Power, Gender, and Aging

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Until the turn of the twenty-first century, feminist scholars and activists paid little attention to older women's issues or their experience of ageism (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). Early activism and books on the topic by Barbara Macdonald (Macdonald & Rich, 1983), Sandra Martz (1987), and Betty Friedan (1993) initially garnered attention, but the experiences of older women soon disappeared from public awareness. Why? Perhaps it is because of the stigma attached to aging in Western societies, where most feminist scholarship has been written. Perhaps the second wave of feminism's slogans about *sisterhood* promoted an emphasis on younger adult women and obscured the experiences of their mothers and grandmothers (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Perhaps activists saw sexism and racism as more fundamental to human oppression and chose to focus their attention there. Perhaps it took changes in longevity and the demographic shift to draw attention to elders; indeed the shift, which has been called the gray tsunami, exposed the extent of ageism as politicians and journalists decried the costs to society of an aging population. Perhaps it took the aging of baby boomer feminists, the first generation to benefit from the Women's Liberation Movement, to recognize ageism as they experienced it first hand.

Yet ageism is an intersectional oppression. If we live long enough, we all (rich or poor, White or of Color, gay or straight, woman or man, trans or cis, thin or fat, able-bodied or disabled) will experience age-related stereotypes, whether positive (in cultures that respect the aged) or negative (in cultures that do not). The first experience of ageism is always a shock, perhaps because, whatever our age, we tend not to think of ourselves as *old* (Furstenberg, 1989). The experience of ageism is disempowering, and the shock of it may be greater for those who have had more ability to exercise power and more access to resources, respect, and dignity. Those who have lived their lives on the margins of society in a struggle for dignity may have

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difficulty recognizing their initial experiences of ageism per se, as it is entangled with other "reasons" why people or institutions ignore or treat them disrespectfully.

Ageism

Ageism refers to prejudice against individuals based on their age. Although there are some instances where younger people experience ageism (e.g., adults-only apartment complexes), in societies where youth is highly valued, it is elders who are most often the targets. Ageism may be experienced as discrimination (e.g., in hiring or promotion) or as microaggressions (e.g., social invisibility, jokes about "senior moments"). The stigma attached to aging is reflected in people's attempts to pass as younger than they are (e.g., cosmetic surgery; cosmeceuticals; hair dye; identifying as middle-aged when they are in their 60s, 70s, and beyond) and in complimentary ageism (e.g., "You don't look 70," "She's 90 years young"). Stigma is also reflected in younger people's preference not to spend time with older people (North & Fiske, 2012); in the development of spaces where elders congregate (e.g., "senior centers," "senior living"), which facilitates social distancing by youth (North & Fiske, 2012); and in the scarcity of positive images of elders in popular culture (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Neville & Anastasio, 2019).

Both women and men experience ageism, but there is some evidence that women may experience it sooner and more frequently. Some research shows that women are perceived as old at earlier ages than men are (Chrisler et al., 2018; Hummert et al., 2019; Kite & Wagner, 2002). The double standard of aging (Deuisch et al., 1986; Sontag, 1979) means that women are judged more harshly than men are when signs of aging begin to show, which results in greater pressure on women to hide those signs (Dingman et al., 2012) and greater shame when their age is obvious (Holstein, 2006). In Hollywood, actresses "age out" of lead roles much earlier than their male peers do, and it is common in films to see leading men paired romantically with actresses who are decades younger than they are (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012).

The stereotype of elders has both positive (e.g., wise, experienced) and negative (e.g., grumpy, senile) components (Kite & Johnson, 1988). In youth-oriented cultures, the negative aspects are emphasized, which may be another way for younger people to distance themselves from elders (Chrisler et al., 2016). Many negative components of the stereotype refer to unattractiveness (e.g., wrinkled, ugly) and incompetence (e.g., forgetful, frail), which places them at the intersection of sexism and ageism, given that the feminine gender role stereotype includes weakness, passivity, and dependence and that women are subjected to the double standard of aging. Thus, it may be easier to perceive older women than older men as incompetent (Chrisler et al., 2016). The stereotype content model places elders in the pitied (i.e., warm but incompetent) group ("doddering but dear"; Cuddy & Fiske, 2004, p. 3), a pattern that has been found across cultures (Cuddy et al., 2005). Housewives (Eckes, 2002) and pregnant women (Masser et al., 2007) have also been rated warm but incompetent, which may make being pitied a more common experience for women

than for men. Benevolent sexism, the tendency to see women as weak and in need of help and support (Glick & Fiske, 1996), may lead to benevolent ageism, the tendency to see elders as weak and in need of help and support (North & Fiske, 2012).

Internalized ageism refers to elders' acceptance of negative stereotypes about aging, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Stewart et al., 2012) and lead to learned helplessness (Cousins, 2000). Ample evidence now supports stereotype embodiment theory (Levy, 2009), which posits that stereotype threat or ageist microaggressions can lead elders to act on (or embody) ageist stereotypes in self-defining ways. For example, priming negative stereotypes (e.g., shaky, senile) in a lab setting results in worse handwriting (Levy, 2000), lower willingness to take a risk, more frequent requests for help (Coudin & Alexopoulos, 2012), and poorer performance on memory and math tests (Abrams et al., 2006; Desrichard & Kopetz, 2005). In longitudinal studies, elders, who internalize more positive than negative components of the stereotype assess their health more positively (Ramirez & Palacios-Espinosa, 2016), are more resilient in the face of stressful events (Levy et al., 2015), and even outlive their more negative peers (Ng et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2012). Thus, ageism actually contributes to the incompetence younger people perceive in elders, reinforces negative stereotypes, disempowers elders, and undermines elders' physical and mental health.

Ageism is more common in developed (industrialized, post-industrial) societies, especially those with individualistic, capitalist, Western cultures, where respect depends upon material measures of productivity (Gullette, 2004; Lips, 2003). Elders may be seen as "greedy geezers" or "deadwood" because they are seen as no longer productive and as takers (rather than makers) of societal resources (Gullette, 2004). In developing societies with traditional collectivist cultures, ageism may be less common because definitions of productivity are more flexible and elders hold respected roles (e.g., grandparent, midwife, mother-in-law) (Lips, 2003).

Power and Empowerment

There are various ways to think about power, but here I follow classic social psychology theories and define power as *influence*: the ability to persuade (e.g., Cartwright, 1959). We can think of power in several ways: *power over*, the ability to influence others to do what one wants; *power from*, the ability to resist others' influence attempts (e.g., to say "no"); and *power to*, the ability to marshal one's own thoughts, emotions, and actions in order to achieve one's own goals (i.e., empowerment) (Hollander & Offerman, 1990; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Women are often perceived to have less influence than men and less ability to exercise the three types of power. However, that analysis is too simplistic. Who is the woman in question, whom is she attempting to influence, and in what circumstances? Power is always dynamic and contextual, and any given woman (regardless of her age) may have more influence and feel more empowered in some circumstances (e.g., in the family) than in others (e.g., in the workplace or public sphere).

Raven (1965) described six power bases, or modes of influence, that people commonly use: reward, coercion, referent, legitimate, expert, and informational. Reward power requires the ability to offer resources to those who accept one's influence, whereas coercion power requires the ability to withhold resources or to deliver punishment to those who resist one's influence. Referent power is based on relational ties that enable people to influence each other (e.g., "Do it for *me*," "Parents should stick together"). Legitimate power is based on social roles (e.g., parent/child, teacher/student) and positions in a hierarchy (e.g., admiral, committee chair, manager) that include a right to influence others. Expert power is the right to influence based on others' recognition of one's relevant expertise, and informational power is the ability to influence based on clear and convincing rationales for action or access to information not generally available. To utilize these power bases successfully, influencers need resources, self-confidence, social status, knowledge/expertise/wisdom, self-efficacy, and/or collective action.

Below I consider how successful elders might be in exercising power and whether there are gender differences in access to what influencers need in order to be successful. I also consider some of the intersectional identities that impact the exercise of power.

Resources Necessary to Exercise Power

Physical Attractiveness

Attractiveness has been shown repeatedly in social psychology research to empower and to provide social benefits. For example, as a result of the halo effect, in which attractive people are thought to have other "good qualities" (e.g., intelligence, friendliness, morality), attractive people are more likely than unattractive people to be hired and promoted and less likely to serve time in jail for criminal infractions (see Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012, for a review). Beauty is especially entwined with social status for women across cultures. Beautiful girls and women are seen as leaders in their peer groups and celebrity culture (e.g., Instagram influencers), are more likely to attract high-status romantic partners, and can deploy their looks as a reward in influence attempts (Frevert & Walker, 2014). Just being seen with a beautiful friend, date, spouse, or co-worker can enhance people's social status (Frevert & Walker, 2014). Thus, women of all ages spend time engaged in beauty work to make themselves as attractive as possible.

The double standard of aging limits women's ability to use beauty as a power base as they age, as beauty is associated with youth in many cultures. Women are judged more harshly than men are when signs of aging appear (Foos & Clark, 2011); the fact that women of all ages report anxiety about aging (Barrett & Von Rohr, 2008; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010) indicates that they are aware of such negative judgment. A much discussed, but under-researched, experience of women in their 50s is "the

transition from visibility to invisibility" (Chrisler, 2007, p. 6), when women used to "turning heads" realize that no one is looking at them anymore, no matter "how well dressed and well groomed they are" (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018, p. 145). The power to attract attention via beauty is gone—for those who once had it.

Many wealthy women try to hold on to beauty as a resource by engaging in more expensive and labor-intensive beauty work designed to hide or remove signs of aging (e.g., hair dye, Botox injections, "anti-aging" creams, cosmetic surgery), work that requires constant self-discipline (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Recent studies in Western countries have shown that midlife women report considerable interest in cosmetic (especially face- and weight-related) procedures that would make them look younger, and many would elect them if the procedures were more affordable (Chrisler et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2007; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010). Perhaps the closer women were to the beauty ideal in their youth (e.g., slender, able-bodied, White, attractive), the more disempowering signs of aging feel to them.

There is some evidence that older women are redefining what it means to be attractive. They are making the most of what they have by focusing on their clothes and their posture, by emphasizing health over beauty, by finding beauty in signs of aging (e.g., white hair), and by focusing on aspects they can control (e.g., hairstyle, make-up) (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018). For example, older women may choose clothes and accessories to cover parts of the body they find unattractive (e.g., scarves, long-sleeved blouses) (Clarke et al., 2009) or develop their own unique sense of style (e.g., Lyn Slater, a former professor of social work who is known on Instagram as "the accidental icon", began blogging about fashion in her 60s). These strategies can contribute to older women's self-confidence and feeling of attractiveness ("looking good" for their age). Indeed, some recent studies show that older women have greater body acceptance and appreciation than younger women do (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013) and that women in their 80s are more positive about their appearance than are women in their 60s (Baker & Gringart, 2009). Some recent films (*Calendar Girls; The Book Club; Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*) that show women in their 60s and 70s as vibrant, lovable, attractive, and sexy might contribute to the empowerment of at least some older women (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012).

Physical Strength

Men and boys typically have greater upper-body musculoskeletal strength than women and girls at all ages. Physical strength can be used in the exercise of coercion (e.g., an implied threat, a physical assault) and reward (e.g., providing protection or assistance) power. It is also useful in *power from* (e.g., "Try to make me do it!"), and it contributes to personal independence (e.g., stamina, ability to do tasks without assistance), which is especially important to elders' empowerment.

Lessened strength is part of normal senescence (Seifert et al., 1997), and weak grip is one of the signs of frailty (Xue, 2011). Both genders, especially in the oldest age

group, can become frail, but women may be more likely to be perceived as frail, and at earlier ages, because of the nexus between sexist and ageist stereotypes (e.g., weak, vulnerable, dependent). Perceptions of older women as frail can result in benevolent ageism (e.g., doing for them what they could do for themselves or urging restrictions of their activities, thus undermining their self-efficacy), targeting them for scams, or using physical threats to control them. Internalization of others' perceptions that one is frail is disempowering and can result in stereotype embodiment: Older women may believe that they cannot exercise, continue with favorite activities, go out by themselves, or live alone (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018).

How serious the typical loss of strength depends on how much muscular strength individuals developed in their youth and how well they maintained that strength through midlife via manual labor, exercise, and/or athletics. Exercise in old age can help elders to maintain or improve stamina, strength, and balance, yet most older women in the USA do not exercise regularly (Lips & Hastings, 2012) or have hobbies that require physical activity (e.g., dancing, gardening) (Taylor, 2012). Older men are more likely than older women to engage in exercise (Chen et al., 2012), perhaps because of habits developed in youth when they were athletes. In the USA, ethnic minority and rural older women are especially unlikely to report regular exercise (e.g., Garcia, 2015; Pullen et al., 2001). Barriers to exercise reported by older women are often related to gender (e.g., beliefs that exercise is unfeminine; that women should not sweat or become muscular; that they are too old or fat or clumsy to exercise) (e.g., Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018). Yet there are signs that this is beginning to change.

Although today's oldest women were born before athletics were generally considered appropriate for girls and women, baby boomer women often have a different view, and younger generations are likely to be even more interested in sport and exercise at every age, despite variations in culture and social class. Sports leagues for senior citizens are growing in popularity in the USA, and community organizations often sponsor exercise classes designed for elders (Chrisler & Palatino, 2016). In China, it is common to see elders exercising together (e.g., tai chi) in public parks. Role models, such as members of the South African Grandmothers' Soccer League and Sister Madonna Buder (aka The Iron Nun, the oldest person to complete the Ironman Triathlon—at age 82), show that it is possible for some women to maintain physical strength into old age. Older women have reported that it is empowering (and a form of resistance to ageist stereotypes) to develop strength, maintain fitness, and improve balance (e.g., Dionigi et al., 2011; Halvarsson et al., 2016). Even playing Wii video games at home brings these benefits (Keogh et al., 2014). Strength and fitness also support elders' independence and contribute to *power to* achieve their own goals.

Money/Gifts

Money (i.e., the ability to provide or withhold it) is a mainstay of the reward and coercion power bases. Across cultures, women typically have less access to wealth than men do (Shein & Haruvi, 2015). This results from gender discrimination in salary, hiring, and promotion; tracking of girls and women into lower paying jobs; time away from paid employment to raise children; inheritance laws or traditions in some countries that favor sons over daughters; and fewer years of education for girls than boys in some countries. Women are less likely than men to have pensions or significant savings to support them in old age; in countries, where all elders have government benefits to protect them from poverty, women's payments may be lower than men's because they have had fewer years in the workforce (Sugar, 2007).

However, older women's economic situation appears to be improving. In industrialized countries, on average, 70% of women ages 25–64 are in the workforce (Schein & Naruvi, 2015), and more older women are continuing to work beyond age 65—some because they need to supplement their retirement income and others because they enjoy their jobs (Cole & Hollis-Sawyer, 2020; Denmark et al., 2015). It is not difficult to point to prominent older women who have inherited (e.g., Queen Elizabeth II) or earned (e.g., Oprah Winfrey) substantial wealth. Many baby boomer women, who had professional careers or good-paying jobs with benefits, are retiring with enough income to live very comfortably. These older women have become known in popular culture as WOOPies (well-off older persons) or GLAMs (gray, leisured, and moneyed) (Muhlbauer et al., 2018). Their financial status increases their social status, draws attention to their personal and philanthropic interests and consumer decisions, and makes them more influential than older women with less income (Muhlbauer et al., 2018; Schein & Naruvi, 2015). Of course, many WOOPies benefitted from wealth transfer (i.e., inheritances from spouses, parents, or other relatives) as well as from their own earnings. Low-resourced families do not have wealth to transfer, undocumented immigrants are excluded from well-paid jobs and educational opportunities, and lesbians in countries where same-sex marriage is prohibited are unable to inherit (or must pay high inheritance taxes) when their partners die. Thus, cumulative effects of prejudice and discrimination can make some women increasingly financially dependent on their families as they age, even as other better-off older women become less dependent than earlier generations (Schein & Naruvi, 2015).

However, there are gifts that do not require purchasing, and almost every older woman has those to bestow or withhold. These include family lore, secrets, recipes, and heirlooms. Grandmother's blessing is a valued reward, and avoiding her curse is a great relief. Older women can be quite skilled at influencing others by offering an heirloom with sentimental value if the child provides a service she needs or a grandchild achieves a particular goal. Such gifts are both rewards and signs of affection.

Affection/Sexuality

Most people find signs of affection (e.g., smiles, hugs, kisses, pats on the back, attention) rewarding, and these can be used very effectively to influence behavior. The feminine gender role stereotype includes kindness, warmth, and nurturance, which means that most women have been socialized to be comfortable displaying these traits—at least some of the time. The promise of affection, and the threat to withhold it, are traditional ways for women to exercise reward and coercion power (Johnson, 1976).

The intersection of gender and age stereotypes may make it easier to perceive older women as likable (grandmother vs. grumpy old man). A likable person who likes us back is a rewarding companion. Likability, similarity/in-group identification, and/ or the bonds of friendship and kin are necessary to exercise referent power, which calls upon shared feelings or identity as a means of influence (e.g., "You're my dear granddaughter/my best friend," "Family should help each other," "Sisterhood is powerful"). Women across cultures often have closer friendships and larger social support networks than men do, and with those come a history of counting on other women for advice and assistance (Lips, 2003; Taylor, 2012). Thus referent power is a comfortable way for most women to assert influence and is a type of power that older women may be especially able to utilize.

Sexuality is another traditional way for women to exercise power—by offering or withholding sexual activity (Johnson, 1976). Although the double standard of aging suggests that women lose their sexual candidacy (i.e., desirability) at earlier ages than men do, older women with romantic partners can still exercise power through sexuality. Ageist stereotypes portray elders as lacking in sexual desire, but a survey of elders in five Western countries showed that 79% of men and 78% of women disagreed with the statement "Older people no longer want sex" (Nicolosi et al., 2006). Sexuality is an important part of relationships for many elders (McHugh & Interligi, 2015) and strengthens the bond on which referent power rests. However, women whose relationships are unhappy or who have unsatisfactory sex lives can draw on the ageist stereotype to exert *power from*, as they explain that they no longer desire sexual activity.

Although sexuality can remain a way for older women to feel powerful, it can also be disempowering. The intersection of sexism and ageism means that women who actively exhibit sexual desire are demeaned, especially in youth-oriented cultures (McHugh & Interligi, 2015). Older men might also be demeaned (e.g., as "dirty old men), but they are more likely than older women to be praised for their vitality if they remain sexually active. It is acceptable for older men to seek younger partners, but older women who do the same are considered to be *cougars* who prey on younger people (McHugh & Interligi, 2015).

Time

Time is a resource that is most available to higher status individuals, who are able to control the number of hours they spend in the workforce and who can afford to pay others to do some of their work at home. Women, who work long hours or multiple jobs or irregular schedules, and also do housework, raise children, and care for older relatives, have little time to spare. Spare time can be used to develop expertise and seek out information, maintain relationships, and provide attention and affection to family and friends, activities that make it possible to utilize the expert, informational, and referent power bases.

Older women whose childrearing days are behind them and who are retired or semi-retired from the workforce have more free time, and more control over their time, than they once had. This allows them to develop new interests (or return to old ones) through volunteer work, political engagement (e.g., poll workers, campaign workers, candidates for office), social justice activism, taking courses, arts and crafts, mentoring, or trying a new career direction. Elders keep many communities going through their dedication to volunteer work, and they find that work both enjoyable and empowering (Denmark & Klara, 2007; Kulik, 2015). Older women can utilize their skills and expertise, accomplish goals, try out new leadership roles, and expand their support and friendship networks through volunteer work and activism (Lips & Hastings, 2012; McHugh, 2012), which provide opportunities to utilize expert and referent power. Many retirees had experience with collective action during their youth (e.g., Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation Movement, Gay Rights Movement, Disability Rights Movement) and welcome the opportunity to reengage with current issues. Activist groups that cater to elders include the Gray Panthers, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the Older Women's League (OWL), Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC), and the Raging Grannies. Collective action, whether toward social justice or in a community organization planning an event, is empowering (McHugh, 2012). Opportunities for activism are increasingly available online, a boon for older women with chronic illness or disability or those who live in rural areas or have difficulties with transportation to events.

Of course, not all older women have the luxury of time. Some continue in the workforce, some are raising (or helping to raise) grandchildren (Duarte-Silva et al., 2012; Kulik, 2007), others are caring for ill partners or friends (Kulik, 2015), or are ill themselves and unable to engage in the activities they would prefer.

Wisdom/Knowledge/Expertise

Wisdom, which is often defined as a combination of knowledge, experience, and sound judgment used for the good of oneself and others (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), develops over time, and is frequently associated with elders. Indeed, *wise* and *sage* are among the positive stereotypes of elders (Kite & Johnson, 1988). Leaders in many

societies across cultures and historical time periods have surrounded themselves with a Council of Elders in order to take advantage of their wisdom; of course, most of those elders have been men. Expertise refers to highly developed skills based on knowledge and practical experience; cognitive psychologists have estimated that it takes thousands of hours of study and practice to become an expert at any task (e.g., juggling, neurosurgery) (Chi et al., 1988). Younger people may have a lot of knowledge in particular areas of interest, but it takes many years to develop wisdom and expertise, including learning from one's own and others' mistakes. Expertise is itself a power base, as others defer to the influence of experts. Knowledge and wisdom support the informational power base, as they aid in explanation of why others should accept someone's advice or suggestion.

A traditional way that older women have demonstrated wisdom, knowledge, and expertise is in the family. Grandmothers and Great Aunts serve as sources of advice and information about childrearing and family traditions. Midwives and Medicine Women are often elders in the community. Witches are typically portrayed in Western popular culture as old women, perhaps due to fear of their particular knowledge and skills. Other cultures have more sympathetic depictions of older women who use their wisdom and expertise for the good of humanity (e.g., the Hopis' Grandmother Spider).

Feminism created a path for many women to develop knowledge and expertise through higher education and career training. Thus, many women today enter old age with nontraditional, as well as traditional, forms of wisdom. Some older professional women continue their careers or serve as consultants or mentors to young (or aspiring) professionals (Denmark & Williams, 2012; Denmark et al., 2015). Others volunteer their expertise to community groups or to politicians or government agencies developing public policy. Today it is easy to think of examples of older women who now, or in the recent past, share(d) their wisdom in politics (e.g., former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, activist LaDonna Brave Bull Allard), business, and the professions (entrepreneurial women over 60, whose small businesses are known as *silver start-ups;* Dr. Alla Illyinichna Levushkina, who was still performing surgery successfully at age 89), and the arts (e.g., actress Judy Dench, artist Grandma Moses).

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is essential to the exercise of power. If the person attempting to influence does not seem confident, others doubt the person's legitimacy, expertise, explanation, or ability to follow through with promised rewards or threatened punishments (Johnson, 1976). Studies of adolescents and young adults have often shown that boys and men are more self-confident than girls and women are (Lips, 2003). However, some research (see Roberts & Mroczek, 2008) suggests that self-confidence increases with age.

Interview studies with midlife and older women have shown that increased self-confidence and authenticity are a hallmark of midlife (50s and 60s) (Arnold, 2005; Burns & Leonard, 2005; Leonard & Burns, 2006); the women spoke about feeling more self-assured because they have coped successfully with challenges and adversities; feeling freer to spend their time the way they want after children are grown; feeling more able to express themselves honestly due to job and relationship security; feeling able to take more risks and to reorder their priorities; and feeling more content or comfortable with their bodies than they did when they were younger. Self-confidence also comes from internalization of successful influence attempts in the past, possession of expertise, and others' acknowledgment of one's wisdom.

Older women who have lived more restricted lives and/or who have been able to demonstrate competence only in limited areas (e.g., childrearing) might find it difficult to be self-confident beyond these areas. Elders who are regularly subjected to ageism and who have internalized ageist stereotypes that lead them to doubt their competence may lose the self-confidence they previously had in connection to their knowledge, skills, strength, beauty, and other resources (Levy, 2009). If independence and self-efficacy decrease, perhaps due to illness, frailty, or disability, then self-confidence is likely to decrease as well.

Leadership Roles

Individuals may hold roles in social hierarchies that grant them the legitimate right to influence others. Leadership roles are seen as particularly powerful. In societies that accept elders as leaders, older people can exercise legitimate power. In most cultures, those elders have typically been men, but this is beginning to change for privileged women in Western countries. Elders may also be influential behind the scenes as éminences grise, mentors to whom younger people turn for guidance and advice. Stepping down from leadership roles (e.g., in business, the military, academe) as a result of illness or retirement is disempowering, and may be particularly difficult for men who are used to being deferred to by others (Sugar, 2007). However, as noted above, elders can utilize their social capital in new leadership roles in civic or political organizations.

People do not retire from their family roles, and they retain their right to influence their younger relatives. Grandmothers and mothers-in-law wield considerable influence, especially in traditional societies where younger women have little influence (Lips, 2003). The head of the family makes important decisions regarding family assets (e.g., business, land use). In wealthy families, grandparents may control their children and grandchildren because they determine who will inherit which family assets.

Helplessness

A less discussed form of legitimate power is *helplessness* (Johnson, 1976). In most cultures people are taught to feel an obligation to assist those who are weak or in distress. (It is difficult, for example, to see a crying lost child in a park or shopping mall without stopping to help.) Elders who are ill, frail, or disabled can command attention and assistance by virtue of their acknowledged helplessness, and they can use their condition to resist unwanted influence (*power from*), both of which can be empowering. However, they are also at the mercy of their helpers (whether relatives, neighbors, or paid caregivers), who may neglect or abuse them. Elder abuse is both dangerous and disempowering, and victims are often reluctant or afraid to complain or report their abuse (DeFour, 2012) because of their dependence.

Conclusion

The question of whether people gain power, lose power, or retain similar levels of power as they age is complicated by gender, culture, and class as well as by other personal (e.g., personality traits, extent of internalization of ageist stereotypes) and demographic variables (e.g., educational level, generation/cohort). Collective action to improve the status of elders in societies and government policies that reduce the levels of poverty among elders (e.g., pensions, free or inexpensive healthcare) have empowered many (Schein & Naruvi, 2015; Sugar, 2007). Healthy elders are able to maintain greater independence, decision-making, and connection to their social networks (Chrisler et al., 2015; McHugh, 2012). The purchasing power of WOOPies and GLAMs has attracted attention to their interests and desires (Schein & Naruvi, 2015), and a change toward a more positive portrayal of elders in the media has begun (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012).

The process of aging may mean decline in access to some resources (e.g., physical attractiveness, physical strength, financial income, friends) necessary to utilize reward, coercion, referent, expert, or informational power and/or a decline in legitimate power previously derived from particular high-status roles. Yet aging may also mean gaining greater access to other resources (e.g., time, self-confidence, wisdom) that enable utilization of power bases such as reward, expert, informational, and referent power. Thus, "aging does not invariably mean a decrease in empowerment; it might just mean a change in how and from where power is derived" (Chrisler et al., 2015, p. 25).

Elders can empower themselves by seeking out new opportunities and roles in community, civic, and political organizations. Learning new hobbies and activities (e.g., arts, crafts), or returning to old ones (e.g., action toward social justice), can be empowering and connect elders to communities who share their interests (Maidment & McFarlane, 2011). Elders can focus on interdependence (i.e., helping each other) rather than independence, use assistive devices and community services (e.g.,

canes, hearing aids, shared van services) that help them to maintain social ties, and engage in self-care (regular physical activity, adequate rest and nutrition) to support their health and maintain their energy and stamina (Chrisler et al., 2015). Engagement in organized religion or other spiritual activities promotes resilience, optimism, and social connections and serves as a source of strength, perhaps especially for older women (O'Brien & Whitbourne, 2015). Elders who are homebound or live in isolated areas may be able to maintain social connections online; playing computer games, face-timing with grandchildren, and participating in Facebook groups or other online communities can empower elders and enhance their quality of life (O'Brien & Whitbourne, 2015). Contact with grandchildren, or other young relatives, friends, neighbors, or former co-workers, provides the opportunity to give them attention, affection, and sage advice. Beauty, money, and high-status careers are not the most important things in life—at old age, or any age. Making the most of what one has can be empowering.

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