and play little rugby. The increasing fragility of their bodies leads to relatively sedate lifestyles. Nevertheless, the recent anti-aging boom sells the implicit notion that relaxation equals death or at least defeat and that, once he retires, only high-priced recreation keeps a man a man. Age and gender ideals to which any man can be held accountable shift from careerism to consumption, from sport to milder recreation, but maintain notions of performance all the while.

The theoretical gain here lies in recognizing the historical (and very recent) shift to old manhood as a social problem solved through the consumption of market goods. Men throughout history and across the globe appear always to feel defensive about manhood, in danger of losing or being stripped of it (Solomon-Godeau 1995). This theme takes different forms in different periods, however, and in our own appears as the notion that old men lose their hardness if they relax but can buy it back from leisure companies and medical experts.

"Staying Hard"

Given the importance of heterosexuality to hegemonic masculinity, we should consider the ways in which age and gender interact with sexuality, so often equated for men with "the erect phall[us]" (Marsiglio and Greer 1994, 126). Although graceful acceptance by men of their declining sexual desire had previously served as a hallmark of proper aging (Marshall and Katz 2002), current depictions of old men's masculinity focus on virility as expressed in a (hetero) sexuality enabled by medical products. "Staying hard" goes hand-in-hand with playing hard in the construction of age-appropriate gender ideals in this consumer economy.

Examples of the link among continued sexual functioning, manhood, and resistance to aging, in a context of individual responsibility and control, appear throughout the anti-aging industry, which has been growing as a part of our popular culture through the proliferation of Web sites, direct-mail brochures, journal and magazine advertisements,

blurbs in academic newsletters, appearances on talk shows and infomercials, self-help paperbacks, and pricey seminars designed to empower the weakening old. For instance, a few passages from *Newsweek* (Cowley 1996) on the movement toward the use of human growth hormone (HGH) and testosterone draw connections among virility, aging, masculinity, individual control, and consumerism.

> Five years ago, on the eve of his 50th birthday, Ron Fortner realized that time was catching up with him. . . . His belly was soft, his energy and libido were lagging and his coronary arteries were ominously clogged up. After his advancing heart disease forced him into a quintuple bypass operation, Fortner decided he wasn't ready to get old. He . . . embarked on a hormone-based regimen designed to restore his youthful vigor. . . . [H]e started injecting himself with human growth hormone. . . . He claims the results were "almost instantaneous." First came a general sense of wellbeing. Then within weeks, his skin grew more supple, his hair more lustrous and his upper body leaner and more chiseled. . . . Awash in all these juices, he says he discovered new reserves of patience and energy, and became a sexual iron man. "My wife would like a word with you," he kids his guru during on-air interviews, "and that word is stop." (Cowley 1996, 68, 70)

Significantly, a yearlong supply of HGH in 1996 ran between $10,000 and $15,000, making it most accessible to elite men.

Another "success story" from the article concerns

> Robert, a 56-year-old consultant who wore a scrotal patch [for testosterone] for two and a half years. . . . Since raising his testosterone level from the bottom to the top of the normal range, Robert has seen his beard thicken, his body odor worsen and his libido explode. "Whether it's mental or physical, you start feeling older when you can't do physical things like you could," he says. "Sexually, I'm more comfortable because I know I'm dependable." His only complaint is that he's always covered with little rings of glue that won't come off without a heavy-duty astringent. (Cowley 1996, 71–72)

Finally, the story concludes by noting that

> as the population of aging males grows, the virility preservation movement is sure to grow with it. "Basically, it's a marketing issue," says epidemiologist John McKinley, director of the New England Research Institute. . . . "The pharmaceutical industry is going to ride this curve all the way to the bank." (Cowley 1996, 75)

Scientific discourse and practice equate, especially for men, sex with "not aging," and propose technology to retain and restore sexual "functionality" (Katz and Marshall 2003). Indeed, as anti-aging guru Dr. Karlis Ullis, author of *Age Right* and *Super T* (for testosterone), proclaims on his Web site, "Good, ethical sex is the best anti-aging medicine we have" (2003). The appearance of such chemical interventions as sildenafil (Viagra) and the widespread advertising campaigns to promote them have also helped to reconstruct old manhood. A recent ad shows an old, white, finely dressed couple dancing a tango, with the man above and the woman leaning back over his leg. The strenuous dance combines with the caption to convey his virility: "Viagra: Let the dance begin" (*Good Housekeeping* April 1999, 79). Here is a man who likes to be on top and has the (newly enhanced) strength to prove it. Still another ad affirms the role of phallic sex in marital bliss. The bold letters next to a black man with visibly graying hair state, "With Viagra, she and I have a lot of catching up to do." And, at the bottom: "Love life again" (*Black Enterprise* March 2000, 24–5).

Such ideals of virility appear in age-defying ads for active leisure—such as one for Martex towels, which features the caption, "Never, ever throw in the towel." Below this line, three old men stand, towels around their waists, in front of three surfboards that stand erect, stuck in the beach sand. Beneath, one reads that the towels are "for body and soul" (*Oprah* April 2001, 118). An Aetna financial planning ad shows an old white man paddling in the surf, his erect board standing upward between his legs. The caption reads, "A Rocking Chair Is a Piece of Furniture.

Not a State of Mind" (*Newsweek* October 27, 1997, 15). In the ideal world of these ads, age is a state of mind, one to be conquered through public displays of a phallic, physical prowess. One accomplishes old manhood, then, by at least appearing to try to live up to some of the ideals pictured in these magazines. The resulting widespread doing of old manhood as consumption of the right products and maintenance of the right activities serves in turn to render natural the ideals toward which men strive.

Masculinity and sexual functioning have long been linked to aging in our popular culture, but the nature of his relationship has shifted as age relations have transformed and come under medical authority. Contemporary drug marketers build on an ancient quest but market it in new ways.

By the 1960s, therapists blamed psychological factors for male impotence and suggested that "to cease having sex would hasten aging itself' (Katz and Marshall 2003, 7). They later redefined male impotence as a physiological event—"erectile dysfunction"—to be addressed through such technologies as penile injections and sildenafil (Viagra)—and declared intercourse vital to successful aging (Marshall and Katz 2002; Potts 2000). More recently, advertisers have catered to a popular notion of "male menopause"—an umbrella label for the consequences of the fears of loss that expectations of high performance, in the context of women's rising status, can engender (Featherstone and Hepworth 1985). Marketers have built their depictions of old manhood on these links among sex, success, and masculinity. Sexual functioning now serves as a vehicle for reconstructions of manhood as "ageless," symbolizing the continued physical vigor and attractiveness derived from the experiences of younger men. To the extent that men can demonstrate their virility, they can still be men and stave off old age and the loss of status that accrues to that label.

To be sure, this shift in advertising imagery toward the phallic can work to the benefit of old men, convincing people to take them seriously as men full of potency as well as consumer power. To stop our analysis there, however, leaves unquestioned the ageism on which these assertions rest, the fact that we root these ideals of activity and virility in the experiences of the younger men. The ads avoid sexuality based on attributes other than hard penises and experiences other than heterosexual intercourse, and these are hegemonic sexual symbols of the young. The little research available suggests that orgasm and intercourse recede in importance for some old men, who turn to oral sex and other expressions of love (Wiley and Bortz 1996). But these phallic ads value men only to the extent that they act like younger, heterosexual (and wealthy) men. Their emphases on both playing and staying hard reveal some of the ways in which gender and other inequalities shape old age. Old men are disadvantaged in relation to younger men, no matter how elite they may be.

The renewed emphasis on sexual intercourse among old men also reinforces the gender inequalities embedded in phallic depictions of bodies and sexuality. Historically, women's bodies and sexualities have been of only peripheral interest in part because they did not fit the "scientific" models based on men's physiologies. For example, rejuvenators were uncomfortable touting sex gland surgery for women (one variation promoted grafting the ovaries of chimpanzees to those of female patients) partly because they knew that they could not restore fertility in women. Thus, when they did speak of women, they tended to focus instead on the "mental" fertility that might result. Part of the problem was that women's "losses" in terms of sexuality (i.e., menopause) occurred much earlier in life. Those women were often "young," which confounded the equation of "loss of sexuality" with "old" (Hirshbein 2000).

People continue to define old women's sexuality in relation to old men's, assessing it in terms of penile-vaginal penetration. An old woman, in such popular imagery, remains passive and dependent on her man's continued erection for any pleasure of her own. Research on old women's accounts of their experiences, however, makes clear that these models represent little of what they want from their sex lives.

These popular definitions also ignore that many old women have no partners at all. Even if old women "accept" and try to live up to the burden of being sexual and "not old" in male-defined terms, there are not enough old men for them to be partnered (and our age-based norms do not allow them to date younger men).

Finally, the ageism implicit in the demand to emulate the young is self-defeating and ignores the reality that even with technology and unlimited resources, bodies still change. Ultimately, individuals cannot control this; it is a "battle" one cannot win.

Theorizing Age, Class, and Gender Relations

The rewards for the inclusion of a marginalized group into research extend beyond the satisfaction of listening to oft-ignored voices. The study of old manhood stands to enrich our theories of masculinity as social problem, as disciplinary consumer object, as the accomplishment of heterosexuality, and as the "crisis"-torn struggle to achieve or resist the hegemonic ideals spread through our popular culture.

Studying age relations can render insights into ways that we theorize gender. For instance, Judith Kegan Gardiner (2002) suggested that we clarify gender relations by making an analogy to age relations. This would help reconstruct thinking about gender in our popular culture, she argued, because many people already recognize *continuity* in age categories while they still see gender as dichotomous. People already see themselves as *performing* age-appropriate behavior ("acting their ages") while continuing to take for granted the doing of gender (Fenstermaker and West 2002). And popular culture more fully recognizes enduring group *conflicts* (over divisions of resources) between generations than between sexes. Gardiner (2002) suggested that a fuller theorizing of age relations has much to offer the study of men, that scholars may move beyond their polarization of biological and social construction, and that our popular culture may more fully appreciate the power struggles that govern gender relations.

We recommend just this view—of age and gender, race and class, and other dimensions of inequality—as accomplished by social as well as biological actors; as accountable to ever-changing ideals of age- and sex-appropriate behavior; as constructed in the context of a popular culture shaped by consumer marketing and technological change; and as imposing disciplinary regimens in the names of good health, empowerment, beauty, and success.

Taken together, the mass media reviewed above posit ideals of old manhood to which most if not all men find themselves held accountable. To the men fortunate enough to have been wealthy or well paid for their careerism, corporations (often with the support of those gerontologists who implicitly treat old age as a social problem) sell regimens through which those old men may live full lives, working, playing, and staying hard. If careerism kept the attention of these men from their families and leisure lives, constricting their social networks and degrading their physical health, then this high-priced old age serves as a promised payoff. Once retired, those few wealthy enough to do it can enjoy a reward: high-energy time with a spouse and some friends, enjoyment of tourism, surfing, and sex. Men sacrificed much, even their lives, in their pursuits of hegemonic masculine status. Those who survive face a rougher time with old age as a result: few sources of social support and bodies weakened by self-abuse. Thus, the accomplishment of manhood comes to require some response to the invitation to strain toward middle-age activities. Some men reach with all of their strength for the lifestyle ideals broadcast so loudly, whereas many give up for lack of means to compete, and still others deliberately resist. In a cruel irony, the ideals move all the further out of reach of the men who pursued them with such costly vigor in younger years and damaged their health beyond repair. The final push for hegemonic masculinity involves spending money and enjoying health that many old men do not have to pursue the recreation and phallic sex that the ads tell them they need.

Certainly, the study of old men offers striking views of a popular struggle over heterosexuality (although the study of old gay men will surely be as transforming, the near total lack of research on them prevents us from speculating how). Widely held views of old men's sexuality suggest dominance over women as a form of virility. But, as bodies change, outright predation recedes as an issue and impotency moves to the center of concern. A popular (consumer) culture that figures old manhood in terms of *loss* hardly departs from any trend in images of masculinity. Men have always felt that they were losing their manhood, their pride, and their virility, whether because their penises actually softened or because women gained status and so frightened them. But the study of this transition—from the feelings of invincibility that drive the destructiveness of youth to the growing expectation of vulnerability—throws old masculinity into a valuable relief. For instance, theories that center on violence and predation capture little of the realities of old men's lives, just as scholarly emphasis on coercion and harassment of women excludes most of the experiences of old women. For old women, the more important sexual theme may be that of being *cast aside* (Calasanti and Slevin 2001, 195). For old men, *impotence* in its most general sense, leading to many responses ranging from suicidal depression to more graceful acceptance, may be a more productive theme. It serves as both positive and negative ideal in a classic double-bind: old men should, so as not to intrude on the rights of younger men, retreat from the paid labor market; but they should also, so as to age successfully, never stop consuming opportunities to be active. They should, so as not to be "dirty," stop becoming erect; but they should also, so as to age successfully, never lose that erection. Old men fear impotence to the point that many suffer it who otherwise would not. Anxieties drain them at just the moment when expectations of aggressive consumption, of proving themselves younger than they are, reach their heights.

The notion that men accomplish age just as they do gender has much to offer, with its sensitivity to relations of inequality, its moment-to-moment accountability to unreachable but hegemonic ideals, and the perpetually changing nature of such accomplishments. Never have erections been so easily discussed in public, and never has this "dirty"/"impotent" double bind been tighter, than since the rise of this consumer regimen. Nor have old men, before now, lived under such pressure to remain active further into their lengthening life spans. The ideals of manhood that tempted so many to cripple themselves in younger years now loom large enough to shame those who cannot play tennis or waltz the ballrooms of fancy resorts. The study of manhood should take careful notice of the ways in which men do old manhood under such tight constraints. The popular images that we have reviewed provide ideals of old manhood, but they do not necessarily describe the lives of very many old men. Given how little we know of the ways in which old men respond to such ideals, the research task before us seems clear.

Conclusion

Scholars tend to ignore age relations in part because of our own ageism. Most are not yet old, and even if we are, we often deny it (Minichiello, Browne, and Kendig 2000). Most people know little about the old because we seldom talk to them. Family and occupational segregation by age leave the old outside the purview of the work that most young people do.

Resulting in part from such segregation, the study of men, although no more than any other social science and humanist scholarship, has focused on the work, problems, sexuality, and consumption patterns of the young. This neglect of the old results in theories of masculinity that underplay the lengths to which men go to play and stay hard, the long-term effects of their strenuous accomplishment of manhood, and the variety of ways in which men remain masculine once their appetites for self-destruction begin to wane. Research on the old can reveal much about the desperate struggle for hegemonic masculinity and the varied ways in which men begin to redefine manhood. At the same time, it

also uncovers the young and middle-aged biases that inhere in typical notions of masculinity that tend to center on accomplishments and power in the productive sphere, for instance. Few researchers have considered the reality of masculinities not directly tied to the fact of or potential for paid labor.

To leave age relations unexplored reinforces the inequality that subordinates the old, an inequality that we unwittingly reproduce for ourselves. Unlike other forms of oppression, in which the privileged rarely become the oppressed, we will all face ageism if we live long enough. As feminists, scientists, and people growing old, we can better develop our sense of interlocking inequalities and the ways in which they shape us, young and old. Our theories and concepts have too often assumed rather than theorized these age relations. The study of men and masculinity and the scholarship on age relations are just beginning to inform each other.

References

Andrews, M. 1999. The seductiveness of agelessness. *Ageing and Society 19*(3): 301–18.

Calasanti, T. M. 1993. Bringing in diversity: Toward an inclusive theory of retirement. *Journal of Aging Studies 7*(2): 133–50.

Calasanti, T. M., and K. F. Slevin. 2001. *Gender, social inequalities, and aging*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira.

Charmaz, K. 1995. Identity dilemmas of chronically ill men. In *Men's health and illness: Gender, power, and the body*, edited by D. Sabo and D. F. Gordon, 266–91. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Courtenay, W. H. 2000. Behavioral factors associated with disease, injury, and death among men: Evidence and implications for prevention. *Journal of Men's Studies 9*(1): 81–142.

Cowley, Geoffrey. 1996. Attention: Aging Men. *Newsweek*, September 16, 68–75.

Cruikshank, M. 2003. *Learning to be old: Gender, culture, and aging*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Davidson, K. 2001. Later life widowhood, selfishness, and new partnership choices: A gendered perspective. *Ageing and Society* 21:297–317.

Dworkin, S. L., and M. A. Messner. 1999. Just do . . . what? Sport, bodies, gender. In *Revisioning gender*, edited by M. M. Ferree, J. Lorber, and B. B. Hess, 341–61. Thousand Oaks. CA: Sage.

Featherstone, M., and M. Hepworth. 1985. The male menopause: Lifestyle and sexuality. *Maturitas* 7:235–46.

———. 1995. Images of positive aging: A case study of Retirement Choice magazine. In *Images of aging: Cultural representations of later life*, edited by M. Featherstone and A. Wernick, 29–47. London: Routledge.

Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics. 2000. *Older Americans 2000: Key indicators of well-being*. http://www.agingstats.gov.

Fenstermaker, S., and C. West, eds. 2002. *Doing gender, doing difference: Inequality, power, and institutional change*. New York: Routledge.

Franklin, C. 1987. Surviving the institutional decimation of black males: Causes, consequences, and intervention. In *The making of masculinities: The new men's studies*, edited by H. Brod, 155–69. Winchester, MA: Allen and Unwin.

Gardiner, J. K. 2002. Theorizing age and gender: Bly's boys, feminism, and maturity masculinity. In *Masculinity studies & feminist theory: New directions*, edited by J. K. Gardiner, 90–118. New York: University of Columbia Press.

Harris, A. P. 2000. Gender, violence, and criminal justice. *Stanford Law Review* 52:777–807.

Helgeson, V. S. 1995. Masculinity, men's roles, and coronary heart disease. In *Men's health and illness: Gender, power and the body*, edited by D. Sabo and D. F. Gordon, 68–104. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hirshbein, L. D. 2000. The glandular solution: Sex, masculinity and aging in the 1920s. *Journal of the History of Sexuality 9*(3): 27–304.

Holstein, Martha. 1999. Women and productive aging: Troubling implications. In *Critical gerontology: Perspectives from political and moral economy*, edited by Meredith Minkler and Carroll L. Estes, 359–73. Amityville, NY: Baywood.

Hooyman, N. R. 1999. Research on older women: Where is feminism? *The Gerontologist* 39:115–18.

Katz, S. 2000. Busy bodies: Activity, aging, and the management of everyday life. *Journal of Aging Studies 14*(2): 135–52.

———. 2001–2002. Growing older without aging? Positive aging, anti-ageism, and anti-aging. *Generations 25*(4): 27–32.