

Older Men's Lives

EDITED BY
 **EDWARD J. CAMPSON, JR.**

RESEARCH ON MEN AND MASCULINITIES

Older Men's Lives

Edited by
Edward H. Thompson, Jr.

*Published in cooperation with the Men's Studies Association,
A Task Group of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism*

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For my dad, and for my children's Papa, my stepdad

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Older Men's Lives

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Contemporary research on men and masculinity, informed by recent feminist thought and intellectual breakthroughs of women's studies and the women's movement, treats masculinity not as a normative referent but as a problematic gender construct. This series of interdisciplinary, edited volumes attempts to understand men and masculinity through this lens, providing a comprehensive understanding of gender and gender relationships in the contemporary world. Published in cooperation with the Men's Studies Association, a Task Group of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism.

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Foreword

"Will you still need me," ask the Beatles in their memorable song, "when I'm 64?" Fears of aging have long animated the human quest for immortality, and recently we have begun to draw the connection between age and gender. Only rarely, though, has that connection been focused on the meaning of aging to men. But what could be more central to men's sense of themselves than being needed, being of use, and being valued? Yet that sense of ourselves is precisely what we feel is most threatened by aging.

How is the aging process experienced by men? How do different groups of men react to this process? What types of strategies do men develop to handle aging, less as an unexpected crisis and more as a process of life? These are the questions that Ed Thompson set for himself in organizing this collection.

This is the sixth volume in the **Sage Series on Research on Men and Masculinities**. The purpose of the series is to gather together the finest empirical research in the social sciences that focuses on the experience of men in contemporary society.

Following the pioneering research of feminist scholars over the past two decades, social scientists have come to recognize gender as one of the primary axes around which social life is organized. Gender is now seen as equally central as class and race, both at the macro, structural level of the allocation and distribution of rewards in a hierarchical

society and at the micro, psychological level of individual identity formation and interpersonal interaction.

Social scientists distinguish gender from sex. Sex refers to biology, the biological dimorphic division of male and female; gender refers to the cultural meanings that are attributed to those biological differences. Although biological sex varies little, the cultural meanings of gender vary enormously. Thus we speak of gender as socially constructed: the definitions of masculinity and femininity as the products of the interplay among a variety of social forces. In particular, we understand gender to vary spatially (from one culture to another), temporally (within any one culture over historical time), and longitudinally (through any individual's life course). Finally, we understand that different groups within any culture may define masculinity and femininity differently, according to subcultural definitions. Race, ethnicity, age, class, sexuality, and region of the country all affect gender definitions. Thus it is the goal of this series to explore the varieties of men's experiences, remaining mindful of specific differences among men and aware of the mechanisms of power that inform both men's relations with women and men's relations with other men.

As the chapters collected in this volume make clear, the convergence of life course processes and gender issues is particularly piquant for men. And, of course, different men—differently situated in other social hierarchies—experience this convergence differently.

Some issues do remain constant, and among the most persistent is the sense of loneliness and isolation that men face as they age. Of course, it need not be that way. "You'll be older, too," the Beatles remind us. "And if you say the word, I could stay with you."

MICHAEL S. KIMMEL
Series Editor

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Introduction

Especially outside, but even inside, the field of gerontology, there has been a tendency to view the elderly population as a homogeneous mass of older people whose lives take place in contexts that differ markedly from the middle-aged and the young. However commonplace this image, it was constructed in error. The elderly population in the United States is not a unified mass, and it has not been for centuries. This population differs conspicuously by gender as well as by birth cohort. Inside the population are older men and older women, very elderly men, and very elderly women. There are more women, and now many theorists postulate that a feminization of "the aged" has begun. But there are elderly men whose masculinities, relationships with intimates, developmental trajectories, worries, work and leisure activities, material resources, age-related limitations, and health concerns differ from other older men and women in their communities.

As much as we know that the elderly population is neither homogeneous nor exclusively female, we have not established much information about elderly men. The research communities in gerontology, family studies, and gender studies have not studied older men as men. Basic to this volume is the distinction between *sex* and *gender*. Sex is fundamentally biological, gender is fundamentally social. Biological males grow and age; men mature and change throughout life. Much of the gerontological literature has introduced us to older biological males

by virtue of describing a sex difference in aging. The 13 chapters in this volume begin a process in which elderly men are studied through a lens that emphasizes gender as much as age.

In much the same way that the gerontological literature treats men as if they are genderless, the gender studies literature has unwittingly presented adult men as ageless. Without a wide-frame, life course perspective and an appreciation of aging as a social process, much of the research on men failed to recognize that numerous masculinities coexist for older men, and that these individuals are not living equally by the same standard. Theorizing the presence of multiple masculinities means that old men of different birth cohorts, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation could have their own age-specific standards of masculinity. The authors contributing to volume, although drawing on different discourses, have begun to help clarify the principle that older men also exhibit masculinities in their relations with others. The authors' work uniquely contributes to men's studies and gender studies.

The collective effort presents no one perspective as the authentic "older men" viewpoint. This collection effectively demonstrates the diversity within the academy. Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder whether the diverse visions of what it means to be both a man and an elder presented in this volume can ever be concurrent and woven together.

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1

Older Men as Invisible Men in Contemporary Society

EDWARD H. THOMPSON, JR.

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 as 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 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

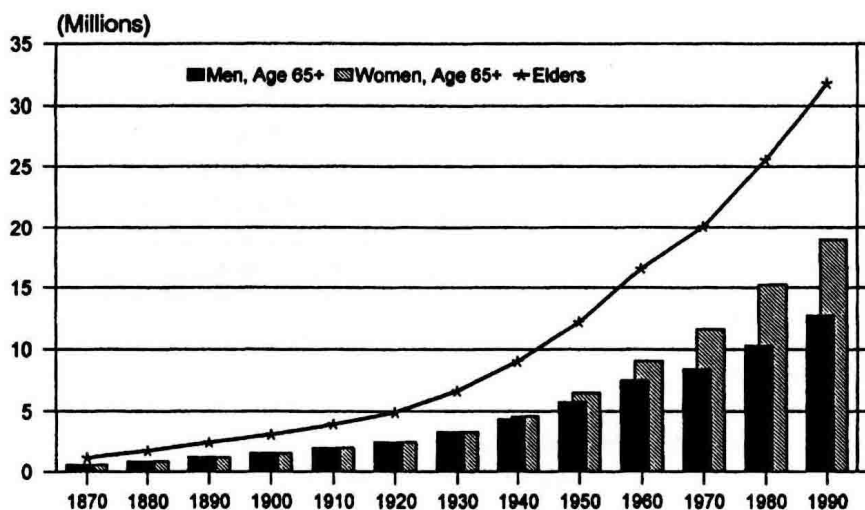


Figure 1.1. Number of Elders in the United States, 1870-1990

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

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 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

Table 1.1 Life Expectancy at Birth (in years)

	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>	
	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
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)

	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>	
	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
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).

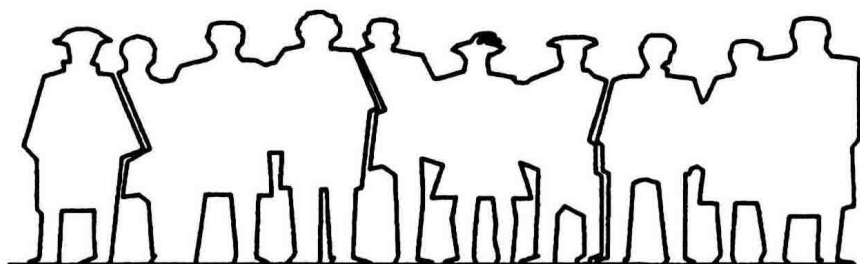
a. Black and other nonwhite "races."

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

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).

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 (1985) 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 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%.