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What is new with old? What old age teaches us about inequality and stratification

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Abstract

Aging is remarkably unequal. Who survives to grow old in America and the circumstances they face once there reflect durable racial, socioeconomic, and gender inequalities that structure our lives from birth. Yet within the field of social stratification and mainstream sociology proper, examinations of the rapidly growing population of older Americans are often relegated to a "gerontological" periphery. This essay posits that the failure to place aging as a core concern in stratification and inequality is a missed opportunity. We argue for the importance of reintegrating studies on the stratification of aging and explain why such a move is necessary. Specifically, we posit that (a) examining the aging population is necessary for understanding American inequality because aging is an outcome that is ubiquitous yet highly stratified; (b) aging and being seen as "old" in a youth-focused society are stratifying processes in their own right; and (c) later life provides for analytical comparisons that are illustrative of how key mechanisms of inequality structure and stratify. After examining insights provided by a new wave of research on the aging U.S. population, we revisit the implications for understanding inequality and stratification in a graying and unequal America.

1. Introduction

In the United States, aging is remarkably unequal (Abramson, 2015, 2016; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Carr, 2012; Harrington Meyer, 2005; Portacolone, 2014; Willson & Shuey, 2007). Some older adults live well into their 80s, whereas scores of others die before ever qualifying for a social security check (Lee et al., 2015; Olshansky et al., 2012). These patterns are not random. They reflect "durable inequalities" along racial, socioeconomic, and gender lines that structure our lives from birth (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Tilly, 1999). The long reach of American inequality profoundly shapes older adults' life expectancies, their relative levels of health, the social ties they can call upon, how they make sense of their circumstances, and even how they die (Abramson, 2015; Carr, 2016; Hayward & Gorman, 2004; Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek, 2010; Umberson, Thomeer, Williams, Thomas, & Liu, 2016). Although most aging Americans face a set of similar challenges associated with the physical and social predicaments of growing old in a youth centered society, they do so in starkly unequal contexts, with unequal resources, after a lifetime of

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exposure to inequality (Abramson, 2015). The most affluent retire to settings with dense services where they become a new "gated elite," whereas others age in impoverished neighborhoods with a comparative dearth of resources (Klinenberg, 2002; Newman, 2004; Portacolone, 2014). Acknowledgements of these stratifying processes have long been central to sociological investigations of aging and the life course (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Elder et al., 2003; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Ferraro, Shippee, & Schafer, 2009). Yet within both the field of social stratification and mainstream sociology proper, examinations of the aged are often relegated to a "gerontological" periphery. As a result, core studies of stratification typically focus on issues such as education, occupational mobility, status attainment, network inequality, poverty, segregation, or racial discrimination earlier in life while paying little heed to the immense insights into these topics provided by inequality's "End Game" (Abramson, 2015).[1]

This essay posits that the failure to place aging as a central concern in mainstream sociological research on stratification and inequality is a missed opportunity.[2] We argue for the importance of reintegrating studies on the stratification of aging and explain why such a move is necessary for understanding American inequality in the context of a rapidly aging society. Specifically, we posit that (a) examining the aging population is necessary for understanding American stratification because aging is an outcome that is both ubiquitous and highly stratified; (b) population aging has profound implications for inequality, and being "old" or treated as such in a youth-focused society is a stratifying process in its own right; and (c) later life provides for comparisons that can be uniquely illustrative of how key mechanisms of inequality–for example, neighborhood effects, health disparities, network inequalities, and culture–structure and stratify. After briefly elaborating each of these three points, we examine insights provided by a new wave of research on the aging U.S. population. We conclude by revisiting the implications for future work in the context of an America that is both graying and unequal.

2. Why Aging is of Central Importance for Stratification and Inequality

Understanding aging is essential for contemporary scholars of stratification and inequality for three main reasons–(a) aging is highly stratified, (b) powerfully stratifying, and (c) uniquely illustrative of social forces.

First, it is important to recognize that aging is an opportunity that is fundamentally unequal–it is a process that is highly stratified. There are innumerable popular and even gerontological tropes, which offer variants of the common saying, "age is just a number" or "80 is the new 60." Some suggest that "successful" aging is largely a choice or state of mind (Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Vaillant, 2002). Unfortunately, as with other accounts that individualize and psychologize inequality, the reality is both more complex and bleak than this framework would suggest (Abramson, 2016; Ferraro et al., 2009; Portacolone, 2014; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015). A vast and continuously growing body of literature demonstrates that survival into old age is shaped by socioeconomic and racial inequalities

[1]This was not necessarily always the case. See for instance Riley's 1986 American Sociological Association presidential address, which extols the central importance of aging for understanding society (Riley, 1987).
[2]Mason (2013) makes a parallel argument about the way scholars of stratification often discount issues of embodiment (Mason, 2013).

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and that these gaps are not disappearing (Lee et al., 2015; Olshansky et al., 2012). Dealing with the substantial physical and social challenges of growing old in America is an opportunity many of its most disadvantaged inhabitants simply do not have. More affluent and educated seniors often live decades longer than their counterparts. Further, the resources available to those who do survive long enough to "grow old" are remarkably unequal (Abramson, 2015; Brown, 2016; Cruikshank, 2009; Newman, 2004; Portacolone, 2014). Rather than being leveled away by entitlements or "selective mortality" (the process whereby the most disadvantaged die early), the intertwined advantages and disadvantages that shape earlier life continue to accumulate and structure our possibilities to the end (Abramson, 2016; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Ferraro & Morton, 2016; Hudson, 2016; Richardson & Brown, 2016; Willson & Shuey, 2007).

Second, population aging is not only a stratified outcome but also a stratifying process–that is, a phenomenon that both alters the existing social order and becomes an axis of inequality in its own right. The unprecedented "graying" of the population is a profound demographic shift that is expected to accelerate with medical innovations and the aging of "baby boomers" (Christensen, Doblhammer, Rau, & Vaupel, 2009). This transformation has implications for issues of core concern to scholars of stratification ranging from the operation of labor markets (Harrington Meyer, 2014) to national politics (Quadagno, 1988a, 1988b), to the structure of families (Angel & Settersten, 2015), to the shape of gendered and increasingly globalized chains of care work (Cruikshank, 2009; Hochschild, 2003), and to the provision (or absence) of social insurance (Quadagno, 1999; Patterson, 2000). The often cited observation that contrary to circumstances in almost all previous eras of human history, most of us will spend more time caring for the aged than the young, puts the magnitude of this shift into perspective (Hochschild, 2003). Further, as ethnographers have long shown, the physical challenges and prejudices faced by older Americans make being "old" in a youth-focused society an aspect of inequality in its own right–that is, a salient category of stratification that organizes our possibilities and experiences (Abramson, 2015; Estes, 1979; Loe, 2011; Myerhoff, 1978; Portacolone, 2013; Torres, 2014).

Finally, aging is powerfully illustrative of core mechanisms of stratification and inequality. Abramson (2015) elaborates this argument in his recent book, which uses later life as a lens for examining broader issues of inequality in America:

> Most of us will grow old and all of us will die. These simple facts provide tremendous and often underutilized leverage for understanding how key mechanisms of stratification operate. Unlike most challenges that people are called on to solve in their lives, the shared physical and social difficulties of advanced age confront all who survive to meet them. Consequently, people from different backgrounds face what Bourdieu refers to as a set of "similarly shaped problems." In later life, Americans from divergent backgrounds come to face common predicaments such as declining mobility, health problems, and the deaths of friends and loved ones… Examining the different (and sometimes similar) responses of individuals and groups provides a powerful vantage point for seeing how inequalities past and present shape experience and behavior (Abramson, 2015, p. 4).

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Thus, like youth, later life allows for analytical comparisons that are key to understanding social stratification and inequality. Youth and old age are notably the only periods in the American life course where there is widespread (if sometimes tenuous) support for interventions into inequality–in youth via the promise of public schooling and in later life via the promise of entitlements (Quadagno & Pederson, 2012). Examining how this works out for different groups of seniors allows sociologists to see the extent to which such interventions "level away" or, counterintuitively, reproduce inequality (Abramson, 2015; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Finally, those who face the challenges of growing old do so after having been exposed to a lifetime of inequality, as well as historical events such as legal segregation, the Great Depression, and the Second World War. Consequently, this segment of the population possesses both wisdom about the past from which sociologists can benefit, as well as key insights about contemporary processes of inequality and stratification.

To summarize, we find that there are profound social and analytical reasons for those interested in stratification and inequality to pay heed to aging and the aged. Just as addressing the policy challenges of an aging population without regard to the growth and expansion of inequality is deeply problematic (Abramson, 2016), so too is attempting to chart the contours of social stratification without looking at aging.

3. Learning About Stratification and Inequality From Older Americans

Having argued that examining aging and later life is central for understanding inequality and stratification, we now turn to a few examples of what studies in this vein can contribute to broader sociological understandings.

3.1. "Old age" as a durable inequality

Aging in the young nation of the United States has historically been a difficult and unequal enterprise. Widespread American ideals such as the potential of youth, the importance of independence and self-sufficiency, and hard work (specifically in formal labor markets) are harder to live up to in old age (Fischer, 2010; Katz, 2000; Portacolone, 2011). In 1975, Robert Butler captured this tension in his Pulitzer-prize awarded book titled *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. To highlight the inequalities embedded in old age, he coined the word "ageism" to make visible any discrimination generated by a difference in age (Butler, 1975, 2005). In the same period, Maggie Kuhn, the founder of the Gray Panthers and a sociologist by training, embraced the mission to denounce any inequalities affecting the old (1991) through guerilla theaters, appearances in the media (Kuhn, 1975, 1977, 1978b), and articles in academic journals (Kuhn, 1978a, 1986). "Go to the top" and "Speak your mind, even though your voice shakes" was one of her mantras (Estes & Portacolone, 2009). Kuhn's mentee, Carroll Estes, a sociologist of aging, made visible the stark inequalities associated with getting old. In her first book (Estes, 1979), titled *Aging Enterprise*, Estes discussed how the pervasive ageism gave rise to a set of industries meant to exploit, rather than to empower, older adults (Estes, 1979).

In the United Kingdom, at the same time, sociologists underscored the role of the welfare state in legitimizing the dependency of older adults through the institution of retirement and limited health services (Phillipson, 1999; Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1980). These studies

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inspired collaborations between British and U.S. social scientists that highlighted the role of a receding and weak welfare state in aggravating the health disparities and other existing challenges suffered by older adults (Minkler & Estes, 1984, 1999, Minkler & Estes, 1991). Furthermore, even before the notion of "intersectionality" became popular in sociology, scholars of aging and the life course, like Kuhn and Estes, highlighted the ideological and structural intersections of ageism, racism, sexism, able-bodied-ness, sexual preference, and social class. In Kuhn's words,

> The convergence and interaction of liberating forces at work in society against racism, sexism, ageism and economic imperialism are all oppressive 'isms' and built-in responses of a society that considers certain groups inferior …. All have resulted in economic and social discrimination…. [and] have brought on individual alienation, despair, hostility, and anomie (Kuhn, 1984, p. 7–8).

Put in the language of stratification, "old age" is a "durable inequality" that systemically shapes our lives (Tilly, 1999).

Contemporary works continue to fruitfully chart the persistent challenges of aging and ageism as part of the backdrop of growing inequality. Ethnographers have repeatedly shown that being considered "old" is a powerfully organizing aspect of Americans' everyday experiences even under the best circumstances (Loe, 2011; Myerhoff, 1978; Portacolone, 2014). In practice, aging often involves confronting the losses of loved ones, aspects of identity, and even a sense of community, as networks shrink and seniors become structurally isolated (Abramson, 2015; Portacolone, Perissinotto, Yeh, & Greysen, 2017). Rather than approximating the brochure image of retirement on a beach (or the academic equivalent in the successful aging literature), later life frequently involves both existential losses and petty indignities such as being ignored by store clerks and spoken to in infantilizing tones (Abramson, 2009, 2015; Estes, 1979; Loe, 2011; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015). This is not a challenge that is only found among one segment of the elderly. Seniors from divergent backgrounds–different racial, socioeconomic, and gender groups–are quick to point out that being "old" shapes experiences in a way sociologists do not always recognize. As James, an elderly African American man described in Abramson's (2015) book, noted "No one understands [the shared challenges of] being old but old people… Everything changes. Old is a different animal altogether. And the only way you can understand it is you have to get there" (Abramson, 2015, p. 20). In other words, although prior racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based inequalities continue into later life, "old age" is itself a powerful aspect of stratification.

3.2. Health, wealth, and the "safety net"

Although they face many shared challenges, older Americans do not do so on equal footing (Abramson, 2015; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Newman, 2004; Portacolone, 2014). Examining how older adults approach shared challenges–for example, declining health, the deaths of friends and loved ones, and being seen as "old" in a youth-centered world–in unequal contexts is powerfully illustrative. Doing so provides important illustrations of how intertwined social forces such as health disparities, network inequality, neighborhood effects,

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and culture stratify life in the current "high inequality regime" of postrecession America (Abramson, 2015; Grusky & MacLean, 2016).

There is a refrain common among segments of the "greatest generation" who weathered the Great Depression and then survived the horrors of the Second World War. It includes several variants of the phrase "health is wealth." Like other forms of wealth, health and our ability to maintain it are unequally distributed (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2002; Williams & Sternthal, 2010). A massive literature on health disparities (i.e., preventable differences in health status and the delivery of health care services) shows how this works out for different segments of the population–often along racial, socioeconomic, and gender lines. Sociologists of aging have long highlighted disparities in the health and longevity among specific groups of older adults, which were keys to the development of this literature. Although sometimes seen as a phase in the life where inequalities level out due to selective mortality, recent work in demography and sociology has revealed that despite the aggregate appearance of "leveling," the ramifications of lifetimes of inequality continue until our final years (Dupre, 2007; Lynch, 2006; Masters, 2012; Richardson & Brown, 2016). Freese and Lutfey (2011) poignantly summarize decades of research on this phenomenon when they note, "The lower status people are, the sooner they die, and the worse health they have while alive. Negative associations between SES and health overall have been found in almost every place and time for which data permit adequate study, implying that the generalization has held even as the prevalence of particular causes of ill-health and death have varied" (Freese & Lutfey, 2011, p. 67).

Yet older Americans are geographically and socially dispersed. Even after accounting for the process of "selective mortality," which systematically limits the chances that those with lower socioeconomic status will to survive to old age and can thus produce the appearance of leveling (Dupre, 2007), the aged are an incredibly diverse (and diversifying) group (Hayes-Bautista, Hsu, Perez, & Gamboa, 2002; Portacolone, 2014). Although they face shared physical challenges and stigmas, they do so on an "unequal playing field" that illustrates both the accumulation of advantages and disadvantages over the life course (Abramson, 2015; Elder et al., 2003; Ferraro et al., 2009; Willson & Shuey, 2007). Scholars of stratification have long pointed to gaps in wealth and its transmission as a powerful force for the reproduction of inequality (Conley, 1999; Hout & Diprete, 2006). On average, these gaps reflect the familiar race-, class-, and gender-based schisms that provide the foundation of American inequality. Dale Dannefer used aging to highlight how the advantage of being born and raised in affluent families shapes our trajectories throughout life through the process of cumulative advantage or disadvantage (Dannefer, 2003; see also Brown, 2016; Merton, 1988; Willson & Shuey, 2007). The advantage was "cumulative" because individuals of high socioeconomic status accumulated advantages over decades. Advantages ranged from good health services, education, employment in the service sector, and social connections to a high allocation of public benefits, a pension, and assets at the end of one's life. These advantages are mirrored in the neighborhood resources and network composition of more affluent seniors (Abramson, 2015; Fischer & Beresford, 2015; Ross & Mirowsky, 2008). On the other hand, persons born from parents of low socioeconomic status often endured a lifetime of stressors, such as poor education, unexpected pregnancies, employment in manual jobs that often led to exposure to toxic environments, and chronic

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conditions later in life (Dannefer, Hagestad, & Crystal, 2004). As a result, the accumulation of systemic advantages or disadvantages leads to a profound bifurcation in health status between the "haves" and the "have nots," provided that the "have nots" even make it to older age (Willson & Shuey, 2007).[3]

In later life, differences in health, wealth, and neighborhood resources mean "the other side of town" can be a world away (Abramson, 2015). Work among the aged has highlighted the unequal provision of social services and "entitlements," which are ostensibly meant to level these differences and provide a modicum of security in later life. Sociologists of aging have demonstrated how the allocation of public resources in the form of social security benefits is biased against women who divorced, who had lapses in their working history because of unpaid domestic labor, or who had limited opportunities for education. The economic penalties women face throughout their lives carry over into their pensions and social security checks and in fact are often compounded in old age. Meredith Minkler and others shed light on the "triple jeopardy" of being old, poor, and female in America (Minkler & Stone, 1985; see also Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Estes & Zulman, 2001; Newman, 2004; Quadagno, 1988a, 1988b). In other words, the intersecting economic and cultural penalties associated with race, class, and gender continue as a structuring force in later life (Abramson, 2015; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Newman, 2004; Richardson & Brown, 2016). Neither aging nor inequality can be adequately understood without examining the connection between the two.

Other sociologists highlighted inequalities in the allocation of resources across groups and generations. For example, Jill Quadagno deconstructed the claims that the aged rob resources for younger generations (Quadagno, 1990). Her discussion of the critical, yet limited, role of the welfare state to address the needs of low-income older adults has been an important empirical resource to fend off the attacks of those wanting to privatize Medicare and social security (Quadagno, 1999, 2004). Fernando Torres-Gil (1986) and Steven Wallace (1990) highlighted the barriers in access to care for older adults of color in the United States (Torres-Gil, 1986; Wallace, 1990, 1997; Villa, Wallace, Bagdasaryan, & Aranda, 2012). Scholars of gender have examined how the economic and cultural penalties associated with womanhood continue to structure both opportunities throughout the life course (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Cruikshank, 2009). Others have begun to examine the substantial challenges lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT+) seniors face in later life (Erdley, Anklam, & Reardon, 2014). In a complementary vein, Portacolone's recent work draws attention to the sense of "precariousness" often experienced by the growing numbers of older Americans living alone. This precariousness is produced in a large part by an uneven allocation of resources and policies promoting segregation by age (Portacolone, 2013, 2015; Portacolone & Halpern, 2014) and entrepreneurial funding mechanisms, which funnel resources away from the disadvantaged communities where they are most needed (Abramson, 2015; see also Lutfey & Freese, 2005).[4]

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[3]For a useful discussion on conceptualizing and operationalizing accumulation, see Ferraro & Morton, 2016.

[4]Although contemporary sociologists continue to focus on the importance of context and neighborhood effects, issues of age segregation seem to be largely ignored. Some have argued that this allows for the growth of senior communities (cf. Hochschild, 1973), whereas others have been more critical of the effects of age segregation (cf. Estes, 1979; Portacolone, 2011). Despite Estes' warning about "solutions that single-out, stigmatize, and isolate the aged from the rest of society," a constellation of buildings for seniors, adult day health centers, and gated communities mark the United States landscape (Estes, 1979). Recently, geographers,

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3.3. Meaningful relations: Culture and social networks

In the past three decades, scholars of stratification and inequality have increasingly recognized the role of culture in stratifying experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. The boundaries of what constitutes culture are contested, and a unifying definition remains elusive (Abramson, 2012; Lizardo & Strand, 2010; Patterson, 2014). Yet substantial empirical research shows that elements of social life, which are broadly considered "cultural"–for example, shared understandings and frames for thinking about the world and ourselves (Alexander & Smith, 1993; Bourdieu, 1984′ Harding, 2010; Lamont, 2000), socially inculcated motivations and values that drive us to pursue particular ends over others (Miles, 2015; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008; Vaisey, 2009), and the symbolic capacities and practices we use to navigate everyday life and existential challenges (Bourdieu, 1992; Rivera, 2012; Shim, 2010; Swidler, 1986, 2001)–are essential for understanding stratification and the reproduction of inequality. Although sociological examinations of aging have occupied a marginal position in the sociology of culture, studies of the aged can provide powerful insights into how cultural forces shape inequality over time (cf. Cruikshank, 2009).

Some new scholarship in cultural sociology has explicitly used later life as a lens for understanding the microfoundations of how culture shapes action in the context of American stratification. For instance, Abramson shows how culture can form a multifaceted temporal link between prior experiences with inequality and the survival strategies seniors deploy in the present (Abramson, 2015). Abramson shows how divergent motivations (e.g., maximizing longevity or maximizing excitement), orientations (e.g., seeing the body as a medical or nonmedical object), and cultural resources (e.g., the ability to navigate a medical institution or an illicit market for narcotics) shape the strategies available to seniors within a given neighborhood context. Like the durable dispositions of Bourdieu's (1984,1992) habitus, these aspects of culture are forged in prior experiences with inequality such as racial segregation, economic deprivation, and divergent experiences with medical institutions. These motivations, orientations, and resources shape what seniors see as desirable, reasonable, and possible responses to the "structural dilemmas" (Swidler, 1986, 2001) they face in the present. Abramson shows how cultural elements congeal to form the strategies seniors from different backgrounds use to navigate both the "similarly shaped problems" of old age and the unequal structural contexts in which they must face them. Further, the reception of these often publically enacted strategies (e.g., going to the doctor or going to the bar to deal with pain) takes on a moral valence that functions as a form of distinction that affects seniors' status and associations with others in their communities (Abramson, 2015; Bourdieu, 1984). Examining "old age" thereby contributes to understandings about the connection between stratification and culture by showing how culture (a) forms as a temporal link that shapes actions, experiences, and outcomes over the life course; (b) functions as part of a system of distinction, which both connects and stratifies seniors; and (c) forms a key underpinning of the social networks they form.

ethicists, and some social scientists have been concerned about this phenomenon (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005; Portacolone, 2011; Vanderbeck, 2007), but more work is required in this area.

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Scholars of aging and the life course have also long worked on connecting broader cultural forces to experiences, challenges, and communities in later life. A critical vein of scholarship has tied the symbolic challenges that seniors face to historically specific notions about work, success, and personhood that are difficult for many to obtain in later life (Katz, 2000; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015; Wallace, 2000). Some have sought to connect these issues to the broader sociocultural ramifications of political economy (Estes, 2001). Numerous works look at how groups of the aged construct a meaningful and dignified identity in the face of the everyday and existential challenges of growing old (Duneier, 1992; Hochschild, 1973; Kaufman, 1994; Loe, 2011; Myerhoff, 1978; Torres, n.d.). More recently, Portacolone's work shows how normative conceptions and frameworks–such as the widely shared value of indepen-dence–ultimately function as symbolic means of isolating seniors (cf. Portacolone, 2011, 2014). Others have connected these to explicitly gendered expectations, around phenomenon such as the value of “youthful beauty,” to show how cultural elements compound intersectional stratification in later life (Abramson, 2015; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Cruishank, 2009; Newman, 2004).

Studies of older adults have also expanded our knowledge about the repercussions of network inequality, that is, opportunity gaps generated by the size and quality of our connections (Small, 2009). Aggregate data analyses show that like other disparities, network inequalities continue into later life with profound consequences (Fischer & Beresford, 2015). Scholars have discussed the inequalities generated by network shrinkage and sometimes toxic ties to speak to the complex contingencies that shape network dynamics in later life–complicating a simplistic notion of social capital (Abramson, 2015; Cohen & Sokolvsky, 1980; Newman, 2004; Rollinson, 1990; Stephens, 1976). The consequences of these patterns were made starkly apparent in Klinenberg's (2002) “social autopsy” of the 1995 Chicago heat wave. Klinenberg showed that of the 521 people who perished, the victims were disproportionately older low-income African American men. These individuals had limited social ties and were wary of the surrounding crime; therefore, they stayed inside their overheated apartments or hotel rooms without air conditioning. The lack of effective social welfare policies, the physical environments these men occupied, their relative invisibility, and network inequalities contributed to a large number of avoidable deaths (Klinenberg, 2002). Likewise, a recent examination of the specific factors contributing to the social isolation of older residents of a high-crime neighborhood highlighted the tension between a longing to participate in society and the immersion in a social and physical environment too hostile to allow this participation (Portacolone et al., 2017). The comparison of study participants with older residents of more affluent neighborhoods nearby highlighted the profound inequalities generated by the small size and toxic quality of participants' connections (Portacolone et al., 2017).

To summarize, studies of older adults provide powerful insights into the interconnections between culture, networks, and community that are central for understanding stratification and inequality in America (Abramson, 2015; Portacolone, 2011, 2014; Torres, n.d.).

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4. Conclusion

We began this article by showing why examining later life is key for understanding inequality and stratification. The population is aging at an unprecedented rate, leading to seismic demographic shifts that affect myriad aspects of life–from economic participation to health to family relations–and there is little reason to believe these trends are slowing. Aging remains both a universal and highly unequal endeavor that allows for unique analytical comparisons that can advance sociological understandings of the operation and consequences of American inequality. Further, as we have shown, studies of older Americans have made substantial contributions to "mainstream" sociological topics such as our understanding of wealth gaps, neighborhood effects, and the provision of state services, social networks, and culture. A renewed recognition of how survival into and the experiences of later life are highly stratified, stratifying, and illustrative of core mechanisms of inequality can substantially advance our understandings of stratification.

It should be clear to sociologists that examining aging is not only analytically useful but also central to understanding stratification and inequality in America. Aging teaches us about both the continuity and reconfiguration of inequality over the life course. Yet some still believe that studies of later life are naught but an "applied" gerontological niche topic of little interest to scholars in mainstream sociology.[5] Perhaps this is due to simply not understanding the analytical value of later life. If that is so, hopefully this article provides a modest corrective. It is possible, however, that the aversion to positioning aging as a core topic in contemporary stratification has deeper roots. Perhaps it is the residue of cultural tropes that cast older people as inherently less valuable than the young. Perhaps examining the aged can be an unwelcome reminder of our mortality. Perhaps the lack of an easy solution for the accumulation of inequities that manifests in America's "end game" makes the topic depressing. Perhaps it simply lacks "exoticism"–aging has been around forever, seems familiar, and is (according to friends and colleagues at least) "unsexy." Although all of these are likely contributors to the marginal position of studies of aging, the fact remains–understanding unequal aging is important pragmatically, analytically, and on a human level. Failure to seriously engage with the insights provided by studies of aging and the life course is a lost opportunity for those who seek to understand stratification and inequality in America.

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[5]In his recent book, Abramson recounts an incident that is illustrative. After articulating the importance of using aging as a lens for charting the operation of mechanisms of inequality in a talk, a senior faculty member at an elite sociology department responded dismissively with the comment "Why should we care about old people?" (Abramson, 2015, p. 148). Re-explaining the analytical and practical case, which is partially outlined above, produced a second dismissive comment–"This is just depressing."

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session at the ASA annual meeting. Abramson's work on the connections between inequality and aging has also been featured in national media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*.

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