

Aging, ageism and the invisibility of older people in the media

An Interview with Laura Hurd Clarke

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PhD in Sociology from the University of British Columbia, Laura Hurd Clarke researches the experiences of men and women during the aging process. She is the author of Facing Age: Women Growing Older in an Anti-Aging Culture³ and articles from journals of social gerontology, the sociology of aging, feminist studies and other fields.

This interview was conducted in Vancouver as part of GRUSCCO (CNPq Research Group for Subjectivity, Communication and Consumption) activities, led by Prof. Dr. Gisela G. S. Castro on PPGCOM ESPM, São Paulo.

Invited to speak at the International Symposium of Communication, Consumption and Aging Modes, an event that comprises the schedule of COMUNICON, Dr. Clark will be in São Paulo in October 2016.

CMC. How did you come to the research topic of aging in an anti-age culture?

Clarke. During my childhood, my grandparents were a very important part of my life. When I was studying Sociology at university I became

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³ Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

interested in the subject of aging. The concept of ageism⁴ really touched me. When I finished my master's degree in Social Services, I worked with the elderly in a hospital for a few years. I could see firsthand the discrimination against older people. This experience motivated me to do a doctorate. I did qualitative research in a center for the elderly, where I investigated subjective experiences of the elderly in the fight against ageism and the loss of their social value. When I was writing the research, I found only two studies published on the subject. My supervisor and I realized then that this would be the topic of my doctoral research.

CMC. What was your experience of writing *Facing Age*?

Clarke. Writing the book was a wonderful challenge. I was an assistant professor and presented a paper at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America when I met Tony Calasanti, a pioneer in research of this area. Tony invited me to write for the Aging and Diversity collection. I hoped to make a significant contribution to the debate.

CMC. Has there been any change in how aging is seen in Canada today and in the recent past?

Clarke. One of the topics of my book is about how much the meaning attributed to wrinkles has changed over the years due to consumer culture and ageism. When I started my doctoral research, women did not speak of wrinkles like they do now. Today they tend to reproduce messages from consumer culture about the aged appearance of their face being something unwanted and unattractive. With the advent and increasing use of injectable fillers, fine lines began to have a bad connotation in product marketing messages. People internalize these messages and begin to see and interpret wrinkles and aging of their bodies in a different way.

Pressure is growing on men and women to sport a youthful appearance, framed in a successful aging narrative that was adopted by gerontologists, pharmaceutical companies and consumer culture on a global scale. To

4 Prejudice that generates discriminatory attitude against people based on age.

be successful, you must have a young and slim appearance. You cannot show any sign of changes through the passage of time. It is expected to be ageless.

Dependent on others, age is perceived as a bad thing – something unattractive. These cultural constructions are establishing themselves insidiously, leading to the avoidance of linkages among people and seeing aging as increasingly negative.

CMC. Comment on your current project, *Older Men, Ageism and the Body: Everyday Embodiment in Later Life*.

Clarke. I had studied the body image of women and the problems related to the ideal of the perfect body in the imperfect body. I realized that men had been left out, which led me to investigate the everyday experiences of aging men. I started analyzing the representations of older men in men's magazines. This study was published in the *Journal of Aging Studies*.⁵ I am currently analyzing the interviews I conducted with older men. Problems related to body image are growing among men along with eating disorders and the consumption of personal care products. The culture is changing. The pressure on men to take care of their appearance and seek the ideal body has increased. Patriarchy oppresses women more, but we need to change this system for all.

CMC. What are the main differences between men and women with regard to aging and ageism?

Clarke. Ageism affects women with greater force. They are more oppressed by structural economic issues, for example. In Canada, the poorest social layer is composed of single mothers, followed by older women. There are structural factors that affect women and result in ageism. Women live longer than men and they are defined by their appearance. Interestingly, in my recent interviews with older men, they also conclude that ageism is harder on women than themselves.

5 Hurd Clarke, L., Bennett, E. V., & Liu, C. (2014). Aging and Masculinity: Portrayals in Men's Magazines. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 31 (4), 26-33.

CMC. Comment on the invisibility and stereotypes of older people in the media?

Clarke. Older men continue to be under-represented in the media. Older women are also highly under-represented. However, it is interesting to see that men tend to be represented more positively. In North America, generally older adults have been represented in more positive ways, although they are still absent from media productions. They are invisible, but nevertheless more positively represented, especially older men. I do not think we should underestimate the power of invisibility. This is a big problem and I would like to change it.

About the authors

Maria Collier de Mendonça – PhD in Communication and Semiotics at PUC-SP (2014), with a foreign term at York University in Toronto, Canada (2013). She is a researcher in GRUSCCO (CNPq's Research Group in Subjectivity, Communication and Consumption), led by Prof. Dr. Gisela Castro at ESPM-SP, as well as a lecturer at BSP (Business School São Paulo) and at COGEAE-PUC-SP (Psychoanalytic Semiotics).

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