Social gerontologists often misunderstand intersectionality, equating it with attention to diversity or difference. However, an intersectional approach moves us beyond observation of difference to specify relations of inequality between groups. Though it implies diverse experiences of ageing, intersectionality does not designate independent groups to be studied separately, but instead relates groups, in terms of institutionalized activities that maintain inequality.

Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term ‘intersectionality’ to suggest how ‘the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately’ (1991: 1224). Since the publication of her work, the list of inequalities has lengthened to include such statuses as sexuality and age (King 2006); and scholars continue to debate which of those intersect, in the sense that Crenshaw meant, and how to measure the complex effects (Choo and Ferree 2010, McCall 2005). For instance, old age is a time of many hardships for women; but being old does not mean that all aspects of womanhood grow worse with advancing age. Neither does it mean that a theorist should add disadvantages in order to conceive of any group’s experience, as a theory of double jeopardy might predict. Indeed, old women find themselves cast aside from sexual markets, less often subject to the compulsory heterosexuality that saddles and exploits younger women. The jeopardy does not double with age but alters in more complex ways.

Despite its increased visibility and use within the social sciences over the last 20 years, this approach remains rare in age studies. Our goal here is to provide an overview of intersectionality, and briefly show its use.

Systems of inequality

Social gerontologists readily discuss differences based on such status characteristics as age, gender, race, and sexuality. But correlating a binary variable such as gender with the behaviors or situations of later life does not necessarily equate with the study of inequality. Men have lower life expectancies than women, for instance, and one may note their higher rates of cigarette smoking or alcohol use in a study of gender and health, but intersectionality must tie these behaviors to
power-based relations among groups: not just women and men, but also groups distinguished by such other inequities as race, class, age, and sexuality.

Social inequalities comprise relations in which some groups lose authority, status, and wealth, and are stigmatized by others, and in which those disparities in life chances are justified as natural, divinely ordained, and/or rational and thus beyond dispute. Such privileges and subordination exist in relation to one another (Glenn 1999), which means that the privileges of any one group are tied to the disadvantages of at least one other (Choo and Ferree 2010, McCall 2005).

The study of intersections of such inequities begins with the insight that reports of aggregate life chances of such large groups as women and men hide substantial differences in income and other aspects among them (Crenshaw 1991, McCall 2005). Hurtado (1989) theorizes that these disparities emerge from the bonds between various groups of women and the most privileged members of any Western society: elite, white men. That is, life chances are shaped by the fact that such ‘white men use different forms of enforcing oppression of white women and of women of Color’ (Hurtado 1989: 843). Noting the longstanding segregation of family ties by race, a divide once codified in law, Hurtado argues that it ‘creates differences in the relational position of the groups—distance from and access to the source of privilege, white men. Thus, white women, as a group, are subordinated through seduction, women of colour, as a group, through rejection’ (844). Hurtado’s theory makes interrelations concrete, by specifying the ways in which all other groups relate to the most privileged among them. Quoting Nancy Henley, Hurtado (1989: 850) argues that many oppressed groups in American society ‘are often physically separated, by geography, ghettos, and labor hierarchies, from power centers.’ People of Color, as a group, do not have constant familial interactions with white men.

Indeed, just as systems of labor and property ownership segregate groups by class, so do educational institutions and nationalized retirement schemes that construct old people as unproductive and dependent (Estes, Biggs and Phillipson 2003: 29). Furthermore, relations of sexuality have marked off those who do not bond sexually with members of the opposite sex as outcasts from legally recognized families and as objects of public scorn and even violence.

In this system of intersecting inequalities, groups that might otherwise remain segregated link up with elite men, in kinship or commerce, as providers of services, as family or as menial labor paid as little as possible (Glenn 1992, Jones 1985). Those most likely to enjoy the most privilege either do business as peers of, or belong to families of, such elite men. Longstanding sensitivities to age, sexuality, and race, as well as gender and class, in courtship and marriage means that most people of color, most old people, and most poor people face rejection and segregation from elite men as partners or wives. Many high-status men go out of their way to take younger women as romantic partners, which means that most old women are cast aside from erotic markets just as many women of color find themselves rejected. Those whom elite men do not desire, at least at the moment, to provide such service may be cast aside as useless or driven away as threats (for example see Calavita 1996).

Old men who have enjoyed elite status find themselves ushered from those ranks by ageist dismissal of their productivity. In the global North, old people mostly leave the labor force on which their professional status depends, either retiring by choice to become consumers or pushed out as unproductive (Graebner 1980, Phillipson 1982). The work they do next goes unpaid, within familial and community networks; and others may define their status as beneficiaries of pension plans and insurance programs as burdensome (Gee 2000).
The embeddedness and naturalization of these relations means that they tend to be invisible, especially to those who are privileged by them. For example, how families divide and compensate domestic labor affects men and women throughout their lives, as workplace experiences of respect and level of remuneration, and later as retirement income. National pension schemes in the global North tend to be based on (white, middle class, heterosexual) men’s occupations and patterns of work, assuming careers in the public realm and unpaid support at home (usually from women). Because most groups naturalize men’s positions within families, they see their retirement privileges as only fair.

As a system of inequality, age involves more than physical changes or the cumulative impact of other inequities over the life course; it is a source of disparity in its own right, in that those deemed ‘not old’ benefit from the ageism and maintain control of valued resources. Equations of old age with decline and frailty justify limiting the autonomy and authority of old people, who find themselves marginalized in the labor market and then find it more difficult to be heard and influence decisions made about their bodies (Calasanti 2003, Calasanti, Slevin and King 2006). When they become dependent on the state, they are seen as less than full citizens (Wilson 2000: 161). The stigma and exclusion attendant on old age is such that people seek to avoid it at all costs, even distancing themselves from those who are seen to be old (Hurd Clarke 1999).

To this point, we have discussed systems of inequality in general and pointed to some specific hierarchies of relevance to contemporary societies of the global North. Below, we discuss how these inequalities relate to one another in responses to the ageing of our bodies.

**Intersectionality and ageing bodies**

Recent social science has viewed bodies as being both constructed and physically real (Laz 2003). For instance, the physiological shifts that we link to puberty and middle age may be equally powerful, but groups interpret them differently. An intersectional approach to ageing theorizes the effect of relations of inequality on ways that people experience such bodily changes.

Bodies are cultural objects to the extent that people use them as markers to distinguish between groups among them (for example, women from men, adults from children); and they are effective hegemonically to the extent that groups naturalize those constructions as beyond their control. Such use of bodies as culture allows people not only to differentiate but also to include or exclude groups and thereby justify and maintain inequalities. People mark group memberships, such as those related to age, in terms of anything from how people shape and adorn their bodies to how they move and feed them. Several constructions of bodies and persons as causal forces in their own rights help to turn daily activities into ageist outcomes and thus contribute to intersecting inequalities.

First, neo-liberal policies attach primary causal force and civil rights to ‘individual’ persons (George and Whitehouse 2011), and assign personal responsibility for risks that they might otherwise handle collectively (Phillipson 2009). This has resulted in greater emphasis on individual control of bodies, sending any given person to the ‘marketplace . . . [to] make himself [sic] whole’ (George and Whitehouse 2011: 592). Second, many groups naturalize a youthful health as a quality to read off bodies and then equate that visible ‘health’ with moral goodness, thus assigning people responsibility for adopting and sustaining whatever they naturalize as healthy lifestyles in the uses of their bodies (Smirnova 2012, Hurd Clarke 2011: 51). Failure to appear healthy permits others to stigmatize a person as unfit. By associating visible ageing with bodily decline, groups treat physical appearances of youth as markers of health and thus personal goodness. Third, a ‘faith in the ability of science and technology to deliver innovations that contribute to human well-being’ (George and Whitehouse 2011: 592) contributes to treating the normal
processes of ageing as pathologies that can be treated medically by interventions on bodies. In these constructions, any outward sign of age indicates a disease of the body that personal discipline and medical science can and should cure. To the extent that bodies look different, they are subject to classification by age and judgment about the attractiveness, productivity, and good health of the individuals and indeed the groups to which they belong.

Taken together, these activities coalesce into belief in personal control over the beauty, productivity, and health of bodies through such means as technologies, diet and exercise, and consumer lifestyles (Estes, Biggs and Phillipson 2003). If people control their health, and others can infer that health from how their bodies look, then those who appear unhealthy and old can be seen to deserve their exclusion. Old people may be blamed for not having taken advantage of new technologies and scientific knowledge to alter their lifestyles and hamper the ageing of their bodies. As Jones and Pugh (2005) assert, physical signs of ageing bodies, such as wrinkling or sagging skin, are ‘symbols of a lack of control, which is unacceptable . . . . Not to resist signs of physical decay may be perceived as evidence of moral decline’ (254–5).

All of this comes under the rubric of intersectionality because the ways in which people mark or perceive bodies as ‘old’ vary with gender, race, class, and sexuality. For instance, women, accorded status in part for their sexual attractiveness to men, appear to be old at younger ages than do men. Such women’s senses of selves as women rest on attractiveness, which helps to drive the use of a range of cosmetic procedures (for example, Hurd Clarke 2011, Smirnova 2012). Because elite men focus their sexual attention almost exclusively on younger women overly styled to draw their admiration, thin, soft, short-skirted, and high-heeled bodies have become hallmarks of the ‘feminine’, from which wrinkling or sagging of skin detracts. Indeed, while people use clothing as a form of self-expression, the options for older women’s bodies are more constrained, especially for women of higher classes (Twigg 2012, Dumas, Laberge and Straka 2005), which rules out many of the markers of femininity that men look for in younger women. And Hurd Clarke (2011) has found that present cohorts of old women are more concerned about the presence of wrinkles than the older women she interviewed previously. In the past, cosmetic surgery was the principal means available to women to eliminate wrinkles; but today’s marketing of such technologies as Botox results in greater pressures to eradicate signs of old age.

By contrast, men appear, at least in the popular culture that celebrates their accomplishments, to be more concerned with their abilities to compete with other men: remaining in jobs and pursuing sex-segregated athletics deemed to be highly skilled (Calasanti and King 2005, 2007). While men may be concerned to limit body weight in pursuit of youthful appearance (for example, Slevin 2008), many reject dieting as ‘feminine’ behavior (Hurd Clarke and Korothenko 2011). They focus instead on bodily strength or musculature and attribute any dieting to their concern for ‘health’ (Hurd Clarke and Korothenko 2011). For example, Lodge and Umberson (2013) find that middle-aged men’s experiences of their bodies are shaped by how their bodies function, and the old men that Slevin (2008) interviewed described their bodies using the classic machine metaphor that emphasizes function. One respondent compared his body to a car that needs to be oiled, greased, fueled, and maintained so it does not fall apart (Slevin 2008: 39). Solimeo (2008) found that old men with Parkinson’s disease were more willing to go out if they felt that they appeared physically capable in public settings. Their status as men thus relies heavily on the appearance of bodies as fit, strong, and able to work or play in male-dominated activities.

Although research among younger men suggests that gay men are more concerned about appearance than are their heterosexual peers (Hurd Clarke and Korothenko 2011), we know less about such variations among their older counterparts. While Slevin’s (2008) study of older gay and heterosexual respondents uncovered few differences in how they felt about their weights
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or appearance per se, it may be that the specter of ageism becomes more important as comments from both groups ‘underscored the appeal of looking youthful or at least not looking old’ (40). Regardless of sexuality, most of the men reported engaging in strenuous activities as a way of denying or minimizing the effects of ageing on their bodies. However, research suggests that the appearance of ageing bodies proves more problematic for gay men, many of whom wish to attract high-status men. Lodge and Umberson (2013) found that, among their middle-aged respondents, gay but not heterosexual men reported concerns with their attractiveness. And Heaphy (2007: 206) finds that, among the gay respondents in his United Kingdom study, many ‘shared a belief that their ageing bodies mark them as unwelcome in gay identified places.’ Thus, while concern with the consequences of appearance might manifest in different ways, or their reasons might have varied by sexuality, there is little doubt that ageism and resultant loss of privilege figured in.

We also glean hints of the intersections of age, sexuality, and gender in the scant research on ageing lesbians. Slevin (2006) finds the lesbians she interviewed to be concerned both about bodies in general and weight in particular, and in ways similar to their heterosexual counterparts. She concludes that, despite expectations that they would not be concerned about attractiveness to men, their status as women in a heteronormative context mattered. However, Winterich (2007) finds that the younger and less economically advantaged lesbians in her study were less influenced by appearance and weight expectations than were their heterosexual counterparts.

Indeed, research finds that class shapes older women’s bodily experiences, in often complex ways. Drawing on interviews with francophone women in Quebec, Canada, Dumas, Laberge and Straka (2005) argue that social class serves to differentiate older women’s experiences of their bodily appearances because of their different access to economic and cultural capital. Working-class older women, for example, ‘are not far removed from economic hardship’ and thus while they are aware of certain beauty standards, they would gain few rewards for trying to living up to these instead of focusing on other aspects of well-being, such as being loved, being at peace, and experiencing good health. By contrast, elite older women, with more direct connections to elite men and thus more economic and cultural capital, enjoy both the time and resources to engage in more practices geared at both health and appearance without compromising other aspects of well-being (Dumas, Laberge and Straka 2005).

At the same time, class intersected with age relations to influence responses to old women’s bodies. Working-class women were more accepting of their bodies’ ageing and more able to deal with their marginalization. By contrast, elite women reported greater dissatisfaction and difficulties with their bodies and resultant exclusion. Further, more affluent women used bodily appearance as a distinguishing characteristic within their own class, disparaging some members for dressing or acting inappropriately for their age (for example, wearing dresses that are too short) and class (buying mass-produced clothing or not using the ‘best’ facial creams) (Dumas, Laberge and Straka 2005). In addition, while women from both groups gradually ‘dissociated themselves from, and revaluated, the norms of youth, and ... [adopted] a more inclusive conception of appearance’ (Dumas, Laberge and Straka 2005: 899), in so doing, they affirmed age relations by marginalizing women deemed not to act in age-appropriate manners, who attempted to live up to beauty ideals reserved for youth. Thus, class differences among women are based on more than financial resources available; the belief in technology and the moral dictate to shape one’s body in particular ways varies according to the power relations that result from class privileges and disadvantages. And in the end, old women find themselves marginalized whether or not they attempt to live up to ideals of youthful beauty that draw the admiration of elite men.

Race relations intersect as well, in that both African-American older men and women are more accepting of a variety of bodies, including those that are heavier and thus further outside
of the narrow range of ‘beauty’ as assessed in elite circles (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2011). Winterich’s (2007) study suggests that ageing African–American women may be less concerned with youthful appearance standards, a finding that dovetails with Slevin and Wingrove’s (1998) findings concerning professional, African–American women’s feelings about their bodies. Given that research finds that African Americans are more satisfied with their bodies at younger ages, it may well be that youthful body standards—that is, what counts as a young appearance—may themselves be race- and class-based.

Just as global and race relations help to drive the marketing and consumption of skin lightening products (for example, Glenn 2008), age relations combine with them to produce the anti-ageing industry, which operates as resistance to group membership (Smirnova 2012, Marshall and Katz 2006, Calasanti and King 2007, Calasanti 2007). Anti-ageing advertisements depict ageing women’s bodies as being ‘at risk’ of loss of beauty without the aid of their products and services (Smirnova 2012); and they present old men as potentially manly but in need of consumer regimens to remain so. Men’s bodies must ‘play hard’ and ‘stay hard’ to avoid stigma (Calasanti and King 2005). (Hetero)sexual function, maintained as a form of individual resistance, appears crucial in the discourses of anti-ageing (Katz and Marshall 2003, Marshall and Katz 2006). Women are to appear attractive, in relation to elite men; men are to perform, in accordance with ideals derived from behaviors (including lavish consumption) of elite men. Anti-ageing advertisements tend to depict either white people or non-whites who look white—with lighter skin tones and professional-class attire. Nowhere is there the suggestion of research that has shown, for example, a greater appreciation for ageing bodies among old, African–American middle class women (Slevin and Wingrove 1998). The costs of many of the products or services also put them beyond the reach of working-class persons.

Conclusion

Drawing from and expanding on the preliminary models of Hurtado and Crenshaw, we suggest links between distributions of resources and relations between elite men and the other groups around them. We see this as a matter of culture, the activities that distinguish groups, and as a matter of bodies, which groups use to naturalize the distinctions among them and thus legitimate inequalities.

We find patterns in the assessments of bodies that suggest intersections of those relations: focus on function and work in evaluations of men’s bodies, focus on beauty in the assessments of women’s, and variations of such focus by race, sexuality, and class, as they affect people’s bonds with elite men. Old age disqualifies from high status, such that merchants urge men to fight losses of function and promise to preserve women’s youthful appearances. Such discourses link good health, for which they hold consumers personally responsible, to attractiveness and receptiveness for women and to valued work and aggression for men.

These patterns hardly tell the whole story of uses of bodies to maintain inequities. We merely suggest questions that intersectional scholarship can raise in cultural gerontology.

References

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