



Ageing and the Gender Agenda: A Critical Reflection

Assoc. Professor Cherry Russell
Faculty of Health Sciences



Population Trends

- Average life expectancy 77 for men, 83 women
- ALE in 2042 83 for men, 88 for women
- No. of women 65+ is 25% higher than men
- Twice as many women as men aged 85+
- →'feminisation' of older population will continue to be defining feature

.....SO WHAT?



Research & Policy: Problematising gender

- Retirement & income support
 - Health, disability & care
 - QoL – housing, transport, social & community engagement etc.
 - Attitudes, values & meaning
- Gender matters as key source of disadvantage in ageing*



Gendering disadvantage: A (changing) paradigm of competitive suffering

- 1940s – early sociologists saw ageing as 'the problem of old men' (loss of work role)
- 1970s – feminists identify 'the problem of old women' (poverty, bereavement, disability)
- 1990s – emerging men's health movement critique ('lethal aspects of male role')
- 2000s – calls for 'rebalanced' approach to gender within a political economy of wellbeing



Longevity & health: Women

- Live longer
- Higher rate of severe handicap (at 85+, two thirds of women, half of men)
- Report more chronic non-fatal conditions
- Appear to be favoured by biology
- Appear to be favoured by health seeking behaviour
- Appear to be disadvantaged by acquired risks (role pressures, lower SES)



Longevity & Health: Men

- Die earlier & at greater rate from all causes of death
- Have lower rate of severe handicap
- Have higher rate of serious & fatal illnesses
- Appear to be disadvantaged by acquired risks (occupational, alcohol, smoking)
- Appear to be disadvantaged by health seeking behaviour



Who is worse off?

- ‘While women...are more likely to experience high levels of disability they are also more likely to be alive’ (Gibson)
- ‘It is not easy to say who is worse off. Their death & disability experiences are simply different’ (McCallum)



Income & Poverty - Women

- Employment rate at ages 55-59 increased 1980-2000 (28% - 46%)
- At ages 60-64 only 20% employed
- Superannuation coverage of employed women was 66% in 1993
- Pension reliance ↑ risk of poverty – women account for 70% of pensioners
- Low income non-owner women more likely to live in households of younger relatives



Income & Poverty - Men

- Employment rate at ages 55-59 decreased 1980-2000 (81% - 70%)
- At ages 60-64 less than half employed
- Superannuation coverage of employed men was 76% in 1993 (10% higher)
- Low income non-owner men more likely to live in lodging houses/homeless shelters



Who is worse off?

- Differential pension eligibility age (60/65) has historically favoured women
- Superannuation – women assumed married, covered through husbands
- Schemes paid pensions to widows long before superannuated in own right



Who is worse off?

- System changes ←women’s ‘liberation’ (workforce participation, gender equity, new family forms)
- Gender differences in income disappear if 50/50 sharing is assumed
- ‘Given these complexities it is an open question whether women are worse off than men in retirement income’-McCallum



Care: Women

- More likely to have ADLs impaired by disability
- Half 65+ widowed (av. 9 years)
- Twice as likely to live alone
- Less likely to have spouse to provide care
- 72% residents in care
- Carry out major share of informal, intergenerational ‘kith & kin’ care



Care: Men

- Most remain married till death, have spouse to provide care
- Similar *proportions* of men (as women) provide care for spouse in old age
- More have poor social networks, including no friends
- Despite more serious illness, average fewer medical services than women



Who is worse off?

- Women's greater longevity means they are dependent on others, including the state, for longer periods
- Is it better to be dead, or alive in a nursing home?



Gender does not come alone: Class

- Class inequalities in health persist into old age; low income men & women have higher rates of illness & disability, worse self-reported health
- Retirement income reflects previous occupation – working class at greater risk of poverty
- Home ownership strongly related to class



Gender does not come alone: Partnership status

- Unmarried people have higher death rates, worse self-reported health & higher illness rates than married (both sexes)
- Prevalence of severe handicap 50% higher for never married men, 30% higher for previously married men (cf married men)
- Different pattern for women →



Partnership status (cont.)

- Never married older women have prevalence of severe handicap over double that of married or previously married women, yet report lower level of fair/poor health & of unhappiness.
- Most significant factor associated with home ownership: 9/10 non-single men of 6/10 single men are owners.



Who is worse off?

- Living alone is greatest risk for institutionalisation
- Recommendation for residential care: living at home alone (39%), with others (34%), with spouse (29%)
- Latter 2 categories most often go to high level care, former low level
- Men statistically more likely to live with spouse hence fewer in care



Attitudes, values & meaning: Are older women oppressed, passive victims of 'double jeopardy'?

- Gendered power relations?
- Competitive advantages of maleness in re-partnering?
- Social isolation & loneliness?
- Women's ageing more heavily penalised?



Gendered power relations?

- Women continue to contribute disproportionately to household work
- But evidence that wives may have greater say than husbands in housing decisions
- May be that women's continuing control over domestic sphere becomes a source of power when husbands lose public bases of authority/identity?



Competitive advantages of maleness in re-partnering?

- Conventional wisdom: Gender disparity in re-marriage reflects demographic & sociocultural gender imbalances - 'Women grieve & men replace'
- There are different gender expectations & motivations for new relationship: women wish for companionship *outside* & men *inside* the home



Competitive advantages of maleness in re-partnering?

- But choice is key intervening variable
- UK study - widows did not *want* a new relationship
- Swedish study – growing phenomenon of 'living apart together' (LAT) relationships driven by women & reflect motivations around autonomy



Social isolation & loneliness

- Evidence that major sociological predictor of social isolation is being a non-married male, infirm & living alone
- Older men who live alone spend 85% of their time alone
- Men aged 75+ spend 154 hours (91%) of the week alone



Social isolation & loneliness

- Women have more extensive non-familial social networks, more sources of support, more confidants
- Women predominate in age-graded recreational, educational & cultural groups (3/4 membership of Seniors Clubs, U3As, etc.)



Whose ageing is more heavily penalised?

- Ageing women's identity penalised re appearance, sexuality (Sontag)
- Less attention to impact of ageing on masculine identity in later life (loss of occupational & social worlds, physical strength, sexual potency)



Conclusion

- Need to shed stereotype of disadvantaged old women *versus* contented or dead old men
- Like all population based generalisations, picture changes as focus moves to individual experience
- Gender is linked to late life advantage/disadvantage, but in complex, mediated ways



Conclusion

- Neither feminist nor masculinist bias provides a meaningful picture of gender-based diversity & inequality in old age
- ? value of treating later life as zero sum competition between women & men
- 'Competitive suffering' approach obscures other intriguing questions...



Such as...

- Psychological/personality factors: Do we become more alike as we age? (Baltes)
- Is there a 'crossover effect' in gender-defined behaviours in later life? (Gutmann)
- Do post-industrial societies 'de-gender' late life roles and identities? (Biggs)
- How do older people themselves understand the role of gender in their lives?



What else?

Are there methodological implications around gender in research? E.g.

- Over-representation of women as subjects?
- Impoverished information about men – communication styles, gender of interviewer?



Does gender matter in ageing?

Gerontology criticised as data rich, theory poor
Re Mars & Venus, multiple perspectives possible and necessary

'Competitive suffering' has not advanced understanding of a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon.

References

- Russell, C. (2007) Gender and ageing. In A. Borowski, S. Encel & E. Ozanne (eds) *Longevity & Social Change in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press
- Russell, C. (2007) What do older women & men want? Gender differences in the 'lived experience' of ageing. *Current Sociology* 55(2): 173-192