Diversity and the State of Sociological Aging Theory

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In the literature on aging there have been almost simultaneous calls for researchers to make more explicit links between theory and research and for researchers to incorporate diversity in their work. Although gerontologists have begun to document diversity, theory is often absent from this research. In this article, the author examines sociological aging theories of inequality and argues that this absence of theory may not be due to an oversight on the part of researchers. Rather, aging theories need to be rethought to be better suited for diversity research.

Key Words: Gender, Social class, Ethnicity, Race

Recently, researchers concerned with aging and social inequality have called for an incorporation of diversity in theory and research (Calasanti, 1993, 1996; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993; Hendricks, 1996; Nelson & Dannenber, 1992). Focusing on diversity brings comparative group differences to the fore of research, allows for descriptive examinations of previously neglected groups, and helps show why and how group differences emerge in the first place (Calasanti, 1996). Studies of diversity are concerned with interlocking hierarchies of power (Calasanti, 1996; Hendricks, 1996), and these studies assess group differences by situating them within the context of this power hierarchy (Calasanti, 1996). Researchers examine neglected groups from the standpoint of the group, thereby avoiding the categorization of the group as “deviant” or “other.” Thus, studies of diversity compare groups and assess differences by privileging the knowledge of the group in question and by asking why and how these groups are oppressed (Calasanti, 1996).

Although there seems to be a general acceptance of the importance of incorporating diversity in research on aging (Hendricks, 1996), many scholars have yet to embrace it in their work. In this article I argue that one reason for this omission may be that there is an incompatibility between diversity research and established aging theory. A point of clarification is necessary here. In her important article on diversity, Calasanti (1996) made the distinction between content and approach diversity. Content diversity refers to group differences (racial, ethnic, class, gender), and approach diversity refers to a research emphasis on power and standpoint. Although researchers who study aging have made great strides in documenting content diversity (see, e.g., O’Rand, 1996a, 1996b; Uhlenberg & Minor, 1996), research that deals with approach diversity lags behind. This, I propose, is linked to the relative reliance on aging theory that is required in each body of work. In other words, although it is relatively straightforward for researchers to document content diversity without much theoretical emphasis, the same is not true for approach diversity. Thus, the problem lies, at least in part, with the state of aging theory (see Appendix, Note 1).

In a recent article, Bengtson, Burgess, and Parrott (1997) addressed the atheoretical nature of aging research and the importance of linking research to theory. They argued that aging research tends to be atheoretical largely because researchers are slow to integrate facts “within a larger explanatory framework, connecting findings to established explanations of social phenomena” (p. S72). The implicit assumption in this argument is that the “established explanations of social phenomena” are adequate, that the explicit connections are there to be made, and that researchers should begin to do so. Although this may be true in some cases, in others the state of aging theory may impede researchers from making those explicit links. This, I contend, is the case with diversity research.

The basic premise of approach diversity is that class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race (see Appendix, Note 2) are interlocking sets of power relations that structure social life. Thus, for a theory to be well suited for diversity research at least two criteria must be met. First, class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race must be conceptualized as power relations, and second, they must come together as an interlocking hierarchy of power rather than as separate systems. In this article, I examine several well-established aging theories on social inequality to assess whether they meet these two basic criteria of approach diversity. I focus on two bodies of theoretical development that have arguably been the most influential in sociological aging research—the age stratification perspective and the political economy approach. I then turn to feminist approaches on aging. Although feminist theory has not had the same influence as the political
economy and age stratification perspectives on research on aging, it is important to consider this work because it comes closest to an explicit theoretical statement of approach diversity.

The Age Stratification Perspective

Conceptualizing Age

The age stratification perspective, as developed by Riley and her colleagues, is arguably the most cited and used approach in the aging literature. According to this perspective, age is conceptualized as both a process and a structure. Riley (1994) conceptualized individual aging as a biopsychosocial process, thus capturing psychological and biological development as well as the experience of entering and exiting social roles (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). According to this approach, the aging process influences the structure of age-related acts or capacities. Allocation and socialization are the processes that intervene between the social structures relating to people (persons of given ages or age strata and age-related acts or capacities) and those relating to roles (roles open to persons of given ages and age-related expectations and sanctions). Allocation refers to the process whereby individuals are continually assigned and reassigned to particular roles, and socialization alludes to teaching individuals how to perform new life course roles (Riley et al., 1972).

The age stratification perspective has evolved into what is now called The Aging and Society Paradigm. Subtle changes in the terminology used to describe the theory came with the model's elaboration including the addition of the word dynamism, which is thought to encompass both process and change (Riley, 1988). Riley described the evolution of the paradigm when she stated that the "distinction between people and roles led us to focus directly on the central theme of the paradigm: the two dynamisms—changes in lives and in structures" (Riley, 1994, p. 438). Each dynamism is a distinct and separate process; both are interdependent and both are asynchronous (differ in timing; Riley, Foner, & Waring, 1988; Riley & Riley, 1994). As a result, they produce a structural lag because human lives change faster than the social structure (Riley & Riley, 1994).

The Age and Society Paradigm seeks to explain the processes that underlie the movement of age cohorts through time and age-related social structures. Exploring the asynchrony between individual and structural change, the paradigm attempts to resolve issues of conflict related to this "structural lag." The theory also strives to understand the interdependence between age cohorts, social structures, and individual aging processes (Bengston et al., 1997).

In age stratification research, the age system of inequality is generally conceptualized in terms of the differences between older, middle-aged, and younger age strata. At a structural level, similar-aged individuals form strata that may be defined on the basis of either chronological age or biological, psychological, or social stages of development (Riley et al., 1972, p. 6). Age strata differ from one another in size and composition as well as the relative contributions that each makes to society. Age is also established in the social structure as a "criterion for entering or relinquishing certain roles" (Riley et al., 1972, p. 7) and thus is used as a marker through which age-appropriate behavior is gauged.

Although there is some recognition that inequalities arise as age strata are constructed and reformulated through the changes in society and age-related processes (Riley et al., 1988, p. 268), age tends to be treated in static, rather than dynamic, terms. Thus, the processes and changes that are captured in the diachronic view of the age stratification approach are generally absent in assessments of social inequality. Instead, researchers tend to start with the assumption that age strata, with clearly defined roles and consequential rewards and expectations, exist and comprise a system of age-based inequality (Foner, 1974, 1986; Riley et al., 1972, 1988). Hence, these theories of inequality are generally framed within the synchronic model of the age stratification perspective.

To illustrate, let us now turn to the specifics of how age stratification researchers might conceptualize age-based social inequality in two spheres—the economy and the family. In this body of research, paid employment and family membership are considered socially valued roles because they function to maintain order in society. According to the age stratification perspective, older and younger age strata are relatively disadvantaged because they tend not to take part in the productive roles that are highly valued in modern society. Labor force entries and exits are allocated by age both directly through labor laws and indirectly through educational criteria for entering jobs and also by the perceived age-related performance abilities for job exit. There are age differences in the kinds of jobs people hold and in the age distribution of the workforce. These age-related roles and expectations for labor force participation lead to different rewards according to age. Thus, compared with labor force participants, retired workers and young people tend to be less powerful and economically disadvantaged. Within labor markets, older workers assume more power and tend to make more money than younger workers, especially in well-established firms (Foner, 1986; Foner & Schwab, 1981; Riley et al., 1972, 1988).

Age stratification discussions of the family have focused on the age-graded nature of the family, its changing structure, its functions, and the roles and norms associated with different types of memberships in families (Foner, 1986). Inequality within families is generally assessed through economic differences and power imbalances between parents and their younger children. In families of procreation, parents have more power and economic control than their children because they assume socializing and caregiving roles. The focus in discussions of later life families is on whether older parents are neglected by their adult children (Riley et al., 1988). Although these discussions tend not to be framed within the context of
power, an imbalance is implied in which the power shifts from parents to children.

Cohort flow is one of the fundamental processes in the age stratification perspective (Riley et al., 1972). Riley and her colleagues (1972, p. 8) suggested that cohort flow is the

essential process underlying the changing size and composition of the age strata and consists of the formation of successive cohorts, their modification through migration and the gradual reduction and eventual dissolution of each cohort through the death of individual members.

Thus, besides specifying age as strata or a biopsychosocial process, age stratification researchers conceptualize age in terms of cohorts. Following Ryder's (1965) definition, Riley defined a cohort as an aggregate of individuals who experienced the same event within the same time interval; birth cohorts are only a special case of this more general definition. Notably, Ryder's conceptualization allows for individuals to be grouped according to any significant event. In practice, however, year of birth tends to be the event that is assigned meaningful significance. Thus, Riley viewed cohorts as aggregates of individuals who are born in the same time interval.

The conceptualization of cohorts in arbitrarily defined 1-year and 5-year age groups is a fundamental problem in the application of age stratification perspectives. This approach serves to reify chronological age as the basis of inequality and ignores the more subjective dimensions of age (Marshall, 1983; Passuth & Bengtson, 1988). By assuming that 1-year or 5-year age cohorts take on meaningful significance, this approach masks qualitative differences in personal experience that are age related (Marshall, 1983).

Maddox and Wiley (1976) and Marshall (1983) have voiced concerns over the atheoretical nature of the term cohort as it is used in most social science research. According to Marshall (1983), it is more meaningful to assess age relations in terms of groups of people who experience a significant historical event in different ways. These groups would not necessarily be defined in 1-year or 5-year birth cohorts. Rather, depending on the historical event of interest, they may encompass people born over a span of 2, 7, or perhaps even 20 years (see also Elder, 1974). Ryder (1965, p. 847) appeared to allow for this possibility in his general definition of cohort by suggesting that a cohort may be "identified by common time of occurrence of any significant and enduring event in life history." Examples Ryder gave of these events include the year in which a group of people completed school, got married, migrated to a city, or entered the labor force. Here again, however, he has reduced cohorts to single years without considering theoretical implications of doing so. For instance, it may make more theoretical sense to compare a group of individuals who completed their formal schooling during the years of the Depression to those who finished their schooling immediately before World War II (see Elder, 1974, for an example of this general approach, and Appendix, Note 3).

Conceptualizing Gender, Class, and Ethnicity/Race

The preceding discussion illustrates that age (conceptualized as a biopsychosocial process, as strata, and as cohorts) predominates as the primary basis of difference in the age stratification perspective. Assigning such primacy to age leads to a homogeneous view of biopsychosocial processes, age strata, and age cohorts that neglects diversity on the basis of other structures such as gender, class, or ethnicity/race (Dannefer, 1988; Dowd, 1987; Tindale & Marshall, 1980). When gender, class, or ethnicity/race are mentioned in this research they are viewed as separate systems of inequality (Foner, 1974, 1986; Riley et al., 1972, 1988). Researchers tend to treat these systems of difference as if they cross-cut each other in similar ways, rather than to assess their interlocking nature.

Age stratification researchers also tend to treat the age system of inequality as if it is similar in nature and process to gender-, class-, and ethnicity/race-, and class-based structures of inequality. According to Foner (1986, p. 85), "if we view the age stratification system as similar to other forms of social stratification, then age, like class, race, or sex, is potentially a focal point around which intragroup solidarity develops and political conflicts between age strata emerge in the society."

A quick comparison of age strata and social class characteristics reveals their differences (see Dowd, 1987). Probably most central is that whereas an individual's social class tends to be permanent, membership in different age strata is a fluid and expected process. However, overstating the differences may be as misleading as inflating the similarities. For instance, Dowd (1987) suggested that a central difference between social class and age lies in the existence of legal statutes that prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of age; no laws prohibit the hiring of managers over workers. He went on to state that

the concept of discrimination simply does not extend to social class, a fact that underscores popular conceptions of the class hierarchy as a "natural" result of either a sifting process based on talent and ability or a more complicated process involving societal needs and differential socialization patterns. (Dowd, 1987, p. 323)

This argument is somewhat misleading because it simplifies the complex and subtle structures of employment that perpetuate gender-, ethnic-, and age-based inequality. Mandatory retirement, for instance, is an age-based event that often results in lower incomes and limited life chances. Substituting mandatory retirement and age hierarchy for social class and class hierarchy in the previous quotation illustrates that there are some similarities between class and age stratification. This is not to say that they are the same.
Rather, exaggerating the differences leads to the treatment of age as a secondary source of inequality, which may be as problematic as assigning primacy to it.

In sum, its normative tendencies; reification of chronological age; treatment of class, gender, and ethnicity/race as separate systems of inequality if at all; and assumptions about the similarity between age and other bases of inequality are problems in the age stratification approach that limit its usefulness as a theoretical paradigm in research on approach diversity. However, within the context of these limitations, researchers and theorists should not lose sight of the importance of this approach in conceptualizing age as a system of inequality. By unraveling the effects of individual aging and age strata from cohort flow within the context of historical time, this approach provides useful tools for those developing theories on approach diversity (see Appendix, Note 4).

The Political Economy of Aging

In the late 1970s and early 1980s social gerontologists began to critique the normative and highly individualistic theories that were then prominent in aging research (Marshall & Tindale, 1978–79; Tindale & Marshall, 1980). Responding to these critiques and the calls for a more radical and critical approach, several scholars from different countries began to assess old age from a political economy perspective (Estes, 1979; Estes, Swan, & Gerard, 1982; Guillemard, 1982, 1983; Myles, 1980, 1984, 1989; Phillipson, 1982; Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1981).

To explain age-based inequality, political economists focus on the interrelationships among the economy, the polity, and the ideological structures that these systems of domination construct and reconstruct. Political economists account for the problems that older people face by considering structural characteristics of the state, the economy, and inequalities in the distribution and allocation of resources that these institutions create. Hence, political economy theories focus on social structural explanations of inequality rather than on individual reasons such as the naturally diminishing physical or mental capacities of older people (Estes, 1979; Guillemard, 1983; Myles, 1984, 1989; Phillipson, 1982; Townsend, 1981, 1986; Walker, 1981).

A substantial body of aging research has emerged over the last 20 years that draws on the political economy perspective. Studies from this camp that are among the most provocative have examined the following:

2. How the commodification of the needs of older adults benefits capital and creates an “aging enterprise” (Estes, 1979, 1991).
3. How old age is dependent on the division of labor in society as well as on the distribution and allocation of resources. Related to this is how the institution of retirement creates a “social death” that serves to define old age (Guillemard, 1982, 1983).
4. The contradiction between the principles of democratic citizenship and the principles governing the capitalist system of allocation; in other words, the contradictions that arise in a social welfare state that assumes primary financial responsibility for its older population in a market economy that eliminates older people from the workforce (Myles, 1980, 1984, 1989).

To a greater or lesser extent, these studies consider the socially constructed nature of aging, old age, and dependency; the influence of ideology in this construction; the legitimation of social interventions pertaining to elderly people; the influence of state, capital, and labor relations on aging and old age; and the effects of social policy for elderly people (Estes, 1991; Estes, Linkins, & Binney, 1996). Although a discussion of the specifics of each of these arguments is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to briefly consider the role of the state in political economy research.

Although the state comprises many institutions (education, criminal justice, health care), researchers from the political economy of aging perspective generally equate the state with the governing bodies responsible for the policies relating to social welfare. The term social welfare in studies of aging most often refers to social security and health benefits (Estes et al., 1996). The importance of the state in this research stems from the power that it has over resource allocation and distribution in the context of its relation to capital and to labor and its ultimate responsibility for the survival of the economic system (Estes et al., 1996; Myles, 1989). In the political economy perspective, the state is thought to reflect the interests of the most powerful members of society and the existing social order is thought to be the result of power struggles in which the state participates (Estes, 1991; Estes et al., 1996). Unlike consensus models where the state is considered a “neutral entity, operating in the universal interests of all members of society” (Estes, 1991, p. 22), political economy scholars generally believe either that the state acts to maintain its own bureaucratic control (Offe & Ronge, 1982, cited in Estes, 1991) or that power struggles within the state represent class struggles (Myles, 1989).

Important advances in the study of social inequality and aging have come from the political economy analysis of state policies relating to retirement and pensions. For instance, Myles (1980, 1984, 1989) showed that income inequality in older age is a function of both the overall levels of inequality in a given society and the way pension systems alter or reproduce that inequality. Although inequalities in preretirement years persist after retirement, an understand-
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in part, through these and other state policies. Traditionally, public pension structures have either been based on preretirement incomes or on the idea of a national minimum benefit. In the first instance, pensions perpetuate class-, gender-, and ethnicity-based inequalities in older age by “graduating” pension incomes according to preretirement income. In the second instance, income equality among older people is achieved because the same sum of money is paid to everyone on the basis of citizenship only (flat benefit structure; Myles, 1980, 1984, 1989).

Most Western capitalist nations have pension structures that combine flat and graduated pension schemes (Myles, 1980). The interplay between graduated and flat benefit structures highlights a contradiction in modern, liberal democratic states between the rights attached to the ownership of property and rights afforded to persons in their capacity as citizens (Myles, 1984, 1989). According to Myles (1989), the strategies that different countries use to come to terms with this contradiction determine the relative pension benefits of older people and are a reflection of class struggles within the state. Thus, Myles (1989) suggested that the quality and quantity of pension benefits are largely a function of the political mobilization of the working class and the election of working class parties.

This brief summary of Myles’s work illustrates the power that the state has in determining the economic status of older adults. Few scholars would dispute this point, although political economists disagree over the precise conceptualization of the state (see Estes, 1991; Estes et al., 1996) and the relative emphasis that should be placed on the state relations (Myles, 1989) versus the relations of production (Guillemard, 1982, 1983) in assessments of inequality. Most would also agree that old age and aging are socially constructed, in part, through these and other state policies.

The Social Construction of Aging and Old Age

The preceding discussion of the state illustrates that scholars who study age from a political economy perspective tend to conceptualize age as strata. Thus, from this perspective Western capitalist societies are thought to be organized on the basis of whether one is old, middle aged, or young. Unlike age stratification researchers, political economists are critical of these divisions and question how a particular chronological age becomes the marker by which one is defined as old and how the polity and the economy legitimize old age by defining it as a problem and then by developing solutions to deal with the problem (Estes, 1979; Guillemard, 1982, 1983; Myles, 1989; Phillipson, 1982; Walker, 1981, 1983). Several political economists have argued that the transformation of old age into a social category based on chronological age was made possible by the establishment of a set of age-based pensions administered by the state and that old age has come to be defined in terms of retirement (Guillemard, 1982, 1983; Myles, 1989; Phillipson, 1982; Walker, 1981).

Estes described an “aging enterprise” that comprises “programs, organizations, bureaucracies, interest groups, trade associations, providers, industries, and professionals that serve the aged in one capacity or another” (Estes, 1979, p. 2). The interests of those that constitute the aging enterprise are realized by making elderly persons dependent upon the services they offer. In doing so, aged persons are processed and treated as a commodity (Estes, 1979; Estes et al., 1982). Further, this

socially constructed problem, and the remedies invoked on the policy level, are related, first, to the capacity of strategically located interests and classes to define the problem and to press their views into public consciousness and law and, second to the objective facts of the situation. (Estes et al., 1996, p. 349)

The crisis ideology perpetuated by the state and the media regarding the aging of the population and social welfare is another example of how old age becomes socially constructed as a problem. The message conveyed is that with the increasing number of elderly people will come a financial burden too large to bear (the emphasis is usually on the baby boom generation reaching old age). However, Myles (1980) has demonstrated that although the structure of state spending, ownership, and control will likely change, it is unlikely that population aging will bankrupt nations.

Political economists have advanced the state of theorizing in gerontological research over the last 20 years by examining issues relating to older age through a critical lens. Nonetheless, the conceptualization of age by political economists is somewhat problematic. First, although this approach places emphasis on the structural characteristics that frame the aging experience and older age, age relations themselves are often considered secondary to issues of social class. The following quotation, which demonstrates this position, is typical of the way age relations are handled in the political economy perspective. In describing the political economy of aging, Estes, and her colleagues (1982, p. 155) stated that

the status and resources of the elderly, and even the trajectory of the aging process itself, are conditioned by one’s location in the social structure and the economic and political factors that affect it. (See Appendix, Note 5)

Thus, aging and age relations do not seem to be central to one’s position within the social structure. Rather, political economists tend to treat other structures of domination, particularly that of class, as the key determinant relations that affect the life situations of older adults and the aging process.

Second, political economists of aging have been critical, and rightly so, of gerontological researchers who seek to explain older age by “naturalizing” the
biological conditions of aging but by doing so, these researchers tend to understate the significance of the biological aging process. Such researchers fail to examine the subtle institutional procedures that discriminate on the basis of biopsychosocial aging and thus render the aging process invisible (see Appendix, Note 6).

**Conceptualizing Social Class**

Social class is a key concept in the political economy of aging approach and it is in discussions of social class that the Marxian influence in this perspective is most evident (Marx, 1867/1967; Marx & Engels, 1848/1970). Political economy of aging researchers emphasize the relations of production in their conceptualization of social class and specifically the relations between those who own the means of production and those who do not (Guillemand, 1982, 1983; Myles, 1980, 1984, 1989; Phillipson, 1982; Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1981). Thus, according to Guillemand (1982, p. 228), “the traditional Marxist definition, which analyzes the class structure of the capitalist mode of production by basically contrasting the two antagonistic classes—capitalist and proletarian—must be upheld.” Among political economy of aging researchers, this understanding of social class is generally enhanced by the work of contemporary Marxist scholars such as Poulantzas (1975), who stressed the effects of economic, political, and ideological structures in class relations, or Wright (1978, 1985), who emphasized the control as well as the ownership of property and resources (see Estes et al., 1982; Guillemand, 1982; Walker, 1981).

The emphasis on the relations of production in the political economy of aging approach is paradoxical because most older people are no longer directly engaged in socially defined productive relations (Dowd, 1980; Estes, 1991; Estes et al., 1982). One strategy political economists use to deal with this paradox is to use a life course framework to assess the class relations of older adults on the basis of their preretirement social class (Guillemand, 1982, 1983; Phillipson, 1982; Walker, 1981). Aware of life course processes, these political economists believe that power relations and resources in later life are shaped by people’s earlier location within the social structure or their class position. Missing in these accounts is an analysis of the relationship between age relations and class relations as they structure inequality in later life. As others have pointed out (Kohli, 1988; Myles, 1980), the economic and social locations of older people reflect not only class inequalities in early life but also unique processes that are structured by age relations.

Estes dealt with the contradiction between the Marxist emphasis on productive labor and assessments of the social location of older people by turning to a more Weberian view of class. Specifically, Estes (1991, p. 25) drew on Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979, p.11) and suggested that a social class is “characterized by a coherent social and cultural existence; members of a class share a common life style, educational background, kinship networks, consumption patterns, work habits, and beliefs.” This definition of social class, Estes (1991; Estes et al., 1982) argued, is analytically appropriate for older people because it does not necessarily reflect productive relations and can capture the dynamics involved with aging and social inequality.

Although a reformulation of social class is no doubt necessary for researchers to fully assess the structural nature of inequality among older people and between older and younger people, it is unlikely that a better understanding of inequality will be achieved if the relations of production and distribution are ignored, as this definition seems to do. The definition is limiting because it does not consider relations or the processes involved in inequality. Rather, as in stratification research, its goal seems to be to assess differences on the basis of categorizing people according to similar life situations.

Another strategy political economists use to deal with this paradox is to assume that more than one structure of domination influences social inequality. Myles (1989) used this approach and argued that two structures of domination in Western capitalist societies structure inequality in older age. One is based on the productive relations whereby power is afforded to those who control economic resources. The other is based in the polity where power is maintained by those who control political resources. The interplay between these power sources determines, both in principle and in practice (these do not often converge), the value of old age pensions and, hence, structures economic inequality in later life.

According to Myles (1989), arbitrations between the polity and the economy over old age benefits are framed in contradictions because the principles of democratic politics are inconsistent with the principles of a capitalist economy. Public pension systems represent the compromise between these sets of principles that has been negotiated within the political arena. Thus, Myles (1989) argued that income inequality in old age is structured by the state rather than by the market’s invisible hand. However, a critical factor determining the extent of pension entitlements is the political mobilization of the working class (defined in Marxist terms), for Myles believed that power struggles within the state are essentially class conflicts.

Myles (1989) improved on the other life course work because he assessed the structure of inequality in older age as a result of both preretirement class-based inequalities and socially constructed age-based inequalities that come with retirement. In doing so, he stressed the importance of class relations and their influence on the state relations of distribution. The most significant problem for studies of diversity in Myles’s analysis, and one that he acknowledged, is the neglect of gender.

**Conceptualizing Gender and Ethnicity/Race**

The significance of gender, race, and ethnicity in assessments of social inequality is often acknowl-
edged by political economy of aging theorists. For instance, Myles (1989) noted the significance of gender by stating that a major problem with his thesis is that it ignores the situation of women. Estes (1979, 1991, 1999; Estes et al., 1982, 1996) highlighted the importance of gender, race, and ethnicity by acknowledging them in her overviews of the political economy perspective and by stressing their structural significance in discussions of inequality. In light of the recognition of gender, race, and ethnicity in political economy accounts, it is rather surprising that most political economists, like other aging theorists, have yet to afford serious theoretical attention to the structural nature of gender (Estes, 1999, is the notable exception) and ethnic/racial relations.

Some political economy researchers have assessed differences between men and women in their work (Olson, 1982; Orloff, 1993) or have considered gender as fundamental to their analyses (Arber & Ginn, 1990, 1991, 1995; Quadango, 1988). However, to the best of my knowledge, Estes (1991, 1999) is the only political economist who has systematically attempted to theorize gender. In 1991 Estes began this work by expanding Acker’s (1988) thesis on the gendered nature of social class, conceived as both the relations of distribution and the relations of production, to include older women. In her argument, Estes (1991) highlighted the point that Acker made regarding the indifference of capitalist economic systems to the reproduction of the working class and the demands of working class daily life.

According to Estes (1991), a research focus on the relations of reproduction allows for an analysis of the gendered division of paid and unpaid labor throughout the life course. Because the concept of social reproduction moves beyond the economic sphere, a new and more accurate light may be cast on “the role of women and the elderly (men and women) in the daily activity of the productive sphere” (Estes, 1991, p. 27). In this work, it is not entirely clear what is meant by gender and ethnic/racial relations. For instance, Estes (1991, p. 20) noted that “class is broadly conceived to include the impact of gender and racial/ethnic relations on the relations of production.” On one hand, this statement could imply that Estes has reconceptualized class by extending the traditional Marxist definition of class to include the gendered and ethnic/racial-based processes that structure the relations of production. On the other hand, it might mean that gender and ethnic/racial divisions may be reduced to class relations.

Estes (1999) addressed this problem in her most recent work by carefully discussing how gender, class, race, and ethnicity are implicated within the state and within symbolic and cultural institutions. By using many concrete examples of social life, she showed that gender relations and, to a lesser extent, ethnic and race relations are sets of power structures in their own right that cannot be reduced to class structures of inequality. Estes (1999) also pointed out that her approach recognizes standpoint theory and conceptualizes race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, two theoretical issues that lend themselves well to research on approach diversity. Despite the latter claim, Estes often reverted back to documenting differences between men and women, racial or ethnic groups, classes, and the young and old without thoroughly considering the intersections among these sets of power relations. This tendency is problematic because readers are occasionally left with an uneasy feeling that gender, race, and ethnicity are being added to an existing paradigm, a difficulty that feminist researchers have often pointed out (Acker, 1988; McMullin, 1995). Nonetheless, this new work in the political economy approach is promising, if underdeveloped, and shows useful directions for advancing diversity research.

In summary, assessments of inequality and diversity would be incomplete if they did not take into account the role of the state in resource allocation and distribution and how these processes are influenced by class struggles. However, in tendency to compare elderly with nonelderly persons, political economists oversimplify the complexities of age relations by not considering issues relating to cohorts, more specific age strata divisions, or aging processes. Further, the a priori emphasis on class relations over and above age relations leads to assessments of social inequality in later life that reflect class inequalities in early life. Missing in many political economy accounts are the unique processes of age relations that structure inequality. The traditional view of class relations in much of this work also leads to a neglect of gender and ethnic/racial relations (see Estes, 1999, for an exception).

**Socialist-Feminist Perspectives in Aging Research**

To better understand the complex interplay between gender and social class, feminist scholars believe that theories need to be rethought and categories reconceptualized (Acker, 1980, 1988; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993; Dressel, 1988; Fox, 1988; McMullin, 1995). Although this type of rethinking is rare in aging research, a handful of feminists have engaged in such theoretical development (Arber & Ginn, 1990, 1991, 1995; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993; see Appendix, Note 7).

Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) provided the most succinct theoretical statement on aging from a feminist perspective in their article titled “A Socialist-Feminist Approach to Aging: Embracing Diversity.” They began by discussing two problematic ways in which gender has been examined in aging research. First, researchers, assuming that there are gender differences, have established separate models for men and women. In this approach, women are compared to the ideal, normative, male model and differences are noted. Second, single models are estimated that include gender as a variable in the analysis. According to Calasanti and Zajicek, this strategy is particularly problematic because researchers treat women as if they were men, using models that were developed to assess men’s experiences. The resulting re-
Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) suggested that this research favors individuals from the White middle class. Thus, according to Calasanti and Zajicek, what is needed is an understanding of the ways in which gender, class, and ethnicity/race structure life chances (see Appendix, Note 8).

According to Calasanti and Zajicek (1993), five of the concepts that inform socialist-feminist thought are necessary for embracing diversity in gerontological research. These concepts are “(1) patriarchy or the paradigm of domination; (2) gendering processes within organizations; (3) production and reproduction as delineated relations between private and public spheres; (4) family; and (5) the gendered welfare system” (Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993, p. 120–121; see Appendix, Note 9). Calasanti and Zajicek discussed these concepts and addressed how a better understanding of the life situations of elderly people could be gained by adapting them. This discussion speaks to how gender, class, and ethnicity/race are conceptualized in socialist-feminist thought.

Conceptualizing Gender, Class, and Ethnicity/Race

Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) suggested that early socialist-feminists viewed patriarchy as a system of oppression that underlies gender inequality and is distinct from, yet related to, capitalism. Recognizing that some socialist-feminists find the term “patriarchy” problematic because its use leads to the analytic separation of gender and class oppression, Calasanti and Zajicek (1993, p. 121) introduced the term paradigm of domination to reflect an “interlocking system of oppression.” Two recent developments in socialist-feminist theory have led to the ideas that underlie this concept. First, there is a general recognition that to understand inequality researchers need to address the interlocking nature of gender, class, and ethnic/racial relations (Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993). Thus, the paradigm of domination eliminates the necessity to talk in separate systems terms, a discourse that seems to be necessary if the concept of patriarchy is used (Acker, 1989; Fox, 1988). Second, socialist-feminists understand that gender relations are historically rooted and that they derive their meanings from economic, social, and political processes. Calasanti and Zajicek (1993, p. 122) suggested that the paradigm of domination concept captures a relational understanding of the structuring of class, race, and gender [that] can be perceived as social processes through which class and race/ethnicity historically structure the concrete meaning of gender, and simultaneously as processes through which class and race/ethnicity also acquire their specific meaning in the context of gender relations.

Thus, Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) suggested that gerontologists should adopt a socialist-feminist view and start with the assumption that researchers cannot understand inequality without considering the interdependent nature of gender, class, and ethnic/racial relations. This view is analytically distinct from separate systems approaches that posit independent structures and then look for linkages between them (Acker, 1989). Rather,

it starts from the assumption that social relations are constituted through processes in which the linkages are inbuilt... Looking at them from one angle we see class, from another we see gender, neither is complete without the other. (Acker, 1989, p. 239)

Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) went on to discuss gendering processes within organizations, production and reproduction, the family, and the gendered welfare system. To summarize briefly, they drew on published research to show that organizations are gendered and that gendered processes in organizations affect pensions. The authors demonstrated that men and women have different relations of production and reproduction because of the gendered division of labor and gendered ideology. These factors structure and are structured by women’s and men’s labor force participation. Calasanti and Zajicek noted that it is important to consider the feminist deconstruction of the family and feminists’ rejection of the idea that the family is the center of loving relations. Finally, Calasanti and Zajicek demonstrated that the welfare system is gendered and that its gendered nature is reinforced by ideology that promotes gender inequality.

Most of the points that Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) made represent a summary of socialist-feminist research and theory. Occasionally, they brought aging research into the discussion to demonstrate that there are variations between different groups of older people according to their class, gender, and race. In fact, a key contribution that Calasanti and Zajicek made is in demonstrating the significance of ethnicity/race. In each of the research domains discussed previously, Calasanti and Zajicek made the point that current research and theorizing is not sufficient because it does not consider race and ethnicity. They suggested that if socialist-feminism was adopted, race and ethnicity would become focal, and racial differences among older adults, some of which they mention, would be better understood.

Calasanti and Zajicek’s (1993) emphasis on ethnicity/race is important and clear. However, the precise theoretical conceptualization of ethnicity/race is ambiguous. For instance, the mechanisms and processes through which ethnicity/race are implicated in power hierarchies are not specified. Rather, it is assumed that the reader knows what is meant by ethnicity/race and what, if any, distinctions there are between these two concepts.

The theoretical conceptualization of social class is also a bit unclear. Socialist-feminist theorists argue that social class (and other concepts) needs to be reconceptualized if the gendered nature of social inequality is to be better understood (Acker, 1988). Yet,
Calasanti and Zajicek (1993) did not tackle the difficulties associated with social class and other concepts but framed their discussion under what seem to be traditional conceptualizations. This is particularly surprising given their reliance on the work of Acker (1988, 1989), who has gone beyond critique in attempting to transform the way in which social class and organizations are viewed.

Age Relations in Socialist Feminism and in Other Feminist Works

The neglect of a conceptualization of age relations in Calasanti and Zajicek’s (1993) article is most problematic and reflects the general neglect of age relations and older women by socialist-feminists (see Appendix, Note 10). Calasanti and Zajicek occasionally referred to the different gender, race, and class experiences of older adults but focused on difference and not the structural implications of age relations. Although the title of their article promised a socialist-feminist approach to aging, they stated in the last paragraph of the article that their goal “has been to put forward an approach to gender (as well as ethnic/racial and class) relations which is embracing, meaning both multidisciplinary and encompassing of diversity” (p. 127). Using this approach Calasanti and Zajicek suggested that diversity can be understood through common and divergent aging experiences. Further, they suggested that this approach allows for examination of the ways in which power relations influence the lives of elderly people. Yet, for Calasanti and Zajicek, power relations are those among the genders, classes, and the races, and do not encompass those among generations, age strata, or cohorts.

The neglect of age relations (see Appendix, Note 11), conceptualized as a dimension of diversity and inequality that intersects with gender, class, and ethnicity/race, runs through works that use socialist-feminist perspectives (Blieszner, 1993; Calasanti, 1993; Gratton & Haber, 1993; Palo Stoller, 1993). Although these scholars agreed that adding gender to research is not adequate in the assessment of inequality, the sensitivity in this research to gender, ethnicity/race, and class relations takes precedence over age relations. Instead, these scholars assess issues that are pertinent to older people—retirement, lay health care, widowhood, and intimacy at a distance—with recognition of the importance of the intersections between gender, race, and class relations. These researchers tend to agree with Hess (1990, p. 12) and start with the assumption that inequalities between the sexes in old age “are not unique to that life stage but are continuous, with patterned inequalities throughout the life course.”

This is the view adopted in other feminist accounts of aging and older women as well. For example, in their excellent collection of essays on inequality in the aging experience, Palo Stoller and Campbell Gibson (1997, p. xix) emphasized “that hierarchies based on gender, race, and class create systems of privilege as well as of disadvantage. . . . [D]iscrimination throughout the life course translates into an accumulation of disadvantage in old age.” Hooyman and Gonyea (1995, pp. 24–25) argued for a “feminist framework on caregiving across the life span” that considers “variations in caregiving experiences by race, ethnicity, social class and sexual orientation.”

Although I do not disagree with these views, I believe that they miss a crucial point. Researchers must recognize that inequality in later life is both patterned throughout the life course and unique. In other words, potential power imbalances that are structured by age relations must be considered. Missing from most feminist accounts of older age, older women, or aging experiences are assessments of age relations themselves. The underlying assumption, then, is that age, however conceptualized, is not a basis of diversity. Thus, although these researchers attack the gender, class, and ethnicity/race issues head on, they leave issues of age relations undertheorized and in the periphery. This separation of age relations from other bases of inequality leads to the conclusion either that they are of considerably less significance than are gender, class, race, and ethnicity or that they stand apart from the rest as a separate basis of inequality. What is needed, then, is what Browne (1998) referred to as a new epistemology on women and aging. Such an approach “acknowledges the interlocking nature of a lifetime of what are often multiple oppressions, the interconnections between ageism and all forms of oppression” (Browne, 1998, p. 263).

Toward a Theoretical Coalescence of Class, Age, Gender, and Ethnicity/Race

In the literature on aging and old age there have been calls for research that embraces diversity, at both an empirical and conceptual level. Although there has been an increasing body of empirical research that documents group differences on the basis of one or more of class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race (i.e., content diversity), this research tends to neglect issues of power and standpoint (i.e., approach diversity). Almost simultaneously, there have been calls for scholars in the aging field to link theory to their empirical work (Bengtson et al., 1997). In this article, I have argued that theoretical assessments of diversity are rare in the gerontological literature because dominant sociological theories of aging and social inequality are somewhat limited in their conceptualization of power hierarchies that are based on interlocking sets of social relations.

At least two conditions are necessary to improve theories of diversity and social inequality. First, class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race must be conceptualized as sets of social relations, characterized by power, that are fundamental structures or organizing features of social life (Calasanti, 1996). Conceptualizing class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race as social relations involves moving beyond the view that these are individual characteristics that create difference. Rather, such a conceptualization suggests that these sets of relations are “fundamental elements of the so-
cial structure that are characterized . . . more by conflict than by consensus” (McMullin & Marshall, 1999, pp. 308–309). A relational understanding of class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race requires an emphasis on “structured forms of power, organization, direction, and regulation that exist in modern societies and through which ruling groups maintain and reproduce their dominant positions” (Layder, 1994, p. 159; see also Smith, 1987). These structured forms of power are established and reproduced through daily experiences as groups interact with one another (Grabb, 1990; Smith, 1987).

Conceptualizing age relations in such a way requires a shift in focus away from distributive issues (which does not imply that these issues are unimportant) that are at the fore of gerontological research and theory to a focus that addresses age-based domination, authority, and power. This conceptualization of age relations is foreshadowed in some recent research by McMullin and Marshall (1997, 1999) that shows that older workers in a manufacturing industry have less power and authority in productive relations because they are considered old. Older workers assign meaning to their age on the basis of their interactions with managers and other workers. Old age is used by managers to conceal their underlying concerns about “problem workers,” and there is a perception among older workers that age-based wage differences lead to job loss and conflict among workers and between workers and managers. In this context, age relations (in combination with gender, class, and ethnic/racial relations) structure the everyday experiences of the workers and place older workers at a disadvantage relative to younger ones. Daily experiences are shaped by taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be old, young, or middle aged and are influenced by perceived and real differences in power and authority.

One key limitation of McMullin and Marshall’s (1997, 1999) research is that age relations are conceptualized as the power and authority relations that evolve through interactions between older and younger workers and managers. Generational issues, in the Mannheimian sense, are not considered. Future research and theorizing in this regard must take generational and strata dimensions of age relations simultaneously into account.

The second condition necessary in conceptualizing diversity is that social class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race must be viewed as interlocking sets of power relations (Calasanti, 1996; McMullin, 1995). None of the theoretical approaches discussed previously assigns equal weight to each of these sets of relations in their theorizing. Of course, whether any of these sets of power relations matter more than any other to a particular outcome is an empirical issue. However, assigning a priori theoretical emphasis to one or more sets of relations over others creates bias that could result in misleading research findings.

Related to this point is the tendency in adherents of the theories discussed previously to treat class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race as separate systems. This occurs in one of two ways. First, in theories where one or another of these bases of diversity is not considered the omission suggests that they should be viewed as separate. Second, in theories that mention more than one base of diversity, scholars tend to start with a theory that assigns priority to one of these bases and then adds another to the approach. Although socialist-feminist theorists come closest to a fully integrated assessment of diversity by treating class, gender, and ethnicity/race as interacting systems of power, socialist-feminists’ neglect of age relations suggests that more work needs to be done.

What is needed is a theoretical framework that fully integrates class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race as power relations that structure social life. Researchers will then be better able to integrate theory and content diversity and provide analyses that fully encompass approach diversity in assessments of inequality. Theorists who have attempted to integrate one or more of these bases of diversity into an established paradigm have advanced our understanding of inequality, but a fully integrative and interconnected approach to diversity requires rethinking much of the theoretical work that has been done to date so that problems associated with adding dimensions to existing theory can be avoided (McMullin, 1995). Rethinking does not, however, imply abandoning. Rather, one might carefully draw on the strengths of existing theory and modify them in such a way that the emerging paradigm is one that embraces the components and complexities of approach diversity.

In this vein, it might be useful to briefly point out some of the key issues that require consideration for theorists developing a theoretical framework that integrates class, age, gender, and ethnic/racial relations. However, advancing the current understanding of social inequality by focusing on these interconnected sets of social relations is not a simple task and it is well beyond the scope of this article to embark on a major development of theory.

In my view, to better understand social inequality scholars must create a theory of approach diversity that considers at least three interconnected processes of social life—the processes of production, reproduction, and distribution. According to Marxist scholarship, processes of production refer to the ways by which raw materials are converted into useful and valuable objects (Allahar, 1995). Processes of distribution are the ways in which material resources change hands in society (Acker, 1988, 1999; Weber, 1922/1978). Distributive processes include wage, state, personal, and marital transfers (Acker, 1988). Processes of reproduction refer to the ways in which life is maintained both daily and intergenerationally and include “how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the social organization of sexuality” (Laslett & Brenner, 1969, p. 382; see Appendix, Note 12). The mere fact of these social processes does not necessarily imply an outcome of social inequality. Rather, understand-
ing the historical context and the nature of the social relations that frame these domains is of fundamental importance in understanding and explaining social inequality.

One task for theorists should be to elaborate on how the processes of production, reproduction, and distribution are shaped by the power relations that are assumed among class, age, gender, and ethnic/racial relations. In other words, theorists and researchers must ask how social relations of class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race structure these processes. With respect to inequality, how these sets of relations evolve into exploitative, oppressive, and alienating processes of production, distribution, and reproduction is of central concern.

At this juncture a point of clarification is necessary. For Marx and to a lesser extent Weber, the relationships of groups of individuals to the means of production constitute class relations—put simply, those who own the means of production comprise the bourgeois class and those who do not represent the working class. However, empirical evidence suggests there are other social groups whose relative power is differentially affected by their relationship to the means of production—women, young and very old workers, and workers of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. In other words, class does not account for all of the power differentials that occur as a result of production processes. Thus, researchers must consider the interconnections between these sets of relations in assessments of social inequality. A paradigm shift is necessary whereby the relations of production assume not only class relations but gender, ethnic/racial, and age relations as well. The same difficulties in conceptual clarity do not arise with respect to the relations of distribution and reproduction—class, age, gender, and ethnic/racial relations are all clearly implicated in distributive and reproductive processes.

Class, age, gender, and ethnic/racial relations are not thought to be causally linked, in any linear sense, to the processes of production, distribution, and reproduction. Rather, they mediate these processes and cannot be separated from them. This approach allows for considerable latitude in assessments of both the independent and combined effects of these sets of relations on the processes of inequality. This suggests that some of what is consequential about each of these sets of relations occurs independent of the others, yet an assessment of inequality would be incomplete without consideration of the intersecting influences as well (see Wright [1997] for a similar discussion of the connection between gender and class).

However, one cannot pick and choose among the components of the framework that one deems worthy of study. Rather, and importantly, the issue of coalescence in this approach suggests that inaccurate assessments of social inequality will result from such strategies. Although one can examine both the independent and interlocking effects of this framework’s components, one must consider the processes and sets of relations contained within it as a whole to fully understand the nature of social inequality. To examine one component without the other will present a distorted picture of social reality. Thus, the coalescence represented in this approach might be visualized as a colorful and tightly woven fabric; the threads may be discernable from one another, but removing any one of them distorts the overall pattern.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

The framework to diversity that I have introduced here is informed by all of the approaches discussed previously, especially by the work of Estes (1991, 1999) and Calasanti (1993, 1996). However, this framework differs from their work in two key ways. First, I conceptualize age as a set of social relations that structures social life and influences inequality. In this framework I seek not only to explain inequality among elderly people as a function of some combination of class, gender, and ethnicity/race, or to use feminist approaches to explore issues that are pertinent to older people, but also to examine how age relations themselves are implicated in such explanations. Of course, researchers should not abandon older adults as the subjects of their research. Rather, researchers might better understand social inequality if age relations are considered as well. In this view of age, theorists would rethink statements such as “social class, race, ethnicity, and gender are seen as directly related to the resources upon which persons may draw in old age” (Estes, 1999, p. 17) to incorporate age as being directly related to the resources upon which persons may draw in old age. And the following statement,

This comparative process is rendered even more complex by the dynamism and simultaneity of various power relations. That is, individuals experience their race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation at the same time. (Calasanti, 1996, p. 149)

would consider age as one of the sets of power relations that individuals simultaneously experience.

The second way in which this approach differs from others is in its conceptualization of age, class, gender, and ethnic/racial relations as a single, interlocking system of power relations. Such an interlocking system is the approach that Calasanti (1996) favored and one that Estes (1999) suggested is consistent with the new political economy perspective. However, in Calasanti’s work, class, gender, and ethnic/racial relations take precedence over age relations, and in Estes, work, class and gender relations reign over both age and ethnic/racial relations. This points to the problems inherent in adding dimensions to existing theory (McMullin, 1995) without carefully rethinking the central processes and categories of analysis, a problem that feminists have acknowledged for quite some time (Acker, 1988; Fox, 1989).

A subtle shift in focus may be all that is required. Perhaps what researchers need to do is ask how three central and interrelated processes of social life—distribution, production, and reproduction—are shaped
by interlocking sets of power relations and, in turn, how this leads to inequality for some and privilege for others. In such an approach, no set of relations is given a priori theoretical weight, and indeed a key research question in this approach would be how these relations coalesce in structuring the interrelated processes of distribution, production, and reproduction throughout life.

The preceding introduction to the ways in which theorizing about approach diversity might proceed suggests many research questions that require further study. Among the most provocative are the following:

1. What role do the different dimensions of age that have been addressed by gerontologists in the past (age strata, generation, cohort, biopsychosocial processes) play in establishing age relations? How do these different dimensions of age interact to produce outcomes of disadvantage or privilege (see Appendix, Note 13)?

2. How do age relations intersect with gender, class, and ethnic relations to form a hierarchy of power?

3. In which sites (e.g., family, labor market, state, culture, ideology) is the intersection of class, age, gender, and ethnicity/race realized? Is the specific nature of the power hierarchy different depending on the site?

4. What is the role of historical, individual, and family time in such a framework? How does the fact that individuals are embedded within a complex web of interpersonal relationships influence diversity? Here, many important lessons can be learned from the life course approach (Elder & O’Rand; 1995), as Browne (1998) pointed out in her work on feminism and aging.

5. What is the role of individual action in such a framework? In this article I have largely been concerned with structural dimensions of social life. However, sociological theories of diversity would be incomplete without full consideration of individuals and human agency. It is important to ask how structure and agency are linked in a conceptual framework of diversity. A perspective that focuses on sets of social relations is well suited to this task because it locates the social structural aspects of these relations in lived experiences and interactions among groups.

By taking these questions into account and by acknowledging that theories must be rethought in ways that privilege the knowledge of groups whose knowledge has previously been neglected (Calasanti, 1996; Smith, 1987), scholars will make useful steps in research and theory on diversity.

References
5. In 1991 Estes used a modified version of this quotation to describe the political economy's structural view of aging. Instead of ending with “and the economic and political factors that affect it,” as the 1982 quotation does, the 1991 version reads “and the relations generated by the economic mode of production and the gendered division of labor” (p. 21). My point regarding age relations is the same regardless of which quotation is used. I use the 1982 quotation for illustrative purposes because, in my opinion, it better reflects most of the work from the political economy perspective in its emphasis on class over age relations.

4. Several researchers who are working within the context of a life course perspective, which as Marshall (1996) argued has intellectual ties to the age stratification perspective, have assessed heterogeneity on the basis of gender and class across the life course (see Moen, 1996; Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1998; O’Rand, 1996a, 1996b; Uhlenberg & Minor, 1996). Less work has been done on cumulative advantages and disadvantages (O’Rand, 1996a, 1996b) of race and ethnicity in a life course perspective. As Calasanti (1996) argued, however, heterogeneity and diversity are not the same thing. Further, in most theoretical and conceptual accounts of the life course perspective, the structures of gender, class, and ethnicity/race are not a key theoretical focus (Elder, 1994; Elder & O’Rand, 1995).

3. In 1991 Estes used a modified version of this quotation to describe the political economy’s structural view of aging. Instead of ending with “and the economic and political factors that affect it,” as the 1982 quotation does, the 1991 version reads “and the relations generated by the economic mode of production and the gendered division of labor” (p. 21). My point regarding age relations is the same regardless of which quotation is used. I use the 1982 quotation for illustrative purposes because, in my opinion, it better reflects most of the work from the political economy perspective in its emphasis on class over age relations.

2. Mannheim criticized previous assessments of generations, arguing that they relied too much on chronological age or the biological fact that generations reproduce themselves. Hence, past treatments of generations neglected the true sociological importance of generational relations. According to Mannheim, although it is true that the sociological phenomenon of generations is based on the biological rhythm of birth and death,

   were it not for the existence of social interaction between human beings—were there no definable social structure, no history based on a particular sort of continuity, then generations would not exist as a social location phenomenon (Mannheim, 1928/1952, pp. 290–291).

Thus, in the first place Mannheim believed that a generation represents a unique type of social location based on the dynamic interplay between being born in a particular year and the sociopolitical events that occur while a birth cohort comes of age. For Mannheim, generational location is an objective fact similar to that of class position. Hence, all individuals, whether they acknowledge it or not, belong to a particular generational location within a given society.

6. One such practice was brought to my attention at a meeting of the Canadian Aging Research Network. For most people, eyesight progressively diminishes after age 30. Yet workplace lighting is designed with the vision of a 20-year-old in mind. Minor increases in the amount of light increased the productivity of older workers substantially (Charness, Dykstra, & Phillips, 1995).

7. Several researchers have examined age-related issues using feminist perspectives, but few focus on theorizing or conceptual development per se. These points of critique have been voiced by feminist theorists about mainstream sociological theory for quite some time (see Acker, 1980, 1988; Fox, 1989), but only recently have a very few feminist scholars begun to apply a similar critique to aging studies.

8. There is little doubt that these issues are critical to socialist-feminist analysis. However, the authors’ use of the word concept to describe gendering processes within organizations, production and reproduction, the family, and the gendered welfare system seems somewhat problematic, particularly in the context of the rest of the article. Although the authors provided a conceptual discussion of patriarchy and the paradigm of domination, the other “concepts” are treated more like substantive areas in which paradigms of domination are located.

9. In a later empirical article, Calasanti and Zajicek (1997, p. 459) addressed this oversight when they concluded that “the problems—and possible solutions—that contemporary and future Polish retirees experience stem from the interactions of age and gender relations.” However, theoretical development in this regard is still lacking.

10. In a later empirical article, Calasanti and Zajicek (1997, p. 459) addressed this oversight when they concluded that “the problems—and possible solutions—that contemporary and future Polish retirees experience stem from the interactions of age and gender relations.” However, theoretical development in this regard is still lacking.

11. Colette Browne (1998), argued for an epistemology of women that takes into account interlocking oppressions. Ray (1996) and Laws (1995) have noted that feminist aging theory must consider age relations as they interact with gender relations (they paid less attention to class and ethnicity/race). Although these researchers made progress toward a fully integrated theory of class, age, gender, and ethnicity, their work has fallen short of this because none of these researchers explicitly defined what is meant by age relations or addressed distinctions among age strata, cohort, and generation.

12. This view of reproduction is generally held by socialist-feminist scholars and should not be confused with reproduction in the Marxist sense of the term.

13. Recently, Gibson (1996) and Browne (1998) argued that many women feel empowered as they age. This assertion is something that is important to study further within the context of research on diversity and inequality.