

Foreword

It is a privilege to write the foreword to this volume, a volume that is at the intersection of the discourses on women's lives, aging, and power. As a gerontologist, a feminist, and a woman who just turned 50, I, too, am located at this intersection. And what a special time it is to be at this intersection. Today, we know a great deal about women's development over the adult life span, their health and well-being, their roles and relationships, their trials and transitions, and their challenges and triumphs (Whitbourne and Bookwala in press). We have accumulated vast knowledge about how women's aging experiences are unique and distinct from the experiences of men. Women differ from men in how long they live, how they are socialized and the roles they occupy in society, how much and whether they earn, how they maintain and influence their social ties, how much others rely on them, what illnesses are likely to inflict them, what life stressors they tend to encounter and how they cope with them. For these advances, we owe thanks to the field of gerontology and especially to its large number of women scholars who have devoted their careers to advancing knowledge on how women's lives develop over the life course.

As this volume so eloquently points out, however, differences in the aging experience exist not only between women and men; they also exist among women. Women's aging experiences are diverse within and across cultures. At the heart of many of these differences are the same power differentials that emerge from the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic forces that differentiate the lives of women and men. Feminist theory and research has drawn attention repeatedly to the underlying differences in the social constructions of gender roles and how differences in power and privilege produce differences in individual and collective life experiences. Notably, the editors of this book—Varda Muhlbaier, Joan C. Chrisler, and Florence L. Denmark—have underscored the role of power politics in determining the multitude of life options and opportunities available to the powerful relative to the limited ones available to the powerless (e.g., Chrisler 2012; Denmark and Paludi 2008; Muhlbaier and Chrisler 2007). These power differentials also explain the divergence in life trajectories among women. And they are cumulative in their impact, such that women who live in cultures that offer them limited power and opportunities are at risk to experience suboptimal aging.

The field of gerontology also has long underscored the role of cumulative inequalities in explaining diversity in the aging experience, however, the two areas—gerontology and feminist scholarship—have developed more or less independently, with only occasional attempts to bridge them (e.g., Muhlbauer and Chrisler 2007, 2012; Sigal and Denmark 2013). Indeed, feminist explanations of how sociopolitical constructions of group identity and power contextualize women's aging have been largely overlooked in gerontology. Until now, that is. This volume provides perspectives from feminist theory and research to inform and transform our understanding about how and why women experience aging differently not only in comparison with men but also among themselves. It accomplishes this by centering on the critical role of power constructions and power inequities in shaping women's developmental trajectories over the life span. In doing so, this volume inextricably links the gerontological and feminist scholarship by filling a critical need for evaluating the diversity in women's aging experiences and offering insights and strategies for empowering women and making successful aging accessible to women all around the globe.

As I write this foreword, I think back to my life's journey, how I came to be at this intersection of aging, feminism, and power. This volume resonates with me both professionally and personally. I remember being a young graduate student in the mid-1980s. I had just arrived in New York City from Mumbai (then Bombay), India, to pursue a graduate degree in Psychology. When I left India, just barely age 20, it was my first time away from family and friends, from what was familiar and facile. As I embarked on a journey that would alter the course of my life profoundly in terms of experiences and opportunities and accomplishments (read, "power"), I left behind my mother who had recently turned 50. She was a woman of vision and remarkable strength, who infused in me the courage and resolve I would need on my ongoing journey. And yet, her 50 was so different from mine. She lived in a time and place in which women were restricted in their dreams and curtailed in their potential. My mother was curious, articulate, well-informed, and inspirational, but she had no college degree or financial independence. And without these, she had little power to influence the course of her own life, to break free of the tight grip of cultural norms and social expectations.

This volume brings into sharp relief how differences in power define and shape how women age in cultures far and near. It brings into sharp relief the differences between my 50 and my mother's 50. My mother, who died of cancer at 57, gave to life and the world disproportionately more than they had given to her. With every dream I fulfill and every milestone I reach, I am acutely conscious of my mother—and the scores of women like her—who never had the same opportunities to steer their own life journeys, fulfill their own dreams, and age on their own terms. From my first graduate class on the psychology of women with Florence Denmark almost three decades ago to Joan Chrisler's invitation to chair the Society for the Psychology of Women's committee on the Denmark Award for Contributions to Women and Aging 3 years ago, I am reminded of how power can enable and disable the ways that age is gendered and gender is aged. For every woman who is privileged through power, there are countless others for whom power is nonexistent or, at best, illusory.

I am among the privileged women that this volume nods to, who through supportive ties and higher education have been empowered to build a life of meaning and purpose despite early sociocultural obstructions. Florence Denmark's course on the psychology of women was integral to my empowerment. It validated my observations and experiences of growing up in a patriarchal society and contextualized them in terms of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces that then prevailed. I became fascinated professionally and personally with development over the adult life span. In particular, I was drawn to a topic that has particular salience in women's lives as they age—their social context. Our close personal relationships are key to defining how we age (Bookwala 2012, forthcoming) and power constructions and differentials are embodied in our relationships with others. Women's relationships evolve in multidirectional ways as they age (Bookwala 2012, forthcoming), and they often have the potential to bring about some measure of power and control. For example, women's spousal relationships are likely to be more equitable in terms of household responsibilities and role allocations in mid and late life relative to earlier in life; women are likely to exert considerable influence on the health behaviors of those they love; women are known to initiate marital dissolution in mid or late life in marriages marked by dissatisfaction; and women are often the party responsible for establishing nontraditional partnered relationships, such as living-apart together.

This volume is a valuable resource for those who want to understand the differences in aging as experienced by women who have power and privilege versus those who lack them. Through their incisive and insightful analysis, the editors of and contributors to this volume inform our understanding of women's aging experiences using classic feminist constructions of power and inequity. I offer that, in planting itself at the juncture at which aging, feminism, and power meet, this volume defines gero-feminism as a field of research that merits continued focus and attention. Indeed, the editors of this volume are three leading gero-feminists of today. Through decades of influential scholarship, leadership, and mentoring, they already have transformed the lives of innumerable young women. Now, they offer a remarkable resource for understanding the integral role played by power differentials in shaping women's developmental trajectories and aging experiences. More significantly, the chapters in this volume point to some select means for empowering women so that they may enhance their capacity to dream, and thereby age, on their own terms. Ultimately, this volume explains eloquently that women must have access to resources that yield power and autonomy—education, income, careers—that are essential to sustaining a lifetime of meaning and fulfillment. The effects of power are cumulative, and, to be a successful older woman, it is essential to have opportunities and resources starting at a young age.

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