

Examining aging and care through an intersectional-sensitive lens

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Aging in a Caring Society: How Power Dynamics Intersect

This special issue emerges from the work of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC), founded in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Graz in Austria. Its opening conference, which took place in 2023, led to this publication, which is also inspired by one of the Center's first projects, "Gender Matters: Aging, Care, and Migration," in the framework of the Elisabeth-List Fellowship Program for Gender Studies. Elisabeth List's feminist philosophical legacy including her emphasis on embodied thinking and the entanglement of knowledge, power, and lived experience, shapes the foundation for the critical perspectives gathered in this special issue. CIRAC builds on this tradition by addressing socially relevant questions regarding aging, old age and cultures of care through critically informed research, education, and community engagement.

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This issue's contributions aspire to enhance our understanding of the complexities surrounding aging in the context of a caring society. Age(ing) and care(ing) are constantly materialized, culturally shaped and reshaped, unequally distributed, and generally invisible. Offering diverse approaches to how social and political identity categories intersect, these contributions aim to unravel the dynamics of power relations embedded in the aging process within a caring society. The increasing interest in intersectional research has not yet reached the point of fundamentally affecting how societies think of age(ing) and care(ing). Therefore, this special issue's activist agenda is intentional. It has the potential of affecting social and governmental structures by suggesting alternate perspectives on age(ing) and care(ing) by fostering minoritarian and heterodox theories that transcend disciplinary boundaries. The aim of this issue is to create a space where theories, ideas, and perspectives related to aging and care are brought into conversation by incorporating intersectional and interdisciplinary points of view.

Intersectionality has become a pivotal tool for understanding, analyzing, and critically assessing inequalities in the context of race, class, and gender. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and rooted in the work of Black feminist scholars and activists in 1960s and 1970s USA (cf. Bennett 2023), it has since been adapted as a critical lens within aging studies: Scholars such as Toni Calasanti, Neal King, Kathleen Slevin, and others (cf. Calasanti et al. 2006, 2007, 2015; King et al. 2019) extended the intersectional matrix to include the category of age to raise awareness to a broader discourse of social, political, and structural inequities.

In this special issue, we explore intersectionality as a lens to detangle the strands of power and privilege across various fields, rendering visible and challenging dynamics of marginalization, discrimination, oppression, and inequity. We understand that hegemonic power structures are neither linear nor static, but dynamic and shifting dependent on circumstances and situations (cf. Keller & Trinkaus 2024). What the individual contributions to this special issue demonstrate is that what may function as a powerful norm in one situation may turn into discrimination or exclusion in another setting.

In our call for papers to our 2023 conference *Age and Care Graz 2023: Aging in a Caring Society*, we invited scholarly and practical engagements

with aging and care that would posit prime examples of living a meaningful life, contributing to a more just and democratic aging and caring in a heterogeneous society. Despite the consideration of community, allyship, and solidarity as salient principles for care as a constituent of a good life (cf. Chatzidakis et al. 2020; Dowling 2022), we must not forget that, beyond a superficial glance, communities thrive on differences rather than being unified hives with only common interests (cf. Joseph 2002). In order to de-romanticize and de-tangle the complicated webs of care and caring relationships, we thus refrain from reductionist assumptions about communities in order to highlight the powerful essence of difference within similarities. As much as we understand intersectionality as a lens to foreground injustice, we simultaneously contemplate on its creative opportunity to uncover the potentials within hierarchies of care. Resonating Davis et al. (2022) we commit to a “willingness to anticipate change and to build into our organization a critical, generative reflexivity and opportunity to learn and grow” from the experiences and outcomes of both, the conference preceding this publication as well as the contributions that follow. In this endeavor, we understand power structures not only embedded in the social and political, the relational, and the caring aspects constituting our lives but also seek to dismantle hierarchies of scholarly imbalance in the way(s) we conduct our own research.

Unveiling Inequalities and Privileges in Aging and Care: The Potential of Intersectionality

Applying an intersectional lens to aging and care research reveals its potential for unpacking the complex configurations of inequality and privilege that inform later life and its research. Intersectionality provides a critical framework for analyzing the reciprocal dynamics that emerge against the backdrop of patriarchal and capitalist structures. Age, in this regard, is as much a marker of difference as a processual identity category, continuously negotiated across time and the intersecting axes of gender, class, race, and embodiment. Through the narratives of the fourth age, for example, neoliberal appropriations of aging and care, such as the individualization and responsabilization embedded in discourses of “healthy” or “successful” aging (Calasanti & Giles 2018), can be interrogated. Even

though there is already considerable criticism of these concepts, within critical gerontology (Katz 2013), an intersectional perspective further enriches this analysis. It helps to reveal that these concepts frequently obscure underlying structural inequalities as well as its interconnections with both gender and other axes of difference (Calasanti & King 2015). Intersectional analysis therefore illuminates further how such discourses reinforce exclusion and marginalization, especially for those whose experiences of aging are shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination.

The potential of intersectionality extends to the critical analysis of care relations. In the context of care it questions conceptions of autarkic and isolated decision-making and enables the integration of diverse aspects of justice as articulated in the narratives of older, intersectionally marginalized individuals (Kainradl 2024). While doubts remain about intersectionality's capacity to inform normative theorizing, it can bring together, as Borrás (2021: 208) argues, "the three spheres of health justice: economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation." By foregrounding these interconnected dimensions, intersectionality challenges reductive understandings of justice, and highlights the need for more comprehensive approaches to equity in later life.

Critiques have been raised regarding intersectionality's focus on identity or group-level analyses (Ciobanu 2023), prompting calls – particularly from Marxist feminists – to more robustly address the role of class (Aulenbacher & Haubner 2025) and structural oppression (Bohrer 2019). Although recent studies have increasingly focused on socio-economic marginalization, the risk of establishing hierarchies of categories and privileging certain axes of difference (Dhawan et al. 2024) while ignoring others, or at least neglecting to address the discriminating as well as oppressing structures. The same concern extends to the risk of subsuming and homogenizing diverse individual experiences under broad categories such as race, without adequately interrogating their representational and structural entanglements (Collins 2017; Dhawan et al. 2024).

Globally, the rise of neoliberal and neofascist tendencies has had profound and often detrimental effects on marginalized groups, including older adults. This raises once again the question regarding the relationship between intersectionality and social activism, and the extent to which

intersectionality functions as a political concept in the current social climate (Collins 2017; Davis 2020). Those who experience multiple forms of discrimination are particularly vulnerable to these developments, underscoring the urgent need to advance intersectional theorizing and activism in aging and care research.

Reaching Further: Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Potentials in Research at the Intersection of Aging and Care

The contributions to this special issue belong to various academic disciplines and enter into a productive relationship through their heterogeneity. This collection, drawing from the fields of history, philosophy, media analysis, and social science empiricism, aims to mutually highlight questions of age, care, and power relations and to conceive of them as a necessarily transdisciplinary theoretical formation. To this end, they approach the critique of power by intertwining different theoretical traditions, including, among others, critical gerontological, decolonial, and queer/crip/feminist strands. These are brought into dialogue with concepts of power, including those by Foucault, Crenshaw, and Hay. Thus, the contributions also demonstrate that an interdisciplinary claim is often inherent in the intersectional claim, which consists precisely in bringing together minoritized and heterodox perspectives. This results in rich, pliable, and convincing analyses that repeatedly highlight the political prerequisites, limitations, or futurities of aging and care. Discourses, ideas, spaces, infrastructures, technologies, narratives, aesthetics, and academic scholarship itself are thus questioned as to what forms of (collective) action and feeling they enable or prevent for, with, against, or through older people. In each case, it is of interest what type of practice is thereby realized or realizable in a (counter-)hegemonic, experimental, tactical, strategic, or structural manner.

As the contributions in this special issue discuss recurring elements of an emerging, interdisciplinary theoretical formation inherent in the engagement with aging and care, it becomes clear: this is not only about the synthesis and application or deconstruction of established concepts, but rather original interventions that demonstrate specific evidence, plausibility, and urgency. Among other things, this concerns the critical

questioning of the relationality of care-giving and care-receiving, as well as questions of intergenerationality and population. A politicization of social diversity, physical frailty, and class-related precarity, as well as existential concepts of mortality, are also negotiated within the framework of the special issue. These highly topical questions reveal that the particular potential of interdisciplinary Aging and Care Studies possibly consists of a science of relationships. In this sense, the contributions work on furthering the concepts of interdependence that, starting from age(ing) and care, opt for an unlearning of normative power structures and, at the same time, pay close attention not to prepare the theoretical potential of this thinking in an abstracted, disembodied, practice-decoupled, or metaphorized way, but always keep it tied back to existential questions of concrete bodies in concrete living conditions.

Reflections, Perspectives, and Pathways: Age, Care, Power Relations

The 10 articles gathered in this special issue approach intersectionality, aging, and care from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives: sociology, history, feminist economics, literary studies, digital media, and gerontology. They also cover different empirical contexts spanning Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Korea, Sweden, and the United States of America. They are presented in three thematic sections. Section One, "Changing Epistemologies of Age(ncy) and Care," features three articles that intervene on different levels, from philosophical foundations of care ethics, the conceptual vocabulary of intersectional analysis, to research practices through which knowledge on aging and care is produced. Section Two, "Infrastructuring Care: Media, Literature, and Design," brings together three articles that examine how care is shaped by cultural and material infrastructures through which older adults engage with the world, including social media platforms, literary narratives, and participatory design processes. This section thus resonates with the emerging field of politicizing and theorizing infrastructures of care (Berlant 2022; Ertner 2022; Manchester 2012; Schweigler 2025). Section Three, "Spatial Experience is Lived Experience," takes up the increasingly important lens of the spatiality of age relations (Kribernegg 2026; Laws 1997), gathering four articles that

ground intersectional analysis in concrete places and institutions – from historical care homes and contemporary workplaces to queer domestic lives and migrant care networks – showing how space, place, and belonging structure inequality in later life.

Changing Epistemologies of Age(ncy) and Care

Albert Banerjee's article "Mortality Matters: Providing a Universal Ground for Care" opens the collection with a philosophical argument for mortality as the universal ground of a caring society. He proposes mortality as a new conceptual foundation for care ethics. Banerjee argues that centering shared finitude across all axes of difference opens a universal ground for care. He points toward a more honest and politically engaged relationship between aging research and the realities of human vulnerability, and proposes mortality as a new conceptual foundation for care ethics.

In their article "Researching the Agency of Older Migrant Women: The Potential of Intersectional Approaches," Anna-Christina Kainradl, Brigitte Kukovetz, and Annette Sprung argue that older migrant women remain undertheorized as agents. They call for intersectional frameworks that are capable of capturing the simultaneous working of gender, migration status, and age, and advocate for expanded conceptual vocabularies that can capture the agency and diverse and often resourceful ways older migrant women navigate their circumstances.

In their article "Intersectionality in Action: Reflections on Decolonizing Research Practice in the context of care(ing) and age(ing)," Justine McGovern, Ingrid Hellström, and Jan Oyebode offer an account of what conducting intersectional, decolonizing research in gerontology means to them. Drawing on fieldwork in communities undergoing rapid diversification, the article examines how researchers themselves reproduce colonial logics even when committed to critical practice. The authors do not merely advocate for decolonized methods but reflect on their own failures, arguing that honest self-examination is a necessary condition for producing knowledge that centers the voices of older adults and carers.

Infrastructuring Care: Media, Literature, and Design

June Oh, in “Beyond Independence and With Care: Reimagining Older Adults’ Digital Agency with a Granfluencer” reframes digital agency as a relational and care-based concept, challenging dominant assumptions that equate older adults’ digital participation with independent media use. Drawing on feminist ethics of care and the case of Korean social media figure Makrye Park, Oh opens new conceptual ground for understanding how interdependence, rather than autonomy, may be the more generative framework for thinking about older adults’ digital futures.

In “An Intersectional Lens: Challenging, Resisting, and Embracing Old Age in Lore Segal’s ‘Ladies Lunch,’” Eva-Maria Trinkaus turns to literary fiction as a site of intersectional inquiry, analyzing Lore Segal’s 2023 short story cycle *Ladies Lunch* through the overlapping axes of age, gender, class, and ability. She shows how Segal’s female protagonists simultaneously resist, negotiate, and embrace old age, constructing counter-narratives to ageist stereotypes. The article makes the case for fictional narrative as a productive space for exploring the lived complexity of later life in ways that complement empirical research.

Katja A. Rießenberger, Tobias Wörle, Barbara Barbosa Neves, and Florian Fischer, in “‘Moving Sands of Power?’ – Power Dynamics in Co-Design Practices with Older Adults” investigate what happens to power when older adults are invited into participatory design processes. Through interviews with Australian co-design facilitators, they identify three constraining dynamics: limited control over recruitment, asymmetries between participants and professionals, and structural obstacles to meaningful inclusion. Australia’s colonial history and disability policies make these mechanisms particularly visible.

Spatial Experience is Lived Experience

Ulrika Lagerlöf Nilsson and Helene Castenbrandt, in “A Question of Dignity? Intersectional Perspectives on the Establishment of Old People’s Homes in Sweden at the Turn of the 20th Century” trace how class, gender, and age converged in 20th-century Swedish institutional care, where dignified housing was conditional on social respectability, revealing the historical roots of the intersectional disciplining of old age.

In “‘I’m Not a Quiet Woman’: An Intersectional Analysis of Gender, Class, and Ageism In the Canadian Workplace,” Amanda C. Bull and Nicole K. Dalmer draw on semi-structured interviews with 10 older Canadian workers (55+). They examine how ageism is compounded by gender and class in ways that rarely occur in isolation. Women in the study faced the dual burden of being older and female in male-dominated, youth-oriented environments, while economic precarity trapped others in physically demanding roles. The study also reveals how racial privilege shaped some participants’ relative “immunity” against discrimination, reinforcing the case for intersectionality as an indispensable lens for workplace policy.

Karin Schönflug brings feminist economics into conversation with queer aging theory through interviews with LGBTQI older adults in Vienna, Austria. In her contribution “Feminist Economics and Queer Aging: Exploring Caring Labor through LGBTQI Narratives In Older Ages,” she examines both sides of the care relationship, the accumulated disadvantages that shape older LGBTQI people’s care needs, and the gendered and racialized labor of those who provide that care within neoliberal frameworks. The article argues that combining these two analytical traditions opens new critical ground for understanding care as work, identity, and political economy.

Saloua Berdai Chaouni considers culturally sensitive care as insufficient in “Toward Equitable Dementia Care for Older Migrants: A New Conceptual Framework.” Using an intersectional, decolonial framework, she argues on the basis of interviews with older labor migrants and their caregivers of Italian, Moroccan, and Turkish descent in Belgium that equitable dementia care requires challenging racialization and structural exclusion directly, not reducing them to cultural difference.

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