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# Feminist Gerontology and CSCW

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**Abstract**

Feminism and gerontology are aligned and have the potential to complement each other. The discipline of feminist gerontology can contribute to the study of aging and understanding of diversity in CSCW. I describe three areas that feminist gerontology enables us to recognize: intersectionality in older adulthood, ageism as a form of oppression, and the variety of roles in older adulthood.

**Author Keywords**

Feminism; Gerontology; Aging; Older adults.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**Feminism and Gerontology**

Gerontology is the study of aging and older adulthood. Feminism and gerontology are aligned in several ways, and each discipline has the potential to inform the other. Feminism and gerontology share "an attempt to create social consciousness, social theory and social policy which will improve the life chances of a specific group" [18]. Further, like some branches of feminism, some gerontologists recognize the importance of intersectionality- or how factors such as race, education, gender, disability and socio-economic status

influence health and access to opportunities in older adulthood [22] .

Further, some gerontologists recognize the importance of attending to gender. One researcher has written that gerontology, “by sheer force of demographics, is necessarily a women’s issue” [17]. On average, women live longer than men, and as a result the majority of older people are women [17]. Older people are also more likely to be cared for by women, whether they are female relatives or paid caregivers [17]. Gender also affects the experience of aging in a variety of important ways. For example, older women have less financial stability than their male counterparts [17]. Women, but not men, lose “social value” with physical signs of aging [24] (the “double standard of aging”, coined by Susan Sontag [21]).

Though feminism and gerontology align in important ways, each has gaps that can be informed by the other. For example, feminist scholarship has historically left out older women and focused on issues that predominantly affect younger women (e.g. reproductive rights, childcare) [6,7], and the early gerontology literature has been criticized for relying on male subjects and only later taking into account the impact of gender on aging [7].

### **Feminist Gerontology**

The field of feminist gerontology focuses on “power relations and intersecting oppressions across the life course” [11]. It moves beyond an exclusive focus on either age or gender and focuses on the areas where they, along with aspects such as race and ethnicity, income level, and disability intersect [11]. Further, feminist gerontology is committed to change. One

scholar described feminist gerontology as working “to change attitudes that construct older people’s positions in society through restrictive roles, beliefs, and stereotypes... and to increase their personal political agency” [17].

Feminist gerontology draws on feminist theory and can be seen as a subgroup of social and critical gerontology, which have are recently gaining attention in HCI [14,25]. Critical gerontology analyzes how political and socioeconomic forces shape the experience of older adulthood, the way that old age is positioned, and questions who benefits and who is harmed from this positioning [6,10]. Feminist gerontology adds an emphasis of the role of gender in the positioning and treatment of older people, and has much to contribute to the field of CSCW.

### **CSCW and Feminist Gerontology**

Below, I describe areas of feminist gerontology that are instructive for researchers in CSCW. I draw on my research over the past five years.

#### *Recognizing intersectionality in older adulthood*

Older adulthood intersects with race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors (e.g. [9,20]). Yet criticisms of research in CSCW and HCI are that older adults are treated as a homogenous group [4,25]. In my own work, I have recruited older adults based on belonging to a category of older adulthood defined as being “older-than” (i.e. 65+). This has led to situations where participants have been grouped despite being more than three decades apart. Recruiting by age alone can result in a participant base with immense differences in the intersecting factors I describe above as well as

dimensions such as interests, attitudes towards technology, and belonging to a particular generation; all factors likely to affect participation in a study [13].

One approach to counter this broad grouping is narrowing a population of study along some of the dimensions I describe above. Researchers can consider increasing research of older people of low socio-economic status and other marginalized groups, as they are more likely to be affected by harmful societal narratives around aging [10]. In my work, though I have done interviews and focus groups in communities with low-income housing, I have typically built and deployed technologies in communities that cater to people of very high socio-economic status. I have done this largely out of convenience: I have found activity directors and facilitators employed who were eager and had the time to facilitate research, management saw technology that I brought in to evaluate as a selling point that they showed to attract clients, and these communities had necessary infrastructure in place (e.g. space, outlets, wi-fi). However, individuals living in this setting are not representative of the general population, and may not be the population that we as researchers wish to reach.

#### *Recognizing ageism as a form of oppression*

Ageism describes the stereotyping, dehumanization, and discrimination of people based on their age. In addition to being a form of oppression, ageism has serious effects on older people's ability to gain and maintain employment, health outcomes, and is considered a contributor to elder abuse.

In a recent study where we looked at older adult bloggers forming a social movement online, bloggers

described feeling that ageism as a social issue has been left behind even by individuals who are attempting to avoid perpetuating injustice. One blogger asked why people who "*would not be caught dead engaging in classist, racist, (hetero)sexist, ethnicist, sizist, ageist or otherwise -isty language feel that it is perfectly fine to traffic in generalities about 'baby boomers'?*" [13]. Indeed, ageism is prevalent and largely considered benign – something that can be seen just by walking through an aisle of birthday cards [23].

There are a variety of ways we can address ageism in our research: even if we do not study aging, we can recognize age as a criteria for diversity in our studies [1]. We can also address ageism directly in our design and study of technologies, and attend to recent work that criticizes an approach to older adulthood that characterizes it as a period of decline [4,15,25]. We can also be sensitive to how ageism affects the ways older people are likely to use and adopt technologies. Research has found that older people will distance themselves from technology that triggers negative stereotypes of aging. After I conducted a study on older adults' leisure activities [14], I realized that using the word "leisure" in interviews seems likely to have motivated older adults to explain how they are indeed not leisurely and the degree to which they ascribe to the "busy ethic," which esteems aging that is occupied with activity and disparages inactive older adults [5]. When researchers approach older people to study, for example, new ways of designing social networking sites, it is likely that older adults are aware of the many stereotypes that exist in regards to perceptions of older adults as socially isolated. This will likely affect how they respond.

### *Recognizing a variety of roles in older adulthood*

One consequence of ageism is the way it narrows the roles in which older adults are seen as fit to occupy; even more so for older women [19]. Work in CSCW and HCI has been characterized by a focus on older adults as passive recipients of care. Though health is an important of older (and younger) people's lives, there are many other areas to study left open by this predominant focus. Recent research has expanded into areas of CSCW that support new roles in older adulthood: blogging/vlogging [3,8], crowd work [2], and online activism [13]. Work in other fields has explored the ways that older women are involved in activist causes [12,16,19], and studying the ways that technologies do or can support their practices is a rich area for further study.

### **Conclusion**

I describe feminist gerontology, which draws on feminist theory and critical gerontology. Feminist gerontology has much to contribute to CSCW, including recognizing age as a dimension of intersectionality, ageism as a social issue, and the variety of roles in older adulthood that may not currently be supported in our design of technologies.

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