

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Elizabeth Bayler Levaro for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Development and Family Studies presented on June 30, 2011.

Title: Theorizing Age and Gender in the Pursuit of Love in Late Life

Abstract approved:

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In this dissertation, I explore how women and men in later life experience the world of dating and the pursuit of new intimate relationships. Although the mortality gap between women and men at older ages is narrowing, as they enter their 70s, 80s, and 90s, there are still at least two unmarried women for every unmarried man. This gender imbalance is due to women's greater longevity and cultural norms based in gender relations that underlie men's preference for younger partners at all ages—and, throughout most of their lives, women's preference for older partners.

Viewing the pursuit of new intimate relationships as embedded within intersecting systems of age and gender inequality, my goal was to explore how unmarried heterosexual women and men negotiate the world of dating in late life and how they view themselves and each other as aging men and women. This research focuses on White heterosexual women and men 70 years of age and older who were actively pursuing new dating relationships through personal newspaper ads and Internet dating and matching

sites. Positioning the search for new intimate partners within the intersection of age relations and gender relations, I addressed two research questions. First, I sought to understand how unmarried—widowed, divorced, or always single—heterosexual women and men age 70 and older who are actively pursuing new intimate relationships view and describe their experience of the world of late-life dating, their place in it as aging men and women, and the dating partners they encounter. Second, I examined how, as men and women in aging bodies in a culture that devalues both old age and old people, they maintain, negotiate, or construct their sense of manhood and masculinity or womanhood and femininity in the context of dating, romance, and sexual intimacy.

This dissertation consists of two studies, both grounded in a constructivist/interpretive paradigm and the thematic analysis of in-depth, semistructured interviews with 24 informants (11 women and 13 men) between the ages of 70 and 92. In the first study, using an intersectional framework of age relations and gender relations, I examined how internalized negative stereotypes of aging in general and one's own aging, in particular, shape the ways in which old men and women position themselves for finding romantic partners and how they manage identity to make themselves attractive romantic partners in an ageist society. Through their personal ads, Internet profiles, posted pictures, and within the interviews themselves, I found that informants both maintained and subverted age and gender expectations. They consistently resisted a self-identity as *old* by invoking claims and affirmations of neither looking nor acting their chronological age. Simultaneously, they communicated admonitions to potential dating partners that *they* should not look or act old. Both the men and the women were seeking

new romantic partners younger than themselves, with the men's mean lower age 21 years younger and the women's, 10 years younger.

In the second study, also grounded in considerations of age relations and gender relations, I examined informants' orientations to sexual activity and the importance of sex in their dating lives. Findings showed that, contrary to ageist stereotypes depicting old people as asexual and earlier research findings that older adults might settle for alternate intimate activities, the majority of the women and men in this study expressed interest in an intimate relationship that includes sex, and most interpreted this to mean penetrative intercourse. Nearly all of the men were sexually active with younger partners, with over half either using or holding samples of drugs for the treatment of erectile dysfunction (ED). A far smaller percentage of the women were currently dating or sexually active, and none had experience with partners who required the functional assistance of ED drugs.

In conclusion, the informants present a picture of late-life dating in which individuals both consciously and unconsciously submit to, resist, and sometimes defy the structural constraints presented by societal ageism, age relations, and gender relations. The intersecting systems of inequality and oppression that impact these women and men as they pursue new love may seem only to privilege old men, offering them, for instance, advantage in terms of more lenience in showing their age and a broader age range in which to pursue dating partners. As a group, however, the women expressed more satisfaction with their lives and were less driven by the desire for an intimate partner, relishing the independence and autonomy their unattached status allowed them.

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Theorizing Age and Gender in the Pursuit of Love in Late Life

by
Elizabeth Bayler Levaro

A DISSERTATION

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Presented June 30, 2011
Commencement June 2012

Doctor of Philosophy dissertation of Elizabeth Bayler Levaro presented on June 30, 2011.

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Elizabeth Bayler Levaro, Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No dissertation journey is successfully negotiated without the support of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family members. I have been fortunate to have that support in abundance. I wish first to offer heartfelt thanks to my co-advisors, Dr. Karen Hooker and Dr. Alexis Walker.

It may seem odd to speak of “potential” in a 59-year-old beginning doctoral student, but Karen Hooker was willing to look beyond the skills and knowledge I initially lacked to see what I might yet become. My early writing was decidedly nonacademic, with substance and style far outpacing standard form. Another might have been unwilling to forgive the stylistic transgressions, but Karen honored the creativity while gently pointing me toward more scholarly practices. Her early and sustained enthusiasm about my interest in late-life dating and sexuality was unflinching, and her consistent support and encouragement were ever appreciated.

Alexis Walker offered me unflinchingly honest and wise advice and guidance, improved my written work her editorial prowess, and celebrated my small and large accomplishments. She personifies the lifespan perspective of Human Development and Family Sciences, where it is understood at a fundamental level that the intersecting parts of our lives can get messy. When the inevitable speed bumps appeared in my path, it was Alexis’s caring insights and assurances that convinced me to hang on at a time when disappearing seemed vastly more appealing. Her encouraging and compassionate reaching out to me remain memorable.

I am honored to now join the long line of women and men whose scholarly journeys have been touched through association with Karen Hooker and Alexis Walker, and I am proud to become their junior colleague.

Dr. Richard Settersten's introduction to the life course provided the single most meaningful and influential learning experience of my doctoral program. His infectious enthusiasm and prodding to "get playful" with ideas fired up both my sociological and gerontological imagination. Dr. Alan Acock's sequence of classes in research methods and quantitative data analysis taught me not only to no longer fear numbers but to actually come to understand and appreciate that they could speak to me. It was from Alan that I learned to ask critical questions of data, of ideas, of results and findings, and of conclusions drawn. Dr. Kate MacTavish graciously agreed to join my committee as a much-needed last-minute replacement. Special thanks also to Dr. Carolyn Aldwin and Dr. Rick Levinson, who welcomed me into their lab and invited me to informal social gatherings with their students, despite my working only peripherally on their projects. They are marvelous mentors.

To the cohorts of graduate student colleagues and friends, some of whom were travel companions for many years and some for just a short while: You supported me, explained statistics, made me laugh, and offered much-appreciated friendship, advice, and insight. Thanks especially to Verna and Soyoung, who traveled the long road with me from beginning to end, and to Kate, whose friendship sustained and entertained me.

I would surely have stumbled over more rocks along the path were it not for the uplifting hands and hearts of the loving, smart, courageous, and outrageous women in my family, my sisters and daughters. As my longest life companions, Jan, Barb, and Marilyn

have cheered every triumph and buoyed me through every life-course disaster for decades. Although we live thousands of miles apart, they were ever-present in spirit each step of the way during my doctoral studies and dissertation process.

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.
—*Christina G. Rossetti*

My daughters Maike and Lisa have grown into wise and compassionate women who never fail to impress me with their intelligence, talent, insight, humor, and grace. I frequently benefitted from these qualities during my doctoral studies and continue to learn more from them than I am sure they ever did from me.

During the long years of my graduate program, my son Jordan went from boy to man—a man I am proud to call not just *son* but *friend*. He will be the last in the family to complete his education—but then, you never know. As I launch into a new career, with freshly earned Ph.D. in hand, my children can be certain they will never hear from me that it is too late to follow their passions.

And finally, I wish to express my gratitude and love to my spouse, steady companion, and sweetheart, Richard—my most ardent supporter through thick and thin, fixer of computer glitches, provider of meals, hugs, and encouragement, solver of problems large and small, and gentle coxer (“Isn’t it time you were finished?”). I truly could not have done this without you.

Dein ist mein ganzes Herz.
O sag noch einmal mir,
Ich hab dich lieb.

Still.

CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Alexis Walker and Karen Hooker provided advice on study design, participated in data analysis, and as coauthors, assisted with writing.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Roseen Bayler Rapley, whose 21 years of post-widowhood living, learning, and growing supplied not only the initial source of curiosity that inspired my research interests but most importantly, provided a living model of continued development throughout adulthood.

Theorizing Age and Gender in the Pursuit of Love in Late Life

INTRODUCTION

The world of old women and men is rarely what comes to mind when one imagines new romantic or intimate relationships. Although old men and women may retain longing for many of the emotional and physical intimacies and desires they experienced at younger ages, theirs has remained a world essentially hidden from—and for the greater part, ignored by—the academy (Davidson & Fennell, 2005). With this research I sought to explore and better understand the lived experiences of old women and men *as old women and men* as they actively pursued new romantic partnerships through the placement of ads in print and on the Internet.

My personal interest in romantic relationships in late life arose from observing the dating and courtship activities of middle-class, community-dwelling widows and widowers in my mother's circle of friends and acquaintance over the 21 years between the time she was widowed until her own death at the age of 88. I watched the communities of friends and neighbors in which she lived, noting the flirtations and infatuations, the pairings and break-ups, the jealousies and broken hearts, and particularly the preening and jockeying among the women in competition for the relatively few available men.

The individuals and couples I observed during those years of informal, nonacademic observations exhibited a range of behaviors and passions that belied the dominant ageist discourses of people in their 70s, 80s, and 90s in our culture. I came to the realization that many older women and men still maintained undeniable interest in

dating, romance, and intimacy, perhaps even sexual intimacy; that there is no age limit on the phenomenon of falling in love; and that even (or particularly) in late life, love might still be what songwriters refer to as the stuff that “makes the world go ‘round” (Merrill, 1961). My mother enjoyed several deeply meaningful relationships over those two decades that greatly enhanced her life, including a long-distance partnership that we might today describe as a *living apart together* (LAT) relationship (de Jong Gierveld, 2004, 2005; Ghazanfaraon Karlsson & Borell, 2002) with a man half a country away with whom she regularly shared Elder Hostel experiences.

Relationships in late life can be heartbreakingly short, and there were losses for my mother as well, several to death and one to a “younger woman,” a widow in her 70s. This first painful experience of being “dumped” for another woman came when my mother was in her 80s. Her last love was a man accustomed to high social status and to women “doing” for him. My mother enjoyed the status gained as the doctor’s girlfriend but more importantly, relished having someone who needed her and gave her days purpose. During her final year, even as she was enduring the cumulative effects of multiple myeloma and heart failure, my mother continued to provide him loving companionship as Parkinson’s disease robbed him of his faculties. As she lay dying, 500 miles from the home she had left, he was the last person she roused herself to speak with on the phone.

The Context: The Late-Life Dating Pool

With this research, I explored how women and men in later life experience the world of dating and the pursuit of new intimate relationships *as* old men and old women. This pursuit occurs in a landscape of late-life dating framed by the realities of a gender

imbalance leading to what has been referred to as the feminization of aging. Although the mortality gap between men and women at older ages is narrowing (Howden & Meyer, 2011), as women and men enter their 70s, 80s, and 90s, there are still at least two unmarried women for every unmarried man (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This imbalance is the result of two sets of demographic realities, biological and cultural. Biological demographics address women's greater longevity, with women age 70 and older in 2010 outnumbering men at 16.3 million women to 11.5 million men (Howden & Meyer, 2011). *Dating* demographics (Sills, 2009) are cultural norms based in patriarchal gender relations that underlie men's preference for younger partners—and, throughout most of their lives, women's preference for older partners. Additionally, at every age, men remarry after death of a spouse or divorce with greater frequency, with the greatest difference in the age groups over 75, where widowed men, for instance, are nine times more likely to remarry (Davidson, 2001), leaving only 28.2% of women 75 years and older living with a spouse (Administration on Aging, 2010). This gender ratio disparity with age creates uneven supply-side relationship economics and a wider, deeper age pyramid of potential partners for men. For women, the pool of available or eligible men shrinks as they age, whereas old men who wish to repartner or remarry are at a decided demographic advantage.

Research Rationale

Simpson (1995) suggests that late love tends to be existential, reflecting an awareness of life's transient nature. Although it is a common stereotype that old people live in the past, they are, more than any other age group, more fully present and focused on the here and now (Fingerman & Perlmutter, 1995). With an acute awareness of

endings, an emphasis on the present increases the value people place on life and emotion (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) and perhaps also on new intimate relationships (Moorman, 2006).

Older dating partners have been found to demonstrate high levels of psychological well-being (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991), providing each other companionship, emotional caregiving, opportunity for self-disclosure, and a sexual partner, benefits unlikely to be met by others in the social worlds of old women and men. Stable intimate relationships have the potential to positively affect individuals' happiness and mental health, physical health, sexuality, and even socioeconomic status (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Such relationships may also significantly reduce the deleterious effects of loneliness and social isolation often reported by old people (de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Dykstra, Tilburg, & de Jong Gierveld, 2005). Gaining a fuller understanding of the desire for and pursuit of new love in late life and how old men's and women's perceptions of themselves and each other as aging and gendered individuals affect both their chances of establishing a meaningful late-life love relationship and the quality of that relationship can lead to insights into the aging process for adults of all ages.

Foundations and Framework for Theorizing Age and Gender

This research is grounded in a constructivist/interpretive paradigm, an analytic method that examines the ways in which informants' realities, meanings, and experiences reflect or are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while recognizing that analytic findings are the researcher's interpretations of informants' interpretations of reality, creating what Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009)

term a *double hermeneutic*. This approach allowed me to think about ways in which social/structural conditions are refracted through personal experience (Biggs, 2008).

Theoretically, my work is centered on the intersection of age relations and gender relations and informed by theoretical and methodological considerations from critical social gerontology and feminist gerontology. Combining insights from these perspectives is not uncommon in gerontology (Bengtson, Putney, & Johnson, 2005; Allen & Walker, 2006). Critical gerontology guides my understanding of how structural considerations and internalized societal ageism impact old women's and men's views of themselves, their aging bodies, and their intimate relationships. Feminist gerontology alerts me to the understudied intersectional and multiplicative power relations of gender and age in late life and how old women and old men are disadvantaged—but also sometimes advantaged—in the process. It encourages theorizing gender relations and age relations to gain insight into how the two strands interweave to shape the production and construction of masculinities and femininities exhibited in the pursuit of late-life romance.

Although a life course perspective was not used as a formal theoretical framework for this exploration of old people's life worlds, its consideration of the present in the context of the past (Connidis, 2006) and emphasis on the institutional structuring of lives (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003) and changing social relationships (Settersten, 2007) provides insight into the choices and constraints that interact to affect individuals' lives and personal biographies, as does the reality of both cohort and period effects. Wilson (1995) notes that gender relations and gender identities in late life are the product of the interaction between individual life courses and cohort and period effects.

Women and Men Studies' Slow Acknowledgement of Age

The combined strands of historical and contemporary feminist theory and thought contribute to an understanding of gender as an organizing principle that shapes lives. Together with race and class, gender has been central to the feminist paradigm and framework of intersectionality (Zajicek, Calasanti, Ginther, & Summers, 2006). As a social and political location, however, *age* has been slow to be included in the list of interlocked oppressions addressed by feminist thought and research (King, 2006; Marshall, 2006). Feminist scholars today pay scant more attention to old women and aging (Arber & Ginn, 1991) than was the case 26 years ago when activist Barbara Macdonald, 65 at the time, challenged the structural ageism in feminism, women studies, and gerontology and angrily demanded that feminists look old women “in the eye” and see them as they are, rather than as stereotypical dichotomies (Macdonald & Rich, 1983, 1991).

At the beginning of the 21st century, feminists still resist facing old women (Marshall, 2006; Ray, 2006) in what Calasanti, Slevin, and King (2006) call an “inadvertent but pernicious ageism” (p. 13) stemming from a failure to study old people on their own terms. Rarely studying either old people or old bodies (Calasanti, 2006), feminists have “sidelined” both issues from their theorizing (King, 2006, p. 49). Brown (1998) attributes this failure to acknowledge old women to the fact that most feminists have not been gerontologists nor have most gerontologists been feminists. Although both women’s and men’s lives are affected by issues of gender, the realization that it is not just women who have and are influenced by gender is also fairly recent in feminist thinking (van den Hoonaard, 2007).

The situation of the study of old men in the discipline of men studies is little different. Although Thompson published earlier seminal work on older men's lives (1994), it was not until 2004 that a men studies journal devoted an issue addressing the social invisibility of old men and their gendered performance as men (Thompson, 2004).

Critical Social Gerontology

Modern critical theory has its roots in Germany with such thinkers as Marx, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Durkheim, and Habermas. It has experienced a turbulent history encompassing widely different disciplines and the impact of strong personalities. Critical theory today focuses on an abiding concern with issues of power relationships, oppression, and injustice, calling into question commonly held values and assumptions, challenging social structures, and encouraging engagement in social action (Crotty, 1998).

Its spirit of critical reflection, social critique, and emancipatory knowledge reflects a number of basic assumptions underlying critical inquiry, including the social nature and historical constitution of power relations; the centrality of language to the formation of subjectivity; the societal privileging of certain groups over others, most forceful when the resulting oppression is culturally viewed as "natural, necessary, or inevitable" and therefore invisible to those privileged; the multiple faces of oppression, creating the danger of counterproductive concern for one at the expense of others; and the recognition that mainstream research practices are unwittingly implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression (and, I must add, age) (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, pp. 139–140). Despite recent research focusing on age and gender as systems (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Arber & Ginn, 1995) and aside from

the debate on intersectionality, however, social gerontology, too, lacks a widespread theoretical connection between age and gender relations (Calasanti, 2004b; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Krekula, 2007).

Feminist Gerontology

Feminism is both theoretical perspective and practice (Letherby, 2003). As theory, it is far from a “monolithic ideology,” (Tong, 1998, p. 1) as it consists of divergent viewpoints resulting in a multiplicity of feminisms. Postmodern feminist Ruth Ray (1996) describes feminist gerontology as an “intellectual exchange between feminism and gerontology that focuses on the complexities of gender and gender relations, as well as the politics of research and theory-making regarding the lives of older people” (p. 675). Feminist gerontology thus straddles the geography between feminist theory and critical social gerontology, addressing what Norris (2006) describes as one of feminist thinking’s most important breakdowns, the lack of critical sophistication when dealing with notions of age.

Feminist gerontology shares with critical gerontology a focus on power relations and their combined effects on individuals over the course of their lives, as well as on concepts of emancipation from political and structural oppressions (Richardson & Barusch, 2006). It explicitly theorizes the inextricable intersecting connections between age and gender with oppressions by race, class, and sexualities. The emergent emphasis on the obvious but frequently ignored relational quality of gender sets the stage for studying the linked experiences of men and women and theorizing *gender relations*, the “dynamic, constructed, institutionalized processes by which people orient their behaviors to ideals of manhood and womanhood, influencing life chances as they do so” (Calasanti,

2009, p. 472). These dynamics or power relations produce the interdependent categories that we call man and woman. Nonfeminist approaches to gender typically treat it as a binary, a demographic variable that may highlight and define but does little to explain differences (Calasanti, 2004a).

In addition to theorizing gender relations, the parallel concept of *age relations* adds to the richness of the feminist gerontology perspective on the study of aging (McMullin, 1995). Age relations, the system of inequality rooted in age that proffers unearned privilege to the young or middle-aged—the not old—at the expense of the old (Calasanti, 2003, p. 199) is the basis of societal ageism and intersects with gender relations in ways that shape old men and women in relation to each other. What differentiates age from other social locations and power relations is the undeniable fact that, regardless of previous status, power, authority—or lack thereof—and regardless of race, class, or gender, if we live long enough, we eventually reach the low-status position of old age.

Just as the study of gender relations opens the way for a better understanding of both women and men, so can an examination of age relations illuminate the ways that age structures lives of individuals and power relations throughout the life course (Calasanti, 2003a). It is only fairly recently that scholars from sociology, psychology, men's studies, and women's studies (e.g., Arber & Ginn, 1995; Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Calasanti, 2004a; Davidson, 2001; Krekula, 2007; Thompson, 1994a) have begun to acknowledge that age relations represent an inequality that affects both genders, albeit differently and at different paces. Men, for instance, who throughout much of their lives are privileged by virtue of their gender, lose status in late life compared to younger men

but nevertheless often retain the advantages of gender over women (Meadows & Davidson, 2006). Aging women, whose status is more often based on remaining young-looking and desirable, more quickly become invisible.

Late-Life at the Intersection of Age Relations and Gender Relations

Until fairly recently, few scholars within feminism, men studies, or gerontology had made a concerted effort to study old people with recognition that they “are not just old, they are either men or women” (McMullin, 1995, p. 37), that is, viewing them as individuals with masculine and feminine identities. Although old women have been the subject of gerontological research for many years, curiosity about their sense of themselves as women has been lacking. Similarly, old men’s construction of masculinities, as well as their very existence, has remained virtually un contemplated and unexamined by academic disciplines: “To all intents and purposes, growing older seems to be outside conceptualizations of masculinity. In most discourses one can be masculine and one can be old, but not both” (Thompson, 2004, p. 1). Crediting this lack of academic attention to ageism and scholarly disinterest, Calasanti and King (2005) critically describe the situation:

Our understandings and concepts of manhood fall short because they assume, as standards of normalcy, men of middle age or younger. Aging scholars’ inattention to old *men*, combined with men’s studies lack of concern with *old* men, not only renders old men virtually invisible but also reproduces our own present and future oppression.

Ginn and Arber (1995) likened the relation between ageing theorists and feminist sociologists as “diners at separate tables . . . exchanging some meaningful glances but without pooling their conceptual resources” (p. 2). To this table we can also add scholars within men studies.

In summary, mainstream feminist theory has not typically considered age relations and the plight of old women (King, 2006) or old men (Calasanti, 2004a). Conversely, aging theorists have not focused on gender relations and have only recently begun to articulate that both old women and old men have gender (van den Hoonaard, 2007). Thus, although they constitute organizing dimensions of the social world that are best viewed relationally, the association between gender and age(ing) remains theoretically underexplored (Calasanti, 2009; Calasanti & King, 2005; McMullin, 1995). Because our society tends to view the old as essentially genderless or in stereotypically and often negatively gendered ways (Nelson, 2002; Palmore, 1999), old women and men have few models (Wilson, 1995) or scripts (Spector-Mersel, 2006) for “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in late life. Old roles, primarily from midlife, are gone, but there are no social prescriptions for new ways of behaving (Wilson, 1995).

The age-gender intersection also guides my examination of how old women and old men construct gendered identities—images of themselves as both old *and* feminine or masculine—as they interact with one another in their pursuits of new intimate partnerships. This connectedness of gender relations and aging weaves through both social-historical change and personal-biographical time.

At the macro level, we need to understand how age and gender are related to the distribution of power, privilege and well-being in society; at the micro level, how age and gender contribute to identity, values, social networks and political and other affiliations (Ginn & Arber, 1995, p. 1).

McMullin (1995) discusses various “add on” or “add and stir” approaches to incorporating age and gender into theoretical constructions—adding either gender relations or age relations to mainstream sociological theories; adding gender to theories of aging; or adding age relations to feminist theory—before describing a possible fourth

path, one that would recognize “that age and gender relations cannot be treated as separate systems which shape life situations” (p. 37) because old people are not just old, they are also women and men. I base my exploration of the pursuit of new intimate relationships in late life upon these theoretical intersections. Becoming aware of and recognizing the intersecting effects of age relations and gender relations at both the micro and macro levels requires a new way of seeing, new lenses, what Calasanti and Slevin (2001) refer to as a “gender lens on aging and an aging lens on gender” (p. 179).

Literature Review

In 1986, Bulcroft and O’Connor noted that “little has been done in the theorizing or empirical investigation of heterosexual dating relationships in later life” (p. 397). Twenty-five years later, there is still little empirical research specifically about dating and repartnering in late life. Indeed, it is not uncommon for articles to mention within the first few paragraphs the dearth or paucity of information available. Addressing the lack of research on marriage in later life, Askham (1995) suggests two reasons that may equally apply to the lack of research on dating relationships: They concern a population—old people—that is considered socially marginal, and its setting in the private sphere is not viewed as forming part of the “major sociological explanatory framework” (p. 88). It should be noted that this dearth does not extend to the popular press, where numerous books have recently been published about late-life dating, romance, and sexuality (see, for instance, Barusch, 2008; Butler, 2002; Sills, 2009; Trafford, 2009).

Where Late-Life Daters Have Been: Marriage, Divorce, and Widowhood

Men and women in their eighth, ninth, and tenth decades of life, whether currently widowed, divorced, or single lifelong, trail behind them a lifetime’s worth of diverse and

complex histories of intimate relationships and experiences. For many, marriage represents the most intimate form of heterosexual intragenerational relationship, and most have been married at some time during their lives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011.) The subject of late-life marriage, whether a marriage extending into later life or resulting from a new courtship, allows a glimpse into gender relations in late life. Although marriages that extend into late life tend to be marked by relatively high levels of satisfaction (Lupri & Frideres, 1981), in the cohorts of women and men in their 70s and 80s today, men appear to benefit or have benefitted more from marriage than do and have women, reporting higher levels of satisfaction than older women (Quirouette & Gold, 1992).

Despite longer life expectancies, the prevalence of long-term marriages in North America and Europe is declining as the divorce rate for individuals age 65 and older grows (Kingston, 2007). Over the course of the past century, loss of a spouse to death has become an increasingly normative experience for old women. Old men, however, have not experienced a “disruptive marital transition” (Wu, 2007, p. 41) to the same degree. The slowly increasing late-life divorce rate, however, is leading to rising numbers of both women and men uncoupled in the last decades of life through either widowhood or divorce, sometimes more than once (Hurd Clarke, 2005).

Because of the typical age and longevity discrepancies between wives and husbands, the ages at which women and men enter widowhood differ significantly, with men statistically older than women: Of men and women newly widowed in 2001, 74% of the men were 65 or older compared to just 62% of women (Kreider, 2005). Marriage rates for men are on the decline, with the numbers of always-single men expected to double over the next few decades (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Combined with widowhood

and increasing rates of mid- and late-life divorce, projections indicate shifting percentages and proportions and greater heterogeneity in marital statuses by the year 2040 and into the remaining 21st century (Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Wade, 1989).

Repartnering: Options and Gendered Differences

Dating. The strongest predictor of the propensity to date in later life is gender, with men significantly more likely to engage in dating than women (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). When asked about the rewards derived from dating, men were more likely than women to note payoffs in intimacy, including emotional support and the possibility for self-disclosure. Women reported receiving that sort of support from female friends and were more concerned with an enhanced sense of identity and esteem from peers, that is, status rewards (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). The prospect of a new relationship is not without a symbolic balance sheet of profits and losses and push-pull factors (de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Stevens, 2002), although these frequently differ for women and men (Carr & Utz, 2005). Women, for instance, express more concern about maintaining (sometimes newfound) independence and autonomy, and often fear losing financial security through pensions from a departed husband.

Remarriage. Studies conducted over the past three decades (e.g., Arluke & Suchwalko, 1984; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Carr, 2004; Moss & Schwebel, 1993) have asked questions, primarily of old widows, about their interest in dating and remarriage. Despite reported loneliness in late life (e.g., Dykstra, van Tilburg, & de Jong Gierveld, 2005; Gibson, 2000; Victor, Scambler, Bond, & Bowling, 2000), few old widows expressed an interest in remarriage (Davidson, 1999; Moorman, 2006; van den Hoonaard,

2005), a state that is viewed by many as holding few benefits and a range of disadvantages (Ginn & Arber, 1995).

Widowers have reported greater loneliness, experienced higher distress and depression, and exhibited a lower rate of psychological recovery than have widows (Lee, Willetts, & Seccombe, 1998), as well as an increased risk of health problems and mortality (Hu & Goldman, 1990). Unlike widowed women, who may ultimately experience a new sense of freedom and autonomy (Davidson, 2001) and who also tend to have more emotionally rewarding friendships (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003), men are thought to adapt less well to widowhood (Rokach, Matalon, Rokach, & Safarov, 2007). These findings may help explain both widowed men's greater interest in dating and why those who wish to remarry generally do so fairly quickly (Carr, 2004), leading some old women to quote the adage that "women mourn, men replace."

A three-factor framework based on *availability, feasibility, and desirability* developed to explain choices and constraints around cohabitation decisions (Hatch, 1995) offers a model for considerations about repartnering or remarriage as well. In late life, the relative availability of partners results primarily from the sex differential but is also affected by such other realities as geographical and residential location. Feasibility takes into account variables such as age, health, and finances. Desirability is based on motivation, which itself is affected by both societal and familial expectations and proscriptions.

Widows reporting lack of interest in remarriage or repartnering have given reasons that broadly fall under Hatch's (1995) rubrics of both desirability and feasibility. Reminiscent of Lopata's description of "husband sanctification" (1981), some believe

they have already had the best possible husband (van den Hoonaard, 2001). Others fear another painful loss and do not want to experience that sort of hurt again (Talbot, 1998). Many have come to the recognition that they do not wish to recreate a marital or marriage-like relationship based on an exchange of gendered division of labor for intimacy nor one that might diminish their sense of newfound independence and self (Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson & Borell, 2005). And finally, some widows simply maintain a deep and abiding tie to their husbands, sometimes reporting that they feel as if they were still married (van den Hoonaard, 2001).

Adult children can also have an inhibiting effect on considerations of intimate relationships or remarriage. Wu (1995) noted that the incidence of remarriage among widows who had adult children was 93% lower than among those without children. Adult children's concerns about parents' possible remarriage frequently center around issues of inheritance (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986), but they also express displeasure at the idea of someone's replacing a lost parent (van den Hoonaard, 2001).

Feasibility, the second facet of Hatch's model (1995), takes into account such factors as age, health, and finances. A phrase often heard when speaking with old widows about a potential remarriage is that men want only one thing, either someone to take care of them or someone able to support them financially—a "nurse or a purse" (Adams, 1985). Wanting to provide neither, many old women decline. Both money and health play roles in relative attractiveness between potential partners. For some widows, the decision not to remarry is purely pragmatic: Unless a future spouse can offer offsetting financial support, marriage could mean a loss of pension benefits from their deceased husbands, a security many are unwilling to jeopardize. Davidson (2005) suggests that men's financial

status and women's good health contribute to their attractiveness as potential mates. From the viewpoint of age and gender relations in dating and repartnering, considerations of attractiveness must also include reference to the *double standard of aging* (Sontag, 1972) in which physical attractiveness is assumed to be a resource available only to the young, with women not only losing this resource at an earlier age than men but being more harshly judged for its loss.

Living Apart (and) Together. Considerable recent research, particularly originating in Europe, has focused on older couples' nonmarital intimate relationships. Intimate partners in late life are increasingly turning to options other than marriage, among them unmarried cohabitation. Cohabiting unions in later life are growing (Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Davidson & Fennell, 2002; Stevens, 2002), as is a form of committed relationship called living apart (and) together or LAT, in which partners maintain separate homes and households (de Jong Gierveld, 2004, 2005; Ghazanfareon Karlsson & Borell, 2002, 2005). Although from a statistical perspective young people are more likely to be in LAT relationships, researchers in the Netherlands (de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004), Sweden (Ghazanfareon Karlsson & Borell, 2005b; Stevens, 2002), and the UK (Davidson, 2001; Davidson & Fennel, 2005) have been exploring its perceived advantages and increasing popularity among older couples.

Driven primarily by old women's preferences for living arrangements that allow them to balance sometimes conflicting desires for autonomy and intimacy and companionship and independence, a living-apart-together relationship dissolves many of the concerns women associate with marriage and cohabitation. LAT provides freedom from caregiving as a potentially prescribed duty and allows for unencumbered contact

with adult children from previous relationships while protecting their inheritance (Borell & Ghazanfareon Karlsson, 2003; Connidis, 2006). It also creates a tangible line of demarcation in terms of gender equity and the distribution of household labor (Ghazanfareon Karlsson & Borell, 2002).

Embodied Age

Aging is an embodied experience, and the body is the location of aging's most evident markers, the battlefield upon which age skirmishes are waged and truces and defeats are negotiated. The duality of the body as biological and experiential, material and socially constructed, means that the physical changes associated with the aging body—such ubiquitous announcements of age as gray hair, wrinkles, sagging jaw lines—as well as age-related physical challenges are interpreted, shaped, and expressed in accordance with age relations (Calasanti, 2005, p. 9), essentially becoming more than the sum of their parts. So powerfully symbolic and socially meaningful are these markers of age on and in the body that their eradication—or at the very least, their functional disguise—becomes a primary weapon in what is ultimately a futile battle (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

The physical changes in body and face that accompany old age are experienced differently by women and men. More so than men, women are subject to gendered ageism (Hatch, 2005), harsh judgment (Arber & Ginn, 1995), and expectations that they retain a youthful appearance despite advancing years. Women's aging involves dual oppressions—what Biggs (2004) calls a “double absence” (p. 49)—being “not male” and being “not young”—an absence more commonly referred to as the double standard of age and aging (Sontag, 1972). This interplay between age and gender has also been

characterized in social gerontology as *double jeopardy*. Critical theorists warn, however, that an emphasis on stigmatized identity represents not only an oversimplification but encourages the study of old women from a *misery perspective*. The double jeopardy assumption for old women “focuses on ageing as physical changes, thereby ignoring that ageing also includes aspects such as new experiences and values” (Krekula, 2007, p. 166). Although acknowledging that men today enjoy more lenience in allowing their age to show, scholars in men studies have pointed out that the cultural codes of masculinity that evolved over the past two centuries have made the juxtaposition of old *and* masculine an “unimaginable pair” (Thompson, 2004, p.1), leaving old men still essentially unstudied and invisible. (See, however, work by Calasanti, 2004, and Bennett, 2007).

Aging Self-Stereotypes and Age Denial

Age denial. Like racism and sexism, ageism is a form of prejudice and a source of oppression. Because it does not tend to be proscribed by political correctness, however (Levy, 2009), ageist beliefs may be implicitly held by a considerably higher proportion of people than is the case for either racist or sexist attitudes (Levi, 2001; Levy [citing Banaji, 1999]). Age is differentiated from other social locations and power relations because, regardless of previous status, power, authority—or lack thereof—and regardless of race, class, or gender, if we live long enough, we eventually reach the socially prescribed low-status position of old age. Because ageism is also a source of disadvantage that is internalized, it is eventually turned against one’s own aging self in the form of self-stereotypes or self-perceptions (Levy, 2003, 2009). Typically, this transmutation of age stereotypes to self-stereotypes does not occur until later in life when

the physical signs of the biological process of aging become more apparent. The point at which the process occurs, however, is subjective. For instance, research suggests that debilitating health conditions can bring on age self-stereotypes at younger ages (Hubley & Russell, 2009). Additionally, because most people do not become personally susceptible to negative age stereotypes until later in their lives, they are unlikely to have acquired the kinds of resistive coping strategies that individuals who have been stigmatized lifelong may learn from their subgroup (Levy, 2009).

In her explanation of stereotype embodiment theory, Levy (2009) describes the internalization of age stereotypes as a four-component process that occurs in two directions: “top-down (from society to the individual) and over time (from childhood to old age)” (p. 332). The process of acquiring self-stereotypes is thought to entail two stages: In the first stage, aging individuals become part of the membership group that is considered, at least by others, to be old. Although this point may well be an artificial demarcation—enrollment in Social Security, for instance—it is nevertheless of cultural importance. In the second stage, aging individuals identify with others in the same category and thus join the aged reference group (Levy, 2003).

The length of time needed to add participation in the reference group to participation in the membership group is likely to vary according to the negativity of an individual’s aging stereotypes. That is, the more negative the aging stereotypes, the more resistance there would be to identifying with the old (p. P203).

After a lifetime of exposure to a constant barrage of cultural age stereotypes, particularly through the medium of television (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005), negative attributes once applied to others now apply—or threaten to apply—to us. As we move from the targeter to the targeted, from the out-group to the in-group, from the oppressor

to the oppressed, our first line of defense is denial. “Whether our quest is to age successfully or to be ageless, the need to deny old age lies at the heart of ageism. We deny that we are aging, and when forced to confront the process, treat it as ugly and tragic” (Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006, p. 16).

The Mandate to Age Successfully

The culturally assimilated ideals of *successful aging* (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), characterized by low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and active engagement with life, have been both lauded and criticized. The challenge to a disease model of aging has offered valuable insights into late-life potential. At the same time, however, it also contains a prescriptive quality that ignores the life-course impact of such social locations as race and class in its implication that aging is related to lifestyle *choices* and therefore depends on our own efforts (Cruikshank, 2003). From a critical gerontology perspective, Minkler and Estes (1999) fault the concept for marginalizing the disabled and contributing to the loss of a “more dialectical vision of aging which respects health *and* disease, able-bodiedness *and* disability, as equally valid parts of the aging experience” (p. 52). Andrews (1999), Katz (2000), and Calasanti (2003) point to the moral imperative, the discipline to activity, and the subtle underlying ageism present in understandings of both successful and productive aging that implicitly devalue the old: “The goal of remaining active is to show that one is not really old. In this sense, successful aging means *not* aging, not being *old*” (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, p. 183).

The mandate to age successfully, actively, and productively is inextricably tied to issues and ideals of both gender and embodiment. Social construction takes us only so

far. Despite well-fought battles and denial of aging, years take their toll, and bodies do decline (Cruikshank, 2003). At some point, most old people are confronted with the reality that disability is not just an “ageist fantasy” (Fleming, 1999, p. 3) and that the physical limitations associated with aging “will happen to us despite diet regimens, lots of green tea, and exercise” (Holstein, 2006, p. 318).

Masculinities and Femininities in Late Life

Hegemonic Masculinity. The lives of old men and the concept of multiple and hegemonic masculinities were made visible in several works published in the last decade of the 20th century (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 1995; Thompson, 1994a, 1994b). The sense of maleness and masculinity is defined and redefined over the life course “through and by reference to ‘age’” (Hearn, 1995, p. 97). Although multiple and competing masculinities coexist, shaped by intersecting social locations (Connell, 1995), only one of these achieves dominance and serves as the “culturally exalted” (p. 77) form of manhood in a particular time and place. This hegemonic masculinity then represents the masculine ideal of what is or should be a “successful man.” In the culture of the United States today, this dominant hegemonic masculinity is defined by such traits as physical strength, (hetero)sexual virility, wealth, self-control, and aggression (Calasanti, 2004a). Other masculinities exist; in fact most men, although perhaps aspiring to and measuring themselves against the dominant ideal, do not achieve it. The ideal remains, however, the standard of a “real man,” a form of masculinity that not only subordinates femininities but other masculinities as well.

As men age, they face losses in arenas typically defined by gender: They retire from occupations, losing the breadwinner role, and perhaps experience losses in physical

strength and sexual potency as well. These losses can weaken what may already be slight ties to a sense of approximating the masculine ideal (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003). Because so many of the dominant ideals are age-based or age-dependent, once these are no longer available, old men may become essentially “absent from a masculinized space, and as a result, are often afforded the status of ‘other’” (Meadows & Davidson, 2006).

As they age, even the most privileged and powerful of men, those few who came close to achieving or approximating the hegemonic ideal in midlife, ultimately lose many of the advantages they enjoyed. They may find themselves not only absent from youth-dominated masculinized spaces but more likely to be co-inhabiting space that is considered feminine. Most men continue to attempt to approximate hegemonic masculinity to some degree (Meadows & Davidson, 2006), and some are willing to go to extraordinary measures to do so. In the documentary film *Eager for Your Kisses* (Cane, 2005), for instance, a 95-year-old widower explains to his film-maker granddaughter how he injects a fluid into his penis to achieve an erection that enables him to be a functioning sexual partner of the younger widows who are courting him.

Kimmel (1994) notes that although it is White, middle-class, early middle-age heterosexual men who set the standard for other men, regardless of variations created by ethnicity, class, age, or sexuality, “being a man means ‘not being like women’” (p. 126). As seen in the discussion on ageism, from the perspective of age relations and the viewpoint of the not-old, age trumps all, including gender. From a gender relations point of view, however, being a man, even an *old* man, still trumps being a woman.

Recent studies of old men’s sense of constructed and maintained masculinity have considered contexts of grandfatherhood (Mann, 2007), caregiving (Calasanti, 2003b;

Ribeiro, Paúl, & Nogueira, 2007), frail men's perspectives on food and eating (Moss, Moss, Kilbride, & Rubenstein, 2007), intimacy needs and social networking of old men (Davidson, 2004), men's health-seeking behaviors (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2007), and bereavement (Bennett, 2007). The question raised by the present study is how old men who are actively seeking a new romantic partnership—and who may lack achievable cultural models (Wilson, 1995) or scripts (Spector-Mersel, 2006) for manhood in late life—attempt to either approximate hegemonic masculinity or engage with alternate masculinities.

Emphasized Femininity. The understanding of old men and masculinities is still in its youth, and even less is known about old women's constructions of femininities and how they “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in late life. Viewing femininities as ways of shaping oneself as a woman across the life course, Swedish researchers (Aléx, Hammarström, Gustafson, Norberg, & Lundman, 2006) describe gendered constructions of four femininities that arose in narratives of oldest old women (85 years and older). They note that “if we are to gain a better understanding of what it is like to be an old woman, it is important to analyze the construction of different forms of femininities among the oldest old women” (p. 856). The four forms they describe, however, seem overly constructed and fail to give a true sense of different femininities.

Whether there *is* such a thing as hegemonic femininity and subordinate femininities that mirror theorizing in masculinities is debated. Connell, writing in 1987, maintains that there are no femininities that are hegemonic:

All forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men. For this reason, there is no femininity that holds among women the position held by hegemonic masculinity among men (p. 187).

He describes instead the concept of *emphasized femininity* as fitting the gender relations mold with a focus on compliance to patriarchy. Modifying Connell's (1987) definition of hegemonic masculinity, Schippers (2007) offers the following:

Hegemonic masculinity is the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 94).

This definition creates the conceptual space for hegemonic femininity as

the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 94).

Schippers thus argues that although the relationship between the two hegemonies remains one of ascendancy for the masculine and men, it also creates an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over others, one that serves "the interests of the gender order and male domination" (p. 94). Using this model, Schippers suggests that questions of masculinity and femininity can be explored in terms of the relationality of gender relations. Modified for the present research, the questions she suggests that would aid in exploring both localized settings and broader structures of gender hegemony are: What characteristics or practices are understood as manly in the pursuit of new romantic relationships in late life? What characteristics or practices are womanly in pursuing a new relationship? Of those practices and characteristics, which situate femininity as complementary and inferior to masculinity? (p. 100).

Sexual Intimacy

The sociocultural context in which current older adults were raised, along with the prevailing cultural stereotypes about aging and sexuality, influence their attitudes toward

dating, intimacy, sexuality, and sexual activity (Zeiss & Kasi-Godley, 2001).

Internalizing of societal values and attitudes that associate sexual expression with youth or stable pair-bonded heterosexual adults of child-bearing age—what Davidson and Fennell (2005) refer to as “deep cultural stains” left from the combination of the “sex-negativity of Christianity and the power of romantic love ideology” (p. ix)—may discourage sexual activity at an age when it might still be enjoyable and rewarding for women and men alike (Byer, Shainberg, & Galliano, 1999). Many may find it difficult to accept today’s greater openness about sex and romantic relationships (Huyck, 2001). Elders living in age-segregated communities have been reported as secretive about their activities (Adams, 1985) and reluctant to talk frankly about sexuality (Trudel, Turgeon, & Piché, 2000), either out of a sense of propriety or perceived intolerance for such behavior. Alemán (2003) notes that particularly women expressed tension between their desire for a sexual relationship and a belief that such relations are inappropriate at their age.

There are indications, however, that sexual activity in late life not only is but has been more prevalent than commonly believed. A large-scale survey of 4,246 men and women age 50 to 93 covering all aspects of their intimate lives was the first to reveal unexpected richness and diversity of sexual experience among those both married and unmarried (Brecher, 1984). More recently, a major study of sexuality and health among older adults in the United States (Lindau et al., 2007) suggests that many older adults are sexually active, with women less likely than men to have a sexual partner. Although among the general public the topic of elder sexuality is still often enough commonly viewed with disgust, ridicule, and disparagement (Butler & Lewis, 2002) or as an oxymoron (Hillman, 2000), over the course of the past 30 years, a growing understanding

of the value of, interest in, and desire for continued sexual intimacy into later life has been underscored by increasing academic interest (Huyck, 2001).

Talbott (1998) notes that earlier studies of sexuality among older adults tended to focus on quantitative counts of sexual behaviors without including the phenomenological aspects of sexuality regarding people's feelings and thoughts about their sexual and romantic lives. Qualitative research suggests that many older adults are willing to discuss their intimate lives, sometimes commenting on the lack of significant others with whom they might discuss such matters (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986). Such qualitative studies have facilitated an understanding that the definition of sexuality may be broader and more inclusive among older lovers than among younger couples. Although not excluding intercourse, the stronger emphasis—perhaps at least partly because of diminished male ability to produce erections—appeared to be on more nuanced sexual behavior, such as hugging, kissing, and touching (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986).

Women's versus men's late-life sexuality. Women's sexuality and sexual expression (or loss thereof) in later life has been viewed from two vantage points. Most oft-cited is *opportunity*, with lack of a partner due to widowhood or divorce common (Delamater & Sill, 2005; Laumann et al., 2005). Within existing relationships in later life, women's sexual retreat has been attributed to physical changes. Declining estrogen levels can result in vaginal dryness and atrophy due to diminished blood flow to the vagina (Kingsberg, 2002), which can cause *dyspareunia* or painful sexual intercourse (Gelfand, 2000). The primary reason for women's sexual inactivity, however, is considered to be *hypoactive sexual desire disorder*, medical terminology for a decline in sexual desire. Desire is understood to be comprised of the interaction of the three related but separate

components: *Drive* is the biologic component of desire; *beliefs and values* reflect an individual's expectations; and *motivation* represents emotional or interpersonal factors that would compel the desire for sexual activity (Kingsberg, 2002). Of the three, motivation has the greatest impact on desire and is "the most complex and elusive" (p. 434).

Studies on late-life dating that have included male informants have reported men's struggling with the knowledge or fear that they were not able to perform sexually (Alemán, 2003). In contrast to women, men's sexual retreat in late life has focused not on lack of desire—there is the expectation that men's desire is constant—but on loss of function, that is, impotence or erectile dysfunction. This bifurcation of sexuality has played a not insignificant role in biomedical research and advances. Because men's loss has been variously viewed as either psychologically or medically related to maintenance of mental and physical health—and because both age and gender relations place men's, even *old* men's, functioning above women's—substantially more research effort has been aimed at men's late-life sexuality, a reality that has impacted men's but also old women's experiences (Potts et al., 2003).

The Viagrization of (not only men's) late-life sexuality. Until relatively recently, men's loss of sexual function and declining virility were viewed as a normal and natural part of aging, and the sexological sciences aimed their efforts at helping men "manage and adjust to what was considered a finite bodily resource" (Marshall, 2006, p. 345). Aging itself was essentially a process of de-sexualization, and life beyond reproduction and sex was extolled as a virtue. Katz (1996) describes the dilemma faced in the early to mid-20th century that saw the emerging sciences of sexology and gerontology

at odds: One viewed sexual decline as natural and inevitable; the other challenged negative stereotypes of aging with an emphasis on vitality, activity, and independence.

The view of impotence gradually shifted from one of organic inevitability to one having psychological roots. By the end of the 20th century, continued sexual intercourse was viewed as not only healthy but a necessary component of successful aging (Marshall, 2006). During the last two decades of the century, urological research redefined impotence, renamed *erectile dysfunction* in 1992, as a disorder of organic causes—a matter of fluid dynamics (Bordo, 1998), a vascular event—rather than a psychological problem. Thus was constructed an “epidemic” (Marshall & Katz, 2002, p. 57) of erectile dysfunction (ED) for which age was but one risk factor among many.

The gradual medicalization of male impotence coincided with the introduction and marketing in 1998 by Pfizer of Viagra’s iconic “little blue pill” for treatment of erectile dysfunction. Viagra and its successor drugs not only revolutionized the medical management of ED but changed the landscape of sexuality and sexual expression in later life with profound effects for both old men and old women. The psychological and sociological outcomes have variously been referred to as the Viagra culture (Potts & Tiefer, 2006), the Viagra age (Marshall & Katz, 2002), the Viagra boom (Hoberman, 2005), and the “Viagrization” of America (Kingsberg, 2000, p. S-33).

Although potency, an erect penis, and heterosexual penetrative intercourse are central to hegemonic masculinity across the life course (Koedt, 1996; Marshall & Katz, 2002) they remain rooted in ideals of the activities and virility of younger men (Calasanti & King, 2005). Today’s ubiquitous availability of erection-facilitating drugs has emphasized the cultural mandate that even for *old* men, sexual functioning within a

heterosexual relationship remains solely defined as the ability to penetrate a vagina (Marshall & Katz, 2002; Potts et al., 2003), strengthening the sense of an *intercourse imperative* that structures late-life sexuality for both sexes. This new emphasis on late-life heterosexual intercourse resurrects the positive stereotype in which old age is characterized as being much like youth (Connidis, 2006, p. 143) and pushes the idea of an “enduring ‘successful’ sexuality (interpreted as orgasm via penile-vaginal sex) as the measure of ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’ old age (Potts et al., 2003, p. 711). Thus, male performance-enhancing drugs add another realm in the intersection of age and gender relations in which old people are pressured and expected to attempt to maintain youthful standards in old age. They also may have the effect of putting pressure on old men, particularly those in dating relationships, to “perform” or risk being rejected by female partners who believe they now have little excuse for erectile failures (Potts et al., 2003, p. 716).

Research Gaps and Research Questions

In 1986, Bulcroft and O’Connor noted that “little has been done in the theorizing or empirical investigation of heterosexual dating relationships in later life” (p. 397). Twenty-five years later, there is still little research specifically about dating and repartnering in late life. Although several excellent books about late-life dating, romance, and sexuality have been published in recent years in the popular press (see, for instance, Barusch, 2008; Sills, 2009; and Trafford, 2009), it is not uncommon for academic research reports to mention within the first few paragraphs the paucity or dearth of empirical information available.

A number of existing studies on repartnering have focused specifically on widows' and widowers' interest in remarriage (Carr, 2004; Davidson, 2000). Of these, some examine only widows (Moorman, 2006; Talbott, 1998; van den Hoonaard, 2002) and some only widowers (van den Hoonaard, 2010). The few that examine late-life heterosexual dating (Alterovitz, 2009; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986) have focused on the nature, function, and importance of dating relationships. Because there is no specific theory on repartnering in later life (Moorman, 2006), most research on late-life dating has been conducted using a variety of theoretical perspectives, including evolutionary theory, activity theory, marriage market theory, dialectical theory, socioemotional selectivity theory, and life span psychology.

The present research adds a new dimension to the late-life dating literature in a number of ways. Instead of focusing on relationship questions in existing dating partnerships, it explores the experiences of women and men who would *like* to be dating or who *may* be dating but who are not presently in committed relationships. It is about the *pursuit* of new romance or love in late life and thus focuses more on individual experiences than on a dating relationship. Additionally, relatively few studies on potential or existing intimate late-life relationships have focused on or included the lived experiences of old men (e.g., Moore & Stratton, 2005). Although the preponderance of late-life research has concentrated on old women—and is sometimes justified by the feminization of aging (Arber & Ginn, 1991)—factors other than demographics likely play a role. Men have proven difficult to recruit for social and behavioral science research at every age, and a number of researchers of late-life dating have attempted and failed to recruit men, turning their studies instead to the experiences of women (e.g., Dickson,

Hughes, & Walker, 2005). Thompson (2004b) attributed the lack of interest in old men at least partially to their degendered minority status.

In summary, academic interest in the topic of love and intimacy in late life has been both relatively scant and recent (Cooney & Dunn, 2001). Few studies have systematically analyzed old women's and old men's feelings and experiences associated with late-life dating, romance, and sexual intimacy, and I am familiar with none that has explored the pursuit of new love in late life via classified ads or the Internet.

Additionally, although gender and old age constitute organizing dimensions of the social world best viewed relationally, the association between the two, particularly in this arguably most relational of heterosexual gendered activities, remains theoretically and phenomenologically underexplored by both feminists and social gerontologists (Calasanti, 2003a). Men's (Thompson, 2004) and women's (Al  x et al., 2006) sense of their own masculinity and femininity in late life and how it affects possible new intimate relationships remains an open field of study.

Employing theoretical considerations on the intersection and intertwining of age relations and gender relations within a constructivist/interpretive paradigm, I pursued two research questions with this research. First, I sought to understand how unmarried—widowed, divorced, or always single—heterosexual women and men age 70 and older actively pursuing new intimate relationships view and describe their experience of the world of late-life dating, their place in it as aging men and women, and the dating partners they encounter. Second, I examined how, as men and women in aging bodies in a culture that devalues both old age and old people, they maintain, negotiate, or construct

their sense of manhood and masculinity or womanhood and femininity in the context of dating, romance and sexual intimacy.

“DON’T LOOK IT, DON’T ACT IT”:
AGE DISIDENTITY IN LATE-LIFE DATING

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Abstract

Guided by an intersectional framework of age relations and gender relations, we explored how internalized negative stereotypes of aging in general and one's own aging, in particular, shape the ways in which old men and women position themselves for finding romantic partners and how they manage identity to make themselves attractive romantic partners in an ageist society. We analyzed interview data from in-depth, semistructured interviews with 24 informants (11 women and 13 men) between the ages of 70 and 92 who were actively pursuing new romantic and intimate relationships using personal ads and Internet dating and matching sites. Through their personal ads, Internet profiles, posted pictures, and within the interviews themselves, we found that informants both maintained and subverted age and gender expectations. They consistently resisted a self-identity as *old* by invoking claims and affirmations of neither looking nor acting their chronological age. Simultaneously, they communicated admonitions to potential dating partners that *they* should not look or act old. Both the men and the women were seeking new romantic partners younger than themselves, with the men's mean lower age 21 years younger and the women's, 10 years younger.

Young at heart country woman, 74, widow of two years. People are usually astounded when they discover my age. I don't look it and I certainly don't act it.

– from an informant's Match.com ad

The most flattering thing you can say to an older American is that he 'doesn't look his age' and 'doesn't act his age'—as if it were the most damning thing in the world to look old. . . .

– Max Lerner in *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today*

Classified personal ads and Internet dating site profiles written by older adults seeking new romantic partners frequently contain claims of age denial, often utilizing the phrase, “don't look it, don't act it.” Although the “it” these advertisers do not look or act is not directly expressed, intended readers know what is meant, what is left out, and why. The advertiser does not look or act *old*. The word itself remains unarticulated because being (or being viewed as) old is something to be dreaded, avoided, rejected, and denied. The phrase “don't look it, don't act it” itself can be read or interpreted on several levels. At face value, it is a statement of age denial, an announcement for public consumption about what one is not. Simultaneously, it may also function as a self-affirming mantra, a reminder that “I am not one of *them*.” We suggest a third meaning expressed by this six-word phrase, a metamessage in the form of a linguistic imperative with an understood “you” as the subject of a command. Read from this perspective, the same words take on an implied warning to readers and potential dating partners: “I don't look it or act it. Don't *you* look it or act it, either.” In this study we explore the ways in which age and gender relations intersect to affect and inform informants' self-identities and the

judgments they hold about potential dating partners on the basis of appearance—how they look—and activity—how they act.

Theoretical Framework

Ageism, Age Self-Stereotypes, and Age Relations

This study is grounded in the consideration of an intersecting framework of ageism, age relations, and gender relations that foregrounds the experience of the pursuit of new romantic relationships in later life. Like racism and sexism, ageism—a term introduced by Robert Butler in 1969—is a form of prejudice and a source of oppression. Because ageism does not tend to be proscribed by political correctness (Levy, 2009), however, ageist beliefs may be implicitly held by a considerably higher proportion of people than is the case for either racist or sexist attitudes (Levi, 2001; Levy [citing Banaji, 1999]). Age is differentiated from other social locations and power relations because, regardless of previous status, power, authority—or lack thereof—and regardless of race, class, or gender, if we live long enough, we eventually reach the socially prescribed low-status position of old age. Because ageism is also a source of disadvantage that is internalized, it is eventually turned against one's own aging self in the form of self-stereotypes or self-perceptions (Levy, 2003, 2009). Typically, this transmutation of age stereotypes to self-stereotypes does not occur until later in life when the physical signs of the biological process of aging become more apparent. The age point at which the process occurs, however, is subjective and varied. Research suggests, for instance, that debilitating health conditions can bring on age self-stereotypes at younger ages (Hubley & Russell, 2009). Additionally, because most people do not become personally susceptible to negative age stereotypes until later in their lives, they

are unlikely to have acquired the kinds of resistive coping strategies that individuals who have been stigmatized lifelong may learn from their subgroup (Levy, 2009).

Ageism is therefore not only insidiously pernicious but may also constitute the most self-injurious of the forms of disadvantage and oppression. After a lifetime of exposure to a constant barrage of cultural age stereotypes, particularly through the medium of television (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005), negative attributes once applied to others now apply—or threaten to apply—to us. As we move from the targeter to the targeted, from the out-group to the in-group, from the oppressor to the oppressed, our first line of defense is denial. “Whether our quest is to age successfully or to be ageless, the need to deny old age lies at the heart of ageism. We deny that we are aging, and when forced to confront the process, treat it as ugly and tragic” (Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006, p. 16).

At the basis of societal ageism lies the concept of age relations, the system of inequality rooted in the assumption that different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another, thus proffering unearned privilege to the young or middle-aged—the not-old—at the expense of the old (Calasanti, 2003, p. 199; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). As a social organizing principle, age relations function to organize perceptions of old age by privileging youthfulness, creating a demand for looking and acting young.

Gender Relations

Gender relations are deeply rooted, often invisible “dynamic, constructed, institutionalized processes by which people orient their behaviors to ideals of manhood and womanhood, influencing life chances as they do so” (Calasanti, 2009, p. 472). Theorizing gender relations means focusing on the power differentials that underlie

gender inequalities that privilege men—giving them unearned advantage based solely on their position as males—while disadvantaging women. This perspective emphasizes the obvious but frequently ignored *relational* quality of gender that sets the stage for studying the linked experiences of men and women as they interact with one another.

Considerations of Intersection

Only fairly recently have scholars from sociology, psychology, men's studies, and women's studies (e.g., Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Calasanti, 2004; Krekula, 2007; Thompson, 1994) begun to acknowledge that age relations represent an inequality that affects both genders, albeit differently and at different paces. Men, for instance, who throughout much of their lives are privileged by virtue of their gender, lose status in late life compared to younger men but nevertheless often retain the advantages of gender over women (Meadows & Davidson, 2006). Aging women, whose status is more often based on remaining young-looking and desirable, more quickly become invisible.

Feeling one's age, viewing oneself as old or not, and being perceived by others as old are experiences that are directly and differentially affected not just by chronological and social age but also by gender. Theorizing age relations and gender relations means critically examining the inequalities of gender intersected by the inequalities of age that all old people are subject and subjected to. McMullin (1995) urges us to recognize that age and gender relations are, indeed, relational, organizing dimensions of the social world that cannot be treated as separate systems. "Older people are not just old, they are either men or women" (p. 37). Viewing the interlocking power relations of age and gender simultaneously—what Calasanti and Slevin (2001) refer to as "a gender lens on aging and an aging lens on gender" (p. 179)—enables a sharper, binocular focus on the

intersection of age, gender, and late-life dating attitudes toward self and others that we explore in this study.

Literature Review

Aging: Embodied and Gendered

Aging is an embodied experience, with the body the location of aging's most evident markers, the battlefield upon which age skirmishes are waged and truces and defeats are negotiated. The duality of the body as biological and experiential, material and socially constructed, means that the physical changes associated with the aging body—the ubiquitous announcements of age as gray hair, wrinkles, and sagging jaw lines and the physical challenges associated with aging—are interpreted, shaped, and expressed in accordance with age relations (Calasanti, 2005, p. 9), essentially becoming more than the sum of their parts. So powerfully symbolic and socially meaningful are these markers of age on and in the body that their eradication—or at the very least, their functional disguise—becomes a primary weapon in what is ultimately a futile battle (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

The physical changes in body and face that accompany old age are experienced differently by men and women. More so than men, women are subject to gendered ageism (Hatch, 2005), harsh judgment (Arber & Ginn, 1995), and expectations that they retain a youthful appearance despite advancing years. Women's aging involves dual oppressions—what Biggs (2004) calls a “double absence” (p. 49), being “not male” and being “not young,” more commonly referred to as the double standard of age and aging (Sontag, 1972). This interplay between age and gender has also been characterized in social gerontology as double jeopardy. Critical theorists warn, however, that an emphasis

on stigmatized identity represents not only an oversimplification but encourages the study of old women from a misery perspective. The double jeopardy assumption for old women “focuses on ageing as physical changes, thereby ignoring that ageing also includes aspects such as new experiences and values” (Krekula, 2007, p. 166. Although acknowledging that men today enjoy more lenience in allowing their age to show, scholars in men’s studies have pointed out that the cultural codes of masculinity that evolved over the past two centuries have made the juxtaposition of old *and* masculine an “unimaginable pair” (Thompson, 2004, p.1), leaving old men still essentially unstudied and invisible. (See, however, work by Calasanti, 2004, and Bennett, 2007).

Successful Aging and Age Denial

The culturally assimilated ideals of successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), characterized by low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and active engagement with life have been both lauded and criticized. Although the challenge to a disease model of aging has offered valuable insights into late-life potential, the model contains a prescriptive quality that ignores the life course impact of such social locations as race, class, and gender in its implication that aging is related to lifestyle choices and therefore depends on our own efforts (Cruikshank, 2003). The moral imperative and discipline to activity that are present in understandings of both successful and productive aging indicate a subtle underlying ageism and implicit devaluing of the old (Andrews, 1999; Calasanti, 2003; Katz, 2000) that Calasanti and Slevin (2001) summed up thus: “The goal of remaining active is to show that one is not really old. In this sense, successful aging means *not* aging, not being *old*” (p. 183).

The mandate to age successfully, actively, and productively is inextricably tied to issues and ideals of both gender and embodiment. Social construction takes us only so far. Despite well-fought battles and denial of aging, years take their toll, and bodies do decline (Cruikshank, 2003). At some point, most old people are confronted with the reality that the disability that eventually accompanies old age for most is not just an “ageist fantasy” (Fleming, 1999, p. 3) and that the physical limitations associated with aging “will happen to us despite diet regimens, lots of green tea, and exercise” (Holstein, 2006, p. 318).

Method

Recruitment

Based on successful recruitment strategies utilized for a pilot study on late-life dating (Levaro & Walker, 2007), initial recruitment efforts for this study focused on personal ads placed in a monthly newspaper claiming to be the state’s largest “50+” publication for “seniors and boomers.” The inclusion criterion for was a minimum age of 70. We mailed invitation letters to the writers of 83 “Friendship Ads” who had identified themselves as at least 70 years old and received just two responses. Interviews with those two informants revealed that they had not only placed ads in the newspaper but were also utilizing a variety of Internet sites in their search for potential new romantic partners.

Following a revised IRB-approved recruitment protocol, we expanded our recruitment efforts to the Internet. Searches for postings from women and men 70 years of age and older in four nearby cities’ Craigslist.org personal ads (“women seeking men” and “men seeking women”) identified five men between the ages of 71 and 85, all of whom readily agreed to be interviewed for this study. During the subsequent interviews,

four of the five from Craigslist reported having both posted and answered ads on a variety of Internet matching and dating sites, such as Match.com, eHarmony, SeniorPeopleMeet, and PlentyOfFish. Satisfied there was no difference between informants who placed and responded to ads, the first author joined Match.com under the moniker “OldGradStudent,” including only minimal personal information that clearly indicated the purpose and scope of the intended research. Because heterosexual women would have been less likely than men to search other women’s listings on Match.com and would not be sent “matches” to other women by the computerized system, the first author also conducted a filtered search for all women at least 70 years of age within 100 miles. Invitation letters describing the research were sent to the first 40 women through “MatchMail,” Match.com’s proprietary message system, and these efforts resulted in 15 additional participants. Two additional informants—individuals who were also actively seeking new romantic partners—were introduced to the interviewer by informants already interviewed and were thus acquired via “snowball” sampling resulting in a total of 24 informants.

Informants

The 11 women and 13 men we interviewed were recruited from a variety of print and Internet locations where individuals seeking new romantic relationships can place ads as well as view those posted by others. As described above, these included classified personals ads in a regional monthly newspaper aimed at “seniors and boomers” ($n = 2$); Craigslist.org, an Internet classified Web site that includes personal ads ($n = 5$); the Internet dating site Match.com ($n = 15$); and informant “snowball” leads ($n = 2$). The 11 women ranged in age from 70 to 82 ($M = 76$; $SD = 3.7$) and the 13 men ranged in age

from 71 to 92 years of age ($M = 77$; $SD = 6.0$). All were living independently, either in their own homes or in rented houses or apartments; all but one, who described herself as Native American and White, were White. Informants were well educated. All reported having attended college, and most ($n = 18$; 75%) had completed college, nine of them earning at least one graduate degree. Educational achievement did not assure financial parity, however. Annual incomes ranged from \$10,000 to \$70,000 or more, and their domiciles included a trailer home on a daughter's farm; a subsidized one-bedroom senior housing high-rise apartment; a tiny low-income rental house; middle-class suburban homes and condos; and an art- and antique-filled 1930s mansion on an urban estate. Except for a woman who described herself as preferring men "because they're equipped differently" but also as "open to a lesbian relationship if it happens to work out that way," all were heterosexual.

Table 1.1 shows informants' age, current marital status, and marital history. Just three of the informants had been married only once, and one woman and one man had remained single their entire lives. The remaining 22 described a varied mixture of marriages and relationship histories. Eight of the women (61.5%) and all but one of the men had been divorced at some point in their lives, seven of them either two or three times. In total, of those who had married, 13 (seven women and six men) had experienced the death of a spouse, and two had been widowed twice. Altogether, the 22 who had married totaled 45 marriages, 30 divorces, 15 deaths of a spouse, and a number of nonmarital cohabiting and LAT (living apart and together) relationships.

Table 1.1
Informants' Characteristics and Marital History ($N = 24$)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	N of marriages	N of divorces	Times widowed
Women					
Judith	74	Single	0		
Annie	73	Widowed	2	1	1
Ruby	74	Widowed	2	1	1
Ayla	75	Widowed	3	1	2
Merry	78	Widowed	2	1	1
Kathy	79	Widowed	2	1	1
Becca	80	Widowed	2	1	1
Olivia	82	Widowed	1		1
Patsye	70	Divorced	1	1	
Sarah	73	Divorced	2	2	
Jai	79	Divorced	2	2	
Men					
Mickey	71	Single	0		
Joe	76	Widowed	2	1	1
Jesse	78	Widowed	2	1	1
Harry	78	Widowed	1		1
	92	Widowed	3	1	2
Hadrian					
Zach	71	Divorced	3	3	
Gordon	71	Divorced	2	2	
Penn	73	Divorced	3	3	
Al	74	Divorced	1	1	
Gene	76	Divorced	1	1	
Tony	77	Divorced	3	2	1
Walt	80	Divorced	4	3	1

Each informant completed a short preinterview demographic profile that also included a question about health status. Sixteen of the informants (67%) rated their health compared with others their age as *excellent*; seven reported their health to be *good*, and just one, who was suffering from vertigo and heart problems, rated his health as *fair*. Of the 16 who rated their health as *excellent*, the list of current health challenges mentioned during the interviews included an array of ongoing problems—diabetes, deep-vein

thrombosis, carpal tunnel syndrome, squamous cell skin cancer, knees that are “starting to wobble,” a bad back, severe prostate problems, and bladder cancer. Informants’ relatively positive self-appraisals of health status despite serious health issues may have reflected an awareness of the desirability of good health to potential dating partners of both sexes.

Data Collection: The Interview

The first author interviewed each informant in a place of their choosing, most commonly in their homes but also in such public settings as a library or café and twice in her own home. The length of interviews ranged from one to nearly four hours with an average time of 1.8 hours. Each interview was digitally recorded, resulting in a total of 43 hours of recorded interview time. Interviews typically began with an invitation for informants to describe what had prompted them to undertake the pursuit of new love at this time in their lives and ended with an open-ended query about topics not covered that informants wished to discuss or thought would be important or interesting for the researcher. The interviewer’s age (64 at the time of the interview) may have contributed to informants’ comfort level as they shared personal details about their intimate lives, thus increasing both rapid rapport and trustworthiness. Topics, questions, and probes were often addressed as they arose, with an interview guide providing general direction for the conversation and serving as a prompt tool, as needed, and for final questions (Hermanowicz, 2002). Guided by theoretical considerations of age and gender relations, the questions asked during the interview were designed to encourage informants to think about or relate their experience “as a woman” or “as a man” in such areas as qualities of ideal partners (“dream guy” or “dream gal”); turn-ons and turnoffs; importance of dating

partners' age and appearance; subjective age; how aging affects feelings about self; and comments and descriptions of what came to mind when picturing an "old woman" and "old man."

Data Analysis

The first author transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim, yielding over 600 single-spaced pages of interview data for analysis. Additional data utilized in the analysis included informant demographics; interviewer field notes; the content of informants' ads, including their profiles and pictures; and e-mailed notes received by the interviewer from several of the informants after their interviews. Utilizing coding procedures similar to those recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Saldana (2009), we followed a recursive analytic process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis: familiarizing ourselves with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report (p. 87).

We began the first phase of the analytic process by entering all data into the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 10 (Verbi Software, 2010), followed by multiple readings of each transcript by the first author and single readings by the other two researchers. Concurrent with initial coding, the three authors met in weekly meetings to discuss each transcript and to share reactions and insights for coding and theme development. Themes defined for this study were derived primarily from categories under coding families identified as *qualities of ideal partner*, *turnoffs and deal-breakers*, *self-presentation in ads*, and *intersections of age and gender*. Sub-codes utilized included *misrepresentation or self-deceit?*, *double standards*, *looking for someone younger*, *criticizing old women/old men*, and *discourses on the meaning of age*, and *age embodied*.

Findings

In this section we discuss four overarching findings linking age and gender relations: challenges in maintaining age denial; disciplining the body to not look or act old; imperatives of not-oldness aimed at others; and the messages, both intended and possibly unintended, about age, appearance, and gender stereotypes contained in Internet daters' pictures.

“He’s not me!”: The Dissonance of Being Not-Old

Because old age represents a powerful category of social devaluation, most old people—old women and old men—assiduously avoid use of the word “old” as a self-applied adjective (Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000; Townsend, Godfrey, & Denby, 2006) and actively distance themselves from the category itself (Hurd, 1999). Our informants were no exception. Acknowledging the objective “oldness” of her chronological age of 80, Becca nevertheless dismissed personal identification with the adjective *old* and the ageist stereotypes it contains:

Eighty to me is undeniably old, and I don't *feel* old, as in 80 is old, but I'm not. So I'm willing to *say* that I'm old, but I don't believe it. I even look at the Elderhostel programs and I say, well, that's for old people. Great cognitive dissonance!

Hadrian, at 92 years of age the oldest person interviewed, reacted even more emphatically when asked to describe what came to mind when he heard the words, “old man.” His response was immediate, almost explosive: “He’s not me!” When asked what she felt was positive about aging, Merry, a very attractive 78-year-old who advertised her age as 70, retorted:

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm sorry, I just...I guess I always thought, I'm never going to get old. I'll always look the same and feel the same and be the same, but then I look at myself in the mirror and I realize, it's not

the same. I honestly don't like it.

As Calasanti (2005) reminds us, although much of what we consider old age is socially constructed, the realities of embodied age eventually make themselves known and felt. Those of our informants who most vehemently and defiantly disavowed being or feeling old—and sometimes lied about their chronological age—displayed the cognitive dissonance Becca mentioned as they negotiated that space between age denial and awareness of age-related change (Diehl and Wahl, 2010) in their bodies and ability. Art was the second-oldest of our informants, an intensely energetic 85-year-old pot-smoking pagan who rejected comparison with his age mates, writing in his online ad:

I must warn you – I do not think or act like my peers. Please do not judge me by the values they embrace, they may not fit. I cannot bring myself to sit in a rocking chair watching the parade go by because I AM the parade.

At the same time, he acknowledged during the interview that things were changing for him:

There's a dichotomy between my spirit and my bod [*sic*] that seems to be becoming more apparent or prominent, to others as well as myself. On the bus this morning I almost lost my balance, and fortunately there was a seat there. I was totally out of control—"Thank you. Sorry. Heh heh."—a little embarrassed. I thought, wow, I'm losing it. I was losing my ability, another indication. So sure, keep going, but the awareness of limitations is much keener now with me than it was.

Becca, who had denied feeling old at 80 but simultaneously acknowledged the inherent cognitive dissonance, spoke wistfully about what she called "a door that's been closed":

When I think about things that I like to do or have liked to do or have done because they needed to be done, I say I can't do those anymore—and then I realize I'm never going to do them again.

In the course of this research, we noted that informants rarely used the word

old. It was the unspoken modifier, sometimes expressed with a trailing-off sentence as in, “I know I’m no longer young, but...” We chose the phrase *not-old* to express what it seemed they were addressing. We view this hyphenation of adverb of negation plus adjective as subtly yet qualitatively different from the simple use of *not old* as in the statement, “I am not old.” That statement expresses one’s age space in terms of a socially perceived negative attribute that one is *not* and that must therefore be denied and renounced. In contrast, “I am not-old” is conceived here as a more positive statement of what one *is*.

[I] Don’t Look it, Don’t Act It: Disciplining the Body and Fighting It “Every Step of the Way”

“**Nobody says I have to look as old as I am.**” Across their lives, women’s social worth is more closely linked to physical appearance and socially defined attractiveness than is men’s (Hatch, 2005). Attractiveness, in turn, is linked to ideals of *youthful* beauty, and as faces and bodies change with age, the gradual decline in perceived attractiveness is typically more distressing for women. Because the simple act of growing older means the loss of social value (Garner, 1999), the impact of old age arrives earlier. As a woman in one of Hurd Clarke’s (2011) studies expressed it, “Women get old, men just age” (p. 77). Given sufficient resources, many women do everything in their power to stay the age-related changes in their appearance by engaging in beauty work through use of hair dye, makeup, cosmetic surgery, or nonsurgical cosmetic procedures (Furman, 1997; Hurd Clarke, 2008; Slevin, 2010). Among the women we interviewed, these practices and activities were sometimes described in terms reminiscent of warfare, a battle to discipline

the body (Bordo, 1989). Ruby (74), a country woman with little patience for fussing with hair and face, described her first skirmishes and future battle plan:

I'm not going to accept it. Bull! I fight it every step of the way. I'm getting older. So what? But nobody says I have to look as old as I am. That's my goal. When I was about 65, I looked at myself in the mirror and I didn't know who I was looking at. I didn't know that pale-faced old lady. About that time I heard that there was such a thing as permanent makeup, so as soon as I found someone who did it, I had my lips tattooed and eyeliner on the top and on the bottom. If I ever win the lottery, I am going to get a face lift. I don't want my face draggin' me down.

Despite declaring that she was “completely turned off by tattoos,” Merry (78) showed the interviewer her newly tattooed eyeliner and was also one of three women who revealed having had face lifts. She was “not attracted to men that really look old and act old” and had only recently broken up with a man 17 years younger. Looking considerably younger than her age was an important weapon in her arsenal. “I don't want to look like a lot of people that are my age, if I can help it.”

Jai had spent the majority of her adult life single and dating much younger men. At nearly 80 and still sexually active, she was proud of her looks, including her dark hair: “It so happens that, as you see, I'm a late grayer—this is not Miss Clairol, this is just me.” She discussed her own past steps to retain a youthful look:

Over the years, I have had a couple of face lifts. In the last three or four years I decided no more face lifts. I mean, you're pushing 80, there's no point in trying to look 40. So I'm not doing any more face lifts. They cost a lot.

Jai's acknowledgment of an approaching demarcation line (“pushing 80”) seemed to represent a certain capitulation to the realities of age. Her ending comment, however, and a lengthy recounting of declining income that followed suggested that the decision to

discontinue surgical beauty work might be driven as much by finances as graceful acceptance.

Because men's social worth is more closely linked to what they *do* (Garner, 1999) and less on physical appearance, they are not subject to as rigorous and early age judgment as are women in terms of physical appearance. Unlike women, who experience gendered disadvantage in relation to men at all ages, men are not oppressed across their lives as *men*, although they are disadvantaged as *old* men compared with younger men in terms of looks, power, and influence (Calasanti, 2004).

The men in this study who were dating—or hoping to date—much younger women acknowledged this reality and had given some thought to their ability to attract women as much as several decades younger. Walt was a competitive and physically fit 80-year-old who had consistently dated (and married) women 15 to 25 years younger. He was no more interested in dating women closer to his own age now than he had been in his younger years, particularly because they looked “old” to him. Here, apparently unaware of the double standard he was referencing, he acknowledged a perceived gender difference in self-appraisal but also hinted at a conscious effort to ignore signs of aging in his appearance:

I think it's easier for men because I think we're less critical of our looks. If I look in a mirror, I just take long enough to shave. I'm looking for the whiskers; I've gotta cut those things off. And never mind the wrinkles in my forehead. That's just part of aging. I don't dwell on it very much.

After having denied giving much consideration to his looks, however, he added, “But we men do still have that looking in the mirror. And I *don't* want to be old, but gosh, I'm definitely aging, and the old mirror tells me that.”

As is the case with gender, age is not simply something that we have or are but something we *do* (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Looking old—or not looking it—involves more than the signs of age in faces and bodies and energy level. We accomplish age via myriad mutually constituted performances—for instance, how we dress, style our hair, stand, walk, and talk (Laz, 2003), all of which provide indications by which others assess our levels of physical, social, and mental activity (Rexbye & Povlsen, 2007). Visual evidence of age also may be provided by the output of our activity, such as our handwriting (Levy, 2000). The informants in this study seemed to realize that although much that is associated with aging might be beyond their control, being viewed as not-old involved strategic choices and actions they could undertake. For one woman, it was reflected in her carriage and gait:

One thing that's important to me is being able to stand upright and march right along. Sometimes I'm stiff, but I manage to work it out and stand straight or sit straight. I want to continue to do that as long as I can.

For another, it involved wardrobe choices: “I hate that thing, that neck wattle. I stopped wearing turtlenecks because of *that*. It makes it worse ‘cause it goes over the edge of the turtleneck.” Eighty-two-year-old Olivia joked that her acceptance of her looks was due to dimming eyesight: “Every morning, I look in the mirror and I say, ‘Hello, you gorgeous creature.’ And then I put on my glasses.” Zach (71) credited good genetics and not being obese for his “youngish” good looks and said, “I’ve never worried about getting older. And even if I were going bald, I wouldn’t do a comb-over. I mean, that just looks goofy. I’ve always believed in living with the hand you were dealt.”

The trappings (or props) of age performance that might hint at frailty or disability become objects to be avoided by those who would be not-old, even when their use might

be indicated. “A cane just screams old lady,” argued Jai, after describing a number of falls over the previous six months and a friend’s recommendation that a cane might be in order.

Even though a number of my friends and acquaintances, whom I don’t think of as old . . . are now using a cane. Even though the ones covered by my insurance are free, I just don’t want them. If I could find a really hip cane, that’s okay, but something that *looks* like a cane just doesn’t appeal to me. I have a very nice walking stick that I picked up somewhere on a trail, and it’s just the right height and works fine.

“I swam a mile this week.” Although the women were more likely than the men to emphasize their not “looking it,” men and women were equally eager to provide examples of their activity levels and physical ability. These indications of their not “acting it,” represented important domains in which informants affirmed their not-old status to themselves, potential dating partners, and the interviewer. Among these examples were sexual interest and activity, a topic we have described in depth elsewhere (Levaro, Walker, & Hooker, 2011). Here we discuss data about their other leisure activities.

The value of being “busy” and staying active has been of gerontological interest since the middle of the last century (Katz, 2000), and the cultural imperative—or moral regulation (Eckerdt, 1986)—has not been lost on our informants: Not acting old means being active. Patsye (70), when asked what “old” meant to her, paused and then answered, “Disabled. Not even disabled, *unable*. I will feel old when I’m no longer able to live the life that I see myself living, unable to lead the life that has made me feel this is who I am.”

Excepting several men living in relative social isolation, nearly every informant reported having a full and busy social, cultural, professional, recreational, and civic

calendar that included a wide range of activities: hiking, hunting, boating, and fishing; growing and selling medicinal herbs and bonsai trees; committees; real estate; local and state politics; intellectual and philosophical endeavors; religious affiliations; writing books, motivational speaking, teaching, and modeling; and teaching computer and Internet classes. Several of the women were deeply involved with animals: Sarah trains horses; Ruby socializes with mule skinnners and does 50-mile endurance rides on her horse; Annie raises an unusual breed of hunting dog and has a herd of adopted mustangs.

She exclaimed:

I'm still a tomboy at heart. I'm out there with my horses. I mean, I got *dumped* the other day quite hard, and I still hurt like hell. And you know, at my age I shouldn't be riding young horses that are likely to dump me 'cause I don't bounce as well as I used to.

Hadrian (92), who had recently started dating Becca (80), laughed when he described how she expected him to fit into her busy life:

She made it plain on our first meeting that she was really looking for somebody who would be there in the evening and at night and breakfast—and then get the hell out of the way, so it wouldn't impinge on the things she had to do!

Although looks, culture, intellect, and sexuality were important to 79-year-old Jai, she seemed most proud of her physical activity level, which was key to her denial of embodied old age:

By the time you're 79—I'll be 80 in February—an awful lot of people automatically discount you because they just feel, well, you know, this is going to be an old woman. And I don't think of myself as an old woman. I swam a mile on Monday of this week. I don't do it often because it takes me forever, but I have good endurance, obviously. And so every several months, I do a mile without stopping, just to be sure I still can. Most of the time I just do half a mile. But half a mile is minimal for me. And then, I think it might've been the same day, I walked a couple miles.

Only when age represented something accomplished, a badge of honor, pride, or achievement, were informants anxious for others to know how old they really were. Merry, for instance, related her delight when she finally admitted to a man she had formerly dated that she had not been truthful about her age—but only because she didn't "look it." Ayla (75) said, "My next-door neighbor, she found out maybe six years ago that I was five years older than her, and she was almost angry. 'Well, you certainly don't *look* it,' as if I had done something wrong." Eighty-year-old Walt was the self-proclaimed king of his exercise class at the YMCA:

I do a spin class, biking for 45 minutes. Five days a week I do that. And I really go, so I'm getting a reputation as being the speedy guy. Most everybody in there is probably 55 and lower, so I'm the oldest guy. And so the instructor said, "Can I tell them how old you are?" And I said, "Sure, I guess so."

Don't [You] Look It or Act It: Imperatives and Admonitions

The admonishing imperative in the phrase, "don't look it, don't act it," communicates in subtext the message to potential dating partners: "*I* don't look or act old. Don't *you* look or act it if you want me to be interested in you." The appraisal of what constituted others' looking old was sometimes compared to those people in informants' lives with whose aging they were perhaps most intimately acquainted. The aged figures most often summoned from memory were "like my mother" or "a grandmother type." Eighty-year-old spinning king Walt said:

If someone looks like my mother and comes on to me—my age group would be that way—she would look old to me. I'm dropping off Match.com because what they're sending me are pictures of women that look a lot older to me than are about my age. And they're looking old to me, like my mother, and I'm being turned off with that lot.

Women, too, often invoked mothers as modal figures when noting their own aging appearance. Merry, for instance, said, “I don’t think of myself as being 78, but when I look in the mirror, I start seeing my mother in my face and my hands. It’s amazing.”

Men more often mentioned the grandmother type as a woman they wished to avoid. This grandmother type was fundamentally a conjuring of cultural stereotypes of old women: She was so identified by how she looked, what she did or did not do, and her life focus: She might have short white “Q-tip hair” and spend her days either in a rocking chair knitting or tending grandchildren. Not only did the physical appearance and role of such an old woman turn men off, but additionally, these men wanted to be “number one” in a woman’s life. They worried that a woman’s preoccupation with grandchildren would leave no room for them and their activities with a desired new partner.

Informants were quick to identify those attributes of an “old woman” or “old man,” the presence of which they variously disguised, resisted, removed, avoided, or ignored in themselves, which would make others undesirable to them. In addition to those qualities previously noted, these included physical attributes and behavioral tendencies: fat, overweight, stoop-shouldered, crippled up, shriveled up, sagging face, neck wattle, arm wings, crinkly flesh, liver spots, false (or no) teeth, balding, shuffling, limping, frumpy, lots of wrinkles, dressed dowdy, maybe scraggly, looking tired or hurting, tottering on a walker, a codger or a geezer, cantankerous old man, a mean and bitter and bossy old lady, fussy about everything, hard to please, inactive, uninterested, sitting around doing nothing (or knitting or crocheting or watching soaps), and interested only in church, pets, or grandchildren. The powerfully negative composite image of physical and behavioral old age painted by this litany of descriptors verges on the comical—until one

startles at the recognition that this list exemplifies the embodied nature of age relations and the ageism they produce.

Perceptions of not looking or acting old are tightly intertwined with one's own subjective or felt age. Two of the questions we asked concerned informants' felt age: *How old do you feel? Is there a difference between your age on the outside and on the inside?* Table 1.2 displays informants' actual age, their felt age, and the age range of their ideal partner.

Table 1.2
Informants' Chronological Age, Felt Age, and Ideal Partner Age ($N = 24$)

Pseudonym	Age	Felt age	Partner age range	Comments
Women				
Patsye	70	55–65	60-73	I don't want to have to take care of them
Annie	73	38	65–73	I don't want to bury another husband
Sarah	73	really old right now		Young enough so he can get around
Ruby	74	54	70s	If older, he couldn't keep up with me
Judith	74	40	64–75	I don't want to take care of an old man
Ayla	75	old is an attitude	68–76	Near my own age and healthy
Merry	78	55–60	60–70	Closer to 60
Kathy	79		73–80	Eighty looks very old to me
Jai	79		35–99	I don't draw any lines
Becca	80	58; All the ages I've ever been	younger	I find myself attracted to men about the age of my 57-year-old son
Olivia	82	like a child reaching out for heaven	75–85	I do hope for somebody that's going to take care of me and outlive me
Men				
Zach	71	61	50–60+	Sexy and blonde
Gordon	71	62	45–68	I put down to 45 just to see what I could get
Mickey	71	not old at all	40–50	The idea is to get a younger woman
Penn	73	25–30	52–73	I'm lookin' for that '57 Chevy
Al	74	Age is a state of mind over matter	64–74	Wise; equal; I don't want there to be any taboos
Gene	76	40-ish	55–70	Vital; young enough to want to <i>do</i>
Joe	76	65	60–72	Physically robust enough for my taste

Tony	77	a young 77	55–75	Probably 50s or 60s
Jesse	78	70	60–75	Somebody that talks in my time
Harry	78	70	55–70	Anybody that'll love me
Walt	80	60	40–65	Forty would be the very bottom of the age bracket
Art	85		65+	
	92	70	65+	In her 70s, tall, husky, affectionate
Hadrian				

Perhaps the most interesting answer was provided by 80-year-old Becca, who first replied, “Would it be cheating to say I’m all the ages I’ve ever been?” She followed this by saying, “I don’t think I ever feel 80. I don’t think I’ve gotten to that age yet.” Her *wished-for* age, expressed in a follow-up e-mail, was much younger:

Although I said I feel all the ages I’ve ever been, if a genie came out of a bottle to grant me just one wish, I’m ready for him: My wish would be that I could be physically exactly as I was in 1987, when I was 58—fully functional, still slender, and relatively youthful-looking, and just recovered from a heavy addiction to nicotine. And it’s interesting that that’s about the age of the men I find attractive!

Adamant about her preference for someone younger, Becca was dismayed when she fell for 92-year-old Hadrian, 12 years her senior *and* incapable of fulfilling her desire for sexual intercourse. She was far from alone in dreaming about a younger partner. As Table 1.1 shows, both women and men reported seeking partners younger than themselves, with the men’s mean lower age 21 years younger and the women’s, 10 years younger.

In the following sections we discuss two prominently mentioned admonitions concerning age-related looking and acting that were indicated by informants to be virtually transgressive qualities in dating partners: being fat and being unable to keep up.

Don’t be a “big fat pig.” The losing battle with weight with increasing age exemplifies the intersection of age relations and gender relations in age embodiment. Weight gain with advancing age is common for both women and men but in a figurative sense, they bear that weight differently. Although both are measured against physical

standards of youthfulness, older men are more frequently excused for not living up to younger masculine body ideals, especially if they bring such other desirable traits to a potential relationship as money, influence, power, strength, and dominance. Body consciousness—and its accompanying preoccupation with fat, diet, and weight—is altogether a more salient facet of the female life course in contemporary Western culture, what Bordo (1993) has described as “one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century” (p. 186). At a time when the average American woman weighs more than ever before (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999), the culturally ideal female body type is also thinner and less attainable than ever before (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994).

Media barrages create and sustain associations between perfect female bodies, beauty standards, and youthfulness that are internalized early by young girls. These images and expectations become embedded in women’s sense of the acceptableness of their bodies—to themselves and others, both male and female—into later life, setting the stage for ageism enacted toward and through bodies. Weight gain as a marker of aging has therefore been viewed as a primarily female concern (Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993). Women experience the cultural burden doubly, judging themselves and in turn being judged by the male gaze in what Hurd Clarke (2011) describes as forms of “patriarchal oppression” (p. 22). So distressing is the very *idea* of becoming fat or fatter with age that weight has been reported second only to memory loss as the largest concern of older women (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984).

In the life worlds of the people in our study, where *old* is viewed as a truncated “four-letter word,” the word *fat* is the second-ranked word of judgment. Of all the perceived negative attributes of the aging body, no other word was uttered more

frequently by both men and women nor voiced with as much disdain and disgust.

Informants' association of "fatness" with age was apparent in their generic descriptions of *an old woman* and *an old man*, where being overweight was often the first thing mentioned:

Most older men have a paunch on 'em, you know, a big belly, they all have big stomachs, so I'm trying to lose mine, but I have a little bit of one still.

Fat was also the most frequently voiced "turnoff" for potential partners.

I hate to admit it, but I don't like fat ladies. I wouldn't want to be involved with a severely overweight woman.

I watch my weight, men can watch theirs, and if they don't take the trouble, forget it. I could be friends with somebody who is overweight, but I'm not romantically attracted, at all.

Being fat was frequently associated with inactivity. For Annie, a 73-year-old

horsewoman, being fat reflected not only age and lifestyle choices but negative personality attributes, as well:

He'd better not be fat, a big fat pig who has let himself go. A man who is big and fat, that says to me that he sits on the couch too much or he drinks too much, or maybe a combination. He's a fat pig physically, and he's also a lazy pig mentally. When a profile says a few pounds overweight, I tend to back off. He's not gonna get on one of my horses! And he's not gonna be able to, either. So don't tell me you're a few pounds overweight when in fact you are obese. Get a clue!

When first considered, Annie's use of the phrase "let himself go" reflects an interesting twist of the intersection of age and gender. This phrase, containing as it does hints of failure to maintain a youthful appearance, is more often used to critically describe old women than old men (Jacoby, 2011). Annie appeared to be using it to criticize a generic man's laziness and inactivity, however, thus making the criticism one pertaining more to men's "acting" than men's "doing."

Several men held potential dating partners to body standards that they themselves did not meet. In his photo-less profile, 71-year-old Gordon, judged by the interviewer as *obese*, described himself as “stocky” and seeking a “45 to 68 year old HWP lady.” Unfamiliar with the term HWP, the interviewer asked what it meant. He replied “height-weight proportionate” and further explained:

I had a lady answer an ad. No picture. And I says [*sic*] to myself, “I’m not gonna go,” but finally I did. I got there, and she was 5-2. Height-weight proportionate? Ha! I would say she weighed about 240.

Of men who are judgmental of women’s bodies and weight but appear not bothered by their own, one woman said:

First of all, I don’t like fat men. I’ve found that men all think they’re gorgeous. They *all* think they’re gorgeous. They can be a hundred pounds overweight, and they’ll say: “I’m a few extra pounds.” Yeah, a few extra pounds a hundred pounds ago!

Other women seemed somewhat more forgiving of such men’s underlying motivation:

[When I met him] here he was, at least 20 years older than the picture he’d sent [and] very round, but in his eyes and the way he described himself in that profile, I think that is the image that he still has of himself.

Don’t lag behind, slow me down, or hold me up. Admonishments regarding physical inability were most commonly heard from women and were among the primary reasons they gave to eliminate an otherwise potentially interesting man:

I mean, when I walk with him on the street, I have to *crawl*. And I’m not the most patient person in the world. I’m fine when it’s somebody I don’t know very well, now and again, but to make it a daily thing? No, I don’t think so. He can’t be a companion. He can’t participate. (Annie, 73)

I’ve only had one experience with an older man. He told me he was 74. So I met him for lunch one day, and I got there a little earlier than he did, and when he got out of his car, I thought that couldn’t be him. Because when he came across the street, he didn’t walk, he *shuffled*. I’m sure he was in his mid-80s. (Merry, 78)

Only one of the men, 76-year-old Joe, complained similarly about a woman's inability to keep up with him, either because none of the men reported dating a woman his age or older or because their requirements for athleticism were not as stringent as Joe's. Joe and his late wife, his senior by over eight years, had hiked together virtually every weekend for 30 years. Finding a woman who could accompany him on strenuous hikes was a primary goal, and he had taken to virtually testing candidates to ascertain whether they were "physically robust enough" for his taste.

I did have one woman who walked every day and had lived in [city name] for many years but had never been for an actual *hike*. She'd never gone out to the [nearby river name] or the [nearby mountain] area, and she agreed to come with me. We started out going up the falls trail. There's a 1,500-foot vertical climb that I usually do there. After about 800 feet, she'd had enough. We had a nice time. I was very gentle; I didn't push her, you know. But I'm not willing to try to change somebody if they've, at that age, I mean, if they don't like to do that, well, that's too bad. We're just not matched.

In a twist of irony, Joe later admitted that just as he had rejected women for their lack of physical endurance, other (younger) women had rejected *him* for similar reasons.

It's been rather painful at times. I've had a couple, actually three, budding relationships that the women have terminated, largely because they felt that I was too old or because of the age difference. These were all in their late 60s. The last one said she liked and respected me, but I didn't have enough energy for her.

Toward the end of the long interview, Joe excused himself to use the restroom. It was the interviewer's perception that he shuffled. Joe maintained an image of himself as a strong, active hiker, a man who could conquer vertical heights that might stop other men—and women. This discrepancy between subjective and objective appraisal highlights a number of men informants' application of different standards (or perhaps more gendered rules) to themselves than to others.

Only women mentioned avoidance of romantic partners with physical impairment or limited ability due to fear of what a possible future partnership or marriage might entail: increasing frailty, incapacity, illness, caregiving, and death. Seven (64%) of the 11 women had been widowed, one of them twice. Five women mentioned worrying about having to take care of or “bury another” husband, a finding also reported by others (e.g., Carr, 2004). Olivia (82), who had lost a husband and two long-term lovers to death, said, “I do hope for a younger person, somebody that’s going to take care of me and outlive me.”

Talking Pictures: Impression Management, Out Loud and *Sotto Voce*

First looks, first hooks. Most of the informants (19; 79%) included at least one and generally a variety of pictures of themselves in their online ads or profiles. If, as many suggested, a person’s posted age is the first filter by which potential partners are selected, appearance is a close second (Whitty, 2008). Pictures provide immediate information and invite a closer look or, as one informant called it, the “hook to get you to open something.” As carriers of multilevel messages that may be both calculatedly purposeful and subliminally informational, pictures represent data not only for prospective intimate partners but for the researcher, as well. In this final section we address profile pictures’ impact on “relationship shoppers” (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010) and our interpretations of the meta messages they may contain countering gendered stereotypes about older adults.

Informants uniformly described pictures as a vital and necessary method of initial screening, grading, and sorting, often ignoring ads with no picture: “I go skimming through my e-mail, and the ones that don’t have pictures, they are out” (Art, 85). The

primary value of pictures is that they offer the double advantage of providing some indication of both appearance and age:

If I see a blonde, even if the picture's not good, I open it up right away. I've probably opened up every blonde in the searches I've done—unless she was, you know, 82 years old with one of those beehive jobs. (Zach, 71)

Some informants explicitly mentioned the requirement of a picture in their ads.

Overweight Gordon (71), whose own ad did not contain a picture, included the warning, “No picture, I will not respond. Picture for picture.” His explanation for this requirement echoed the sentiments of other informants and recent research findings regarding impression management, strategic misrepresentation, and deception in online ads (Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Toma & Hancock, 2010; Whitty, 2008):

Unfortunately, I've found a lot of women—and I've heard men do the same thing—that just don't quite tell it like it is. If you don't get a picture, they'll tell you certain things, and you meet 'em and, you know, they look 80 instead of 60, like they said they were.

Another man put it less kindly:

I should tell you that a lot of women lie. I know men lie, too, but I think woman lie more than men when they're on these sites. They lie about three things: their age, their weight, and their height.

See how I live: Men at home. Of the nine men whose ads included pictures, more than half showed them in their home setting. No picture of a woman explicitly displayed her home environment. Zach's pictures showed him sitting proudly in the midst of a pristine home with furniture he had designed and built himself:

I send them pictures of my home. I mean, I'm proud of my house. Neatness, cleanliness, all these things are important to me. You can see my home. It always looks like this. It's neat and orderly, and I'm neat and orderly. I like the way it's decorated. It's kept clean and neat, et cetera.

Mickey's picture showed him standing in front of his house and garden, and his profile described his yard and menagerie of animals. Joe, the hiker, included one close-up picture of himself with a backpack and wooded background but also one sitting on a chair in his living room. Jesse had had several women move into his farmhouse with him since the death of his wife, none of lasting duration. His picture showed him sitting in the living room next to an interesting antique lamp, a cowboy hat on his head.

The unifying theme in the men's pictures is one of hearth and home, of inviting warmth. The pictures are an invitation, a self-promotion that seems to announce: "I am not that macho guy who only cares about guy things. I have a nice home that I would like you to visit and feel comfortable in. I have nice things that I take care of. I am a homeowner and financially secure. I am solid and safe and reliable, a homebody. You can make a home with me; you can feel safe with me; you can trust me."

See how active and vital I am: Women at play. In vivid contrast to the men's pictures, those posted by 12 of the 13 women tell a different story—one not of hearth and home but of adventure, activity, vibrancy, passion. They seem to be assuring the viewer of their not-old status, inviting him to join the adventure: "I am not the Q-tip-haired grandmother type, sitting in a rocking chair with a babe in arms and watching the world go by. I am interesting, exciting, engaged with life. Come join me!" Countering expectations and stereotypes of both age and gender, the women's pictures show them at play: Annie atop one of the mustangs she has adopted and gentled; Judith at an exhibition of her art; Patsye at a vineyard; 82-year-old author, dramatic motivational speaker, and model Olivia, arms outstretched, showing her as she describes herself, "Like a child reaching out to heaven"; 78-year-old Merry, perched in shorts astride a massive

motorcycle; Ruby, the endurance rider and mule skinner, in jeans and a bandana relaxing on a mud-spattered raised car with gigantic tires. Although the men's written profiles described their hobbies, interests, and favored outdoor activities, no men's profiles included pictures showing them so engaged.

Discussion and Conclusion

Age Tensions

Gerontologists have made numerous attempts to carve the expanse of years that we call old age into narrower age segments with specific nomenclatures (e.g., Neugarten's young-old and old-old, 1974). As with the members of Hurd's (1999) senior center "line-dancing gang," who vigorously distanced themselves from any aged category by proclaiming, "We're not old," none of our informants, ranging in age from 70 to 92, wished to be associated with that word or categorization, going to considerable lengths to justify its misapplication to them. Not a single person wanted to "own" a word that at least one of the authors had grown fond of using with conscious political purpose (see Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). To those who *are* old, however, *old* is a word for other people.

Informants' attempts to hide not only the tell-tale signs of years lived but also the specific *number* of years while being pleased to be recognized for not looking or acting their age reveals the conflicts and tension they must navigate in becoming and being old. There is no intrinsic honor in being old. To gain any credit at all based on one's chronological age, that number must be divulged, since it alone supplies the reference point for positive comparison. Thus, the only status to be gained with age is attained if one does not represent others' expectations of how a person that age should look or act. *Successfully* aging means not appearing to age, maintaining the physical appearance and

abilities of the *actual* not-old. Failing to attain either may ultimately be construed as a shameful failure—*unsuccessful* aging.

Identity Management

Identity management (Biggs, 2005) played a key role in how the men and women we interviewed chose to present themselves in ads or online dating site profiles. They struggled to balance realistic awareness of age-related change (Diehl & Wahl, 2010) with the demands of the dating marketplace, an arena where being, looking, and acting old means being less relationally marketable (Coupland, 2000) and where de Beauvoir's "biological repugnance" (1970) toward manifestations of age is aimed equally at others and self.

Lying—or strategic misrepresentation—particularly about age and weight, was part of this process. Considered a secondary compensatory strategy for warding off the application of negative stereotypes, lying represents a method of disidentification, as does many older adults' not viewing themselves as old (Richeson & Shelton, 2006). Our findings—including the interviewer's subjective comparison of informants' pictures, profile descriptions, and their actual looks—suggest that posted information was strategically used by many informants to give an impression of their being younger and more attractive than they might appear in real life. Some women and men reported lying about their age and posting pictures taken as many as 10 years earlier in order to appear more attractive and desirable. Misrepresenting one's age has one additional benefit: It allows a Match.com member to slip under an age limit that may be set by seekers performing a digital search for "matches." An upper age of 70 seems to be one of these boundaries. In a recent study examining age and gender differences in strategic

misrepresentation in online dating ads, Hall et al. (2010) found that at younger ages, only male daters typically misrepresented their age. At ages 50 and over, however, both women and men were more likely than were younger daters to lie about their age, a finding consistent with tenets of age relations and the privilege of youth. Intertwined gender relations help explain and differentiate the reason each lies: Women were more likely to misrepresent their age in order to match *men's* preferences for a younger partner, whereas men's motivation for lying had more to do with attracting a *younger* woman.

Age and gender relations were also operative in both women's and men's stated preferences for younger partners and were consistent with findings reported by others (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). Although the widowed women sometimes justified this desire with a hope to avoid having to "bury another husband," women who had not been widowed were also interested in younger men. It may be easier to look and feel younger when *with* someone younger and more energetic and when engaged in activities that are commonly associated with more youthful persons. Merry, for instance, was eager to show the interviewer pictures of a motorcycle trip she had taken with a much younger lover and his "biker" friends. Younger men's greater sexual functioning provides another reasonable rationale for women in their 70s to prefer younger men, (Levaro, Walker, & Hooker, 2011), and patriarchal gender relations have always provided a cultural norm for men to "go younger."

In addition to the "pull" factors of younger partners, there were "push" factors, as well. Men and women uniformly reported finding potential partners near their age unappealing, sometimes noting their discomfiting resemblance to a parent or grandparent. Because larger age differences conform to traditional (patriarchal) gender

relations and are thus not socially sanctioned, the men in this study appeared to feel both entitled and encouraged to give finding a younger woman a try.

Chronological age versus subjective age. Many older people have reported their felt age to be eight to 15 years younger than their chronological age (Barak & Schiffman, 1981; Kaufman & Elder, 2002; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, & Smith, 2008), with discrepancies between subjective and actual ages becoming more pronounced with advancing chronological age, especially for women (Montepare & Lachman, 1989). A number of studies have found a correlation between self-rated health and functioning and subjective age (Hubley & Russell, 2009), as well as lack of psychological morbidity and positive attitudes toward aging (Bowling, See-Tai, Ebrahim, Gabriel, & Solanki, 2005). As much as 80% of the variance between subjective age groups remained unexplained, however. The relatively high percentage of unexplained variance in studies seeking to understand the gap in years between chronological age and subjective age reflects “the complexity of subjective variables” (Bowling et al., 2005, p. 494). Hubley and Russell (2009) suggest additional research with samples that include reported health conditions commonly viewed as age-related or individuals who use such age-related devices as hearing aids, canes, or walkers. In our study, *not* using such devices—Jai’s reluctance, for instance, to use a cane because it “screamed old lady”—seemed to be part of the role or mask (Ballard, 2005; Biggs, 1997) of not “acting it,” a key to a younger felt age.

Rejecting and Projecting the Aged Reference Group

In her explanation of stereotype embodiment theory, Levy (2009) describes the internalization of age stereotypes as a four-component process that occurs in two directions: “top-down (from society to the individual) and over time (from childhood to old age)” (p. 332). The process of acquiring self-stereotypes is thought to entail two

stages: In the first stage, aging individuals become part of the membership group that is considered, at least by others, to be old. Although this point may well be an artificial demarcation—enrollment in Social Security, for instance—it is nevertheless of cultural importance. In the second stage, aging individuals identify with others in the same category and thus join the aged reference group (Levy, 2003). “The length of time needed to add participation in the reference group to participation in the membership group is likely to vary according to the negativity of an individual’s aging stereotypes. That is, the more negative the aging stereotypes, the more resistance there would be to identifying with the old” (p. P203).

This two-stage understanding of age denial and age (reference group) identity may help explain the informants’ sometimes vociferous negative comments about those whom they perceived as looking or acting old or as exhibiting negative characteristics of old age. Research on age stereotypes has traditionally focused on those who hold ageist beliefs, that is, younger adults or the “targeters,” rather than older adults, the “targets” (Levy, 2009, p. 332). Our research contributes to the growing understanding not only of the effects of age and gender relations on the targets’ sense of themselves as aging individuals but also on potentially wider ramifications of their negative self-perceptions as these are projected back out toward others, creating yet another loop of ageist (and sexist) reinforcement. In this case, the reactive antipathies are essentially preemptive—our informants have, in their own minds, not yet reached the shore of old age—and would prefer to stay on the ship a while longer. Their targets have already reached their destination and await *them*.

Subverting Expectations of Age and Gender

The findings from the analysis of informants' posted pictures in their online profiles suggest that informants publicly positioned themselves, either consciously or unconsciously, in an attempt to subvert normative age and gender expectations of how women and men 70 and older *are* in the world. In portraying themselves as interesting, active, and engaged in endeavors not typically associated with women and femininity—among them, taming mustangs, mule-skinning, and “hog” riding—the women subverted age and gender stereotypes, declaring unequivocally, “I am not an *old woman*.” The men, in contrast, countered expectations or mandates of hegemonic masculinity by emphasizing the comfort of their homes.

Reflexive Note: Aging Researchers Researching Aging

One problem with gerontology is that most gerontologists are not themselves old. In a discussion on potential sources of research bias associated with specifically intergenerational contexts, Biggs (2005) suggests that “older people talking with or about older people may generate different data from young people talking with or about older people and vice versa” (p. S124). What might our own age perspective mean for the validity of our findings? None of the three authors is young. More to the point, the first author and interviewer is of “a certain age” (Rubin, 1980), having reached that official milestone that marks the beginning of old age, at least by government definitions. Her age may have contributed to increased comfort for both male and female informants, particularly when discussing sexuality, and this comfort may have resulted in “thicker” data. She also struggled with issues of age identification while conducting this research, expressed in this reflexive note:

The realization that I was in the “target age zone” for many of these men rather stunned me. Most of these guys felt like old men to me! I realized

that my feelings were little different from those of the female informants who described with a measure of critical distaste how “old” some of the men they met were—often men near their own ages. At a time when I was well underway with interviews, someone not associated with the study asked me how or why I had selected 70 as the minimum age for participation. When I later thought reflexively about it, I realized that I had not wanted to study “myself,” that is, people I considered my contemporaries. How ironic that in the minds of some of the men I was interviewing, I would have been deemed too old.

Limitations and Conclusion

Interpretation of our findings or attempts at generalization require caution.

Although purposive sampling of older women and men seeking romantic relationships represents a strength in terms of understanding certain aspects of self and self-presentation, it limits conclusions to this particular group of older adults. Despite similar findings of age disidentity—viewing oneself as not looking and acting old—noted by numerous researchers (e.g., Biggs, 2005; Hurd Clark, 2001, 2011; Katz, 2000), we do not know if and how the men and women we interviewed might differ in their judgment of themselves and each other from others of similar age who are not proactively seeking new romantic partners, particularly in so public a venue. The experience of being on the online “dating market,” an activity that Heino and colleagues (2010) call *relationshopping*, involves a commodification of self and appraisal of and by others that may be much more critical than what might be experienced in day-to-day living. Men and women might, for instance, exhibit more tolerance for physical signs of aging in others if they were not viewing them as potential dating partners. Old women might not be as critically conscious of their aging appearance if they did not feel they must compete with younger women for male attention.

We set out with this study to acquire a more nuanced understanding of how heterosexual women and men in the dating marketplace position themselves as attractive dating partners in an arena in which age relations have the potential to disadvantage them both, although not equally. Both women and men utilized denial and age disidentity to hold age self-perceptions at bay, taking pride in engaging in physical activities that allowed them to compare themselves favorably to younger people. The old men allowed glimpses of their growing unease as they attempted to navigate the space between the internal image of themselves and the undeniable aging physicality of their bodies, but they aggressively resisted joining the aged reference group about which they maintained such negative stereotypes. Unlike the women, who were not only structurally more subject to gendered ageism but also turned that internalized disgust inward against themselves, the men exhibited remarkable ability to construct a subjective self-image that often failed to meet objective reality.

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“I’M OLD, I’M NOT DEAD”:
SEXUALITY, AGE, AND GENDER RELATIONS AMONG LATE-LIFE DATERS

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Abstract

Using an intersectional framework of age relations and gender relations, we examined orientations to sexual activity and the importance of sex in the dating lives of men and women over the age of 70. We analyzed interview data from in-depth, semistructured interviews with 24 informants (11 women and 13 men) between the ages of 70 and 92 who were actively pursuing new romantic and intimate relationships using personal ads and Internet dating and matching sites. Contrary to ageist stereotypes depicting old people as asexual and earlier research findings that older adults might settle for alternate intimate activities, we found that the majority of the women and men expressed interest in a romantic relationship that included sex and viewed penetrative intercourse as normative, definitive, important, and desirable. Both men and women were seeking younger partners, with men's age goals considerably younger. Nearly all of the men were sexually active with younger partners, with over half either using or holding samples of drugs for the treatment of erectile dysfunction (ED). A far smaller percentage of the women were currently dating or sexually active, and none had experience with partners who required the functional assistance of ED drugs.

It has become *de rigueur* to introduce academic discussions of late-life sexuality by contrasting two culturally available discourses or storylines (Jones, 2002) concerning old people and sex: a mythic, culturally dominant *asexual* discourse depicting old people as either no longer interested in or no longer capable of sexual relations and an explicitly counter *liberal* discourse of lifelong sexuality and sexual activity (Jones, 2002). Between the two floats a third discourse addressing the distaste associated with any possibility of sexuality in old people that might be termed *mocking/disgusting*. The latter is readily apparent in everyday culture in ubiquitous jokes, birthday cards, and cartoons in which crude representations and mocking imagery of the sexuality of the old reflect the underlying discomfort that the very idea of old bodies in sexual passion elicits (Walz, 2002).

Rarely dignified in serious print (Jones, 2002), evidence of the asexual and mocking/disgusting discourses resides primarily in our collective cultural consciousness (Butler & Lewis, 2002). Over the past four decades, however, the emerging liberal discourse, emphasizing an understanding and acceptance of the value of, interest in, and desire for continued sexual intimacy into later life, led to increasing academic interest (Huyck, 2001) and rising prominence in the academic and practitioner literatures (e.g., Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Langer, 2009).

This prominence, in turn, paved the way for a more recent “sexy seniors” (Marshall, 2010) or “still-doing-it” (Gullette, 2011) version of the liberal discourse that boldly, sometimes defiantly, challenges the “youthsex” standard (Gullette, 2011) that would deny those no longer young the pleasures of the flesh. Featured predominantly in popular literature (e.g., Butler & Lewis, 2002; Sills, 2009), the “sexy seniors still-doing-

it” mantra has entered the embrace of the academic and merged with the liberal discourse. Sex in later adulthood is not only acceptable, good, and natural but a lifestyle activity that is to be encouraged and applauded. Indeed, this “approach du jour” (Gullette, 2011, p. 124) has become definitionally tied to ideals (and increasingly, mandates) of positive or successful aging (Katz & Marshall, 2003, 2004; Rowe & Kahn, 1998), prompting Gullette (2011) to warn, “But the ‘still’ syndrome doesn’t add up to a useful progress narrative. It assumes that if older women *don’t* do it, or don’t do it the young way, that we’ve fallen below the standard” (p. 125). That standard was significantly raised—both for men and for women—in the late 20th century with the introduction of drugs to treat male impotence, transforming it from an accepted, if lamented, fact of aging into a treatable “disorder.” Under the new medicalized name of *erectile dysfunction*, its conquering has become a topic associated with positive aging and a public health issue (Katz & Marshall, 2003) not unlike obesity, a “moral disorder” resulting from consuming the wrong things or failing to consume the correct ones (Slater, 1997, cited in Katz & Marshall, 2003).

Much of the recent academic literature, grounded predominantly in the liberal discourse, has medically and critically addressed the issue of male or male-oriented sexuality, including erectile dysfunction (e.g., Marshall, 2006, 2008; Potts & Tiefer, 2006). Although the personal stories recounted in trade books in the popular press overwhelmingly describe heterosexual relationships, many have focused only on the sexual experience or desire of old (and older) women (e.g., Fishel & Holtzberg, 2008; Juska, 2002). The popular interest in these books’ revelations may lie less in the fact that old people *are* “still doing it” (or would like to be) and more in the fact that these old

people are *women*. Old men's sexuality is possibly not as titillating to the popular mind nor perceived to be as transgressive as old women's.

We should point out here that the "old" people whose sexual lives are described in popular trade books are often as young as 50. Holding 50-year-olds or even 65-year-olds as models of contemporary, sexually active elders dismisses the desires and needs of women and men in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. The cracks in each discourse become visible: Both old men (Thompson, 1994b, 2006) and old women (Jacoby, 2011) remain in some ways socially and sexually invisible as gendered adults who *may* have continued interest in and desire for sexual relationships.

Dating and Late-Life Sexuality: Posing the Question

Talking with one's parents about sex does not get easier with increasing age, either ours or theirs. Even at midlife and beyond, we avoid the topic. The first author recalls observing her widowed mother as she began dating, eventually entering into several deeply meaningful love relationships during the last two decades of her life. They were not always smooth, and there was heartbreak, but these relationships also greatly enhanced and expanded her life, happiness, world view, and well-being. Although suspecting that some of those relationships included sexual intimacy, the participant-observer adult daughter never brought up the subject, never had the nerve to ask. She wishes now that she had.

In the qualitative study presented in this paper, we asked that question of 24 women and men between the ages of 70 and 92 who were actively pursuing new romantic relationships via personal ads in print and the Internet. We explore here—

through their words, experiences, and sentiments—findings from the analysis of in-depth, semistructured interviews.

Theoretical Foundations

Our exploration of sexuality and sex relations among late-life daters is informed by considerations from critical and feminist gerontology, particularly a theoretical framework that considers the intersection of ageism, age relations, and gender relations. First given social currency through naming over four decades ago (Butler, 1969), ageism refers to prejudice, negative stereotyping, and discrimination against older people, old age, and the aging process based on beliefs and assumptions that aging “makes people less attractive, intelligent, sexual, and productive” (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002, p. 340). Current conceptions of ageism often emphasize broader definitions (Bytheway, 2005), claiming that “[t]here is no one group discriminating against another” (p. 338) and that “we are all oppressed by ageism, by dominant expectations about age” (p. 338).

Such broadening definitions of ageism belie the unearned privilege proffered to the young or middle-aged at the expense of the old that defines age relations and that permeates views of old age in substantial and pernicious ways (Calasanti, 2003, p. 199). With the term age relations, we refer to the system of inequality rooted in the assumption that different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another. As a social organizing principle of unequal distribution of power based on age, age relations function to organize perceptions of old age by privileging youthfulness, thus providing the ground from which contemporary understandings of ageism sprang.

Gender relations are those deeply rooted and often invisible “dynamic, constructed, institutionalized processes by which people orient their behaviors to ideals of

manhood and womanhood, influencing life chances as they do so” (Calasanti, 2009, p. 482.) As age relations underlie and precede the formation of ageist attitudes and beliefs, so gender relations structure sexism and sexist attitudes and beliefs. Theorizing gender relations means focusing on the power differentials that underlie gender inequalities that privilege men—giving them unearned advantage based solely on their position as males—while disadvantaging women. It also emphasizes the obvious but frequently ignored relational quality of gender that sets the stage for studying the linked experiences of men and women as they interact with one another both socially and sexually.

Theorizing age relations and gender relations means critically examining how these two systems of inequality differentially impact old men and women, creating different life experiences and outcomes even—or especially—during life’s final decades. Simultaneously considering the interlocking power relations of age and gender allows us to better understand the lived world of late-life dating and sexuality. Using these dual theoretical lenses—“a gender lens on aging and an aging lens on gender” (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, p. 179)—enables us to sharpen the focus on the intersection of age, gender, and sexuality. It allows us to theorize how age relations shape old women’s and men’s experiences of themselves and each other as potential intimate partners and how gender inequalities between old men and old women continue to be shaped and maintained as they age (Calasanti, 2004a). We can, for example, examine how embodied age itself is perceived differently depending on one’s gender, as well as how male-centered sexuality dominates our ideas and ideals of what sex is, who is more likely to experience it, and with whom.

Literature Review

Dating and Sexual Intimacy in Late Life

The strongest predictor of the propensity to date in later life—in this study defined as age 70 and older—is gender, with men significantly more likely to engage in dating than women (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). The prospect of a new relationship can involve a number of push-pull factors (Stevens, 2002) that frequently differ for women and men (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Carr & Utz, 2002).

Both the sociocultural context in which current older adults were raised and prevailing cultural stereotypes and discourses about aging and sexuality influence their attitudes toward dating, intimacy, sexuality, and sexual activity (Zeiss & Kasi-Godley, 2001). Internalizing of societal values and attitudes that associate sexual expression with youth or stable pair-bonded heterosexual adults of child-bearing age—what Davidson and Fennell (2005) refer to as “deep cultural stains” from the combination of the “sex-negativity of Christianity and the power of romantic love ideology” (p. ix)—may discourage sexual activity in later life (Byer, Shainberg, & Galliano, 1999). Many old people may find it difficult to accept today’s greater openness about sex and romantic relationships (Huyck, 2001). Elders living in age-segregated communities have been reported as secretive about their activities (Adams, 1985) and reluctant to talk frankly about sexuality (Trudel, Turgeon, & Piché, 2000), either out of a sense of propriety or perceived intolerance for such behavior. Alemán (2003) noted that particularly women expressed tension between their desire for a sexual relationship and a belief that such relations are inappropriate at their age.

There are indications, however, that sexual activity in late life not only is but has been more prevalent than commonly believed. Population-based studies covering all

aspects of older adults' intimate lives have revealed unexpected richness and diversity of sexual experience among those both married and unmarried (Lindau et al., 2007; Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010). Talbott (1998) noted that earlier studies of sexuality among older adults tended to focus on quantitative counts of sexual behaviors without including the phenomenological aspects of sexuality regarding people's feelings and thoughts about their sexual and romantic lives. Qualitative research has indicated that many older adults are willing to discuss their intimate lives, sometimes commenting on the lack of significant others with whom they might discuss such matters (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986).

Gender Relations, Age Relations, and Social and Sexual Invisibility

At the beginning of the 21st century, feminists still resist facing old women (Macdonald & Rich, 1983, 1991; Marshall, 2006; Ray, 2006) in what Calasanti, Slevin, and King (2006) call an "inadvertent but pernicious ageism" (p. 13) stemming from a failure to study old people on their own terms. Rarely studying either old people or old bodies (Calasanti, 2006), feminists have "sidelined" both issues from their theorizing (King, 2006, p. 49). Brown (1998) attributes this failure to acknowledge old women to the fact that most feminists have not been gerontologists nor have most gerontologists been feminists.

Despite research focusing on age and gender as systems (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Arber & Ginn, 1995), and although both women's and men's lives are affected by issues of gender, the realization that it is not just women who have and are influenced by gender is fairly recent in gerontology (Calasanti, 2009; Krekula, 2007), in feminist thinking (van den Hoonaard, 2007), and in men's studies (Thompson, 1994a,

2006). Few scholars have made a concerted effort to study old people with recognition that they “are not just old, they are either men or women” (McMullin, 1995, p. 37).

Old men’s construction of masculinities as well as their very existence long remained, for the most part, un contemplated and unexamined by academic disciplines (Calasanti, 2004a). Although Thompson published earlier seminal work on older men’s lives and was the first to write of old men’s invisibility (1994a, 1994b), it was not until 2004 that a men’s studies journal devoted an issue addressing the social invisibility of old men and their gendered performance as men (Thompson, 2004). Crediting this lack of academic attention to ageism and scholarly disinterest, Calasanti and King (2005) critically described the situation:

Our understandings and concepts of manhood fall short because they assume, as standards of normalcy, men of middle age or younger. Aging scholars’ inattention to old *men*, combined with men’s studies lack of concern with *old* men, not only renders old men virtually invisible but also reproduces our own present and future oppression.

Although gender and (old) age constitute organizing dimensions of the social world best viewed relationally, the association between the two, particularly in matters of sexuality—arguably the most relational of heterosexual gendered activities—remains theoretically and phenomenologically underexplored by both feminists and social gerontologists (Calasanti, 2004a). Relatively few studies on potential or existing intimate late-life relationships have focused on or included the lived experiences of old men (but see work by Bennett, 2007; Carr, 2004; Moore & Stratton, 2001, 2005; and van den Hoonaard, 2007, 2010). Fewer still have systematically analyzed old women’s and old men’s feelings and experiences associated with late-life dating, romance, and sexual intimacy. We are familiar with none that has explicitly explored sexual sentiments and

behaviors among older adults pursuing new love through classified ads and Internet dating and matching sites.

Method

Informants

The 24 women and men interviewed for this study were recruited from a combination of classified personal ads in a regional monthly newspaper aimed at “seniors and boomers” ($n = 2$); Craigslist.com, an Internet classified Web site that includes personal ads ($n = 5$); the Internet dating site Match.com ($n = 15$); and informant “snowball” leads ($n = 2$). (For a more detailed description of recruitment efforts, see Levaro, Hooker, and Walker, 2011). The 11 women were between 70 and 82 years of age ($M = 76$), and the men’s ages ranged from 71 to 92 years ($M = 77$). All were White and living independently in their own homes or rented houses or apartments. All informants had, at a minimum, attended college and reported annual incomes between \$10,000 and \$70,000 or more. Except for a woman who described herself as preferring men “because they’re equipped differently” but also as “open to a lesbian relationship” if it happened to work out that way, all were heterosexual. Both widows and widowers mentioned time—often years—spent providing spousal caregiving, and a number of them expressed concern about becoming romantically involved with someone their age or older for fear of repeating that experience.

Two informants, one woman and one man, had been single lifelong. Of the remaining 22, just three had been married only once. As a group, they reported 43 marriages, 30 divorces, 15 deaths of a spouse, and numerous nonmarital cohabiting and LAT (living apart and together) relationships. In total, of those who had married, 13 had

experienced the death of a spouse, and two had been widowed twice. Eight of the women and all but one of the men had been divorced at some point in their lives, some two or three times.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by the first author and took place over a period of three months in late 2009, usually in informants' homes, but also in such public settings as a library or café. Interviews ranged in duration from one to nearly four hours with an average time of 1.8 hours. Topics, questions, and probes outlined in the interview guide were often addressed as they arose organically, with the interview guide serving as a prompt tool, as needed, and for final questions. Interviews typically began by encouraging informants to share what prompted them to proactively undertake the pursuit of new love at this time in their lives.

Questions asked and topics discussed included creation of the ad and its content; descriptions of their "dream guy" or "dream gal"; turn-ons and turnoffs; hopes and expectations for a new relationship; and dating today versus at earlier times in their lives. Two questions from the interview guide directly addressed sex and sexual intimacy: We asked about the importance of sexual intimacy in a new relationship and about their thoughts and experiences with such products as Viagra or Cialis for the treatment of erectile dysfunction. We ended each interview with a query about any topics not covered that informants thought we should know about. This open-ended question was often perceived as a "last-chance" opportunity and elicited particularly rich data.

Data Analysis

A total of 43 hours of interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently

transcribed verbatim by the first author, yielding over 600 single-spaced pages of interview data. Additional data used in the analysis included informant demographics, interviewer field notes; the content of informants' personal ads, including their self-descriptive profiles and pictures; and e-mailed notes received by the interviewer from several of the informants after their interviews. Prior to formal coding, the three researchers met in weekly meetings to discuss each transcript and to share reactions and insights for theme development. Data were then entered into the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 10 (Verbi Software, 2010) for coding and analysis. Coding procedures were similar to those recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and outlined by Saldana (2009). Guided by steps and procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006), Holloway (1997), and Luborsky (1994) to assist in the identification and analysis of themes and patterns, our thematic analysis emphasized the subjectivity of personal meaning, researcher reflexivity, and the emergent essence of the quality and texture of individual experience (Longino & Powell, 2009). The findings described and discussed here reflect analysis of codes concerning intimacy, desire, sex, and sexuality; relationship history; qualities sought in an ideal partner; age preferences; "turnoffs and deal-breakers"; and intersections of age and gender.

Findings

Although a pilot study (Levaro & Walker, 2007) had elicited spontaneous narratives of sexual longing and desire, we anticipated neither informants' enthusiasm nor candor expressed when the subject of sex arose, as it invariably did even before the topic was formally addressed. This willingness to discuss sometimes very personal experiences reflects previous researchers' findings that when older adults were given the

opportunity to talk about their love lives, many seemed eager to do so and were readily forthcoming (Blank, 2000; Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986). It is also possible that the interviewer's age (64 at the time of the interviews) contributed to the establishment of rapid rapport and increased informants' comfort when sharing personal details of their lives.

Among the informants were a few with decades of dating experience and numerous sexual partners; more, however, had led substantially less adventurous sexual lives, for the most part within traditional marriages. In discussing their present sexual interest and experience or inexperience, they frequently made reference to their naiveté at the time of their first sexual encounters, which had often coincided with marriage.

You know absolutely nothing. I mean, on your honeymoon you are just absolutely *shocked* at what goes on. Because, you know, sex was not really talked about in my family. I really didn't have any idea what a penis looked like, especially fully aroused, you know. I thought, my *gosh!*
(Merry, 78)

Do you realize the first person I was ever intimate with was my *wife*? I was 23 years old. (Art, 85).

Four of the women and three of the men reported that their sole sexual experience was within a decades-long marital union or unions. Ruby (74) describes her own sexual background: "Well, I've not got a lot of experience because I married the first guy I ever went out with, my first boyfriend. I was still a senior in high school."

Some spoke openly and unselfconsciously about sexual matters; a few women initially made use of the coded language of the personal ads, using such euphemisms as "cuddling" to express their desire for sexual intimacy. Seventy-eight-year-old Jesse's initial comments about sex were interspersed with such apologies as, "I don't mean to

embarrass you, but...,” indicative of what Jones (2002) identifies as a *transgressive narrative*, one that invokes the notion of taboo or rule breaking.

Here we discuss our findings organized under three broad themes: *Orientations to Sex*: informants’ current involvement with and attitudes toward sex and sexuality; *Imperatives of Desire*: those attributes in potential partners reported by informants as being most desirable and most off-putting for establishment of an intimate relationship; and *In a Viagra State of Mind*: the profound impact of drugs for the treatment of erectile dysfunction on the sex lives of old men and women alike.

Orientations to Sex: Lost, Missed, Refound, and Dismissed

“Dry-docked for some time.” Of the 11 women, four were currently or had recently been sexually active. The remaining seven expressed varying degrees of interest if the right man were to come along, three of them specifying that at this point in their lives, they would only consider sex within marriage. Giggling slightly, Becca (80) revealed that the two-year period since her husband had died was the first time since she was 16 that she had been “without any male affection,” adding that her husband’s prostatectomy 10 years before his death had meant a total of “12 years of enforced auto-eroticism” leaving her now feeling “without for way too long.” Currently dating Hadrian (92), Becca was anxious for their relationship to move to a level of intimacy that included intercourse. A vibrant nonagenarian widower and the study’s oldest informant, Hadrian had also gone without a sexual relationship for a long period. He related a poignant tale of two and a half decades of sexual intimacy lost:

My wife and I didn’t have intercourse for 25 years, for the last 25 years that we were together. We did become very good friends, but we were not lovers. It was my own stupidity. My wife became an alcoholic, and I didn’t know how to handle that, so I decided that well, intercourse

probably doesn't mean anything except it's an opportunity to get drunk. That was all I knew it as, so we stopped having parties on the weekends. She became completely sober. Twenty-five years, neither one of us had a drink. But I wasn't smart enough to make a change. I didn't know how to reinstate anything, so... stupidity.

Echoing Becca's experience, other widows mentioned their husbands' inability to have intercourse during the last years of their time together. Merry (78) described her husband's last years and her now savoring a degree of sexual freedom never before available:

I have become, in my older age, I have decided I really enjoy it! And I make no bones about it. The last four years of our marriage, there was no sex because of his heart condition. He couldn't take anything [i.e., drugs for erectile dysfunction], and it bothered him, so I wasn't going to pursue it at that point because I knew that it did worry him. So after he passed away, I thought, "Gosh, I still have some feelings." I'm very happy in my sexual life. I've been married all my life, since I was 18. This is my first chance to be carefree.

Several men remarked, sometimes with veiled criticism, on the topic of widows' desire for sex. Using a decidedly male-oriented simile, Zach (71) described a widow he had dated: "She was horny as a two-peckered owl, I swear to God. I mean, she was just gonna wear my dumb ass out." Tony, 77 and both widowed and divorced, displayed the orderly file folders in which he kept information about the women who had contacted him. Counting them off one by one, he paused at one folder recalling an encounter, the memory of which elicited both judgment and rationalization for his own eagerness in taking advantage of the opportunity:

Uh, I was surprised at this one and if I'm talking straightforward, I guess I kinda consider her a nymphomaniac. She wants sex is what she wanted, and she got it. Because I've been dry-docked for some time.

Tony's mixed use of present and past tenses hinted at the possibly ongoing nature of this sexual relationship between two previously "dry-docked" individuals.

“Just turn the bed down and jump in the sack.” As a group, the men presented a near mirror image in terms of sexual demographics compared with the women: All but three were currently sexually active or reported having recently been in a relationship that included sexual intimacy. Nearly half of the women mentioned sex in the context of current or former relationships, but they remained circumspect in the telling, and none revealed details of possible first-meeting trysts. Over half of the men, however, described the logistics of arrangements for initial sexual rendezvous with women they had “met” online. Although they never used the contemporary term *hooking up* or even the more traditional *one-night stand*, these men’s narratives suggested that casual sex—sex with the possibility but not necessarily the expectation of a future commitment (Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003)—may be relatively common within the late-life dating scene.

Walt (80) described a typical first meeting with a hypothetical woman with whom he would previously have had only e-mail or telephone contact:

Well, if I meet someone that’s from out of town and we get together and we are gonna stay a couple of three days, then there’s no problem. Just turn the bed down and jump in the sack.

When asked in a follow-up question if there were always the expectation of sex during such a first rendezvous, he answered,

I think so, yeah. Like one I dated, we took a trip down the coast, and it was just like, “Which side of the bed do you like to sleep on?” One gal I met just by phone, and she drove down to my house to meet me, and we’re being passionate and setting on the couch and just talking and getting to know one another’s likes and dislikes—a very attractive woman about 20 years younger, I guess. And so I say, “I guess it’s getting late. Do you want to stay with me rather than [the hotel]?” And she said, “No, I’d like to stay with you.” And so that’s not usually a problem. I guess I’m physically strong enough that they probably feel I would be a good bed partner.

A few moments later, Walt added, “It’s not just jumping into bed. I don’t really want to be that. I want to at least get to know them a little.”

Not all first meetings went as smoothly as Walt’s. Zach (71) told a “disaster” story of an eagerly anticipated rendezvous with a “very sexy redhead” who “just reeked of sex” with whom he had been exchanging e-mails and phone calls for some time. When asked if he should book separate rooms, she had told him that was not necessary. When she ended up bearing no resemblance to the posted picture that had so enticed him, however, he wanted out. Although “she looked like she was nine months pregnant, with this huge big belly,” he was nevertheless reluctant to say what he was thinking: “Well, it’s because you lied about your picture, you turned into a blimp. And I can’t do a blimp.” The fact that she smoked constituted the deal-breaker that allowed him to escape the weekend unbedded.

“I cannot be comfortable with that.” Although many of the women spoke positively about sex as part of an intimate partnership, none displayed overt desire for a weekend getaway with a man they did not know well or at all, nor did any indicate a willingness to casually help relaunch a man’s dry-docked ship. When asked about sexual intimacy in a new romantic relationship, Sarah (73), who had met (online), married, and divorced a man whom she described as an Internet sex addict, replied,

If they want that, I’m the wrong chick. I’m looking for a friend, a really nice friend. Just too much damage and harm comes from that. I have shown a lack of responsibility myself, and it leads to heartache.

Kathy, a gentle, soft-spoken woman of 78, said:

I cannot be comfortable with that. I don’t think it’s a recreational sport, you know? To me, it’s an expression of deep love and something that can be shared with two people that do love each other, not just a one-night stand or just casual. I can’t do that. I wouldn’t do that.

Harry (78), the only man married life-long to the same woman, said that in the year since his wife's death, he had begun thinking that he "probably could have a sexual relationship, but it's gonna be in my bedroom, and I'm gonna be married to her."

Several women expressed sentiments of such apparent animosity around the topic of men and sex that it was difficult to imagine either having a place in their future. Ruby, a 74-year-old self-proclaimed "country gal," was the most outspoken in her disdain. Commenting on her own long time without sex, she said that at this point she could not imagine "anyone else's bodily fluids" and that sex was "absolutely the last thing on [her] mind."

In sum, although nearly everyone we interviewed defied the asexual discourse associated with old age in terms of stated interest in sex, the 24 individuals split fairly cleanly along gender lines when it came to sexual attitudes and practices. The majority of the men were reportedly currently engaging in sexual activity, sometimes casual, and the majority of the women were not. Although women's sexuality at all ages is more proscribed than is men's, several of the women were extraordinarily frank about their desire for a sexual relationship. The women who currently were in a sexual relationship were dating younger men, and, for the most part, those who were not had reported interest but little opportunity.

Imperatives of Desire: Be Attractive, Be Younger, and Do Not Be Fat

"She wouldn't stop a clock when she looked at it." Appearance is an important element in sexual attraction, and male eroticism is thought to be more powerfully based on visual stimuli than is that of women (Bakan, 1966; Ellis & Symons, 1990; Townsend, 1993). Comments made by many of the men emphasized the value of women's looks to

them, especially in attracting their attention. “Despite what we all say, I think that’s the initial cut,” said Gene (76). Walt (80) categorically agreed and felt he could speak for other men, as well: “I like good looks. We all do.” Penn (73) appended to his requirement that a woman be “nice-looking” the three-word qualifier dreaded by many no-longer-young women, “for her age.”

The men expressed the sentiment that, at the very least, a woman under consideration should not elicit immediate negative evaluation. As 78-year-old Jesse put it, “She wouldn’t stop a clock when she looked at it.” Joe, a 76-year-old widower, stated it more emphatically: “She wouldn’t have to be beautiful, but she would have to be reasonably, uh, someone you could look at without throwing up.” Lifelong bachelor Mickey (71) described his dream woman as a “30-year-old, or at least really young-looking, somebody really beautiful with long blonde hair.”

The women more typically spoke about personality traits or characteristics they did *not* want in a partner rather than describing a “dream guy” in terms of looks, but when they did, they sometimes leaned toward the romantic. Olivia (82) described him with romance novel hegemony as “handsome, dashing, gray haired, tall, and strong with laughing eyes and a wonderful smile.” In contrast, Kathy, who was short and had had two tall, handsome life partners, said with a gentle smile: “I’ve read so many times that tall men and handsome men seem to advance at work and things seem to just be easier for them. And I thought: I’d like somebody shorter. Maybe they would try harder.”

No “fat pigs” or “big fat ladies,” but we “could be friends.” In terms of physical turnoffs to a sexual relationship, *fat* topped nearly everyone’s list although some were embarrassed to say it: “I hate to admit it, but I don’t like big fat ladies. I wouldn’t

want to be involved with a severely overweight woman.” Annie (73) was similarly clear in her judgment:

He’d better not be fat, a big fat pig who has let himself go. When a profile says a few pounds overweight, I tend to back off. So don’t tell me you’re a few pounds overweight when in fact you are obese. Get a clue!

When asked what would constitute a “deal breaker” for him, Gene (76) said, “One is overweight. And I think overweight people are the most discriminated-against people, but I do have that bias. I don’t want a slob.” Jai (79) expressed similar sentiments more bluntly:

I am absolutely not interested in any sexual relationship with anybody who has a belly that loops out over his belt. I watch my weight, men can watch theirs, and if they don’t take the trouble, forget it. I could be friends with somebody who is overweight, but I’m not romantically attracted—at all.

The abbreviation “HWP” (height-weight proportional) was used in several men’s ads or profiles to clarify women’s physical acceptability: “Please be HWP, as I am” (Zack, 71). Not every man who listed that requirement for a potential dating partner, however, conformed to the same standard himself. Gordon (71), who described himself as “stocky” and seeking a “45 to 68 year old HWP lady,” was himself—in the interviewer’s opinion—obese. Art (85) was the sole exception to the no-fat rule, admitting that a “BBW” (big beautiful woman) is a major turn-on for him:

All my life, I’ve been attracted to large women. Fat just does something to me. There’s something very immoral about it and lascivious and very inviting, *lust*y, all of the basic, you know, *appetites*.

Although both women and men were equally judgmental about physical traits they found unattractive, few men expressed flexibility in their preferences or shared the women’s apparent willingness to accept the realities of (others’) aging bodies. Judith, 74

years old and the only woman who had remained single lifelong, described this attitude of lenience:

Looks? Uh, I have to be realistic with looks. I don't want them fat but um, I've tried to be kind of easy-going about looks because I know a lot of people, especially at my age, people are beginning to sag and they're getting bald and gray. I like for them to have teeth [laughs]. Yeah, looks are important but they don't have to be, ah, Hollywood, you know? I've never had that, anyway.

After expressing her own dislike of fat men, Merry admitted that the man she was currently dating was “very overweight, but we just get along really well, and his weight doesn't bother me.” Ayla (75) admitted that although looks were not unimportant, she might be able to look beyond them, including a man's being overweight:

I can overlook physical deficiencies or imperfections. I mean my last husband was overweight. Talk about a few extra pounds, he had them. I could even put up with that although I swore I never would again, but I could. It depends on the personality.

Even Annie (73), who had been sharply critical about overweight men (“Get a clue!”), laughed and said, “If push came to shove and the possibility came up, I'd change my mind completely. Present me with a person, and I'll give you an answer!”

“The idea is to get a younger woman.” Romantic relationships, sexual liaisons, and marriages in which the woman is younger—sometimes substantially younger—than the man are common, not just in the United States (Darroch, Landry, and Oslak, 1999) but in many cultures and historical periods (Presser, 1975). One need look no further than romantic pairings in Hollywood movies to confirm its continuing cultural acceptance. Invoking Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection, Jacoby (2011) argues that old men are “hardwired to be aroused by women whose appearance announces their fertility” (p. 149). She further suggests that old men require a “more

powerful sexual stimulant” than that provided by the “image of a woman whose body is also ravaged by time” (p. 149).

Walt, a physically fit 80-year-old, married four times to considerably younger women, seemed to personify this sexual stimulation argument. He admitted preferring women 20 to 30 years younger because they are “more aggressive sexually, which I suppose any man would love, and that pushes you along.” In four short sentences, Mickey (71) expressed not only persistent sexual fantasies of women of child-bearing age but also ageist sentiments about older women’s asexuality, and faith in the age-equalizing power of money:

Well, either I have to lower my standards or I just have to work harder at meeting somebody younger. A lot of women that are 60 or 65 or 70 don’t really enjoy sex. So the idea is to get a younger woman. But I don’t think that’s probably too realistic, but um, or else I have money. So if I get a job where I have a lot of money, well then....

Walt reported having had “no problem” finding the younger sexual partners he preferred, musing that “many younger women prefer an older man because they’re more stable maybe, sexually.” He had recently begun thinking more critically, however, about the age difference. Readily acknowledging women’s concerns about the projected lack of longevity of much older men, he purposefully worked to nip doubts in the bud:

But here I am, an 80-year-old man, and they’re 50, so I don’t know. I think much more than 20 years younger, they’re not looking for someone that much older. So I have to convince them that I’m in pretty good shape and that I’m not gonna die right away.

Although virtually all of the men interviewed were seeking younger women—and evolutionary theory of attraction (Buss, 1988) notwithstanding—the majority of them were not casting their lines quite as deep as Walt and Mickey into the dating pool. Zach

(71) was conflicted when it came to the age question. He said he understood the attraction to younger women but had reservations based on personal experience:

It's nice to have a young, hot babe on your arm, and that's what a lot of guys are thinking about. I'm not so sure about that. I went through menopause with my wife. I don't know why I'd want to do that again.

On face value, this statement seems to support the age criterion contained in Zach's ad, which led with the headline, "Where are all the 60+ women?" Later in the interview, however, his more equivocal revelations made the above comment about premenopausal women suspect. Zach admitted that after failing to ask out a strikingly beautiful woman to whom he had been attracted because of their age difference, his thinking was changing:

I let my being 71 and her being 50 hamper it, because you just never know what's gonna happen. It's always "nothing ventured, nothing gained," and I say that all the time. And I didn't listen to my own advice.

He said he was now displaying his age as 10 years younger in his online ad and had also lowered the age of prospective women to 50.

Age—both an intimate partner's and their own—is a more complex issue for old women than for old men, reflecting myriad ageist attitudes internalized over a lifetime by both genders (Levy, 2003). With few exceptions, the women we interviewed had typically been in marriages and relationships with men older than themselves. Not unlike the men we interviewed, however, every woman presently hoped to find a partner younger or one very close to her own age. In addition to simply finding older men too "old" looking and acting, many of the women, but particularly the seven (64%) who had been widowed, mentioned hoping to avoid both the burden of caregiving ("I don't want to take care of an old man") and the pain of another loss ("I don't want to bury another

husband”). Olivia (82), who had been widowed at an early age, followed by two long-term relationships that had each ended with the death of her beloved, said:

I do hope, I must say, for a younger person because my darling Maximilian died, and he was 92, and if he had been 10 years younger, we would be sitting here together. But, I hope, I just hope for the next time for someone that’s gonna take care of me and outlive me.

Annie’s husband had been 16 years older than she:

I didn’t turn down the opportunity, and I’m glad I didn’t, and I was glad for the 20 years together. I was not glad the day he died and for the 16 years since then.

It is interesting to note that most of the widows, like Olivia and Annie, had been married to older men. At one time, *they* were the younger women. Now they wanted what their husbands had, a younger partner.

Some women also admitted “lusting after” younger men they saw on the street, and several had had relationships with considerably younger partners. At nearly 80, Jai had maintained an active, taboo-free dating and sex life for many years, always with younger men. Here she described the relationship that represented the tipping point for her acceptance of virtually any age difference:

I used to think I can’t go out with anybody who’s younger than my sons or the age of my sons, and this guy was right in between my sons, 31 years younger than I. So from then on, I just decided I’m not an ageist, and I won’t go out with anybody who is.

Embracing a sexuality free of age and gender boundaries and norms, she described a current threesome arrangement with a “60s-something” unmarried couple. When asked about her current age limits, she replied that she could go 20 years in either direction but admitted that she had never had an intimate relationship with anyone older than herself.

Jai aside, the other women's interest in much younger men appeared to be either fanciful or short-lived. Becca (80) voiced recognition of social proscriptions regarding old women and younger men with an incestuous-tinged thought in a post-interview e-mail:

Although I know that a handsome face and figure aren't the most important things, I do appreciate them when I see them! The thing is, that invariably when I spot a man that I find particularly attractive, I'm brought up short by the realization that he's probably somewhere around the age of my 57-year-old son. If I ogled him, it would be entirely inappropriate...and he'd be disgusted.

Merry, a 78-year-old who put her age as 70 on online dating sites, had recently ended an 18-month relationship with a man 17 years younger. The age difference ultimately made her uneasy, ostensibly for reasons similar to Becca's.

We went on a 2000-mile trip on his motorcycle to Montana with two other couples, which was fun, and we had a good time and, you know, just enjoyed each other. But he was close to the same age as my son-in-law, and I decided it's really not going to work. So it was time we both moved on.

Merry seemed pleased to show the interviewer pictures from the trip and to describe how it felt to ride on the motorcycle behind her lover. She later described how she came to reveal—after the breakup—her true age to this man. Her rather abrupt explanation of the breakup—“I decided it's really not going to work”—coupled with the admission that he had not been aware of the actual age difference suggested that additional motivations related to age relations might have driven her decision to discontinue the relationship.

More typically, it is the man who is older in an age-disparate relationship. The fact that men are much more likely to actually be able to attract and hold onto younger partners often angers older women (Jacoby, 2011). Here, two of the women puzzled over older men's *expectations* of being able to attract younger women, which they apparently

could only explain through tenets of social exchange theory:

I think they're in fantasyland. It's like the guy who's 5-6 and "a few extra pounds" and he's 71 years old, but he's looking for women 45 to 50. I'm thinking, you dreamer! How can you possibly, realistically even write that down? [Laughs] What are you smoking? What woman 40 or 50 would be interested? Unless he's got tons of money and he's willing to just dump it their way, then somebody might do it. (Ayla, 75)

They're all unrealistic. These guys are wanting the younger women. Come on. Look at yourself, bucko! Get a grip! You left your youth behind somewhere, so why do you think now? Are you wealthy? You know, you look at their income, and their income doesn't match their expectations. They want a younger woman, but they have nothing to offer. And it's not that they just need money to offer, but they'd better at least have the money to compensate for some of it. (Ruby, 74)

Summarizing our findings regarding potential dating and sexual partners' desired physical attributes, attractiveness was generally of more importance to men. Informants of both genders were equally judgmental and harshly critical of people who are fat although women showed a greater tendency toward willingness to overlook a man's weight if he were otherwise appealing. Many of the women and virtually all of the men interviewed were either hoping to find younger partners or currently seeing someone younger. Both women and men found *old* people unappealing, but only men talked about younger women as sexual stimulants.

Given our culture's historical acceptance of older men with younger women, men had more reason to expect that they might be able to attract a younger partner. Despite age differences of as much as 30 years, no man expressed the concern voiced by some women about a younger partner's age being close to that of his own daughter. Particularly those women who had been widowed after sometimes years of spousal caregiving wished to avoid repeating those responsibilities. Nearly all of the women, whether or not they were among the 64% who had been widowed, hoped for a younger

partner who might then grow old with them or even outlive them. These findings all reflect underlying gender relations that enable even old men to expect that—as long as they are not feeble or otherwise age-constrained—their attraction to and desire for younger women may have a chance of being fulfilled.

In a Viagra State of Mind

The gradual medicalization of male impotence coincided with the introduction and marketing in 1998 by Pfizer of Viagra's iconic "little blue pill" for treatment of what since 1992 had been known under the new diagnostic term *erectile dysfunction* (ED). Viagra and the related drugs to follow not only revolutionized the medical management of ED but changed the landscape of sexuality and sexual expression in later life with profound effects for both old men and old women. The psychological and sociological outcomes have variously been referred to as the Viagra culture (Potts & Tiefer, 2006), the Viagra age (Marshall & Katz, 2002), the Viagra boom (Hoberman, 2005), and the "Viagratization" of America (Kingsberg, 2000, p. S-33).

Aware of the reported erectile dysfunction prevalence rate of 70.2% of all U.S. men aged 70 years and older (Selvin, Burnett, & Platz, 2007), we were not surprised to discover that nearly all of the men in this study reported having some sort of acquaintance with ED drugs, through either their use, contemplation of use, or outright rejection of the drugs for themselves. Numerous others have written critically and persuasively of Viagra as a biomedicalized technology for the production of gender, sexuality, and the gendered body (e.g., Loe, 2005; Mamo & Fishman, 2001; Marshall, 2002). Here, we report our informants' opinions about and experiences with erectile dysfunction and erection-enhancing drugs.

The intercourse imperative: “A lot of these guys just can’t get it up anymore.” Potency, an erect penis, and heterosexual penetrative intercourse are central to hegemonic masculinity across the life course (Koedt, 1996; Marshall & Katz, 2002) but nevertheless remain rooted in ideals of the activities and virility of younger men (Calasanti & King, 2005). Today’s ubiquitous availability of erection-facilitating drugs has emphasized the cultural mandate that even for *old* men, sexual functioning within a heterosexual relationship remains solely defined as the ability to penetrate a vagina (Marshall & Katz, 2002; Potts et al., 2003). This *intercourse imperative* contains a progression of definitional components that defines sexual activity: Sex means intercourse; intercourse means vaginal penetration; and vaginal penetration requires penile erection.

Although some research has suggested that older adults who are no longer partnered tend to devalue the importance of sex (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003), the women we interviewed not only expressed interest but also suggested tacit acceptance of the intercourse standard by such casual remarks as,

I like sex, and this would not present a challenge unless he’s one of the many men in this age group who have ED. A lot of these guys just can’t get it up any more. (Ayla, 75)

When asked how she saw sexuality differing for men and for women her age, Jai, nearly 80 and arguably the most sexually adventurous woman interviewed, replied,

Well, sexual functioning for men is very iffy at this age, and not everybody can use Viagra or Cialis, or whatever, successfully. For me, I can be friends with somebody who doesn’t function sexually, but if it’s going to be more than friendship, then I want everything to work.

For Becca (80), who wanted sex and noted that it was now “a little hard to come by,”

Viagra offered the promise of intercourse that might otherwise be unavailable to her if

she were not able to partner with a younger lover. Now enjoying a blossoming relationship with 92-year-old widower Hadrian, she was anxious for it to move to the next level with some assistance from Viagra. For his part, Hadrian placed more importance on the physical contact involved in sex:

Now my doctor thinks that Viagra at least will get me an erection, which might make me a little bit of a partner, I don't know. I'm very much interested in sex, not for the pleasure it will give me, but for the physical contact, which to me is like being reborn. I hadn't realized how much of my humanity had drained away over the years that I was not physical—and I don't mean just in a sexual sense.

With a counter-twist against cultural gender norms, for this couple it was the woman pressuring for sex and her male partner who longed most for simple human touch.

The women as a whole appeared not to knowingly have had experience with men who required or used the assistance of ED drugs although they were certainly aware of their existence. For some, the lack of first-hand experience may have been due to their having been widowed after years of providing care to ailing husbands, a period during which intercourse was frequently discontinued. Kathy (79), who had described loving and selfless caregiving during her husband's last years, noted:

I think, for men, sex is about the ego and the feeling of retaining their youth, but from what I hear—with all the ads for men that need help—apparently a lot of them don't have the ability. I know when [my husband] was so ill, it was just as meaningful to me for us to be able to put our arms around each other and hold hands.

The awareness of ED in older men caused a number of women to consider younger men as partners. Sarah (73) noted,

I think if I were still looking in that direction, that would be the one thing that would draw me to a younger man—the fact that the older guys have problems that way sometimes.

Table 2.1 shows the women, with those currently sexually active listed first and their

reported experience with a partner with ED in the center. Table 2.2 shows the men, ordered by their ED drug use. On the right side of each table are listed desired partner age range and the age difference in years. As shown, both the men and the women were seeking new romantic partners younger than themselves, with the men's mean lower age 21 years younger and the women's, 10 years younger.

The contrast between the women and the men is striking. Although the women's partner age ranges extend to below their own age—a reflection of their stated desire not to lose (another) partner to death—nearly all still paid homage to the preference founded in age relations for older partners, with upper ages that hover around their own age. The outlier is Jai, who said she could go 20 years in either direction but who had never in her

Table 2.1

Women's Experience with Erectile Dysfunction ($N = 11$)

Pseudonym	Age	Sexually active	Women's experience with erectile dysfunction	Partner age range	Age difference in years
Patsye	70	Yes	No experience: "What's a little blue pill?"	60–73	10 or fewer
Merry	78	Yes	Younger partners; drugs not needed	60–70	8–18
Jai	79	Yes	No experience but wants "everything to work"	59–99	20 or fewer
Becca	80	Yes	Encouraging older ED partner to try sample	younger	
Annie	74	Interested	One past experience with ED partner	65–73	1–9
Judith	74	Interested	No experience with ED partner	64–75	10 or fewer
Ayla	75	Interested	Critical of men's sexual focus	68–76	7 or fewer
Olivia	82	Interested	Okay if "it isn't there" but hopeful	75–85	7 or fewer
Kathy	79	No	Does not know "if that would be a problem" but requires marriage	73–80	6 or fewer
Sarah	73	No	Not interested in sexual relationship	younger	
Ruby	74	No	Critical of men; not interested in sex	in 70s	4 or fewer

Table 2.2
Men's Use of Drugs for Erectile Dysfunction ($N = 13$)

Pseudonym	Age	Sexually active	Erectile dysfunction drug use	Partner age range	Age difference in years
Zach	71	Yes	Uses	50–60	11–21
Penn	73	Yes	Uses	53–73	0–10
Joe	76	Yes	Uses	60–72	4–16
Tony	77	Yes	Uses	55–75	2–12
Mickey	71	Yes	Has samples	40–50	21–31
Al	74	No	Has samples but “it hasn't come up”	64–74	0–10
Harry	78	No	Has samples but requires marriage	55–70	8–23
Hadrian	92	Yes	Has samples but reluctant to try	65+	27 or fewer
Walt	80	Yes	Contemplating need	40–65	15–40
Jesse	78	Yes	Rejects use	60–75	3–18
Art	85	Yes	Rejects use	65+	20 or fewer
Gene	76	No	“I wish I had gotten to that point”	55–70	6–21
Gordon	71	Yes	Unknown	45–68	3–26

life dated an older man. Disregarding Jai, the women's mean lower age is about four years. Whether using a performance-enhancing drug or not, no man indicated an age range that extended beyond his own age, and most were substantially lower.

Other women's more recent experience had been with younger men, effectively eliminating thoughts of erectile dysfunction entirely. Patsye, at 70 the youngest of the women, had previously dated a man younger than herself whom she described “as active as a rabbit.” She was so unaware of the whole topic of ED drugs that she was forced to ask a girlfriend to explain what a potential suitor meant when he wrote her boasting that he had nothing to do with “those little blue pills.” During the interview, Patsye mused aloud whether ED might be an issue with the man she was currently seeing who, although demonstrably affectionate, had never gone beyond a kiss on the cheek:

There have been no bedroom activities, no suggestions, and I mean, this is the first time in my *life* that I've had ten dates with a man that they've not [done something]. It's foreign territory for me because usually I'm trying to come up with ways that I'm gonna get a guy out the door and not hurt anybody's feelings.

Patsye's experience is not uncommon. In the first major study of sexual activity among older men and women (age 57–85), Lindau et al. (2007) reported that a male partner's physical inability was cited by 60% of the women as the reason for a lack of sexual activity in their partnership or marriage.

Lack of direct experience with ED drugs did not restrain the expression of strong opinions on the subject among the women, however. Several were critical of men's continued desire for sex and their use of ED drugs to revive their sex lives. Ruby (74), speaking here of her wariness of men who describe their marital status as "separated," simultaneously revealed not only her thoughts about Viagra but perhaps also about men and sex in general:

What is that? What's the matter? You can't make a decision? Or there was a good reason why [his wife] finally got sick of it and kicked him out. Or he went to the doctor and got Viagra pills and she said, "Why didn't you ask me first? I woulda said no, especially now that you're old and stinky." There's a lot of crudities to relationships—realities of the flesh, you know.

Ayla (75) proclaimed, "Men live their whole lives thinking sex is the most important thing. And here they are at 80 and 90 still thinking sex is the most important thing." When asked in a follow-up question whether she believed men think sex is the most important thing for themselves only, or whether they think it is also important for women, she replied,

For their self-identity. The ability to be virile, and when they can't, they feel they've lost it all; they've lost their power. When, in fact, I think there's a lot of women who could care less. "He can't get it up? Good! I don't have to do that!" I don't know if it's culture or if it's actually

genetic, but I do think that all their life men are totally focused, I mean, they really do think with their penis. They really do. They don't like you to say that, but they do.

The renewed emphasis on old men's sexual functioning with the aid of ED drugs creates a double-edged sword for old men. To the extent that they can still achieve or at least approximate the erectile symbol of younger manhood, they are more likely to hold onto a desired sense of virility and masculinity. If, for whatever reason, a man could not or chose not to use drugs to treat his ED, it appeared to create an additional challenge to successfully maintaining a self-identity as a complete man. Jesse, 78 years old, was one of the men who reported not being interested in trying performance-enhancing drugs. Despite having spoken frankly about his oral sex prowess ("I've never had any complaints yet"), because he could not fulfill the intercourse imperative, he nevertheless perceived himself as something less than the "real man" who could give women what they wanted:

There are women in their 70s and 80s that say—and they're pretty blunt about it—I want somebody to go to bed with me at night, to hold me, and what have you. But when I met 'em, I was right up front with 'em and I told 'em. I said, "If you're looking for a physical relationship, that will not happen with me."

Viagra, yes, but it's "more of a supplement." Of the 13 men in this study, only two did not spontaneously mention the oral drugs approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to treat ED. Four were either currently using one of the drugs—Viagra, Cialis, or Levitra—or described its use in a recent past relationship. Five of the men had samples waiting to be tried when the opportunity arose (no pun intended) or were contemplating whether such a boost might be suitable for them. Despite admitted prostate-related erectile dysfunction, three of the men either mildly or emphatically

rejected the use of erection-promoting drugs. They spoke openly, however,—and sometimes proudly—of alternate sexual skills learned and developed “to please a woman” without the necessity of erections and penetration.

The men who had been using Viagra, Cialis, or Levitra felt generally gratified with the experience. Borrowing lines from a Toby Keith song, Zach, a 71-year-old thrice-divorced man single for all but 15 years of his adult life, was the most forthcoming about his experience of Viagra’s effects and benefits—while being careful to note that its use was not absolutely essential for him:

My favorite expression is: “I’m not as good as I once was, but I’m as good once as I ever was.” I have a prescription for Viagra and I use it, only because—the desire is there, certainly, all the time—it’s the longevity of the erection. As you get older, it just doesn’t stay up as long as it did when you were 40 and 50. So the Viagra is more of a supplement.

Penn, also 71 and likewise married and divorced three times, described a regular weekend routine at the country home of the younger woman he had until recently been seeing, a routine that had enhanced his sense of self through two types of masculine effort: “I worked hard. I was out there choppin’ wood and pullin’ weeds and diggin’ potato mounds. I just loved to do that, for me and for her.” The day of physical labor was followed by beer and pizza in town before progressing to the much-anticipated Saturday night special:

Then we go for the pizza, tired out and exhausted. And all this time, we’re drinkin’ and eatin’ and the Cialis is circulating, and I can sort of sense it. So I’m like, let’s get back home! We get back there, and things are gettin’ readier and readier, and the Cialis is workin’ like crazy, and, you know, zippity doo dah. So yeah, and then I’d go home the next day and I’d be tired till Wednesday.

He later added with a slight sigh,

Now that I’ve had that experience with her, I’d kinda like to do that again,

but alas, my friend that I'm dating now just wants friendship only, so we'll see where it goes from there.

Those with trial samples from their doctors had been holding onto them, apparently for quite some time, awaiting the opportune moment and woman with whom to share their bounty. Seventy-four-year-old Al was one of these men. Jumping out of his chair, he said,

Well, I have something right here, Levitra. I was given this sample by my cardiologist, and I don't know if it's past the pull date. The thing is, I've talked to my doctors and cardiologist about [using it], but I don't know how virile I'll be because I haven't had any experience. But it's always been important, and I've never been told, "Oh, you suck." I've never actually discussed this at all because it never comes up, literally or figuratively.

Like Zach, who had described his use of Viagra more as a "supplement," Mickey, an oddly naïve, never-married 71-year-old interested solely in relationships with much younger women, wanted to make sure the interviewer understood that he didn't *need* the Viagra samples he had received from his doctor. He emphasized that any possible performance difficulties were probably unrelated to his age and due instead to other insecurities:

I'm still okay, but you know, I'm gonna talk to my doctor. I've talked to him before and he gave me samples of Viagra, but I've never tried it. And I was looking at them the other day, and they're date-expired now, so I thought I'd ask him for another sample. But I don't think I really have any problem—except that when you're with somebody new sometimes, you get a little nervous. And, you know, it isn't just older guys that have a hard time performing.

The men who were beginning to have doubts about their continuing ability to perform or function—what one man termed his "sexual integrity"—were contemplating what Viagra or Cialis might do for them. When Walt (80) spoke about his possible use of ED drugs, his considerations, too, were couched in terms of other rationales for such

assistance. Unwilling to attribute his “slowing down” to age, he appeared to place blame for his increasing difficulty to achieve an adequate erection on his sex partner’s inability to turn him on:

I haven’t found it necessary yet, but I’m definitely slowing down, just this last year. I don’t know whether it’s because the interest just isn’t there. The interest physically is there, but whether or not I just can’t get turned on with this woman. The desire has to be there. Whenever I find a woman that I guess I think I can’t seem to get physically real attracted to, and if she wants to, then I find that it’s more difficult. And I don’t know if Viagra would help or if I’ve gotta find somebody who I can really relate to better.

Walt’s descriptions of some of the times when he was less functional clarified the definition of “somebody who I can really relate to better” as a younger woman. The women whom he could not “get turned on with” had been closer to his own age.

A devoutly religious recent widower whose online profile began with the words “Looking for a Wife,” 78-year-old Harry occupied the opposite pole from Walt on the male spectrum of sexual activity. When asked about his interest in a sexual relationship, he chuckled and said, “Oh boy, it’d be nice. I’d probably have to go see if I could get Cialis or something.” His wife had been afraid for him to consider trying the ED drug his doctor had offered because of his heart and had told him she could do without sex if he could.

Three of the men, all with long histories of health-related erectile dysfunction, had serious reservations about the viability of ED drugs for themselves personally as well as concern about possible side effects. Two categorically refused the option, whereas one was willing to reluctantly reconsider under duress imposed by his girlfriend. Jesse (78) had not been swayed by marketing promises of Viagra’s efficacy to produce erections regardless of the ED etiology and provided this rationale for his decision to not take it:

Everything I see—and there may be no medical foundation—but what I think is that once your prostate begins swelling and you have problems and you take medication for blood pressure, forget an erection. Nothin' works. I haven't had an erection since I was 55 years old. Anyways, me and my doctor, we kind of agree: All it does is gives ya a fuckin' headache.

At 85 and with nearly 30 years of erectile dysfunction due to treatments for leukemia, prostate cancer, and bladder cancer, Art likewise entertained no expectation of regained functionality from ED drugs:

The last time I had intercourse was in 1980, just before the chemotherapy. The chemo knocked that out. It didn't knock out my libido, and it didn't knock out my ability to have sexual pleasure and orgasms but not, it's not any good for penetration.

Hadrian, 92 years old, who had not had intercourse during the last 25 years of his marriage nor since his wife's death four years earlier, reported being strongly pressed by Becca, his new 80-year-old girlfriend, to try the Viagra sample his doctor had provided him. He described extreme reticence due to concern about the warnings issued in advertisements about longer-than-four-hour-erections:

I have been afraid to try it. I decided that when I use it, which I will do reluctantly, I'll do it at home [not in the city where Becca lives] because I know where the emergency room is.

“I am a man, regardless.” Those men for whom the drugs are either not an option or whose erectile dysfunction cannot be ameliorated by their use are challenged to find other means of being “real” men because they are incapable of having “real” sex. Lacking the “power tools” (Bordo, 1998, p. 227) of younger men and their own younger bodies, the three men who chose not to use ED drugs spoke openly of having learned alternate ways of providing sexual pleasure. After delineating his erectile deficiencies, Art, 85-year-old hedonist and admirer of big beautiful women, described his current

sexual arsenal: “But, you know, fingers, lips, tongue, the whole thing, in a creative sense.”

Although some of these men had received encouragement from their physicians, others reported either being too embarrassed to talk to their younger doctors or having received less-than-helpful comments, a not uncommon experience (Hirayama & Walker, 2011). When Jesse (78) talked with his doctor about a long-anticipated motor home adventure with a new woman in his life, his doctor reiterated that he required a catheter for his ongoing prostate problems:

He says, “If you’re takin’ someone with you, forget it if you think you’re gonna do anything. You’re not gonna do anything.” And I told him, I says, “I’ve found out that you don’t have to get an erection.” And he looked at me kinda funny and didn’t say anything.

Apparently somewhat uneasy or at least mindful of the culturally transgressive quality of both oral sex in place of penetrative intercourse and of his willingness to talk frankly about the subject, Jesse offered this personal viewpoint about satisfying a woman as well as his interpretation of women’s needs and desires:

I don’t mean to embarrass you—but there are many other ways, if you are not squeamish, if you’re not having some sort of a mental block. For the lack of a better way to put it, I am not afraid to make a woman happy. And I will tell you that most women that I’ve been around can’t handle that kind of intimacy. Think back. You’re not that old, but add another 10 or 15 years to you. “Good girls” don’t do that kind of stuff. Good girls don’t have outercourse or whatever you want to call it, but I have never had one that I satisfied ever complain about it. And they wind up by liking it. One gal says to me—and like I say, to put it very bluntly: “I have never had a cock that made me feel as good as you make me feel.” And the thing of it was, she says: “What kind of satisfaction do you get out of it?” I says: “The satisfaction I get is knowing that I can still please a woman. I am a man, regardless.” And like I tell people: I’m old, I’m not dead.

After 55 years of marriage; 25 years of self-imposed celibacy; six years of caregiving; and the subsequent death of his wife, Hadrian, then age 88, had started dating.

Soon learning that the women he met were interested in having a sexual relationship and recognizing that “the well [had] run dry,” he spoke with his doctor about the possibility of drugs for ED. Although he did get some samples, his doctor also urged him to consider other options: “He says to me, ‘Use your imagination, man, for God’s sake, use your imagination.’” His imagination was ultimately stimulated by a woman, also in her late 80s, who had made it clear that her invitation to spend a summer evening in her garden involved more than botanical delights:

So when I told her I couldn’t really carry through, sexually, at least in terms of getting an erection, it didn’t make any difference. You know about brains and the two things you can do for your brain to make it better is to learn a language or learn to play a musical instrument? Well, I’ve tried both of those. So she taught me how to play the dildo.

After the laughter subsided, he continued, serious again: “So I thought, well, this is alright. I really can’t get any particular pleasure out of it—it’s exciting and all that—but no ejaculation. But at least I can make some woman happy.”

We have addressed here three interconnected themes surrounding sexuality in late life. We first placed informants’ orientation to sex within the context of their recent history and their present interest and desire. We then discussed the attributes that men and women most valued (or rejected) in a potential sexual partner: that they be attractive, younger, and not fat. Although general attractiveness was of more importance to men, both women and men revealed powerful judgment around the issue of fat, and both expressed preference for a younger partner. Finally, we discussed the sex life-changing role played by drugs for erectile dysfunction for men’s sense of virility and youth.

Sexuality in late life, particularly men’s sexuality, is a location in which the relational understanding of privilege and disadvantage is powerfully marked by the

intersection of age and gender relations. For the greater part of the 20th century, men's loss of both sexual desire and function was considered a normal part of aging. With the advent of ED drugs, old men's manhood, just as young men's, has become linked anew with virility and hegemonic expectations of sexual performance. Sexual activity becomes old men's avenue to anti-aging, to being not-old. The sexual and romantic partners that men in later life might have previously enjoyed now are labeled as "too old," and old women must either be reconciled to a doubled disadvantage of age and gender or themselves seek younger partners.

Discussion

Currently between the ages of 70 and 92 and with a mean age of approximately 77, the women and men in this study are members of cohorts that came of age in the fourth and fifth decades of the last century, a time of sexual conservatism in middle-class America. Descriptions of their premarital dating, extraordinarily "innocent" by today's standards, bear this out. Naïve and inexperienced, many married their first love and engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time on their wedding nights. Although some of the men and women had actively dated over wide swaths of their adult lives, most had been in traditional marriages. Long years of marriage—even multiple marriages—did not guarantee broad sexual experience, however, nor did they prepare informants for the world of late-life dating and expectations of sexual intimacy. Many decried the lack of rules whereas others bemoaned not knowing the dance steps or being without a map of the terrain.

Whatever the metaphor, particularly when it came to sex, these men and women often found themselves in unexplored territory—territory crisscrossed with intersections

of age and gender relations. Their orientation to sex as important, desirable, and, for at least some, requisite for a love relationship—as well as their orientation to penetrative intercourse as normative—contradict earlier findings that older adults settle for such alternate activities as hugging, touch, and hand-holding (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986).

The domain of late-life sexuality has undergone immense change in the two decades since the oft-cited Bulcroft and O'Connor study. Our data suggest that the difference in findings can be attributed to the changes in late-life sexuality wrought by medicalization of old men's impotence and the resulting "Viagratization" of their sexual functioning (Kingsberg, 2000). The resulting very public cultural dialogue about men's erectile abilities and the widespread use—or even contemplation of the use—of readily available drugs for erectile dysfunction changed the shape of the sexual landscape for old men and had a profound impact on the sexual expectations, experiences, and intimate partner choices of late-life daters of both sexes.

Seeking Younger Partners

Early researchers of "lonely hearts advertisements" (Harrison & Saeed, 1977) found a gender differential in partner age preferences with increasing age. Women's preferences for older partners declined slightly with age, but the parallel for men was not the case. Men to age 60 were about as likely as men in their twenties to seek a younger woman. The authors noted, "The pattern in which men seek younger women (and women seek older men) gives the men a distinct advantage in the form of more options, at least in a society such as ours where relatively youthful people predominate" (p. 259). Three decades later, our data suggest this to be true far beyond the age of 60.

In this study, however, both men and women expressed a preference for a younger

partner, with the men's age goals often considerably lower. Several described feeling forced to lie about their age in order to circumvent the age filters that seekers might set in their searches for suitable or desirable partners on Internet dating sites. Searchers' parameters might eliminate them from searches as potential dating partners, thus leaving them invisible to the very people who might have been perfect "matches." Exercising a kind of bilateral ageism and sexism in which each held similar ageist and gendered stereotypes about the other, and wishing to themselves escape the stigma of (old) age, their paths were unlikely to cross. The men in our study were seeking and dating women much younger than the same-aged women in our study, whose profiles might never come to the men's attention. By the same token, the women, too, set their searches for younger partners.

The motivation for a younger partner and the internal reaction to that motivation, however, differed by gender, creating different push-pull motivators for the men and the women (Stevens, 2002). Men's attraction or pull toward younger women seemed based on a combination of variables: For the most part, they were following an attraction they had maintained for much of their adult lives. They were still attracted to women who had fueled their desire as middle-aged men. The object of their desire—and the *age* of that object—had not kept pace with their own advancing age, however, resulting in growing age disparity. Of note is the fact that the men seemed unaware that women in their age group also preferred younger romantic and sexual partners. This information appeared not to concern them. Their prime concern was that the younger women to whom *they* were attracted might be more attracted to men younger than themselves.

The men who were sexually active, with or without the aid of ED drugs, seemed

delighted with the sexual activities they were able to sustain with younger women yet also expressed worry about how long their good fortunes could last. They reflected a certain sense of pending foreboding and an accompanying attitude of “have sex today, for tomorrow we may be truly old.” Indeed, several had already experienced abrupt and devastatingly painful breakups, “dumped” by younger women who claimed the men couldn’t “keep up.”

Internalization of the asexual discourse—as it applies to *women*—created and maintained men’s assumptions of older women’s disinterest in sex and the need to look to younger women for sexual fulfillment. Even if women nearer their age might be interested in sex, however, the men’s descriptions of how “old women” look and act precluded these women’s being perceived by the men as either sexual objects or intimate partners. We take exception to Jacoby’s statement (2011) that most men in the cohort of women 70 or older are “dead, taken, or gay” (p. 148). The single and unattached men in that age bracket may simply be looking elsewhere, that is, in age pools of younger women.

Although women’s attraction to younger men contained some of the same elements of midlife memories, they were more likely than were the men to reject such “ogling,” as Becca called it, as vaguely incestuous. Because our culture does not proscribe men’s attraction to women the age of their daughters, the men suffered no such qualms. The women were less *pulled* toward younger men as they were *pushed away* from older men, ostensibly for fear of losing yet another partner to death or becoming ensnared in long-term caregiving obligations. The women, too, however, rejected men their age for looking and acting “too old.”

The Viagrization of Desire: Fountain of Youth or Performance Mandate?

We chose the phrase, “in a Viagra state of mind,” under which to discuss this primary finding central to many of the men’s sexual activity with younger women. We did so in recognition that although potency-enhancing drugs work directly on the penis, they are foregrounded and infused with issues of age relations and gender relations that are embedded in our culture as systems of inequality and thus also in the mind or psyche of the potential or actual user and his partner.

The purpose of Viagra and its successor drugs is the creation of an erection sufficient to allow satisfactory sexual intercourse in men who could not otherwise reliably achieve an erection. Desire to engage in intercourse despite age- or illness-related inability is a prerequisite for the man and presumably also for his partner. Part of this desire concerns maintaining or re-establishing sexual abilities inextricably linked with masculine hegemony of youthful sexuality—with still being a man despite the body’s unmedicated unwillingness to so cooperate. Another part of this desire may also be a function of a new societal expectation that equates the continuation of “youthful (energetic) sex lives focused on penetrative intercourse” (Potts et al., 2003) as healthy and normal life for older people. For unmarried men who are dating, with renewed performance capability comes also the recognition that younger women might now once again be within their reach as sexual partners. The desire and the means become fused in the prescription solutions for erectile dysfunction.

Women’s Sexual Interest

Female sexual dysfunction is frequently described as due to declining estrogen levels and resulting vaginal dryness and atrophy (Kingsberg, 2002). None of the women

in this study mentioned their own sexual inability or disinterest, however. Women's supposed dysfunction in late life is more often an issue of *desire* and *opportunity* than of increasing inability linked to physical health and aging (Delamater & Sill, 2005; Laumann et al., 2005). Compared with men, 70% to 80% of whom are sexually active across all ages, fewer than 40% of women aged 75 and older—an age group corresponding to that of our informants—reported having a sexual partner (Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010). These percentages can be interpreted partly by the demographics of late life, particularly that most women 75 and older are widowed and most men still married, but they also speak to the dating demographics (Sills, 2009) that underlie men's preference for younger partners

It is impossible to gauge the true level of interest in or desire for a sexual relationship among the women in this study. It takes little time in the dating marketplace for older women to realize that most men are looking for a relationship that involves a sexual component. The women were keenly aware that many men have the capacity, should they wish, to attract a woman as much as 20 or more years younger without risk of social sanction. If women prefer a younger man—and most seemed to do so—they know that sex is likely to be near the top of many men's lists.

Some of the women clearly had expectations of a man's ability to “perform,” whether with or without the aid of performance-enhancing drugs. Platonic friendship aside, Jai, for instance, would not consider a relationship with a man unless he was fully functional, saying she expected “everything to work.” And we wonder what might happen with the budding romance between Becca (80), who had hoped to find a younger man, and Hadrian (92) if he remains reluctant, or eventually expresses unwillingness, to

try Viagra. As a woman quoted by Potts and colleagues said, “With Viagra, women can recycle a man . . . Either address it or get out of my bed” (2003, p. 716).

Limitations and Conclusion

Our findings illuminate the intimate worlds of unattached and dating old women and old men in interesting and potentially valuable new ways. These must be viewed with caution, however, for a number of reasons. Our interviews represent a snapshot in time, a narrow slice in the life course of 24 individuals in their eighth, ninth, and tenth decades.

Twenty-two years separate the youngest and oldest informants, and they may have come of sexual age in different ways and at different times. Our data do not allow us to analyze the effects of such differences. Even the term “coming of age” has different interpretations. For instance, three of the men described divorcing wives and leaving children behind to partake in midlife delights during the sexual revolution. They considered this a time of immense personal growth; one said he did not truly start growing up until in his 60s. Others married early and enjoyed long-lived marriages. We do not know how these—and myriad other varied life experiences—might have impacted their views about sex and dating in their 70s, 80s, and 90s.

Our decision to study the expression of sexual activity and desire among single (never married, widowed, or divorced) men and women actively pursuing new romantic relationships primarily via the Internet limits conclusions to that particular group of older adults. They may differ from those utilizing more traditional means of meeting new people or from those who quietly long for a new romantic relationship but whose health, socioeconomic status, or geographical location, for instance, make that desire seem a near impossibility. Similarly, we cannot assume that our findings speak to the sexual lives of

older men and women in long-standing marital or cohabiting relationships. Finally, all the men and women we spoke with were heterosexual. Little is known about the experiences of aging lesbians or gay men in pursuit of new intimate relationships. This area of study represents a rich and challenging research gap and one overdue for scholarly exploration.

Despite these limitations, by analyzing interview data from old women and old men actively pursuing new romantic or intimate partners, this study addresses dimensions that are missing in the literature on late-life sexuality. ED drugs are now commonly advertised directly to the consumer, whether in print or on television. Perhaps to cast their use within a more conservative sexual landscape, advertising and marketing for these products subtly stresses the drugs as a “relational technology” (Mamo & Fishman, 2001, p. 27) primarily for young-old men in monogamous heterosexual relationships. Old men are certainly not portrayed as “players” or Lotharios. Most research, as well, has either addressed the drug’s impact on couples in a stable relationship (Loe, 2004) or has focused on the medicalization of late-life masculinity, that is, on the equation of men’s general and sexual health with sexual function, performance, and desire (Marshall, 2008).

Just four of the women in this study were currently sexually active. Although they did not report having experience with men taking ED drugs, their sentiments about erectile dysfunction and the desirability of penetrative intercourse provided valuable counterpoints. The men were currently unattached, dating, and for the most part, sexually active. With the exception of Hadrian, none was currently in a committed relationship.

This qualitative study contributes to our understanding of single old men’s use of and relationship to ED drugs in pursuit of romantic and sexual relationships. Previous research has examined how the use of ED medications has affected couples’ relationships

(Potts, Grace, Gavey, & Vares, 2004) and also how older wives have dealt with their husbands' ED drug use (Potts, Gavey, Grace, & Vares, 2003). In the present study we hear from sexually active unmarried men who are not in committed relationships and who are either using ED drugs to enhance their sexual performance while dating or considering the need for their use. By definition, all men who use drugs for erectile dysfunction do so in order to achieve or increase penile functionality. What is of more interest theoretically, however, is not just these men's desire for functionality but the potential they appear to offer them as old men—removing or alleviating their age relations disadvantage as old men compared with younger men while simultaneously giving them increased unearned privilege in relation to old women.

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CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I sought to explore and understand the ways in which the intersection of two often invisible systems of structural inequality, age relations and gender relations—and the resulting societal ageism and sexism that represent these systems’ public faces—affect and shape old women’s and old men’s lived experience as they negotiate the unfamiliar landscape of late-life dating and the pursuit of new intimate relationships. Despite old people’s frequent claims to the contrary, the lived experience of old age is considerably more than just a number. Whatever that number may be and whatever it may represent, it is experienced differently by women and men. This difference is principally due to the intersecting power relations of age and gender that simultaneously proffer unearned privilege to the young or middle-aged—the not old—at the expense of the old and—in general, although not in every regard—to old men at the expense of old women. These dynamics shape women and men in relation to each other at all ages and profoundly affect their experience in the late-life dating marketplace.

Summary of Findings

Study 1

In the first of two qualitative studies in this dissertation, “*Don’t Look It, Don’t Act It*”: *Age Disidentity in Late-Life Dating*, I analyzed data from in-depth interviews with 24 women and men who had placed personal ads and profiles, primarily on the Internet dating and matching site Match.com. Informants revealed internalized age stereotypes they rejected for themselves through claims and affirmations of neither looking nor acting their age, directing criticism instead toward others they did identify as being “old.” These claims also served as admonitions to potential dating partners that they, too, should not

look or act old. While rejecting society's stereotypes of the age represented by their years lived, informants nevertheless acknowledged, often reluctantly, the attendant changes in their physical capabilities, struggling to balance this awareness (Diehl & Wahl, 2010) with the demands of the dating marketplace.

Women learn at an early age that their social currency derives largely from their ability to achieve and maintain ideals of feminine appearance. Echoing findings from previous research (Furman, 1997; Hurd Clarke, 2011), these women described the ways in which they fought “every step of the way” the external signs of aging that removed them from beauty ideals of younger women. These included dyeing their hair, cosmetic surgery, and tattooed makeup. Whereas women are judged—and judge themselves—more on appearance, men are socialized to value “strength, prowess, and domination” (Hurd Clarke, 2011, p. 22) and are judged by others more on ability and accomplishment. Unlike the women, who were not only structurally more subject to gendered ageism but who also turned that internalized disgust inward against themselves, the men exhibited remarkable ability to construct a subjective self-image that often failed to meet objective reality. The men's claims of being not-old centered more on what they could still *do*—besting younger people in a spinning class, accomplishing challenging day hikes, or teaching computer skills. The women, too, took pride in engaging in physical activities that allowed them to compare themselves favorably to others their age as well as to younger people.

In their admonitions for potential dating partners, informants revealed their negative judgments about how old people look and act, underscoring those traits they wished to avoid in themselves. Although issues of age embodiment most often concern

such things as gray hair, wrinkles, and sagging flesh for women and loss of strength and ability for men, the single most despised attribute named by informants of both genders was the adjective *fat*. Interestingly, this attribute is one not limited to the old (Bordo, 1993; Brewis, Wutich, Falletta-Cowden, & Rodriguez-Soto, 2011). Only women expressed a willingness to possibly excuse a potential partner's being overweight if he had other desirable attributes.

Women and men positioned and presented themselves in their Internet ads and profiles to appear younger than their present age and more attractive than objective evaluation might assess them to be. Nearly 40% of women and men reported lying about their age and posting pictures as much as 10 years old in an effort to avoid being overlooked by potential dating partners who sought someone younger. Their preferences and rationales were consistent with underlying age and gender relations. Women were more likely to misrepresent their age to match men's preferences for a younger partner, whereas men's motivation for lying had more to do with a desire to attract younger women.

The analysis of informants' posted pictures suggests that in addition to portraying themselves as young and attractive, they also sought to counteract or subvert age and gender stereotypes by situating themselves in counter-gender activities and locations—the men in their home environments and the women engaged in “ungrandmotherly” endeavors. In sum, the findings show that old men and women are ever aware and watchful of age stereotypes, actively resisting and sometimes defying gendered expectations of old age through age disidentity and strategic self-presentation.

Study 2

Utilizing the same qualitative interview data in the second study, *“I’m Old, I’m Not Dead”*: *Sexuality, Age, and Gender Relations Among Late-Life Daters*, I explored the expression of sexuality within the context of late-life dating among informants seeking new intimate partners. Nearly all of the men but just four of the women reported being sexually active. For many, a potential partner’s interest in sex and the ability to perform sexually were seen as requisite for the establishment of a new love relationship. Regardless of current sexual activity—and with the exception of three men with erectile dysfunction who preferred oral sex—penetrative intercourse was viewed as normative, definitive, important, and desirable. This *intercourse imperative* contradicts earlier research (Bulcroft & O’Connor, 1986) suggesting a devaluing of sexual intercourse among late-life partners in favor of alternate, nonsexual intimacies. It should be noted, however, that Bulcroft and O’Connor’s oft-cited research predates the introduction of Viagra and therefore reflects a time when erectile dysfunction was more likely to be viewed as a normal part of the male aging process (Marshall, 2006).

Two themes represent core findings of this research. The first concerns men’s and women’s stated desire for younger intimate partners, with men’s age goals considerably younger—a mean lower age range of 21 years younger versus women’s 10 years younger. For men, this attraction was a continuation of life-long dating patterns reflecting cultural norms based in gender relations. Although some women specifically admitted attraction to younger men, most women’s desire for a younger partner was fueled less by *pull* or attraction than by the *push* to avoid men they considered old and unappealing. Additionally, women wished to avoid future caregiving responsibilities and the concomitant potential loss of a spouse.

Closely related to old men's desire to date often considerably younger women was the reported use of drugs for the treatment of erectile dysfunction (ED). Three quarters of the sexually active men either used ED drugs or were contemplating their use. They provided the means for men to fulfill the intercourse imperative, thus satisfying their own desire and their younger sexual partners' expectations for intercourse. For many, the ability to attract and sexually satisfy younger women was an integral part of their sense of masculinity, allowing them to still or once again approximate the hegemonic ideals of younger manhood.

General Discussion

Seeking, Finding—and Missing—Potential Dating Partners in Online Searches

The online search process. A first visit to the online dating and matching service Match.com requires completion of a simple and free registration process, following which the hopeful seeker may conduct searches based on parameters of the sex, age, and geographical location of a potential match. The site visitor can choose to browse listings that include photos only and further customize the search by qualities of appearance, interests, background and values, and lifestyle included in members' profiles. Pressing the *Search Now* button returns a list of possible matches that includes thumbnail photographs, the age and location of the individuals found by the search, and access to additional photographs and information. Only if they become members by paying a monthly subscription fee, however, are seekers able to contact potential matches or send them a "wink" indicating interest. Despite the ease of such browsing and searching, many of the informants in the present study reported relying primarily on the "Daily Five" matches that the Match.com system generates and e-mails based on information in

members' profile preferences. Whether they create searches or rely on system-generated matches, seekers will see only those men or women whose basic profile information, including age preferences, fits the search parameters.

Age reification and age misrepresentation. Interview data from this study suggest that perceptions and stereotypes of age and age embodiment are of paramount significance to those seeking dating partners. Internet dating sites' focus on stated age as a primary filter for selection or rejection may contribute to the reification of age as a salient category (Dowd, 1987), particularly for women (Weil, 2008), and may tempt or induce seekers to misrepresent their age. A number of informants reported having "shaved off" enough years in their profiles to make themselves more marketable, often claiming their age to be at or below the next-lower age decade. Seventy years of age, for instance, seemed a significant subjective boundary between *not-old* and *too old* for many of the informants between the ages of 73 and 79—an age range occupied by 63% of the sample.

Listing their actual ages put informants at risk either of being rejected as too old by those whom they were most interested in attracting or of not showing up at all in search-generated lists. Lying about their age constituted a proactive circumvention of age bias and Internet sites' search parameters, allowing their profiles to slip under other seekers' upper age limits. Several informants who admitted posting their ages as younger said they generally revealed their true age sometime during the first several dates, if it came to that, but one 78-year-old woman related she had not divulged her actual age until after the romantic relationship had evolved into one of friendship only. Because the men's average preferred lower partner age was 10 years younger than the women's, the

combination of mutual preference for younger partners and strategic misrepresentation of seekers' own age created a dating universe in which women and men of similar age and interest might never meet through online dating and matching services' search protocols. Metaphorically speaking, they were using similar bait but fishing in different ponds, unlikely ever to end up on each other's hooks.

In face-to-face, in-person social interactions, individuals learn about and get to know each other without the benefits (or barriers) of immediately displayed information about age, personal demographics, interests, and preferences. Unlike online searches, in the nondigital world, age categorization and age reification play a lesser immediate role in interpersonal relations: The first question asked upon meeting or being introduced to a potential dating partner is unlikely to be, "How old are you?" As is the case with searches conducted on Internet dating sites, first impressions are often based on looks, but far less deception is possible in person. The presence or absence of what late-life daters refer to as *chemistry* or "*clicking*" can also be gauged unaided (or unhindered) by expectations primed by carefully crafted personal profiles. The primary advantage of searching for potential dating partners online lies in the sheer number and variety of individuals advertising themselves in the marketplace. As many of the informants in the present study reported learning, the watchword remains: *Caveat emptor*.

The Presumption of Sexual Functionality, Men's Sexual Identity, and ED Drugs

Although multiple and competing masculinities shaped by intersecting social locations coexist, only one of these achieves dominance and serves as the masculine ideal (Connell, 1995). Among the traits that define this hegemonic masculinity is (hetero)sexual virility (Calasanti, 2004a). Men's virility and sexuality represent a central

site in the construction of masculinity (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004), themes of masculinity that begin to shape boys at an early age, affecting their sexuality throughout the life span (Marsiglio & Greer, 1994). Developing and sustaining a heterosexual masculine identity entails the notion of being successful in sexual relationships with women (Herek, 1986). As men age, maintaining positive views about their sexual prowess is part of a self-affirming process “that enables them to retain the masculine sense of self that probably has been a central feature of their self-concept throughout their lives” (Marsiglio & Greer, 1994, p. 125). The erect phallus has been a symbol and cultural icon of sexual virility and masculinity in many cultures throughout history, and the continued ability to “stay hard” (Calasanti & King, 2005, p. 13) plays a vital role in old men’s retained self-concept.

The composite picture of late-life sexuality, age relations, and gender relations is therefore fused with issues of masculine self-concept, virility, erectile function and dysfunction, and old men’s use of such ED drugs as Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra. Regardless of a man’s need for or utilization of an ED drug, he inhabits a biomedicalized domain of male sexuality and functionality (Marshall, 2006) characterized by a cultural presumption that men should—and now can—perform, regardless of age. As sexual functionality and activity are also increasingly linked to concepts of successful aging (Marshall, 2009; Marshall & Katz, 2002), the widespread availability and use of drugs that alleviate erectile deflation exert additional pressure on men to utilize the resource or face the prospect of female rejection.

Age relations privilege younger men (Calasanti & King, 2005). With Viagra at hand and a decades-wide expanse of younger women seemingly open to them, many

older unmarried men perceive the availability of ED drugs as an opportunity to (re)occupy the realm of midlife and regain the advantages this status carries. Given their expressed distaste for “old” women, that is, women in their own age group, the prospect of potential sexual liaisons with younger women becomes particularly tantalizing. The potential social and emotional fallout of such endeavors, however—cultural “side effects” unmentioned in the drugs’ alluring advertising campaigns—can prove devastating. Several men in the present study who had dated younger women and reported being very happy with their renewed or continued ability to perform sexually were nevertheless eventually rejected by these younger women for being too old or for their inability to keep up.

Such painful experiences illustrate part of the illusion of Viagra—that it removes old men’s disadvantage relative to younger men. Virility-by-Viagra does not, in fact, equal youth, nor does it truly turn back—or even stay for long—the clock or calendar. It does not require many such experiences to dash old men’s fantasies of younger women, leaving them in the irreconcilable state of feeling inadequate and rejected by the objects of their desire while being turned off by “old” women their age.

Future research on late-life sexuality might specifically address the question of what the ability to engage in intercourse means for an old man, particularly when undertaken with a considerably younger woman. If, as 80-year-old Walt noted, younger women “push” men along sexually, does such welcome assistance indicate that the younger women function as a kind of anti-aging device for old men’s desire and sense of masculinity? With old men’s newfound techno-virility and the expanded age range of sexual partners this biotechnology enables and encourages, what have they lost and at

what cost? If there is “value” in impotence, might it be, as Hadrian mentioned, a heightened appreciation for tenderness, touch, and other forms of intimacy mentioned in earlier research (e.g., Bulcroft & O’Connor, 1986)? And finally, given an assumption that both unmarried old men and unmarried old women in the dating market say they are interested in a relationship that includes sex, how do their held meanings of sexual intimacy differ?

Reflections on Age and Gender Relations in the Qualitative Interview

Intersectionality of age and gender. Deutsch (2007) suggests that to “undo” gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987), it is necessary to reframe the questions we ask, one of which is whether gender can be irrelevant in social interaction. In this discussion, the question that might be posed is whether the combined effects of gender and age—of the interviewer as well as the interviewed—can be irrelevant in the specific social interaction of a qualitative interview.

A core concept underlying the utilization of dual lenses when considering the intersectionality of age and gender (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001) is the recognition that they are intertwined in such a manner that one cannot be understood without the other (McMullin, 1995). The purpose of the present study was not to investigate the undoing of gender but rather to uncover how the power dynamics and inequities of the intersection of age and gender impacted men’s and women’s experience of the pursuit of new intimate relationships in late-life. As the interviews with the 24 women and men who agreed to speak with me for this research progressed, I became increasingly aware that we were meeting in a space that was permeated not only by the informants’ age and gender, but by my own, as well.

Rarely in the course of the interview conversations, however, was I acutely conscious of my own age and gender. As described in a reflexive note about the first study, it was a surprise for me to realize that although I was more than 10 years younger than the mean age of the men I interviewed, many were looking for women younger even than myself. My age of 64, however, placed me well within the desired age range for those men 80 and older whose expressed preference was for women 10 to 20 years younger than themselves. Not unlike sentiments expressed by many of the women informants, these men would not have been attractive to me. Now I am challenged to explicitly consider how the combination of my age and gender may have impacted the interview atmosphere and content—what is disclosed, withheld, pursued, or neglected (Lee, 1997, citing McKee & O'Brien, 1983)—as well as my reactions and interpretations.

Interviews with the women. The interviews with several of the women were initially somewhat more carefully formal than those with any of the men, although these interviews, as virtually all the other interviews with women, ultimately developed into what felt much like friends enjoying a candid conversation. My only explanation for the—*my*—initial awkwardness with these few women concerns their age: They were among the oldest female informants. Despite all my flailing against overt ageism, in retrospect I believe I saw (and treated) them as old women to be met with the polite respect due their age. I must have perceived them first as *old* and only then as *women*. This process also entailed a subtle perception of myself as younger than my 64 years, that is, it created a greater perceived age difference that allowed me to feel young and view them as old, a feeling I experienced with none of the men.

Once the interviews were underway, the women's candor and genuineness disarmed any profound vestiges of age relations, and we became two women talking. There was a good deal of laughter, a palpable sense of "we are all in this together" rather than any sort of performance or gender positioning. Perhaps it was simply that I could be—or was allowed to be—more "backstage" (Goffman, 1959, p. 112) with the women. In general, with the women I was an insider, privy to their often derogatory or denigrating and sometimes funny, touching, or even scary tales of men encountered online or on first dates.

Interviews with the men. In contrast, the interview atmosphere with the men was typically immediately comfortable. I have spent much of my professional adult life in the company of men, often as the only woman in a group, and I am comfortable with them. My own perceived age, however, was different from with the women: Although many of the men felt old to me as *men*, I did not feel particularly *young*. I was immediately at ease, and my comfort likely contributed to their own sense of safety. With the men, my role felt that of a counselor-confidante with whom they were free to share and to whom they could say things they might not readily reveal or admit to others. They frequently thanked me at the end of the interview for talking with them, listening to them, understanding. Two men became emotional and teary while expressing how much they had enjoyed talking with me, an indication, I believe, of their profound loneliness.

With only two of the men did I have the feeling they were relating to me specifically as a *woman*. One described a woman he had dated as "very, very attractive" and admitted that "there were feelings and desires startin' to surface again that hadn't been around for some time." He then added, "Not that she was any more attractive than

you are, but you put me in the mind a lot of her.” When I asked him how old he felt, he replied, “With you here and visiting, I feel like a teenager again. I mean that as a compliment.” It is notable that these two were among the most isolated and lonely of the 13 men with whom I met. Also of note is that each had shared deeply personal details of his life and emotions with me, an interpersonal activity that can create a heightened sense of perceived intimacy.

Gender relations and gender performance in interviews. The literature on issues of gender in interviews has typically been concerned primarily with the study of women by men and women by other women (Arendell, 1997). Considerations of the gender relations and dynamics in studies of men conducted by women are still relatively scarce. My being a woman undoubtedly contributed to the men's ease during interviews, as men are believed to be more comfortable discussing personal issues and speaking intimately with a woman than with another man (Williams & Heikes, 1993). In contrast, women are less in need of such a “sympathetic listener” (Cotterill, 1992, p. 596) because they are more likely to have friends in whom they can confide (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986). As Cotterill (1992) points out, however, the sympathetic listener role is augmented by the fact that in the interview context, the interviewer is also a “friendly stranger” (p. 596) with limited status in her informants' lives. She provides the structure for a moment outside of normal social intercourse in which informants are given the opportunity (and express permission) to talk at length about themselves. Even the women who had close female friendships may not have felt comfortable speaking as freely with them about their intimate lives as they did with me. In addition to these considerations, my previous

training and experience as a counselor in private practice may have aided my ability to create an interview container or space in which rapport was quickly established.

In the literature discussing women's interviewing men, most of the studies concerned topical areas in which it might be anticipated that masculinities be performed. Arendell (1997), for instance, interviewed divorced fathers, and Pini (2005) spoke with male agricultural workers. Each researcher describes examples of the men's performing masculinity (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). It is possible that some personal characteristics of the researchers generated more strongly felt gendered reactions among the men they interviewed, thus inviting masculine posturing. The ages of both the interviewers and their informants may also have played a role. In Arendell's study, the men's median age was 38, that is, an age that might be considered the peak of masculine power. Her descriptions of interactions with informants suggest that she was of similar age and attractiveness. Sallee and Harris (2011) report findings comparing two separate qualitative studies of masculinities among male university students, one conducted by a female researcher involving graduate students, and the other conducted by a male researcher with undergraduate students. The authors conclude that the substantial differences noted in observed gender performance were the result of a collective creation between researchers and informants in which informants either emphasized or downplayed aspects of their masculine selves, depending on the gender of the interviewer.

In the present study, despite the men's speaking frankly about their feelings, sexual yearnings, and performance ability or lack thereof, I did not have a strong impression of their performing masculinity or of their relating to me not as a person but

rather “as a position in an imagined relation—as a feminized Other” (Arendell, 1997, p. 348). Nor did I perceive dynamics marked by power imbalance and gender hierarchy (van den Hoonaard, 2009, with widowers); men’s attempting to take charge of the interview process, challenge the process, assert superiority, or engage in presentations of their masculinity (Arendell, 1997); or emphasized heterosexuality (Pini, 2005). One topic Arendell (1997) mentions, however, did resonate with me, that of *touching*. Several of the men I interviewed hugged me when saying goodbye, an action initiated by only one of the women interviewed. Again, unlike Arendell’s reported experience of unwanted advances, there were no hints of suggestiveness, and I experienced no sense of discomfort.

I introduced this reflexive discussion with an extension of Deutsch’s (2007) question—whether the combined effects of gender and age can be irrelevant in the specific interaction of a qualitative interview. Both my own experiences and the relevant literature suggest that age and gender are never irrelevant. As McMullin (1995) noted, old people “are not just old, they are either men or women” (p. 37). To that I would add that the same statement can be made about people at every age. It seems vital to bear in mind that there is a difference between *having* gender or *being* gendered and *performing* gender.

The Double Standard, Double Jeopardy, and Intersectionality

Disadvantaged old women? The concept of a *double standard* for women’s and men’s aging (Sonntag, 1972) emphasizes old men’s being valued for accomplishment, whereas old women’s value more typically resides in their ability to maintain a youthful appearance, to not look old. Similarly, as applied to the interplay between age and

gender, the *double jeopardy* hypothesis (Dowd & Bengtson, 1978) predicts an adverse interaction between getting older (ageism) and being female (sexism), a perspective that portrays women's aging as a problem. Within gender theory, the concept of *intersectionality*, introduced in the 1990s, emphasizes how power relations should be understood as dynamic interactions that mutually construct one another rather than being based on additive principles (Krekula, 2007; McMullin, 1995).

In the intervening years since introduction of these concepts, scant feminist or gender theory utilized the intersectional approach to consider the interplay between age and gender. Krekula (2007) maintains that social gerontology has utilized the double jeopardy perspective to problematize the interaction between age and gender, a focus that has resulted in a "simplistic misery perspective" (p. 163) that obscures the possibility that the interplay between age and gender could also result in opportunities and assets (p. 167). She suggests that double jeopardy on the structural level—norms about aging and gendered meanings of appearance—can result in a different outcome at the individual level, where the interplay might also result in opportunities and assets, and reminds that "when it comes to the micro level, individuals are actors who interpret and define their reality" (p. 167).

According to principles of the double standard of aging and double jeopardy, the women in this study must be considered more disadvantaged by age than are the men. As critical theorists warn, however, these assumptions for old women focus on aging in terms of physical changes, "thereby ignoring that ageing also includes aspects such as new experiences and values" (Krekula, 2007, p. 166). External signs of aging, such as white hair, wrinkles, and sagging flesh, have no negative functional effect on health or

well-being, nor are they universally judged. Indeed, in some cultures around the world, primarily ones in which younger women are considered unclean, postmenopausal women are afforded more privileges, respect, and status than are available to younger women (Flint, 1975). Old women in our culture who are able to come to terms relatively early with the “ravages” of age and resist the combination of media demands, the critical male gaze, and their own internalized ageist sentiments about age and aging may discover that rather than being “bad, repulsive, and ugly” (Healey, 1993, p. 48), old age for women can be liberating.

They may come to the insight that bodies, despite cultural judgment concerning looking old, “shape but do not determine who we are or what we do or how we act our age” (Laz. 2003, p. 518). Despite talk of hating double chins that preclude wearing turtlenecks or jokes about looking good in the mirror until they put on their glasses, a few of the women in this study modeled disregard for the close encounter with ageist mandates of youthful beauty in later life. Annie (73), for instance, heartily laughs off her deeply creased face—and goes out to round up her mustangs or play the banjo in an all-night bluegrass music jam. Although not unaware of her beauty “deficiencies,” she embraces life with little attempt to be other than her current embodied self.

Privileged old men? The intersecting systems of inequality and oppression in age and gender that impact these older adults as they pursue new love seem only to privilege old men, offering them, for instance, advantage in terms of more lenience in showing their age and a broader age range in which to pursue dating partners. Simultaneously, however, the data offered by the present study suggest that these men are not so privileged when they are old and alone. Lacking supporting systems of same-sex friends

and confidants more typically available to and experienced by women (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991), their search for new female relationships had a sometimes desperate quality. As they related tales of the women who had answered their ads and the course of those usually short-term relationships, they frequently vacillated between pride at the number of replies received, self-doubt about negotiating the dating landscape, guilt at ending relationships with women who did not appeal to or attract them, and painful reports of rejection that left them reeling.

As a group, the women expressed more satisfaction with their lives and appeared less driven by the desire for an intimate partner. They described social and recreational outlets and activities that they admitted might not be possible were they in a committed relationship. Not unlike women described in studies on LAT relationships (e.g., de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson & Borell, 2005b; Stevens, 2002), despite their avowed desire to find a romantic partner, most seemed content to enjoy a level of independence and autonomy that their unattached status afforded them. They remained more selective, no longer willing, as they might once have been, to take as a partner a man who does not suit them. As Olivia (82) said, "I would much rather be alone than with the wrong man, but I'd much rather be with the right man than alone."

Such willingness to choose remaining alone over partnering with the wrong man may also be related to these women's relative financial security. None of the women expressed the *need* to find a man who could support them. In contrast, several of the men related relationships with women with substantial financial difficulties. Some men's willingness to cohabit with financially challenged women—moving them into their homes and often paying off the women's debts—underscores the willingness of many of

the men to make substantial sacrifices in exchange for marriage-like benefits. Gender relations and constructed ideals of masculinity played a role, as well. One man, age 78, for instance, when asked what he thought was the explanation for his consistently being taken advantage of, explained that he had been “born and raised” to view it as his responsibility to look after women’s financial concerns and protect them.

Limitations

Informant Characteristics and Selection Factors

The findings from this research illuminate the experiences and lived world of unmarried old women and old men seeking intimacy, love, and companionship in interesting and potentially valuable new ways. Because qualitative research is not concerned with representative samples nor with the ability to draw conclusions relative to a wider population, generalizations from the findings of this study as they may pertain to other older adults, even those interested in new intimate relationships, are both impossible and inappropriate. I do not know how or if these elders might differ from those utilizing more traditional means of meeting new people or from those who wish for a new romantic relationship but whose health, socioeconomic status, or geographical location, for instance, make that desire seem an unattainable goal. Nevertheless, it is of interest to consider how the women and men interviewed for this study compare with others of similar age in terms of demographic characteristics and their use of computers and Internet technologies.

Relationship histories. In 2009, the year the interviews for the present study were conducted, 95.7% of White, non-Hispanic women in the United States age 70 and over and 96.6% of men had married at some point in their lives (U.S. Census Bureau,

2011). Because this study concerns men and women age 70 and older who were actively pursuing new romantic relationships, it was anticipated that the vast majority of informants would have married at least once but would not be married at the time of their participation in the study. As expected, except for one woman and one man, all informants had married at least once in their lives. Seven of the women (63.6%) and four of the men (30.8%) were currently widowed; three of the women (27.3%) and eight of the men (61.5%) were currently divorced. All but one of the women who had ever married had been divorced at some time in her life, including six of the seven who were currently widowed. Similarly, of the 12 men who had ever married, all but one had been divorced, and six had been widowed. Only one man and one woman had a single long-term marriage that ended with the death of a spouse. (See Table 1.1.)

It is challenging to make comparisons between the men and women in this sample and national statistics relating to current marital status and marital history because the sample consists almost entirely of widowed or divorced individuals. Nevertheless, national census data can inform a discussion that compares this cohort with others of similar age. In the year 2009, 21.4% of all women and 23.4% of all men 70 years and older had ever divorced, with fewer than 10% of each currently divorced. Over twice as many women than men (51.2% versus 22.6%) had ever been widowed, and the vast majority of both women and men ever widowed were currently widowed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The men and women in the present sample are drawn from these pools of currently widowed or divorced individuals, with currently widowed, previously divorced women and currently divorced men predominating in the sample.

Beyond gaining an understanding of the relative *size* of the population of currently unmarried individuals from which this sample was drawn, however, percentages of widowed or divorced individuals in the population do not provide information that helps to distinguish individuals in the sample from others of similar age. It is necessary to consider the relatively high number of times these informants had been married to draw further conclusions: The 10 women and 12 men who had married reported a total of 45 marriages, an average of two marriages for each man and 1.7 marriages for each woman. The men averaged 1.6 divorces compared to the women's 1.1. Nationally, of the individuals in 2009 who had ever divorced, most had remarried (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Similar to the population, most of the informants had also remarried following divorce and remained unmarried after being widowed.

The two groups diverge when considering those reporting more than two marriages. Nationally, just 4.6% of women and 5.7% of men had married three or more times (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Among the informants who had married, one woman (10%) and five men (41.7%) reported three or more marriages. The relatively large percentage of men with three or more marriages suggests that they may be particularly atypical for their cohort. Because the numbers are small, however, care must be taken in interpreting their meaning. Of the five men reporting three or more marriages, for instance, three had also been widowed. One had been divorced when very young and then widowed twice in later life. Another had married the same woman two times. As has been reported of other widowers (see Davidson, 2001), two of the men remarried rather precipitously following the death of their wives, and these marriages did not last.

These facts alone may not tell the whole story, however; they can be augmented with nuances gleaned from these men's narratives of their lives and their relationship histories. Taken as a group, the five men with three or more marriages—but also a significant number of the other eight men—reported sentiments and actions in relation to women in general and their wives in particular that suggested the type of “difficult personality” qualities described by Huston & Merz (2004, p. 950) as lying beneath both rocky courtships and brittle marriages: lack of conscientiousness, independent-mindedness, and anxiety. These men may simply not be what Huston and Merz call good “marriage material” (p. 950) and may stand as examples of the kind of dating and life partners the women informants in this study deemed unacceptable and wished to avoid.

Older adults, the Internet, and online dating. Use of the Internet by older adults is growing rapidly. The numbers of broadband users 70 and older quadrupled between 2005 and 2008, and adults identified as part of the *Silent Generation* (ages 64–72) and the *G.I. Generation* (ages 73+), which represent 18% of the total adult population, constitute 11% of the Internet-using population (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). Social networking among Internet users ages 50 and older nearly doubled between 2009 and 2010, with one in four users age 65 and older using social networking sites (Madden, 2010).

The use of online matching and dating sites by older adults is growing, as well. Although specific numbers are not revealed, Match.com reports that people 50 and older represent its fastest growing user segment (O'Brien, n.d.). Older adults may turn to online dating because their available social networks lack suitable potential partners. In addition, because older adults are generally no longer involved in such “natural” institutions as

school, university, and work sites that bring together like-minded people and mutually attractive potential dates (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2005), they may be particularly drawn to the numbers available on Internet matching and dating sites.

Describing the relationship between a person's dating options and available time to find and meet potential partners, Stephure and colleagues (2009) argue that involvement in online dating may actually increase rather than decrease with age. It is even possible to envision that, just as today's younger people have moved away from the use of e-mail toward such newer technologies as text messaging and Twitter, older adults may eventually find themselves in the majority among members of online dating communities as younger people migrate to the next new thing. A number of emerging online dating sites, both fee-based and free, for older adults have launched in recent years. One of the more popular subscription-based sites, SeniorPeopleMeet.com, recently spun off a new service called OurTime.com, perhaps in a desire to remove the stigma-weighted word *senior* from potential members' consciousness. This service now touts itself as the largest online dating community catering to singles over 50. The women and men in the present research may still be among the minority in their cohorts in Internet usage and in seeking new romantic relationships online, but that usage is no longer cutting edge nor is there clear indication that they differ in substantive ways from others of their age seeking new intimate relationships.

Late-life variability. The data reported here represent a snapshot in time, a narrow slice in the life course of 24 individuals in their eighth, ninth, and tenth decades. Despite sharing the nebulous trait of "oldness," with a range of 22 years between the youngest and the oldest informants, they cannot reliably be described as a single cohort

or even a single generation. All informants were living independently, a fact that may have some bearing on both their dating and their sexual intimacy. Others (Adams, 1985) have found that older adults living in age-segregated communities, as many in these informants' age range do, feel a need to be secretive about their dating activities. Congregate living, however, may also offer a more easily accessible and immediate source of social fellowship and possible romance.

Social and emotional loneliness is sometimes reported among old women and men (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007), particularly among widowers and the oldest women (Rokach, Matalon, Rokach, & Safarov, 2007) and not only among those who are unmarried (de Jong Gierveld, van Groenou, Hoogendoorn, & Smit, 2009). Most estimates suggest, however, that the majority of older adults are neither lonely nor socially isolated, nor is living alone necessarily synonymous with being alone or experiencing loneliness (Victor, Scambler, Bond, & Bowling, 2000). Among unmarried older adults, contacts with kin, friends, and neighbors were negatively related with loneliness, with divorced and widowed adults profiting more from contact with adult children, and never-married and childless individuals profiting most from contacts with siblings, friends, and neighbors (Pinquart, 2003).

The women in the present study more frequently reported satisfactory or meaningful social ties and networks than did the men, who, in turn, were significantly more apt to mention feeling both lonely and alone. Although many women and some men mentioned time spent with adult children and grandchildren, these relationships were seldom described as central to informants' regular social lives and activities. The informants spoke less about loneliness than about *longing*, a sentiment well expressed

with the German word *Sehnsucht*, defined as “an intense desire for alternative states and realizations of life” (Scheibe, Freund, & Baltes, 2007, p. 778). Regardless of the richness of their social ties and networks, informants’ descriptions of ideal partners and their forays into descriptions of past relationships often revealed the presence of *Sehnsucht* and the belief that finding an intimate partner would fill an empty spot in their lives that no other type of relationship could.

Finally, it should be specifically noted that all the men and women interviewed for this study were heterosexual. Little is known about the experiences of aging lesbians or gay men in pursuit of new intimate relationships. This area of study represents a rich and challenging research gap and one overdue for scholarly exploration.

Conclusion

At every age in life’s last decades, women outnumber men, a fact not lost on old women. They frequently live in a world seemingly populated by a society of unmarried women—widows and, increasingly, divorcees. As I was leaving a formal event during which I had made a brief presentation about my research, two elegantly dressed, refined-looking women stopped me at the door. One asked, “Aren’t you the one who is interested in romantic relationships in late life”? When I replied in the affirmative, she said she had just one question: “Where do I find one?”

The present research concerns the *pursuit* of new love, rarely the attainment. As the findings reported here attest, it is not just old women who struggle to fulfill their desire for romance and wonder where to search. The male informants’ stories were also primarily tales of unsuccessful or short-lived forays into the world of dating. And yet, the women and men who shared their trials and infrequent small victories in conversations

with me have not, for the most part, succumbed to despair: They continue the search, ever hopeful that “the one” is still out there. They explore multiple avenues, join yet another online matching service, get excited about the newest “wink” from what looks like an attractive potential partner, and forge onward. Statistics—and informants’ own storied histories—suggest that the vast majority of seekers will not find a new love that develops into a long-term relationship. For some, particularly the men, the delight may, in fact, be in the hunt, the pursuit. Nearly all are likely to eventually settle into the prospects of a solitary but not necessarily lonely life, buoyed by the company, fellowship, and love of friends and family members. Whether their future finds them in the intimate partnerships they seek or living singly, these not-old women and men model alternate ways of “doing” aging as they defy stereotypes, challenge assumptions of how old age “looks” and “acts,” and reject ageist notions of romantic disinterest and asexuality in late life.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Sample Recruitment Letter (to a Woman)

[Month] [Day], 2009

I am writing in response to your personal ad in [*source here*]. Let me say straight off, however, that I am not the person you are looking for! I am, in fact, a married woman and a 64-year-old graduate student at Oregon State University interested in friendship and romance among adults who are 70 and over.

I have met a number of men and women who formed meaningful and enriching love relationships in their 70s, 80s, and 90s, and knowing them is what triggered my curiosity about new relationships in later life. I am interested in hearing people's stories about their search for a new dating partner, sweetheart, or spouse. I often read personal ads and I was particularly intrigued when I discovered the Friendship Ads in the *Northwest Senior and Boomer News*. I wanted to know more about the people behind these ads! [I have been intrigued by postings on Match.com, and I wanted to know more about the people behind these ads!]

Your ad caught my eye because you listed your age as 70 or older and you sound like a woman who is active and engaged with life. Would you be willing to meet with me, tell me a little bit about yourself, and share your personal story? We could meet anywhere that is convenient and comfortable for you. The interview would take about an hour but perhaps longer, depending on how our conversation is going. Our conversation would be audio recorded and later transcribed, and your identity would be fully protected.

If this sounds like something you would be interested in and you would like to learn more or set up a time for us to meet, please contact me. You can write me at the university address at the top of this letter or email me at [redacted for privacy] or call me at [redacted for privacy]. Please remember to include your

contact information and how you would prefer to be contacted. I will reply quickly with more information about the study and details about your participation and how I will protect your identity and maintain your confidentiality. I hope we can also set up a time to meet and talk.

Thank you very much for considering my invitation. I really want to talk with you and look forward to hearing from you!

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

[signed]

Liz Levaro

Appendix B

Sample Recruitment Letter (to a Man)

[Month] [Day], 2009

I am writing in response to your personal ad in *[source here]*. Let me say straight off, however, that I am not the person you are looking for! I am, in fact, a married woman and a 64-year-old graduate student at Oregon State University interested in friendship and romance among adults who are 70 and over.

I have met a number of men and women who formed meaningful and enriching love relationships in their 70s, 80s, and 90s, and knowing them is what triggered my curiosity about new relationships in later life. I am interested in hearing people's stories about their search for a new dating partner, sweetheart, or spouse. I often read personal ads and I was particularly intrigued when I discovered the Friendship Ads in the *Northwest Senior and Boomer News*. I wanted to know more about the people behind these ads! [I have been intrigued by postings on Match.com, and I wanted to know more about the people behind these ads!]

Your ad caught my eye because you listed your age as 70 or older and you sound like a man who is active and engaged with life. To be honest with you, it is easier to find women who want to talk with me than it is to find men. I love talking to women about their experiences, but I also really want to get a man's point of view. I am especially anxious to hear how you as a man experience the world of dating and romance! Would you be willing to meet with me, tell me a little bit about yourself, and share your personal story? We could meet anywhere that is convenient and comfortable for you. The interview would take about an hour but perhaps longer, depending on how our conversation is going. Our

conversation would be audio recorded and later transcribed, and your identity would be fully protected.

If this sounds like something you would be interested in and you would like to learn more or set up a time for us to meet, please contact me. You can write me at the university address at the top of this letter or email me at [redacted for privacy] or call me at [redacted for privacy]. Please remember to include your contact information and how you would prefer to be contacted. I will reply quickly with more information about the study and details about your participation and how I will protect your identity and maintain your confidentiality. I hope we can also set up a time to meet and talk.

Thank you very much for considering my invitation. I really want to talk with you and look forward to hearing from you!

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

[signed]

Liz Levaro

Appendix C

Interview Guide

DECIDING TO PLACE AN AD

We connected with each other because of the ad you placed in/on _____.
I'm interested in how you came to the decision to place an ad looking for a new romantic partner. Could you tell me about that?

Have you tried this before?

CREATING THE AD

I can imagine that writing an ad like that must be a challenge! In your ad, you wrote ____/ you described yourself as _____. How did you decide what you would include about yourself—and what you would leave out?

You mentioned your age. What kind of a difference do you think age makes?

How is the whole age thing different for men and women?

What do your friends and family think about all this?

FINDING THE RIGHT ONE: Turn-ons and turn offs

What are the qualities you are looking for in a new romantic partner?

What do you find especially attractive in a woman/in a man? If you could describe that “dream gal”/“dream guy,” what would she/he be like?

How is what is important to you today different from when you were younger?

What would be a “turn off” or “deal breaker” for you, something that would make a relationship with this person impossible for you?

How important to you is a potential partner's:

- Age
- Physical appearance
- Personality
- Finances
- Health
- Personal hygiene
- Habits and lifestyle

In what ways do you think people tend to evaluate the attractiveness of men and women differently?

DATING

Rules of Dating: Who makes the first move in asking for a date? What about “winks” (on Match.com)?

What’s the first date like? (Perfect first date?)

Do you have stories to share? (Adventures, romantic interludes, duds?)

How do you find the whole idea or experience of dating as a woman/man today?

How is the experience compared to when you were younger? (Different? Harder? Easier?)

How important is sexual intimacy for you in a relationship now?

ED drugs (Viagra, Levitra, Cialis, etc.), implants, penile injections: What are your thoughts? Similar products for women?

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

As a woman/man, how are you imagining or hoping your life with the right new romantic partner might be different than it is now? From other relationships you’ve had?

Assuming that you found the right person, what kinds of living arrangements would you consider? Are you interested in getting married (again)? Living together? LAT?

GENDER & AGING

How old do you feel? Is there a difference between your age on the outside and on the inside?

In what ways do you find aging affecting how you feel about yourself as a woman/man?

What types of situations, activities, or people make you feel older or younger or think more about your age?

What are the positive things about being your age? The negative things?

How do you see yourself compared with other women/men your age? Compared with men/women?

If you think about an “old woman,” what do you see in your mind’s eye? What about “old man?”

WRAP-UP

Is there anything else we haven’t talked about that you think I might like to hear about or that you think I should know?

