Chapter Ten: Gender and Age

Learning Objectives

- Describe the differences between sex and gender.
- Analyze whether gender differences are rooted in biology or culture.
- Explain why sociologists consider women as a minority group.
- Summarize the main theory, based on reproduction, of how females became a minority group.
- Identify global violence against women and gender inequality in the U.S.
- Explore the three waves of feminism.
- Explain gender inequality in the workplace and the changing role of politics that affect gender inequality.
- Understand what is meant by the social construction of aging. Define the term “graying of America.”
- Describe the three theoretical perspectives on aging.

Chapter Summary

Gender stratification refers to males’ and females’ unequal access to power, prestige, and property. Gender is especially significant because it is a master status that cuts across all aspects of social life.

Sex refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish males from females; gender refers to the social characteristics that a society considers proper for its males and females. Primary sex characteristics consist of organs directly related to reproduction, such as a vagina and a penis. Secondary sex characteristics are those not directly connected to reproduction but that become evident during puberty. These secondary characteristics include muscle development and the change to a lower voice in males and the development of broader hips and breasts in women. Although human beings are born male or female, they learn how to be masculine or feminine. This process of gender socialization begins at birth and continues through the life course. In short, we inherit our sex, but learn our gender.

There is a significant debate over whether biology or culture is most responsible for gender differences. The dominant sociological position is that social factors, not biology, most account for gender differences in behavior, including male aggressiveness and female nurturing. A minority view within sociology, however, attributes male dominance in society to biological differences between males and females. A classic study addressing the nurture versus nature argument is the case study of an identical twin who was subjected to a sex change shortly after birth after an inept physician severed the baby’s penis during circumcision. Another study of Vietnam veterans measured the relationship between testosterone level and aggressiveness.

Around the world, gender is the primary division between people. In practically every society, greater prestige is given to male activities, regardless of the types of activities. To some degree,
this unequal treatment stems from the idea that women are considered a minority group because they are discriminated against on the basis of a physical characteristic—their sex.

A patriarchy is a society in which men dominate women and authority is vested in males. Although nobody knows the origins of patriarchy, the dominant theory contends that patriarchy was a social consequence of human reproduction.

A global human rights issue is violence against women. Historical examples include foot binding in China and witch burning in Europe. Modern examples include rape, wife beating and forced prostitution. Inequality is not an accidental affair. It is how society’s institutions work together to maintain the group’s forms of inequality.

Because men tenaciously held onto their privileges and used social institutions to maintain their dominance, basic rights for women came only through a prolonged and bitter struggle. Feminism is the belief that biology is not destiny and that stratification by gender is wrong and should be resisted.

In the United States, the “first wave” of the women’s movement (early in the twentieth century) gained women the right to vote. The “second wave,” beginning in the 1960s, contributed to women achieving more rights and gains—from raising women’s pay to changing policies on violence on women. A “third wave” of feminism has emerged; three main aspects are apparent. The first is a greater focus on women in the Least Industrialized Nations. The second is a criticism of the values that dominate work and society. The third is an emphasis on women’s sexual pleasure.

Females are discriminated against in areas of health care and education as well. Studies showed that women were twice as likely as men to die after coronary bypass surgery and surgeons were also likely to recommend more radical surgeries to their female patients on their reproductive system than necessary. There is evidence of educational gains made by women, but some old practices and patterns, such as “gender tracking” still persist.

The most remarkable area of gender inequality at work is the pay gap—men earn more than women, even when their educational achievement is the same. Some of this is the result of women’s career choices and the “child penalty”—women missing out on work opportunities while they care for their children. Women are also underrepresented as CEOs of the largest U.S. corporations. The “glass ceiling” is the invisible barrier that prevents women from advancing to the top levels at work. Another area of concern is sexual harassment in the workplace. The perception on this issue is changing so that we are now more apt to perceive a supervisor who makes sexual advances to a worker not as sexual attraction, but as a misuse of authority.

Globally, females are more likely to be the victims of violence. Forcible rape and date rape are prevalent—1 of every 1,000 U.S. girls and women between the ages of 12 and 50 is raped each year and studies show that date rape is a common occurrence.
Despite the gains U.S. women have made in recent elections, they continue to be underrepresented in political office, especially in higher office. However, current trends indicate that women will participate in political life in far greater numbers than in the past.

As females come to play a larger role in the decision-making processes of American social institutions, structural barriers and traditional stereotypes will continue to fall. This should result in less gender stratification as both males and females develop a new consciousness.

Every society must deal with the problem of people growing old. Because more of the world’s population is considered “elderly” than ever before, every society is experiencing a drain on its resources. A society’s definition and treatment of its elderly is socially constructed. Attitudes about the elderly are rooted in culture and vary from one social group to another.

When a country industrializes, its people live longer. This is the result of technological advances that include making work safer, food better, living conditions better, water cleaner, and advances in medicine more readily available. The “graying of America” refers to the growing percentage of older people in the U.S. population.

The symbolic interactionist perspective examines the “signals,” or labels and stereotypes that people associate with aging. Robert Butler coined the term “ageism” to refer to prejudice and discrimination directed against people because of their age. The basic principle of symbolic interactionism is that people perceive both themselves and others according to the symbols of their culture, and these symbols change in meaning. The elderly now are beginning to perceive themselves in a new light.

The functionalist perspective on aging uses disengagement theory, activity theory, and continuity theory to examine people’s adjustments to aging and retirement. Disengagement theory takes the view that society prevents disruption by having the elderly vacate, or disengage, from their positions of responsibility so the younger generation can be promoted. In activity theory, satisfaction during old age is related to a person’s amount and quality of activity. Continuity theory, as the term implies, refers to the tendency for people to continue into their retirement the activities they pursued previously. This could include being more involved with church activities, greater degrees of travel, or the pursuit of additional education.

The conflict perspective on aging focuses on intergenerational conflicts surrounding the allocation of limited resources. The best example of these conflicts is the management of the Social Security program through the years when the “baby boom” retires. This will tax the fund more than at any other time in history.

As we look to the future, we see that the elderly have begun to challenge the demeaning stereotypes of the aged. They are developing a new perspective on aging—one that sees old age as a new period of life with specific challenges that can be celebrated and enjoyed. It is too early to determine how this new approach to aging will play out and how stereotypes of the elderly may change.
Chapter Outline

I. Issues of Sex and Gender
   A. Gender stratification refers to men’s and women’s unequal access to power, prestige, and property.
      1. Gender is especially significant because it is a master status, cutting across all aspects of social life.
      2. No matter what we attain in our lifetime, we carry the label male and female with us; this label guides our behavior and serves as a basis of power and privilege.
   B. Sex and gender reflect different bases.
      1. Sex is biological characteristics distinguishing males and females, including primary sex characteristics (organs related to reproduction) and secondary sex characteristics (physical distinctions not related to reproduction).
      2. Gender is a social characteristic which varies from one society to another and refers to what the group considers proper for its males and females.
      3. The sociological significance of gender is that it is the means by which society controls its members; it sorts us, on the basis of sex, into different life experiences.
   C. Some researchers argue that biological factors (two X chromosomes in females, one X and one Y in males) result in differences in conduct, with men being more aggressive and domineering and women being more nurturing.
      1. The dominant sociological position is that social factors explain why we do what we do.
      2. People in every society determine what the physical differences separating men and women mean to them.
   D. The door, however, to biological factors being involved in human behavior is being acknowledged by some sociologists. Real-life cases provide support for the argument that men’s and women’s behavior is influenced by biology.
      1. A medical accident led to a young boy being reassigned to the female sex. Reared as a female, the child behaved like a girl; however, by adolescence she was unhappy and having a difficult time adjusting to being a female. In adolescence, the child underwent medical procedures to once again become a male.
      2. A study of Vietnam veterans found that the men who had higher levels of testosterone tended to be more aggressive and to have more problems.
      3. Alice Rossi suggested that women are better prepared biologically for “mothering” than are men; nature provides biological predispositions that are overlaid with culture.

II. Gender Inequality in Global Perspective
   A. Around the world, gender is the primary division between people. Every society places men and women into separate groups and these divisions always favor men-as-a-group. Historian Gerda Lerner concluded that “there is not a single society know where women-as-a-group have decision-making power over men (as a group).”
   B. Some analysts speculate that in hunting and gathering societies, women and men were social equals.
C. The main theory to explain the origin of patriarchy—men dominating society—centers on reproduction.
   1. As a result of pregnancy and breast-feeding, women assumed the tasks associated with the home and child care.
   2. Men took over tasks such as hunting, which allowed them to make contact with other tribes. Male prestige resulted from their accumulation of possessions through trade and war with other groups.
   3. Eventually, men became dominant and use of their weapons, possessions and knowledge assured them that they held more social power than women.

III. Global Violence Against Women
   A. Violence against women is a global issue.
      1. Historical examples include foot binding in China, witch burning in Europe, and burning living widows with the bodies of their dead husbands (suttee) in India.
      2. Current examples include rape, wife beating, infanticide, kidnapping of brides, and forced prostitution.
   B. Honor killings are another form of violence against women. In some countries, if a woman brings disgrace on her family, she is killed by a male relative, usually her brother or husband.
   C. Inequality is not an accidental affair. It is how society’s institutions work together to maintain the group’s forms of inequality.

IV. Gender Inequality in the United States
   A. A society’s culture and institutions both justify and maintain its customary forms of gender inequality. Until the twentieth century, U.S. women did not have the right to vote, hold property, make legal contracts, or serve on a jury.
      1. Males did not willingly surrender their privileges; rather, greater political rights for women resulted from a prolonged and bitter struggle.
      2. Feminism—the view that biology is not destiny and that stratification by gender is wrong and should be resisted—was met with strong opposition, both by men who had privilege to lose and by women who accepted their status as morally correct.
      3. This movement was divided into radical and conservative branches. The radical branch wanted to reform all social institutions, while the conservative branch concentrated only on winning the vote for women. After 1920 and the achievement of suffrage for women, the movement dissolved.
      4. A “second wave” of feminism began in the 1960s. As more women gained an education and began to work outside the home, they compared their wages and working conditions to those of men. As awareness of gender inequalities grew, protest and struggle emerged. The goals of this second wave of feminism are broad, from changing work roles to changing policies on violence against women.
      5. A “third wave” has now emerged. Three main aspects are apparent. The first is a greater focus on women in the Least Industrialized Nations. The second is a
criticism of the values that dominate work and society. The third is an emphasis on women’s sexual pleasure.

6. While women enjoy more rights today, gender inequality still continues to play a central role in social life.

B. There is growing evidence of sexual discrimination in health care.

1. Studies showed that women were twice as likely as men to die after coronary bypass surgery. Physicians had not taken the complaints of chest pain as seriously in female patients as they had males. As a result, women received surgery later after the disease had a chance to progress thereby reducing their chance for survival.

2. Surgeons were also likely to recommend more radical surgeries to their female patients on their reproductive system than necessary.

C. There is evidence of educational gains made by women; more females than males are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, females earn 57 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, and the proportion of professional degrees earned by women has increased sharply. Despite these gains, some old practices and patterns persist.

1. There is still the matter of gender tracking. College degrees tend to follow gender.

2. Men earn 95% of the associate degrees in the “masculine” field of construction trades, while women earn 96% of associate degrees in “feminine” field of “family and consumer sciences.”

V. Gender Inequality in the Workplace

A. One of the most remarkable areas of gender inequality at work is the pay gap.

1. One of the chief characteristics of the U.S. work force is the steady growth in the number of women who work outside the home for wages. Today, nearly one in every two women is employed.

2. Women who work for wages are not distributed evenly throughout the United States.

3. Men earn more than women, even when their educational achievement is the same. U.S. women who work full time are paid roughly $700,000 less than men over their lifetime. All industrialized nations have a pay gap.

4. Researchers found that half of the gender pay gap is due to women choosing lower-paying careers. The other half is due to gender discrimination and the “child penalty”—women missing out on work experience while they care for their children.

5. Of the nation’s top 500 corporations, only twelve are headed by women. The best chance to be CEO of the largest U.S. corporations is to have a name such as John, Robert, James, William, or Charles. One of the few women to head a Fortune 500 company had a man’s first name: Carleton Fiorina of Hewlett-Packard.

B. The “glass ceiling” describes an invisible barrier that women face in trying to reach the executive suites.

1. Researchers find that women are not in positions such as marketing, sales, and production, ones from which top executives are recruited. Rather, they are steered
into human resources and public relations; their work is not appreciated to the same degree because it does not bring in profits.

2. Another explanation for the situation is that women lack mentors.

C. Until the 1970s, women did not draw a connection between unwanted sexual advances on the job and their subordinate positions at work.
   1. As women began to discuss the problem, they named it sexual harassment and came to see such unwanted sexual advances by men in powerful positions as a structural problem. The change in perception resulted from reinterpreting women’s experiences and giving them a name.
   2. Sexual harassment laws also apply to homosexuals who are harassed by heterosexuals on the job. By extension, the law also applies to heterosexuals who are sexually harassed by homosexuals on the job.

D. Most victims of violence are female.
   1. Each year almost 1 of every 1,000 American women between the ages of 12 and 50 is raped.
   2. The typical rape victim is between 16 to 19 years old, most of whom know their attacker.
   3. An aspect of rape that is usually overlooked is the rape of men in prison.
   4. Date rape (sexual assault in which the assailant is acquainted with the victim) is not an isolated event and most go unreported.
   5. Males are more likely than females to commit murder and be the victim of murder.
   6. Other forms of violence against women include spouse battering, marital rape, incest, honor killings, and female circumcision.
   7. Feminist sociologists have been effective in bringing violence against women to the public’s attention.

E. To solve violence, we must first break the link between violence and masculinity.

VI. The Changing Face of Politics
   A. Despite the gains U.S. women have made in recent elections, they continue to be underrepresented in political office, especially in higher office.
   B. Current trends indicate that women will participate in political life in far greater numbers than in the past.

VII. Glimpsing the Future—With Hope
   A. As women play a fuller role in decision-making processes, further structural obstacles to women’s participation in society will give way.
   B. As gender stereotypes are abandoned, both males and females will be free to feel and express their needs and emotions, something that present arrangements deny them.

VII. Inequalities of Aging
   A. The Tiwi got rid of the old, decrepit females in their society by “covering them up.” That is, they dug a hole, put the old woman in the hole, and covered her with dirt all the way with only her head showing. Returning in a day or two they found that she had died.
VIII. Aging in Global Perspective
A. Every society must deal with the problem of people growing old; as the proportion of the population that is old increases, those decisions become more complex and the tensions between the generations grow deeper.
B. How a society views the aged and attitudes about aging are socially constructed; thus, the aging process depends on culture, not on biology.
   1. The Abkhasians, pay high respect to their elderly. They may be the longest-living people in the world, with many claiming to live past 100.
   2. The main factors that appear to account for their long lives are diet, lifelong physical activity, and a highly developed sense of community.
C. As a country industrializes, more of its people reach older ages.
   1. This reflects the higher standard of living, and success in fighting deadly diseases.
   2. As the proportion of elderly increases, so does the bill that younger citizens must pay in order to provide for their needs. This has become an especially troubling issue in western Europe and Japan, which have the largest percentage of citizens over age 60.
D. In the United States, the “graying of America” refers to the proportion of older people in the U.S. population.
   1. Today, 13 percent of the population has achieved age 65; there are 8 million more elderly Americans than there are teenagers.
   2. While life expectancy (the number of years that an average person at any age, including newborns, can expect to live) has increased, the life span (maximum length of life) has not.

IX. The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective
A. Robert Butler coined the term “ageism” to refer to prejudice, discrimination, and hostility directed at people because of their age.
   1. With the coming of industrialization, the traditional bases of respect for the elderly eroded. Young workers became as productive as the elderly; coupled with mass education, this stripped away the elderly’s superior knowledge.
   2. The meaning of old age is being transformed with the increasing wealth of the U.S. elderly and the coming of age of the baby boom generation. The baby boom generation, given their vast numbers and economic clout, are likely to positively affect our images of the elderly.
   3. The mass media communicates messages about the aged, influencing our ideas about the elderly.

X. The Functionalist Perspective
A. One of the components of society that functionalists analyze is age cohorts—people who were born at roughly the same time and who pass through the life course together.
B. Elaine Cumming and William Henry developed disengagement theory to explain how society prevents disruption to society when the elderly retire.
   1. Pensions are used to get the elderly to disengage from their positions and hand them over to younger people.
2. This theory is criticized because it assumes that the elderly disengage and then sink into oblivion.
3. Dorothy Jerrome, a critic of disengagement theory, found in her research that the elderly exchange one set of roles for another; the new roles, centering on friendship, are no less satisfying than the earlier roles.
4. The nature of retirement has also been changing; more often, workers slow down rather than simply stop working. Many never “retire” but simply cut back.

C. According to activity theory, older people who maintain a high level of activity tend to be more satisfied with life than those who do not.
1. Most research findings support the hypothesis that more active people are more satisfied people.
2. Contradictory findings from a number of different studies suggest that counting the number of activities is too simplistic. Rather, researchers need to take into account what activities mean to people.

D. Continuity theory focuses on how people continue their roles in order to adjust to change. Over the course of our lives, we develop various strategies for coping with life. When confronted with old age, people continue to use these coping strategies.
1. People from higher social classes have greater resources to cope with the challenges of old age, and consequently adjust better.
2. People who have multiple roles—wife, mother, worker, friend—are better equipped to handle the loss of a role than are people who do not.
3. Critics claim that this theory is too broad; it is seen as a collection of loosely connected ideas with no specific application to the elderly.

XI. The Conflict Perspective
A. Conflict theorists examine social life as a struggle between groups for scarce resources. Social Security legislation is an example of that struggle.
1. In the 1920s, two-thirds of all citizens over 65 had no savings and could not support themselves. Francis Townsend enrolled one-third of all Americans over 65 in clubs that sought a national sales tax to finance a monthly pension for all Americans over age 65. To avoid the plan without appearing to be opposed to old-age pensions, Social Security was enacted by Congress.
2. Initially the legislation required workers to retire at 65. For decades, the elderly protested. Finally, in 1986, Congress eliminated mandatory retirement. Today, almost 90 percent of Americans retire by age 65, but they do so voluntarily.

B. Conflict theorists state that Social Security was not a result of generosity, but rather of competition among interest groups.
1. Since equilibrium is only a temporary balancing of social forces, some form of continuing conflict between the younger and the older appears inevitable.
2. The huge costs of Social Security and Medicare have become a national concern—three of every five tax dollars is spent on these two programs. Conflict is inevitable, as proportionately fewer working people are forced to pay for the benefits received by an increasing number of senior citizens.
3. Some argue that the elderly and children are on a collision course. Data indicate that as the number of elderly poor decreased, children in poverty increased. Also,
the medical costs for the elderly have soared and some fear that health care for children will be shortchanged. It has been argued that the comparison is misleading because the money that went to the elderly did not come from money intended for the children. Framing the issue in this way is an attempt to divide the working class and to force a choice between suffering children and elderly.

XII. Looking Toward the Future
A. The elderly have begun to challenge the demeaning stereotypes of the aged. They are developing a new perspective on aging—one that sees old age as a new period of life with specific challenges that can be celebrated and enjoyed.
B. This new time of life provides unique opportunities to pursue interests, to develop creativity, and to enhance the appreciation of life’s beauty and one’s place in it.
C. It is too early to determine how this new approach to aging will play out and how stereotypes of the elderly may change.

KEY TERMS
After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

activity theory: the view that satisfaction during old age is related to a person’s amount and quality of activity (p. 305)
age cohort: people born at roughly the same time who pass through the life course together (p. 304)
ageism: prejudice and discrimination directed against people because of their age; can be directed against any age group, including youth (p. 303)
continuity theory: focuses on how the elderly continue ties with their past (p. 306)
disengagement theory: the view that society is stabilized by having the elderly retire (disengage from) their positions of responsibility so the younger generation can step into their shoes (p. 304)
feminism: the view that biology is not destiny and that stratification by gender is wrong and should be resisted (p. 284)
gender: the behaviors and attitudes a group considers proper for its males and females (p. 276)
gender age: the relative value placed on men’s and women’s ages (p. 305)
gender stratification: males’ and females’ unequal access to property, power, and prestige (p. 276)
glass ceiling: the mostly invisible barrier that keeps women from advancing to the top levels at work (p. 294)
graying of America: the growing percentage of older people in the U.S. population (p. 302)
life expectancy: the number of years that people, can expect to live (p. 301)
life span: the maximum length of life possible (p. 302)
patriarchy: a society in which men as a group dominate (p. 282)
sex: biological characteristics that distinguish females and males, consisting of primary and secondary sex characteristics (p. 276)

sexual harassment: unwelcome sexual attention at work or at school, which may affect job or school performance or create a hostile environment (p. 295)

**KEY PEOPLE**
*Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.*

**Robert Butler:** Butler coined the term “ageism” to refer to prejudice, discrimination, and hostility directed against people because of their age. (pp. 302-303)

**Janet Chafetz:** Chafetz studied the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, noting that as large numbers of women began to work in the economy, they began to compare their working conditions with those of men. (p. 287)

**Elaine Cumming and William Henry:** These two developed disengagement theory to explain how society prevents disruption when the elderly vacate their positions of responsibility. (pp. 304-305)

**Sue Fisher:** She discovered that surgeons were recommending total hysterectomies to female patients when they were not necessary. (p. 289)

**Charles Hart:** This anthropology graduate student carried out research on the Tiwi, a gerontocracy. (p. 299)

**Alison Jaggar:** Observed that as society changes, we may see a greater appreciation for sexual differences and gender equality can become a background condition for living in society rather than a goal to strive for. (p. 298)

**Dorothy Jerrome:** This anthropologist is critical of disengagement theory. She pointed out that it contains implicit bias that the elderly give up productive roles in society and slip into oblivion. (p. 305)

**Gerda Lerner:** While acknowledging that in all societies women—as a group—have never had decision-making power over men, Lerner suggested that patriarchy may have had different origins in different places around the globe. (pp. 279, 282)

**Alice Rossi:** This feminist sociologist has suggested that women are better prepared biologically for “mothering” than are men. (p. 279)

**Diana Scully:** She learned that surgeons “sell” unnecessary female operations to women in order to keep themselves in business. (p. 289)
Discussion Topics to Encourage Student Participation

- The selection in Cultural Diversity Around the World: “Female Circumcision” discusses the circumcision of young girls as a traditional practice in certain cultures. This custom takes on different forms in different cultures. Often it is supported by women who insist that the custom continue. Others claim it is a form of ritual torture to control female sexuality. Ask students to write an essay to discuss this tradition and attempt to explain the gap in public opinion and the persistence of the use of female circumcision despite prohibition in countries such as Egypt.

- Ask your students to name any professional men’s sports team from any sport. Randomly pick five or six students to respond. Now ask five or six students to name any professional women’s sports team. Next, ask them to name any professional male athlete and then any professional female athlete. How did the responses differ in the number of students who could volunteer a response and the time it took them to do so. Was there a difference in the number of male students familiar with professional female sports and the number of women familiar with professional female sports? If so, was the difference related to the students’ participation in organized sports on campus, or because of exposure from televised sports?

- For years, sociologists have argued that men dominate and interrupt conversations and compare a man’s conversation with a woman to a boss speaking with an employee. Recent research challenges this assumption and finds that men and women equally interrupt and change topics. Have your students openly discuss this topic and keep track of how often a woman interrupts a man while he is presenting his feedback on the subject, and how often a man interrupts a woman presenting her feedback on this subject. What may be important to note is whether the interruption resulted from the student raising his/her hand to speak, or whether the student just jumped into the discussion. Also note whether the female students stood their ground in the argument as equals, or whether they submitted to male dominance. Note the class consensus in general on the subject.

- Ask your students to discuss and/or debate the following: Do you think there will be a woman president of the United States in your lifetime? If not, why? If so, what differences, if any, do you think a woman would bring to the office of the presidency? If the United States had a woman president, do you think that other nations might perceive this as a weakness or as a strength?

- Ask your students to discuss perceptions of aging while addressing the following: As you see it, at what age are people no longer young? What is it, specifically, about this age that makes a person “old”? What are some of the social factors in the United States that have shaped your ideas about the elderly? How often do you think about growing old and, when you do, do you think about it in a positive or negative light? Finally, if aging were eliminated tomorrow by advances in technology, what do you think would be the perfect age to be, and remain at, for the rest of your life? Why?
Ask your students to discuss the question of how long people should live. As a nation, we are faced with a serious dilemma in the United States over financing Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid while, at the same time, advances in medicine are prolonging life. Research with gene manipulation shows promise of extending life significantly beyond current mortality tables. Hence, the Methuselah problem: extending life while financing it at the same time. Should we extend life when we are already experiencing problems caring for the elderly? Should we eliminate retirement or raise the age of retirement? If we do either, would that then create more of a job shortage for younger workers? If so, would we then need to expand government support to the unemployed? At what cost?

Considering the different theories and policies associated with retirement, ask your students to address the following: At what age and/or under what circumstances should people be forced to retire? How might this vary, if at all, from one job or profession to another? Should older people leave their jobs—freeing these up for younger people—when they can no longer perform adequately? What constitutes adequate performance? Should supervisors who judge “adequate performance” make any allowances for age? Finally, at what age do you imagine yourself retiring, and under what circumstances?

Ask your students to think about and discuss the following: What advantages do senior citizens have over younger people? What advantages do younger people have over senior citizens? Should senior citizens get special discounts and other privileges because they are senior citizens? If so, why? If not, why do you think they get them? Overall, do you think the senior citizen lobby in the United States is too strong? Do you think it receives a disproportionate share of the nation’s limited resources?

Ask your students to think about how American society views “youth” and “aging,” while addressing the following: In what ways, if any, does American society celebrate and glorify looking young? What accounts for American society’s obsession with youth? Who profits by it? How do they profit by it? Who is hurt by it? How are they hurt? At what age do you think Americans start using “anti-aging” products and/or considering surgery to make them look more youthful? Are you, or anyone you know, using products that purport to slow down or reverse the aging process? What are these products and why are they being used? Finally, how might a functionalist, conflict theorist, and symbolic interactionist explain the popularity of such products and the consequences of that popularity?

Classroom Activities and Student Projects

Ask your students to think about and discuss the following: Will there ever be complete equality between males and females in the United States? Should there be? What would constitute complete equality? Do you think the women’s movement is stronger or weaker today than it was in the 1970s? In what ways? In challenging gender stratification, do you think that feminists sometimes exaggerate the problem of sexual inequality in the United States? If so, how? The text offers a few explanations for the origins of patriarchy while
ignoring religion. Given that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all patriarchal religions, do you think that the feminist movement is an attack against religion? Finally, what is a feminist? Are you a feminist? If so, why? If not, why?

- Conduct a “show and tell,” asking your students to bring to class a large shopping bag containing three or four of their favorite possessions. These can be books, records, stuffed animals, games, magazines, toys, dolls, posters, or anything else that can fit into a large shopping bag. Have each of the students come up to the front of the classroom, present his or her favorite possessions, and briefly share with the class why these possessions are important to him or her. During the “show and tell,” ask your students to look for and note any gender distinctions and stereotypes between the male students’ favorite possessions and those of the female students. Afterwards, have your students discuss these gender distinctions and stereotypes, while addressing the social and/or biological factors that might account for them.

- Breaking your students into small groups, ask them to look for and list as many examples of gender stratification as they can find on their college campus. These can include, for example, the percentage of male instructors versus female instructors; the number of male sports teams versus female sports teams (as well as funding inequities between the sports teams); advertisements, posters, and/or graffiti that objectify or devalue women (or, for that matter, devalue femininity); and gender imbalances in different departments or programs (such as more male engineering majors than female engineering majors or more female health sciences majors than male health sciences majors). Afterward, have the groups present and critically analyze their lists.

- Ask your students to conduct a research project on different ways the elderly are treated around the world. Compare those to the ways they are treated in the United States. Students can each pick a different country to examine and, afterward, report on the following: What percentage of the country’s population is elderly? How is “old age” defined in the country? Compared to other segments of the population, how financially secure are the elderly in the country? How psychologically and/or emotionally well off are they? How much political power do they have? Overall, are the elderly respected in the country? How is that respect (or lack of respect) manifested?

- Ask students, either individually or in small groups, to critically analyze Hollywood’s representations of the elderly and report on the following: Compared to other groups in the United States, how often are the elderly included in Hollywood movies? When the elderly are included, how are they depicted? What roles do elderly people typically play and how do these roles either reinforce or challenge stereotypes about the elderly? How often, for example, are fifty-year-olds pictured falling in love in Hollywood movies? Passionately kissing? Taking off their clothes? Having sex? How about sixty-year-olds? Seventy-year-olds? What are fifty-year-olds, sixty-year-olds, and seventy-year-olds typically pictured doing in Hollywood movies? And overall, what might these depictions of older people be “telling” younger people about what it means to grow old?
As a group project, have your students create a documentary video about aging in America. The video should include interviews with younger people on their attitudes about older people, and interviews with older people on their attitudes about younger people. If possible, the video should also include interviews with some of the students’ own grandparents, asking their grandparents to address the following three questions: First, thinking about all the technological advances, political events, and/or social changes that you have witnessed in your lifetime, which ones have been the most amazing, influential, and memorable for you? Why? Second, what can the United States do to better meet the needs of its older people? Third, if there was a single lesson that you learned from your life that you would like to pass along to younger people as words of wisdom, what would it be?

**Service Learning Projects and Field Trips**

- Arrange a tour of a domestic abuse shelter where women can seek relief from living in an abusive relationship. Ask the director of the shelter to provide your students with a candid presentation on the services the shelter provides. What are some of the necessities of operating such an agency? What are some of the problems workers face that are unique to the position? Would you choose work in such an agency? Why or why not?

- Arrange a tour of a continuing care retirement community that has independent living, assisted living, and nursing facilities as part of its operation. Have the students pay attention to how each component is different in its structure and supervision.

- Contact the local AARP chapter and ask a representative to address the class on the programs they offer for the elderly. How successful are these programs? What about them most appeals to their membership? As a part of the presentation, ask the representative how the membership defines itself in terms of age.

- Arrange for a tour of a senior center in your area. Try to arrange a roundtable discussion with some of the senior citizens and students to openly discuss their concerns and interests.

**Suggested Films**

*History of Prostitution: Sex in the City.* A&E Home Video. 2009, 50 min. (DVD).

  This video is a sociohistoric account of prostitution in the United States.


  Deborah Tannen discusses communication between the sexes.

*Social Roles and Relationships in Old Age.* Insight Media. 1993, 60 min. (Video).

  This film shows how family, friendship, leisure and work roles change as one ages.

*Tuesdays with Morrie.* Harpo Films. 2000, 89 min. (Video).
The story of an old man, professor of sociology, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying from ALS. He tells a former student, Mitch Albom, about dying, living and what’s important in life.

This film is designed to stimulate discussion on the place of television in perpetuating gender stereotypes.