

INTRODUCTION

KRISTIAN PARK FRAUSING, MICHAEL SMAERUP, KIRSTEN MAIBOM,
& KAREN PALLESGAARD MUNK

In 2015 we set out to explore the lives of older men living alone. Inspired by Robert L. Rubinstein’s “Singular Paths: Old men living alone” (1986), we wanted to take a new look at a group of men that had become known primarily for their poor health and stubborn resistance to the public health and social care services. Our ambition was to shed light on these men’s social situations, on the kind of challenges they experienced in their everyday lives, and on how they coped with these challenges – if they did.

Throughout, we encountered stereotypical understandings of these older men, including our own presumptions that they might have withdrawn from society and become resigned to a state of being devoid of agency. Most notable among the preconceptions we met was the curious experience that people always seemed to assume our study was about loneliness, though our project title emphasized a rather neutral description of living arrangements. Or so we thought. The fact that solitude seems to be unfathomable as anything but loneliness sharpened our attention to the possible ways in which the men in our study might reject the cultural imaginaries in which they were inscribed (see also Higgs & Gilleard, 2015; Mikkelsen, 2016).

The study resulted in six publications – some of which are yet to be released – about older men living alone. To establish an

overview of older men's health, we extracted data from three different sources in our article "Health and health-care utilisation in old age: The case of older men living alone" (Frausing et al., 2022). We tapped into Danish registries to see how much older men living alone use different kinds of health care services; we obtained data from a national survey to gain insight into older men's self-reported health; and we created our own survey to find out what health care workers saw in their encounters with older men living alone. In another sub-study, we ran a series of focus groups with health care workers (Frausing et al., 2020) and explored their function as "compensating microsystems" in the men's ecological environments.

The main part of our study, however, was the conversations with the men themselves. We interviewed 40 older men, all born between 1925 and 1956. They were chosen based on their fit with the statistically demarcated at-risk group: They all lived alone. Their income was confined to the state pension. Some of them had no education, others were craftsmen, but most of them had spent their working lives doing hard manual labour. Almost all of them suffered from various chronic medical conditions. Together, the men represented a group expected to be void of various kinds of capital, be it physical, educational, social, or material. They are, we believe, an understudied group in both masculinity studies and gerontology, where they seem to escape the plethora of notions about the good life in old age. Our research on the one hand showed that these were men dealing with a series of harsh circumstances, but on the other broke with pessimistic preconceptions in many ways. We discuss our findings in three chapters in this volume, on loneliness, everyday lives, and social inequalities, respectively. A final article on issues of masculinity is in the making.

BROADENING THE SCOPE ON MEN'S AGING

In late 2019, we decided to invite contributions to this anthology from scholars who deal with aspects of older men's lives – each in

very different ways – in their academic work. We wanted to broaden the perspective on aging men, taking a diverse approach to their unique situation. Our ambition is to draw attention to some of the experiences of older men, identifying how they differ from those of older women and within the group itself.

The view on aging put forward in these chapters is two-sided. On one hand, it is apparent that the book mainly concerns the “normal” or “usual” aging process of rather able-bodied older men who age – to varying degrees – into stages of gradually worsening disability. These perspectives are visible in, for instance, Maja Klausen’s interviews with users of email medical consultations, Kristian Park Frausing et al.’s interviews with older men living alone, and, maybe most strikingly, Ole Jensen’s closing essay on his own experiences as an aging man. But this view of the “typical” aging process also appears in chapters on central tendencies in old age, such as Lars Larsen et al.’s chapter on well-being or Helle Gerbild et al.’s chapter on sexuality.

On the other hand, heterogeneity among older persons is also highlighted throughout the book, for instance in Edward Thompson’s exploration of masculinities or in the chapters’ different subject groups, such as Søren Harnow Klausen et al.’s older men in care homes, Kristian Park Frausing et al.’s older men living alone, Anika Liversage’s immigrant older men, or Georgia Zara’s criminal older men. The latter three chapters can be said to emphasize the heterogeneity of older men’s lives from a more norm-challenging perspective.

Thus, contrary to much gerontological research for the past 30 years, the book as a whole, with few exceptions, deviates from the task of describing “successful aging” as theorized by John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn (1987), instead coming closer to dealing with aspects of older men’s “usual aging.” Likewise, though some chapters implicitly address the meaning of a good old age, it has not been the ambition of this anthology to critically examine notions of successful aging. But, at the same time, the men’s aging processes take place within a societal context where “successful”

or “active” aging are desirable goals; these cultural norms thus remain a backdrop against which the explorations are made. They show indirectly in the authors’ choice of perspective, or directly in the analyses as something with which the subjects wrestle.

The anthology is centred on what it is like to be an old man in the 21st century, following the societal and cultural changes of the second part of the 20th century, which are explicitly addressed by Karen Pallesgaard Munk et al.’s chapter on inequality. The central view is that there is a symbiotic relationship between person and environment. Aging processes are deeply influenced by the transactional processes that occur throughout an individual’s life, and the traces of shifting contextual frames throughout their lifespan will reveal themselves in studies of old age. The content of the book reflects both aging as a universal condition, in its many aspects, and the role of the current, primarily Danish, welfare society for the old man.

ENTERING THE FIELD OF MASCULINITIES

The book can also be seen in connection with a broader societal interest in gender equality. The most recent decade has seen an upsurge in studies of men’s marginalization, especially as regards health (see for example Madsen, 2014; White et al., 2011). This stretches into old age; aging men have, in our opinion, also been ignored in the history of gerontology. This might have to do with the cross-cultural finding that women have longer average life expectancies and increasingly outnumber men the older the age segment. In addition, women have historically been disadvantaged and have, consequently, been the focus of much gerontological research.

Along with increasing life expectancies in world populations, men are to a greater and greater extent joining the historically new life spheres of old and very old age. They also enter these spheres on historically new terms. The cultural idea of the patriarch has been challenged for decades, and recently even more so.

Greater numbers of men remain unmarried and childless, and thus must adapt to a life alone. They are joined by the increasing numbers of divorcees (for example, half of the men in our own study had gone through a divorce). Old age increasingly becomes a site for negotiations of men's statuses as men.

Thus, a thread that runs through parts of this anthology concerns masculinities. Though not every chapter touches upon it, it is a prevalent theme throughout. This field is still rather young, with masculinity studies gaining momentum in the 1980s. Until then, masculinity was largely studied as a personality trait along a masculinity–femininity spectrum, with an underlying concern for boys' development of proper masculinity (Pleck, 2017). The 1980s inspired theories of gender role strain and gender ideologies that transformed how we studied and understood masculinity. Now, the problem was not so much failure to live up to masculine expectations as it was the expectations themselves. This turn was supported by theoretical expansions into concepts of multiple and hierarchical masculinities (Connell, 2005). Research since then has paid increased attention to the downsides of holding certain masculine beliefs, both for men and for the people around them. For instance, health research problematizes the health behaviours associated with traditional masculine values (Courtenay, 2000).

At first, older men remained relatively invisible in this revolution of masculinity studies (Thompson, 1994). Studies of men and masculinities paid little attention to old age, and the matter of masculinity was absent in gerontology. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars called for more research into this group, and in 2004, *The Journal of Men's Studies* published a special issue on older men. In 2007, *The Journal of Aging Studies* focused their special issue on "Masculinity and Aging." Since then, numerous articles have explored the meanings and challenges of being an older man. Still, it remains a relatively new field of research. Some perspectives assume that aging presents a fundamental challenge to men because they drift to the margins of society and power and

fail to live up to the masculine norms of bodily strength and endurance. Others explore whether old age affords new (positive) ways of being a man.

In this anthology, masculinities are addressed in multiple places, most notably Edward H. Thompson, Jr.'s chapter on the topic, where new opportunities for men are explored. They also appear in Maja Klausen's analysis of men's use of email medical consultations, where she evokes the notion of "caring masculinities" as a new way of performing masculinity in old age. Søren Harnow Klausen and his co-authors touch upon a more traditional masculinity in their analysis of men's use of alcohol. They point to alcohol use as, among other things, a site for showing typically masculine behaviours, but they also highlight a lack of masculine spaces in care homes and tensions between masculinity beliefs and experienced vulnerability. These tensions are also addressed in Frausing et al.'s chapter on the meanings of loneliness to older men, as well as in their chapter on older men's everyday lives, where men negotiate their self-presentations in light of cultural norms of aging actively that in some ways resemble traditional masculine norms.

Other chapters do not address concepts of masculinity explicitly, instead operating with an understanding of men more closely resembling that of "the biological male." In these chapters, the point is not necessarily to explore "ways of being a man" but to identify what makes older men stand out in comparison to other groups by looking at sex and age differences. This view is grounded more in statistical data than in qualitative methodologies. This is not to say that these chapters cannot have norm-questioning implications. The chapters on, for instance, criminality and sexuality throw a different kind of light on men's behaviour and experiences in old age.

These differences across chapters highlight a key characteristic of this book: older men constitute the gravitational centre, around which different perspectives, analytical strategies, and scientific genres revolve. The authors were invited to contribute

their own perspectives on older men. Their methods or theoretical convictions were unimportant; the crucial factor was how their own research applied to this group of men. This means the result reflects a multitude of perspectives. Though we recognize that some scholars might miss deeper explorations of old age masculinities and more critical engagement with prevailing norms, we consider the scientific plurality of this collection stimulating for thinking about older men, and useful not least for practitioners in the health and social professions.

The authors all contribute in their own ways to the continuing enlightenment of what it means to be an older man in the 21st century. As the baby boomer generation ages, these meanings will likely change, just as recent cohorts have witnessed emancipatory equal rights movements and the breakdown of traditional gender roles. Negative stereotypes of old age and older men might be subverted from within, as new types of men age with new skill sets and other masculinity ideologies.

INTRODUCING THE CHAPTERS IN THE PRESENT VOLUME

The chapters in this volume can be grouped into three sections. The first section, “*Old men and old men*,” consists of two chapters that each emphasize part of the book title. Bernard Jeune considers what it means to be an *old* man. He examines longevity in periods when very old persons were presumed to be men, which is in stark contrast to the present-day reality in which just one in ten “supercentenarians” are men. Jeune investigates the cultural history of very old men from the tales of the very (very) old patriarchs of the Bible to the quests for age validation among the alleged supercentenarians of the 17th and 18th centuries and all the way up to Jiroemon Kimura, who, as the first man to do so, reached the age of 116 in 2013. Besides providing the reader with a glimpse into this remarkable branch of gerontology, the chapter thus concludes by offering men a hopeful crack in the narrative of the longevity gap.

Chapter two, on the other hand, sees Edward H. Thomp-