Introduction

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The psychosocial landscape with regard to the aging process of women over 60 is fast changing. One can hardly fail to take note of the changes that have taken place in the actual lives of older women and, consequently, in their upbeat cultural portrayal. Women in this age group have been engaged in extending the restrictive sociopolitical boundaries of both age and gender. They have often been doing this in ways that signify a fundamental cultural shift in how we tend to think about older women. This fascinating transformation is taking place in defiance of the traditional construction of collective gendered age identity and, also, against social and cultural odds. These changes are easily detected in the way older women position themselves in organizational politics, in the division of power in their families, in the ways they manage multiple identity roles (e.g., job holder, spouse, parent, grandmother, mentor, volunteer) and in the broad life goals they now set for themselves (Muhlbauer and Chrisler 2012). Representations of contemporary older women in popular media are additional indicators of the overall change in the progress in women's lives. Attractive actresses such as Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, Judy Dench, Susan Sarandon, Helen Mirren, Sally Fields (all of them are over 60), and many others play fictional characters in films or television series who are powerful and highly accomplished, and they tend to enjoy their stylish and often flirtatious appearance (Lemish and Muhlbauer 2012). It is as though aging were reinventing itself as a much more playful development than ever before. In this respect, the popular media are becoming more responsive to sociocultural trends affecting the lives and whims of women in the over 60 age group. All these rather impressive changes have raised serious and intriguing questions: Is this the first generation of powerful older women who have battered the absurd stereotypical portrait and cultural codes of the devalued lifestyles of old age? If it is, what is driving this phenomenon? And more importantly, is this change relevant and accessible to most women in this age group?

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The sociocultural profile of women over 60 is intriguing. In order to justly reflect the caliber and quality of the changes that have taken place in the representation and actual life experiences of older women, it is, perhaps, most helpful to refer to social and feminist theories that explore the dynamics of the construction of collective group identities. These theories tend, directly or implicitly, to connect the unending process of construction of group identities to sociopolitical power relations. Thus, a group's social standing and cultural representation are the outcome of its relative status in power hierarchies (e.g., Fraser 1989; Snow 2000). In this respect, an impressively large group of women over 60 succeeded in improving its relative position in the overall sociopolitical power relations.

It is important, though, to note that the theories of the sociopolitical construction of group identities do not speak in a single voice (e.g., Bernstein 2005), and it is not our intention to investigate the great variety of social critiques based on these theories. Nonetheless, most theories lean on power relations as the significant context for understanding the construction of group and individual identities, which the editors of this volume think is important for a better understanding of how women aged 60 and above experience aging. It seems plausible to us, therefore, to situate the power construct—in all its manifestations—at the core of our analysis of the present day sociopolitical position of women in the over 60 age group.

Power constructs have featured both in feminist theory and in feminist political movements from a very early stage. As far back as the late 1960s, power was embedded in the slogan "the personal is political." The emphasis, then and now, on gender equality is based on human rights discourse. However, it is the integration of the postmodernist critique of power structures (e.g., Foucault 1973) into contemporary feminist theory that has definitively enhanced its theoretical and practical insights.

Indeed, it is a difficult undertaking to encapsulate the construct of power as it figures in sociopolitical theories. Still, very broadly stated, the extensive and the complex nature of our current understanding of power concepts have broadened and facilitated more productive explanations such as the subtle ways in which power operates to produce and maintain its hierarchies in our society (Yuval-Davis 2011). Following the same theoretical line, Castells (2004) stated that power is mobilized to prioritize the interests, values, and preferences of those of higher status. Thus, a group's position in society (possibly, the group of women over 60) reflects its relative power vis-à-vis other groups. Whenever a group succeeds in improving its relative social positioning, its share in sociopolitical, cultural, and economic eminence is enhanced. In this respect, power is basically a relational phenomenon, that is, one that reveals more about the dynamics and the power relations among people or groups than about the individual characteristics of the people or groups involved (Ritzer and Ryan 2011). Blaikie (1999) also contended that "identity is created, confirmed, maintained, and changed by a person's interaction with other people" (p. 198). As such, power relations contain the potential for both constraint and enablement of the parties involved.

Recently, academic researchers have pointed out the physical and mental health disparities that are related to one's position in the social hierarchy. Langner et al. (2012), for example, reported high rates of depression and emotional repression

among individuals with low social power and low social status. Boksem et al. (2012) argued that power activates a general tendency to action, whereas powerlessness activates a tendency to inaction. Their assumption is that, whereas increased power is associated with a reward-rich environment and freedom, powerlessness or reduced power is associated with an increased threat and greater social constraint. Flaskerud and DeLilly (2012) also related powerlessness to poor health and shorter longevity and raised questions about whether discrimination in and of itself could explain poor health. The findings make it very clear that the outcome of low social status and low social power is a risk factor that might cause difficulties to individuals as well as to groups of all ages.

The debate about power is mesmerizing. It is often the beginning and the end of analytic attempts at theorizing about contemporary society. Our attention, though, is mainly drawn to two dominant characteristics: (a) the fragmentation of power constructs into many, quite subtle, axes; and (b) the institutional nature of its build-up. We assume that both elements are very helpful in understanding the dramatic changes privileged women over 60 have made in advancing their quality of life and in raising their sociopolitical stature and, at the same time, the regrettably greater variability within the same age group that exposes enclaves of lower-income and less-educated women trapped in powerless or poor living conditions. Thus, the large differences between women in the over 60 age group call into question the wide-ranging usefulness of the concept of "double jeopardy," suggested by Dowd and Bengtson (1978) as a point of reference in defining the danger in the interaction of two or more marginalized positions (e.g., age and gender). It seems that, today, a conventional addition of the disadvantages imposed by gender and old age does not provide us with much relevant information regarding the position or quality of life of the women involved. So much so, that the once routine question regarding age is now considered superfluous. What are called for are questions that provide us with more relevant information. Krekula (2007) took the argument one step further and wrote that "the interplay between power relations can signify that these structures (e.g., gender and age) either strengthen or weaken each other, or that they supplement or compete" (p. 167). That is to say that the misery perspective implied in the "added risk approach" is not necessarily the only possible outcome of these intertwining systems of old age and gender. Rather, the outcome of added assets offers another possibility. She argued for a more complex understanding of the intersection of age and gender. We also suggest that the point can clearly be made that we need additional sociopolitical signifiers, such as socioeconomic class, educational level, race, or religion, in order to presume anything about the position or lifestyle options women over 60 might have. To sum up, the gendered power shift has made the question of *whose* aging more relevant than ever before.

Thus, individual and collective gender identities of women are caught at the intersection of several social structures (Cole 2009; Hurtado 2003; Shields 2008). The intersectional perspective strongly indicates that societal power hierarchies are reflected in the structure and salience of various sociopolitical signifiers of a person's or a group's identity (e.g., women of color, college graduates, sexual minorities). It is the specific positioning on different power axes within these societal structures

that ultimately determines the quality of people's general experiences. In other words, one's location in the social structure is indicative of a variety of constraints and possibilities. It is interesting to refer to a heated debate in *The Guardian* (Press Association 2013) on feminism and British working-class women. It was stated that "gender still has a strong independent impact on earnings prospects but class, education and occupational backgrounds are stronger determinants of a woman's progression and earnings prospects." *The Guardian*'s report is an acknowledgement of the overall importance of an assortment of sociopolitical indicators, other than gender, in determining a woman's trajectory.

Our analysis leads us to the conclusion that there is no distinctively consistent collective gender identity of women in the over 60 age group. The privileged women, that is, mainly middle/upper class and well-educated women in liberal democracies have gained—since the late 1960s—impressive social and political influence, which, gradually, has evolved into a greater share in political, academic, social, and economic power. The implications of this sociopolitical change for understanding the subdivisions within today's women in the over 60 age group are very strong: Privileged women tend to share a sense of entitlement for individual and collective rights and to enjoy the benefits that accrue as a result of the accumulation of multiple power resources. Against this, a much grimmer pattern emerges when we focus on older women in gender-conservative societies, as well as poor and marginalized women in westernized nations. Access to power resources is not within reach when gendered age constraints of traditional worldviews or institutionalized intersectional social divisions are left intact. The lives of powerless older women reflect the dire consequences of life under repression. In many cases they are deprived of basic human rights to health, education, work, and control over their own bodies (Chrisler 2012). However, even subtler manifestations of restriction tend to constrict the opportunities of these women, and older women in particular: They are deprived of the right to experience life to its full potential.

Today the aging of women over 60 is, at once, a story of success and failure. Gendered age boundaries have become more permeable for large groups of women; however, they are left intact for many, far too many, others. The range of individual and group identities of women in the over 60 age group indicates that it is the availability and extent of power resources that define women's aging. It is, therefore, the existence of power (or its relative absence) that provides the adequate structure for interpreting and understanding the various representational and experiential perspectives of these women. Because of this shared understanding and because of the personal experience of unease about the growing variability among women in the over 60 age group, we, as feminist researchers and activists, felt the need and the responsibility to emphasize the interconnectedness between gendered age and power resources and the well-being and quality of life of older women through, whenever possible, an international and intersectional perspective. In this respect, this book is politically nuanced as we wish to transform as well as to inform. This view led to an additional editorial decision to elaborate on the following issues of importance to older women: economics and consumerism, leadership, work and career, the impact of multiple roles, aging lesbians, sex and sex appeal, and overall body and health

politics. The questions raised and analyses suggested in each chapter concentrate on meanings and implications attached to concepts of constraint and enablement and the manner in which they affect older women as individuals and as a group.

Older women are generally portrayed more negatively than older men. This is because women's power in youth-oriented cultures depends to a large degree on the body, as attractiveness is a traditional source of power for women. However, as Joan C. Chrisler, Meghan Rossini, and Jessica R. Newton tell us, signs of aging do not carry the same meaning for all women and do not necessarily mark overall loss of power. Older women can reinterpret their body changes in ways that are empowering. The authors suggest that women aged 60 and beyond can make necessary adjustments and learn to use their bodies in ways that can contribute to the continued use of the body as a source of personal and interpersonal power, albeit not in the same way they did when they were younger.

Andrew Schein and Nava Haruvi started by pointing to two major changes that occurred in the twentieth century: the overall rise in life expectancy and a huge increase in the participation of women of all ages in the labor force. These two changes have resulted in many older women with greater economic power than ever before. There is, though, a substantial disparity in economic freedom amongst older women: Not all women have this power because many older women live in or near poverty. Still, they point to a growing subset of older women who might have an impact on various markets and influence the goods that are sold. Thus, older women with financial means could harness their power to impact economies and change cultures.

Liat Kulik reviews the impact of multiple roles on women's well-being in late adulthood. She indicates that the quantity of roles per se cannot explain the effect they might have on older women's well-being; more consideration should be given to qualitative measures such as perceived role centrality, role satisfaction, and perceived meaningfulness of roles. Overall, cultural and socioeconomic background is strongly related to the potential impact of multiple roles on well-being: Empowered women with resources, who belong to a culture that encourages self-expression and self-fulfillment, can afford to take on nonobligatory roles and enjoy a diverse range of activities, whereas women who belong to a culture that restricts them from taking on enjoyable roles and forces them to occupy prescribed roles can weaken them and have a harmful effect on their well-being.

Maureen C. McHugh and Camille Interligi discuss the concerns of older women regarding issues of appearance, sex appeal, and desirability in androcentric cultures. They explain that older women's experiences of their own sexual desire and desirability tend to be more complex and contextual than usually portrayed in oversimplistic and prejudiced cultural stereotypes. They conclude that there is a need to re conceptualize older women's sense of desire and desirability as the present model is flawed by derogatory cultural views that impair women's ability to identify, own, and enjoy their own sexuality.

Lesbians over 60 from the present cohort in North America as well as in other liberal democracies might reasonably expect aging to be a phase of life marked with well-being and empowerment. This trend reflects a shift in cultural values in many

countries toward greater acceptance of lesbians. Suzanna Rose and Michelle Hospital review research on older lesbians to explain this encouraging outcome. As often is the case, no one single factor can clarify the impressive change in lives of older lesbians. However, older lesbians are equipped with sound adaptive responses as a result of a life-long coping with minority stress. This resilience is complemented by the love, friendship, and community relations lesbians enjoy throughout life that tend to benefit them in the transition to old age. However, the aging experiences of lesbians may be complicated by having multiple socially disadvantaged statuses.

Gendered agism was, for a very long time, an impenetrable barrier to fully developed careers and leadership roles for women in general, and particularly for older women. Florence L. Denmark, Hillary Goldstein, Kristin Thies, and Adrian Tworecke inform us that we are currently witnessing noteworthy cracks in the once rigid barriers to influential positions in business, academia, and politics. The viable pathways open to older women's meaningful careers and leadership positions are diverse and extensive: mentorship, coaching, self-employment, volunteering, and encore careers. The opportunities now accessible for women in the 60 and beyond age group are related to the progress already achieved by many in greater gender equality and an enhanced sense of personal power.

Finally, Jennifer O'Brien and Susan Krauss Whitbourne present a model to understand the psychological concerns of older women and offer suggestions for mental health practitioners to follow in providing care and counseling to this population. They expound in the importance of the biopsychosocial model, wherein lifespan development, physical, psychological, and social factors interact to influence the trajectory of an individual's aging process. In their view, it is the stereotypical views of women, particularly in traditional cultures, that build serious barriers to successful or active aging.

The editors of this book set out to provide a broad basis to understand contemporary women in the over 60 age group. From the very beginning it was clear that women's aging process is occurring in a sociopolitical context that tends to stratify older women along status lines and power resources. As a result, today, it seems that the ways women experience aging reveal more about their social positioning and relative power than about their chronological age.

We hope this book will stimulate more thought about women over 60—both from women themselves and from academics and professionals who work with them. Undoubtedly, further research and practical attention should be targeted toward the needs of older women who have not been able to overcome the willful combination of sexist and agist barriers in their lives. Further media and research attention should also be paid to those who are succeeding in ways that women in previous generations could not even imagine.

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