

Aging Anxiety, Identity and Gender Equality: A Study on Key Issues in Contemporary Western Gerontology

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Abstract: Since the late 20th century, Western gerontological research has expanded from purely biomedical to a broader cultural approach, developing interdisciplinary subfields such as humanistic and cultural gerontology. Cultural gerontology, drawing from cultural studies theories, places aging in parallel with categories like class, gender, and race to explore its culturally constructed attributes. Traditionally, old age has been negatively stereotyped as fragile and obstinate, leading to societal fear and discrimination. In reality, the segmentation of life stages is a product of societal evolution. Analyzing aging through a cultural studies lens—focusing on identity, aging anxiety, and gender power dynamics—reveals the critical role of culture in shaping the experiences and identities of the elderly. This approach effectively deconstructs negative stereotypes associated with old age and provides insights for the development of gerontology in China.

Keywords: Cultural Gerontology; Identity; Gerontological Research; Aging Anxiety; Gender Equality.

1. Introduction

Since the late 20th century, aging has become a global phenomenon, with academia showing unprecedented interest in old age and aging. Many scholars recognized that pure gerontology and geriatric studies "lost something very important," purely rational, objective technical research, which failed to address the psychological predicaments faced by the elderly.[1] As a result, they extensively absorbed the achievements of humanities research, creating "humanistic gerontology," "cultural gerontology," "literary gerontology," "critical gerontology," and other related interdisciplinary studies, greatly enriching and expanding the breadth and depth of gerontology research.

As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Coming of Age*, "To understand old age, it can only be considered as a whole. Old age is not just a biological fact but also a cultural fact." [2] Cultural gerontology actively draws from cultural studies theories, placing age in categories similar to class, gender, and race for scrutiny, and attempts to reveal the culturally constructed attributes of old age. In traditional concepts, old age has always been assigned negative stereotypes such as being frail, stubborn, useless, and outdated. Fears, resistance, and discrimination against old age have become common social phenomena. Indeed, the division of life stages from childhood to old age is not a naturally formed concept but a product of social development, and identity, aging anxiety, and gender equality related to old age are also deeply influenced by cultural constructions. Therefore, this article will discuss these three key issues surrounding "aging" in cultural gerontology, aiming to reveal the importance of culture in shaping the experiences and identity of the elderly, thus deconstructing the negative discourse attached to the elderly.

2. Aging and Identity

Identity actually comprises two concepts: first, identity itself, which refers to "the certain explicit and significant criteria or measures by which an individual or group confirms

their status in a society, such as gender, class, race, etc.;" second, identification, which is "the attempt by an individual or group to pursue and affirm their cultural 'identity'." [3] Therefore, exploring the issue of elderly identity is primarily difficult due to how "old age" is defined, which is both the starting point for research and the subject of controversy, and cultural studies about aging begin by deconstructing this concept.

As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, many cultures have "rites of passage" to celebrate the transition from adolescence to adulthood, but no culture has a so-called "old age rite" to announce the entry into old age. [4] The retirement age is often considered the official standard for determining whether someone has entered the elderly phase in modern society, but retirement ages vary by country and are also influenced by gender in many countries. Thus, even from an official perspective, there is no unified standard worldwide for what constitutes old age. Definitions of old age have varied across different historical periods, regions, and even social classes.

Before the 18th century, Europeans did not pay much attention to specific ages; instead, family status, rather than age, was the primary determinant of a person's maturity and independence in pre-modern Europe. [5] In modern society, biological age is closely related to one's daily life and is used to determine eligibility for driving, drinking, working, retiring, etc. In a sense, age has become one of the most important identity characteristics. While this division has practical significance and value, it also deepens stereotypes about the relationship between age and expected behaviors.

The idea of dividing life into different stages is not new. In the play "As You Like It," Shakespeare vividly describes seven different stages of life: from the infant "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms" to old age as "lean and slippered pantaloons," and finally to life's late stage, which is "a second childishness, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." [6] Shakespeare compared life to a stage where everyone plays different roles at different stages, reflecting the traditional cultural notion of interconnected life stages and behavioral characteristics. Humans, like other life forms, follow the natural laws of birth, growth, and death. However,

dividing a person's life into stages like childhood, adolescence, middle age, and old age, and assigning each stage specific rights and behavioral expectations, is a result of the development of human society. In fact, in the U.S., the concept of childhood as a distinct life stage only emerged among the urban middle class in the early 19th century, and before that, children and adults were not considered fundamentally different. By the 20th century, the progression of life stages became more strict, orderly, and universally consistent.[8]

In the article "Aging Masks and the Postmodern Life Course" (1991), Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, using Foucault's concepts, pointed out that the institutionalization of the life course is a result of the development of nation-states and industrialized societies. To implement social management and control, such as children's education and development, school education, careers, and marriage systems, "the life process has been subjected to increased monitoring, control, and normalization." [8] As society has developed, the life course has been incorporated into more systematic and refined management, tightening the link between a person's biological age and behavioral expectations.

The division into life stages emphasizes the differences and continuity between stages, and its problem lies in an implicit ideology that seems to assume a boundary clearly distinguishing each stage from earlier ones.[9] However, in reality, the division of life stages is highly subjective, and an individual's identification with "old age" varies with factors such as their social class, physical condition, and life circumstances. Overall, old age is not a fixed stage but a complex social and cultural phenomenon that needs to be analyzed and understood from multiple perspectives. In this rigid division, many people's behavioral habits, inner feelings, and societal expectations for the elderly do not align. Scholars refer to the sensation of a youthful self trapped within an aging face as 'the mask of aging,' where the aging body acts like a cage, imprisoning the youthful inner self.[10] It represents a betrayal of the soul by the body, and under societal pressure, many choose to hide their true inner selves, striving to maintain a balance between age-appropriate external behavior and their subjective experience.[11] The aging appearance, like a mask, becomes a symbol of contradiction between a fixed body and a fluid social image.[12] In modern society, as personal identity awareness increases, this phenomenon becomes more common, highlighting the irreconcilable conflict between the external and internal selves.

In this conflict, 'masquerading' becomes a strategy chosen by many. Masquerade is an important concept in feminist studies. Joan Riviere, in her article 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1923), suggests that womanliness is a performance developed by some women out of fear that displaying masculine traits would invite retaliation and punishment, a survival strategy in a patriarchal environment, hiding their desire for masculine traits. Womanliness is a practice, not an essence. Kathleen Woodward extends the concept of masquerade to aging studies, indicating that 'youthfulness as masquerade' is pervasive in contemporary society. In a culture that depreciates aging, masquerade is a 'denial of age,' an effort to 'erase age and dress up youth.' [13] In modern society, people always try to hide their true age, eliminating the marks of time on their bodies. Here, age shows its paradoxical existence; on one hand, it is closely

related to behavioral norms, and on the other, it is a marker of identity that people try hard to conceal.

Postmodernist theories, which emerged in the 1960s, questioned the complete, coherent, unified concept of identity, emphasizing the uncertainty and ambiguity of identity. Identity is not 'finished' but should be seen as a 'production': 'it is never complete, always in process, and always constituted internally rather than externally.' [14] Postmodernist influences profoundly impacted gerontology, challenging the traditional concept of age identity and emphasizing the diversity and complexity of old age identities in contemporary contexts. Many scholars believe that in postmodern society, the distinctions between life stages are no longer clear or significant. Firstly, future biomedical technologies might slow or even reverse aging processes, extending middle age into what is currently considered old age. Secondly, as living standards improve and people pay more attention to fitness and diet, individuals appear younger than ever before.[15] Moreover, influenced by mass media, children in real life increasingly resemble adults, and adults resemble children, while on virtual platforms, it's hard to distinguish age stages.[16] These scholars question the institutionalization and stability of the life course, attempting to deconstruct the link between age and corresponding identity roles. Postmodern society offers many possibilities for those who age conditionally, making aging less a biologically controlled single process and more influenced by technology and culture. Larry Polivka thus declares: 'We are witnessing the end of the idealized life course.' [17] And Mike Hepworth refers to the relationship between aging and various disciplines as a subjective linkage, stating, 'Once we realize that the constantly declining life course is imagined, and that biological changes associated with aging do not necessarily lead to universal and inevitable decline...once we realize that the relationship between aging and biology, psychology, and sociology is narratively linked and a product of our imagination, we have every reason to remain optimistic.' [18]

In summary, contemporary aging studies question the traditional linear development model of the life course, emphasizing more flexible, dynamic identity characteristics. If the boundaries of aging are blurred, then the real concept of old age no longer exists. The postmodern discourse on aging powerfully deconstructs the stereotypical link between age and its inherent behavioral characteristics, treating individuals as diverse, concrete beings rather than simply categorizing them into a collective 'old age' category."

3. Aging and Aging Anxiety

In traditional cultures, old age is often associated with negative images such as decay, loneliness, obstinacy, and frailty. Although the global society is gradually aging, the negative stereotypes associated with old age have not improved. In mainstream discourse, aging is still widely considered a psychological and social decline, a despised and shameful behavior. Lynne Segal notes that the increasing extent of global aging has "amplified rather than diminished" society's distaste for the elderly.[19] The negative discourse surrounding older people continues to marginalize an increasing number of the elderly, and the social status of being ignored and discriminated against has not improved.

If primitive societies abandoned the elderly based on the real needs of survival, in the 21st century, prejudice against the elderly involves more complex social factors. Firstly, the rise and development of industrialization and capitalism made

efficiency and profit maximization universal pursuits, hence older people with lower productivity became a burden to be discarded. As J. Brooks Bouson pointed out, "Beneath our culture of competition, success, and individualism lies a fear of dependence, vulnerability, and failure. Chronically ill, disabled, and physically weak older people collectively become the projection of this fear." [20] On the other hand, the technological revolution has profoundly affected the social image and status of older people. In the past, the experience accumulated by older people in life was respected and cherished, but today this experience is being replaced by technological advancements; people can easily obtain the knowledge they need through search engines, [21] and thus older people have shifted from being symbols of wisdom to representatives of conservatism, uselessness, and backwardness.

From another perspective, ageism is part of the rising consumer culture ideology. In the article "The Body in Consumer Culture," Mike Featherstone delves into how mass media and consumer culture shape our desire for young, attractive bodies. The dazzling and omnipresent advertisements and shows continuously remind people of the enchanting charm of youth, which is seen as a symbol of identity and self, achievable through proper maintenance and self-management. Neglect of bodily management implies "laziness, lack of self-respect, and even moral failure." Thus, the traditional pursuit of inner self has been abandoned; appearance and moral and self are linked, the external is the self. Consequently, aging and death, which contradict this cultural content, have become negative and need to be hidden: "These are the distasteful, inevitable signs of decline and failure." [22] In a consumer society, the youthful body becomes the target of product creation, and the mass media, cosmetic medical, and fashion industries tirelessly build a set of ideologies about maintaining youth: "We have only one body, and it must be redeemed." [23] In an aesthetic culture that idolizes youth, avoiding aging becomes an individual's unavoidable moral obligation. It could be said that consumer market culture has driven the fear and rejection of aging, deepening age discrimination.

Although people are living longer, culture correspondingly pushes aging anxiety forward. The term "midlife crisis" was first coined by psychologist Elliott Jaques in 1965 and later popularized by culture. As Margaret Gullette pointed out, although age discrimination has a long history, the framing of age 40 as a critical life stage is quite recent. Media constantly reminds us that we are entering these crucial life stages and need to start paying attention to our aging. The aging anxiety brought by culture is becoming younger, and our identities are placed within the life course, with age, even surpassing class, race, nationality, gender, and politics, becoming our most important identity characteristic. Thus, Gullette writes, "Human aging is first and foremost culturally induced, a social construct." [24] While aging is a natural biological phenomenon, the anxiety and fear surrounding aging are results of cultural shaping, and studies around old age are revelations and critiques of the underlying ageist ideology in cultural representations.

Since the late 20th century, Western countries have seen a surge in "successful aging" and "active aging" movements, attempting to dissolve the long-standing negative discourse attached to older people and construct a positive image of aging. "Successful Aging" (1998) by John Wallis Rowe and Robert L. Kahn is an influential work in this movement. The

book claims, "The main message we want to convey is that we can have a significant impact on our aging success, far beyond what is usually imagined." [25] At the individual level, the successful aging movement calls for avoiding diseases and disabilities through controlled diet, active exercise, and improved interpersonal relationships, maintaining a high level of mental and physical function. The vision of this concept is very inspiring, effectively stimulating the confidence and potential of older people to face aging and playing a significant role in eliminating the negative discourse surrounding old age and constructing a positive image of aging. Therefore, the concept of successful aging has received widespread attention and welcome in society. As scholars have pointed out, "If aging is imagined as a natural decline process largely out of personal control, then the successful aging paradigm has overturned this assumption." [26] Movements like successful aging and active aging have profoundly influenced society's perception of older people and how they perceive themselves.

However, the age discrimination implied behind the discourses of "successful aging" and similar "active aging" is also noteworthy. As Sarah Lamb pointed out, "The paradigm of successful aging is built on an understanding and pursuit of individualism and autonomous personality, characterized by an individual's sense of control over self and life, as well as a value system that seeks eternal youth and avoids aging." [27] Aging is an inevitable process for humans as living beings; while shaping a positive image and agency for older people, the inherent connotation of successful aging is still anxiety and fear of aging. For those who are no longer able to achieve successful aging, they are further marginalized.

Additionally, the successful aging movement primarily targets the middle and upper classes, making it difficult for the impoverished lower classes to achieve. Similarly, while cultural construction theories around aging emphasize the positivity and agency of the elderly, they can easily overlook the actual difficulties encountered by older groups in life. After all, if one lives long enough, age-related decline is an inevitable biological rule, not entirely a cultural construction, fundamentally different from discrimination against minorities or marginalized groups based on race, class, or gender. Blind opposition to aging discourse around older people can easily overlook the actual living difficulties of the elderly, thereby deepening discrimination and exclusion against marginalized older groups.

4. Aging and Gender Equality

The relationship between aging and gender is one of the main themes that aging and elderly research has focused on since the late 20th century. The plight of older women has long been overlooked by feminist researchers, a situation that improved only in the late 20th century, partly because the young feminists themselves began to experience aging. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a landmark feminist work, with the statement "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" becoming one of the most influential feminist declarations. However, in her later years, Beauvoir expanded her research focus to the elderly population, claiming that compared to women, older people are in an even more marginalized position. In her 1970 book *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir explored the status and value of old age from biological, anthropological, historical, and sociological perspectives, critiquing the long-standing neglect and discrimination against old age and aging in Western culture.

She pointed out that while women have never been the main subject of history writing, they at least were meaningful promoters, whereas older people "have never been involved in the operation of the world." She wrote: "Once he loses his activity, he belongs to 'the others,'[28] even more thoroughly becoming a mere object than a woman. Women are necessary to society, while the elderly are utterly useless." Beauvoir was only 54 when she wrote this book, but her own and her relatives' aging had already made her deeply aware of the various difficulties of old age. This book is a pioneering work in gerontology, highlighting Beauvoir's undeniable pioneering status in aging research. Unfortunately, the book did not receive the attention it deserved after publication, reflecting the social marginal status of aging research at the time. It was not until the late 20th century that Beauvoir's profound insights gradually gained recognition, becoming a cornerstone of gerontology research.

If Beauvoir's discussion primarily targeted the entire elderly population, then Susan Sontag's article "The Double Standard of Ageing" (1972) focused specifically on the intrinsic connection between aging and gender. In the article, she sharply pointed out that aging in a youth-worshipping society is "a moral disease, a social pathology," and within this, society is more tolerant of men's aging than women's. Although the poor generally appear older than the wealthy, middle-class and affluent women experience far more intense and acute aging anxiety than working-class women. Sontag wrote: In fact, nothing could more clearly illustrate the fabricated nature of this crisis than the fact that those women who maintain a youthful appearance the longest—those who live a carefree life, are well-cared for, eat a balanced diet, can afford good healthcare, and have few or no children—are those who feel aging most intensely. Aging is more of a social evaluation than a biological inevitability.[29]

Sontag profoundly exposed and criticized the social and cultural factors behind women's aging anxiety. Male hegemony and consumer culture ideologies have long placed harsher social pressures on women's aging. Since then, attention to older women has shown a rapid growth trend, with a series of studies emerging. Notable feminist Germaine Greer published *The Change* (1991), fiercely attacking the patriarchal culture that views menopause as a state of loss of female functions. Two years later, Betty Friedan published *The Fountain of Age* (1993), in which Friedan, referring to her own experiences, criticized society's neglect and marginalization of the elderly or the portrayal of older people in negative, detrimental images. Additionally, Friedan pointed out that scholars like Erik Erikson, who studied the life course, followed a male life trajectory—from youth accumulation, midlife peak and crisis, to old age and death—a linear life course that does not match the actual experiences of women, whose life trajectories show a less orderly and more complex development, a process of continuous interruption and continuation.[30]

In the 21st century, many scholars in literature and cultural criticism have focused on the portrayal of older women in novels and mass media, which had previously been neglected. Works like *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (2005) by Zoe Brennan,[31] *Performing Age, Performing Gender* (2006) by Kathleen Woodward,[32] and *The Shame of Old Age: Contemporary Women's Literature Confronts Age Discrimination* (2016) by J. Brooks Bouson,[33] are among the outstanding results in this field. These scholars, with their sharp critiques, have exposed and criticized the pervasive

structural discrimination faced by the elderly, especially older women, playing a crucial role in resisting age and gender discrimination. Overall, feminist theory's interpretations and theoretical constructions of body, gender, self, and subjectivity hold a primary position in aging studies, fundamentally influencing contemporary research on aging. Whether in theoretical explication or in the fight for actual rights, the earliest members came predominantly from women, many of whom were active feminists, therefore, as Bytheway states, "Women stand at the forefront against age discrimination." [34] Feminist gerontology, evolving from feminist and gerontology theories, is becoming one of the most active fields in contemporary aging studies, continually focusing on gender and power relations in the aging process.

Attention to older men, by comparison, started relatively late. It can be said that previous studies on masculinity or aging also overlooked the plight of older men. Since the 21st century, the humanities have shown rapid development in interest towards older men, producing a large body of research. These scholars have questioned the common feminist assumptions about gender and aging, namely the idea that men are less concerned about aging and suffer less social marginalization than women. Broadly speaking, these viewpoints include the following aspects: (1) Aging signifies the loss of masculinity. The helplessness and vulnerability implied in aging discourse are contrary to the power, independence, and vitality emphasized in traditional masculinity, signifying a loss of patriarchal authority. Margaret Gullette points out, "Masculinity is youth," and the pursuit of virility has led older men to face the difficulties once experienced by women.[35] In a patriarchal society, it is the young male body that constitutes the norms of masculinity, and aging signifies a lack of masculinity, thus falling into the status of "the other." (2) Men are the main workforce, and their aging anxiety becomes more apparent once they retire. First, women, due to reasons like pregnancy and childbirth, have a period of adjustment to leaving the workforce, whereas retirement is often the first time many men leave the workforce, thus facing a greater psychological adjustment. Second, many men cannot achieve the recognition and satisfaction in retirement that they once did in their careers, thus suffering greater psychological impacts, while traditional female roles revolve around the home, allowing them to continue to find satisfaction in domestic tasks as long as their health permits.[36] Finally, middle-aged and older men, worried about threats from younger colleagues in the workplace, are usually more anxious, while the workplace is not the center for women, who are less affected.

Some scholars believe that gender differences between men and women actually decrease in old age. Since gender characteristics and work are no longer central to elderly life, old age provides an opportunity to overturn patriarchal oppression and traditional gender relations. Middle-aged individuals face conflicts closely related to gender, such as childbirth and work, but older individuals are freed from these bindings, gaining more freedom and choices. David Gutmann points out that traditional parental role differences are a necessity for the continuation of human life, a result of human species evolution. Raising offspring as a central event in human life plays a significant role in shaping the lives and characters of adults. In the parenting stage, fathers and mothers are forced to suppress internal potentials that conflict with their roles. Fathers give up behaviors that could harm their masculinity to ensure their children's physical safety,

while mothers give up their aggressive sides to provide emotional support to their children. Only after parenting ends can they freely develop their suppressed selves. Therefore, in the later stages of life, men often display characteristics traditionally considered feminine, such as gentleness, sensitivity, and expressiveness; while women, moving away from traditional family roles, participate more in public life, thereby displaying traditionally male characteristics like firmness, confidence, and authority to gain more control.[37] However, it is worth noting that with societal developments and demographic changes, the image of older men as a significant consumer market is also gradually changing. Toni Calasanti and Neal King found that the image of loving, family-oriented grandparents is increasingly rare in media; today's advertisements often depict older white middle-class men engaging energetically in various expensive sports or leisure activities.[38] Although the shift in image brought about by consumer culture cannot be simply classified as good or bad, it is a manifestation of gradually narrowing gender differences between the sexes.

Indeed, once individuals enter advanced age, the gender differences between men and women in the elderly phase are often diminished by universal human traits such as frailty, illness, and fear of death. In general, the main difficulties faced by the elderly are social marginalization and the resulting alienation, discrimination, and isolation. Catherine B. Silver points out that in post-industrial societies like the United States, the loss of economic rights and status for the elderly provides the necessary conditions for a "new (de)gendered identity." She notes, "Compared to other characteristics of self, gender as a marker of elderly self-identity becomes less prominent." [39] Viewing older women as victims also presents numerous problems: firstly, it reinforces the image of older women as fragile, naive, and in need of help. Secondly, by primarily viewing aging as a women's issue, feminists display a preference for gender differences, thereby missing opportunities to understand the process of (de)gendering. In Silver's view, in post-industrial societies, power relations and gender differences have been minimized, and hermaphroditism has become the norm; old age is nearing a feminist utopia of gender equality. It should be said that Silver's assertions accurately respond to the evolving gender relations in old age under social changes. As society progresses, the phenomena of gender inequality in old age exhibit more pronounced regional and class-specific characteristics, and thus, aging research should not merely start from gender experiences but also consider regional, class, racial, and other related factors more comprehensively. In many areas, the commonalities between sexes have become more significant than the differences; focusing solely on power differences between genders can lead to overlooking the overall difficulties faced by the elderly as a group.

5. Conclusion

Since the 21st century, with the continuous intensification of global aging, aging research in the humanities is receiving increasingly widespread attention. As Amelia DeFalco has pointed out, "Aging research is largely a response to the negative cultural construction of old age," and the critical discourse surrounding aging research re-examines the Western societal cultural constructions of aging and old age, emphasizing the heterogeneity, fluidity, and ambiguity of elderly identities. This effectively refutes the deep-seated cultural prejudices attached to older people, offering positive

theoretical and practical value. However, at the same time, unlike categories such as gender, class, and race, aging is an unavoidable natural law for humans; in the final stages of life, disability, helplessness, and dependency are almost inevitable fates that everyone must face, and overly emphasizing its cultural construction attributes can easily overlook the real-life difficulties of the elderly, thus intensifying the shame felt by those elderly who need dependent care. For some older individuals, dependence on others and society is a practical necessity of life. Therefore, the cultural shift in aging research needs to be viewed dialectically and rationally, to avoid moving from one extreme to another. In summary, aging research is both an academic and a social issue, and delving into it holds theoretical value and practical significance.

Finally, as China gradually enters an aging society, related research on old age is also showing a rapidly growing trend. Compared to domestic research, gerontology research in the West since the late 20th century has its own unique characteristics. First, Western gerontology actively constructs its theories, featuring a departure from theory, continuity theory, successful aging, active aging, and other related theoretical expositions and debates among various theories. Secondly, contemporary Western gerontology research has increasingly close connections with literature, culture, sociology, psychology, and other humanities disciplines, actively drawing on research achievements from feminism, queer theory, postmodernism, and narratology, reflecting a multidisciplinary research integration perspective. Relatively speaking, domestic gerontology research often focuses on practical application, with theoretical exploration and interdisciplinary research receiving less attention; therefore, examining Western gerontology theory research and development provides certain reference value for the theoretical construction and practical guidance of domestic aging research.

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