Older Men as Invisible Men in Contemporary Society

Edward H. Thompson, Jr.

If someone asked you to visualize an older or elderly person, what image would come to mind? Given that women's life expectancies are longer than men's, you might imagine an elderly woman. Given that we tend to hold stereotypical images of older people, you might visualize a person who is ill or otherwise infirm. If your image is a man, it's likely that he's not particularly manly, given that we tend to see older people as genderless. All of these factors, according to Edward H. Thompson, Jr., lead older men to be invisible in contemporary society.

As the 21st century approaches, academic researchers, journalists, professional caregivers, and other opinion makers are beginning to see a shortcoming in our discourse on class, race, and gender. We have ignored age. Marginalization of elders might feel wrong and yet be in perfect accord with ongoing discussions. The collective effort in this book is to call attention to one group of elders: older men. It is timely, acknowledging that "older men" are a distinct group of men and elders. Their gendered experiences and social lives are different from women their age well as younger men. It is timely also to look inside the elderly male population to appreciate the diversity among older men when generations are studied separately, class differences become well known, or family status, ethnicity, and race are considered. Taking the point position, my introductory chapter was designed to make the study of elderly men more customary and theoretically interesting.

The basic question is, Why have elderly men been relatively invisible? Four assessments are offered. Beforehand, Bureau of the Census information is used to develop profiles of the men (and women) within the age band "65 and over." These demographic sketches are constructed to call attention to

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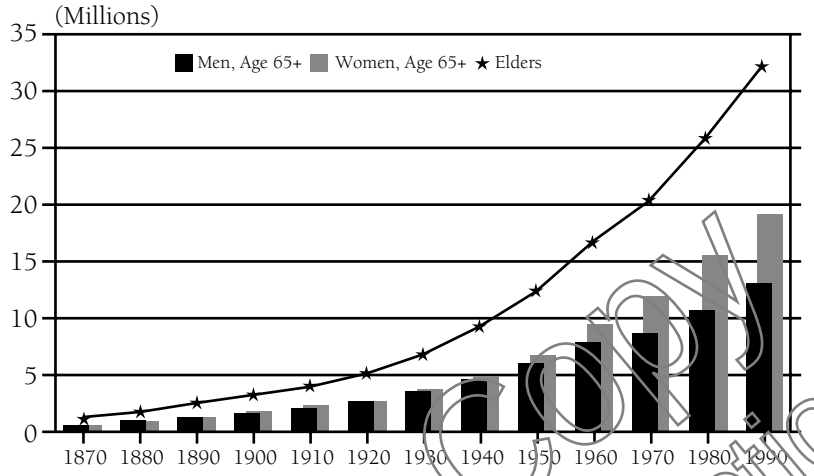

Figure 1.1 *Number of Elders in the United States, 1870–1990*

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1976, 1993a).

the presence of older men in the United States, as well as the diversity among elder males. The sketches provide a necessary window into objective reality. Following this demographic overview, the question of older men's invisibility is addressed systematically in an effort to grasp the problem of such invisibility as one generated in conventional practices of reality and knowledge production. Seeing older men's invisibility as built into the maintenance of core values and the rules of knowledge production helps reveal how social constructions about "old men" and theories addressing the interaction of gender and age pose intriguing research agendas and policy questions.

Daguerreotypes

We are all somewhat aware of the *remarkable restructuring of the shape of the age pyramid that has occurred in the United States over the last century*. We also are somewhat aware of the remarkable shifts that are forecasted to take place between 2010 and 2025. These are the years when the age cohort of baby boomers will begin their march into the "Third Age" (Laslett, 1987) and their

Table 1.1 Life Expectancy at Birth (in years)

	Males		Females	
	White	Black	White	Black
1900	48.2	32.5	51.1	35.0
1929–1931	59.1	47.6	62.7	49.5
1959–1961[a]	67.6	61.5	74.2	66.5
1990	72.6	66.0	79.3	70.3

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1976, 1993a).

a. Black and other nonwhite "races."

Table 1.2 Proportion of Populations Surviving to Age 65 (in percentages)

	Males		Females	
	White	Black	White	Black
1900	39	19	44	22
1929–1931	53	29	61	31
1959–1961[a]	66	51	81	61
1990	76	58	86	75

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1976, 1993a).

a. Black and other nonwhite "races."

lives as elders. This march of the baby boomers will prove to be both historic for the nation and for older men's lives.

A century ago in 1890, just 4% of the U.S. population was aged 65 and older. The entire elder population numbered approximately 3 million. By 1930, the group had doubled in size to 6.7 million. It more than doubled in size again by 1960, and by the early 1990s nearly doubled once more (Figure 1.1). Currently, there are 32 million men and women age 65 and older. They represent 12% of the nation and include more than 3 million elders over age 85, an age many now identify as "very elderly" rather than the twice stigmatizing tag "old-olds" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993b).

Implicit in these changes and hinted at by the growing size of the nation's elder population is what each individual man experiences: It is much more common for men to at least celebrate their 65th birthday. A long life has become ordinary and predictable. Life expectancy at birth has increased for

white males from 48 years in 1900 to 73 years in 1990, and for black males from just 32 years to 66 years (see Table 1.1 for more detail). The proportion of males surviving from birth to age 65 has similarly increased: from 39% to 76% for white males, and from just 19% to 58% for black males (Table 1.2; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1978, 1993a). The narrowing of the marked racial disparity in men's life expectancy witnessed from the beginning to the end of the century is most often attributed to improved nutrition and the less toxic physical environment in which people work and reside, particularly for African-Americans (McKinlay & McKinlay, 1977). For these very same "health" reasons, the life span for males to be born in the first decade of the 21st century is forecast to be virtually the same for all ethnic and racial groups, and not much greater than found for white males currently (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993b). But this prediction for greater equality in life span is debatable. Manton and Soldo (1995) forecast increasing divergence. They observed substantial variation in the timing of death when standard deviations of death rates are examined, rather than the median number of years of survival, and this variability in mortality has increased over the last two decades.

With many more men routinely living to and beyond age 65, there has been an emerging consciousness of the distinct age groups that exist among elder men (Neugarten, 1975). Formerly, all men aged 65 and older were categorically the same: "old." Distinct elder age groups are now regularly identified (see Table 1.3). The male population aged 65 to 74, for example, is part of what is called the "young elderly." This group is perhaps the most widely recognized, partly because of these older men's sheer numbers and presence and partly because of the research attention given to their retirements. But as each

Table 1.3 Growth of Older Male Population, 1970–1992 (in thousands)

	1970	1992	% Increase
65–69 years old	3,125	4,478	43.3
70–74 years old	2,317	3,643	57.2
75–79 years old	1,562	2,538	62.5
80–84 years old	876	1,446	65.1
85 and over	489	911	86.3
Males, 65+	8,369	13,016	55.5

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993a, 1993b).

year passes, this age cohort represents a smaller and smaller proportion of all elder males. In 1990, for instance, the young elderly group, as a percentage of all males aged 65 and older, constituted 62% of older white males and 63% of the elder black males (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993a). By comparison, young elders accounted for nearly three of every four elderly white and black males in 1930. Projections for 2050 indicate that young elders will represent just 47% of elder white males and 52% of elder black males. The key point is that the population of elders is itself aging, with increasing numbers of men in the 85-and-over population. What are the experiences, social worlds, concerns, opportunities, and views of the "over 75"? How do faith experiences change images of self? What opportunities do older men have in their families?

Most striking about the information in Figure 1.1 is the gender difference in mortality over time. Men and women were equally represented in the growing elder population until the 1930s. Then men's morbidity and mortality became measurably distinct from women's. The size of the elder population has since reflected these different mortality rates and, increasingly, the disproportionate number of males to females within the elder population. Today the minority of elderly are men: 13.0 million versus 19.2 million women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993b). Because of the sex and gender differentials in life expectancy, men are increasingly the minority population as age advances. It is still remarkable for men to reach age 85: The 911,000 men who survived to age 85 in 1992 may well be the fastest-growing cohort, but they represented just 7% of all elderly men (review Table 1.3). By comparison, one in eight elderly women has reached age 85 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993b).

The importance of gender to aging is more visible in Figure 1.2. As presented, the plotted sex ratio of men to women aged 65 and older was balanced at virtually 1:1 until the 1930s. For the next 60 years, however, the sex ratio turned downward and thus a "feminization" of the elder population has been ongoing since the 1930s (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Verbrugge, 1989). By the early 1990s the nation's elders were represented by three women for every two men. During this 60-year history, improvements in nutrition, work, and living environments, as well as medical therapies had multiplied the proportion of elder men from nearly 4% to 10%. However, because gendered morbidity and mortality risk factors paced the deaths differently (Harrison, Chin, & Ficarrotto, 1992; Waldron, 1976; Wingard & Cohn, 1990), the proportion of older women increased at a quicker rate and now approaches 15%.

The often-cited gender gap in longevity, which steadily widened for the last 60 years, may have peaked. Projections for the next 60 years (Figure 1.2)

Figure 1.2 *Proportion of Older Men and Older Women in the United States, 1890–2050*

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1976, 1993a, 1993b).

suggest two stunning trends: (a) the sex ratio will tighten considerably, and (b) the proportion of elders will stabilize just above 20% of the nation's population. This means many more men are expected to live to fully experience and extend the normal male life course deep into the Third Age, and, much more so than previously, women will face the life-shortening risks associated with paid employment. By 2030, it is unlikely that older men could continue to be invisible in the population. They will represent one of every five men in the nation, and among elders there will be, on average, four men per five women. Put differently, older men will account for 20% of all males, twice the shadow they now cast, and this older male population will be the size of today's entire elderly population, a tenacious 32 million. What are the implications for elderly men's (and women's) lives? The forecasts further suggest that women's prior "advantage" in longevity will decrease and within 60 years the numerical ratio of women over men in later life will diminish considerably, particularly for the population under 85.

Although these changes are imminent and will amend the past 60 years' feminization of the elder population, there is no need to wait until the baby boomers march into old age or until elderly men cast off their demographic

invisibility before scholars begin to study older men's lives. There are already nearly 13 million men age 65 and older. The minority among elders, and especially the minority among the very elderly, 13 million older men is still a sizeable population. It is greater than the number of all undergraduates enrolled full-time in 4-year colleges in 1992 (U.S. Department of Education, 1992), greater than the number of children living in single-parent families in 1980, and nearly three quarters the size of group of children in 1990 (Thompson & Gongla, 1983; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992), nearly 20 times greater than the number of physicians practicing medicine in 1993 (Roback, Randolph, & Seidman, 1993) and 10 times the number of people incarcerated in correctional institutions in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993a). Mainstream journals and opinion makers have made us much more familiar with these folks, however smaller their population size.

Reasons for Invisibility

Older men have remained invisible for reasons beside their smaller number. For one, gerontologists have not encouraged the distinction between the concepts of "sex" and "gender." Gender is often accepted as if synonymous with sex, serving fundamentally as a categorical construct for grouping the aged. Consequently, the literature introduces us to older biological males by virtue of describing a sex difference in aging. However, what surely distinguishes older biological males, as a group, is their cohort-specific, gendered social lives. As much as research has treated all men as if they were genderless (Kimmel & Messner, 1992), fewer researchers have paid attention to the masculinities that older men encounter or those they disclose.

Another reason for older invisibility is that aging and ageism do not affect men and women equally. From a political economy perspective, it is true that older men have a more comfortable, privileged life compared to older women of the same generation. Consequently, when gender is taken into consideration, elderly women have a much higher profile in gerontological research because the view of aging places women in double jeopardy relative to older men (Sontag, 1972) and because sociological research on "advantaged" groups has traditionally attracted less sustained attention than studies of the disadvantaged (Berger, 1963). In this frame, the pernicious concept of "the aged" is synonymous with a disadvantaged group and thus more synonymous with the providence of older women than older men.

Similarly, the organizations, interest groups, industries, professional societies, and political bodies that make up "the aging enterprise" and serve the elderly in one capacity or another (Estes, 1979, 1993) also furnish ideas about aging and images of elder men. These are elaborately constructed images pressed into public consciousness, and the images the aging enterprise has fabricated are just that—"constructed." To illustrate, for two decades the medical-industrial complex has profited handsomely by medicalizing elderly men's lives more than meeting elderly men's and women's needs. Cardiac catheterization laboratories, fourth- and fifth-generation ventricular pacemakers, arthroscopic surgical technology, and cardiac bypass surgery all derive great profit by "servicing" the elderly male population's health problems and yield much greater profit for the enterprise than would programming to raise the standard of living and health status of all elders. The socially constructed image of elderly men—former breadwinners and national leaders—as "old" and by definition in poor health fuels compassion and, of course, greater profit than the image of most elderly men (and women) as having poor access to health and medical care services. This "compassionate ageism" (Binstock, 1983) is also sexist. It has medicalized elderly men's lives and their perceived well-being, perhaps more than elderly women's. One unintended consequence, for example, of the "compassion" and profiteering is that older men's nonmedical needs become frivolous. The everyday needs of healthy elder males, as well as elder men's need for services other than medical interventions, become remote concerns when compared to the life-and-death emphasis.

In much the same way that gerontologists have inadvertently homogenized elders to make older men genderless, scholars working in the field of gender studies have not paid much notice to men in late life. Older men's masculinities are couched as an invisible part of the dynamics of hegemony or, more simply, ignored. Whether in the research traditions or contemporary theorizing "about men," age is truncated. To illustrate, Daniel Levinson and his colleagues (1978) discuss men's late adulthood in their landmark The Seasons of a Man's Life in just seven pages (pages 33–39) and characterize this age in "discontinuous" imagery, as if aging is a negation of masculinity: "A primary developmental task of late adulthood is to find a new balance of involvement with society and with the self. A man in this era is experiencing more fully the process of dying and he should have the possibility of choosing more freely his mode of living" (p. 36). The widely praised second edition of Men's Lives that Kimmel and Messner organized for gender scholars has not one article among the 56 that directly probes older men's masculinities. At this point in the development of gender studies, the masculinities of older men have been subordinated to the concerted effort to understand middle-aged and younger

men's lives, who are, as Ortega y Gasset (1958) suggests, "the dominant" group. Even when a life course perspective is recognized (e.g., Connell, 1992; Segal, 1990), the theoretical discourse on masculinities has concentrated on social practices of young to middle-aged men and, by default, marginalized the masculinities of elderly men. But, metatheoretically, has the marginalization of older men in the scholarship on gender contributed to the preservation of conventional discourses on masculinity? Failing to acknowledge elderly men as a distinct group of men may have homogenized not only adulthood but also theory on masculinity.

One can see, with retrospective clarity, how these four initiatives have helped conceal older men's lives. My interest is to examine them collectively in greater detail. The task is to advance the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings for a more long-term discussion of older men as men and as elders.

The Relative Comfort of Older Men's Lives

They are often pictured as poor, standoffish, persnickety, and of ill health. Often they are imagined to be living alone, following singular paths. But as a group, and compared to both older women and younger men, they are more likely to have fewer financial liabilities and more assets, enjoy good health, lead active lives unhindered by disability, and experience few distressing "turning points" or "life events" in this age of the life span.

Although the incomes of elder males, as a group, are lower than younger men's, in a peculiar way "less is more" (Lazer & Shaw, 1987). Older men spend little of their assets. They are more likely to have paid off their home mortgage, and they spend less on the necessities—houseold operations, food, clothing—as well as discretionary items (Lazer & Shaw, 1987). In fact, older men would seem to be at a quality-of-life advantage, for they may face fewer emotionally wrenching life events than younger males, who cope with the work and family conflicts of two-income households, the downsizing of corporate America, intermittent periods of unemployment, state governments that have gotten out of the education business and children's educational needs, and so on (Chirboga, 1989).

OIder men, compared to older women, would also seem to be at a quality-of-life advantage even though they are at a mortality disadvantage; their deaths may come sooner, but later life for older men presents fewer troubles (Kaplan, Anderson, & Wingard, 1991). Consider, for example, older men's living arrangements and marital status. Excluding elders who make up the

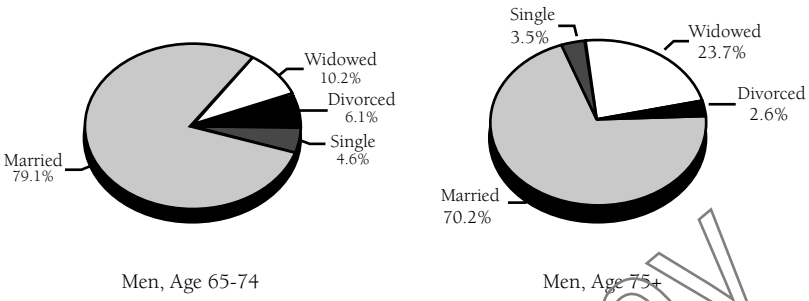

Figure 1.3 *Marital Status of Older Men, 1992*

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993b).

institutional population, such as those living in nursing homes or other places providing custodial care, elderly men are much more likely than elderly women to live with their spouses. Nearly three quarters of elderly men today are both married and living with their spouses. Barely 1 man in 10 aged 65–74 is a widower, and by the time they are age 75–84, just 2 in 10 are widowed (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Aging does not oblige many older men to recast their lives and go it alone after the death of a spouse.

By comparison, fewer than 40% of the older women in the nation are both married and living with their spouse. Half of all elder women are widowed, and the vast majority of widows (71%) do not live with others. They, rather than men, follow singular paths. As many as one third of all women aged 65–74 and about one half aged 75 and older lived alone in 1992 (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4 for details). The proportions for older men, by comparison, were 13% and 22%, respectively. The point is not men's earlier deaths. Rather, it is their relatively nonplussed lives, compared to older women of the same age, when living arrangements and marital status are compared. Men are not obliged to bury their spouses and live alone as often as women. It is also because elderly men as a group are more likely to be married and less likely to live alone that they derive several other late-life advantages.

Thus for the vast majority of older men, the company of a spouse affords greater opportunity to enjoy the extension of the life span into the Third Age. Older men rely on their spouses and report greater satisfaction with marriage than do older women (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). And as Shumaker and Hill (1991) noted, the protective role of social support is consistently demonstrated for marrieds and white men. For older men, assets—and not just their income and pension—are greater, allowing them greater autonomy. Personal

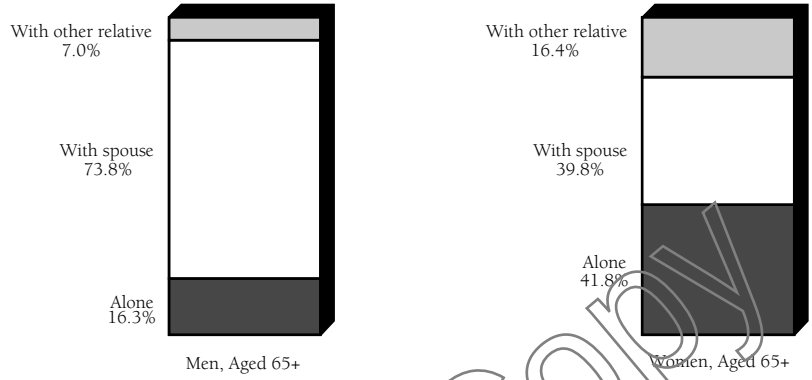

Figure 1.4 *Living Arrangements of Older Men and Women, 1992*

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993b).

care tasks are maintained by two adults, not just one. Life is experienced in the company of another.

Not surprisingly, the relative advantages to everyday morale and well-being that the community of a spouse affords elderly men *does not apply equally to all older men.* We need to anticipate and be sensitive to the diversity among elder men. Elderly black men are much less likely to live with a spouse than are white men or men of Hispanic origin. Among the "young elders" aged 65 to 74, the married proportions for each group are 58%, 79%, and 77%, respectively. Add 10 years to compare men aged 75 and older, and the proportions drop roughly 10% to 46%, 70%, and 67%, respectively. This variance in older men's marital status across ethnic and racial lines may be a result of the greater proportion of black men who never marry (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992) and the higher levels of marital disruption among blacks. Whatever the reasons, the proportion of elderly men who live alone is higher for blacks (29%) than whites (15%) or men of Hispanic origin (11%).

Socially Constructed Images of Aged Men

Visualize the image. The men hold themselves upright and proud—these middle-aged men whose time of life is shifting from "early" to "middle adult-

hood" and who are perhaps at a peak in their impact on the world outside the home. They are the "dominant" generation, as Ortega y Gasset defined the age 45–60. They make their ideas and aims the pivotal ones in every sector of society: business, politics, religion, science. But soon they take up wearing bifocals, their skin wrinkles more, their hair turns silvery, they become grandparents, they stoop, and they embrace the season of life that Levinson and his colleagues (1978) call "late adulthood" and, for some, "late, late adulthood."

In the popular culture men in late adulthood no longer occupy center stage. Their generation is no longer the dominant one: It has been displaced by a younger, "Pepsi" generation. Men in late life are classed as "senior" or "old." They become "socially opaque" (Green, 1993). They are presumed to have completed the major part—perhaps all—of their life work. The older man sees himself living in his shadow or death's (Levinson et al., 1978). Writing in *Esquire,* novelist Thomas Morgan (1987, p. 162) describes a memory of his father's 60th birthday: "I do not remember his exact words, only that he seemed to be telling me he was conceding at sixty, perhaps welcoming at sixty that he need not be a part of the future. . . . As it happened, he worked ten more years, but lived, I'm sorry to say, as though it were all an anticlimax."

Television commercials, newspaper presentations, and magazine advertisements fully impart this image, too. No longer in control, wealthy, and urbane, old men are pictured as living neither in the city nor the suburbs but in a small rural town or in the country, near the pasture. Homes are smaller, more plain, without gadgets and machines. Bodies are not virile, rather pleasantly plump. Checked, flannel shirts have replaced the dark blue suit. As part of the "grandparent" generation, advertisements will show that the older man's soft lap cat has replaced the younger man's spirited black labrador retriever. Lemonade is now the drink of choice (Buchholz & Bynum, 1982; Ferraro, 1992; Kaiser & Chandler, 1988; Powell & Williamson, 1985; Swayne & Greco, 1987). Such images seem inflated to the point of parody. Perhaps, as Wernick (1987, p. 283) would maintain, when advertisers and other opinion makers become interested in speaking to and about older men, the more conventional construction of masculinity as a symbolic term will have weakened, and we can then expect a disappearance of what one might call the *metaphorical* old man.

Until then, it seems that the constructed images of older men leave these elders with two strikes against them. First is the prejudice within public (and professional) attitudes regarding "old age" in general (Butler, 1969; Walsh & Connor, 1979). Elders—in particular, elderly men—are thought to suffer sig-

nificant losses: Their occupational role, their livelihood and community of co-workers, their health and independence, and their masculinity are commonly thought to be displaced by aging. The traditional discourses of masculinity and aging separate adult men into two categories: old and all others. The older man is depicted in a yo-yo fashion, with both positive and negative content (Hummert, 1990). He is portrayed as interactively and psychologically involved in more expressive and caring roles within the family. He is also, by default, contrasted with an image of the younger, justly preoccupied father and husband whose primary concern is with productive labor and power management. The underlying core values in the discourse extol youth, independence, and economic productiveness and an aversion to aging and anything feminine (Cole, 1986; Fischer, 1978; Green, 1993, p. 53).

By displacing elder men from the mainstream, one result of contemporary cultural coding is the oppression of older men. As Fischer (1978) observed when he reviewed American cultural documents and chronicled the development of a "cult of youth" from 1770 to 1970, the definition of elder men as oppressors provided a symbol for all other echelons among men to unite against gerontocracy.

The second strike is older men's perceived genderlessness. Ask people to complete the sentence "An old man . . ." and then listen to ungendered ageism and his feminization. Older men are depicted as sedentary, resting on a park bench, passing time, asexual. Images of older men basically portray diminished masculinity (Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991; Puglisi & Jackson, 1980–81; Silverman, 1977). To many people, aging is a negation of masculinity, and thus older men become effeminate over time. Given this cultural assumption, older men are used, however unwittingly. The degendered imagery of the older man keeps afloat a masculinity and a discourse that sustains younger men. The conventional discourse describes gender in simply binary terms, wherein aging diminishes men's masculinity and, by default, heightens their femininity over time. Framed this way, images of age-specific and cohort-specific masculinities never rise to a threshold of public consciousness. Rather, the social construction maintains that "old men" are not men at all.

Discourses in the Academy

As the size of elderly female population increased between 1930 and 1990, the importance of gender and aging commanded greater and greater attention among academics and policy makers (Haug, Ford, & Sheafor, 1985; Herzog,

Holden, & Seltzer, 1989; Lesnoff-Caravaglia, 1984; Markson, 1985; Matthews, 1979; also see Coyle, 1989). Ironically, as older women's lives and their profound needs gained visibility, older men became more marginal and invisible. In fact, being elderly appears in some quarters to have become synonymous with being female. For example, in *Gender and Later Life,* Arber and Ginn (1991, p. vii) state, "Later life is primarily an experience of women." Their first chapter is powerfully titled "The Feminization of Later Life," because the demographics of aging show that elderly women outnumber elderly men in later life, especially as age advances. The message that is constructed, however, goes beyond making note of a sex differential in longevity. Rather, as women's experience in later life is brought to the foreground, older men's fade from attention. Arber and Ginn's otherwise very fine work makes "later life" as synonymous with women as "gender" has become.

Homogenizing elders—as reflected by midcentury discourses on "the aged" or the new academic discourse on feminization—was once said to be akin to "tabloid thinking" (Binstock, 1983, p. 140). Homogenizing sets the stage to ignore individual differences and to think about "the elderly" only at the collective level as disadvantaged individuals beset by common problems. Kalish (1979) warned that this construction was a form of "new ageism." The new discourse of feminization of the aged goes beyond the devaluation of diversity (Butler, 1969) to thwart discussion of the ways in which the population of older men is itself devalued and the ways in which men's personal experiences of age are challenged by cultural double binds and structurally induced conflicts about masculinities—conflicts such as about their work ethic and their diminished social significance as men, or their relative social opaqueness as individuals versus a collective.

Although the core value behind older men's invisibility is academics' "compassionate ageism" for older women (Binstock, 1983), knowledge production in gerontological studies currently makes for blinds spots and a lack of understanding of older men. As Cook (1992, p. 293) warned in an editorial in *The Gerontologist,* "If we want the public and the media to abandon the oversimplifying generalities they often make about age and aging and look instead at the diversity among older people, then gerontologists must stop asking attitudinal and factual questions about 'the elderly' as if they were a homogeneous group."

In the sociologies of the life course and family life, elderly men were not often studied as men but served as the referent point to better understand late-life families, elderly women's lives as caregivers, or younger men. Small wonder then that as much as "wives' sociology" once informed us about fam-

ily life (Safilios-Rochschild, 1969), there is a "midlife sociology" that has tried to theorize about older men's lives. To illustrate, role-theory sociologies directed attention to the rolelessness of late life. Retired men were envisioned outside the "normal" work spaces, and, by default, they were invading their wives' space—the family home (see literature review in Brubaker, 1990, and Chapter 8 in this volume). This early sociological discourse of older men defined their lives as a period of indispensable disengagement from former, power-brokering statuses. Older men were portrayed as obsolete currency in a culture that cherishes power; in disengagement terms, the spotlight was on younger men's welfare. Later discourses of activity theory similarly emphasized the core values of a masculinity that best fits younger employed men's lives. Neither did these theoretical accounts reveal much about older men as a group or about subgroup and individual differences.

Logically, the diversity among young and middle-aged men does not disappear at age 65, 70, or 75, when older men leave the workplace to take up more assiduously their semipublic and private social worlds. Their gendered lives continue. Their relationships with institutions, women, other men, and children press on. Dannefer (1988) pointed out that as men grow older, their accumulated decisions about life course options produce increased differentiation among them. But in what ways? Do age and gender interact to affect older men's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relations with others? Do the two interact to affect men as a group?

Aging and Masculinities

Over the last 30 years a body of theoretical literature on men's character in late life (or the postparental years) has emerged to explain the psychological comfort of the individual man as he ages (e.g., Deutscher, 1964; Gutmann, 1987; Livson, 1983; Lowenthal et al., 1975; Vaillant, 1977). By far the greatest common denominator in these accounts is the focus on the individual and his gender orientation. Gender is conceptualized as the "male role" and visualized as the institutionalized practices of men. The common discourse also proposes a single masculinity for each developmental stage that men confront in their life span; thus any diversity in masculinities is age-specific and accounted for by the underlying developmental processes. This theorizing targets the men who "do gender," not the masculinity ideologies (Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992) or the structure of gender relations that organize the way men do gender (Connell, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Neugarten and Gutmann (1958) and Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) envision individual aging as a life journey through socially scheduled role entries and exits. Strong age and gender norms structure the march across the life course, and changes in men's (and women's) gender relations are normative for each transition point. However, agreement among theorists ends on this point. When the literature discussing older men is examined, two fundamentally different views have been constructed on the "continuity" of gender across the life span. One viewpoint has proposed a general "discontinuous model" of gender across the life span and a formulation wherein the older man is emasculated by aging. But the common discourse even among these authors breaks up. First, these models offer different assumptions about what determines the changes. Some theorists (such as Gutmann and Huyck—see Chapter 4 in this volume) emphasize an ontogenetic basis for the behavioral, personality, and spiritual changes; others (such as Payne—see Chapter 5 in this volume) attribute distinct life stage differences in men's experiences to structurally induced conflicts and men's accommodations to changes in expectations. Second, discontinuity models present different nuances of discontinuity. Some theorists visualize men experiencing dramatically different gendered worlds in contiguous life stages. In Gutmann's scheme, for example, at the onset of parenthood adult men engage in highly polarized gender relations and exhibit gender-congruent personalities; on exiting this life stage, however, men experience a "nomic rupture" by facing a crossover toward a more feminine world (Sinnott, 1984).

Third, the discontinuity models introduce quite different masculinities for older men. Sinnott (1982, 1984) and Gutmann (1975, 1977, 1987), for instance, theorized a convergence of conventional masculinity and femininity in late life. This pattern of gender convergence in older men's and women's lifestyles and personalities, however, has failed to find much empirical support (McCreary, 1990). Others do not agree with the assertion that either diminished masculinity or increased femininity parallels men's aging; instead they propose that there is greater consistency to masculinities over time (McCrae & Costa, 1982).

The other representation emphasizes the continuity of gender experiences across the life span, particularly as men enter late life. According to the continuity models, becoming an older man might mean adapting to a new masculinity, but one not too different from the previous (Neugarten, 1977; Solomon, 1982). The continuity perspective suggests that men's gendered social worlds do not appreciably change throughout the life course; rather, older men continue to participate in the "institutionalized" practices that sig-

nificant others expect (Brubaker, 1985; Szinovacz, 1980) and continue to reveal consistency in their self-conceptions.

Within the available literature on aging and masculinities, change in men's character or institutionalized practices is at times thought to be ontogenetic, at other times triggered by the individual man's psychological discomfort with aging. Consistency also is thought to be generated by individual monitoring of psychosocial norms. The discourse is a biographical stage of life and not the masculinities within gender relations or the masculinity ideologies in the culture. Attention is directed to individual experiences with a stage-specific conventional masculinity without deciphering the matrix of masculinities that older men exhibit, the dynamics generated within gender relations, or the kind of masculinity that would be consistent with a (historical) change in the structure of gender relations.

Little has been said about the social conditions under which the different masculinities older men live with are constructed. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that the older men who were familiar with the Depression and who adopted a two-income family model (and thus elected not to be sole breadwinners) practice a different masculinity than sole breadwinners. Could both men participate in the public world of hegemonic masculinity in sports? Are they equally interested? Can they both return home to resume the full caregiving responsibilities of supporting a wife with Alzheimer's?

More work is also needed to address older men's lives in masculine spheres—such as when visiting with friends, whether on the golf course, in a cafeteria, in a veterans' bar, over the back fence (Duneier, 1992; Halle, 1984), or in gender relations (see Chapters 9 through 12 of this volume). What has emerged to date is an ambiguous image of elderly men in families and society. Are older men in fact marginal and nonessential, perhaps in the way of their wives and younger men? Is their experience one of exclusion? Is it one of rekindling the gerontocracy (see Chapter 13 in this volume)? The scope of theorizing and research both need to expand from examining only conventions of gender to understanding the ways in which older men's practices support and change gender relations broadly.

The merit of examining ordinary men's lives has become more widely acknowledged (Diamant, 1992; Heller, 1993), but in the investigations of masculinities, older men have not been the men studied. Age distinctions in how adult men embrace manhood, generational differences in masculinity, attention to gender presentations when similarly aged men engage in a common sphere of activity, and the meaning of being a man in the Third Age are

largely outside what is understood and need to be brought in theoretically and placed on research agendas.

Questions

1. Name the four reasons why older men have been socially invisible.
2. In what ways do older men tend to have a "quality-of-life" advantage over older women? What is "compassionate ageism"?
3. What does Thompson mean by the "medicalization" of older men's lives?
4. What problems result from the failure to examine older men as *men*? Are all old men alike?
5. Find a popular culture image of an older man that goes against the image Thompson lays out. In today's society, is your image exceptional or more common than Thompson's analysis would suggest?
6. Make an argument for the importance of more research on older men's lives.

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