Women's identities and the third age

A feminist review of psychological knowledge

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The third age

In the past century, the western world 'acquired' an extra life stage, the third age, an outcome of the continued increase in the life span, the healthy state of seniors, and socioeconomic developments that allow for early retirement (Laslett, 1989; Price & Nesteruk, 2010). In effect, many women and men living in the developed world now face a period in their lives in which they are free from paid employment and child responsibilities, while they are still sufficiently healthy to be active in the world and too young to accept disengagement from society let alone the marginalization of retirement. Thus, they now enjoy a transitional period that some have likened to adolescence (Kroger, 2002), when they must devise how they want to spend their time and energy in the years ahead, with associated implications for identity. For example, will they continue their former occupation in some way, go travelling, start a new hobby, or assist other people, either family members or others? As part of this transition, they must discover the social and economic spaces available to them as well as the norms and expectations that constrain them. Here, class, cohort and generational influences come together (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002; 2007).

Today, the baby boom generation, born between 1940 and 1960, is reaching its post-working life. Presumably, they have grown up with increasing wealth, education, consumption and leisure, and identify with generations that come after them rather than those who came before (Biggs, Phillipson, Leach & Money, 2007). Importantly, this generation was swept up in major emancipation processes involving, of course, women, but also sexual, racial, ethnic and religious minorities. Such far-reaching change necessarily has had effects at both societal and individual levels, with consequences for identity during late adulthood (including the third age). How older persons understand their lives, who they are, and what they envision for themselves in the future will reflect both continuities and discontinuities with their former lives. For instance, given the increased occupational and educational opportunities afforded women of the baby boom generation, many enter the third age with an educational background that allows for further education and skill development, e.g., in becoming a creative writer or drawing on a previous occupational identity as the basis of a 'new' identity within the volunteer sector. Thus, the features that characterize the third age are being shaped by the activities of this generation and will continue to evolve with future generations. As Moen and Spencer (2006) convincingly argued, men and women come to the third age by different routes, and therefore the third age cannot be adequately studied without paying attention to gender.

Narrowing the focus to women's identities

Gender remains an important social distinction that is embodied and therefore permeates all of life, even though there is widespread endorsement of gender egalitarianism in western societies. Thus, people's life histories and

the identities they take up in their everyday lives are inevitably gendered. But what does this mean in light of studying the third age? In addressing this question, we were mindful of Scott's (2013) recent observation that gender is the 'perceptual lens through which we are taught the meanings of male/female, masculine/ feminine' (p. 66), and that the meaning of 'gender' as a concept remains contested within a variety of contemporary political struggles. As first used by feminists in the 1970's, 'gender' applied to everyone and was meant to emphasize that biology does not determine the destinies of either women or men; but it has also been used to highlight social inequalities, sexual differences or some combination of these (Scott, 2013).

As feminist psychologists, we decided to explore what psychology has contributed to the understanding of women's identities in the third age. We have chosen to focus on research conducted in North-European (Belgium, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Scandinavia, The Netherlands and Switzerland) and -American (Canada and the United States) societies, because they are where the third age concept originated and has received the most attention to date. Our aim was to review the available psychological knowledge and to offer a synthesis and critical analysis of the scholarship on third age women's identities.

The focus on women's lives also helps to identify masculinist bias and alternatives that reflect women's lives. Some aspects of the third age, for example, the emphasis on achievement through the pursuit of education post-retirement or being productive in some other manner, seem to reflect a masculine identity and the way that men have traditionally lived their lives. Of course, the problem is not with educational achievement or producing tangible outcomes per se. Rather, the problem is in potentially overlooking other ways of 'doing' the third age. Attending to the ways in which gender plays out in older women's lives also means being sensitive to the differences among women, as it is now widely recognized, that gender intersects with other social distinctions in shaping women's (and men's) lives and identities (e.g., Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997/2005). This is important in the context of understanding the third age, because the activities frequently associated with this period of life require financial resources and proximity to educational institutions, which may not be available to all women.

Searching the psychological terrain

Our selection of source materials consisted of five rounds. Firstly, we used Psychinfo, a widely accepted abstract *database* that provides systematic coverage of psychology and related disciplines (such as medicine, law, social work, neuroscience, business, nursing, forensics). We chose 1988 as our start date, because in 1989, Laslett's well-known book about the emergence of the third age appeared. This allowed us to capture any relevant published work that might have just preceded this milestone. Applying the search terms 'third age', 'ag*ing', 'ageism' and 'identity' combined with 'gender', 'wom*n', 'retired women', 'older women' or 'psychology of women', we focused on peer reviewed journal articles, book chapters and books in the English language. In two cases, the results included many irrelevant sources, and therefore, we placed further limits: (1) Ag*ing gender identity (in basic search) + limit to sex roles (code 2970) or Ag*ing + gender identity (2) Identity + psychology of women (in basic search) + ag*ing or limit >65 (code 380). The searches were restricted to keywords, titles and abstracts or table of contents.

Secondly, by reviewing the title and abstract, we excluded sources with a focus on education, retirement, (mental) health problems, dying, sexual identity, perception, memory, the function of various brain structures, and one-off studies focused on aging in particular countries (e.g. Portugal, Israel). Although some of the excluded sources may have incorporated gender in some way, they did not include an interest in women's identities in the third age. This resulted in 117 relevant entries.

Thirdly, we screened the sources for their disciplinary affiliation, by selecting those contributions that appeared in a psychology journal, were included in an edited volume as an explicit example of psychological scholarship, or had at least one author who could be identified as a psychologist. This became our database of psychological sources and included 33 contributions.

Fourthly, we identified which articles and book chapters covered women in their third age by eliminating texts focused purely on middle adulthood (i.e., 50-55 years) or older late adulthood (i.e., over 80 years). This was necessary because very few sources explicitly referred to the third age. The remaining sources dealt with women in the age range of 56 to 75 years, roughly the age span that corresponds to the third age. We recognize that these age boundaries are somewhat arbitrary and open to dispute. However, they reflect the categorical designations most commonly used in the psychological literature. This resulted in seventeen sources, which are marked with an * in the reference list.

In the fifth round, as we read the identified sources, we added to our collection from their reference lists.

For our critical, feminist reading of the sources, we considered two questions: (1) What identities do women take up in their 3rd age and how is gender incorporated into this psychological research? (2) How are power relations taken into account? To ensure a consistent reading of the sources, we organized our notes by using a template with the following categories: Context, Identity, Power, Gender, Sample and Methods, References, Critical Remarks.

Third age women: identities and gender

We identified four main approaches to aging in the psychological research on older women's identities. The first illuminates how physical and cognitive senescing processes are experienced; the second utilizes well-established theories of psychological development over the life span, in particular Erikson's psychosocial theory and Piaget's cognitive developmental theory (often with adaptations) with a view to understanding late adulthood as a developmental stage; the third focuses on social psychological processes and role transitions in late adulthood; and the fourth adopts a social constructionist perspective in analysing how older people construct their identities and the discursive constraints on those constructions. In this section, we provide a brief overview of what each of these approaches offers to the understanding of third age women's identities.

The senescing approach

Here, aging is mainly understood as a matter of decline and decreased bodily and cognitive functioning, such as wrinkles and gray hair, lessening visual and hearing capacities, and various memory deficits. Occasionally noted are improvements, such as wisdom, maturity, and emotion regulation – if not a postmenopausal 'zest'.

Our literature search produced no individual articles. In their chapter, however, Stewart and Newton (2010) cited three empirical studies of potential relevance to our

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concerns with women's identities in the third age. These studies examined how people feel about and negotiate physical and mental age-related changes. In one, women in their 60s reported more concerns about their aging bodies than did women in their 40s or 20s, but in absolute terms these concerns were not large (Zucker, Ostrove & Stewart, 2002). In the second, in-depth interviews with 42 women and men (only three women and two men fell into the third-age age span and none were yet retired) indicated a double standard of aging, i.e., women's aging bodies were evaluated more negatively than were men's (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). Finally, Wilson and colleagues (1999), employing a sample aged 65 to 108 years, reported that women were more likely to participate in daily cognitive activities, such as reading the newspaper, whereas men engaged in more cognitively intense activities, such as reading a book or visiting a museum. Together, these studies suggest that any bodily and cognitive changes they have encountered so far are not a concern for third age women.

On a critical note, the limited amount of research to date indicates that researchers adopting the senescing approach have yet to explore in any detail how women's identities may be related to the physical and cognitive

changes associated with aging. Moreover, they cannot explain why women (and men) might differ or whether there are qualitative differences in their experiences, due to their reliance on sex comparative and cross-sectional research designs.

The life span development approach
An important assumption of the life span development approach is that the psychologically healthy self is relatively stable and associated with a set of measurable personality traits. Furthermore, Erikson (1982) understood individual development to occur within society, which constrains what the individual may become. Altogether, he identified eight successive critical periods, with four of them occurring during adulthood. More recently, Stewart and colleagues (e.g., Stewart & Newton, 2010) have highlighted the importance of considering the social contexts associated with specific generations, in particular, the expectations associated with gender and the constraints and opportunities for women and men at different points in history. Although many contemporary feminist psychologists continue to draw on (mostly) adaptations of Erikson's theory, there has also been some debate about whether the theory is gender-biased. Specifically, some have pointed to Erikson's rather traditional view of women as reflected in his emphasis on their procreative and nurturing roles (e.g., Gergen, 1990; Kroger, 2003; Stewart & Nelson, 2010).

Based on chronological age, the stages of *generativity* and *ego integrity* seem to be the most applicable to third age women. Generativity, the seventh stage thought to exist mainly in middle age, is the process of creating or producing people, ideas, art and things. Although Erikson reserved the full range of possibilities for men, women's primary outlet, he claimed, was their creation

and rearing of children. Ego integrity, the eighth stage, involves a quest for personal meaning through reviewing one's life and either judging it to be satisfactory or feeling a sense of regret and despair at the lack of accomplishments.

Only recently have researchers begun to assess the applicability of Erikson's theory to the later years of life. James and Zarrett (2005) focused on the predictors and correlates of ego integrity in a longitudinal study of 78 mothers living in the United States, who had been interviewed in 1951 and 1996 (age range 70-91 years, with an average of 78 years). Consistent with the era in which they became adults, all had given up employment by the time they became mothers. The mothers with higher ego integrity showed higher generativity, psychological well-being, levels of self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and growth. They also reported generally positive relations with others and high involvement in volunteer activities and helping others – in 1951 and in 1996 – but not necessarily a higher sense of social responsibility toward family, work, and community. Importantly, they felt secure that they would be cared for in the future as needed. Consistent with the notion of the third age, James and Zarrett (2005) described the mothers with high ego integrity as: 'accepting life for what it is, still striving for self-improvement and manifesting interpersonal sensitivity' (p. 163).

Kroger's (2002) research underlines the transition in identities between middle age and late adulthood and also fits with the notion of ego integrity and the third age. Although her sample of eight women and men between 65 and 75 years of age limited the analysis of gender, there was gender-specific *content* for one of the four identity processes that she identified. Socio-economically advantaged, none of the women had been employed in their younger years, but they had served as volunteers. Now, in late adulthood, all of the women worked to develop and obtain public recognition of their long-standing vocational interests, such as writing, an example of 'reintegrating important identity elements' (p. 90-91).

Identity Process Theory (Skultety & Whitbourne, 2004; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003; Whitbourne, Sneed & Skultety, 2002) is informed by Erikson's theory and Piaget's identity styles, assimilation, accommodation and balancing. Older people presumably use these styles, developed during their youth, to negotiate new experiences associated with the bodily and cognitive changes of aging. *Assimilation* helps individuals to maintain a sense of self-consistency even in the face of discrepant experiences or information. For example, assimilating to a change in memory performance or vision may involve attributing it to factors, such as environmental stressors, while maintaining a sense of self-continuity as 'not old'. Only women (aged 40-84 years; $M = 57.5$) appear to benefit from identity assimilation in terms of increased self-esteem. These benefits have been attributed to the 'double standard of aging', whereby there is greater societal emphasis on women's physical appearance. *Accommodation* involves an abrupt change in identity in response to changes that are attributed to the aging process to, for example, 'old (wo)man'. The ideal state is *balance*; age-related changes are gradually integrated into one's self-definition. Although women showed higher levels of identity accommodation than men, gender did not interact with the three identity styles. For both women and men, identity accommodation was negatively related to self-esteem and identity balance was positively related to self-esteem.

Taken together, the psychological research drawing from the life span development approach highlights the continuities between

past and present identities, and offers insights into the paths and strategies that may lead to positive identities in late adulthood (and presumably the third age). However, like the senescing approach, the knowledge produced is based on an understanding of gender as sex differences, and consequently pays insufficient attention to social and cultural aspects of femininity and masculinity. These aspects are better covered in the social psychological and constructionist approaches, to which we turn next.

The social psychological approach
Social psychological research focuses on the connections between norms, stereotypes, and roles, which are prescribed by the culture and internalized by the individual through socialization processes, and the individual's perceptions, attitudes, and conduct. One's identity is captured by the concept of *self*, and emphasis is placed on how closely the individual's characteristics match socially prescribed ones and how one feels about oneself (i.e., self-esteem). Age stereotypes are frequently internalized. Subsequently, they have psychological, behavioural, even physiological, and social effects on older persons and the people with whom they interact. Importantly, gendered age stereotypes gender the identities of older people.

We found two relevant review articles with a focus on *social expectations*. Dingman, Otte and Foster (2012) addressed the increasing demand for cosmetic surgery and noted that although such surgery is marketed as a way to enhance self-esteem by meeting or maintaining cultural standards of beauty, from a feminist perspective it can be seen as an 'identity intervention' (p. 187). In maintaining a youthful physical appearance, older women who opt for cosmetic surgery need not shift to a 'new' identity as an 'old woman' in response to how others treat them. Lips

and Hastings (2012) argued that the social expectations for women at early late adulthood are changing in at least two contexts, work and health, and are conflicting. For example, the common image of older women as weakening and subject to physical decline, which can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, now competes with the alternative, strong image, portrayed by elite athletes. They recommend various kinds of resistance to debilitating messages, including psychotherapy aimed at making these contradictory discourses explicit. Thus, both articles emphasize how the social expectations that constrain the identities of older women may be contradictory and problematic.

Another area of interest is *role transitions.* Etaugh (2008), for example, highlighted the numerous role transitions that confront people approaching late adulthood, including parenthood, labour force participation, grandparenthood, caregiver, and spouse. Nevertheless, the precise role transitions of third age women will depend on the roles they have occupied earlier in their lives, their accumulated capabilities, the available options, their marital/relationship status, educational level and ethnic background. Traditionally, these transitions have been gender-differentiated, with those involving marriage and children of particular importance to women. From this perspective, late adulthood, including the third age, is equated with a loss of gender roles. In addition, late-life roles, such as homemaker and retiree, can be regarded as ill defined and ambiguous. Importantly however, Adelmann (1993), in her analysis of women, aged 60 years and over (242 black and 622 white with a mean age of 71 years) from a 1986 USA national survey reported, firstly, that older women adopted multiple role identities, and, secondly that the women who identified themselves as retired and as homemakers scored higher on

measures of well-being than those who identified with a single role, either retired or a homemaker. Further analysis suggested that daily activities, engaging in volunteering and do-it-yourself projects specifically, accounted for differences in well-being. Women may look forward to retirement as a time of enrichment, especially those who have fewer care-taking responsibilities, fewer children and more liberal social views (Winter, Torges, Stewart, Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 2007). Women's friendships may also undergo a transition when entering a stage of life in which they may have more leisure time due to a decline in family and household responsibilities, and may be less constrained by patriarchal definitions of women's place (and friendships) as subservient and secondary to men (Rose, 2007).

A role (transition) currently encouraged for retired people in many western societies is volunteer. The women in early late adulthood who participated in Kroger's (2002) study had actively taken up voluntary community roles, such as church-related work, hosting foreign students, leadership in political action groups, and involvement in civic cultural groups and educational groups working toward reform. Such activities may not constitute a 'new' role, but rather, a continuation of the volunteer role that changes in light of changes in other areas of women's lives, for example, decreased family responsibilities. In their study of 125 older Australian women (the cohort entering the workforce in the 1950s or earlier, and leaving it upon marriage), Warburton and McLaughlin (2006) concluded that the women had clearly established role identities as informal volunteers. Those roles provided meaning to their lives, contributing to their self-worth, and benefiting their communities. In a few cases, women expressed concerns about being exploited, for example, in being expected to always care for

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grandchildren when asked. Overall, however, the women positioned themselves as actively pursuing their informal volunteer work.

The social psychological approach provides valuable insights into the importance of the social context, including social expectations and social roles, for women's identities. Sometimes, however, the stability of the context may be overestimated and conflicts and ambivalences generated by potentially multiple and overlapping identities (e.g., as women in late adulthood, living with a chronic illness, belonging to a specific cultural community) may be overlooked. Also, as yet, research has not paid attention to how women strategically adapt to or resist social expectations and engage in selective roles. Women of the baby-boom generation, for example, have frequently moved in and out of education, employment and community roles, often in response to changing family care obligations and/or accommodating their husbands' job-related moves, thereby constructing 'a seriatim self', while most men followed the conventional and neatly segmented path of education and employment that constitute a 'career self' (Moen & Spencer, 2006; Nelson, 1999; Rattansi & Phoenix,1997/2005). Such selective dynamics are more visible in the social constructionist approach.

The social constructionist approach

Social constructionism, broadly construed, highlights the manner in which knowledge, including how we understand ourselves, is negotiated and built through social consensus. This line of reasoning obviously can be extended to identity. The accounts people give of themselves will depend on the social context and the dynamics of the social interactions in which they are involved. For example, the same 60-year old woman may position herself as 'old' when interacting with her college students, and 'young' when caring for her elderly neighbours. Thus, identity is neither fixed nor always consistent or singular. Besides, people may take up multiple identities simultaneously, e.g., as 'old, white, middle-class women'. Moreover, within a given social interaction, there may be a struggle between the identity a woman constructs and the identity that others construct for her. This intersectional approach differs from the social psychological approach in focusing on (wo)men's actions in the social world in the form of texts, various media, and conversations, and the multiplicity and fluidity of identities.

Different versions of what it means to be an aging woman serve as resources for women to work up their own identities or those of others and constrain the possible identities than can be worked up. As early as 1988, Rodeheaver and Datan published an article in the *American Psychologist*, in which they highlighted the 'double jeopardy' of aging women who face ageism and sexism. In so doing, they contrasted two different versions of aging – one involving resilience and being a psychological survivor and the other involving vulnerability and being psychologically needy. The introduction of the term *third age* to describe a phase of life suggests that new cultural discourses are available for women to draw upon in creating their identities as they age,

with the older woman as an active and competent performer. To the extent that third age women are engaged in reproducing these new discourses, they can be described as serious social actors who are 'rewriting their collective identity' (Muhlbauer & Chrisler, 2012).

Within this social constructionist approach, there has been limited research focused on third age women. Paulson and Willig (2008) is one exception. They analysed 'expert' discourses of ageing, i.e., those produced by professionals, and identified four types of discourse, used to construct older women: (1) biological discourses emphasizing physical degeneration and vulnerability and proposing activities aimed at ameliorating this inevitable decline, e.g., exercise; (2) social constructionist/historical and personal agency discourses allowing that the ageing body will be constructed in different ways in different contexts; (3) female beauty discourses acknowledging loss of control over physical appearance and failure to meet normative standards of youthful, female beauty; and (4) feminist discourses highlighting the male gaze, the beauty industry and women's discursive strategies of resistance. They also explored how older women (aged 58-83 years), who were recruited through a fitness centre and a University of the Third Age, talked about their bodies in terms of a Cartesian, dualistic mind-body split and simultaneously drew on the expert discourses. The women objectified their ageing bodies and body parts, and constructed biological ageing of the body as beyond the control of their minds. Such an understanding of one's self in relation to one's body discourages action as it implies that nothing can be done. However, the women also constructed themselves as agents, with an 'active' mind/sense of self, who managed their ageing bodies by being 'busy bodies' that, for example, exercised to strengthen body parts and prevent falls. Such

an understanding of one's self in relation to one's body offers the possibility of *gerotranscendence* – the ability of the active mind to rise above the ageing body (See Tornstam, 1996). Thus, their research highlights the significance of discourse in shaping older women's identities and body practices and the importance of recognizing identities as multiple and fluid.

Despite the limited amount of empirical research informed by the constructionist approach, it has been usefully employed as a means of critically analysing how aging is constructed (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 2007). Adopting this perspective also draws attention to missing discourses, in this case the notable absence of attention to sexuality discourses. In our searches of the literature, we identified research that either focused on sexual problems or sexual identity. It would seem that the older, third age woman has no interest in sex. Finally, a social constructionist approach also links to questions of agency and power in focusing on available discourses; in other words, the second part of our analysis.

Power relations

For our analysis of how power is taken into account, we identified any references to power relations and how power was conceptualized. Many times, it was implied by the use of other terms, for example, 'empowerment', 'personal control', 'level of agency', (environmental) 'mastery', women's 'capital' or 'the male gaze' without further explanation. Apart from the texts that remained completely silent about power (approximately 30 percent of our selection), the others usually covered it on both macro and personal levels, and their interaction.

A power perspective highlights how women's identities in late adulthood are constrained and enabled. Mitchell and Bruns

(2010), for example, point to the multiple jeopardy of discrimination and marginalization associated with ageism and sexism, and possibly classism, racism, and heterosexism. Typifying the culture as patriarchal, they offer a complex view of power: 'Each person exists within a matrix of socially ascribed privileges and oppressions that can shift in importance and meaning depending upon context' (p. 122). Institutional power, such as governmental policies regarding care, housing and pensions can also have gender-specific effects. For third age women, privilege may come through economic resources that allow them to be relatively independent of institutional constraints and to do volunteer activities or study, while oppression may come through ageism that characterizes all older women as physically unattractive and otherwise useless, rendering them invisible. Thus, problematizing the context may be an essential strategy for third age women to thrive. For example, discourses of 'hobbies', 'contribution', 'full life' and 'independence' need to be deconstructed and examined through a critical, gender lens for their assumptions about what is worthwhile activity. Importantly, researchers have pointed to existing collective action that includes such critique, e.g., WomanSage, Grey Panthers, American Association of Retired Persons, American Association of University Women, and the Older Women's Network (McHugh, 2012). Of course, critiquing culture is only one form of resistance. Creating new identities is also important (Chrisler, 2007). Writing as feminist therapists, Mitchell and Bruns (2010) challenge other therapists to work with their older clients to disrupt a social narrative of aging that emphasizes biological decline and personal failure, a process that requires therapists to also reflect on their assumptions about aging.

Although macro-level power relations constrain the possibilities for women in late

adulthood through discourses that position them as in decline and past their prime, older women can also resist or revise the interlocking discourses of femininity, aging and strength (or weakness) (Lips & Hastings, 2012). For instance, Erikson's acknowledgement of women's power as residing in their capacities to nurture others can be extended in late adulthood from rearing children to caring for grandchildren, a spouse or other family members. More recent research provides examples of women positioning themselves within 'new' discourses that resist traditional conceptualizations of womanhood, e.g., working to develop and obtain public recognition (Kroger, 2002); exercising agency and contributing to society through their informal volunteer activities (Warburton & McLaughlin, 2006); assimilating, accommodating and balancing their identities in the face of losses and other stressors (Whitbourne et al.); resisting stereotypes and combining and selecting roles (e.g., Adelmann, 1993); and using Cartesian mind-body dualism to position themselves as gerotranscendent (Paulson & Willig, 2008).

These instances of personal empowerment, involving conformity to traditional conceptions of femininity and aging *and* resistance to them (to varying degrees), entail third age/late adulthood women redefining who they are and what they can do. Nevertheless, this also involves re-negotiating their relationships with institutionalized power (Denmark & Klara, 2007), which remains challenging in the face of policy documents that fail to recognize older women's agency and capacities (Warburton & McLaughlin, 2006) and ageism. Moreover, economically, many retired women are at a disadvantage due to a work history that can include part-time or sporadic employment and insufficient or no private pensions (Stewart & Nelson, 2010). This puts constraints on the discourses available to them and creates heterogeneity among older women in terms of those with more or less privilege. Thus, personal empowerment is always intertwined with macro-level power relations (Muhlbauer & Chrisler, 2012).

Reflections and conclusions

As a discipline, psychology has not yet recognized the third age as a psychologically important time of life. This was evident in the results of our literature search, our analysis of the four approaches to women's identity in later life, and our analysis of empirical studies.

Moreover, gender, as an overlapping identity that intersects with age identity, has received limited attention in psychological studies relevant to the third age. Again, this was evident in the relatively small database of research that we generated for this study. Furthermore, when gender is acknowledged as relevant, it is frequently under-theorized with insufficient attention to the processes that produce gendered persons. Especially in the senescing and lifespan development approaches, gender is often silently reduced to sex differences, with Stewart's emphasis on generational context being an exception (e.g., Stewart & Newton, 2010). Researchers adopting social psychological and constructionist approaches have only recently turned to the study of older women's identities, and what seems most significant is the recognition that available identities are multiple, fluid, and contradictory.

The identities available to older women are defined within a complex array of power relations, including economic, housing, insurance, and government policies that privilege some women and disadvantage others. Thus, who and what is privileged versus who and what is disadvantaged deserves more consideration. The 'new' discourse of the

third age seems mostly available to relatively privileged women. Of course, it cannot be assumed that the less privileged are not actively engaged in redefining early late adulthood, but proponents of the third age may wish to consider who they are excluding. Clearly, sensitivity to the differences between women is extremely important, and as yet, we do not have a clear sense of what the third age could be or whether it will become a fruitful way of distinguishing different ways of aging.

There is a lack of longitudinal research devoted to women's identities as they age. Thus, many of the research findings reported here, with claims about continuities and discontinuities in women's identities and practices are based on the women's retrospective accounts. Given the contextual nature of identities, it cannot be assumed that how women understand their past selves from the vantage point of today is the same as they understood themselves in the past.

Being forced to use chronological age as a proxy for the third age means that we cannot conclude anything definitive about third age identities. The research cited here mainly deals with women's identities post-midlife, but it seems logical to conclude that third age women (and men) are also constrained by the norms, expectations and cultural constraints of gender and age. Consequently, emancipatory efforts remain necessary in practice, research and theory. For this, we recommend an intersectional perspective in which the combination of social inequalities produced by age, gender and class are tackled.

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