

Relationality as a Frame for the Chaos and Order of the Social Duality of Age and Gender

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Ageing is one of the biggest issues of the 21st century and it is significantly characterised by its gendered aspects. Not only do women have a longer life expectancy than men, ageing is also a powerfully gendered experience. These are the facts we have been dealing with to now, but much less is known about what these facts mean for social actors, for actual men and women, and how their experiences of ageing unfold in different cultural and social contexts.

Ageing should be viewed as a life-long process that is shaped by different factors with changing effects. One of the most significant experiences of ageing is social exclusion. In contrast to the standard interpretation of this concept in economic terminology, where it is almost a synonym for poverty and ethnicity, Walsh et al. (2021) examine social exclusion among people of an older age from five different perspectives: spatial and community exclusion, economic exclusion, and exclusion from social relations, civic rights, and social services. Available research evidence has shown that different sexes experience these forms of exclusion in different ways. In the case of older women, economic exclusion is a serious issue, and when combined with other minority statuses it leads, for example, to a higher risk of poverty, especially in single-member households (Vidovičová et al. 2015). Conversely, the findings on loneliness as a product of social exclusion are not so clear-cut. Some studies indicate a higher level of loneliness among men, as a result, for example, of divorce earlier in life; others, conversely, observe more loneliness among women, once they become widows. The different trajectories that women and men follow in later life thus underscore the complexity of the interplay between age and sex, which defies simple explanations and frames of interpretation. Sociology, social gerontology, and

even gender research are not in a position to provide any straightforward answers. Even if we succeed for a moment in tracing and testing the empirical connections between two phenomena, we need take just two steps into a different sociocultural environment, move into a new stage in history, or use a different empirical instrument and our model will collapse like a house of cards.

That there is a fluid complexity to the relationship between age, sex, gender, social environment, culture, and time is one of the main conclusions of this thematic issue, which rests on three thematic pillars: gender, age, and relationality. Here relationality is understood as a conceptual framework that encompasses both close, intimate interpersonal relationships and wider social, intergenerational relationships, as well as systemic and structural relationships, which means relationships between the systems and institutions of the social world, and relationships between concepts and theories. The articles in this issue guide readers through the world of social and family relations, education and the labour market, public discourses and historical contexts, and emerging theories and models. The contributing authors represent ten countries and an even larger number of nationalities, and the subjects of the articles range geographically from the Czech Republic to Lithuania, Malta, South Asia, and even Ancient Rome. Many of the articles are more universalistic and global in their aims, while others, by contrast, take global concepts and apply them to a specific cultural environment.

The first such article, and one of two that focus on the family, is by Kateřina Prášilová, a young scholar who is presenting here what is probably the first Czech scoping review of 'grandfamilies'. This phenomenon, which in the Czech Republic is mainly familiar to social workers and the staff of OSPOD, the Czech agency for the social and legal protection of children, has significant sociological contours and offers new ways of approaching an analysis of social roles among older people. Roles and role expectations are discussed in the article by Sara Casamayor Mancisidor, but within the specific context of Ancient Rome. Her analysis of the dynamics of the relationships between elderly mothers and their adult children creates a picture of 'ancient orders', which are in an almost surprising way relevant for analyses of the performance of age and gender today. Ieva Stončikaitė uses a similar type of data arsenal, literary sources, in her analysis of the work by the influential and internationally bestselling author Erica Jong (works published in Czech include *Fear of Flying* (Odeon 1994), *Fear of Fifty: A Midlife Memoir* (Eroika 2001), and *Sappho's Leap* [Lika Klub 2007]). Inspired by a fascination with Jong's feminist studies and the revolution her autobiographical novels caused in the 1970s (cf., e.g., Hogeland 2016), Stončikaitė presents Jong as a new opinion leader on the basis of the transformative narratives she offered on ageing that contest the notion of ageing as signifying decline. As Stončikaitė argues, however, this did not occur without generating some conflict. Stončikaitė's article

is extremely valuable, not just for its empirical findings but also for its theoretical introduction, which offers a presentation of selected key concepts in the field of 'age studies' (Pickard, 2016; Gullette 2004; Katz 2014).

In contrast to the quasi-private spheres of the individual and the family, the public domains of the labour market and education are the subjects addressed in the article by Radka Dudová and the essay by Marvin Formosa. Dudová examines the relationship between age, sex, gender, and an ageing body through the profession of a public transit driver. She presents a picture of this profession that is created out of the reflections of men and women who have often been working for many years in an environment marked by a creeping transformation in the form of technological developments on the one hand and their own ageing bodies on the other. The interviews she conducted with workers at the older end of middle age sometimes revealed the very subtle gendered assumptions that underpin the conditions that govern the performance and very practical everyday aspects of this type of work. For example, the issue of access to public toilets in cities is regarded as a key and culturally cross-sectional precondition for creating an age-friendly environment (Moulaert, Garon 2016). For male and female public transit drivers, this is part of making their work environment age-friendly and the litmus test of its genderedness.

Some articles in this collection are centred on the perspectives of age and ageing, while others revolve around gender and acquire an added depth by including age dynamics. Marvin Formosa's essay is an example of the former approach. In it he puzzles critically over the lack of any feminist and gender studies devoted to lifelong learning. Formosa notes that learning in the third age is highly feminised and therefore offers a number of opportunities for us to redefine our understanding of women's knowledge through formalised modes of learning (and especially through the popular format of Universities of the 3rd Age) and education in general. His arguments have arrived just in time, as a political discussion is again arising around the meaning of lifelong or later-life learning and its role in the active ageing process, including coping with the new challenges of a digital labour market in the 21st century (European Commission 2018). These reflections will be of key importance in the discussions and thinking on non-linear life courses that yet await us (Leichsenring 2018).

Where Formosa talks about a lack of interest, Ezdi speaks directly about a lack of women. Strictly in the terms of scholarly field, an article like Ezdi's would usually be more at home in a journal dealing with population studies. Ezdi here presents a demographic analysis of selected South Asian countries and explains the masculinisation of ageing on the basis of cohort and life-course effects. She also very effectively holds a mirror up to our usual way of thinking about ageing as a feminised phenomenon amplified by the aforementioned differences in life expectancy (life expectancy at birth being 76 years for Czech men and 82 years for Czech women;

and 20 years for 65-year-old women and 16 for men of the same age [ČSÚ 2021a]) and the resulting ratio of there being 3 women to every 1 man aged 100 years and over (ČSÚ 2021b).

Sarmitė Mikulionienė and her team of co-authors focus on older men from the perspective of a different type of empirical and geographical source and with qualitatively very different results. This empirical study works with a quantitative sample survey that was conducted in the Baltic states and examines the concept of social embeddedness. Their analysis yields the interesting finding that the effect of sex on social networks is primarily observed among people at the two extreme ends of social embeddedness – which is to say, among the people who are the least and those who are the most embedded in networks of social support. In contrast to the usual theories, the authors argue that it is primarily men who are most impacted by the negative effects of exclusion from social relations in older age. Social exclusion is also the central theme of the article by Marja Aartsen and her team of co-authors, which opens this thematic issue. Aartsen and her co-authors try to find a way in which to bring some order to the gender complexity of exclusion from social relations and propose a heuristic model of exclusion from social relations in old age. They define exclusion from social relations as a situation in which people are socially and emotionally disconnected from a requisite (adequate) level of close relationships, social networks, social support, and social opportunities, wherein gender is both a cross-sectional and overarching factor that influences the experience of social exclusion at an older age. The arguments that the authors have gathered here reveal, among other things, that the individualised effects of social exclusion from relations, such as loneliness and poorer health and wellbeing in life, are also potential individual predictors of the occurrence of this type of exclusion. This model should be of use to future empirical studies conducted in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts that try to examine the strength of these social ties. Finally, the model itself can also be used as a roadmap for potential policy measures should any society decide to try to combat the negative effects of social exclusion.

There are also, however, subjects that did not make it into this thematic issue, even though they are key for thinking about age and ageing, gender, and relationality. The issue of care, its provision and receipt (see, e.g., Dudová 2018), brings out questions that give significantly more meaning to the picture of gender in the lived reality of people as they grow older. Owing to spatial constraints we also had to leave out discussion of the deep social transformation ushered in by reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has in a unique way starkly exposed how we as a society treat older people (Hasmanová Marhánková 2021) and what kind of impact the mitigating measures we adopt have on generations, families, carers, and the gendered

labour market (Heřmanová 2020). This collection of articles also does not pay much attention to a topic that is extremely important for social gerontology, which is the issue of space, place, and community as a frame for sex, gender, and relations (cf., e.g., Herbert 2018; Vidovičová et al. 2021). Attentive readers will notice that in our overview of gendered experiences we did not go beyond a binary division, and we only marginally touched on sexuality. The subject in relation to LGBTQIA+ experiences is, however, an 'emerging' topic (Hasmanová Marhánková 2018). In the field of social gerontology, the subject of sex and gender in an everyday context is addressed in an inspirational way by the subfield of cultural gerontology, which is characterised by intersecting points such as subjectivity and identity, the body and embodiment, representation and visibility, or time and place/space (Twigg, Martin 2015; Teuscher, Teuscher 2007). In the Czech cultural environment these topics have yet to be addressed.

Despite a certain thematic selectivity, this thematic issue hopes to help bring age into gender studies and gender into age and ageing studies. The dual relationship between sex and the ageing body and gender and ageing generates a dynamic picture of social reality in which multi-layered relationships are built between individuals, collectives, structures, institutions, and ideas. As we try to show through the articles published here, relationality can serve as a useful theoretical and empirical frame with which we can observe the distinctive order and instability of these two very powerful human characteristics. We wish you an inspiring read, and we look forward to discussing the published texts on our social networks: <https://www.facebook.com/GenpathTeam/>.

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