The tyranny of 'should':
Narrative exploration of the negotiated female identity

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List of abbreviations

BPD	Borderline Personality Disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAT	Cognitive Analytic Therapy
CAN	Critical Narrative Analysis
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EUPD	Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Acknowledgements

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Declaration

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Preface

Overview

This thesis offers an exploration of negotiated female identities, formed and performed at the intersection of social discourses that create imperatives of being and becoming. Women are subject to gendered stigma and normative disciplines, often internalised and held unconsciously, that can affect feelings of inadequacy and shame. The portfolio is divided into three sections that are woven together by the connective thread of the tyranny of 'should' that shapes and constrains female psyches. Narratives of 'not being good enough' and 'should' complicate female expressions of agency and choice. Complex, confused, and contradictory negotiations construct identities that appear to be in flux; female potentials are at times thwarted or dimmed.

Here, I begin by providing an orientation to the three sections that comprise this body of work and end with a reflection on the process of personal and professional development that has shaped the course of this study. This portfolio in part illustrates my core competencies as a counselling psychologist, and the three pieces of work represent my journey and chart a trajectory of growth with respect to psychological skills, shifting attitudes and assumptions, and increasing awareness and effectiveness.

Sections of the portfolio

Section A presents the research study that explored younger, pre-midlife women's narrative constructions of their ageing identities. The research aimed to address the question: how do women make sense of their embodied ageing experiences, how do these experiences shape their negotiated identities, and how do social discourses shape subjective selves? This was investigated through a Critical Narrative Analysis ('CNA') of subjective accounts of female ageing that were further interrogated using feminist theory.

Section B includes a journal article intended for publication within a peer-reviewed periodical. The publishable piece is a condensed version of the research study in section A. Salient aspects of the research findings are presented within this, with a specific emphasis on suggestions for practical applications of the results to clinical practice and future directions of research. The article is intended for submission to Feminism and Psychology, the stated aim of which is to foster feminist theory and practice in, and beyond, psychology.

The final section of the portfolio, Section C, presents a clinical case study. It is a report and evaluation of a piece of therapeutic work I undertook during my final year of training. This piece demonstrates my clinical work with a young woman with a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder ('BPD')[1] and whose story was infused with senses of shame, inadequacy, and worthlessness. Many of her narratives correspond with the gendered pressures identified in Section A. The clinical work highlights the importance of identity in the maintenance of mental health distress, and how socially-prescribed 'shoulds' and ideals of femininity augment and interact with pathologies. To some extent, it presents an extreme manifestation of disturbed female identities owing to social discourses and structures that oppress, discipline, and stigmatise. The case study provides an opportunity to critically explore the challenges of working with subjective female experiences situated in a system that further depletes them of secure senses of self, and the importance of creating a shared understanding in therapy.

Development of the portfolio

The three pieces of work in this portfolio are linked by the theme of narrated female identities that are subject to sociocultural norms and gendered discourses. In conceptualising the research project and the portfolio, the same broad themes were percolating in my mind: the female identity, relationality, constructed meanings, and structural influences. How are female identities limited by social norms and imperatives? How do women negotiate these pressures? How do they narratively construct senses of self and create meaning? How might women differ in their meaning construction? What are the relational factors that impact female identities? What role might counselling psychology play in helping women flourish?

In the early stages of the research study, I was inspired by women's accounts of ageing in the media and in literature, and by my witnessing of similar disquiet in female friends and in myself. I observed an unspeakable, avoidant, and shameful discomfort with ageing, despite its universal and biological truism. There appeared to be a strange juxtaposition, a silencing of the emotionality of ageing with the enterprising and zealously promoted activities of anti-ageing. When I spoke of ageing with friends, I noticed a tendency to distance, as though the acknowledgement of ageing made it real. Women appeared to feel irrationally responsible for their ageing; there was an illusion of control and, as ageing proceeds, a sense of failure. As a woman who identified with feminist ideas and strong

[1] Borderline personality disorder ('BPD') is also known as emotionally unstable personality disorder ('EUPD'), which is now preferred as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders ('DSM') (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

female role models, I was nonetheless subject to notions of 'normal' or 'ideal' female trajectories and presentation. I was curious about the extent to which ageing and the anticipation of future ageing seep into the female experience, and just how conditioned we are by the patriarchal system in which we reside.

The storied nature of women's accounts also struck me; I was keen to explore the use of narrative as a process of meaning making and identity work further. My initial search for relevant literature revealed an academic vacuum with respect to the ageing experiences of younger women, when signs of ageing are just beginning to materialise and when female bodies are perhaps most seen as objects of display. How women narrate this transitional process became a focus of academic interest. Concurrently, the question of narrative became increasingly relevant to my clinical work in secondary mental health care, where so many of the patients, all female, experienced unstable and fractured senses of self. How we use narratives to lineate human experience and create order and identity, however tentatively and fleetingly, which we then project into the world interested me greatly.

It thus seemed fitting to employ a narrative inquiry approach to my research endeavours, to explore how younger, pre-midlife women make sense of their ageing changes through the narratives they construct. Relatedly, I aimed to investigate the meaning making process inherent in this and how women situate or find themselves located in the world. Being subject to their influences myself, I was particularly interested in the wider social discourses implicit within these constructions. In deciphering and uncovering the rootedness of these broader sociocultural discourses in women's accounts of the ageing self, I hoped to provide suggestions for shaping counselling psychology practice in relation to this neglected area of study and cohort, and to champion social change. A narrative inquiry approach therefore enabled me to enrich my understanding of this complex and layered phenomenon. The adoption of a critical lens, by way of my engagement with CNA as my chosen methodology and feminist theory as my theoretical framework, further enabled me to critically interrogate the relevance of gendered structural influences on women's lived experiences.

My experience working with female clients with mental health disorders, some of whom with diagnosed personality disorders, also compounded my belief that whilst sociocultural factors are by no means the sole cause of pathologies, they play a vital role in entrenching unhelpful beliefs and attitudes surrounding self-worth, acceptability, appropriateness, and senses of success and failure. The challenges I faced working with female clients reflected this, as illustrated by the case study presented in this portfolio. Therefore, I also intend for this body of work to bring needed attention to the systems in which mental health issues, as experienced by women, are exacerbated and

maintained, and how female identities are so often at the mercy of normative rules of appearance and behaviour. For Maya, the subject of the clinical case study, her internalised beliefs around ideal femininity, sourced from her mother and society writ large, compounded her sense of worthlessness, inadequacy, and self-disavowal. Further, her BPD diagnosis could also be read as the socially sanctioned rejection and stigmatisation of female emotionality. The complex interface between individual values and socially constructed values thus became a central theme of the work.

This portfolio therefore links the experiences of the participants in the research study, who grapple with ageing within a society that fetishises youth, and the experience of distressed female identity recounted in the case study, one that is constructed by society as being 'other' and flawed. The thesis endeavours to prioritise and honour the subjective experience of the individual, whilst also allowing for the consideration of the impact of the wider world, to go beyond the "individualism impasse in counselling psychology" (Vermes, 2017, p.44). The three sections are inspired by a quest to give women voice, and to foreground the multiples ways in which female identities are shaped and limited by social norms, and how negotiated selves are often experienced as confused, incomplete and steeped in contradictions. The portfolio is also about my learning and growth as a counselling psychologist, which are evidenced within. In completing the project, I have developed a way of approaching clients that is holistic, relational, and sensitive to context and history. Through immersing myself in the experience of the different women across the body of work, I am better able to attend to the different voices and 'shoulds' that occupy women's minds. This helps me to be more effective in the therapy room, in being able to hear what is being said (and not said) by my clients, the canonical narratives they inadvertently reproduce, and to encourage a curiosity as to whom the narratives belong to.

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Section A: The Research Study

Ageing experiences of younger women: Narratives of embodied female identities

Abstract

Situated in a feminist perspective, this qualitative study explored the embodied ageing experiences of seven women between the ages of 30 and 34, as they encountered the first wave of physical change and identity shifts. Their accounts were analysed using Critical Narrative Analysis which resulted in three overarching themes: *fertility: urgency and ambivalence*; *cusp of awareness: noticing and forgetting;* and *surviving ageing: crisis and agency*. The themes were then destabilised by way of the feminist lens of interrogation and further synthesised. The discussion centred on how powerful social discourses intersect to construct imperatives that shape the female identity: *the 'appropriate' female life course*; *the 'good' woman' is "forever young"*; *the 'good' woman is 'ageless' and in control*; and *the dilemma of 'feminism versus femininity'*. The female ageing experience was found to be characterised by deep contradiction, incongruence, and senses of 'should' and shame. Identities are narratively negotiated, perpetually formed and performed anew. Implications for Counselling Psychology theory and practice were subsequently explored and suggestions were made for the direction of future research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study aims to understand the ageing experiences of younger, 'pre-midlife' women, and more specifically, the intersection of ageing and gender as located within socio-cultural contexts. The initial interest stemmed from personal curiosity, supported by the literature review highlighting the population as being under-researched, both within the field of psychology and 'age studies' in general. Although the phenomenon of female ageing has inspired much discourse and debate since the 1990s, having previously been eclipsed by ageist sentiments within academia and feminist movements (Segal, 2013; Woodward, 1999), research has tended to focus on the experience of older women, with notable clustering around 'midlife' and 'older age'. Perhaps it was assumed that the phenomenon of ageing has less psychological impact on the lived experiences of younger women. However, some literature, although limited and scarce, suggests otherwise, that the phenomenon may be more subtly expressed in younger women but is no less impactful. Studies support a hypothesis that body and ageing anxiety are potentially more damaging to the self-identity and self-esteem of younger women, and that they are more psychological vulnerable to gendered and ageist discourses, with acceptance emerging only in later life (Halliwell, 2013; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013; J. Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). This study aims to further explore this hypothesis, to address an important under-representation in the literature, and to critically understand how younger women negotiate and perform their ageing identities, combining a structural focus with personal meaning that centres the body. The research agenda not only aligns with the micro-macro focus of feminist approaches (Bengtson et al., 2005; Biggs, 2004), but also with counselling psychology ethos that knowledge is contingent, relational, subjective and contextual (Henton, 2016). It recognises multiplicity and embodiment and legitimises women's voice as a source of knowledge; its emancipatory ambition is congruent with the consciousness-raising aims of counselling psychology (Rafalin, 2010).

Research under the collective term of 'age studies' is characterised by its cross-disciplinary nature, with literature spread across psychology, feminist studies, sociology, and gerontology. Much of the literature originates from cultural, critical, and feminist gerontological sources, hence the dominance of these disciplines in the review. Although these fields appear to not be well-integrated with psychological literature, within which I struggled to find much meaningful material on ageing identities, this study endeavours to engage with the topic of ageing from a broad interdisciplinary perspective while maintaining a focus on psychological understandings and implications. The experiential findings could meaningfully contribute to ageing literature and inform counselling psychology research and practice, by enhancing our understanding of age-related psychological

changes and challenges, and the awareness and sensitivity of counselling psychologists when guiding younger women through transitions and identity work.

Overview

This chapter begins with a conceptual and theoretical review, where the definitions of and theoretical approaches to ageing and gender are critically analysed. The theoretical framework of this study, that of feminism, is used to interrogate essentialist views that dominate the topic. I then review the relevant literature, setting out the three layers of enquiry, cognisant of their intersecting and mutually constructing nature. They are: embodied experiences related to physical change; cultural narratives and structural forces that shape subjective experiences; and the meaning-making processes that women engage in as they negotiate and renegotiate their sense of self and identity. The inter-relationship between the theoretical and empirical sections is also acknowledged.

Part one: Constructions of female ageing

This section aims to define some key terms and constructs that are central to ageing research. These constructs are complex, elusive, and are at the centre of contention and epistemological and inter-disciplinary debate. Attempts to define and critically interrogate, as presented below, help to guide and ground research and provide clarity and continuity.

Situating age and ageing

Ageing is a socially constructed phenomenon, and how it is perceived and experienced is influenced by culture, societal expectations, and individuals' lived experiences (Teater & Chonody, 2019). The definition of age, multiple and contested, is informed by epistemology and theory. Chronological age, defined as the time passed since the birth of a person, a common variable in quantitative research, is widely criticised as being atheoretical, and a measure of time and not of age-related change (Schwall, 2012). It does not capture the multidimensionality of the ageing process and neglects the subjective experience. Alternative conceptions, such as 'functional', 'subjective' and 'contextual' ages reflect the notion that individuals age as biological, social, and psychological beings, and that ageing can be objective or self- or other-perceived (Mathur & Moschis, 2005; Moody, 1988).

'Functional' age or 'biological age' describes a person's physiological condition and deterioration, denoted by biomarkers, and follows a decremental model. It is criticised for being a unidimensional index of ageing, simplistic, pessimistic and overly medicalised (Schwall, 2012). 'Subjective' or 'inner'

age is a perception of age that resides in the individual, a person's sense of how old or young they are (Montepare & Lachman, 1989), which shapes identity, beliefs and actions. A meta-analysis showed that women felt overall more youthful (i.e., have lower subjective age) than men (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001), possibly because older age is more devalued for women, and holding on to more youthful identities optimises women's self-esteem (Barrett, 2005). 'Contextual' age concerns how social perception, which may be stigmatising, affects a person's sense of self (Schwall, 2012). This echoes Gullette's (2004) thesis that "we", and especially women, are "aged by culture", and by the social gaze. Age norms that are enshrined in culture carry social meaning about how a person has lived and should and will live. Age ordering enforces society's expectations onto individuals and construct a "mental map of the lifecycle" against which individuals are evaluated (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976).

Age categories

There is little consensus within the literature with respect to chronological or qualitative criteria attached to age categories. Cultural gerontologists increasingly see age divisions as elastic and boundaries between life stages becoming more blurred as "ageing has become a much more reflexive project" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p.25) and people employ strategies to reinvent themselves (Hockey & James, 2003). The idea of 'middle age' continues to lengthen, "a sign of the cultural force of age anxieties" and of a moral imperative to remain "forever young" (Segal, 2007). For postmodernists, extending the "self-articulating society" (Pollner, 2000) to an extreme, there is no limit to a person's 'subjective' age; identity is fluid and 'ageless', radically separated from the ageing body.

The flexibility of age categories, however, continues to be affected by the imprint of class, ethnicity, gender and economic options (Segal, 2007), and in 'later life' by corporeal frailty, as exemplified by the qualitative distinction between the 'third' and 'fourth' ages (Gilleard & Higgs, 2015). Although the latter are often approximated as ages 50-75 and 75+, "the body is key, for it is the onset of serious infirmity that marks the point of transition" (Twigg, 2004). Yet the demarcation between the 'third age' (Laslett, 1987), characterised by post-retirement affluence, freedom, and activity, and the 'fourth age', by illness and frailty, when old age is no longer subjective, has been widely criticised, seen as aspirational in nature and strongly associated with consumer culture (Katz, 2001) and individualistic neoliberal discourse (Asquith, 2009).

Empirically, while 'midlife', a more distinct time period between adulthood and old age, has been noted as existing somewhere between 35-55 (Banister, 1999; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010), 'younger adulthood', the age range at the heart of this study, is less defined. 'Younger adults' often refers to

university-aged students owing to their frequent participation in campus-based research (Hahn & Kinney, 2020), but an older cohort of 'pre-midlife' adults are not represented. This, again, illustrates a general under-representation of participants that occupy this age cohort within the literature. Despite attempts to find answers in the literature, it is not known why this may be the case.

The intersection of ageing and gender

Ageing and gender are widely accepted as social systems that intersect in dynamic ways, simultaneously shaping life situations (Arber et al., 2003). De Beauvoir (1996 [1970]) first identified the intersection of ageism and sexism and called attention to the construction of older women as 'the other', marginalised and discriminated against. Ageing women are said to experience a "double standard of ageing" (Sontag, 1972), involving "a gendered ageism that more severely and rapidly erode women's than men's social valuation as they age" (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016, p.764).

After decades of omission and invisibility, gerontological researchers have centred older women's experiences of ageism and sexism in recent years. They have so frequently been the subject of study that the discipline has been characterised as 'feminised' (Russell, 2007). This presumed compound impact of age on gender or "inter-locking oppressions" (Trethewey, 2001) has led to the emergence of the "double-jeopardy" approach to the analysis of being old and female (Gibson, 1996). When several marginalised positions, such as gender, age, ethnicity, class, and disability, are considered, it has been described as a "triple-" or "multiple jeopardy" (Ovrebo & Minkler, 1993, p.294).

This 'additive' approach to oppressions, however, has been criticised. As Calasanti and Slevin (2001) argue, the interplay between two marginalised positions is not necessarily a question of additional oppression; instead, the complex interplay between power axes can create qualitatively different experiences. The portrayal of ageing women as a "problematic object" foreground misery so readily that any advantages or assets or manifestations of agency are obscured (Krekula, 2007, p.159). The lens is reductionist and simplistic; it obscures the heterogeneity of ageing experiences and aspects of ageing that are a source of empowerment and strength (Gibson, 1996).

The notion of "intertwining systems" has been proposed instead (Krekula, 2007, p.163). Adopting principles of intersectionality (Calasanti, 2004), the 'double' impact of age and gender is not neglected, but "rather than examining [them] as distinctive hierarchies, intersectionality examines how they mutually construct one another" (Collins, 1998, p.62). Certainly, the literature supports the multiplicity of the female ageing experience, one that is complex, subjective, and much contested.

The interplay between ageing and gender can "either strengthen or weaken", and "supplement or complete" (Krekula, 2007, p.167).

The construction of the ageing body

The body figures as an important if not essential point of reference in enquiries of ageing and gender. "We are aged by culture" (Gullette, 2004) and the body, itself socially and culturally constituted, is central to the subjective experience of ageing (Twigg, 2004). The term embodiment captures this subjective experiencing, the complex and dynamic nature of bodies, seeing them as objects and subjects (Shilling, 2012), and enables us to problematise the relationship between body matters and identity (Tulle, 2015).

Since the 1980s, a somatic turn towards the body has emerged within cultural studies, strongly influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives (Gilleard & Higgs, 2015; Woodward, 1999). Feminist cultural critics remind us of the ways ageing bodies are oppressed by culture and subjected to modalities of regulation. Ageing is to be dreaded and concealed, and narratives of decline obscure all other possible interpretation of the body in later years (Gullette, 1997). Modern biomedical discourse and practices also deny aged bodies of any complex readings of virtue and wisdom (Cole, 1992), and turn the problems of ageing into sets of "universal dilemmas" (Katz, 2000, p.137), homogenising experience.

In the context of consumer culture, the body becomes a project to be managed, enhanced and controlled, a site of self-articulation, reflexivity and of consumption (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Pickard (2013) identifies neoliberalism and late capitalism as having hastened this ideological shift, and discourses of 'active' and 'successful ageing' place the responsibility of ageing in the hands of older people themselves. The modern body is subject to self-scrutiny, and media and advertising images fuel "a new perfectionism" (Twigg, 2004). The cosmetic industry is preoccupied with the denial of ageing, with seemingly unbounded possibilities, and signs of age are read as failure, infused with shame (Furman, 1999). The anti-ageing movement aims to regulate the ageing body, but the path of ageing "naturally" is also problematic; it denies women their self-fashioning choice and assumes a "natural" body that cannot exist (Twigg, 2004).

Here an epistemological reading of embodied ageing seems needed. Radical poststructuralists see the body as discursively produced, and any basis in nature or physiology is denied (Twigg, 2004). For many theorists, this is limiting, for it leaves the materiality and lived experience of ageing bodies undocumented (Tulle, 2015). Ageing forces us to engage with physiology; biological ageing and death

are real and cannot be arrested. Feminist critics are equally wary of the revival of Cartesian dualism. The radical separation between the ageing body and the 'ageless' self neglects an understanding of their mutually constructing relationship (Kontos, 1999). 'Agelessness' assumes endless 'readings' of the body and radical fluidity of identity; it is ultimately a false ideal (Andrews, 1999). Structural factors constrain social possibilities; "to show that something is culturally constructed is not the same as saying it is personally optional" (Twigg, 2004, p.63).

It is therefore important to place the phenomenon of embodiment at the core of the analysis and temper the excess of postmodern epistemology (Williams & Bendelow, 1998). A phenomenological reading of the body enables us to explore how people experience the materiality of their bodies, mediated by external factors, not as pre-social or 'natural' (Tulle, 2015), but from a 'contextual constructionist' perspective (Madill et al., 2000) which is thought to capture a material-discursive 'middle-ground'. It acknowledges the materiality of the ageing body, social forces and discourses that act upon the body, embodied lived experiences, which are then narrated or internalised, constructing identity. Here the body and mind are not ageing in radical separation, but in contested negotiation, integrated. The "agentic subject" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p.184) is subject to social construction but retains a 'realness' in experience that opens up the possibility of individual reflexive agency. The embodied woman can conform, resist, deny, accept and grief; body practices can be a mark of liberation, and of internalised oppression. Biological and contextual determinism intersect with personal agency (Paulson & Willig, 2008).

Part two: Theoretical understandings of ageing and gender

Addressing theories of ageing is a complicated task given its all-encompassing nature. Here, I attempt to provide brief outlines of three broad theoretical approaches to ageing: psychological, psychosocial, and critical, with the latter inclusive of feminist perspectives. These approaches are the most commonly occurring theoretical models that appear in the literature and were collated and organised according to origin of thought and disciplinary leanings. A comprehensive survey, though not exhaustive, is therefore pertinent, to theoretically ground empirical literature and illustrate how ageing is generally understood and theorised about.

Traditional psychological theories of ageing

Psychological theories of ageing typically encompass developmental psychology and psychodynamic perspectives of individual development across the life span, and have been described as "restricted, negative, and scarce" (Gergen, 1990, p. 471). Such perspectives are criticised for their simplistic

construction or complete omission of women's experience of ageing, and the prevailing focus of concern remains the woman as a biological creature, and especially as a mother.

It was surprising to find a scarcity of psychological theory that concern the phenomenon of ageing, and those that exist, presented here, are relatively dated, reductionist, and fail to critically engage with multiple ageing female identities. Perhaps the field of psychology left the theorising of ageing to gerontology, feminism, and cultural and age studies, with their burgeoning success and dominance in research? During my literature search, empirical studies of a psychological nature have tended to focus on pathologies attached to body and ageing anxieties (Mahoney, 2018; Pruis & Janowsky, 2010; Quittkat et al., 2019; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010), ageist attitudes in society (Allan et al., 2014; Bodner et al., 2015; Prior & Sargent-Cox, 2014), cognitive decline and dementia (Hudon et al., 2020; Talamonti et al., 2021), and mental health interventions for older adults (Blanchet et al., 2018; Dening & Barapatre, 2004; Moye, 2019). They span the fields of social psychology, clinical gerontology, and neuropathology, and typically employ quantitative methods. Those that concern the lived experience of women may draw from feminist theory, stigma theory, and terror management theory, as opposed to a comprehensive psychological model of ageing (Chrisler, 2011; Ussher et al., 2015), and a rare study of female midlife personality development relied still on the 'generativity' theory of Erikson (Stewart et al., 2001). With these findings in mind, I present the traditional psychological theories of ageing, however sparse and inadequate, below.

Earlier theories were almost exclusively Freudian and centred on the playing out of psychosexual themes; to achieve mature development; a woman's sense of identity was assumed to derive from her support functions within the family (Gergen, 1990). Built on Jungian premises, the model of 'midlife crisis' developed by psychoanalysis Elliott Jaques (1965), in which this 'seminal turning point' held the promise of deeper self-awareness and expressiveness, is entirely predicated on the experience of men, and Jaques reportedly believed that for women, midlife was obscured by the proximity of menopause (Sherman, 1987).

Erikson's (1959) eight stages of psycho-social development also assume a white, male, Western subject (Gilligan, 1982). Each phase of development is defined by engagement with a new task, resolved through a dynamic interaction between inner ego and outer social demands. For Erikson, identity formation continues through adulthood, and the task of midlife is to reconcile the crisis between generativity, the challenge for the adult to project his or her being into future generations, and stagnation or self-absorption. In this sense, Erikson views "a woman's capacity to reproduce and mother as the single most important determinant of her adult identity" (Gergen, 1990). Men, by contrast, can achieve generativity through intellectual, vocational, and other public pursuits. In old

age, typically aged 65-70, Erikson posits a final life assessment; those satisfised with a life well-lived experience integrity, while others who experience lack or loss of integrity will feel regret and despair. The final phase of life, therefore, is conceived as one of passive reflection and mourning, with little said about re-engagement with generative activities, to create identity and purpose. Women were believed to be particularly vulnerable to despair that emanated from the design of their body, and their experience of separation from loved ones, loss, widowhood, childlessness, and divorce, special threats not believed to affect men (Erikson, 1963, 1968)[2].

Perhaps most strikingly, theoretical accounts of gendered development among feminist psychologists remained faithful to the centrality of a woman's role as mothering agent (e.g., (Chodorow, 1976, 1978, 1989; Deutsch, 1944, 1945; Dinnerstein, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Keller, 1985). Gilligan's theory of female psychological development emphasised 'crisis and transition', positing that identity development for women is stifled during adolescence when they first encounter patriarchy and feminine norms (Gilligan, 1982). Women therefore lose their authentic voice, and crisis has the "potential to break a cycle of repetition" and promote growth (Gilligan, 1982, p.109). By centring connection and relationality, however, Gilligan sees women's sense of self and effectiveness in the world achieved through successful caretaking relationships, thereby undermining their capacity to develop 'male' characteristics such as individuality and autonomy (Greene, 2003).

Therefore, theoretical terrain specific to women's psychological development can be described as "impoverished", characterised by an almost exclusively biological and normative reading of development, which continues to order women's lives according to chronological age and position in the "marital-reproductive cycle", and by a linear narrative form that is progressive during childhood and adolescence, constant through adulthood and regressive in middle to old age (Gergen, 1999, p.475-6). These one-dimensional accounts of women's lifespan development essentially replicate a narrative of decline, and regulate women's identity to fulfil their care-taking and reproductive duties (Gergen, 1990).

Traditional psychosocial theories of ageing

Historically, dominant theories of ageing not only neglected gender and the experience of older women, but also focused on ageing as decline. The disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961)

[2] By contrast, although inspired by Erikson Levinson's (1978) model, which divides the life course into three eras, each 20 years long, within which individuals pass through periods of stability and evaluation or transition, makes no account of gender differences; gender is conceived as a stable fixed singular identity that is framed within dominant discourses of heteronormativity (Burman, 2016).

conceptualised old age as a period of withdrawal and disengagement from public life, and activity theory (Havighurst, 1961) suggested that older adults should adjust, redefine, and substitute their roles to maintain a sense of self. Other theories, such as the 'decline' model or the 'adversary' model (Bytheway, 1995), positioned ageing as a purely biological fact, a time of dependency and loss, a depiction that continues to persist. The finality of 'dependent' invokes a life of being in need, denied of the possibility of reciprocity, of being a person of value; and the tendency for old age and illness to be studied in parallel has only strengthened this association (Cruikshank, 2003). With respect to older women, the lack of theoretical interest and resources has been said to mirror their powerlessness in society (Ginn & Arber, 1998), which resulted in older women being constructed within research as "objects in need of care" (Krekula, 2007, p.159).

From the 1990s, positive theories of ageing that focused on activity and health began emerging. 'Productive' (Bass et al., 1993), 'healthy' (White House Conference on Ageing, 2015), and 'active' (World Health Organisation, 2002) ageing theories and policy frameworks are examples of this. They aim to maximise older adults' physical, social, and mental well-being to promote independence and reduce reliance on others, and especially on social services, and were developed as a counter response to decline models of ageing. During this time, ageing theories also began to address issues of gender but tended to 'add' older women to existing research, using older men as the 'norm' from which to make comparisons (Calasanti, 2009; Krekula, 2007).

Critical approaches to ageing developed out of a recognition of the inadequacies of existing theories in understanding the experiences of ageing adults. They include those that prioritise structure in the analysis of ageing, those that centre agency and, in the case of feminist approaches, those that consider both.

Critical approaches to ageing

The political economy approach

The political economy approach developed from the 'structured dependency' theory of the 1980s (Townsend, 1981). It challenges ageing as being biologically or psychologically determined and so locates older age structurally and focuses on how retirement and the welfare state construct ageing as a time of dependency (Bernard et al., 2005), and how the loss of income and social status impact negatively on self-identity (Venn et al., 2011). Although initially focused on men's experience, this was challenged for neglecting women and their disadvantaged positions in relation to pensions, health, and access to care (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Krekula, 2007). Women had different experiences

compared to men regarding paid employment, career breaks owing to caring responsibilities, their undertaking of unpaid 'caring'/'family' work, and of part-time employment (Estes, 1991). These differentials saw women in later life facing structural challenges in terms of access to opportunities and material resources (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Bury, 1995).

This approach was criticised for its central and exclusive attention to structural factors, neglecting individual agency. With the focus on disadvantages and inequalities, it also constructs older women as a homogenous group, impoverished, passive, and victims of the double jeopardy of ageism and sexism (Krekula, 2007). Moreover, it neglects power relations between ageing men and women, unable to shift its emphasis from class to include other social locations of inequality within its analysis (Ginn & Arber, 1998; Maynard et al., 2008).

'Successful ageing' and the 'third age'

These two interrelated concepts underpin later approaches to ageing, which sought to create a more positive and less deterministic view of old age, largely as an antithesis to the political economy of ageing (Maynard et al., 2008). They rest on the notion of a post-modern identity and the 'reflexive project' of later life, and so foreground self-determination and agency. 'Successful ageing' is defined as having been achieved when individuals exhibit low probability of illness and disability, high mental and physical functional capacity, and high social activity and engagement in relationships (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). The 'third age', a separate but closely related theory of ageing, denotes "a new life-course stage of extended and self-fulling leisure and community participation following retirement", which transforms later life (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2011, p.2), and is individually achieved regardless of social divisions (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991). The aspiration towards 'agelessness' is facilitated by the biomedicalisation of ageing, the anti-ageing industry, and the encouragement of older people to resist stereotypes of old age by building a youthful identity through consumption (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000).

Many argue that this theory takes the notion of 'reflexive project' too far whereby older adults are being held to unrealistic standards in order to be 'successful' (Teater & Chonody, 2019). Its focus on remaining able-bodied and disease-free also fails to acknowledge the natural changes that inevitably occur with ageing, and reinforces stigma (Teater & Chonody, 2019). It therefore excludes older people living with illnesses and/or disabilities, which disproportionately affect older women's lives (Arber, 2004). Critical gerontologists also draw our attention to its problematic entanglement with neoliberalism (Minkler & Holstein, 2008), Western norms (Liang & Luo, 2012), ableism (Gibbons, 2016), and heteronormativity (B. L. Marshall, 2018), and emphasise the binary nature of the theory,

which depends on the existence of 'unsuccessful' agers, "those who are too queer, too disabled, too demented or too poor to reap its rewards" (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017, p.8). Finally, 'successful ageing', with its focus on individual responsibility, neglects to address imbalances in society and social policy that impact older people. Not only is 'successful ageing' more easily achieved with economic resources, the lifestyle changes that are needed rely on lifelong habits that are not equally accessible by all (Asquith, 2009).

The feminist gerontological approach to ageing

Feminist gerontology is grounded in feminist theory and critical gerontology. It aims to account for both the micro and macro aspects of society in its theorising of ageing (Bengtson et al., 1997), thereby synthesising the structural and agency-oriented modes of analysis. It focuses on power relations and intersecting oppressions across the life course and, as a discipline, is diverse and plural.

Feminist movements are often described in terms of first, second, and third waves, to delineate distinctive concerns, epistemologies, and theorisation of gender. This is a helpful characterisation but may be an oversimplification that obscures subtler evolution (Hemmings, 2005). Historically, feminists were slow to focus on age as a social location of power, partly due to the "ageism [that was] entrenched within feminism itself" (Woodward, 1999). However, as a generation of long-time feminists reached retirement age, several turned their attention to ageing (Heilbrun, 1997; Segal, 2013), and demonstrated the necessity and fruitfulness of thinking critically about both age and gender (Gullette, 2004; Holstein, 2015; Woodward, 1999). This accounted for the rise of "age studies" in the 1990s (Segal, 2013). Equally, growing numbers of gerontologists began using feminist frameworks to analyse old age, in response to the relative neglect of ageing women in both gerontology and feminism (Hooyman et al., 2002). Since then, there has been a tradition of gerontological studies that centre the experience of ageing women, as well as a growth in feminist theoretical sophistication and scope (Calasanti, 2004).

What is the feminist framework?

It is important to discern what is feminist research, which may begin but does not end with women (Hooyman et al., 2002). The feminist framework is not the same as research that studies women or those that include gender as a factor of analysis (Calasanti, 2004); rather, it focuses on "power differentials across groups, the relational nature of age and dependency, the centrality of diversity, and the need for social justice" (Hooyman et al., 2002, p.4). Feminist research examines both women's *and* men's privilege, oppression, diversity, and abilities, along with their shared interests

and difficulties in meeting life's challenges (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986). It helps us understand the advantages and disadvantages that follow gender throughout the life course, and the gendered nature of collective power and oppression, which cannot be separated from other axes of oppression, by race, class, and age (Hooyman et al., 2002). Feminists conceptualise gender as being socially constructed through the structural, relational, and symbolic uses of power between men and women, acknowledge the problems that surround the gendered division of labour, advocate social justice through changes in existing structures and institutions, and seek to document women's history of resistance as a source of strength and inspiration (Hooyman et al., 2002). Feminist gerontologists, therefore, point to the value in analysing ageing from women's perspectives, not just because they are women, but because this intersecting analysis reveals the power relations that shape the ageing experience.

What is the feminist perspective of ageing and gender?

The concerns of feminist research on ageing and gender have been rich and complex. Although the fundamental premise has been discussed under 'the constructions of female ageing', a summary of the feminist lens emphasises women's ageing bodies as being vulnerable to the internalised male gaze, the cosmetic industry, discourses of anti-ageing, health, and 'successful ageing', and structural and institutional barriers that confine and control women's lives, denying them access and power, both in the public and private spheres. It highlights the gendered nature of societal ageism that impacts women throughout the life course and forces us to account for the complexities that surround ageing. Feminist gerontology, therefore, provides a theoretical base from which to critique society's response to ageing women, document their multiple voices, and conceptualise a social agenda where diversity is valued (Hooyman et al., 2002). Examples of feminist scholarship that attempt to advance this objective include work on feminist political economy (Estes, 2000, 2004, 2005), the gendered aspect of citizenship (McDaniel, 2004), negotiated identities (Biggs, 2004), theories of the body and clothes (Twigg, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2013), how gender, age, and class influence self-esteem (McMullin & Cairney, 2004), ageing and identity politics (Cruikshank, 2008), narrative gerontology (Randall, 2008), and how gender intersects with marital status for both men and women (Arber, 2004). There are many more strands of feminist gerontology that are not mentioned, and the discipline continues to usher in new directions, refining methodology, applying feminist perspectives to a range of issues, not only challenging existing concepts but revising entire areas of research.

Part three: Review of relevant literature

As mentioned above, the topic of ageing spans several disciplines, and an enormous amount of literature refers to the subject and related sub-topics and issues, all of which are intricately interconnected and mutually affecting. In the following review, ageing is explored from three overlapping perspectives: research that centres the ageing body, that which delineates normative (ageist) structures, and that which explores the process of identity-making. This tripartite, layered articulation was thought to best reflect and organise the literature on ageing and offers clarity and thematic coherence.

The literature search was iterative and complex. I conducted searches on numerous psychological and academic databases, including PsycArticles, PsycInfo, APA PsycNet, Pubmed, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar. Search terms used included 'ageing' in various combinations with the following terms: 'women', 'female', 'gender', 'identity', 'qualitative', 'narrative', 'experience', 'feminist/feminism'. After an initial review of the search outcomes, and having identified several sub-themes, I then narrowed my search parameters to include these terms, also in combination with 'ageing': 'anxiety', 'body image', 'discourse', 'ageism', 'ageing gracefully', 'midlife', 'anti-ageing', and 'embodiment'. With further understanding of the research landscape, and when I reviewed literature for each of the key sections, I focused my searches on specific theories or approaches, e.g., 'successful ageing', 'ageing and dress', 'shame', 'body/beauty works', age-appropriate', 'third-age', 'media' etc. I also reviewed citations and suggested articles as needed. When compiling literature that focused on women and/or are from a feminist perspective, I systematically combed through individual journals, covering the past 10 years; they include, Body Image, Journal of Woman and Ageing, Psychology of Women Quarterly, The International Journal of Aging and Human Development, Feminism & Psychology, and Age Culture Humanities. Each iteration of searches helped to collate and condense the literature into meaning themes, until I arrived at the tripartite structure. I used Zotero to organise the literature, which amassed to 450 items (see Appendix P for categorisation). Research reviewed was predominantly from the last 10-15 years, although research up to 80 years old was reviewed if relevant to the present study.

The embodiment perspective: coping with changing bodies

This section concerns women's ambivalent and conflicted relationship with their ageing bodies, namely the body's appearance, functionality, and behaviours around beauty work and health practices. It explores how bodies are understood, experienced, appraised, managed, through the prism of culture and identity; and the coping strategies that women develop to make physiological

ageing tolerable, if not accepted. A woman's body is complex and multifaceted but current societal standards emphasise the body's appearance. This normative preoccupation is reflected in research on women's perceptions of their changing and ageing body.

The body appraised: body image and dissatisfaction

Body image is a multidimensional construct that reflects a person's body-related perceptions, cognitions, emotions, and behaviour (Bennett et al., 2017). In past decades, the majority of body image research has focused on adolescent women; only in recent years have there been more studies exploring age effects on body perception. Body image concerns life satisfaction, appearance management, health behaviours, and social habits (Cash, 2011; Tiggemann, 2011). Age effects on body image also produce outcomes related to body dissatisfaction, dieting behaviour, and eating disorder symptoms (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Tiggemann, 2004).

Throughout the life span, most women experience significant changes in their body size, weight, and shape (Grogan, 2016; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Hormone changes, childbirth, and menopause can lead to weight gain and changes in body mass distribution; grey hair amasses, and skin wrinkles and loses elasticity (Carrard et al., 2021). Accordingly, women's perceptions of their body may also change. As noted earlier, bodies are in part culturally constituted; women are subject to the cultural representation of ideal feminine bodies in the media (Clarke, 2011). They receive and internalise ageist cultural messages and are compelled to preserve youthful and healthy appearances (Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 2008). And so as women age and deviate from the beauty ideal, their self-perception is negatively impacted (Grogan, 2008; Clarke, 2011). Studies indicate that the body as an object of display is important to women throughout their lives (Grogan, 2016), and that body dissatisfaction in women, measured as the discrepancy between current and ideal figure ratings, is remarkably stable across the life span, suggesting it to be truly "normative" (Carrard et al., 2021; Grogan, 2016).

Feminist perspectives conceptualise enduring body dissatisfaction as "self-objectification", whereby individuals assume an observer's view of the body and place undue emphasis on appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women who predicate value or self-worth on appearance overwhelmingly associate ageing with a loss of youthfulness, desirability, and control (Clarke, 2011). This may lead to negative emotional consequences including anxiety, shame, hyper-surveillance, and habitual monitoring of the body, and poor self-image has been identified as a contributing factor towards mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Roberts & Waters, 2004).

Does this change with age? Would it make sense to expect the prizing of appearance-related attributes to diminish with age as women become more protected from the 'male gaze', and so that their body returns to their own? Empirical studies appear to support this premise. McKinley (1999) found that mothers of university students displayed lower "objectified body consciousness" (lower body surveillance and body shame) than their daughters, and Tiggemann & Lynch (2001) found self-objectification, habitual body monitoring, and appearance anxiety to decrease with age across a 20–85-year age span. The relationship between body dissatisfaction and global self-esteem and self-concept also weakens with age (J. Webster & Tiggemann, 2003), suggesting that despite body dissatisfaction being stable across the life span, its impact on identity changes. Conversely, however, women express difficulty adjusting to their ageing body and unfamiliar invisibility (Clarke & Griffin, 2008), and recent studies have confirmed high levels of body concerns among older women, consistent with an enduring narrative of decline (Clarke et al., 2007; Jankowski et al., 2016). The landscape, therefore, is unclear.

Towards acceptance in older age

To understand this better, it is helpful to distinguish between body dissatisfaction and the *importance* of appearance, which has been found to decrease with age (Tiggemann, 2004). This is particular true for older women as they shift their concerns from appearance to functionality (Clarke, 2000; Jankowski et al., 2016). As women's bodies deteriorate with age, they remain dissatisfied, but it matters less to them. This possible reduction in importance may explain how women cope with body changes, instilling a shift of perspective (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Many older women report at least some degree of body dissatisfaction with their weight or a specific feature (Bailey et al., 2016; Liechty, 2012), but with age they modify the amount of time, attention, and resources dedicated to their bodily appearance (Gosselink et al., 2008). Higher body appreciation was demonstrated in older (rather than younger) women (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013), which was found to be protective against the negative effects of media exposure to thin body ideals (Halliwell, 2013).

It is important to note, however, that importance of appearance is found to be more stable when studies concern women who are aged 65 or below, suggesting that the shift to prizing functionality over aesthetics happens in later life (McLean et al., 2010; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). Indeed, a qualitative study of women aged 61 to 92 found that whilst they described their ageing body in negative terms, denying that they may be seen as desirable, they also deemed good health and independence as being more important than attractiveness (Clarke, 2000). By engaging in cognitive strategies (reappraisal and the lowering of expectations), older women are better able to accept their

ageing bodies (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). A "dual existence of contentment and desire for physical change" characterises later life (Liechty, 2012, p.70). Older women are concurrently appreciative, accepting, *and* critical of their changing functionality and appearance, and qualitative accounts provide a rich forum for women to share diverse body image experiences (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010).

Gender difference

When compared with men, studies appear to support a "double standard of ageing" but not necessarily 'additive' oppressions. That is, gender differences exist in men and women's experience of ageing, but the nature of difference and how difference changes across the life span, is unclear. It can be said that older age protects against gender difference, especially those that are negative, suggesting that the interaction of gender and ageing is qualitatively complex. Studies in this area remain scarce; those that compare men and women with respect to body image and related factors do not typically account for the impact of age (Quittkat et al., 2019). Studies showed that women consistently reported greater body dissatisfaction than men throughout the life span (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998; Mellor et al., 2010), and placed more importance on their appearance than did men, and that this remained stable across the different age groups for women but varied in men (Öberg & Tornstam, 1999; Quittkat et al., 2019). Conversely, weight dissatisfaction decreased in women despite analogous increased in weight (Keel et al., 2007), and body appreciation improved and was higher in women across all ages than in men (Quittkat et al., 2019), suggesting greater acceptance of the body for older women than for older men. Halliwell & Dittmar's (2003) thematic analysis of men and women's (aged 22-62) attitudes towards the ageing body revealed more complexities and distinctive gender differences. Men conceptualise the body as a holistic entity and focus on functionality, whereas women report more site-specific body focus, with greater negativity; women view ageing more negatively in terms of its impact on appearance, whereas men perceive the impact on appearance as neutral or even positive. Taken together, these findings suggest that men and women's body image are dissimilar and vary across different ages, but that specific trends are difficult to conclude. The "double standard of age" is therefore likely but not always true, and other social and individual factors, including a person's location in other systems of inequality (race, social class, disability, and sexual orientation) remain important.

The body as a site of struggle: body and beauty practices

The body is recognised as a site of struggle, through which women learn and attempt, within the current socio-cultural context, to emulate normative ideals of femininity (Carter, 2016). It is

increasingly seen as a "central paradigm" for the self (Biggs, 1999, p.5), and "assumes a new significance as a focus of personal identity and control" in the modern consumerist society (Twigg, 2000, p.39). How the body is constituted by culture and discourse, subject to normative order, and mediated by materiality and reflexive individual agency has been discussed in the theoretical review. This section concerns the matrix of material and cultural practices underpinning an 'ageless' beauty system that induce women to discipline their bodies through health and aesthetic practices. It acknowledges a multiple reading of these practices, to reflect the tension and complexity at play in this negotiation.

As women age and deviate from the youthful ideals of normative beauty, they increase their effort to counteract the effects of ageing (Bailey et al., 2016; Clarke & Griffin, 2007a). They engage in body practices to minimise or prevent signs of ageing, to maintain youthful appearance, and boost self-esteem (Clarke & Bundon, 2009; Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Winterich, 2007). Hair dye, make-up, cosmetic and surgical interventions are routinely practiced, and women report restrictive eating, dieting and exercise as a response to age-related weight gain, and to maintain health, ability, and appearance as they age (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Rudman, 2015; Slevin, 2010). These practices are more common among women who place a high value on appearance (Covan, 2005; Liechty, 2012). Ageing anxiety (Muise & Desmarais, 2010; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010), self-objectification (Calogero et al., 2010), age-related discrimination in the workplace (Clarke & Griffin, 2008) are all predictors of a willingness to engage in cosmetic practices. Women for whom self-worth is tied to appearance spend more time and money complying with ageist standards (Winterich, 2007), and the financial cost of body work places women from a high socioeconomic status at an advantage (Dumas et al., 2005). Those who have accepted their ageing body and appearance instead 'retire' from beauty work in old age, opting to grow old "gracefully" (Bailey et al., 2016; Dumas et al., 2005).

Why?

Women engage in body practices for multiple reasons, some known and narrated, some they are less conscious of or are in denial of. A common factor affecting these behavioural choices is the young, thin, feminine beauty ideal (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010). The ageing body is consequently negatively constructed, as an image to be distanced from (Rudman, 2015). Women are thus torn: they may wish to expand this unrealistic ideal to include ageing bodies (Clarke & Griffin, 2007a), but also dread the negative experiences of looking old (Slevin, 2010). Not adhering to these standards means being perceived as unattractive, unhealthy, or invisible (Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Slevin, 2010). Engagement in beauty interventions, therefore, is a woman's way of maintaining social value (Dumas et al., 2005).

The illusion and narrative of control is another factor. Rather than accepting ageing, women are encouraged to control their body; "to let oneself go" suggests not only ugliness and sloth but a relinquishing of authority, a betrayal of the self (Brooks, 2017). In older age, the notion of control shifts to moral obligation. Older women feel that they are responsible for their own health, to maintain independence and minimise the need to rely on others, adhering to gender norms of selflessness (Clarke & Bennett, 2013). Body practices, including but not limited to surgical interventions, are a means of reconfiguring the self (Alsop & Lennon, 2018). Bodies are carefully managed to be read as appropriate for social contact; dress is one mechanism, but increasingly aesthetic surgery is being used to enhance people's participation in the public sphere (Holliday & Taylor, 2006). In brief, "repair the body or face and the self will be repaired" (Featherstone, 2010, p.205). As well as enhancing the self, women also engage in beauty works to facilitate congruity between their appearance and their sense of felt identity and age, usually more youthful (Clarke & Griffin, 2007b).

There is also a relational component to these choices. Several women cited the expectations of their husbands as reasons for engaging with beauty work (Clarke, 2000; Liechty & Yarnal, 2010), while some noted that their aesthetic practices were influenced by body image issues and beauty routines modelled by their mothers (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Griffin, 2007a); and the desire to attract or retain a romantic partner accounted for a life-long investment in appearance in older women (Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

The motivation to engage in aesthetic practices, however, is not without tension. Women identify ambivalence between having a "natural" body and an unnatural body (Gosselink et al., 2008). The epistemological debate on the extent to which a pre-social, "natural" body can exist has been noted earlier; but ageing naturally is generally defined by women as accompanied by a lack of cosmetic treatments (Clarke & Griffin, 2007b). Women's desire to accept their ageing appearance and to look "natural" is in discordance with the cultural context of ageing that emphasises concealment (Carter, 2016; Chrisler, 2011). They acknowledge that these interventions produce an "unnatural" body but experience them as a natural part of ageing in today's society (Slevin, 2010). This tension can lead to judgement, either inwardly or outwardly. In two quantitative studies, women reported that they both used anti-ageing products and criticised media messages about them (Muise & Desmarais, 2010), and women who use concealment products were judged as conceited, vain, foolish, and pathetic (Harris, 1994). Similar harsh judgements are reflected in the derogatory terms used to describe the effects of ageing on the body (e.g., crow's feet, bat wings, and turkey wattles; Clarke et al., 2009). Stigma is therefore attached to both fighting *and* not fighting ageing; women's attempt to

'age gracefully' demands from them an impossible reconciliation of presenting both a body both 'natural' *and* unaged.

Appearance as health

Increasingly, aesthetic practices are reconfigured as health practices; the medicalisation of ageing and gendered health promotion have reframed youthfulness and anti-ageing as being related to good health. Health norms have become increasingly dominant over the past 30 years, imposing responsibility for health onto the individual, and intensifying women's obligation to discipline their bodies. Feminist theorists point out that the legitimacy of needing to "ward off ageing" and be healthy "masks social dynamics of racism, classism, sexism, fat phobia and heterosexism" (Carter, 2016, p.201). Appearance is assumed to be indicative of health (Slevin, 2010), and ageist discourses encourage women to perceive ageing as an unhealthy state that should be minimised (Rudman, 2015). Several studies illustrate women's beliefs that their efforts to control their health are aided by their efforts to maintain youthful appearance (Carter, 2016; Slevin, 2010). They express a tension between health and appearance, which are also intertwined; vanity is perceived as less important than health but not unimportant (Clarke, 2002), and narrating concerns of appearance as health legitimises the former. However, research show that efforts to maintain youthful appearance may actually produce poor health behaviours such as habitual body monitoring, restrictive dieting, eating disorders, appearance anxiety, and avoidance of social situations (Clarke & Griffin, 2007a; Slevin, 2010); and Liechty & Yarnal (2010) found that older women cited appearance-related insecurities as the primary reason for avoiding exercise.

Multiple meanings of aesthetic practices

Researchers are beginning to emphasise multiple readings of body and beauty practices, moving away from dichotomies of conformity and empowerment (Ribeiro, 2011). Such readings allow for the possibility of individual reflexive agency, so that women are not simply characterised as 'victims' of a disciplinary beauty culture (Alsop & Lennon, 2018), nor of a "false consciousness", an unconscious submission to objectification. Ribeiro (2011) stresses that women have never solely seen themselves as "victims" of "male-fabricated judgements of appearance"; they are centrally involved in establishing ideals of beauty: "women choose their clothes and their make-up, not with men in mind, but themselves" (p.329). Researchers also champion the imaginative possibilities of the "expressive body", which fits on neither side of the objectified and subjective body in relation to aesthetic surgery (Alsop & Lennon, 2018), and, similarly problematise the oppressive interpretation of undergoing surgery as "denying ageing", pointing out its moralising undertone (Garnham, 2013). Indeed, the

choice to engage in aesthetic practices should not be shamed. Women who do so are doing so with the purpose of "fighting invisibility, of resisting exclusion, of trying to maintain positive cultural capital" (Slevin, 2010, p.1017). They should feel free to engage in these practices but not feel forced or that such practices are mandatory. As Furman, (1999, 1997) reminds us, what constitutes resistance and what capitulation is far from clear; the battle against ageing is embedded in both narratives of self-determining agency and of denial. Equally, feminists' "desire to resist sexual objectification and oppressive norms of femininity" should not "result in a form of puritanism and a denial of pleasure and joy in self-fashioning and display" (Twigg, 2004, p.62).

Ageing anxiety and mental health

The distress of ageing is also a focus of mental health research, namely the multiple sources and dimensions of ageing anxiety, defined as "concerns and anticipation of adverse physical, mental, and personal losses during the ageing process" (Bodner et al., 2015, p.16). One study concludes that anxiety about attractiveness and health is higher among younger, White, heterosexual, less financially independent women, and that anxiety about fertility is higher among younger, more educated, heterosexual, more financially independent, and childless women (Barrett & Robbins, 2008). African American and lesbian or bisexual women appear to worry less than their respective counterparts; the race patterns may relate to cultural norms creating broader definitions of beauty and better body image, and immunity to the male gaze may protect non-heterosexual women from ageing concerns (Barrett & Robbins, 2008). Of the three sources of anxiety, health and attractiveness strongly predict greater mental health consequences, and draw attention to the role ageing plays in producing women's greater risk of depression and other internalising psychiatric disorders (Barrett & Robbins, 2008). Indeed, other studies demonstrate a positive correlation between ageing anxiety and depression (Kim & Lee, 2007), and greater ageing anxiety in young females than young males (Barrett & von Rohr, 2008). Personality and individual differences predict or buffer against ageing anxiety, with higher levels of personal distress predicting greater ageing anxiety, and stronger ageist attitudes (Allan et al., 2014). Emotional complexity, or "adaptive emotional regulation", moderates the relationship between death and ageing anxiety and psychological distress (Bodner et al., 2015). Thus, ageing anxiety not only effect real mental health consequences in women, it also incites ageist attitudes.

In summary, research that explores ageing, body image, and appearance-related anxiety remains largely contested; the effects of ageing on such psychological constructs and processes remain unclear and many narratives are evidenced in the literature. Although some qualitative studies are beginning to focus on the multiplicity of experience as opposed to 'truths', many studies are of a

quantitative nature, and fail to capture the richness of women's shifting attitudes towards the ageing body. They lack an underlying theoretical framework, and investigations of age effects rely on a cross-sectional design that is subject to cohort and generational effects (Tiggemann, 2004). That is, the comparison between the older and younger age groups fails to account for differences in historical and social forces that have shaped their differing attitudes towards the body, beyond age differences alone; they investigate age *differences*, rather than age *changes*. While some studies adopt a retrospective or longitudinal approach to counter this, they remain scarce (Lee & Damhorst, 2019; Mellor et al., 2010). Further, much of the literature focuses on 'midlife' and 'older women', and the age cohort at the centre of this study, 'pre-midlife' women, are glaringly under-represented.

The structural perspective: discourse and stigma

Having explored how anti-ageing and health discourses interact upon the ageing body, instigating body discipline and aesthetic modification, this section is concerned more broadly with the structural forces that shape women's embodied experiences of ageing. Ageism and its components, including normative dress codes, the desexualisation of older women, its psychological basis, and the paradigm of "successful ageing", will be examined.

Ageism: pervasive, internalised, and gendered

Women are not only "aged by culture", but are aged long before men (Gullette, 2004). Studies show that ageism is deeply entrenched in society and is internalised across age groups. Underlying ageist stereotypes are our society's obsession with youth, our fear and denial of death, and old age being equated with illness and dependency (Clarke, 1999). Ageism is also gendered, and stereotypes of older women are particularly negative and demeaning (Arber & Ginn, 1991). Biomedical discourse reinforces the "disease model" associated with menopause and sexuality, internalised by women (Banister, 1999); and although older women are viewed more positively than men, the start of middle- and old-age, according to young people, begin earlier for women than for men (Barrett & von Rohr, 2008). Moreover, ageism has 'outside' and 'inside' components: the negative attitudes toward older adults among younger cohorts (e.g., Hahn & Kinney, 2020; Rittenour & Cohen, 2016), and ageism manifesting internally as shame (Jacobs, 1990) and age and death anxieties (Bodner et al., 2015). Research on ageism as a social force, and how the 'public' engenders the 'private', will be explored here.

A pervasive view of ageing emphasises continuous deterioration and decline in all areas of life. The term "ageism", coined by Butler (1969), describes the prejudice that originate from ageist beliefs and

misconceptions about old people. It can manifest as overaccommodative yelling, slowed and patronising talk and reduced talk time (Ryan et al., 1986), and persists even in cultures in which older adults are more respected, suggesting that it is a truly "transcultural epidemic" (Rittenour & Cohen, 2016). For example, Gullette (2000) queries the generalisation of older people into homogenous groups that span decades, which inspire unjust labels; headlines such as "the grey tsunami" and those that blame the failing health services on the ageing population are examples of ageist messages being propagated through the media. If older people are not seen as individuals, it is easier to blame 'them' as a group for perceived wrongs.

Language is also a powerful tool of oppression; phrases such as "still creative at…" or "still assertive at…" reveal inherent ageism, as older people's everyday abilities are met with patronising surprise (Cruikshank, 2003). Ageism is also discerned through the absence of older people, an erasure that consigns older people to "optical oblivion" (Gullette, 2017, p.24). Cruikshank (2003) notes the frequent use of younger photos in obituaries and publicity materials, suggesting that concealment and youth is always the preferrable choice. A "hyper awareness of age" also permeates social interactions between people of different ages; it creates expectations of difference in intergenerational contact and negates similarities (Cruikshank, 2003, p.173). Similarly, the categorisation of age groups such as "baby boomers" and "gen Xers" enables "age wars", the blaming of one so-called generation by another (Gullette, 2000); this is what Hamad (2017, p.170) calls "toxic intergenerationality", which fuels ageist attitudes.

Older women: invisible, desexualised, 'dressed down', and 'graceful'

For older women, ageism manifests as invisibility and desexualisation; the older female body is pathologised and constructed negatively against the thin-young ideal (Bordo, 2003). Despite women's disciplinary effort to rid the body of signs of ageing, which has become, and all the more so with advancing anti-ageing technology, an unconscious obligation of women to society (Goodman, 1994), the realities of ageing are impossible to hide and result in a "spoiled identity" whereby ageing female bodies are socially defined as "abominations" and "imperfections" (Goffman, 1963, p.4-6). 'Looking your age' has become culturally unforgivable, and the ageing female flesh is particularly disparaged and invisible.

Equally, "the menopausal woman" is conceived of as a threat for "the only thing worse for women than menstruating is not menstruating" (Tavris, 1992, p.133). Menopause provides clear-cut evidence of ageing; the outward signs, sweating, hot flushes, communicate to others a woman's age and loss of fertility (Chrisler, 2011). "The menopausal or postmenopausal body is continuously represented as

a problematic and lacking body, deprived not only of reproductive capacity but also of sexual desire and attractiveness" (Sandberg, 2013, p.33). Although feminists have embraced the freedom that "postmaternity" brings, for society, it signals a woman's loss of social value afforded to her by her child-bearing ability (Gullette, 2002). Menopausal women are also described as "old, irritable, tense, and bitter"; much like menstruating women, they are constructed as an irritation, to be approached with caution (Chrisler, 2011, p.204).

Stigma can powerfully influence one's felt identity, be internalised by older women and experienced as a profound sense of shame and aversion towards their own and other older women's bodies (Jacobs, 1990). Hine (2011) found that sexualised images of young women in the media affect the mental health of at least some older women, substantiated through participants' disclosure of feelings of depression, self-loathing, and dissatisfaction. Indeed, elderly sexuality remains "essentially taboo" in mainstream culture (Williams et al., 2007), and its "unwatchability" has a distinct gendered dimension (Woodward, 1999). Vares (2009) found that women (aged 49-85), more so than men, responded with verbal and bodily 'disgust' to filmic images of a naked, sexually active women in her 60s, indicative of internalised ageist constructs of 'moral' or 'normal' sexuality. 'Outside' stereotypic beliefs about sexuality in old age are also shown to be gendered; undergraduate participants believed that older men were more sexually active than older women and that it is more socially acceptable to see an old man kiss a young women than the gender-reverse equivalent (Bodner et al., 2015).

Similarly, a moral regulation of age-ordering in dress also applies, and those who transgress from standards of 'appropriateness', either too vain or too sexualised, are stigmatised by observers (aged 22-87) as "mutton dressed as lamb" (Rexbye & Povlsen, 2007). Age-ordering is the systematic patterning of cultural expectations according to an ordered and hierarchically arranged concept of age; dress practices encode and reflect meanings about age, and are thus also ordered (Twigg, 2013). Clothes, as Breward (2000) argues, are one of the key means by which social positioning is made concrete and visible; and research reports that 97% of participants' opinions of stereotypes and identities are based on others' clothes (Todorović et al., 2017). Dress norms for older women are largely expressed in negative terms; clothes should avoid claims of sexual attention and be sober and self-effacing (Twigg, 2018). They cannot appear too young or too old (Miller-Spillman, 2019), or else may be perceived as "dressing too young for their age," or as "letting themselves go" (Clarke et al., 2009). Women themselves are found to agree with these prescriptions of 'appropriateness', which correlate with social messages of 'ageing gracefully', and many use clothes to mask or hide bodily ageing (Clarke & Bundon, 2009). Clothing choices also allow women to present themselves as 'put together', which may counter ageist perceptions of them as incompetent, unreliable, and dependent

(Clarke & Bundon, 2009), and temper workplace ageism and lookism (McInnis & Medvedev, 2021). While these cultural meanings appear persistent and entrenched, there is also evidence of change, of new attitudes and expectations in society, and new responses in the fashion industry (Twigg, 2013).

Understanding 'outside' ageism

I now attempt to explore and better understand the psychological mechanisms that underpin pervasive ageist attitudes in society. The internalising of ageist attitudes and stereotypes is said to begin in childhood (Isaacs & Bearison, 1986), and persists throughout the life span (Clarke, 1999; Öberg & Tornstam, 2001; Slevin, 2010). Young adults typically hold the most negative beliefs about ageing, influenced by peer-group identification and generational separation (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). Prejudice is also a means of distancing themselves from the inevitability of future ageing, a form of denial and ego protection (Packer & Chasteen, 2006; Snyder & Miene, 1994). In a recent study, young adults who were exposed to self-aged virtual simulation experienced greater ageing anxiety and more ageist attitudes; they were also more likely to deny the authenticity of their transformed image (Rittenour & Cohen, 2016). In previous "imagined future self" studies (Giles et al., 2003; Heckhausen & Krueger, 1993), participants' self-projections of their own ageing, characterised negatively, were less drastic than presumed about the broader cohort, suggesting that they see ageing as decline but enact self-preservation through social comparison by telling themselves "it will be better for me". Another study explores the notion of self-control; university students choose to believe they have control over their appearance as they age, and so discriminate against older adults who have allowed themselves to look old (Gendron & Lydecker, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, ageing anxiety, explored previously, and death anxiety, "an emotional state of death awareness in which people experience terror", have been found to predict ageist attitudes by numerous studies (reviewed in Bodner et al., 2015; Allan et al., 2014). Researchers have used Terror Management Theory to conceptualise this (Martens et al., 2004): given the narrative of decline, disease and deterioration attached to ageing, older adults remind us of our mortality, triggering terror which then manifests as aversion, and a tendency to reject and distance. In addition to "warehousing the infirm in nursing homes", society constructs an "other" or "stranger" who is "old" and from whom we differentiate and distance ourselves (Clarke, 1999, p.421).

The moral obligations of "successful ageing"

"You are as young or old as others make you feel" (Karp & Yoels, 1981, p.149). We have seen how normative ordering and dominant images of the feminine ideal limit the lived potential of older

women, creating shame and anxiety; and now turn to how older people distance themselves from the label "old" by way of an "extended middle age", under the value-laden banners of "successful ageing" and "personal agency" (Paulson & Willig, 2008; Sandberg & Marshall, 2017). The tenets of "successful ageing" have been discussed in the theoretical review; how such discourse, together with others that emphasise the "activity/non-activity divide", stigmatise ageing is discussed here (Rexbye & Povlsen, 2007, p.74).

Studies have shown that older people tend to deny the severity of their own age (Palmore, 2001), and exempt themselves from the accompanying stereotypes (Marshall & McPherson, 1994). Clarke (1999) describes older women's (aged 50-90) desire to distance themselves from the category of "old", to preserve a belief of older adulthood as a time of activity, health, and happiness, and not of declining health and loss. They maintain membership of the "not old" through the credo of activity, which, along with the "use it or lose it" message, permeates discourse; activity is the cultural ideal, and an indicator of "successful ageing" (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Older adults are expected to successfully manage and counter their own ageing and perform 'agelessness', not only in terms of maintaining youthful body and appearance through disciplinary practices, but also by engaging in social activities, keeping busy, and conserving an active mind (Katz, 2000). In Rexbye & Povlsen's (2007, p.74) study on how visual images of older persons (aged 70+) are evaluated, participants noticed and expected signs of physical, mental and social activity, and inactivity was only accepted in the "oldest old".

In this, several discourses intersect; aside from a health discourse that is medically rooted, the activity/inactivity divide also has its origin in the moral-ethical discourse linked to productivity by which the Protestant work ethic has been reframed as the active "busy ethic" in retirement, a form of moral regulation (Erkerdt, 1986; Katz, 2000). Inactivity, therefore, has a moral meaning for older adults, and is unacceptable. The postmodern value of personal agency is also at play; it places the onus of 'ageing well' – free of disease, self-sufficient, psychologically positive – onto the individual, and assumes endless possibilities in terms of continuous energy, fitness and identity fluidity (Rexbye & Povlsen, 2007; Twigg, 2004). The 'ageless' discourse fails to acknowledge physiological limitations of the body (Teater & Chonody, 2019), societal ageism, and "social and structural inequalities that create illness and disability in the first place" (Martinson & Berridge, 2015, p.63). This individualistic view also exempts governments from social responsibilities; they can be said to endorse 'active' ageing to further their own agenda, anxious about the welfare resources needed to accommodate ageing populations (Segal, 2013). Finally, this extended middle-life creates an hostility towards the infirmed body and, similar to Neugarten & Hagestad's (1976) differentiation between the "young-old" and the "old-old", serves to bifurcate the "Third" and "Fourth" ages, with the former celebrated

and endorsed for its consumerist abundance and good health, and the latter stigmatised and shunned, creating not the end of ageism but a "new ageism" (Boudiny, 2013, p.1093).

The negotiated identity: resistance and capitulation

Critical commentators adopt discursive and narrative approaches in exploring the process of meaning-making ageing women engage in, as they endeavour to reconcile many evolving selves and layers of identity that are both organically and socially constituted. Theorists refer to the "mask of ageing" (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991), drawing our attention to the incongruence that ageing persons experience, between external appearance, functional capacities, and subjective sense of personal identity. Segal (2014, p.4) argues for temporal fluidity that is non-linear; "as we age, changing year on year, we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been, creating a type of temporal vertigo and rendering us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age". Ageing is therefore a process, a matter of degree as opposed to a fixed identity.

Banister's (1999) ethnographic study, although dated, remain an important qualitative exploration of women's subjective experiences of change in midlife. In it, narratives of 11 women aged 40-53 were analysed, and results indicate that the midlife experience encompass a broad spectrum, full of contradictions and change. Issues of loss, cultural messages that perpetuate ageism and sexism, the menopause, questioning, redefining self, and self-care were all central themes in women's lives during this time of transition. Another touchstone of qualitative female ageing literature is Winterich's (2007) thematic analysis of interviews with 30 women, aged 46-71. It focuses on how they experience signs of ageing in everyday life, and responses were found to replicate normative femininity and appearance norms as well as different gendered meanings of the body that included caretaking, work, ageist treatment, and past abuse. The study highlights women's unique constraints and concerns with ageing, and "the multiple ways that gender shapes how ageing women make meaning of their appearances and sense of selves" (Winterich, 2007, p.67).

Alienation and incongruence emerge as important themes for ageing women, characterised by "late midlife astonishment" (Pearlman, 1993), with the realisation that they can no longer 'pass' as young, and the difficulties in reconciling an inner sense of youth and ageing appearance (Banister, 1999; Clarke, 1999; Clarke & Griffin, 2007a). Women express feeling disconnected from their ageing body and articulate how their outer appearance may change but their personalities do not (Clarke, 1999, 2001; Covan, 2005). This is also noted by Slevin (2010) who found that women do not feel 'old' but are identified by others as 'old'; and women themselves reject the notion of 'older women' because for them it refers to something they have not become (Quéniart & Charpentier, 2012).

Postmodernists emphasise a "self-articulating society" (Pollner, 2000), in which individuals can adopt strategies to minimise incongruence, through activity, anti-ageing practices, performed 'agelessness' or personal integration. Biggs (2004) highlights the contradiction between fixity, physiological reality, and embeddedness of stigma in social structure, and fluidity, the degree to which self-concept and identity is fluid, a subject of choice and desire. Metaphors of narrative and masquerade help us understand processes of negotiated identities structured by age and gender relations, how women negotiate their inner selves and the selves they perform for others (Biggs, 2004). They bring issues of power relations into sharp relief, "how much one should reveal under such circumstances, and whose story is being lived out" (Biggs, 2004, p.56). At the level of subjective experience, Furman (1997) also emphasises the layeredness of women's meaning making. The beauty shop represents a safe and protected space in which women can show affection for each other, while also engaging in indulgences of vanity. Furman (1997) reminds us that preoccupation with appearance should not necessarily be confused with a desire to stay young, and the desire to stay young is both at once conforming to society's cult of youth and resisting by asserting agency within it.

Indeed, Trethewey's (2001) exploratory study of 15 self-described professional midlife women's experiences of ageing, feminist in nature, demonstrates entrepreneurship and self-determining strategies situated within master narratives of both decline and resistance that also encompass themes of loss, isolation, and fear. The narratives do not represent an either-or orientation. Narrators do not evidence either domination by or resistance to age ideology; rather, they engage in "hegemonic struggles", out of which contested identities emerge (Trethewey, 2001, p.188). The study suggests that how we socially construct midlife has material and ideological consequences for middle-class professional women, and that ageing is increasingly constructed as an individualised problem best "managed" through "enterprising" choices (Trethewey, 2001). The simultaneity of midlife professional women's oppression and privilege therefore points to "the fluid, complex, and contradictory nature of identity construction processes" (Trethewey, 2001, p.218). Similarly, in Winterich's (2007) study, older women dye their greying hair, partly because of internalised ageism but also as a creative strategy to assert power and demand visibility within ageist contexts. Biggs (2004, p.53) refers to this as "mature imagination", a "masquerade that protects the mature self from external attack, […] a Machiavellian vehicle for self-expression in its own right". Self-care and agency also dominate the narratives, with many women experiencing "perspective transformation" towards regeneration, autonomy, and emergence, for example, from childrearing roles towards caring more for the self (Winterich, 2007). Thus, ageing identities are crafted and negotiated, and capture the tension between external performance and inner concern, as well as the contested experiences of

decline, resistance, acceptance, and liberation. What these qualitative studies omit to explore, however, is the experience of younger women, aged 40 and below, whose contested identities may take on different meanings unknown to us yet.

Rationale for the study

The review of the literature reveals a persistent lack in qualitative research on the experience of female ageing, and the recent burgeoning of research interest in the intersection of ageing and gender has tended to focus on the experience of midlife and older women. This study, therefore, aims to address an important gap: the narratives of younger women as they encounter the first wave of physical change and visible signs of ageing, as well as shifting ageing identities constructed within an ageist culture. This point of transition can be particularly challenging and destabilising, as younger women first experience a loss of social power, waning visibility, and bodily threats to ideals of feminine youthfulness and desirability. Certainly, studies appear to support a hypothesis that body and ageing anxiety are more damaging to the self-identity and self-esteem of younger women (Halliwell, 2013; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013; J. Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). 'Anti-ageing' discourse may be more strongly internalised by younger women; the pressure to 'pass' for younger and to perform 'agelessness' may be more acute when the likelihood of success is higher, and when the distance from the young-thin ideal is slight. Younger women are also less equipped with strategies to cope with these emerging changes and are potentially more vulnerable to the psychological impact of moving out of a position of power into one of disempowerment. How younger women negotiate and perform their contested identities as their status quo erodes will be the focus of this research. Therefore, how younger women experience ageing and narrate their embodied female identities is the question asked of this research.

The study hopes to contribute to counselling psychology research and practice by presenting the multiple ways gendered ageing and socially constructed norms of femininity psychologically impact younger women. With a focus on nuance and subjectivity, it aims to reveal the meaning making processes that younger women engage in in facing ageing challenges. With better knowledge and awareness, practitioners could more astutely help clients navigate these life transitions, issues of internalised ageism, self-objectification, identity work, and mental health implications. More broadly, findings could point to systemic and structural stigma and biases that constrain the lived potential of young (and older) women as they face this universal experience of ageing that is so culturally marked. Such findings would dovetail with counselling psychology's broader social justice agenda, giving younger women voice and perhaps contributing to education and conscious raising.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Overview

This chapter aims to provide a thorough account of the research process employed in the present study. The research aims are defined, followed by the epistemological and theoretical positioning of the study, which influences not only the information collected but also how it is understood. I situate and discuss narrative inquiry as my chosen research methodology, detail the methodological procedure, and introduce Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) employed to interrogate the interview material. I then offer an account of methodological reflexivity, and finish by addressing ethical considerations and validity of the study.

Research aims

The study attempts to explore how younger, 'pre-midlife' women make sense of their embodied experiences of ageing, how shifting identity is negotiated within existing socio-cultural structures, many of which gendered and ageist. It examines the dialectical relationship between the body, culture, and the self, combining structural focus with personal meaning. These aims are achieved through analysing the narratives of seven women, to understand how narrative constructions encompass their beliefs, ageing experience, meaning-making, identity-searching and how the social world is understood and interacted with. The experiential findings could meaningfully contribute to ageing literature, inform counselling psychology research and practice, and enhance practitioners' awareness and sensitivity to the psychological impact of age-related life transitions and identity-formation. The study's prioritisation of 'otherness' and critical ideological considerations, with an emphasis on female emancipation, are also congruent with counselling psychology axiology, that of subjectivity, multiplicity, and the generation of social action and change (Rafalin, 2010).

A qualitative approach

A qualitative approach, which prioritises meaning, the "quality and texture" of subjective experiences (Willig, 2013, p.8), and emphasises research reflexivity, was deemed most appropriate in meeting the objectives of the study. For a phenomenon as elusive, contested, and individual as ageing, a qualitative process that aims to uncover meanings that are "fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal" is preferred (Riessman, 1993, p.15). Particular attention is paid to an in-depth exploration and interpretation of individuals' accounts of lived experiences (Smith, 2008), the meanings attributed to such experiences and the context within which they are constructed (Willig,

2013). In doing so, the qualitative researcher aims to understand the implications and consequences of such accounts, both for the individual and wider society. Research reflexivity is therefore pivotal as meaning derived from the research data is understood to be constructed relationally (Willig, 2012). Furthermore, qualitative methods' predominant reliance on verbal accounts centres language as an essential component of human understanding (Smith, 2008). In my endeavour to understand experiences, above all else, a qualitative framework best facilitates this objective.

Part one: Epistemological positioning and theoretical perspective

Epistemological positioning, a set of assumptions about knowledge and knowing that provides a framework for understanding the world, should be "the starting point of any research project" (Willig, 2013, p.66). Considering my wish to access the experiential worlds of women, and my assumption that these worlds are situated within and shaped by wider socio-cultural contexts, the study adopts a 'contextual constructionist' epistemological stance, which sits between a relativist and realist ontology (Madill et al., 2000). The world of things, which encapsulates the ageing physical body, is objectively real and can exist outside of our experience, but multiple (relative) meanings could be derived from the material, by our interaction with it. That is to say, mind mediates experience; what cannot exist independently of mental processing is a meaningful world, at least not meaningful in a way that humans can access (Crotty, 1998). Meaning, instead, arises from our engagement with the material in a co-constructive process that is inherently individual (Crotty, 1998). Thus, the world influences the mind of the individual in inscribing meaning to the world. I do not, however, subscribe to a Cartesian dualism of body and mind, a "binary of materiality and representation", which privileges the constructive mind over a constructed body (Budgeon, 2003, p.36). As posited in chapter one, which explores in detail the construction of the ageing body, postmodernist disembodiment of the social actor is reductionist. The body is not merely "a natural foundation or passive surface upon which meanings are inscribed"; rather, it is a site of production, processes and embodied practices (Budgeon, 2003, p.36).

A 'contextual constructionist' orientation, therefore, better captures the philosophical underpinning of my research aims than a strictly social constructionist or phenomenological position, which either negates material realities or undermines constructed 'truths'. Central to this epistemological stance is the belief that all knowledge is both contextual and subjective; it is therefore possible to gain knowledge of a particular phenomenon through varied accounts of the same experience (Willig, 2008). This approach also assumes that "human experience is mediated by language" (Willig, 2013, p.18), making it a suitable framework for narrative inquiry. Age is considered a social construct with an embodied underpinning, the meaning of which is influenced by society's master scripts within

which individual narratives are localised. I also honour the 'realness' of the subjective worlds for the women who live them. There are, therefore, phenomenological echoes within the research in my desire to understand, as opposed to merely deconstruct, the world of the individual (Willig, 2013). 'Contextual constructionism', with its emphasis on "completeness not convergence" and permission for some underlying reality or structure to ground discursive accounts, captures this pluralistic positioning (Madill et al., 2000, p.12). Indeed, the distinction between a phenomenological and a constructionist perspective is not absolute (Ashworth, 2008) and narrative inquiry is said to have a "double signature", with its roots in social constructionism but incorporating "both a rich description of the socio-cultural environment and the participatory and creative inner world of lived experience" (Hiles & Čermák, 2008, p.151). Such epistemological pluralism aligns with counselling psychology ethos that knowledge is contingent, relational, subjective and contextual (Henton, 2016), and that "theoretical triangulation" and paradigm complementarity can enrich data, expand the analytical scope and enhance transparency and validity (Frost & Nolas, 2011, p.115; Josselin & Willig, 2015; Madill & Gough, 2008).

Employing a feminist lens

This study is informed by a feminist theoretical stance, which guides not only how information is sought but the lens through which data is understood. The considerable contribution feminist theory has made to 'age studies', the gendered nature of ageing, and my interest in understanding women's lives in gendered societies make it an obvious choice. It allows for the consideration of ageing dynamics, the construction of the ageing body, and ideas of femininity by way of a feminist interrogation of cultural norms and assumptions. The feminist perspective, which theorises at a micro-macro level, also combines a structural focus with personal meaning that centres the body (Bengtson et al., 2005; Biggs, 2004). Articulating how women are made to experience their bodies because of their ideological or narrative positioning is the focus of this study.

A feminist lens complements the "double signature" characteristic of narrative inquiry; experience is not foundational but it is influenced by discourses of power. It is not individuals who merely have experiences, but rather they are constituted through experiences (Scott, 1992). This study conceives of experience in much the same way; "the stories a woman tells about her specific experiences and her feelings about her experiences will provide much deeper and more nuanced examples of how she has internalised or rejected or transformed ideologies" (Chase, 2002, p. 86). Experience is therefore informative of the processes women are engaged with and embedded within, and which concern negotiations with multiple and completing norms in relation to their diverse social identities.

Feminist ideals also align with counselling psychology ethos: to capture and legitimise women's voices as a source of knowledge with an emphasis on consciousness-raising and emancipatory social change (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Falconer, 2009). A feminist interpretation of women's narratives allows for complexity and contradictions (Madge et al., 1997), and aims to reverse the systematic silencing of women in social research by making public women's own experiences (Bloom, 1998). Feminist researchers stress using women's lived experiences as a starting point to theorise about broader social relations; through personal accounts, narrators "create and recreate representations of the self within socialised contexts" (Falconer, 2009, p.25). Women's accounts may reproduce 'master scripts' of patriarchal ideologies but also other experiences of selfhood; the narratives therefore require analysis, and simply privileging personal narratives is not sufficient for liberating women from cultural silences (de Lauretis, 1987). Instead, this study is guided by Denzin's (1997, p.146) contextual, performance-based, 'messy' perspective that "embraces critical readings that are always incomplete, personal, self-reflexive, and resistant to totalising theories".

Part two: Methodology

A narrative inquiry was chosen for its focus on meaning-making, its prioritisation of the voice of the participant, its attention to context and language, and its blended approach in both validating and deconstructing experiences (Hiles & Čermák, 2008; Willig, 2013). This methodological approach sits well within my epistemological and theoretical stance, including feminism's concern with understanding and exposing the multiple ways gendered relations in everyday life saturate women's narratives, and how such narratives indicate a continual negotiation and development of female identity (Bloom, 1998). Narrative inquiry also allows for 'cross-fertilisation' with other disciplines, which suits the multidisciplinary nature of the ageing phenomenon (Hiles & Čermák, 2008).

A phenomenological approach was initially considered but abandoned. Although this study is interested in the 'essence' of experiences, it was felt that an interpretive phenomenological analytical (IPA) lens would not have illuminated, to a sufficient degree, the wider socio-cultural positioning of the topic, nor of the negotiated, performed and conflictual nature of female identity, and how social processes interact with individual experience (Willig, 2013). It would have focused on meaning, taken at face value, as opposed to meaning-construction (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), and would have positioned the researcher as a neutral chronicler of experiences as opposed to a co-constructor of narratives, which better aligns with 'contextual constructionism'. Memory work was also considered for its emphasis on the 'collective voice', which typifies emancipatory feminist values. However, a

narrative approach was chosen, for its prioritisation of individually negotiated identities, which then reveal wider dynamics of power.

Narrative inquiry

Narrative is inherently synonymous with 'story', and narrative inquiry refers to the rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse body of research that puts the storied nature of people at the centre of analytic investigation (Riessman, 2008). It represents a means of acquiring knowledge of the world that departs from paradigmatic scientific thinking (Bruner, 1986), and at its heart is a relational activity, requiring both a storyteller and an audience. Narrative is the story of a sequence of events told to a particular audience in order to convey meaning (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Within narrative research in psychology, it consists of "long sections of talk – extended accounts of lives in context that develops over the course of simple or multiple interviews" (Riessman, 2008, p.6). Narrative approaches emphasise that "we are born into a storied world" (Murray, 2008, p.113), and so narrative is central to human existence and experience; it is through the construction and exchange of stories that we give meaning to our lives (Crossley, 2000; Josselson, 2011).

The significance of the narrative form may be charted from classic Aristotelian narratives through to modern literary analysis, with its appropriation by qualitative researchers occurring in the last three decades, which coincided with a broader shift towards acknowledging the importance of cultural context and subjective experience in the social sciences (Hiles & Čermák, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Within psychology, though the concept of narrative dates to the case-writings of Freud and Jung, a more recent 'narrative turn' signalled a new way of conceptualising reality, prompted by various seminal publications in the 1980s, by Sarbin (1986), Bruner (1986), and Polkinghorne (1988). Narrative became a radically new "root metaphor for psychology", a new means of making sense out of life events (Sarbin, 1986, p.3). Narratives serve to create the semblance of a whole out of what are otherwise unconnected events (Polkinghorne, 1988). They are essential in creating meaning and structure from the chaos of life (Hiles & Čermák, 2008), and a basic property of the human mind (Bruner, 1991). Narrative is therefore both a method of knowing and an ontological condition of social life (Smith & Sparkes, 2006); it gives us an opportunity to define ourselves, to clarify the continuity in our lives and to convey this to others (Murray, 2003).

A narrative focus may be particularly relevant when issues of identity are being explored. The construction of narratives is central to the forging of identities and to our self-definition, as we perpetually create and recreate ourselves through stories, what we choose to share with others and how we choose to convey it (Crossley, 2000; Riessman, 2008). It therefore concerns social identity;

through narratives, we present and perform a particular version of the self to the outside world, with various psychological and social implications (Crossley, 2000). Indeed, "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (Somers, 1994, p.606). Personal narratives often encapsulate broader societal discourses (Wells, 2011); narrative accounts are not "emitted in a vacuum" but are shaped by the social context (Murray, 2008, p.116). Narrative approaches are therefore well-placed to examine the interaction between society and the individual, the structural and the subjective, a key concern of this study (Salzer, 1998), and narrative analysis allows investigation of the process of performativity and of meaning construction, the *how* as well as the *what* of identity-formation (Andrews et al., 2000).

Narrative also concerns temporality, rendering it particularly relevant to a study of ageing, of the passing of time and of continuity. The concept of time is considered a central characteristic of all narratives, which follow a sequential order of a beginning, middle and end, and it is the ordering of events and of characters that gives them their significance, relationality, and sense of lucidity (Bruner, 1991). Narratives therefore serve as a vehicle for restoring and reconstructing the meaning of historical events, and for communicating related thoughts, emotions and interpretations (Chase, 2005). Evolving away from a linear conception of temporality, narratives also increasingly recognise fluidity, "in the way pasts and futures come together in temporal sensemaking of an emergent present" (Dawson & Sykes, 2019, p.97). This fluidity mirrors a growing trend in gerontology, that explores ageing beyond chronological time; narratives therefore elaborate a sense of "human time" and of a "longitudinal present" that may be atemporal or temporally fluid (Baars, 1997, p.283), a central interest of this study.

Furthermore, the performative as well as reflective function of narration emphasise not only the meaning-making process of the narrator but also the role of an audience who equally tries to grasp this meaning (Bruner, 1991). In qualitative research, this highlights the active role of the researcher as a co-constructor of narratives, and of the research interview as a stage where identities emerge and are performed for and negotiated with the audience (Crossley, 2000; Riessman, 2008). This focus on interview context and how narrators present themselves allows for a multi-layered understanding of narrators and their experiences (Squire et al., 2008). The narrative interview is therefore an interactive process and "the researcher does not find narrative but instead participates in their creation" (Riessman, 2008, p.21). The same phenomenon, therefore, may be produced in a myriad of different stories, that vary across time and the interview situation (Squire et al., 2008), and what is accounted for and what is omitted within the research interview are of equal importance that carry meaning. In the present study, I was eager to examine my role in the co-construction of narratives,

bearing in mind the power differential between myself and the narrators, the impact of my presence on how they choose to present themselves to 'society' and to a female audience. I hoped in this way to situate individuals' narratives within cultural discourses and narrators' performative priorities.

Finally, the co-constructed nature of narratives raises the question of how research could be a beneficial process for the participant. The opportunity to narrate a significant life event has the potential to facilitate positive change (Chase, 2005), and individuals come to know and integrate themselves through the medium of language and the process of narration (Crossley, 2000). Narrative interviews, open and permissive, encourage individuals to develop their perspectives uninterrupted, and allows their stories be heard in their entirety (Hydén, 2008). Narrative inquiry, therefore, has an emancipatory function, giving the narrators a sense of agency and ownership. It not only prioritises the female voice as a source of knowledge but storytelling evokes "nonunitary subjectivity", which captures the complexity of women's multiple gendered identities, and it is precisely this tension and non-uniformity that add to the richness of the data (Bloom, 1998, p.102; Falconer, 2009).

Critical narrative analysis

Narrative analysis encompasses a wide spectrum of methods but broadly seeks to discover the meaning of experience, and the ways in which people organise and give order to experience, through a systematic analysis of narrators' interpretations of events and selfhood (Willig, 2008). Riessman (2008) conceptualise the *what*, *how* and *why* of narrative analysis as the following: thematic, focusing on the content of narratives; structural, an examination of the stylistic and linguistic forms; and dialogic analysis, how narratives are interactively constructed and performed. Priority is accorded to one or more of the above, depending on the aims of the research. Analysis may therefore prioritise 'content' or 'form', and may focus on the 'holistic', interviews in their entirely, or the 'categorical', narratives constructed around specific events (Hiles & Čermák, 2008). The 'story context' and 'discursive context' highlight a distinction between the actual story and the occasion of its localised retelling, which explores the functionality of narratives (Hiles & Čermák, 2008). It can be argued that an exploration of the inextricable link between social structures and the self is particularly pertinent to a narrative approach (Crossley, 2000); it is also the central aim of this study.

Langdridge's (2007) critical narrative analysis (CNA) presented itself as a suitable analytic frame that would allow for a multi-layered exploration at appropriate depth. It prioritises understanding the functionality of narratives as "culturally framed" without negating a phenomenological ambition (Wells, 2011, p.5). Drawing from the work of Paul Ricoeur, CNA adopts a broadly phenomenological stance; it considers knowledge to be the product of experience and has storytelling at its heart.

Where CNA departs from interpretive phenomenology is its focus on interrogating narratives using aspects of social theory, which fits well with the critical and deconstructionist aims of this study (Langdridge, 2007). It borrows Ricoeur's assertion that we always have a view from somewhere and that this "somewhere" needs to be known (Langdridge, 2007). Thus, as well as prizing subjectivity and the voice of the individual, CNA seeks to bridge the gap between phenomenology and discursive psychology through engagement with wider social discourses and Ricoeurian hermeneutics (Finlay, 2009). Hermeneutics of suspicion enable the discovery of underlying meanings. With its application, new interpretations are generated, thus opening up another layer of knowing, by casting doubt over the "initial empathic account of meaning" (Langdridge, 2007, p.44). CNA therefore goes beyond phenomenology and towards a more constructionist perspective, as supported by Ashworth (2008).

Other key features of the model that appealed to me were an explicit focus on research reflexivity, on identity work, on both the themes and process of meaning-construction through rhetoric, on dialogical dynamics, on narrative as performance, and lastly, on the interaction between the structural and the personal (Langdridge, 2007). It is also one of the most thoroughly outlined narrative method, clear in its analytical stages. The multi-layered nature of CNA therefore best facilitated the complex interpretation of female ageing identities as situated in sociocultural contexts.

Part three: Methods

Sampling and recruitment

The study aimed to recruit five to eight women, aged 28-38. With the research focused on 'pre-midlife' women, the least well-represented age group within ageing literature, I initially intended to recruit women who best resonated with this life stage as opposed to stipulating a discrete age range. However, a chronological age range was later added for transparency and clarity. Aside from gender, no exclusion criteria were included since ageing is universally experienced. Langdridge (2007) emphasise the idiographic nature of CNA but to ensure the richness of data I decided on a relatively large sampling size, and finally recruited seven women.

Individuals were recruited via the snowballing technique, purposeful sampling being typical of narrative approaches (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). Emails were sent to colleagues and acquaintances outlining research focus and recruitment criteria (see Appendices A and B), requesting that the content be forwarded to potential participants who were not known to me.

Interested individuals were invited to contact me directly to maintain confidentiality. Several responded and initial telephone screenings, lasting 5-10 minutes, took place; none were excluded from participation. Suitability concerns included mental health vulnerability and how individuals may respond to the interpretive nature of narrative research, to ensure ethical practice and to minimise harm (Smythe & Murray, 2000). These telephone conversations were not recorded, nor did they form part of the analytic data. Participants were advised that interviews would last between 1-2 hours, arranged at a time convenient for them.

Initially, I had hoped to recruit women aged between 28-38, spanning over ten years, to capture a more diverse and richer set of ageing experiences and to better understand how meanings may shift and evolve as women transition from the twenties to the late thirties, as these age groups are perceived differently by society. During recruitment, however, owing to the random nature of the process, I finally recruited women who were aged 30-34, a relatively small range. Although this increases potential homogeneity within the sample group, it is regretful that a greater age range was not captured.

Pilot interview

I conducted a pilot interview with a personal acquaintance using the interview guide, to practise my interview technique, explore the interactional dynamics involved in the narrative interview encounter, and obtain reflective feedback (Crossley, 2000; Langdridge, 2007). It was initially difficult to find a volunteer interviewee, and my requests were met with social discomfort and reluctance, implying that ageing was a difficult topic to discuss openly. This was an important learning point for me, and I could empathise with wishing to distance from the reality of growing older; the acknowledgement itself was seemingly difficult. I therefore re-ordered my interview schedule to allow for initial conversations to be more broadly concerning a person's life story, detailed below. I was also mindful to ask questions with sensitivity, to convey acceptance and understanding. Indeed, I emphasised my role as ally, equal and empathic, without stepping into a therapeutic stance.

Interview settings

Interviews were conducted in 'natural settings' where participants felt most at ease. I interviewed one participant at City University and the remaining in their homes. The building of rapport depended on ensuring comfort and privacy, a prerequisite for the gathering of solid and quality narrative data (Charmaz, 2006). When working alone and off-site, I followed standard risk assessment and safety protocols.

Narrative interviews

Confirmed participants all attended individual, semi-structed interviews, each lasting between 55-127 minutes. Interviews were recorded on two separate audio-recording devices. Before each interview, individuals were presented with an information sheet, outlining research aims and procedure (Appendix C); I answered any questions raised. They were then presented with a consent form (Appendix D), confirming that their participation was voluntary, and outlining their rights, including their right to pause and withdraw at any stage; this was signed by myself and the interviewee. Each participant chose their own pseudonym, by which they would be referred in the study. These steps helped to ensure interviewee protection, promote transparency of the interview setup (Potter & Hepburn, 2012), and facilitate a sense of ownership over the interview data (Grinyer, 2002).

An interview schedule (Appendix E) was used to guide the interviews, which follows the topic-focused narrative style proposed by McAdams (1997), and further developed by Langdridge (2007), and aims to encourage narrative production. The guide begins with a biographical interview, followed by topics aimed to elicit 'experience-centred narratives', drawing on stories about specific events, but also fundamental themes relevant to the narrator's life and identity (Squire, 2013). The sequencing of the questions, from the more descriptive to those that require more evaluative and analytic responses, and the 'funnelling' towards more sensitive topics, help to relax the participant into the process of being interviewed (Smith et al., 2009), thereby ensuring the production of rich data that is detailed, focused and full (Charmaz, 2006). CNA also prioritises understanding the life story as presented, allowing for holistic accounts to emerge (Langdridge, 2007). Interviews were therefore loosely guided by the interview schedule, influenced by my curiosity about the ageing experience, questions raised by the literature review, and the pilot interview. The guide was not prescriptive, and many of the topics were introduced intuitively by interviewees themselves. I facilitated this process with in-vivo responses, including follow-up questions and probes to draw out fuller stories. As I was interested in the meaning-making process I explicitly asked questions such as 'why do you think that is' and 'what do you think about that'.

Narrative interviews need to prioritise the building of rapport and the cultivation of an accepting and non-judgemental environment (Crossley, 2000), and maintain sensitivity involved in evoking vulnerable memories, to transcend the 'defended subject' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). As an interviewer, I endeavoured to cultivate these qualities within the interview setting. All interviewees noticeably 'settled into' the interview after some initial nervousness, and narrative themes became

more open and revealing as the interviews progressed. Once the interviews had drawn to a close, I presented participants with an opportunity to debrief, guided by the debriefing sheet (Appendix F).

Data storage

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview scripts and audio recordings were stored on my personal laptop and an external drive, under password protection. The audio data will be stored for the duration of the research process, destroyed upon completion. Transcripts will be stored for ten years following publication, according to BPS guidelines (BPS, 2014) and City University requirements (City University, 2021).

Analytic strategy

Below, I outline the 6 stages of CNA as I applied them (see Appendix G for diagram). I followed a standardised approach to CNA as detailed by Langdridge (2007). Prior to analysis, interview transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA, a software I used to compile and organise analysis, colour-coded for each of the stages of CNA (see Appendix H for sample). Detailed analytical notes were then organised into mind maps for each of the narrators (see Appendix I for sample). I commenced analysis of each interview by repeatedly reading through the transcript, once while listening to the audio recording, to re-familiarise myself with the data and maintain an overall sense of the narrative context.

Stage 1 – A critique of the illusions of subjectivity

As recommended, I began by engaging with what Langdridge (2007, p.134) terms a process of "reflexive engagement". I considered the significance and personal relevance of the research topic by journaling intuitive thoughts and reflections, to clarify how my beliefs and preconceptions around the topic may impact my understanding and interpretation of the narrative data. This helped to identity my schemas, biases, and delineate the 'horizons' of my world in relation to the research; it thus enabled "a move beyond the apparent" (Langdridge, 2007). The procedure was aided by reflexive questions found in Appendix J, and was guided by feminist theory, thus illuminating assumptions stemming from my gender position. The work carried out here informed the entire analytical process to ensure a continuous process of reflexivity.

Stage 2 – Identifying narratives, narrative tone, and rhetorical function

As I searched for distinct and identifiable stories in the text, I focused on narrative tone and content, finding master and minor narratives. Langdridge (2007) advises that it is possible for one interview to contain several interwoven strands of narrative, which may support a central story. I first attempted to organise the data into meaningful sections, noting shifts in content, jumps in time and the introduction of new characters, before focusing on shifts in tone and how they provided insight into meanings conveyed. Narrative tones may be comic, tragic, optimistic, or pessimistic; they may juxtapose with the content of the narrative, thus revealing an alternative interpretation. As Langdridge (2007) suggested, I used the most appropriate descriptors available, rather than imposing a predetermined typology.

Analysis of tone was intertwined with an exploration of narrative function by identifying the rhetorical functions at play, for example, when narrators attempted to justify, explain, criticise, or endorse. By asking questions such as 'what kind of story is being told?' and 'what is this story attempting to do?', I identified opinions and attitudes expressed, excuses, evaluations, and where individuals positioned themselves against perceived counter positions. Taken together, these allow for a greater understanding of the narrators' intensions, either implicitly or explicitly expressed. Rhetoric function also helps to illuminate the dialogic dynamics within the text, that is, how the presence of the audience (researcher) affected narrators' expressed meanings and concerns. I was also mindful to note how individual stories interacted with 'canonical' narratives that reflect dominant societal discourses and constructions of how lives could be lived (Bruner, 1991). This helped to situate individual stories within their wider social framework.

Stage 3 – Identities and identity work

By re-engaging with the transcript, I considered the self or selves being brought into the narrative. This stage explores the kind of person the narrative constructs, and who or what narrators may position themselves in relation to, for example, when a narrator positions herself as being different from or the same as her peers. I especially paid attention to "I" statements, and how narrators conveyed an older or younger self, thus revealing counter-narratives, transitional points, and continuity or the lack thereof. Rhetorical function and tone are important indicators of identity work, for example, whether the individual views herself as a victim or a hero. The separation between stages 2 and 3 is therefore somewhat artificial; both constitute a performative analysis, whereby narrating is regarded as an activity of doing as opposed to simply telling (Riessman, 2008), and the role of the audience is an important consideration.

Stage 4 – Thematic priorities and relationships

In this stage, I returned to all the transcripts once more to identity overarching themes in the narratives. I systematically worked through all seven narratives, noting down themes in the margins. The aim here is to identify dominant themes rather than breaking apart the text into first and second orders, as is common in most versions of thematic analysis (Langdridge, 2007). It was important to maintain the coherence of each narrative in its entirety. As I repeated this cyclical re-reading of the text, I compiled mind maps that illustrate dominant themes and their associated sub-themes for each narrative (Appendix K). I then began to cluster themes together to identity common themes that emerged across all narratives (Appendix L). Once this task had been completed, I cross-referenced each theme with the annotated transcripts, allowing me to consider the context in which the overarching themes appeared. This was an iterative process; I refined the thematic categories, and the relationships that exist between them as I proceeded. I also compiled a collection of relevant quotes for each of the dominant themes (Appendix M). During this analytical stage, I sometimes returned to the audio recordings of the narratives, as advised by Langdridge (2007).

Stage 5 – Destabilising the narrative

This penultimate stage mirrors stage 1 where the researcher critically engages with the text with reference to a relevant critical social theory, in this case, feminist theory. The theory is used as a lens through which the text is interrogated, to open up "future possibilities for the narrative" (Langdridge, 2007, p.150). The process aims to situate narratives within a sociocultural context since, as Ricoeur (1981) posits, we can never have a view from 'nowhere'; we always speak from some tradition and some ideological position. This stage is also an extension of the performative analysis of stages 2 and 3; it therefore also considers the interaction between the researcher and each participant. I began by re-situating myself in my own context before turning my attention to the text. I spent time reflecting on the transcripts with a critical eye, and by engaging with narrative themes identified in the previous stage, compiled examples of how narrators were limited and constrained by social discourses and structural forces, as informed by feminist theory (see Appendix N). This stage therefore involves a return to the literature review and, in some cases, the search for additional literature.

Stage 6 – A critical synthesis

After having applied several lenses of analysis, there is a risk of ending up with disconnected and disparate analysis; a process of synthesis is therefore needed. Langdridge (2007) does not offer prescriptive guidelines on how this should be done but notes the importance of outlining the key

themes identified and privileging the voice of the individual. My own synthesis was a lengthy, iterative process. I returned to the research question as a focus to the production of distilled themes, and returned to the original transcripts once more, holding in mind the dominant themes, the identities presented to me, my own reflexive process, and the addition of a feminist lens. A cyclical immersion in the data was repeated. In this way, I could formulate subjective meaning-making as well as structural influences at play, and by drawing on existing theory and literature, I arrived at four themes that form the discussion chapter.

Methodological reflexivity

Early in the research process, I carried out a reflexive exercise using Langdridge's (2007; Appendix J) schedule, devised to facilitate a reflexive approach to research. Through this I could interrogate the meanings that I attach to the research, my motivations for initiating this study, my positioning of the interviewees, and how I viewed myself in relation to them. I kept a reflexivity journal, in which I reflected on my process, struggles and the turning points in my thinking. Following each interview, I reflected on the experience of the interview, and beliefs of mine that may have been activated and conveyed during the process. When I returned to these reflections at the beginning of the analytic stage I could trace the arc of researcher impact, and how my decisions could shape the psychological knowledge I aimed to produce. Additionally, I reflected on the boundaries and merging of my identity as a counselling psychologist and as researcher, and how this may have created unique dynamics within the interview encounter.

Researcher reflexivity guards against the researcher imposing their own meaning onto the data; adequate attention to reflexivity therefore strengthens the validity of the research (Willig, 2008). Within narrative approaches, and CNA in particular, the context of the interview, the dialogic dynamics at play, and the impact of my shaping the narratives, are fundamental to the analysis (Langdridge, 2007). I have outlined aspects of this consideration in stage 1 of 'Analytic strategy', namely my relationship to this topic and the assumptions, biases, privileges, and values I bring to the process. These reflections are explored in the following chapter, and in the final reflexivity statement.

Part four: Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from City University, with no further approval from outside agencies required (Appendix O). Ethical guidelines as proposed by the British Psychological Society (BPS) were adhered to at all times, which included the researcher's responsibility to minimise all harm for

participants (BPS, 2009, 2014). Participants were required to give free and informed consent at the outset of involvement. The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) presents the aims of the research in clear, non-academic language. Given the idiographic and emergent nature of narrative methodology, consent was open and could be freely withdrawn at any time. Participants were informed that they may refuse to engage in topics deemed too personal or intrusive, although this was not an issue that arose during interviews. Audio recordings and transcripts were encrypted and stored securely (see 'Data storage'). Participants were debriefed in a timely fashion, following each interview (Appendix F). Details of support and counselling services local to each participant were provided should unexpected emotional distress arise.

Confidentiality

Precautions were taken to always protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used and all identifiable information and biographical details were altered to increase anonymity. However, as it was the aim of the study to give 'voice' to the narrators, I tried to remain as true as possible to participants' full stories. Thus, as an added precaution, the study's appendices contain an extract from an interview transcript, and not a transcript in its entirety, for the purpose of confidentiality. Further, care was taken when using participant quotations, so that they did not contain too many 'identity markers'.

Ethical considerations of narrative research

Ethical recommendations unique to a narrative inquiry, given its personal and relational quality, were incorporated (Smythe & Murray, 2000). Conflict of interest was avoided to the best of my abilities, but multiple relationships are considered inherent in narrative research (Smythe & Murray, 2000), given the tension between serving as the participants' confidant and then going public with their stories, with an analysis that might not chime with their own (Josselson, 1996). 'Transition to friendship' is widely critiqued (Falconer, 2009), and researchers are advised to continually monitor participants' vulnerability and consent, the development of trust, and individuals' motives for wanting to participate, for example, out of loneliness (Smythe & Murray, 2000). I was mindful of these potential ethical risks throughout the study and used telephone pre-screening to uncover any vulnerabilities.

Further, narrative analysis, which essentially consists of the re-telling of another's story, is laden with responsibility and the risk of misrepresenting the narrator (Squire, 2013), especially given the undue power of a so-called expert narrative (Smythe & Murray, 2000). It is fundamental that there

is a level of interpretation in research, especially with constructivist approaches, regardless of how moderate. I applied a 'suspicious' lens to the narratives, probing the text for performance, function, and psychological meaning, which may go beyond the participants' actual intended meaning. As Josselson (2007, p.549) reminds us, narrative analysis involves "understanding a narrator differently than he/she understands himself/herself". The act of analytic interpretation could therefore transform the narrator's story into something unfamiliar, which compromises the ethos of giving 'voice' to participants. This was a tension that I endeavoured to ethically address, by ensuring utmost transparency and researcher reflexivity, unequivocally laying out standpoints, aims, positions, and taking full interpretive authority and responsibility (Josselson, 2007). By claiming interpretive authority, participants better understand the multiplicity of narrative interpretations, and that the researcher's analysis is merely one and not a privileged account. Continual reflexivity during analysis, given the researcher's interpretive freedom, was also paramount; I recorded personal perspectives, concerns, and interpretive choices throughout the study. Lastly, Clandinin & Huber (2010) advocate a respectful and non-judgemental attitude, and empathic listening to personal narratives. This was maintained throughout the analysis and in how narratives were represented in the write-up. I attempted to accurately represent individuals' stories by presenting extensive extracts from the transcripts to support the analysis and aimed to convey that the interpretations made were my own, and do not reflect any form of 'truth'.

Part five: Evaluation of methodology

While reliability and replication are not necessarily concerns of qualitative research, qualitative findings should be meaningful and go beyond the subjective opinions of the researcher (Crotty, 1998; Hiles & Čermák, 2008).

Validity in narrative research

Establishing validity and quality within narrative research is a challenge for investigators. While Yardley (2000) defines quality criteria in qualitative research as sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance, narrative researchers also focus on the status of the narrative content, the 'narrative truth' (Polkinghorne, 2007). This is defined as the individual truth and meaning for the narrator, as opposed to a measurement against some objective truth of the outside world (L. Webster & Mertova, 2007). In other words, a narrative approach may be evaluated by assessing the extent to which observations and interpretations, or 'narrative knowledge', are successfully grounded in the narrative data and the contexts which generate them (Polkinghorne, 2007; Willig, 2008). In this study, I have tried to clearly distinguish

between narrators' views and my own interpretations, and have used extensive verbatim quotes from the transcripts, to contextualise my interpretations and conclusions.

Polkinghorne (2007) posits that validity threats arise owing to the inefficiency of language to fully capture human experience, the limits of personal reflection, interviewee resistance due to social desirability, and the co-constructed nature of narrative data. Although these threats cannot be eliminated, open interviewing and the fostering of trust helped to produce rich narrative accounts, which were careful transcribed to minimise data dilution. The CNA approach also encourages rigour through the multiple questions asked of the data, and through hermeneutic interpretation, which situates the researcher, the narrators, and the resulting narratives in context. The role of the researcher is acknowledged, and I aimed to understand my impact on knowledge production, considering both personal and methodological reflexivity. Thus, while textual interpretations are always perspectival, the effort to bring these perspectival influences into awareness is fundamental to ensuring quality research (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Generalisability

This study has a relatively small sample of seven participants. The research endeavours to say something about the phenomenon of female ageing, but any attempt to generalise this experience to all 'pre-midlife' women is impossible. What the research does is to postulate female ageing experiences as experiences that are located in a certain culture or society, and that some common grounds can be drawn from a shared socio-cultural context. Indeed, Brinkman and Kvale (2015) problematise the entire notion of generalisability in qualitative research and reject the notion that psychological theory can produce universal models for all people in all places and times. Instead, Finlay (2009) suggests that qualitative researchers can concern themselves with the transferability of the findings, that is whether meanings located in the findings have significance and relevance if applied to other individuals. The current study is relevant insofar as 'pre-midlife' women are an under-researched population with respect to experiences of ageing, and so any new formulation of how ageing is experienced will make a valid contribution to the field of psychology and 'age studies' in general. The findings cannot be mapped onto every individual but help to illuminate the collective experience of female ageing.

Methodological reflexivity

I was aware that the category under which participants were recruited, that they were experiencing ageing more visibly, was itself an active part of the research process, and potentially shaped

participants' expectations of how they were relevant to the study (Potter & Hepburn, 2012). Given my mixed success in recruiting acquaintances for pilot interviews, there was a concern that self-selection would take place, and that those who were more comfortable with their ageing experiences and perceived their ageing identities more positively would be more likely to participate. The recruitment material was therefore crafted to convey transparency, openness, and acceptance, and to highlight the 'social capital' of the research agenda.

During data collection, it was at times difficult to maintain an ideal balance between allowing participants' narratives to organically materialise, to honour their voices, *and* keeping to the topic of ageing; I tread a fine between allowing and focus. I transcribed long passages of text that were not in the end relevant for this study, but the interactions were helpful in better understanding particpants' history and social contexts, and to build rapport. Another issue pertaining to interviews was the decision to limit interviews to one per participants despite originally planning to conduct second interviews. However, it quickly became apparent that this would not be practically feasible due to time constraints.

Additionally, following analysis, I have come to realise that a sample size of seven women was perhaps too large for the chosen analytical method, especially given Langdridge's (2007) emphasis of CNA's idiographic priority and advocation for case-study work and the method's complex analytical layers. CNA is better suited to a smaller sample size, so that the in-depth analysis could be conducted within the time constraints of the study and its word limit as a professional doctoral thesis. Although I have endeavoured to maintain the richness of analysis as best as I could, much of the narrative data were left out of the final write-up given these constraints.

Chapter 3: Critical narrative analysis

Overview

As outlined above, the narrative data generated from the study was subjected to a six-stage Critical Narrative Analysis (Langdridge, 2007). The following chapter begins by engaging with the first analytical stage, a reflexive consideration that critiques the illusions of my own subjectivity. Subsequently, for each of the 7 participants, a brief biographical introduction is presented followed by stages 2 and 3 of the analysis, which encompass individual narratives, narrative tone, and rhetoric function, and identities and identity work. This level of analysis retains the essentially idiographic nature of CNA, so that the particular selves can be known and considered individually. Finally, stage 4, analysis of thematic priorities and relationships, allows for dominant themes to emerge from the collection of data. Stages 5 and 6, the destabilising of narratives and the critical synthesis of findings are presented within the next and final chapter.

Part one: Critique of the illusions of subjectivity

This analytical stage functions to illuminate the 'horizons' of my narrative world, the assumptions that underpin my analytical position. Having transcribed all 7 interviews, I paused to consider how my subjective views may influence or restrain the analysis, and subsequently subjected these assumptions to an appropriate hermeneutics of suspicion. In this case, given the gendered nature of ageing, and my affinity with feminist thinking, a feminist lens was thought to best interrogate these views. Certainly, as a woman in the same age category as my participants, experiencing ageing as they are, I may expect commonality and resonance in their narratives. I therefore reflected on questions of gender and power, issues of race and ethnicity, and of body and appearance amongst other things. I present three facets here, which I feel most impact on how I might have 'read' the narrative data: i) viewing ageing as decline; ii) developing feminist awareness; iii) ambivalence towards motherhood and preserving fertility.

My curiosity about the ageing process and decision to research this topic likely stem from my own preoccupation with ageing. I am certainly not exempt from cultural messages that valorise youth and norms of femininity and am susceptible to societal pressures to delay ageing through health practices, beauty works, and self-care, to present the 'best' version of myself to the outside world. I can acknowledge the influence of a neoliberal fixation on self-improvement (Gill & Schraff, 2013), which encapsulates a dimension that is surface, and constructs the body as an object of display (Grogan, 2016). Like many women before me, I remember being aware of my appearance in

comparison to others from a young age and am familiar with the social capital that came with being young and admired. As an East Asian woman, I am also subject to Eastern cultural norms that prize body thinness to an extreme, and am expected to age more slowly, if not imperceptibly, when compared with my Western counterparts. By acknowledging this, I can open up any assumptions about the preservation of youth for women of different ethnicities.

At the inception of the research project, I was feeling increasingly aware of loss, of ageing as an inevitability and was looking for answers, and possibly reassurance from knowing the experience of women like me. I therefore constructed ageing according to a deficit model, maintained by dominant culture (Gullette, 1997). I had internalised narratives of decline, was aware of the negative potentials of such internalisation, and was searching for other forms of meaning and interpretation to enrich and broaden my relationship with ageing and ease anxiety. Although I perceived ageing largely as loss, something to survive and make sense of, an equaliser in society and a reminder of our certain mortality and fragility, I also hoped to transcend these preoccupations, and hoped to contribute to the literature that helps other women do the same. While I had internalised the male gaze, I was eager to lessen its hold on me; there was and is a tension between capitulation and resistance.

An interesting and unexpected trajectory influenced the research process, owing to the delay that occurred in my doctoral journey. This meant that I was in my late 30s by the time I arrived at the analysis stage. I therefore became older than my participants at the time of their interviews; their stories remained fixed in time while I continued to evolve. Women are not only "aged by culture", but are aged long before men (Gullette, 2004). Over the past years, owing to my own psychotherapy, my Buddhist practice, and growing awareness of the forces of patriarchy, I became more attuned to Gullette's protest, and more sensitive to the ways women are conditioned by structural forces that are sexist and ageist. With age, I have also deviated from the feminine ideal, which leaves me feeling both relief and grief. I experience a tension between wanting to close the gap, to the best of my abilities, and to simply relax into a new state of being. My internal value-system, with respect to how to age 'well', with compassion, remains in flux. I am mindful to not impose these beliefs, however wavering, onto the narratives of my participants, to lessen expectations and any notion of 'should'.

Finally, my personal ambivalence towards motherhood also separates me from some participants, and the anxieties shared by many women with respect to reproduction and preserving fertility. Indeed, Roman (2004) argues that strong feminist discourses of choice and independence have (unfairly) resulted in motherhood, and especially early motherhood, becoming a symbol of willing submission to patriarchy, and a woman's rejection of her freedom. Although I do not feel that I embody such a strong bias, I am aware that I may find a woman's preoccupation with childbearing

and fertility as too simplistic or reductionist a representation of meaning and identity. I may find motherhood being equated to womanhood as predictable and uninteresting, and possibly personally confronting.

With these three facets in mind and by engaging with this process, I hope to provide a sense of transparency in terms of my own subjective experiencing and the pre-existing assumptions and values I bring to the study. I recognise the need to preserve neutrality, openness, and respect for the data, to welcome difference and multiple meanings, while acknowledging that my 'reading' of the text will inevitably be shaped by my subjective positioning.

Part two: Introducing narrators and narratives

Ada

Ada was a 33-year-old White Bulgarian woman who grew up and studied in the United States before relocating to the UK with her British husband, who was 5 years younger. They did not have children. She was a scientist and researcher and came from an academic immigrant family.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

The master narrative elicited in Ada's story is one of quiet despair and contained anxiety that is held by her pragmatism, wisdom and strength drawn from her husband, family and her professional role and standing. Ada speaks with refreshing frankness and ease; there is little performance in her narratives. Rhetorically, she largely seeks to explain, understand, and be witnessed. Themes and insights emerge organically in richly recounted vignettes that form her life story. She takes her time, not rushing to summarise or abridge, and explores new insights with little self-consciousness. Any attempt to construct identity is subtle or matter of fact. Although some stories align with canonical narratives, one does not get the sense that she is rhetorically borrowing dominant social discourses to bolster her point of view. Her stories are very much her own. Ada speaks in a jovial tone, childlike at times, open and unabashed. The volume of her voice shifts from bright to soft, conveying pathos and uncertainty, especially when she projects into an uncertain future. "Not dwelling on it" is her go-to reminder when she finds herself saddened or anxious, a mantra by which she lives and survives life. Following a comprehensive biographical narrative of Ada's early and adult life, including detailed accounts of two significant relationships and her steadfast career progression, narratives of ageing fell largely into three categories: noticing ageing, the embodiment of that, and deliberations of motherhood.

Noticing ageing dominates much of Ada's narratives; she offers anecdotes that telegraph a growing awareness of her ageing body and gendered position in society. Her stories are relational, depicting the ageing that she witnesses in others, which professes a future that she hesitates to acknowledge, as well the ageing she observes in herself by way of others and her own keen noticing.

Her experiences of ageing feel episodic and iterative, an ebb and flow of noticing and forgetting is conveyed. Ada is often jolted into awareness of her ageing or aged presence by an event or acute observation. They have included an old photograph ("very stark"), finding her gumline receding ("oh my god, what is happening"), a televised interview ("wow, wow my hair is so white"), and being called "madam" in public, which was disturbingly "formal" and "age-y". These encounters bear a strong emotional impact, which Ada often trivialises and downplays with an upbeat and humorous delivery. What often follows are panic, anxiety and a collapse in confidence; recovery happens either by negotiating a rationalised equilibrium or by seeking reassurance and validation from her husband. The negative consequences of ageing could be endured if he does not entertain them, and if his attraction towards Ada does not wane. The "little panic" moments are often contained by his pledges of loyalty: "I'd like to sleep with those kinds of girls but not to be married to them because they're too high maintenance".

In older women, Ada sees a future that she dreads; she absorbs their cries of distress and fear. An older sister admits being "terrified" at turning 40 and dabbles in "Botox and sculpting treatments". Female colleagues in their "mid- to late-40s" lament vanishing into "sexual obsolescence". Ada's tone oscillates between sadness and anger, but always bright and humorous. She sees the societal pressures that limit women and rails against that; equally, she shudders at her accelerating physical decline and the social consequences it carries.

> "…my features are going to change significantly in the next 10 years, much more significantly than they have in the last 10, and that scares me". (41:8)[3]

Ada has an open and tolerant attitude to cosmetic procedures, not ruling them out and not shaming others for opting in. Her anti-ageing rituals are minimal, centred mostly on maintaining her athletic physique.

Embodiment is a strong theme in Ada's narratives, telling of her fascination and heightened awareness of the minutia of physical change. Aghast at seeing her own features morphing slowly

[3] Narrative extracts are referenced by transcript page and the first line number

into that of her ageing parents, she winces at the "faded" "gentler features of youth", "much more square" jawline, and her "stark" resemblance to the men in her family. A long sub-narrative investigates her greying hair, and elsewhere she contemplates the loss of mobility, physical prowess and musculature.

Ada's sense of ageing is often foregrounded in her relationships; with her young husband, his 20-something-year-old friends, and her ageing parents and grandparents. Ada is acutely aware of ageing being gendered; her words interlace with canonical narratives that construct men as "peaking" and women being in "decline" as they age. In a moment of real pathos, Ada centres this tension in her marriage, "…he's going to be a catch, and I'm going to be less and less of a catch to others…". Socially, Ada constructs herself as the "Debbie Downer" of the group but feels at ease transitioning into a quieter life, honouring her changing needs. In her parents and grandparents, Ada sees her inherited future, and the lineage of decline – "bad back", "bad knees", "double-chin" – that feels inescapable, "oh my god, that's where I'm going". Their mortality haunts her, and she contemplates "euthanasia", preferring that to 'old-old' age. Her expressed terror aligns with canonical narratives that position later life as one of suffering and dependency, "gross", "sad and scary".

Ada states having children as the "main concern" of ageing. Her narratives on motherhood, however, are patchy and insubstantial; they feel incidental and often contradictory. The 5-year age difference creates a schism for Ada and her husband. His disinterest in children, at least at the age of 28, jars with her growing maternal yearnings, a "growing, growing feeling", which Ada herself tries to minimise in other parts of her story, "I'm still not interested. I don't feel the clock ringing in my head or whatever…" Many sub-narratives form Ada's deliberations: she considers adoption, the "environmental principle babies", "the freezing" of eggs, and champions "the really good genes" that she could pass on, it being "a pity to not do that". Later in the narrative, Ada charts a timeframe for having children, "I feel like if I have a child, I want to do it when I'm like 35", but also fears her life and career would be threatened and curtailed by becoming a mother. Keeping up with friends and having a family to fall back on in old age are also considered. Overall, Ada conveys a continuous grappling, which is a function of age, that feels gnawing and irreconcilable. She pushes them away, but motherhood and its implications keep resurfacing in her story.

Identity

Ada describes herself as a "tomboy" and a "careerist", two principal identities captured in her narratives. Both have, however, been agitated and unsettled by Ada's experience of ageing. Ada constructs herself as naturally "tomboyish", "masculine", with a tendency to form competitive as

opposed to flirtatious relationships with men. This persona suited her rebellious nature throughout her early adulthood; she aspired to subvert conventions and conventional beauty ideals as a young woman and felt confident doing so. Her earlier identity embodied fierce empowerment steeped in feminist zeal.

In her narratives of ageing, however, the strength of her convictions dissipates as her "cockiness" and youthful bravado wane; she finds herself more susceptible to social pressures to perform ageless femininity, and her attractiveness feels less assured.

> "...as I got older, I think that confidence started to wane because suddenly guys just see you less anyway". (18:11)

If the social capital afforded to Ada by way of femininity was in short supply to begin with, the loss of youth feels all the more daunting. Competitively relating to men felt radical and less objectifying as a young woman, but it affords Ada less validation and assurance just as she is becoming invisible to the 'male gaze'. She is less objectified by men but also less feminised by men, something she finds herself missing as she ages.

> "...I definitely wish that I get more approaches or more flirtations, or the stupid things where my friends complain about being dog-whistled at, no-one ever dog-whistles at me, no-one". (20:25)

Ada describes a painful duality; her lived identity, that of a "sparky, young, fun", "cute" "pretty little thing on a bicycle", shifts further away from how she imagines herself perceived by men and society writ-large, "crazy", "middle-aged", and a "butch" "lesbian". An age gap forms between Ada's ageless inner experience and an ageing self as bound and constructed by society. Reconciling the two produces a discordant identity that unsteadies her sense of self. Ada copes by performing youthfulness, which she conceptualises as being light, "much more smiley" and perpetually "positive". Her earlier identity, that of a feminist warrior, appears to have been eroded by age, by society and the pressures it exerts.

Ada's exceptional career successes and professional status constitute a facet of her identity that affords her grounding and fortitude. She admits leaning into this, especially when she finds herself "floundering"; defining herself by her career is something that she's come to accept. Although it saddens Ada that she is no longer "young and impressive", having lost that heady, intoxicating sense of extraordinariness, she enjoys rising from young protégée to an experienced mentor and leader.

Looking forward, as she begins to conceive becoming a mother, she questions integrating maternal yearnings with spirited "careerist" ambitions. How might the role of motherhood agitate or even derail this promising trajectory, so far uninterrupted? This question is left open; Ada's identity remains in flux.

Clare

Clare was a 30-year-old mixed heritage British Korean woman. She grew up in Kent and lived in London where she worked as a civil servant. Previously, she worked abroad in international development. She grew up in a nuclear family; her early upbringing was Christian but she now identified as an atheist.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

Clare's narratives are considered, carefully constructed and conveyed. They tend to be intellectually informed and rational, in a tone that is somewhat detached, emotionally neutral and matter of fact. When she is emotionally stirred, typically with sadness or fear, Clare might curtail the narrative or switch to speaking in general as opposed to personal terms. One senses that she is much more comfortable speaking about the gendered nature of ageing and rage against patriarchy than delving too deeply into her personal experiences. Her words tend to echo feminist literature and theory, which she has been engaged with in the past few years. There are many long pauses in her speech, indicating tentative starts and a hesitation in how best to recount her life stories. Clare seems to require prompting from me, to sustain and build narratives. I am positioned to be more directive, providing guidance and encouragement. Clare also often drifts into long tangents, preferring to peripherally comment on issues of ageing as opposed to confronting the topic head-on. This may be owing to her discomfort in thinking about ageing, or because the experience is less vivid for her right now, with very few observable physical signs of ageing to speak of. Structurally, her narratives follow a logical progression with clear separation of themes and are easy to follow and organise.

Following a detailed depiction of Clare's earlier gender conditioning and sexualisation, as well as an exploration of gender dynamics in the workplace and her fraught relationship history, Clare turns to the issue of ageing by recounting the "anxiety" she felt prior to turning 30; "I was definitely freaking out about it…". She describes "expectations" and "goals", echoing canonical narratives that align age with milestones in life. For Clare, content with her career progression, her main source of anxiety related to "the whole 'settling down' thing". She narrates the possible origins of such felt pressure; from mum, for whom "you're not a woman until you're a mother"; from peers, nine of

whom got married in the preceding year; and from Clare's own experience of "deep longing". Clare describes "conflicted views", aware that she is "not anywhere near" the "traditional trajectories" that are being lived out by her "whole age cohort". She feels "a deep belief or a deep inclination" enshrined in her upbringing; there's a sense of predestined inevitability to her having children. In a tone that flares from resigned sadness to anger, Clare narrates being "enraged" at how these pressures are "much more placed on the shoulders of women at that age than it is on men". She describes "horrifying" imbalances endured by female friends and colleagues with children, "having to make a decision of career versus child" and firmly rejects such a position. Coming back to being 30, Clare reflects on being "a lot more relaxed" now and wonders how much of that is related to her being in a new relationship.

A later narrative centres on Clare's growing awareness of ageing. She describes "consciousness" of her parents ageing, "vulnerability" and growing "dependency", experiencing "fears around that" and a sense of "responsibility"; "I couldn't really see myself moving away now". She revisits this fear at the very end of our conversation and, almost unable to bear the reality of life and mortality, considers her father's "mental decline" and dementia with immense anguish.

> "I don't want to think about it, I think I block it out and just not think about it". (35:24)

Turning to her own ageing, Clare observes having "a mixed bag of emotions" and only just beginning to notice physical signs of ageing, being someone who naturally looks young. She considers the positive impact on her professional life ("people can take you a bit more seriously"), being "very aware of fertility", and moving "into a new age bracket" on the dating scene ("people probably have filtered me out"). She goes on to describes "some sadness towards ageing", conveying nostalgia for a youthful kind of "excitement and optimism for the future". For Clare, ageing narrows life, rendering it predictable and safe; "you have more responsibilities and less freedom to kind of just pick up and go". Ageing is equated to an expectation of maturity, which, according to Clare and canonical narratives, is defined by stability, limited choices, and caution. For Clare, it also enforces realism and depletes "trust in the world"; "I'd rather believe good things in people; I don't want to be cynical".

It was difficult for Clare to find examples of adverse physical impact of ageing. She remains immune at this age, and protected by her Korean genes, which are considered a prize in life; "like my mum; she looks so young. I'm like, 'I really hope I have her genes'". There is an awareness of potential decline, however, as Clare describes a shift towards making healthier choices and growing out of youthful neglect and disregard for the body. Her regime includes using strong sun-protection, quitting smoking, exercising for mental and physical health, and using "some skin products". The

trauma of childbirth is something that Clare has "mixed-feelings towards". It is constructed as being a 'game-changer' for a woman, something that accelerates physical ageing and, perhaps, something to be avoided.

> "So, in some ways it s prolonging your shelf life as a woman by not having children". (32:9)

For Clare, retaining youthful attractiveness prolongs a woman's "shelf-life". In making this association, she reproduces canonical narratives of 'ageing well' or 'ageing gracefully' that rewards older women for looking younger and obligates them to practice agelessness. As enraged as she may be about the gendered reality of ageing, she also accepts the social scripts that punish women for looking old:

> "Your worth as a commodity in the dating market is probably going down, for a woman, as you grow older". (24:10)

Concluding her narratives, however, Clare tries to find reconciliation. She proposes a balance between "maintaining making an effort in my appearance" and "questioning assumptions around women having a shelf life". Clare's narratives set her out as a conscious and curious person, prepared to subvert gendered norms without shaming herself for any inclination to conform. There is a desire to integrate and grow in the process.

Identity

Clare engages in identity construction from the very start and is deeply thoughtful about her inner landscape and the multiple facets and manifestations of her identity. Her opening narrative, extensive and thorough, highlights Clare's sense of self as being predicated on her academic and professional achievements thus far. Indeed, she herself is aware of this; "I feel like I'm just doing like a career history right now". Clare recounts getting "validation through school stuff and university stuff" and how this has followed through with her performance in "an academic slash work setting". This aspect of her identity feels cemented but not always gladly received; "I kind of wish it wasn't so important to me". Clare describes being concerned with external perception and enjoying the prestige attached to her earlier humanitarian work and overseas experiences. Her being an independent and adventurous person is an aspect of identity that was "solidified" through extensive travels as a young woman. Clare's professional life serves as an anchor for areas of instability in life,

typically in the romantic domain. Describing herself as having "trust issues" with men, work, by contrast, provides certainty and assurance; "it's one part that I can count on…".

Clare speaks of her identity as being "intersected" by gender, ethnicity and class and constructs the identity of someone who is committed to learning and is critically engaged. She narrates becoming "racially conscious" and "more aware of structural inequalities between men and women", having "developed a kind of feminism consciousness in the last few years". There is an intellectual underpinning to her narratives; she frequently speaks to a feminist audience, reproducing established discourse. Wishing to reconcile gendered "societal pressures" with her growing critical engagement, Clare narrates the rejection, at least in part, of certain traditional institutions and trajectories. Speaking of plans for the next five years, she rejects weddings and marriage as being "a bit performative and a bit meaningless", preferring, instead, to have "one or two" children with a committed partner. She also laments against tired gender dynamics and references earlier experiences of being objectified by the "male gaze" and exoticised by men for her "ethnic appearance". Equally, she champions for identity to not be rooted in romantic relationships, drawing on an experience with a close female friend who became subsumed in her marriage. Here, Clare speaks in a way that is designed to rally and convince, a manifesto of female liberation:

> "So, one thing I don t really like is how romantic relationship is put on the top of the hierarchy of relationships… [and] also for you to be judged on whether or not you re in this like happy monogamous relationship." (21:23)

Elsewhere, however, Clare narrates tension and uncertainty that challenge this identity construction. With some poignancy and vulnerability, she acknowledges feeling more strongly able to stand behind these views when she is safe in a relationship than when she is single, which is "sad" and not what she wants. She describes the emotional cost of living a path that goes against the grain and is aware of her internalised sense of couplehood being a symbol of social success and normalcy.

> "But, there s also a part of me that does still judge myself against all my friends who are on this traditional path and I have to consciously remind myself not to do that, or to know that I value different things, not to see myself as failing because I m not married and settled." (23:2)

Religion and her internalised Christian values, inherited from mum, are an aspect of identity that can also be fraught with confusion and contradictions. Although she "identified as an atheist", Clare acknowledges conservative values from mum that continue to "filter into your subconsciousness".

They can compound the social pressures levied on women and have at times rendered Clare uncomfortable with embracing and owning her sexuality.

Clare, armed with an inquisitive intellect and much self-knowledge, embodies someone who is embarking on a quest for resilience and immunity against the structural barriers that limit women. She is mid-journey, however, and continues to grapple with divergent forces that challenge her, despite seeing them very clearly.

Ester

Ester was a 34-year-old White American woman who moved to London to work as a researcher in History, having completed her PhD in the United States. She was single, without children and came from a middle-class professional background and identified as Jewish.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

Ester's narrative is one of ongoing evolution and self-examination, rich in nuanced tension and ambiguity. By acknowledging and elevating but not rigidly aligning herself with feminist discourse, Ester is able to openly explore and interrogate the incongruency and confusion that she experiences. She is less concerned with performing feminism but would rhetorically engage a feminist audience to justify what she might perceive to be ideological departures. Her narratives are often in flux and alternate between that of emancipatory growth and that of socially inherited pressures and anxiety. Being older means letting go of the trivial preoccupations of her 20s, but the timeline also feels more immediate. There is a simultaneous easing and raising of pressure. Ester also alternates between describing her past, present and an anticipated future, in an effort to make sense of her changing self. She maintains professional distance and a matter-of-factness throughout the interview; only subtle shifts in affect were detectable. She is, at times, reluctant to think on the spot, "I don't know about that, I'd have to think about that", and uses humour to deflect from moments of real pathos. Her words often trail off, suggesting that she is sure that I would implicitly understand, that I know and share her experiences. At other times, trailing off follows an impulse to navigate away from vulnerable threads, a reluctance to continue.

Three narratives emerge from the interview: the first telling of her struggles to reconcile canonical narratives of "milestones" with the realities of her life; the second chronicles her experience of transitions and change; and the third, briefer, captures her relationship with wider society, seen through the lens of age and ageing.

Ester begins her narrative by way of comparison; she contrasts her status quo with traditional "milestones" of adulthood, namely career-building and motherhood. In doing so, she narrates both defiance and disappointment, as well as a sense of being unsettled, in flux and therefore insecure. Her "precarious academic positions" frustrate her wish for "permanency", a clear career trajectory and "timeline" that is a function of age. Naming herself her "own worst enemy", Ester's awareness of these self-imposed age-related pressures only adds to her "frustration" and "anxiety".

Ester appears to simultaneously endorse and reject canonical narratives of marriage and motherhood as normative rites of passage for women. While she attempts to elevate "alternate paths" and female role models who represent "other possibilities", her words carry a tinge of shame, at having 'failed' to meet society's expectations of women.

> "…when I was in my 20s, I anticipated that by age 34 I would be married, I may even have a kid. Now I m not sure I want to have children or want to be married (laughs) but, you know, there s definitely-, I still feel that kind of societal pressure especially when I see other women my own age." (2:1)

There is a sense of Ester speaking rhetorically to a feminist audience, which necessitates a rhetorical (and personal) struggle within the narrative to avoid the telling of an anti-feminist story.

> "… in theory none of this should matter. In theory, I should be able to embrace the fact that I am leading a really good life and I don t need these things to define who I am and … shouldn t let my age feel like such a limitation, to even have or feel like there should be milestones that I have ahead of us … that I m flawed in some manner." (3:13)

Ester needs to complicate and agitate the canonical narratives of motherhood even as she simultaneously demonstrates quiet and confused vulnerability. She caveats normative desires with feminist awareness of gendered conditioning and subtly judges herself for not being "empowered" enough. For Ester, her Jewish upbringing, unique family script and "biological clock" help explain her reproductive yearnings; highlighting these sources of pressure helps Ester make sense of her felt internal conflict and positions her as being at the mercy of these powerful emotional and social forces. Ester traces painful negotiations with her "Jewish mother" who "desperately" wants to see her married with children. She ends on a hopeful note, however, as she describes finding compromise and being able to transcend, at least partially, family dynamics that are stale and oppressive, "she doesn't totally let up on the pressure but she's, it's a lot better now".

Speaking on transformation, Ester narrates her changing relationship with men and with her physical body and appearance. Ester describes being "much more sexually empowered" in her 30s and speaks with compassion and some pity to an earlier, more naïve self, thus splitting her 20s and 30s.

> "I just so wish I could go back in time and tell my younger self to like calm down, stop dating, getting into relationships just because you feel like you have to be in them, … I sort of do feel like my youth was squandered on, (laughs) on a young person, you know?" (5:1)

She describes being better able to navigate the dating world, now smarter and more assertive and less "sexualised by men", a consequence of ageing that is "wonderful". Ester constructs an emancipated self but seems unaware that she is defining herself in relation to men. Later and seeming more apprehensive and conflicted, Ester ponders the less favourable reality of being less "lusted after" by men and constructs herself as a "sexual being" in spite of physical "flaws" and "wrinkles". In doing so, Ester implicitly reproduces canonical narratives that predicate a woman's sexual attractiveness on physical perfection and youthfulness. Bringing men and women into comparison, Ester also endorses popular notions of men being the inferior sex, developmentally behind women, the downside of ageing being that she is less able to find 'good-enough' men with "a certain level of life experience or sort of thoughtfulness or orientation towards the world". Rhetorically, such a perspective also provides some explanation for her still being single.

When narrating her experience of physical ageing and change, Ester is matter of fact, not concerned with performing feminist indifference or resistance. She conveys honest awareness of decline, the wrinkles that she "hates", a body that is less immune to indulgences or 'abuse' and her ticking biological clock (her "main anxiety"). Her tone communicates concern and fear, not for the "subtle" changes that she sees now but in anticipation of the near and far future, when "your body just start to betray you a little bit". Ester firmly constructs ageing as decline, "downhill" and, beyond the potential for gaining professional respect by evading the male gaze, an unavoidable human tragedy.

Projecting forward, Ester's narratives become more existential. She recalls being jolted into awareness that time is passing by, and quickly, the likelihood of traumatic illnesses in middle-age and time being fleeting and finite, it being both "motivating and sad". Evoking dark humour to abate pathos, Ester bemoans the absurdity of the human condition and her heightened awareness of

mortality, something that happily eluded her younger self. For Ester, ageing sharply punctures the myth of her personal immortality.

Ester's latter narrative threads concern women's changing relationship with society, solidarity and community, her search for female role models, and her changing perceptions of elderly people in society (no longer "infantilising" them and recognising their "depth of experience"). Ester describes with much positivity and celebration her growing appreciation for female friendships, shifting away from needing male validation and competing with women, finding solidarity in "shared grievances". Her craving for female role models also stems from a need to counter society's doctrine of 'ageing gracefully'; "it has a kind of negative connotation for me". For Ester, positive strides have been made ("perception is changing a little bit") but ageing remains gendered, and women's unique experience of ageing cannot sadly be understood by men:

> "…women tend to have a strict timeline in their head, and I don t think men have it to the same extent". (16:13)

Identity

Ester positions herself as being caught in a "fraught" relationship with ageing; she struggles to integrate and reconcile her "feminist ethos" with her lived experience of desiring normative experiences that are, by her accounts, gendered and socially prescribed. Ester constructs the identity of a frustrated would-be feminist, academically enlightened and critically engaged, whose emancipation is impeded by her socialisation and biological impulses. In doing so, Ester speaks to a Cartesian dualism of mind and body (Descartes, 1641/1980); she delineates her feminist "intellectual ethics" from the emotional pulls of the body, which she judges to be lesser-than and incompatible with female empowerment. Referring to her "biological clock", Ester laments:

> "And part of me also feels like I shouldn t give a shit about any of this. Like, I wish I was a more-, I wish I felt more empowered in my feminism". (3:11)

> "…it s frustrating to also be intellectually aware of that and yet nevertheless feel those feelings." (3:18)

Indeed, Ester herself speaks to the incongruence between the image that she would like to project, that of "a woman who doesn't need to live within those conventions" and the realities of her

preoccupations ("I try to fight it"). Throughout her narratives, Ester frequently refers to an abstract ideal, a form of emancipation and resilience that she aspires to but finds herself wanting.

> "...in an ideal world, that is how I would like to be, ... to be able to reach my 40s and maybe still be single, maybe still be childless and just don t give a shit and also not feel like my age sort of defines the parameters of how I can live." (14:23)

Her words are often infused with frustration, self-judgement and shame, a need to atone for any transgressions from the feminist archetype. She constructs the identity of the fallen feminist most vividly in her narratives on anti-ageing cosmetic practices. Her words take on a dialogic quality, revealing internal conflict that jars. Thoughts about what she might be prepared to do in the future are immediately qualified as "vanity" and condemned.

> "I do have a certain vanity, and again this is like so counter to my feminist ethos, but I do wonder, if I got to an age where-, like would I do Botox? ... I hate that I m even like admitting to this, but I do wonder whether I would do them, ... and then I feel bad about myself for even contemplating it." (12:19)

Ester positions herself as both "not unique" and "an anomaly", further constructing a splintered identity, one that is still to be negotiated. Both serve a rhetoric function to offer assurance and safety. Being "typical" and characterising her ambiguous experience of ageing as "quite common" evoke female solidarity and a shared collective narrative, equally confused. Doing so bolsters and validates Ester's lived experience but also muffles the strength of her individual voice; there is comfort in being one of many. Elsewhere, Ester emphasises the uniqueness of her upbringing and social world; "I'm both proud of that and part of me feels like a weirdo (laughs), you know, an anomaly". Constructing an identity that is uniquely conditioned by an unusual upbringing justifies Ester's reproductive urges and thereby relieves some of her held guilt; she is not quite as 'bad' of a feminist as we might think.

Francesca

Francesca was a 33-year-old mixed heritage British Jewish Chinese woman. She was from London, where she lived still with her husband. She was university-educated and worked as a personal assistant in a financial services firm. Her parents divorced when she was very young.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

Francesca speaks in speeches; they detail conversations that she's had with others and with herself. Her narratives are therefore dynamic and dialogic. She is very much in the moment, descriptive and free-associating. She is less reflective about the implications of her offerings and is unconcerned with image-construction and management. She would occasionally temper what has been uttered, to minimise its importance. These gestures seem instinctive, however, as opposed to deliberate. She is refreshingly unabashed and unselfconscious, and makes no attempt to speak to a liberal, feminist audience. Her tone is matter of fact, occasionally nervous and anxious or sad. Ageing is perceived as decline, a certain tragedy of the human condition. Francesca's narratives trace the negative impact of such decline; she also pre-emptively braces herself for what may come still. Rhetorically, she tries to reassure herself that further ageing can be tolerated and survived but is aware that she is currently shielded from the worst of it. She seemingly oscillates between horrified "catastrophising" and conscious avoidance and leans on her husband for validation and assurance. Narratively, Francesca conveys a preoccupation with tracking physical signs of ageing, and a tendency to scrutinise. Elsewhere, Francesca describes being reminded of her age and ageing, an attachment to youth, and the social construction of her age and gender, in her male-dominated workplace and as a woman who married young and desires no children.

Following an account of her coming of age, Francesca recounts the ease with which she has been able to look "fairly attractive", which in no small part depended on her being an "easy" "size 8 to 10". Infused with annoyance and panic, Francesca proceeds to outline all the dreaded symptoms of ageing that she now experiences. Becoming 32 was depicted as a shocking turning point; "I had a bit of a meltdown about my weight and my face." Her words echo the adage that 'youth is wasted on the young'; only in hindsight is she able to realise how "lucky" she has been.

She speaks, in detail, of weight gain ("I started getting pretty dumpy"), slowing metabolism ("why aren't I losing weight, what's happening here"), hormonal issues ("a weird puberty thing in my 30s"), and adult acne and eczema ("why does your skin need to change"), finding them all incredulous and "distressing". She also describes regimes of diet and exercise designed to keep her looking "average" and "normal". Her narratives suggest that Francesca subscribes to normative beauty ideals of body thinness and "looking good", much of which inherited from her mother whose own relationship with ageing, seemingly one of secrecy and shame, is also explored:

> "She never ever spoke about her age; she didn t want anyone to know her age." (21:1)

The need to "groom" oneself is an inherited script that has been internalised by Francesca. For her, this manifests as a preoccupation with maintaining "normal" weight; weighing more would constitute almost a moral and personal failure. In a moment of pathos, Francesca recounts being "in a grump" over her weight and being trapped in a negative spiral of scrutinisation and self-judgement.

> "I would just stare at myself and go, what the hell is wrong with you, why are you so lumpy , and it was just horrid." (13:10)

Finding some relief and catharsis in being able to rant about the torments of ageing, Francesca recounts exhausting hypervigilance, scanning her body for "cellulite", "stretchmarks", "love handle", "the fat that turns up in places where you thought no fat could ever turn up", and her face for inherited "jowls". She describes being "really aware" of losing or gaining "a kilo" and choosing her outfits depending on her body image and "mood". Francesca's ability and willingness to meet the world with confidence is seemingly predicated on her self-perception of fatness. Conversely, not quite realising the contradictions in her narratives, Francesca narrates leaving this phase of scrutinising ("a can of worms") behind her. As she describes renewed regimes to "control" her weight, she evokes canonicals narratives of 'keeping fit' and 'mindful eating' to justify and normalise her fears of being larger and her exhaustive efforts to prevent this fate.

Elsewhere in her story, Francesca describes the psychological impact of ageing. She points to the wedding dress that she may no longer fit into and photos of her in her 20s ("I don't look like that anymore") as painful reminders of ageing. She describes fluctuating awareness of her age, something that "is there", not constant but frequently recalled. Equally, Francesca describes "mentally preparing" herself for 50, pre-emptively bracing herself for later decline wondering how she might cope; "maybe your goalposts change, like when you're 70, you wanna be mistaken for your 50s". On mortality and loss, Francesca describes the "pre-grief" she experienced for her parents, something previously unacknowledged or thought of, and needing to seek therapy to help manage her emotions:

> "I m still aware that they re both getting quite old, and it really bothers me that they are. You know, they re my parents. And because there s never been an emphasis on age, it s just sort of hit me that they are that old. And that bothers me, and I don t want that. I guess part of it is I wish that I was in my 20s because then they re younger too." (23:3)

There is a sense of anticipated tragedy in Francesca's narratives and a tension between wanting to confront ageing head-on, to minimise the shock, and preferring to hide from it "because it hasn't happened yet".

Lastly, Francesca conveys her rejection of motherhood, her lack of affinity with children and awkwardness in relating to children. She fears the impact of pregnancy and childbirth on her body and physicality ("your body changes so much"), and sees motherhood as a temporal marker of agedness, "a huge milestone of being old", which she spurns. Her refusal to have children is resolute and matter of fact, a rejection of the financial, physical, and emotional strain of parenthood:

> "…it would ruin my life, my lifestyle and therefore my life". (29:8)

Identity

There is an unquestioning ease with which Francesca is simply herself, quite unaware of the ways in which she is gendered by her social world. There is no agenda and no manifesto to speak of, no language of emancipation nor of female empowerment. Rather, she narrates trusting and "naïve" acceptance; she aims to survive as opposed to rebel. Francesca narrates an identity that is predicated on having a "normal" body weight and shape and being "well put together" and works to maintain these internalised standards of feminine beauty. She constructs her identity as "unusual", a combination of multiple cultures and influenced by opposing personalities. She speaks of a mum who prioritises aesthetics, a dad with "zero interest in what people look like, including himself", and an ex-nanny who sits "in the middle". Their influences feed into Francesca's sense of self. She is at times preoccupied with preserving youth but prefers a minimalist approach to grooming, enough to "look good" minus most aesthetic flourishes.

Francesca occasionally pathologises her personality, regarding herself "dramatic" and "sceptical" and a "catastrophist", especially in relation to age and mortality. Having received therapeutic input in the past, she constructs herself as being cured of these undesirable tendencies; "I don't do that anymore, it's good". Purging herself of these traits equates to a purging of age-related anxiety, a means of survival.

Francesca appears resigned to be a "very shy" person, with "low self-esteem" and defers to men for validation and protection. Much of her later narrative focuses on her absolute aversion to being single. For her, hypothetical singlehood equates to limited opportunities and an unlived life. Life is on hold somehow until one is coupled up; the "doing" and "exploring" of life necessitate having a

partner to share the experience with and a husband who lends her strength and confidence. Francesca constructs a self in need of rescuing and propping up; she needs the "safety blanket" in her husband to be able to take risks in life, to be "comfortable" and to survive any existential dread about the future. That she feels this way feels completely natural for Francesca.

> "...it s that whole appreciation package that he gives that makes me feel, okay, I m getting old but it s okay because he s there . So, I think being single and going through this age would be very difficult". (36:6)

In professional contexts, Francesca derives confidence from male attention and approval, without "playing up" to her "youth and attractiveness", maintaining "an even keel". Her role as "secretary", "a very, very old role" foregrounds these traditional gender dynamics, which Francesca navigates and tolerates. She senses her dwindling social capital at the workplace, being lower in the pecking order for "perks" and describes an "irrational" urge to compete:

> "I want to show these young whippersnappers I m still in the game". (20:24)

The need for people to validate her looking good and looking younger than her age is important for Francesca; being thought of as younger creates an illusion of being younger:

> "...if nobody else thinks you re that old, then you don t look that old, and you re not that old". (38:3)

There is a sense of being able to get away with something, tinged with the fear of eventually losing this edge.

> "At some point that s going to stop. I think that s probably when I ll... feel my age". (38:1)

Francesca therefore reproduces a canonical narrative that conceptualises 'looking good for your age' as social triumph and genetic advantage. Similarly, Francesca leans into the fluidity and ambiguity of her age and, by extension, an age-defined identity. Being vague affords her a degree of anonymity and respite from being fixed by society. According to Francesca, marrying young ages her but not wanting children spares her from the 'mother' archetype that denotes age and maturity. Her true social age, therefore, remains ambiguous. She narrates an attachment to being young, almost preferring to be infantilised and ageless. Half serious, Francesca fantasises embodying a teenage body again:

> "I wish I was 16 again (laughs), I could lose all of this!" (12:14)

Taken together, although Francesca makes no deliberate attempt to construct a particular identity, through her narratives, she produces facets of a natural and unaffected self who strives to survive life and ageing. She is guided by instinct as opposed to doctrine, happy in being shielded and protected by the man in her life.

Mary

Mary was a 29-year-old White British woman who moved to London to pursue a teaching career. She was single, without children and lived in a shared house with flatmates. Mary lived for one or two years in Argentina during her twenties, which she identified as being a turning point. At the time of the interview, Mary was a few days shy of her thirtieth birthday.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

Mary's narratives read like streams of consciousness, unstructured and meandering. They seem to capture Mary's inner discordance and her committed but laboured attempt at sense-making. The overall tone is tentative, soft, occasionally punctured by joyful and wilful declarations of certainty and strength. She speaks in incomplete sentences; they often trail into tangents or weave between age-related threads and concerns. Meanings seem ungraspable, difficult to follow and indicative of her own ambivalence and confusion. There is a stop-start rhythm to her speech; at times, she slows down to articulate her meaning with exceptional care, self-conscious of her use of language and presentation. Rhetorically, Mary is concerned with image management and performs social niceties. She is sweet-natured and nervous and often rushes to dilute her views to maintain an impression of neutrality and fairness, preferring words like "bizarre" and "interesting" to more explicit descriptors. Stilted speech occurs in moments of discomfort and awkwardness; for example, when Mary expresses judgement of other women or when she comments on her ageing body. She struggles to reconcile truth and 'shoulds' in her storytelling, limited by a need to 'come across well'. Mary spends much of her narrative constructing identity; she tries to understand and articulate her process of "awakening" and maturation. Turning 30, for Mary, is a natural cue for retrospection and appraisal. Indeed, her narratives are concerned with tracing change; in herself, her changing relationships and shifting needs. Mary alternates between describing her past and present lived experience, in an effort to both separate and contrast the two. Elsewhere, narratives of ageing centre on physical changes

and body image, the social meaning of turning 30, on social norms, and briefly on motherhood as a possible life choice, no longer definitive.

Almost as if wanting to get it out of the way, Mary begins her narrative with a brief contemplation of motherhood. She describes a shifting perspective, no longer beholden to a traditional script modelled by mum. "Marriage and kids" are "not a reality in any way" and "no longer an aim". Later in the narrative, the only other time she revisits this subject, she describes being "freed up" by this new vantage point, not dismissing the possibility but not bound by a need to have children.

> "...now I think that I don t-, I don t know if I ll want them, and I would actually to be very scared to have them". (25:15)

The tension between craving adventure and being "settled" is an ongoing theme in Mary's story, rendered more conscious by her turning 30. Argentina, an "open time" of exploration, symbolises escape and possibilities in Mary's story. She narrates a compromise, necessitated by age, and balances this craving with the domestic responsibilities of "making money and paying the bills" as well as an appreciation for "stability", a "cosy home" and "community". Having "a strong supportive network of women", for Mary, as her tone shifts from nervous ambivalence to one of joy, is both a function of growing older, and a way of surviving ageing and its associated social pressures. The importance of sisterhood and allyship is emphasised throughout her narrative, replicating canonical narratives that champion the same.

> "...that s something that I think will be increasingly important as I get older, sharing experiences, knowing each other very well..." (34:13)

Coming to terms with turning 30 and appraising her life at this juncture encapsulate much of Mary's narrative. She finds meaningful reference points in beloved TV characters, having now caught up with them in age; in older female role models, their enduring attractiveness giving her "faith"; and in younger women, about whom Mary is ambivalent. Younger women serve as a "bizarre" reminder of Mary's ageing, which she expresses with discomfort and incredulity:

> "...wow, actually there are women who are a few years younger than me who are still considered women...". (5:16)

There is a sense of Mary not quite feeling her chronological age and feeling the distance between her lived experience of being '30' and how society constructs her at this age, that "it's a big thing". Speaking of TV characters who epitomise age-appropriate maturity, Mary muses:

> "...it's very bizarre thinking that I'm now that age and I'm supposed to be that same level of maturity". (4:28)

Rhetorically, Mary engages in comparison and seeks to reassure herself that she compares well: "have I done enough to warrant being this age"? Commenting on a younger flatmate who is "very successful", Mary narrates resentment and envy before promptly reassuring herself that "things change". Referring to friends who are "very impressive women" and "all about 34", Mary elevates them but feels the pressure to live up to expectations. Comparison and pecking orders are strongly held notions; they resonate with canonical narratives of growing into a 'successful' life and of social hierarchies. Mary is caught between wanting to transcend these normative milestones and remaining limited by them.

Despite her use of humour to minimise, Mary describes her physical ageing often with enormous discomfort, tinged with shame. She tries to understand her preoccupation with her "saggier breasts" and recounts the "shock of seeing it" and the realisation that "there's no reversing that". The disappointment is more potent because they are not "a symbol of experience". For Mary, "having an older face can bring great gravity", something that she is more likely to embrace. Her breasts, on the other hand, symbolise physical decline in a more personal, inevitable, and nonsensical way.

While she describes having better body image and minimal anti-ageing practices, being 'attractive' is a recurring concern for Mary; her grappling with it feels immediate and unresolved. Rhetorically aligning herself with discourses of female empowerment, Mary narrates an enlightened notion of 'attractiveness', taking it beyond the physical. Elsewhere, however, she constructs ageing as something that impedes as opposed to enhances attractiveness in women. The litmus test for an older woman's attractiveness still rests on her ageing well and maintaining "attractiveness to men". There is a sense of confusion in Mary, and of her wanting to believe certain 'truths' but her feelings not quite matching up.

Identity

From the outset, Mary constructs herself as someone who "reflects" and is concerned with "developing" herself, with "finding out" who she is. For Mary, she has "done that to a certain extent".

She narrates the identity of the awakened or "awakening" person and is keen to tell a story of transformation, with Argentina being the turning point that jolted her into awareness. In doing so, she positions herself within a canonical narrative that aligns foreign travels and growing older with self-actualisation and, leaning on feminist discourse, with female emancipation. Mary creates a duality in her narratives that delineates a younger, docile, foolish self, from the self that she constructs now: "confident", liberated, "honest" and "powerful".

> "…I'm really aware of how much more self-conscious I was when I was younger, and how much more confident I am in myself, and happy in myself…" (3:1)

Rhetorically, Mary tries to illustrate and fortify this empowered present-day identity, by emphasising contrast between her earlier and later experiences. Notably, they include her growing sense of individual style and her changing relationships with men. Mary describes not having "anything really specific" and being "a bit of a cliché attractiveness" in her early twenties, lost in imitation and envious of those who "had something about them". In contrast, she is now "much more confident", authentic and "relaxed" in her judgement and taste and relishes having her "own style".

> "It was so hard and you re so affected by what other people say and who other people think of you and the expectations you put on yourself because of that". (18:9)

In her romantic relationships, Mary describes a younger self who was "self-conscious" and "paranoid and almost out of reality", eager to please and defer to men. Sex was performative and other regarding; she charts a process of self-discovery, becoming self-assured, "in control" and "powerful", more sexuality liberated and at ease in her own body ("fun sex and easier to orgasm").

> "…everything I did was so affected by everything that I had seen on TV, much of that being porn". (14:12)

> "…through the relationships I found many different sides of myself and many different layers to myself as I ve gotten older". (9:6)

Elsewhere, however, the identity of the "awakening" person is tempered by narratives that do not seem to support this (perfect) transformation. Mary narrates tension and contradictions. The strength of her conviction dissipates somewhat as she reluctantly describes an "abusive relationship" she just came out of ("it was quite interesting") and traces her own physical decline, in a tone that conveys fear and doubt ("it's certainly been interesting as I grow older"). In moments of pathos and discomfort, when Mary is forced to confront the discrepancy between her ideal self and the realities

of her experiences, she uses the word "interesting" to deflect from both unpleasant emotions and inconsistencies that weaken her preferred identity and actualising life trajectory. Ultimately, there is a tone of tragedy in Mary's storytelling. Despite her efforts to persuade and construct, the identity of someone who wants to be more confident than she is prevails.

Stella

Stella was a 34-year-old, white, heterosexual woman born in the UK. She was educated to degree level and re-trained to become a full-time yoga teacher. She was single, without children. She has been travelling in Europe for the past year, occasionally stopping to help run yoga retreats. She recently settled in a small and vibrant city in a Southern European country, teaching yoga in a local studio.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

The master narrative elicited in Stella's story is one of becoming, transcendence, a quest; she recounts a process of self-discovery, one that is not yet complete, an attempt to elevate beyond the shackles of social normative expectations. Within the master narrative of tentative defiance and awakening, sit other narratives, including stories of sexual discovery, embodied womanhood, victimhood within a toxic relationship, rejecting London, stories of health as mental clarity and physical well-being, rejecting cosmetic anti-ageing practices, and reflections on mortality and late old age. These stories interlace with broader canonical narratives, illustrative of wider societal discourses (Langdridge, 2007), which Stella typically critiques and creates distance from, positioning herself as the non-conforming other. This is not always consistent; tensions exist between counter narratives of both strength of resistance and fearful surrendering. Through these invocations and threads of storytelling, Stella tries to make sense of her current existence, finding 'home', her singlehood, the ageing self, and the uncertainties ahead. The rhetoric largely seeks to explain and justify the 'alternative' path, providing reassurance. In doing so, she casts London and its inhabitants as symbols of conventionality and conformity, the "sheep" of "cultural conditioning". Stella draws on canonical narratives of spirituality, yoga philosophy, and alternative wisdoms; they provide her with direction, strength, and a sense of knowing and trusting. However, despite Stella's efforts in evoking a narrative of resistance against age-normative pressures, and her rally-cry for women to embrace ageing with honesty and dignity, the plotline often meanders and contradicts, moments of doubt and fear seep through the rhetoric of wilful independence. She appears to conclude with a tentative ending, demonstrating self-awareness and humility, and indicating her continuing journey towards meaning-making, wish-fulfilment, and ageing 'well'.

The narrative tone predominantly shifts between optimism when referring to acquired wisdom and hopes for the future, and sorrowfulness when reflecting on unfulfilled wishes and troubled pasts. The narrative has a staccato effect; tonal shifts happen quickly in a melodic way. The text is peppered with sing-songy comedic attempts to make light of some subject matters, and to entertain in a deliberately cheery way. These fall away at times, when volume shrinks to a whisper, and things are uttered with great delicacy, thoughtfulness and poignancy. Stella begins her narrative by positioning her younger self as a product of "a very masculine" household, a tomboy by default, desiring the approval of an alpha-male stepfather. A tone of wonderment and at times disappointment accompanied the recounting of past relationships and a process of sexual exploration, culminating in an "embodied" sense of womanhood, as opposed to performing femininity as a teenager, "…I didn't feel empowered". In doing so, Stella evokes narratives of learning and growth. Describing a toxic and abusive past relationship, narratives of shame and atonement dominate. Although Stella justifies the relationship as a consequence of her upbringing ("…his personality was a lot like my stepdad's, very alpha, very domineering"), she also shames herself, bewildered that she could be a victim of male domination. Stella draws on two seemingly conflicting canonical narratives, creating tension in the story. One affirms traditional gender roles, positioning the male as necessarily strong and sexually assertive, "I think I felt a bit too domineering… I wanted to feel like a woman"; the other invokes the rhetoric of feminism and female empowerment, "as a feminist I think it's important to represent and be an example".

Justifying becoming "broody and clucky" in her early thirties, Stella calls to biological determinism, constructing herself as a victim of surging hormones, and to a lesser extent, social conditioning. Stella's biology and her hormone cycles are called upon again later in the narrative to justify a period of sadness and nostalgia, her "winter", supporting a solemn counter narrative of longing for "the things that other people have at my age", and craving for "someone to share my life with, just someone to get-, like have my back". She conveys poignant inner conflict, at times able to reassure herself that "it is what needed to happen…" and to "just trust", but at other times, struggles with doubts, "am I doing the right thing?" This pattern of conflict and uncertainty emerges many times, vulnerability weaves between tales of defiance and resistance.

Leaving London is a vital turning point in the story of Stella, separating prior ignorance and fear from later awakening and strength. London symbolises normative values that gender, restrain and age women, from which Stella is able to liberate herself, narrating a tale of triumphant overcoming, "…for the most part we're just f-, sheep, just following each other!" With passion, and at times anger, Stella criticises conventional and rigid parenting, inadequate education systems, the mortgage

conundrum, and narrow and age-restricted social circles, all conveyed as the 'ills' of London. The geographic distancing, for Stella, cements a psychological and ideological distancing, which she desires.

Stella narrates body-mind dualism when speaking about ageing, prioritising the maintenance of an agile and spirited mind over a youthful body, "it should be about how you feel and if I feel vibrant and, you know, youthful then… then I think that shows". A tone of positivity and empowerment occasionally gives way to one of anger and exasperation as Stella acknowledges the social pressure on women to perform agelessness and insists that cosmetic treatments are not only futile but also undignified: "they just look like someone who had plastic surgery". Make-up is equated to not being "honest" and a "slippery-slope", but also a "love" for its theatrical effect. Stella tempers her criticism of women's dependency on make-up by declaring, "I don't mind what anybody else does", demonstrating an awareness of the performative function of her narrative, and a desire to be perceived well by her audience. Stella evokes canonical narratives' prioritising of healthy living as a form of socially endorsed anti-ageing practice that feels reconcilable with her feminist ideals:

> "…I look after my body, eat well, in an effort to feel well, for as long as possible, and that prob-, that does come into getting older, or not wanting to get=not wanting to feel that my body is getting older". (Lines 284-6).

In doing so, she distances herself from any preoccupation with physical appearance, which she constructs as frivolous, "…the more we get lost in tryna you know touch up the vehicle, like do a paint job, or replace the tyres…, we're losing track of what's, yeah, of who we are". Later, Stella reflects on mortality and late old age by reference to her "Nana", who suffers from late-stage dementia, shifting rapidly between tones of rejoicing and celebration and tones of sorrowfulness and despair, once again demonstrating an internal struggle of wanting to be brave and positive but not managing to muffle the fear that mortality and uncertainties bring.

Identity

Stella alternates between casting herself as a pursuer of the 'alternative', highlighting her agency and independence, and as a victim of her circumstance, biology and context. The two predominant identities constructed in her story are that of the feminist crusader and of the spiritual wanderer, and seeker of wisdom. In doing so, she occasionally steps out of her constructions and comments on the content of her narratives, aware of how she is being presented, and consequently perceived:

> "...I realised that I've just talked about relationships, that's interesting isn't it? I'm talking about relationships with men in rela-, with how I feel about my own womanhood". (Lines 77-9).
>
> "Hmm, I do-, maybe I'm fooling myself". (Line 205).

As the feminist crusader, Stella emphasises her otherness in contrast to ruling norms that oppress and limit women. She delineates herself from social conventions and a preoccupation with appearance and anti-ageing practices. There are echoes of the trapped heroine in Stella's accounts, striving to uphold ideals of female empowerment within a hostile environment. She is sensitive to possible transgressions from this identity, quick to justify a desire for children as a consequence of biology and hormones, and constructs living healthily as a pathway to "embodiment" and "truth", and not vanity and pride. Allied to this is the persona of the nomadic spiritual seeker. Stella references yogic philosophy and spirituality to present an unconventional life trajectory, predicated on a search for alternative wisdom that promises to elevate her from the 'normal'. Spiritual teachings are sometimes employed to invalidate conventional life and its preoccupations, but the 'alternative' resides mostly as abstraction. Being grateful is a component of the spiritual identity; Stella refers to the unfortunate and less privileged, to foreground her gratitude and enliven positivity. The lost heroine resonates still, however, at times uncertain of her quest and identities, questioning their authenticity and her ability to carry the burden of female emancipation on her lone shoulders. Sentiments of doubt routinely disperse that of determined exploration.

Tanya

Tanya was a 33-year-old woman who grew up in Bulgaria but studied, worked and lived in London. She completed her doctoral studies and now worked in the private sector. She married in her early 20s.

Narratives, narrative tone, and function

Tanya's narratives are infused with ideology and rhetoric. The interview is short and concise; she appears reluctant to delve into the personal, beyond the safe grounds of intellectualisation and critique. She speaks predominantly to a liberal, feminist audience, keen to demonstrate her feminist awareness, actions, and credentials. She employs and reproduces feminist discourse and draws on general observations of gender norms in society. Her tone is confident, one of defiance, dismay and, at times, anger. I sense emotional distance and guardedness, although her immense passion for

challenging patriarchy and normative barriers for women is palpable and admirable. Her personal experiences, however, are often filtered through a lens of academic interrogation and critical analysis, brief, redacted and stripped of emotional resonance. When Tanya makes a statement that risks vulnerability or potentially disrupts feminist ideals, she realises this and swiftly caveats it and corrects herself. The tension between the lived experience and 'should' is very much alive. The encounter feels primarily like an exercise in identity construction. I sense a strong desire in Tanya to manage and control the conversation and especially my and the audience's impression of her. In doing so, her narrated self becomes sanitised and limited. Her narratives fall under three overarching themes; ageing as a positive experience; a critique of society's gendering of women; and the social meaning of ageing.

For Tanya, turning 30 has not been a "watershed moment"; she has yet to feel the impact of ageing. She describes always having "an older face", which has normalised being seen as older. She constructs the "30s" as her "prime" and a "relief"; it combines "being young and attractive" with reassuring maturity, an "empowering age". She describes "straddling" youth and ageing, taking shelter in this ambiguous transition space. There is comfort in being able to pass at being young, "a student even". Seemingly, for Tanya, ageing is a positive experience for as long as the physical changes are not pronounced, and attractiveness remains unthreatened.

Determined to be "in the moment" and clinging to a tone of defiance and nonchalance, Tanya momentarily imagines a time when ageing might become "obvious", when pressures "power up". It is only towards the end of her narratives that Tanya reveals more vulnerability and uncertainty:

> "I fear and also I wonder, of course, would there be a point at which I m like, oh, I m starting to not enjoy this, I don t like this, oh please make this stop", but that's not something that I think about". (27:28)

Tanya goes on to evidence her belief that ageing is, at least for the moment, an empowering process. She cites various factors; they include transitioning from the academic to the private sphere, building strength in her body, sporting a shorter haircut, and "owning" her "presentation", and getting married young. Tanya presents these snapshots of her coming of age by aligning them with her desire to protest and subvert conventional expectations of women. On getting married, she describes her attitude of indifference, triumphant:

> "...after experiencing it to dismiss it as meaningless, and to essentially be like this doesn t really mean anything and to be like... this doesn t really matter, it s sort of irrelevant to me at that point". (9:26)

She accords these milestones with much meaning; they represent her shedding of gender conditioning, her process of emancipation. In doing so, she signals feminist resolve and a life lived in service of that.

There is a tonal shift, to one of anger and indignation, when Tanya describes the pressures imposed on single women of a certain age. She critiques gendered and ageist attitudes ("singledom is vilified in contemporary society") and laments that friends have to settle for "suboptimal" men because society unfairly punishes single women ("women are made to feel like they're failing if they can't have a relationship that is long-lasting"). Rhetorically, Tanya signals progressive values and allies herself to single women whilst acknowledging that she is exempt from the same social pressures ("I can have my rich sort of like individual life, and no one was going to question me"). Her offerings are infused with frustration and passion, a real sense of injustice being preserved by arbitrary social conventions.

On the plight of the older women, Tanya describes bemused belittling of older and outspoken female colleagues in the workplace and confronts society's as well her own judgement of Madonna's reluctant ageing process, which offends the canonical narrative of 'ageing gracefully', a staple of mainstream media. She expresses confusion, not quite understanding the root of her disappointment, disgust even, and unsure as to whether it is deserved:

> "I mean, it s very obvious that she s trying to look young, and I find that aesthetically displeasing. I m like, why do I find it aesthetically displeasing, because it s obvious that she s not young but she s trying to look young ? So, what s wrong with that?" (15:23)

Tanya speaks of the internal conflict between feeling obligated to challenge patriarchal norms (e.g., hair removal) versus the ease of conforming ("when I do shave that area, erm, I feel more at ease, I have more peace"). The tension between 'should' and 'is' or 'comfort' is acutely depicted in her narratives. She describes both feeling greater "internal expectation" to "challenge the status quo" and a willingness to pick her "battles" more wisely. On anti-ageing practices, Tanya describes a middle way, not wanting to conform to commercialised beauty standards but mindful of a

conditioned resistance to becoming "middled-aged" and "dowdy". She predicts not dyeing any future grey hair but caveats that her opinions "might change".

The issue of age-appropriate fashion and behaviour is also explored in Tanya's narratives. She describes a preference for outlandish clothes, a habit that she is starting to call into doubt as she grows older. She muses on her changing relationship with the younger generation, especially in shared spaces like night clubs, and questions an expiry date for being able to 'dress young' and 'act young'. Here, Tanya questions the boundaries of age-related social acceptability and conveys both a desire to transcend boundaries and a fear of the emotional risks that it entails. Elsewhere, Tanya describes a fascination with the glamourous older women who are role models, fertility being an "irrelevant" issue given her decision to not "grow things" in her body, and the prospect of losing attractiveness.

> "There s probably going to be a sense of 'I m now less attractive because I m older'..., but that would probably be counteracted by, I don t give a shit ! (laughs)". (24:13)

The tone shifts between determined resolve and poignant discomfort as Tanya considers losing men's attention and affection ("they would much rather flirt with someone who is 30 than someone who is 60") as well as the potential ease of escaping the male gaze ("it gives you more credibility"). Ending on a note of vulnerability and sadness and referencing her grandmother, Tanya tentatively considers advanced ageing, and recoils at what that might look like:

> "I haven t thought about that. I think I haven t thought about it obviously because it s a difficult thought..., what happens when things start going down, essentially. And, you start losing ability to do things, taking care of yourself. You know, when you re not like worried about, oh, am I sexy still , when it s like can I make my dinner, can I go to the toilet, erm, you know, am I making sense when I speak." (26:27)

Identity

There is a strong performative element to Tanya's narratives. She performs feminism, liberal progressiveness and political correctness and constructs the identity of an emancipated woman, someone who sees through the gendered nature of society and is largely freed of it. Being sexually empowered and awakened is an important aspect of this identity ("it's like what do I want, whom do I desire, as opposed to who's looking at me and how do I respond to that"). Tanya liberally uses feminist concepts and her narratives often read like a feminist manifesto or teaching as opposed to

a personal account of the ageing experience ("…it would be impossible to completely separate us from social expectations from, sort of, the social gaze"). There is also much self-correction, a self-conscious re-stating of her words to conform to critical theory discourse:

> "…it s funny that I m even like talking about it in terms of '20' and '30', that s such a sort of fake category". (1:14)

Her feminist zeal and a commitment to continuously push herself to "challenge the status quo" are vigorously expressed and centred. Her narratives feel limited, however, and emotionally restrained. As the interviewer, I am left wondering about what is not said, the negative space in this encounter, the editing behind Tanya's narrative production. Are strands of her story omitted for their incompatibility with her preferred identity? Are 'weaker' emotions and doubt concealed under strong statements of resistance and conviction?

Tanya is also fiercely intelligent and adaptable and is aware of the meta-dynamics in our interaction. She constructs the identity of someone who is spontaneously authentic, rooted in the moment, "a decision-maker on the spot", ruled by "gut feelings". Rhetorically, she is concerned with convincing me of the unstudied nature of her comments; "I promise you I haven't thought about this in advance." She later assures me again that there is no premeditation and no strategy. I speak more frequently during our interview and make attempts to try and open up the conversation, to encourage ease and honesty. When I remind Tanya of just how human and natural it would be for a woman to transgress from strict feminist ideals and rules, however, she swiftly adopts and incorporates this component into her performed identity:

> "…part of the growing process for me has been the acknowledgement of-, I m inconsistent and I can be inconsistent. If-, if that s who I am, I m going to be inconsistent because I will be true to myself." (12:19)

Ultimately, Tanya's performed identity feels fraught and reveals what was possibly a disorienting process for her. The challenge of navigating through this internalised moral maze of being a good enough woman and feminist is palpably felt through her words.

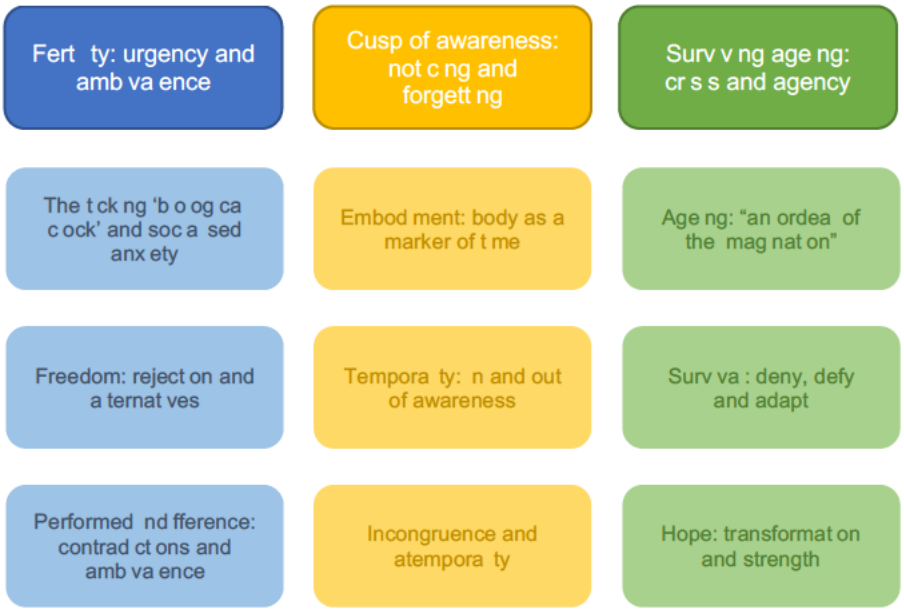
Part three: Thematic priorities

Stage four requires the identifying of overarching themes within the narratives, as presented below. Three major themes emerged, illustrated by and grounded within quotes from each of the seven

participants. Each thematic category contains several constituent categories. As emphasised by Langdridge (2007), the purpose of this stage is to seek out the dominant themes, while honouring the cohesive narratives that lie within. It does not seek to excessively deconstruct and acknowledges the heterogeneity of individual experiences.

Figure 1

Master themes and subthemes



Fertility: Urgency and ambivalence

Fertility and the potential loss of fertility is a theme that permeates all narratives. Notably, narrators' relationship with the ticking 'biological clock', anxiety attached to retaining fertility, the consideration of alternative paths towards motherhood, the rejection of traditional scripts and expectations, and performed identities arising out of these competing norms and possibilities are key sub-themes.

The ticking 'biological clock' and socialised anxiety

A sense of urgency and anxiety prevails in the narratives of four of the seven participants, those who remain eager and hopeful in relation to the prospect of bearing children and are acutely aware of the biological cut-off that looms. The window of opportunity is perceived to narrow with age and fertility is positioned as an option that will soon disappear, an irreversible and unpredictable loss.

These concerns form a 'crisis' narrative; an undertone of uncertainty and powerlessness permeates the text. Ester, for example, isolates fertility as her most important source of ageing anxiety:

> **Ester**: My main anxiety about ageing is just my biological clock. (10:17)

Clare and Stella describe a "longing" and Ada, "a growing, growing feeling" that seem predestined, and deeply embodied, a biological drive and imperative of which they are at times unwilling subjects. There is a sense of them being at the mercy of biology, 'victims' of hormones, and not being in control.

> **Clare**: So, kind of being aware of that, very aware of fertility. I don t really want to be but I am. (24:11)

> **Stella**: I see the cycles in my-, in my menstrual, you know, hormonal cycle. I recognise when I'm broody and clucky whatever and recognise when I'm not, less so and it's-, that's fascinating to sort of watch how much your hormones affect the desire to have children and, and hmm, make you a bit crazy." (6:7)

Physical stamina and recovery from childbirth are also cited as reasons why motherhood must begin soon, by a nominal age, beyond which the experience becomes taxing on the body, and therefore less feasible and desirable.

> **Ada**: I think about it a lot, yeah, I m going to be 33 in a few months. I feel like if I have a child, I want to do it when I m like 35, because… Not just you know am I going to be able to get pregnant, which of course is a big question, but also how will my body even handle a pregnancy, the recovery after pregnancy, not sleeping for hours. That gets harder and harder when you re older. (29:24)

> **Stella**: I'm tired enough now, wait 'til I'm 40, like, 'you're kidding me'! (7:1)

This constructed timeline and the urgency it renders is further reinforced by the narrators' social conditioning and changing social worlds. They are confronted by family scripts, internalised to an extent, that privilege motherhood. They also observe peers living out traditional trajectories and feel out-of-step and left behind, not quite treading the 'right' path, with time running out to mobilise a correction.

> **Ester**: Yeah, I have a Jewish mother. My mother has cried before, because she desperately wants to see me married and having a kid. (4:6)

> **Clare**: It can be quite overwhelming to feel that-, up to that point maybe you were like fairly on a par, at the same kind of stage in life and suddenly people start shooting off on these, like quite traditional trajectories. (16:15)

Narrators narrate different ways of managing this sense of urgency and an abundance of rhetorical work is done to make this age-related anxiety more tolerable and survivable. As seen below and despite such work, the narratives are infused with contradictions and tension, and a sense of coping with this perceived biological deadline and the potential loss of fertility remains elusive.

Freedom: Rejection and alternatives

Sitting alongside narratives of uncertainty and of anticipated wanting and lack are also stories of liberation and an easing of internalised pressure. These stories take on three distinct threads: the first extends the possibility of motherhood beyond a physical experience; the second teases out the rejection narrative; and the third chronicles the raising of consciousness which frees some narrators from the burden and limitations of a traditional telling of female identity, one that is intimately aligned with the 'mother' archetype.

Adoption is presented as an alternative to having biological children, which for the narrators offers assurance and a sense of possibility that is less time sensitive. It is a hedge against the ticking 'biological clock' and a much needed 'plan B'. For Tanya, it is also a hedge against changing her mind, aware that her current attitude, one of ambivalence and disinterest, may shift. It eases the urgency of fertility, rendering the physical timeline "irrelevant". Adoption is also politicised, positioned as an expression of Tanya's ethical beliefs with respect to climate change and resisting the forces of patriarchy.

> **Ada**: If at some point I decide that I absolutely must have a child and I find that I can t have a child, I will adopt. (28:6)

> **Tanya**: Like, so far until now, I don t want to have children. I haven t made a firm decision. Erm, I don t see myself wanting to have children but if at age 35 I decide that I want children, I won t have my own children because I think that s bad for the environment. So, I think that aspect of my body is sort of irrelevant. (22:17)

Further extending the definition and scope of motherhood, Ester and Stella narrate embodying maternal instincts and serving as 'parent' in non-conventional ways. Ester describes seeing the "reality of parenthood", detaching herself from the "romantic gloss" that was once upheld, and realising that there are "different ways of becoming a parent and being a parent". For Stella, conventional parenting styles are problematised, deemed too "structured and institutionalised", harmful to children and emblematic of social limitations and dysfunction. Instead, she privileges an alternative reframing of parenthood, much guided by and aligned with her construction of self as a spiritual non-conformist.

> **Stella**: So, if children are not a part of that then I'd just be a really good mum to my friends, my mum when she needs it eventually, and you know, I can care for people in lots of different ways. (15:21)

In almost all accounts, an emphasis on 'alternatives' allows the narrators to distance themselves from a 'crisis' narrative, preferring to narrate agency and emotional preparedness instead. Rhetorically, this reassures and eases anxiety and for some participants shapes into a narrative of rejection, however incomplete and ambiguous.

Francesca is the only narrator who unequivocally rejects motherhood; she is therefore exempt from the sense of urgency that others experience. For her, not having children is a means of preserving youth, not wishing to experience the trauma of childbirth, and of preserving life as she knows it now, unencumbered and, in some ways, ageless.

> **Francesca**: I don t want them. I think that it s-, it would ruin my life, my lifestyle and therefore my life. I think if I was to have children… then that would be a huge milestone of being old, feeling-, your body changes so much. Erm… I just, it scares me. I think, as well, like… you re never the same. (29:8)

Clare mirrors Francesca's aversion to the experience of childbirth, positioning it as a catalyst for ageing and decline, but is nonetheless willing to endure it.

> **Clare**: Well, it s a traumatic process isn t it, giving birth? And a lot of my friends who ve had kids have suffered the long-term consequences from the birthing process itself. So, in some ways it s prolonging your shelf life as a woman by not having children. (32:7)

Rejection is also considered in terms of preserving identity and lifestyle, with many narrators positioning motherhood as being a disruptor in life. For Clare, Ester and Ada, becoming a mother could derail career success and progression, integral to their senses of self, while Ada and Tanya position motherhood as a threat to life, without, however, ruling it out as a future possibility. Decisions around maternity are characterised as 'inevitable' for narrators, however confusing and unwelcomed the process may be:

> **Ada**: Yeah, I do find it threatening to my, to my life, I guess. (29:18)

> **Tanya**: I genuinely just don t want-, I-, I think about my life with a child and I m like, I don t want this, I don t want to have this in my life . I don t want my life to have this element in it. It s not appealing. So, I m not worried. Even if this changes and it might change… I most likely would not want to produce a child myself. (22:26)

Equally keen to distance herself from a 'crisis' narrative, Mary narrates a process of liberation, of rising above traditional scripts and implied expectations. She describes growing out of needing her future to conform to a picture-perfect end point and is instead happy to dwell in a place of unknowing and indifference.

> **Mary**: When I was younger and I used to think about it, erm, I used to sort of think that that was like the end (chuckles a little), like getting married and having kids, that was some sort of end and now I realise how that's not a reality in any way. (2:10)

Rhetorically, Mary shapes her narrative into that of a journey, of being able to shake off and transcend normative rules, thereby positioning herself as existing outside of social conditioning that concerns fertility and motherhood. For her, "a liberation has come" from knowing and living this realisation.

Performed indifference: Contradictions and ambivalence

Narratives on fertility and motherhood appear coloured with internal conflicts and ambivalence. Narrators are keen to avoid the telling of a 'crisis' narrative, one that is fraught with fear and potential loss. Instead, much rhetoric work is done to perform indifference, centre alternative lifestyles and suppress longing, whether embodied or socially prescribed. There is a sense of defiance and a determined assertion of agency as well as an undercurrent of vulnerability, with narrators needing to convince themselves and the audience that they can survive the non-materialising of a desired future. For many, this is a means of delaying and denying anxiety, of minimising psychic pain. Indeed,

Mary describes the mental contortion that she performs for precisely this purpose. Not hoping and suppressing longing are processes employed to preserve psychological wellness.

> **Mary**: I used to think that I wanted kids, or I used to want kids and a few years ago I said to myself, maybe I should just tell myself I don t want kids to not put the pressure on myself . (25:11)

Mary's narratives of indifference and transcendence as illustrated above sit in stark contrast to this emotional concealment. We observe a tension between how she would like to be seen and the actuality of her lived experience.

Similarly, Ada's narratives are peppered with inconsistencies and indecision. At times, she is adamant of her invulnerability to the 'biological clock' but elsewhere she describes a deep sense of longing and a defined timeline, suggestive that such concerns may play on her mind more than she would care to admit. Much of her deliberations are socially inherited, the fear of missing out on the maternal experience, wanting to pass on "good genes" and needing to create a "safety net" for old age are some examples. Her words convey unresolved grappling, a life being negotiated from competing truths.

Clare narrates in detail her distain for the traditional trajectory but is clear about her own ambivalence. Despite her feminist critique of normative expectations, she nonetheless narrates an inevitability of her living them out. She conveys powerless resignation, a sense of being acted upon, unable to choose.

> **Clare**: So, I had very conflicted views. I think definitely like a deep belief or a deep-, an inclination or a longing or something from the way that I was brought up that that was what I probably would want or needed to do at some point. But not really knowing how I was going to get to that point (laughs). But surrounded by people who had already got to that point. (16:19)

For Stella and Ester, a mind-body duality is constructed to separate biological impulse with rational stoicism and practicality, adoption being an example. The separation serves to justify and explain a recognised preoccupation with fertility and, by extension, ageing. Narratives of alternative paths and other means of experiencing motherhood are centred, which keeps the potential of motherhood alive, independent of time and ageing; the timeline is thus rendered more spacious, extendable. The extent to which narrators are convinced by their own words of assurance, however, is open to

question. At times, they are aware of their own contradictions and can acknowledge the gap between performed indifference and a longing that lingers.

> **Stella**: Hmm, I do-, maybe I'm fooling myself. (9:1)

> **Stella**: Sometimes I feel very sad about not having the things that other people have at my age, not having the things-, or actually genuinely not having the things that I think I would like. (14:15)

Indeed, all five narrators feel compelled to distance themselves from an uncomplicated narrative of maternal longing, downplaying a sense of urgency and need. I frequently consider my role as co-constructer of the narratives, reflecting on how narrators perform a desired impression through their discourse. They seem to want to convince me and, more importantly, themselves of their psychological preparedness for confronting the loss of fertility, pragmatism, and equanimity. What appears truer, however, is how notions of fertility and motherhood, compounded by the ageing experience, acutely impact the ways in which narrators understand themselves as women.

Cusp of awareness: Noticing and forgetting

Narrators are aged between 30 and 34; they therefore narrate an experience of transition, of being on the brink of encountering ageing in a meaningful way, overt and observable. They describe coming in and out of awareness, oscillating between noticing and forgetting. Within this sit sub-themes on the physicality of ageing, however subtle, on reminders of ageing and a sense of time passing, and on atemporality and feeling incongruous with one's chronological age.

Embodiment: The body as a marker of time

Most narrators reference their changing physical bodies and the impact of this noticing on their lived experiences of ageing. The degree of noticing shifts and modulates, from barely perceivable and emotionally neutral to jarring and cruel. For example, narrators describe not normally being aware of ageing:

> **Ada**: But visually, I don t really perceive it until I see it., and then it s like, oh, okay . (24:21)

> **Mary**: I think in some ways I think of myself as still quite young. (5:15)

For some, the noticing is deeply embodied, with the minutia of physical changes tracked and observed. The body serves as a marker of time passing; subtle changes are prescribed meaning, indicating age, transition, and a sense of what lies ahead.

A general sense of the body's changing chemistry, metabolism and resilience permeates the narratives. As well as a greater propensity for weight gain, or weight loss in the case of Clare, narrators also describe deterioration and the body being less immune to youthful indulgence and neglect. There is a sense of the body being less 'new', more easily battered and in need of greater care. For many, this prompts a shift in attitude and lifestyle, less hedonistic, more protective and with an emphasis on 'health' and health practices. Emotionally, however, the change feels tolerable for most, subtle enough to contend with.

> **Clare**: I think I m much more aware of drinking and hangovers now. I ve felt those getting worse over time. (29:14)

> **Tanya**: …definitely more tired, more tired more often. Erm, I don t get this, you know, with age you start sleeping less. If anything, I m sleeping more. Erm, I want to spend more time in a horizontal position. (21:24)

For Ester, an extrapolation is made from this felt experience of decline, of losing vitality. Temporally, she constructs a moving timeline that is situated on the body. She describes changing physicality and the emotional effect that noticing engenders. Narrating an awareness of transitioning, of losing youthful invulnerability, and of further decline to come, her words convey a sense of the body no longer being 'on her side', shifting from friend to foe. Although punctuated with a light-hearted chuckle, a sense of dread is evident.

> **Ester**: I m also just more conscientious about my diet, […] I was very abusive to my body (laughs) when I was in my 20s, in terms of like drinking and smoking and eating poorly and not exercising and now I just don t feel like I can get away with that. Yeah, erm, I m not looking forward to that aspect of aging, of like feeling your body just start to betray you a little bit, you know? (9:25)

Francesca narrates even greater anxiety and hypervigilance with respect to her body, and especially the tracking of her body weight and shape. Staying "normal" is a task rendered more impossible by ageing. She rails against this freely; her narratives are rich with details of change and decline, infused with frustration and concern.

> **Francesca**: It s the fat that turns up in places where you thought no fat could ever turn up, [...] and I m like, I ve got a love handle, where did that come from ? And it s like... stretchmarks, where do they come from? I can still fit into my jeans I had 10 years ago and yet my body shape has totally changed. (40:15)

> **Francesca**: I just- it s the metabolism thing that really-, that bothers me the most because I ve never had to watch my weight, and now I do, and I really don t like it. (40:28)

Francesca's narratives convey appearance anxiety, fixation, and much emotional distress. Temporally, she keenly compares her body to that of her youth, constructing duality and a deep sense of loss and regret. For her, at least in terms of these physical phenomena, awareness of ageing is persistent, visceral and at times, overwhelming. Indeed, she herself is aware of the pernicious nature of this habit of hypervigilance and works on her mental wellbeing to relieve some of its grip.

> **Francesca**: I would just stare at myself and go, what the hell is wrong with you, why are you so lumpy , and it was just horrid. (10:13)

> **Francesca**: I m trying very hard to not go back to last year where I was scrutinizing because if I do that it s just opening up a can of worms. (41:8)

A common thread within the narratives is the phenomenon of site-specific focus, with narrators channelling and fixing their awareness of ageing on specific parts or aspects of the body, rendering the observable change more meaningful and telling of age. Mary's description of her breasts, how they are "starting to sag", suggests quotidian tracking, a "strange awareness". She describes habitually evaluating them in the shower, in bed, much more so than the wrinkles on her face, the emotional response to which is one of helplessness, a sense of youthful vitality slipping away and being without recourse. Like Ester, Mary extrapolates and imagines a future in which the observable signs of ageing will accelerate and become irreversible.

> **Mary**: I always look at my breasts then, and just thinking that there s no-, there s no reversing that. You know that it's only going to go one way and it s only going to get more pronounced. (11:1)

> **Mary**: I don t know why that is because I don t necessarily have the feeling that my face is suddenly going to get more wrinkly. I sort of don t mind that. I don t know

> why that is. But with my breasts, I m much more aware that-, that no matter how much exercise I do, no matter what I do, that it s not going to change. (11:5)

Ada and Francesca also narrate observing an aspect of their bodies that triggers a particular knowing and experiencing of ageing. Ada's "receding gum" and Francesca's inherited "jowls" serve as searing markers of decline, sharp with emotional impact, pulling narrators into raw confrontation with their ageing bodies.

While only some narrators mention changes to their facial features, namely emerging wrinkles, most narrate a particular relationship with greying or white hair. Stella's narratives were almost entirely free of references to bodily ageing except for an awkward mention of her "first grey hair", as if an initiation into a new phase in life, the impact of which was unexpected and "surprising". Something that "wasn't an issue" for her suddenly had meaning.

> **Stella**: My two best girlfriends are always complaining about their grey hairs and I-, because it wasn't an issue for me, I was like, 'oh don't be ridiculous', like it's not… and then of course you see one and you're like, 'ah, okay, how do I feel about that'? (8:6)

Conversely, Clare, much like Ester and Ada, is determined to embrace her "one or two grey hairs", emphasising their utility in the professional sphere, a means of commanding respect. There is a sense of greying hair being the most tolerable aspect of physical ageing, the reasoning for which appears involuntary and arbitrary.

> **Clare**: It s not something I m too concerned about, and I would never pull them out. I think I m more fascinated by it than anything else. (27:23)

> **Ester**: I m looking forward to going grey, […] that is the one thing that I look forward to, with aging. Beyond that, the rest does not seem fun. (10:10)

> **Ada**: And things that I thought would really bother me don t bother me, like I have lots and lots of white hair… (23:8)

The physical embodiment of ageing has a notable effect on most of the narrators, but not all and not always. Taken together, we get a sense of temporality, an awareness of time passing, of the ageing process in flow, being shaped haphazardly for most, at times potent and at other times fleeting. Sites of the body are ascribed meaning and experienced as sharp or steady reminders of ageing. The experience of being aged is at least partially engendered by an embodied experiencing of the body

changing, losing youthful energy and characteristics, morphing into something mysterious and, at times, unspeakable.

Temporality: In and out of awareness

Temporality refers to the narrators' relationship with time, and the interaction between the past, present, and future. We have seen narrators locating themselves in time by way of the body, framing an ageing trajectory. Elsewhere, narrators are also aged by the social world; their awareness of time passing is brought to the fore in relation to others and the social and cultural domains which they occupy, mediated by perception and interpretation. This section captures the ways in which narrators oscillate in and out of awareness of their ageing identities.

The quality of shock is detailed by many narrators; they are often caught unawares when confronted by reminders of age and ageing. Mary describes "shock" and feeling as though she had "time-travelled" on occasions when awareness is acute, and Francesca recalls being jolted into anxious disquiet by the daunting presence of a wedding dress from times past that she may no longer fit into. For many, awareness is sharpened when confronted with photos of their younger selves, the reality of time passing arising out of comparison between past and present.

> **Ada**: So, it s a bit of a shock. I was like, oh yeah, I am a bit older , [...] like, I don t perceive myself as looking that way, I definitely-, you know I remember my mum and my grandmother always saying like, I wake up, and I look in the mirror and I scream . (24:13)

> **Francesca**: So, I was 22 in that one and I m like, oh, what s going on, how is-, like how is my face ? (16:26)

There is a sense of narrators being jolted into awareness by these innocuous encounters; they puncture an existence that is perhaps otherwise less marked by age. The process is dynamic, wavering, and changeable; awareness is always just within reach.

> **Francesca**: In a week, five days a week, five days out of a week out of seven days. It will be-, not the forefront, but it will be there. It pops in and pops out, a lot. So, I m not dwelling on it, but it is there. (16:12)

> **Ada**: It was just a momentary thing, just a little beep from the radar, [...] I m aware that those beeps are going to become more frequent. (40:17)

Comparison is a recurring theme, an impetus for noticing ageing. As well as with their younger selves, an awareness of ageing also arises out of comparison with younger women, a younger partner, peers who are 'advancing' in life, and television characters who are frozen in time. Narrators are aged in relation, in parallel with to their social worlds. With younger women, Francesca describes a loss of social capital, falling in the office pecking order, Ada details feeling out of sync with her young husband's social circle, Tanya describes a sense of invading young people's territory in nightclubs, and Mary expresses her disbelief that women younger than her are indeed women.

> **Mary**: I think to myself, 'wow, actually there are, there are women who are a few years younger than me who are still considered women'. And that was bizarre, I mean I-, I always thought that women who are a little bit younger than me, a few years younger than me were girls but actually, they're women. (5:16)

> **Tanya**: If someone is a decade older than you, they look-, you don t see them as someone that is your age-mate, right? (18:24)

These interactions centre an experience of being aged out of a social role they no longer embody and have lost access to. Their 'young woman' credentials and the perks they encapsulate are disappearing. They also evoke a sense of being 'aged' by others, by society's changing perception of and reaction to these women, both real and imagined. Ada recalls the horror of being called "madam" in public, and the negative connotations she associates with the term. The aversion she feels is in part a reaction to being instantaneously 'aged' in that moment, fixed and constructed through the lens of strangers.

> **Ada**: No one even calls my mother by that name, and I was like, who are they talking to , and oh they re talking to me , and they keep using this word and-, and it s worse than ma am ! Like, it s like madam , so formal and so-o-o-o age-y (laughs). Like, stop saying that ! (36:12)

Narrators describe sporadic experiences of time being in motion, advancing at an accelerating speed. Ester and Mary both ground this temporal experience in their reencounter with moments from their history, captured and immortalised. The moments serve as a time stamp, immutable and true; they generate a sense of incredulity at just how much time has passed. There is a felt misalignment between chronological time and their experience of time passing.

> **Ester**: ...being on Facebook and having Facebook give you all those Memories and you re like, oh fuck, that was 10 years ago ! And it doesn t feel-, it feels like it was two years ago. That-, I think more than just the physical changes, there s a feeling that time is passing more rapidly. (10:27)

> **Mary**: I remember seeing the ac-, the characters in and thinking that they were much older and much more mature, and now it's very bizarre thinking that I'm now that age, and I'm, I'm supposed to be that same level of maturity. (4:27)

As well as catching up to the age of beloved TV characters, Mary's words also evoke the notion of milestones and expectations that are age derived. For Mary, not quite living up to an age-appropriate degree of maturity both concerns and frees her. Narrators' relationships with their social ages, the objective number by which they abide, also creates jolts of awareness, of being reluctantly aged. However, 'turning 30' is constructed as being a turning point of ageing by some (but not all) participants.

> **Francesca**: But then, got to 30, and I said, okay fine, 30 is a big milestone, I m fine . 31, fine, pretty close to 30, which is kind of 29, so I m fine. Then I got to 32 and I was like, fuck, I m actually in my 30s . (10:10)

> **Mary**: They re all like younger than me and I just suddenly realised that gosh, you really think that 30 is a big thing (laughs). (23:24)

> **Tanya**: I haven t felt that, you know, turning 30 has been the sort of watershed moment, where suddenly things are different, and my priorities have shifted. (1:15)

For Clare, ageing also restricts; life becomes narrower and more predictable. She describes a gnawing awareness of options closing and time running out.

> **Clare**: Maybe because my life is starting to feel a bit more like I can see what s coming next, whereas when I was younger it was more, 'I ll jump on this opportunity, this is going to lead to this'. You felt like time was endless and now I don t feel like that. (24:23)

Incongruence and atemporality

Not 'feeling' one's age is a phenomenon that rings true for many of the narrators. They describe a felt mismatch between the age that they are and how they experience themselves and construct a sense of self. There is tension between lived experience and their social and chronological ages. A feeling of atemporality or being outside of time and history is frequently expressed. Rhetorically, time enables narrators to create distance from the pain and grief of ageing, constructed as loss.

Tanya describes the experience of having an older face, which means she has long settled into a position of being aged by society; any new development, as her numerical age advances, is more easily tolerated. Mary describes not quite living up to a level of maturity that her age denotes; not 'advancing' at the same pace as her peers makes her feel less aged, still grappling with transition and, in many ways, still free to fashion life anew. Similarly, Stella's nomadic lifestyle and cohort of young friends keep her feeling young and, for Francesca, not having children exempts her from being aged by society, 'mother' being an archetype that alludes to age.

> **Tanya**: I, erm, maybe I m blocking it here, but I don t really feel that my position has shifted that much in society. (1:6)

> **Stella**: I don't feel 34. I don't know what it's meant to feel like, but I don't feel old… especially I think because of my living situation, I'm still quite nomadic. I would like to find a home… erm, but I have, you know, friends of all ages as well, which makes me feel young, older ones and young ones. (13:5)

> **Francesca**: I just… sometimes it feels like I m not getting any older because I don t have children, there s no-, there s none of that milestone. (37:17)

Equally, there is a perpetual risk of being caught out by society, of being fixed by others, of having their ages pinned down. The incongruence is rendered moot when Mary senses a friend's perception of her and, similarly, Ada vividly laments a painful duality between her lived persona and how she imagines the world sees her.

> **Mary**: I think he must have been thinking to himself, you have really not come to terms with how old you are (laughs). (22:26)

> **Ada**: But yeah, there is a disconnect with-, and that s something I m recently trying to grapple with, how other people see me. I think in my head people see me as this

> like sparky, young, fun like erm… person, […] but then I m like, I wonder if other people just see me as a crazy, like, middle aged woman, like just racing everyone and going really fast , you know? (35:16)

Indeed, 'passing as young' is a phenomenon lauded by many as being a genetic advantage and social triumph. Clare and Francesca describe looking younger than their age, protected by their Asian genes, which are considered a prize in life, one that shields them, at least for the moment, from the outward expression of ageing. Being validated by society as looking younger is desired and coveted. It creates an illusion of being younger and a much-needed respite from needing to consider ageing. There is a sense of being able to camouflage. The sense of triumph, however, is tinged with a dread and fear of eventually losing this edge.

> **Francesca**: People go, 'how old are you , I m 32 , No, I thought you were 27 . You know, and that s really nice. At some point that s going to stop. I think that s probably when I ll… feel my age. I think that s a big thing actually, when people are surprised at how old I am, […], cause if nobody else thinks you re that old, then you don t look that old, and you re not that old. (37:27)

> **Francesca**: Maybe-, sometimes maybe I m a little bit, erm, naive, like hiding from it, because it hasn t happened yet. (37:20)

> **Clare**: Yeah, I think I ve been trying to not think at all. I don t know, I haven t really been thinking about it. I think there will be a shift when I have children. (32:26)

Narratives of time therefore suggest motion and fluidity; consciousness of ageing modulates between comfortable incognisance and jarring confrontation. Narrators are caught in this juncture of transition, not quite in control of how much ageing enters their awareness.

Surviving ageing: Crisis and agency

The future looms large for all participants; narrators project themselves forward in time, imagining their ageing trajectory. The theme of 'survival' captures the narrators' ambivalence and hesitation when confronted with an imagined future, when ageing and its effects are no longer subtle. Narrators traverse between narratives of crisis and agency; some explicitly describe fear and anxiety, keen to deflect and avoid, while others champion resilience and positivity. Within this, the content of this imagined ageing process, narrators' response to such a reality, and narratives of hope and fortitude are explored.

Ageing: "An ordeal of the imagination"[4]

That physical signs of ageing will become more pronounced is a sentiment that permeates the narratives. The extent to which narrators willingly dwell in this abstract future, however, varies. While Ada's account is rich with a sense of horror and intolerability, Mary's utterances about the future are vague and faltering.

> **Ada**: My features are going to change significantly in the next 10 years, much more significantly than they have in the last 10, and that scares me. (41:7)

> **Mary**: I m aware of what I will start to look like and I m-, I m aware that I will, I will need to check in with myself every so often and… Just, every so often try and come to terms with my age as I get older, and maybe more consciously. (33:11)

For most, there is a knowing anticipation that this current phase of muted ageing, just beginning and still bearable, will soon expire. As well as imagining the physical embodiment of ageing, how it cruelly marks the body, narrators also shudder at the emotional pressure that will ensue.

> **Tanya**: I feel like maybe further down the line it would be much more obvious, […] and that s when the pressure probably powers up. (2:5)

> **Ester**: Everything else has been pretty subtle, but I just have this anticipation that it s gonna-, like you know it s just going to go downhill from now, from here on out. (10:8)

For Francesca and Ada, their future fate is etched in the faces of their ageing parents, inescapable and "stark". Knowing what your facial features will eventually morph into heightens the tragedy; the predestined future is locked in and perpetually in sight.

> **Ada**: I can see very clearly now see the resemblance between my face and my father and my paternal grandmother, […] and it made me a bit sad, I think I had a day of like, oh my god, that s where I m going . (20:19)

> **Francesca**: I can see the jowls from my mum and my dad and my grandfather, […] and I look at myself and I go, am I drooping', and I poke my cheeks. (17:7)

[4] (Sontag 1972)

Narratives on appearance are inextricably linked to a woman's loss of social capital with increasing age. Canonical narratives that predicate a woman's attractiveness on youthful beauty are reinforced by the narrators, and a distinction is made from a man's ageing trajectory. For Ester, it is "abundantly clear" that women "lose value with age, both in terms of their sexuality" and "the kind of roles they can play"; they "become more limited with age". Both Tanya and Ada convey ambivalence and dread as they imagine a future in which their attractiveness wanes, especially in contrast to their partners' rising desirability.

> **Tanya**: These men my age at that point, say 60 years old, they would much rather flirt with someone who is 30 than someone who is 60. That would probably feel quite horrible. (25:5)

> **Ada**: I think that s a really scary process for me in a way, this idea that I m going to be in decline, whereas he s peaking. (31:21)

Ada situates her sentiments in social discourse and how they are internalised and reproduced by women. Clare echoes these beliefs; dating commodifies women and ageing is constructed to correlate with falling desirability and opportunity.

> **Ada**: The expectations are different, but the messages are obviously very different. We re told all the time that we re done and spent. And guys have got time, they ve got time. (34:20)

> **Clare**: If I was dating right now, I would be quite aware that I ve just moved into a new age bracket and people probably have filtered me out on certain things. (24:8)

Narrators' observation of older women's loss of visibility and narrated plight paints a less than ideal fate, the horror of what is to come. Ada conveys her older sister's devastating fear and older colleagues' experience of "sexual obsolescence" and Tanya describes the ill-treatment of older women in her workplace. These encounters affirm society's cruel punishment of older women.

> **Ada**: She just started crying and she was like, I m terrified of getting old, I m terrified of it , and that s shocking. (15;24)

> **Ada**: They were like, are you worried, he doesn t even see us, we re like non-existent . And I think that was the first time where I was like, oh my god, yeah, that happens doesn t it . (16:28)

> **Tanya**: I m wondering to what extent, if she was a man, people would say those same things about, you know, 'age is really catching up with her'; it sounds very innocuous and it s not. (15:5)

Beyond the visual horrors of ageing, meditations on advanced ageing and mortality also preoccupy narrators. Old age, as mirrored in the lived experience of ageing parents, is constructed as painful loss. Francesca describes continuous generational shifts that signal ageing; the loss of grandparents precedes the arrivals of new-borns, a sense of everyone "shuffling along". Her and Clare describe pre-emptive grief, both conscious of their ageing parents' mortality and visible decline. Ada also alludes to impermanence, an awareness that time with her parents is running out; "am I spending enough time with them"?

> **Francesca**: I m still aware that they re both getting quite old, and it really bothers me that they are, [...] I wish that I was in my 20s because then they re younger too. (23:3)

> **Clare**: There is the consciousness of my parents ageing as I get older, and fears around that. I m very aware of my parents vulnerability, [and] growing dependency on me. (23:22)

'Old age' triggers a fearful awareness of the eventual loss of physical independence and mental acuity. Stella and Clare painfully convey family member's dementia progression, Mary recalls her father's arduous recovery from surgery, Ester senses higher risk for "traumatic illnesses" ("we're going in a dark direction") and Ada describes surveying her body for inherited back and knee pathology.

> **Ada**: Every time I feel like a little weakness in my knees I think, oh my god, I m not going to ride my bike . For me that s almost like death, I love riding my bike. (40:14)

> **Clare**: I find mental decline a lot scarier than physical decline I guess, in terms of like your sense of self and your connections to other people. (34:19)

In their parents, the fate of old age is constituted and foreshadowed. For narrators, the peril of their own ageing is given form; the existential dread and physicality of decline, embodied and material,

looms. Old age is constructed as suffering and dependency; it ravages, and the self diminishes into non-recognition.

> **Stella**: I'm not scared of death, but I'm scared of dying, the dying process (laughs), being incapacitated, debilitated, not, you know, having all that dignity taken away, 'cause your body can't look after yourself anymore. (28:16)

> **Tanya**: I think I haven t thought about it obviously because it s a difficult thought, [...] what happens when things start going down, essentially, and you start losing ability to do things, taking care of yourself. You know, when you re not like worried about, oh, am I sexy still , when it s like can I make my dinner, can I go to the toilet, erm, you know, am I making sense when I speak. (26:27)

Survival: Deny, defy, and adapt

Central to 'survival' are narrators' ideas about how to <u>be</u> and <u>be with</u> their age as they age. How will they negotiate ageing? How are stories of the self designed to placate, renounce, or celebrate future ageing? Is it something to be controlled, retreated from, or eased into? Do we delay or accept ageing?

Narrators' differing interpretations of 'ageing gracefully', a now ubiquitous beauty myth and cultural expectation that binds women, is central to these questions. Francesca conveys a common interpretation; it is a woman's imperative to "look good" and be "well put together", at any age. Mary echoes similar sentiments; maintaining attractiveness remains an essential goal of 'ageing well'. For Clare, an intention to keep "making an effort" in her appearance is countered by hopes to thwart "assumptions about women having a shelf life". She centres the need to "reconcile"; attempts to delay ageing must coexist with "valuing the wisdom that you gain as you age". Stella's definition rejects aesthetic efforts altogether, calling for women to age "naturally". Her narratives are infused with ideology and a model of ageing that espouses non-doing.

> **Stella**: I think all this covering up, this trying to be something we're not, deviates us from our true self, our spirit. (10:25)

Ester and Tanya narrate suspicion of the term, keen to debunk its authority. Ester emphasises its "negative connotations" and questions its narrow definition and implied normative values. She instead champions "not putting such priority on age".

> **Ester**: I would like to be able to reach my 40s and maybe still be single, maybe still be childless and just don t give a shit and also not feel like my age sort of defines the parameters of how I can live, [...] that to me would be ageing gracefully. (14:23)

Tanya's interrogation is more nuanced still. Citing Madonna as an example, she narrates her own judgement and aversion towards the singer's attempts to delay and conceal ageing, finding it "aesthetically displeasing". However, she complicates this instinct and questions its social origin.

> **Tanya**: Why do I find it aesthetically displeasing, because it s obvious that she s not young but she s trying to look young ? So, what s wrong with that? (15:24)

In effect, Tanya is calling attention to social codes that dictate how women should age and dress. Ideology restricts expression; Madonna's choices are just as shamed as a woman who makes no effort to 'age well'. Describing the archetype of an "gracefully aged women", someone who "put on a few pounds", with "grey flowing locks" and "slightly more hippieish clothing", Tanya critiques its internal tension.

> **Tanya**: So, still accepting the aging process, not tinkering with your sort of skin, [but] you still-, you can t really be very big, you still have to like you know present yourself, [...] you basically still need to really care about your looks. (16:5)

A woman is judged for doing too much or too little to delay ageing. Rhetoric that calls for 'natural' ageing equally demands that women still present 'well', stay in their lane, and gradually embrace more self-effacing manners of dress and presentation. Indeed, the matter of dressing 'appropriately' is considered by Tanya, Mary, and Ada as a means of surviving ageing. For Ada, appropriate dress demands an identity shift, a reimagination of the self. She feels no longer able to 'pull off' a nonchalant style of dressing that is defiantly unfeminine. Ageing creates in her a pressure to feminise her presentation and perform youthfulness through adopted mannerisms that are "upbeat", "positive" and "much more smiley".

> **Ada**: I think now that perception is becoming a bit more pressured because maybe I m feeling that the youthfulness aspect is fading, and so it becomes a bit more like, oh, maybe I should wear makeup more often, maybe I should wear dresses more often instead of ragged cut-off shorts (laughs). (20:5)

Both Mary and Tanya hint at the need to embrace a new "style" that aligns with their age. While Mary champions styles that "negate all sense of youth as being beautiful", positive in its sentiment

and resolve, Tanya takes stock of a wardrobe that includes a "pink vinyl dress" and "feather capes", aware that they are targeted at "19-year-olds". She at once wants to subvert socially codified dress hierarchies, keen to avoid becoming a "middled-aged, dowdy person", but equally feels the pressure to conform. Projecting into the future, she casts doubt on the longevity of her style and clubbing lifestyle.

> **Tanya**: I sometimes catch myself thinking, when I m out, like at what point is it going to become apparent to me that I m one of those 50-year-olds in a club, [met with] sort of a mix of admiration and slight pity. (19:1)

The prospect of future cosmetic procedures, stricter anti-ageing practices and health regimes are all expressed strategies for surviving age, for 'ageing well'. Tension is apparent within the narratives of Mary, Ester and Ada; they do not rule out future procedures but feel the need to caveat this likelihood, keen to spotlight the things they wouldn't do, emphasising moderation and tastefulness.

> **Ester**: I think there are like a lot of limits, like a whole slew of things that I would not do but more minor cosmetic things as-, I hate that I m even like admitting to this, but I do wonder whether I would do them. (12:21)

Similarly, narrators emphasise health and not vanity when describing practices that are at least in part designed to delay ageing. Most speak of intentions to "look after" the body, "maintaining weight", "being fit", "eating better" and "general health consciousness" but tend to distance from a narrative of vanity, of being preoccupied with appearance. There is a sense of needing to underplay the impact of physical ageing, to perform ambivalence. Rhetorically, narrators speak to a feminist audience and feel compelled to subvert social conventions around preserving youth and beauty. Stella's narratives especially centre on "spirit" and feeling "vibrant", negating appearance altogether.

Psychological strategies of survival are just as varied and complex. While many demonstrate open acknowledgment of future ageing, Francesca's pre-emptive approach being an example of this, elsewhere they narrate reticence and an inclination to avoid and deny. The essential omission of future aging from Mary's narratives also speaks to this. The future, being "abstract", permits non-engagement; the speakability of future ageing, unknown and difficult to behold, waxes and wanes.

> **Francesca**: I m aware that 50 is coming up, [...] I can actually see 50, in my head I ve gone past 40 already, I think I m mentally preparing myself for 50. (16:2)

> **Clare**: I don't want to think about it, I think I block it out and just not think about it. (35:24)

> **Ester**: I have a really hard time doing that, […] I think I m under this delusional idea that I m not gonna age (laughs). (21:21)

Finally, female ageing happens in relation to men and to the male gaze. We have heard narrators' stated fears around losing social capital, sexual prowess, and attractiveness according to men. Whether they are securely held in a romantic relationship also mediates the psychological impact of ageing on narrators; partners serve as buffers to the pain of ageing. Francesca and Ada are especially overt in their construction of partners as validators and even saviours in their own ageing journey.

> **Francesca**: It s that whole appreciation package that he gives that makes me feel, okay, I m getting old but it s okay because he s there . So, I think being single and going through this age would be very difficult. (36:6)

Clare, similarly, narrates relief at no longer being the "token single" friend at social gatherings, finding life and ageing challenges more tolerable in relationships. She describes internalised stigma, a felt sense that being single at a certain age is abnormal and shameful.

> **Clare**: And it feels easier, to feel that way or to be comfortable with that position when I m in a relationship than when I m on my own, which is sad and it s not the way I want it to be. (23:5)

> **Clare**: When I have been single, I think I definitely felt judged by certain people, who just can t understand it. Even though I don t think it should-, and I feel self-conscious of it. (23:8)

Indeed, Tanya, although in a relationship herself, laments at how "singledom is vilified in contemporary society", and both Stella and Ester, single, narrate longing and the amplified anxiety that being both single and ageing brings.

> **Stella**: Sometimes I do feel like 'ergh', yeah, sad that I don't have someone to share my life with, just someone to get-, like have my back, someone to be on 'Team Stella'. (14:23)

> **Ester**: I think it depends on whether or not they re married and have kids. I think that makes a big difference. Erm, and whether or not they want to get married and have kids. I think that-, that changes the tone of the conversation a lot. (17:15)

Hope: Transformation and strength

While the path towards surviving ageing feels largely perilous, uncertain, and paved with tension and contradictions, bound by social codes, ideology, and the male gaze, this final sub-theme draws on narratives of agency and strength that also intersperse the text. Implicit within is a hope for survival, for a shift in mindset that transforms and liberates. In other words, narrators hope to 'not care' as ageing ensues. For Francesca, making peace with changing appearance is paramount; although her words suggest a lingering preoccupation with delaying ageing and passing as younger, a heedless attachment to youth loosens.

> **Francesca**: Maybe your goalposts change, like when you re 70, you wanna be mistaken for your 50s. (38:9)

Tanya conveys tentative hope; she projects forward, conscious of the challenges ahead but aspiring to inner resolve and resilience, a non-plussed attitude. There is an awareness of not quite knowing how ageing will 'feel' until the worst of it materialises.

> **Tanya**: I guess I just hope that the process going forward is going to feel as reassuring as my experience so far has been, [...] I don t want and so therefore I fear and also, I wonder, of course, would there be a point at which I m like, oh, I m starting to not enjoy this, I don t like this, oh please make this stop'. (27:24)

> **Tanya**: I imagine it will change, [...] I completely expect that to happen and, sort of, 'I m in a different category of desirability because I am an older woman', but that would probably be counteracted by, I don t give a shit ! (laughs). (24:13)

Ada's words echo a similar sentiment, tentatively optimistic that later ageing can be endured and survived, that her emotional barometer will recalibrate with time.

> **Ada**: Maybe by the time it happens it won t bother me, cause when I was younger, I thought, oh my god, life ends at 27 , you know? And now I m like, pff, I feel great , you know? And things that I thought would really bother me don t bother me... (23:6)

Stella's expression of hope is more emphatic and celebratory. She centres mental resolve, agency, and spiritual beliefs that can contain the perils of ageing, aspiring to "not live in fear,".

> **Stella**: I definitely want it to be a choice. And I think that's the thing, you have to-, you have to make a choice for yourself, not be a victim of circumstances. You have to be proactive about where your life is at and make the most out of it. (29:7)

Narrators are also keen to explore the positives of ageing; Stella looks forward to "being really wise" and, for Mary, getting older "liberates you to be more and more honest about what you like". Age is also aligned with professional status and respect; it affords women "credibility" and "authority" in the workplace, grey hair being an external marker that facilitates this shift. Ageing, therefore, is constructed as a panacea to the social structures that limit young women. It helps to shield women from the male gaze; narrators are more 'themselves' as they age.

Lastly, for all narrators, role models and community are fundamental to surviving ageing. They are united in their appreciation and admiration of older women who represent successful models of growing old. For Francesca, Clare, and Mary, seeing ageing women retain attractiveness, health, and positivity is comforting and restores "faith". Tanya, through her observation of older women, identifies a particular style that she hopes to emulate, one that is "glam", "impressive" and commands attention.

> **Francesca**: My mum can still get that reaction from looking good. You know, she doesn t try to hide her age, she just makes the best of what she s got. And she s yeah, fit and healthy. (38:6)

> **Tanya**: It s almost like, not I can t wait but, you know, this is a presentation and a look that I definitely dig, and I would love to one-, one day own and proudly display. (20:21)

Ester and Mary joyfully describe their changing relationships with female friends, conveying a sense of solidarity and mutual support, united in "shared grievances" in a gendered world. Older women also embody "alternative" lifestyles, offering diverse ageing trajectories that empower narrators to embrace individual choice that spurns conventionality and the tyranny of 'should'.

> **Ester**: They re just stylish, they, they travel, they have great careers, they re smart, [...] I want more women like that in my life, older women that I can sort of model myself after, if that makes sense. (14:6)

> **Stella**: Like my yoga teacher, she's an amazing example, she's in her early forties, and she's still-, like she's just vibrant, so she's a real example to me, of what the alternative can be. (13:15)

Finally, female friends, old and young inspire a sense of community, an almost surrogate family, partners with whom to grow old with.

> **Stella**: I'm really looking forward to having that friendship, growing old with them. (26:10)

Surviving ageing is not about cheerfulness and consolation but a fearless confrontation with the fearful ageing self. The narratives are simultaneously optimistic and apocalyptic, moments of both ebb and flow, interweaving and creating fascinating conflict and discord. Seemingly contradictory sentiments can coexist; they are not mutually exclusive. The theme of 'survival' evokes such rich tonal palette, and layering of identities in creation, so infused with multiplicity and possibilities.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Overview

With the word constraint in mind and to avoid repetition, a decision was made to conclude with a critical discussion of the study's key findings. I use the feminist hermeneutic introduced in the first chapter to interrogate the findings, situating them in the broader literature. This meant combining stages 5 and 6, in effect using the flexibility of CNA in a way that fitted the aims, but also the limitations inherent to the project. The discussion that follows therefore encompasses both a destabilisation and a synthesis of the narratives. Additionally, the applicability of the findings to counselling psychology and implications for therapeutic practice are considered. To conclude, an evaluation of the research is provided; I assess the limitations of the study and suggest areas for further research.

Part one: Synthesis and destabilisation

This final stage concerns a reading of the narratives by way of social imperatives and constructions that are theorised by feminists to maintain gendered power differentials in society, and thereby oppress and constrain the lives of women. A synthesis of how these competing norms are internalised and negotiated by narrators in their narrative and identity work is also considered.

The 'appropriate' female life course

Age is intimately tied with notions of appropriate behaviour, the proper timing and progression of events and roles, and the ways in which life is culturally divided into meaningful segments (Settersten & Hägestad, 1996). Individuals in a shared socio-cultural context are subject to what Neugarten (1969) calls the "normal predictable life cycle", cultural constructions of age and the life course that give individuals a sense of what lies ahead as well as an obligation to stay on course. Age timetables, therefore, are thought to be normatively prescribed, supported by consensus, and enforced through mechanisms of social discourse and control (Settersten & Hägestad, 1996).

These notions of age-appropriate milestones are shown to be of central concern in the stories of Ester, Ada, and Clare. They narrate measuring life and career successes against age-defined benchmarks; successes are more meaningful when achieved at a younger age. Ada narrates her sense of specialness when she describes the dual experience of being professionally successful and young, and her dismay at eventually losing this edge. For Ester, not hitting certain milestones, held from an

earlier age, is an important source of ageing anxiety. Her narratives reflect a fear of not living up to society's expectations, not meeting internalised 'cultural age deadlines', and the pressure of having to manage milestones that compete for her time and energy. Similarly, Clare is anxious of not having done 'enough' and not comparing well with peers. Together, as well as conforming to the 'normal life cycle', narrators describe a pressure to exceed it and to excel. Tonally, the narratives shift between determined readiness and uncertain despondency. Those who appear to opt out of these 'deadlines' take a somewhat rebellious stance, aware and affirmative of their existence but choosing an alternative expression of these pressures. Stella and Mary, for example, emphasise choosing a different path, and construct themselves as being outside of these normative experiences. At times, however, these rhetorical protections fall away, and they too express the pressure to conform. Narratively, all 7 women convey a pressure to live a life of meaning, which, by way of society's emphasis on measurable successes, is distorted to mean a life of predictable and 'normal' trajectory.

For feminists, gendered timetables that are constructed by cultural perceptions of age appropriateness, age norms and ageism and that are particularly oppressive for women are those that concern motherhood and a woman's relationship status. Age therefore persists as a social marker in structuring subjectivities of women, upheld narratively by the women of this study.

Ageist and sexist constructions of age intersect to form stereotypical understandings of late singlehood, by which single women above a certain age face a triple discrimination, based on their age, gender, and single status (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). This echoes Tanya's outcry that "singledom is vilified in contemporary society". As long as heteronormative monogamy is taken as the norm, "ways of living outside family structures will always be cast as less than ideal" (Jackson & Scott, 2004, p.155). Discursive processes occur by which single women 'age faster' and 'age' differently from coupled and married ones. Despite changes in family lifestyles and the growing numbers of single women, long-term singlehood remains stigmatised and subject to significant social scrutiny (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). Contemporary media presents partnering as the universal feminine desire (Taylor, 2012) and single women are seen as lacking, lonely or unhappy (Byrne, 2008; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2007). These stereotypical depictions provide limited cultural resources for single women to construct their lives and identities (Reynolds et al., 2007). This limitation is narratively reproduced in this study also.

Singlehood is storied to compound the negative emotional impact of ageing within the accounts of most participants. Those who are married narrate a sense of security that mitigates ageing effects; being partnered reassures Ada and Francesca that ageing can be tolerated and its emotional burden shared. Indeed, both explicitly describe seeking reassurance from their husbands during times of

age-related insecurities and concerns. For Francesca, 'Mike' serves as her "safety blanket", protecting her from both the challenges of ageing and the alternative prospect of having to venture into the dating market and starting afresh ("I think being single and going through this age would be very difficult"). As posited by feminists, Francesca's identity construction is much dependent on his validation and encouragement, and she herself attributes her "self-esteem" and "confidence" to Mike's presence and "appreciation package". For Ada, although she too gains much reassurance from her husband ("I think he tries really hard to keep my head above water"), she expresses less security in her marriage, a five-year age gap being the cause of this. This echoes ageist notions of a woman's social capital being in sharper decline with age. She narrates a fear of loss and a fear of moving back into a single status, constructed as being less than.

For those who were single at the time of the interviews, although the 'independent single woman' narrative is also emphasised, singlehood is nevertheless constructed as a temporary state, not preferred, and not adopted out of choice. The hope for relationships is alive and the prospect of ageing and dating fills many with dread and despair, however subtly expressed. Even Stella, who strongly narrates non-conformity and choosing to be in relationship with a broad network of friends, wistfully longs for a partner who is on "team Stella". Singlehood is a label that participants are socialised into. Ester and Clare describe being positioned by others, namely mothers and peers, within what Reynolds and Taylor (2005) calls the 'dominant coupledom narrative'. They describe interrogations by others within this positioning, which constructs them as lacking and as outsiders. Much like in Byrne's (2008) study of single women, the single women of this study construct self-identities rooted in a positive conception of self as single, but also experience feelings of shame and diminished personhood when interacting as singles in social situations. Alongside her narration of sexual empowerment and savvier dating knowhow, Ester describes ageing women being less seen as "sexual creatures" and her frustration with not dating the 'right' men. Similarly, and reluctantly, Clare admits to being more comfortable navigating social scenes in a relationship than as the "token single person", careful to caveat her feelings of being judged by others with dynamics of internalised stigma. The dating scene is also an arena in which age and age categories feel more prominent and tangible. Clare, like other single women, predicts being aged by others, and possibly out of realms of desirability because of her age ("your worth as a commodity in the dating market is probably going down, for a woman, as you grow older").

We have seen previously how participants' ambivalence regarding their reproductive timetable, the 'biological clock', contributes significantly to their experience of ageing anxiety. They simultaneously narrate a sense of urgency *and* hesitancy and employ rhetoric work, the mind-body duality being one, to help explain and understand internal confusion and indecision. Certainly, much like a

woman's relationship status, motherhood plays an important role in many women's sense-making and identity work, which creates undue pressure and limited subjectivities (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Pronatalist discourses shape women's beliefs, and contribute to narratives of the 'good' and 'appropriate' female life course (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Having children becomes a normative expectation and childlessness is constructed as a lack of feminine fulfilment. Women's decisions on child rearing and motherhood are therefore seldom as autonomous as they could be, influenced by the social environment, family, partners, and "mythologies of rapturous motherhood" (Meyers, 2001, p.746). Decisions are a multi-layered process, that concern the timing of motherhood, ambivalences encountered in choosing to become a mother, and the link between the heterosexual relationship and its quality and making this choice (Sevón, 2005).

Narrators' stories reflect these internalised norms, dynamics, as well as desires for alternative paths. Their attempts to integrate and consolidate these competing and complex social and biological forces are what produces such nuanced and conflicted accounts of potential motherhood. Clare, for example, narrates feeling out-of-step with peers, being confronted by family scripts and pressures, wanting to both subvert and conform to "traditional trajectories", experiencing both obligation and inherent "longing". Stella's strong maternal instinct is curtailed by her single status, which she compensates for by redefining the meaning of 'mother' to include caring for all those around her. Timing for 'reasonable' motherhood is defined by narrators in terms of physical health and stamina, side-stepping social barriers and stigma altogether. Much like Letherby's (1994) proposition, the desire for motherhood thus appears to be a multidimensional phenomenon, comprising of biological and social elements that are impossible to delineate. A woman with non-biological children, for example, may still grieve over her infertility, a sentiment that echoes Ada's ambivalence towards adoption, fearing missing out on the maternal experience and not being able to pass on her "good genes". In their stories, one hears maternal longing, the curbing of such maternal longing, a deep sense of not knowing, all compounded by ageing, the notion of time running out and the 'shoulds' of female identity.

The 'good' woman is "forever young"

Modern beauty standards emphasise body-thinness and youth; together they account for the feminine ideal, which is perpetuated in the media, by cultural narratives, and are ultimately internalised by women (Clarke, 1999; Grogan, 2008). Complex structures of ageism and sexism intersect and the moral imperative to remain "forever young" (and forever thin) is entrenched in the female psyche (Bordo, 2003; Segal, 2007). Ageing is thus constructed as decline, associated with the loss of youth and of an easy ability to maintain thin bodies. It is to be dreaded and concealed, and

ageing bodies are problematised and subjected to modalities of regulation (Gullette, 1997). The findings of this present study suggest that pre-midlife women are acutely aware of their changing appearance and physicality, some current and some anticipated, most of which unwelcomed.

The 'decline' perspective is most unchallengingly conveyed in the narratives of Ada, Clare, and Francesca, and form aspects of other narrators' stories. Francesca's prizing of her lost teenage body and preoccupation with the body's weight and size demonstrate strong youth- and thin-biases in her notion of 'normality' and acceptability ("I wish I was 16 again, I could lose all of this!"), while others narrate an aversion to the body's decreasing vitality and changing appearance. Narrators' descriptions of inherited "jowls", breasts that "sag", "receding gum", "stretchmarks", "wobbly bits", and "the fat that turns up in places" convey visceral displeasure and annoyance, site-specific focus, and a reluctant witnessing of the body changing (deteriorating) with age, the thin feminine ideal being strongly internalised as 'default' and desirable. These accounts reflect a narrow reading of the female body, essentially reducible to binary categories of youth and age; women are thus not judged by how old they are, but how young they are not (Woodward, 1999). The evocative terms, loaded with negative connotations, also convey a "spoiled identity" whereby ageing female bodies are socially defined as "abominations" and "imperfections" (Goffman, 1963, p.4-6). Ada's frank description of elderly skin as "gross", "shocking", "scary" and "sad" reveals her fearful projection into advanced old age, shame and aversion towards older women's bodies and the "unwatchability" of elderly flesh (Jacobs, 1990; Woodward, 1999). Narrators' descriptions also set out clear distinctions between the 'young-old', characterised by consumerist abundance and good health, and the 'old-old', characterised by debilitation, the loss of mental acuity, and "traumatic illnesses". They therefore bifurcate, as does society, the 'Third' and 'Fourth' ages, with the former celebrated and the latter stigmatised and feared, emblematic of the "new ageism" of contemporary society (Boudiny, 2013). With age, narrators also observe acute awareness of their own mortality, which prompts existential dread, and a horror-filled anticipation of how old age may ravage ("I'm not scared of death, but I'm scared of dying, the dying process, being incapacitated, debilitated, [...] having all that dignity taken away").

The imperative to remain ageless is evident in narrators' collective emotional attachment to a body that is unmarked by age, when it is 'new' and at its 'best'. That 'passing as young' is a phenomenon lauded by narrators as a genetic advantage and social triumph highlights this bias; being validated by society as looking younger is desired and coveted, and facilitates a psychological distancing from ageing (Rudman, 2015). Contemporary bodies are subject to a "new perfectionism" and deviations from the young-thin ideal are read as failure, infused with shame (Furman, 1999; Twigg, 2004). The ageing body is therefore othered and negatively constructed, and so holding on to more youthful

identities optimises women's self-esteem (Barrett, 2005). For Ester, an ageing body feels like a 'betrayal', unnatural and inappropriate. She describes the body no longer being 'on her side', no longer as energetic as it once was, conveying a sense of disavowal. Specific body parts can also become the focus of negative constructions. For Mary, her 'sagging' breasts represent a deterioration that is dreaded and irreversible; she narrates helpless grief, subtle shame, and an awareness of a trajectory of further decline. The contemporary body is also subject to self-scrutiny aided by technologies for self-monitoring and surveillance (Twigg, 2004). For many, photographic reminders of their younger selves, generated by Facebook and other technologies, although not on a quotidian basis, heighten their awareness of growing deviation from the feminine ideal.

Shame is an emotional tone that permeates the narratives of participants when they are pulled into raw confrontation with their ageing bodies. Mary describes a "strange awareness", a reluctant seeing, unavoidable but difficult to encounter without the accompanying rhetoric work done to minimise unpleasantness. Ada and Francesca describe observing ageing changes, which serve as searing markers of decline, sharp with emotional impact. There is an unspeakable quality to this witnessing, a desire to turn away and avert their gaze, to distance themselves from the realities of ageing. The sentiment of 'not yet' is expressed by both Ester and Clare, a mechanism of self-soothing; "I think I block it out and just not think about it". Stella's account of her ageing experience is especially infused with rhetoric work. One senses that she performs nonchalance to deemphasise its emotional impact. Her reluctant account of finding the "first grey hair" is particularly poignant, worded so subtly but with undeniable sadness ("…and then of course you see one and you're like, 'ah, okay, how do I feel about that'"). These sentiments demonstrate narrators' perceived sense of individual responsibility for reversing or halting ageing, as irrational and impossible as the proposition reads. Ageing as a universal human experience and biological truism appear to not be a consciously held belief. The imperative to 'not age' generates a particular kind of shame and sense of personal and moral failing.

The imperative to engage in anti-ageing practices that are expressed by narrators as likely adopted strategies for surviving ageing and future ageing is narratively constructed as horrific and "stark", an anticipated emotional challenge that must be survived ("My features are going to change significantly in the next 10 years…"). The language used by narrators reinforces a doom scenario in which unpleasantness might amplify, where "pressure" "powers up", and when things go "downhill". These projections align with the 'decline' perspective and vividly convey internalised ageism, the psychological consequence of which includes ageing anxiety and poor self-perception, perhaps more readily seen in Francesca's narrative (Clarke, 2011; Grogan, 2008). She recounts being "in a grump" and being trapped in a negative spiral of self-judgement and scrutinisation, "really aware" of the gaining and losing of "a kilo", weight being an aspect of ageing that is most feared at this stage.

Feminist perspectives conceptualise body dissatisfaction as "self-objectification"; individuals assume an observer's view of the body and place undue emphasis on appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This tendency is observable in narrators' equating of 'ageing well' with retaining attractiveness, and attractiveness is understood to mean proximity to the feminine ideal, and not losing social validation from others and especially men. Tanya constructs ageing as a positive experience for as long as physical changes are not pronounced, and her attractiveness remains unthreatened. For Clare, retaining attractiveness prolongs a woman's "shelf life" and the enduring attractiveness of older female role models is what gives Mary "faith" in surviving ageing. The fear of losing sexual appeal and, by extension, social desirability is experienced by most narrators ("I don't want to be sexually obsolete"). In her critique of the 'normatisation' of the female body and the disciplinary (male) gaze of power structures, Ponterotto (2016, p.138) warns of sexual attractiveness becoming a norm for social acceptability, "a norm that invades intimate and economic relationships". As seen in this study, an implicitly held belief by narrators is that only women who respond to the norm will be certain of success and survival.

Most narrators do not rule out partaking in more invasive cosmetic procedures in the future, as difficult as it may be to reconcile that with a determined attitudes to 'age gracefully'. Their accounts reflect a feminine imperative to ramp up efforts to counteract the effects of ageing as ageing becomes more pronounced, and departure from the youthful ideal escalates (Bailey et al., 2016; Clarke & Griffin, 2007a). Ada, for example, describes a growing pressure to wear make-up, feminise her appearance, and perform more "upbeat" and "smiley" youthfulness, and Francesca emphasises a need to "be well put together", maintaining attractiveness being an essential goal of 'ageing well'. Francesca's narratives, which are often infused with her mother's voice, also highlight aesthetic practices and body image concerns being an inherited trait from mothers (Clarke & Griffin, 2007b), thus bringing out the intergenerational dimension of ageing experiences.

The 'good' woman is 'ageless' and in control

As well as the duty to retain the feminine ideal, the fashioning of a youthful body demonstrates perceived control and capability, qualities of personal success that shore up the modern female identity (Carter, 2016; Twigg, 2000). The body becomes a project to be worked upon, increasingly seen as a "central paradigm" of the self, a site of struggle and reflexivity (Biggs, 1999, p.5). Findings here exemplify the control imperative, with its many intersecting components and drivers that concern narrators' need for certainty and security, and for strategies of survival within the social and professional spheres, influenced by the hegemony of 'successful ageing' and health discourses.

An entrepreneurial energy characterises some narrators' determined strategies for combating ageing. Although these strategies vary in nature and content, between spiritually centred practices, strict weight and diet control, and the adoption of new dress codes and styles, they convey pragmatic readiness that is individual and goal-oriented ("I definitely want it to be a choice, […] not be a victim of circumstances"). Narrators convey a self-prescribed duty to take on ageing in an enterprising manner, to manage and minimise its negative impact. They convey the need for mental and physical preparedness, so that the worst of ageing can be contained or delayed ("Maybe by the time it happens it won't bother me"). The specifics of such strategies, however, can sometimes feel abstract and distant, with many oscillating between ready engagement and psychological avoidance. There is a sense of needing to be in control but the precise plans for survival have yet to crystallise for some. Tonally, the narratives convey agency, a wishful hope for survival, as well as doubt.

These sentiments mirror the moral obligation of 'successful ageing', much discussed and critiqued in the literature. Here, health discourses that are medically-rooted and the moral-ethical discourse of productivity and activity intersect (Rexbye & Povlsen, 2007). Individuals are expected to successfully manage and counter their own ageing and perform 'agelessness' and the postmodern value of personal agency assumes endless possibilities in terms of physical capabilities and identity fluidity (Twigg, 2004). Narrators appear to reproduce these social discourses; when projecting forward, they anticipate the management and regulation of the ageing body through cosmetic practices, physical activity, and mental resilience. Stella's accounts especially link her constructed identity as a champion for 'alternative' lifestyles with the construction of a 'good' ageing experience through choice and design. As well as maintaining a supple and energetic body through the practice of yoga, she emphasises psychological and spiritual qualities of "trust" and "acceptance". She centres the aspiration of feeling "vibrant", in body and mind, as a means of countering the ageing process. Many others echo similar life choices, eschewing youthful hedonism for "general health consciousness", "eating better" and "being fit". Narrators tend to frame aesthetic aspirations as health concerns and strategies, which reflect the growing trend of health norms and health promotion whereby a youthful appearance is assumed to be indicative of health (Slevin, 2010). As well as the imperative for women to distance themselves from narratives of vanity, further discussed below, health discourses, infused with ageist undertones, encourage women to perceive ageing as an unhealthy state that should be minimised (Rudman, 2015). Problematically, the legitimacy of needing to "ward off ageing" and be healthy "masks social dynamics of racism, classism, sexism, fatphobia and heterosexism" (Carter, 2016, p.201), and amplifies the pressure women experience to perform 'agelessness'.

Indeed, women are socially encouraged to control their body, and "to let oneself go" suggests a betrayal of the self (Brooks, 2017). Body practices are thus a means of reconfiguring the self, towards youth or simply to facilitate congruity between appearance and their sense of felt identity, usually more youthful (Clarke et al., 2007). Atemporality is a recurring theme within the narratives, with narrators describing not 'feeling' their age, until they are jolted into awareness either by visual reminders or when they are 'aged' by the social gaze, fixed by others into a particular age category. Ageing is thus a relational experience, and women are perpetually "aged by culture" (Gullette, 2004). Ada, for example, vividly contrasts a painful duality between her lived persona and how she imagines the world seeing her, a "disconnect" that she grapples with. Her inner lived experience of a "sparky, young, fun" girl was cruelly dispersed, for example, when she was called "madam" in public ("so formal and so-o-o-o 'age-y'"). The careful management of youthful bodies is therefore also a means of preparing the bodies for social contact, to minimise social punishment, and to enhance a woman's participation in the public sphere (Holliday & Taylor, 2006). For Francesca, managing her appearance is a prerequisite for professional success. She narrates declining visibility in the workplace and comparing unfavourably with younger women. The imperative to 'dress well' points to workplace ageism and lookism (McInnis & Medvedev, 2021), whereby a woman's appearance is unfairly associated with her competency and professionalism. Narrators' examples of female role models also reflect these biases. They not only represent professional triumph but are also admired for being "attractive", "glam", and "impressive". 'Not letting oneself go' is still the benchmark of ageing well. Interestingly, aspects of physical ageing are embraced by narrators as means of enhancing their professional status, to neutralise the male gaze. Greying hair and looking older up to a point, are storied as strategies for commanding respect in the workplace.

The illusion of self-control has also been found to feed 'outside' ageism. In previous "imagined future self" studies, young adult are found to see ageing as decline but enact self-preservation through social comparison by telling themselves "it will be better for me", a belief that is observable in the narratives (Giles et al., 2003; Heckhausen & Krueger, 1993). In doing so, they may discriminate against older adults who have not been able to exercise control and have allowed themselves to look old (Gendron & Lydecker, 2016). The concept of 'ageing gracefully', mentioned by all narrators and interpreted in slightly contrasting ways, appears to be at the core of a tension between internalised ageism, which may manifest as judgement against those who have let themselves become "middle-aged" and "dowdy", and the imperative to transcend social conformity, couched within feminist discourse.

The dilemma of 'feminism versus femininity'

Apparent within the narratives are tensions participants experience in negotiating their feminist identification on the one hand and engagement in normative appearance and age concerns on the other. Tanya, Esther, Stella, Mary, and Clare, who identity as feminists, frequently speak rhetorically to a feminist audience, with me positioned into the role of conduit, representative, and sometimes adjudicator. For participants who do not identity as feminists, as least not explicitly, their concerns around 'ageing gracefully' echo a tension between the imperative to age 'naturally', thereby transcending normative models of femininity, and 'unnaturally', to conceal ageing. Narratives of 'awakening' and 'empowerment' are also storied by participants, along with reproductions of discourses of 'self-help' and 'self-care'. They not only individuate issues of gendered ageism, by emphasis of the individualistic ideal-self, but also position women as being in need of improvement (Riley et al., 2019). These dynamics are discussed here, along with what Riley and Scharff (2013) calls the "ideological dilemma of 'feminism versus femininity'", whereby the two frameworks of feminine existence are constructed as mutually exclusive. How women who identity as feminist and feminine negotiate cultural discourses that construct their identities as contradictory is explored here.

'Ageing gracefully' is much narrated in the study. Ester emphasises its "negative connotations", which place undue pressure on women to both engage in beauty practices with the aim of concealing ageing, and to distance themselves from narratives of crisis and conformity. Ester, for example, simultaneously champions "not putting such priority on age" *and* narrates her readiness to engage in aesthetic practices, while emphasising tastefulness and moderation, her "limits" and the "whole slew of things" she would not do. Rhetorically, she attempts to negotiate a precarious middle-ground and to preserve her feminist identity, while recognising incongruence between her ideal self, that of "a woman who doesn't need to live within those conventions" and the realities of her ageing concerns. Her accounts exemplify the ambivalence women experience between having a 'natural' body and an 'unnatural' body (Gosselink et al., 2008). Women's desire to accept their ageing appearance with 'grace' is in discordance with culturally normative aesthetic preferences that emphasise 'agelessness' (Carter, 2016; Chrisler, 2011). This tension is observable in narrators' collective efforts to distance from narratives of vanity and an excessive preoccupation with maintaining youth and beauty. Appearance concerns are more comfortably narrated as health concerns, which better reconcile with the imperatives of female empowerment and their "feminist ethos".

The dilemma of 'ageing gracefully' can also lead to judgement, either inwardly or outwardly expressed. Stella's narratives on the ills of conformity, including but not limited to women wearing make-up ("so for me not wearing make-up is being honest") and having injectable cosmetic

treatments, are particularly disparaging and critical ("she just looks like a woman who's had plastic surgery, […] to my mind it never looks good"). As well as dogmatic feminism (Riley & Scharff, 2013), she constructs an unhelpful binary, those who "embrace" ageing and embody authenticity, herself included, and those who pitifully subject themselves to the tyranny of anti-ageing practices. Similar sentiments were found in studies by Harris (1994) and Muise and Desmarais (2010); women who used concealment products were judged as conceited, vain, foolish, and pathetic, and women both engaged in cosmetic practices and criticised media messages about them. Tanya's assessment of this tension is more nuanced. Using Madonna as an example, she narrates her judgement and aversion to the singer's obvious age concealment, finding it "aesthetically displeasing" but complicates this instinct by questioning its social origin and her own ambivalence ("it's obvious that she's not young but she's trying to look young, […] so what's wrong with that"). In effect, Tanya is calling attention to social codes that dictate how women should age and dress, and those who transgress from standards of 'appropriateness', either too vain or too sexualised, are stigmatised as "mutton dressed as lamb" (Rexbye & Povlsen, 2007). Mary and Ada also narrate appropriate "style" as a means of surviving ageing, preferring styles that align with their age, and that "negate all sense of youth as being beautiful", while avoiding looking "dowdy" or, in the case of Ada, like "a lesbian". Women are therefore caught in a moral quandary; they cannot appear too young or too old (Miller-Spillman, 2019), or else may be perceived as "dressing too young for their age," or as "letting themselves go" (Clarke et al., 2009). This notion of 'appropriateness' thus becomes an unresolved struggle, between trying too hard or not enough, both stigmatised, compounded by a feminist critique of the feminine ideal, which narrators undeniably covet still.

Narratives of empowerment are readily reproduced by all narrators except for Ada and Francesca, and are, at least in part, inspired by narrators' sense of feminist duty, to distance from narratives of ageing crisis and perform optimism. Thus, concerns about ageing and the loss of youthful appearance are constructed as anti-feminist, and narrators walk a rhetorical tight-rope, keen to narrate their embodied ageing experiences with sincerity and emotional vulnerability while needing to maintain their feminist identities. This discomfort is most observable in the narratives of Ester and Clare, which leads to talk of 'betraying' feminism, labelling themselves as 'bad feminists', while Mary, Tanya, and Stella choose to eschew their identification with normative femininity and construct themselves as being 'awake' and 'transformed'. Regardless, vulnerabilities seep through their stories, however well-managed to minimise ageing anxiety.

Ester and Clare position themselves as feminists who desire normative feminine experiences: marriage and children. Although their narratives are not without rhetorical struggles, possibly employed to avoid the telling of an anti-feminist story, and to justify this perceived transgression,

pervasive are sentiments of guilt for not being good enough feminists ("I wish I felt more empowered in my feminism"). They narrate apparent failure to live up to feminist ideals through their continued investment in normative femininity ("in theory none of this should matter"), which constructs a rigid feminism, and supposes that having the ability to critique normative expectations of women equates to being above the influences of these social norms, "that in seeing them as problematic we should not and would not engage with them" (Riley & Scharff, 2013, p.216). This echoes Throsby's and Gimlin's (2010) reflective piece on being female researchers critical of the thin ideal while also subjects to its discourse, and Adams et al.'s (2007) discussion of the difficulties young women encounter in 'coming out' as feminists and negotiating the expectation that as 'real' feminists they should reject heteronormative expectations.

Tanya, by contrast, circumvents feeling guilty or fraudulent and negotiates the dilemma of 'feminism versus femininity' by constructing a defiant feminist identity, as someone who sees through gender norms and is largely freed of them, and by intellectualising the encounter, avoiding emotionality. Any perceived transgressions are skilfully narrated away through careful corrections or by reproducing postfeminist discourses of autonomy and 'choice' (Amy-Chinn, 2006). The individualist 'doing it for me' argument, however, while it departs from 'perfectionism' feminism and allows for pleasurable self-fashioning, reflects neoliberal sensibilities that emphasise individual strategies to structural constraints and fails to consider the discursive origin of some 'choices' (Riley & Scharff, 2013). In a similar vein, Stella's and Mary's "awakening" and "transformation" narratives incorporate ideas of positive psychology, Eastern spirituality, "alternative" lifestyles that forsake conventionality, and postfeminist 'love yourself' discourses. They represent a "postfeminist sensibility" that articulates a form of ideal femininity aligned with neoliberal rationality, which, according to Gill (2007), who first coined the term, demands of women three things. They are: increased self-surveillance and -regulation; an expansion of surveillance over new spheres of life and intimate conduct; and a focus on the psychological and on the imperative for women to transform themselves and remodel their inner lives. While these affirmative statements resonate with feminist principles (e.g., that women have intrinsic value), they are "simultaneously tied to a neoliberal incitation to work on the self", which locates the problem (e.g. of confidence) in women, rather than in social contexts (Riley et al., 2019, p.9). These invocations of self-improvement are also characterised by complexity, contradiction, and confusion, pervasive in participants' stories, meaning that however much effort they make, women can never be confident that they got it right (Riley et al., 2018).

Part two: Evaluation of the study

Implications for counselling psychology and therapeutic practice

Crotty (1998, p.17) cautions against qualitative researchers being "abstract intellectualisers, divorced from experience and reality", and so perhaps the most important means of evaluating this present study is its applicability and contribution to counselling psychology theory and practice. The theoretical terrain specific to women's psychological development, typically derived from developmental psychology and psychodynamic perspectives, is said to be "impoverished", characterised by an almost exclusively biological and normative reading of development, which replicates narratives of decline and regulates women's identity to meet their care-taking and reproductive duties (Gergen, 1990, p.475). This study, being cross-disciplinary in nature, attempts to promote a cross-fertilisation of theoretical perspectives, as well as adopting the feminist lens with which to critique the limitations of traditional psychological, psychosocial, political economy and 'successful ageing' approaches to ageing. In doing so, it hopes to expand counselling psychology's theoretical scope with respect to reading female ageing and enable constructive borrowing from the considerable contribution feminist theory has made to 'age studies', especially in understanding the complicated gendered dynamics that infuse ageing experiences.

Indeed, the findings presented above not only address a distinct demographic gap in the literature, by considering the gendered ageing experiences of younger, pre-midlife women. In doing so it enriches psychologists' understanding of the social constructions of ageing, understood as decline of the female body, which is subject to the social gaze and must be disciplined to be 'ageless'; and societal ageism, which is internalised and replicated by younger women. Most importantly, the study highlights how competing social discourses, which compound in young women a sense of 'should' and inadequacy, intersect and how identities, which are fraught and in flux, are negotiated narratively. The study therefore supports the hypothesis that body and ageing anxieties are as damaging to the self-identity and self-esteem of younger women as they are for older women, and that younger women are perhaps more psychological susceptible to gendered and ageist discourses, being more vulnerable and of closer proximity to the feminine ideal, which drives the collective female experience of 'not being good enough'. Furthermore, the study spotlights additional age-related themes, some of which specific to this age-cohort, including that of temporality and atemporality; the incongruence felt between the interior and exterior experiences of ageing; the intersection of ageing with singlehood, couplehood, and potential motherhood; and the dilemma of 'feminism versus femininity', ageing experiences as situated in a postfeminist context.

The study thus uncovers the multiples layers of impact ageing has on young female identities. It theorises ageing on a macro-micro level, combining a structural focus with personal meaning, which aligns with counselling psychology ethos and practice (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). Further, as argued by Moradi and Yoder (2011), for counselling psychologists attempting to formulate women's mental health difficulties, it is essential to consider the effects of sexism, inequality, and power differentials, often relationally expressed. They therefore call for counselling psychologists to adopt the feminist understanding that "women's well-being depends on both their personal and sociopolitical empowerment", which is precisely what this study attempts to deliver (Moradi & Yoder, 2011, p.346). Therefore, a feminist lens compliments and helpfully augments and expands the life-span perspective that typically informs counselling psychology.

As well as better theoretical understanding of women's age-related distresses, the study also contributes to counselling psychology's understanding of how best to support and empower women in their ageing. Counselling psychology is concerned with the subjective meaning-making of individual clients and service users (Milton, 2010), and this study may help practitioners deepen their awareness of how meaning is derived from and attributed to the ageing experiences of younger women. In a therapeutic context, such an awareness is invaluable in helping younger women disentangle the multitude of complex forces and experiences that feed into their self-concept, in diffusing distress and assisting in the construction of new meanings. Indeed, the study strongly suggests that matters of identity formation are particularly pertinent to participants' expressed sense of confusion and anxiety. Psychological interventions that attempt to ameliorate ageing anxieties therefore need to take these complicated dynamics into careful consideration. Arguably, an integrative approach to therapy, which aligns with counselling psychology's emphasis on a holistic approach to therapeutic interventions, may be most apt in addressing ageing's multiple implications and expression.

The work of Carl Rogers (1961) and person centred therapy's emphasis on 'self-actualisation', 'congruence', and 'unconditional positive regard' may facilitate practitioners' empathic response to ageing women's negotiated identities, often infused with senses of incongruence and inadequacy. This corresponds with counselling psychology's positive view of humans as having potential to self-realise and become fully-functioning entities (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). However, this should not be divorced from a feminist structural reading of ageing, especially when accounting for the potential negative implications of 'postfeminist sensibility' and self-help discourses (Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2019). Additionally, themes around mortality and temporality suggest that an existential approach, which centres "the awareness of non-being" (death), the "thrownness" of existence, and

experiences of "clock time" and "existence time", could add to the therapeutic meeting of ageing women's support needs (Adams, 2014, p.37). The avoidance of death and mortality speak can be extended to psychology as a whole (Kastenbaum, 2007), and mainstream psychology neglects the impact of these universal truths on psychological difficulties (Milton, 2010).

The study's emphasis on reflexivity and the co-constructed nature of research and narratives also highlights counselling psychologists' need to reflect on their own ageing constructions, and how these dynamics affect the therapeutic relationship and 'therapy narratives'. Where the therapist is on his or her own life course is of importance (Sugarman & Woolfe, 1997), and age differences and ageist assumptions, for example, should be included in practitioners' reflexive work, alongside other differences. Indeed, this aligns with the systemic approach within counselling psychology, and the notion of 'Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS' (Burnam, 1992, 2011; Roper-Hall, 1998, 2008).

Another area of potential usefulness is the incorporation of group work as intervention in relation to age- and identify-related psychological disturbances in pre-midlife women. This aligns with narrators' reports of seeking out role models, taking inspiration from other women, and finding understanding and support in communities and networks of female friends. Therefore, group work could be an effective means of delivering psychological input.

Finally, by incorporating a sociocultural framework in therapy that includes feminist and social constructionist principles, counselling psychologists have the opportunity to explore 'post-individualistic' therapeutic philosophies that encourage more socially transformative means of practice (Vermes, 2017). Vermes' (2017) critique of counselling psychology being shaped by the cultural value of individualism is precisely what this study attempts to address. Beyond contributions to practice and theory, it hopes to galvanise the profession's socio-political agendas and its emancipatory focus (Rafalin, 2010). The study's critical stance, with an emphasis on female emancipation, elevates a structural perspective that adds to individualistic understandings of female psychological development. Through better understanding structural constraints that limit and oppress women's lived experience and existential potential, the profession could help challenge and redefine social discourses and systemic structures that perpetuate ageist stereotypes and gendered power differentials in society. Indeed, the unique role of counselling psychologists as therapists, researchers, social advocates, and as important sources of learning and supervision, provides an important opportunity to promote more considered, holistic, and empowering dialogues around the topic of female ageing, and contribute to real socio-political change. The study's ideological premise also aligns with that of The Psychology of Women and Equalities Section ('POWES') within the BPS,

which aims to "highlight issues of gender and inequality in academic and applied psychology in order to positively influence policy and practice" (POWES, 2021).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The current study sought to advance our understanding of ageing as experienced by younger, pre-midlife women. It adopted a broad explanatory stance and analytic method, allowing for ageing and its many layers to emerge and be examined from multiple vantage points, incorporating phenomenology, narrative enquiry, and engagement with critical social theory through the inclusion of a hermeneutic of suspicion. In his guide to CNA, Langdridge (2009) warned of the arduous nature of the method, even with a modest number of participants. Therefore, although the sample size of the present work, limited to seven participants, was 'small', the employment of CNA in its entirety ensured that the idiographic nature of the method was not lost, and depth of analysis and richness of exploration maintained. In effect, breadth was sacrificed for depth, and there was no expectancy of generalisation, as is the case in most qualitative research (Willig, 2012). Indeed, by providing insight into the ageing experience and highlighting intertwining perspectives, the findings could generate further and alternative avenues of enquiry.

The interviewees were only interviewed once due to time constraints; a second meeting could have further enriched or refined the narrative data, transcended the 'defended subject' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), and provided an opportunity to obtain credibility from the participants themselves (Willig, 2013). Relatedly, a second interview after a gap of several years could explore the effects of ageing changes on participants as they advance into their late 30s and deviate further from the feminine ideal. This would provide a longitudinal perspective that explores ageing change as a continuous process, and how identities shift as women age closer to their 40s, a notable milestone.

Further, diversity, in terms of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, social class, disability and health status, was not adequately achieved within the sample. While two participants were of mixed-race (white/east Asian), the majority were white, educated, middle-class, heterosexual women. This is a common limitation given the narrow homogeneity of qualitative research samples, and especially given the informal recruitment process this study employed, but it is an important failing. The study could not consider deeply intersectionality in women's gendered experiences of ageing and how social discourses that construct ageing women as 'less than' intersect with different social and cultural norms. Future research should include a broadening of scope to explore these intersectional dynamics, to challenge heteronormativity and give voice to those who may be marginalised or forgotten. Additionally, the participants recruited were of a small age range,

30-34, and none had children. This was a consequence of the randomness of the recruitment process but creates a missed opportunity in capturing a more diverse and richer set of ageing experiences, and better understanding how ageing intersects with motherhood, and how meanings may differ for women in the twenties and thirties.

Related to this is an acknowledgement of the social and cultural dynamics that shaped the research process, which were unique to this researcher and this group of participants. My relationships with the participants were laden with layers of identification and notions of 'sameness' and 'difference'. Narrated by the participants were a variety of identities to which I could relate, for example, that of feminist, educated, and middle-class. There was a sense of commonality, which frequently manifested in our interactions, knowing looks and shared laughs that implicitly marked our shared identities and discourses. This suggests that a different outcome would exist if either I or my participants were of alternative racial or social identities. Indeed, narrative research methods allow for multiple interpretations, my contribution being one of many possibilities (Squire, 2013). Alternative readings of the data would be equally valid.

The participants in this study narrated clear differences between the male and female ageing experiences, as constructed from the female perspective. Further studies could compare the ways in which men and women construct ageing, how they make sense of ageing, and whether the discourses available to them converge or differ. Indeed, feminist research may begin but does not end with women, and examining both men's and women's privilege, oppression and shared interests and difficulties help us understand the advantages and disadvantages that follow gender throughout the life course (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986). Future research could also employ alternative methodologies and analytic approaches to further enrich our understanding of female ageing. These could include participatory action research, which emphasises participants becoming equal partners and social change and action (Aldridge, 2015); memory work, which facilitates emotions coming to the fore, particularly emotions that are not easily voiced (Bryant & Bryant, 2019); and focus groups as a means of collecting narrative data, which would align with the importance of women-based community as narrated by the women of this study. The latter would likely bring out the relational aspect of female ageing experiences, the universality of such experiences and elicit dynamics of corroboration, validation, and conformity; it would thus bring out an additional layer of meaning beyond individual narratives. Lastly, future research could focus on finding ways to help women better navigate the competing normative discourses to which they are subject and to identity alternatives to the dichotomy of 'feminist versus femininity'. This would open up the narrative possibilities for women and help highlight and challenge the individualist and hidden racialised and class-based aspects of postfeminist sense making (Riley & Scharff, 2013).

Conclusion

This study presented the ageing stories of younger, pre-midlife women as they encountered the first wave of physical change and identity shifts. Their accounts were analysed using critical narrative analysis which resulted in three overarching themes: *fertility: urgency and ambivalence*; *cusp of awareness: noticing and forgetting;* and *surviving ageing: crisis and agency*. The themes were then destabilised by way of the feminist lens of interrogation and further synthesised. The discussion centred on how powerful social discourses intersect to construct the imperatives of the 'good' woman and the 'good' feminist. The female ageing experience is therefore characterised by deep contradiction, tension, incongruence, and senses of 'should' and shame. Identities are narratively negotiated, perpetually formed and performed anew. Women's ageing choices are therefore both acts of capitulation and resistance; they can be enterprising, agentic, and are means of survival within a sociocultural context that subjects women to normative disciplines, many of which internalised. The narrators found themselves at a precarious junction of competing discourses which simultaneously insist on an acceptance of ageing, to distance from narratives of crisis and decline, as well as urging women to defy ageing. 'Appropriate' ageing is a notion that pervades the narratives, but its meaning remains elusive and ambivalent, at times empowering and freeing, and at other times punitive and demanding. Finally, implications for counselling psychology theory and practice were explored and several limitations and future directions of research were identified.

Younger, pre-midlife women, the focus of this study, have been an under-researched cohort with respect their ageing experiences. It is often assumed that they are too young to feel the repercussions of ageing and its associated stereotypes and negative assumptions. It is hoped that the findings of this study may expose the gaps and silences, to allow fuller understanding and consideration of younger women's ageing plights and pressures to emerge.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity engagement has been an essential feature of this research study, as seen throughout the preceding chapters. Considerations include my motivations for conducting the research, the co-constructed nature of narrative generation, and my subjective positioning within the analytic material. This statement reflects upon the study from the point of completion, to situate the entire process within its subjective context.

Notwithstanding my personal health issues and barriers to completion, the research process was a demanding and arduous one, infused with doubt and uncertainty, but ultimately rewarding. I perhaps underestimated the complicated and intricate nature of CNA and the considerable effort required to engage with its six layers of analysis. In retrospect, I would limit the number of participants to perhaps four or five, to further prioritise the idiographic purpose of CNA, condense the amount of narrative material with which I was engaged, and create space for a more detailed analysis of narrators' stories, word constraints being a recurring limitation of the research process. I may also more narrowly define my research aims, focusing on an aspect of ageing as opposed to the phenomenon as a whole. I was frequently overwhelmed by the complexity and broadness of the topic and the number of interwoven threads that emerged, many of which overlapping or contradictory. I faced much indecision when organising and categorising both the literature and research findings into meaningful sections, creating some links and neglecting others during the write-up.

I was also aware of the multiple possible ways of reading the narrative data, and that my reading is but one of many. Although narrative methods do not require the 'bracketing' of one's own views and implicit biases, guided by the 'critique of the illusion of subjectivity', I was sensitive to how I may be imposing my own perspectives onto narrators' stories. At times I questioned whether I had been too 'critical' or interpretative, perhaps privileging gender-based themes during analysis, and needed to return to the data to find grounding and agreement. I allowed my thinking to take many turns as I engaged in repeated questioning of the material, standing back from it at times, which gave space for themes to percolate and consolidate.

There were several moments of 'stuckness' when I faced what felt like an insurmountable amount of material. I used mind maps, several iterations, to try and create clearer networks of thought in my mind and sought guidance from my supervisor for validation and encouragement. I used the 'getting through' narratives to try and create small victories and steps forward, although periods of procrastination and avoidance were also common. Alongside moments of despair and paralysis were also instances of fascination, energy, and excitement, especially when a thematic picture began to form, when workable structures materialised, and when I knew what I wanted to say, what the point was. These moments punctuated a continuous fog of unknowing and grappling. I also experienced buoyancy and pleasure from simply learning, about narrative methods, 'age studies', and feminist thought in particular; they were new frontiers. I could also observe a gradual easing into a narrative way of perceiving interactions, becoming more attuned to discursive dynamics and rhetoric mechanisms in communication, which fed into both my therapeutic practice and personal life.

Ponterotto (2005) has drawn attention to the impact of the research process on the inner world of the researcher. As a woman of a similar age to my participants, I found much resonance and commonality in their stories. I am just as exposed to the demands of femininity and the ideologies of the 'good' woman and feminist as they are. Through knowing them, I can better understand my own ageing and see the workings of gender and ageist dynamics in my own experience and internal landscape, and how I am indeed situated in society and am conditioned by it. As well as being alerted to the more troubling aspects of ageing, I also shared joyful, pleasurable, liberating, and inspiring moments with participants, and was at times nourished and fortified by their resolve, strength, and compassion. Overall, the research has contributed considerably to my awareness of the myriad of discourses that feed into the individual encounter in the therapeutic space, and how women especially need support in being able to let go of the tyranny of 'should', and step into a realm of true acceptance and self-compassion.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment email

EMAIL SUBJECT: Recruiting participants for qualitative psychological study on ageing

Dear all,

Apologies for the mass email. As you know, I am currently in my second year of studies in Counselling Psychology at City University. For my doctoral research, I am focusing on attempting to better understand how women experience and make sense of their first wave of ageing and physical change. Although it is difficult to map this experience onto a concrete biological age range, an age limit of 28 38 years has been agreed on for the purpose of recruitment.

I would be grateful if you could forward this email and attached recruitment flyer to friends or acquaintances you think might be suitable and interested in participating. Participation would involve a pre interview telephone screening, one face to face interview lasting approximately 1.5 hours and, if deemed necessary and beneficial, a second, shorter interview to expand on themes and clarify any prior statements.

The participant should be:

Female and aged 28 38, living in London and interested in talking about their personal experiences of growing older.
In order to ensure her anonymity, please ask her to contact me directly.
It would be required that I do not have any prior knowledge of nor social contact with the individual.

Thanks a lot for forwarding!

All best wishes,

Anne

Appendix B: Recruitment poster

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

Department of Psychology, City University London

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN

Women's experiences of the first signs of ageing, and how they make sense of related changes

We are recruiting volunteer participants to take part in a study on women's subjective experiences of growing older, as they encounter the first waves of physical change and first signs of ageing.

We are interested in how, if at all, the experience of ageing and transition interacts with the woman's sense of identity, relationship to others and society, and the meanings ascribed to growing older.

The participant would be interviewed in an open and flexible manner, to discuss what growing older means to her.

Practical details:

The participant will be a woman, aged 28 – 38.

The initial interview will likely take place at the participant's home, office or a mutually agreed setting that is conducive to conversation in private. The interview will be digitally recorded and will last approximately 1.5 hours. A second, shorter interview might be scheduled at a later date in order to clarify or expand upon certain themes.

Prior to participation, the researcher will telephone the potential volunteer to brief her on what participation might entail, answer any queries and to address any suitability concerns (e.g. existing mental health diagnosis, emotional fragility, other therapeutic needs beyond the scope of research).

The participant will be reimbursed any travelling costs incurred for the study.

For more information about this study, or to take part, please contact:

Researcher: Anne Li ([redacted])
Research supervisor: Dr. Daphne Josselin ([redacted])

This study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Committee, City University London.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

Appendix C: Participant information sheet

Title of study: Ageing experiences of younger women: Narratives of embodied female identities.

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?
This research is being undertaken as part of a DPsych Counselling Psychology research project, and will inform the write up of the final doctoral thesis.

It aims to explore how women aged between 28 and 38 understand and make sense of the first waves of physical ageing. I am interested in the impact of ageing on all aspects of life, and your sense of self. Are you aware of it? And how do you cope with it?

Why have I been invited?
You have expressed an interest in participating, along with 7 other women of a similar age. You have been chosen following an informal telephone conversation, based on your willingness to participate, availability for interview(s), and suitability (your age and gender).

Do I have to take part?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary, and you may decide to withdraw at any time until 6 months after the initial interview, without any consequences. You may also avoid answering questions that are felt to be too personal or intrusive, also without consequences or penalties.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw within 6 months and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

- You will be asked to sign a consent form.
- You will be interviewed about your experiences. The interview will take place at a time and location agreed beforehand, and will last approximately 1.5 hour. The interview questions are open, flexible, and broadly relate to your experiences of growing older.
- You will be asked to review a transcript of your interview.
- You may be invited to be interviewed again, in order to clarify or enrich certain themes. You may refuse, without giving a reason.
- You may also request to be interviewed for a second time, should you wish to clarify or comment further on the content of the first interview.
- Your interview transcripts will be analysed, to better understand your story of ageing.
- The research will conclude by late 2018 but your direct involvement will likely last for a few months in 2017, involving at most two meetings.
- You may request for a copy of the final report be sent to you should you desire.

Expenses and Payments (if applicable)

- You will be reimbursed any travel expenses incurred for the purpose of this research.
- You will be reimbursed in cash, on the day of the interview.

What do I have to do?
You will be asked to sign a consent form, indicating that your participation is voluntary and that you understand your rights. We will arrange a mutually agreed interview time and location. You will be interviewed and audio-recorded; this will last for approximately 1.5 hour. I will contact you again at a later time and send you a copy of the interview transcript for you to review. You may point out any errors or misrepresentations. I may invite you to be interviewed for a second time, should the need arise, in order to further explore the initial interview material. You may refuse the second interview, without giving a reason. If you would like to be contacted once the final research report has been completed, please let me know. You may also choose to read the report if you should so desire.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
Given the open and flexible nature of the interview, it is difficult to anticipate precisely the subject matters that might arise. It is therefore possible that sensitive or anxiety-provoking topics might come up, which may cause you some distress. It is, however, not my intention to elicit distressing material, and I will aim to sensitively navigate around moments of vulnerability or difficulty. You will also be given resources (counselling and support services) to refer to following the interview.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
The research aims to give women the space to discuss issues of ageing on their own terms; it is potentially empowering, interesting and cathartic. You may walk away slightly more aware of your feelings and thoughts around the matter, more informed.

The findings will also inform Counselling Psychology practices and contribute to wider academic knowledge on ageing.

What will happen when the research study stops?
The data collected for this research (i.e. your interview audio file and transcript) will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of the study. Until then they will be encrypted, coded, and securely stored.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?
- The interview transcript will be anonymised (coded, using pseudonyms) to ensure confidentiality. Any personal, identifiable information (e.g. references to organisations or Third party individuals) will also be altered to protect your privacy.
- The de-coding key will be encrypted and securely stored, accessible only to the researcher. It will also be destroyed, once your personal and identifiable information is no longer needed.
- All data (audio file and transcript) will be destroyed 5 years after project completion.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results of the research will be written up as my final doctoral thesis. It may also be published in peer-reviewed journals (within the fields of psychology and social sciences) at a later date. Your anonymity will be maintained in all future publications and use of the findings. If you would like to receive a copy of the final report please let me know and I can make this available to you.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?
You are free to leave this research process at any time, without explanation or penalty. If you would like to request for data withdrawal, i.e. to revoke my right to include your interview data in my analysis, please do so within 6 months of your first interview. This allows me the necessary time to find replacement participants.

What if there is a problem?
If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: Ageing experiences of younger women: Narratives of embodied female identities.

You could also write to the Secretary at:
[redacted]
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: [redacted]

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been approved by City University London Research Ethics Committee, PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 76.

Further information and contact details
If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Researcher: Anne Li ([redacted])
Research supervisor: Dr. Daphne Josselin ([redacted])

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix D: Consent form

Title of Study: **Ageing experiences of younger women: Narratives of embodied female identities.**

Ethics approval code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 76

Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve: • being interviewed by the researcher • allowing the interview to be audiotaped • consider being available for a second interview should that be required	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s): to meet the research aim of discovering women's experiences of ageing, the compiling of the final research thesis, and any related future publications. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation. I understand that I will be given a transcript of data concerning me for my comments before it is included in the write-up of the research. I may request to be interviewed a second time in order to expand, correct or clarify any themes or statements.	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw from project until **6 months** after the date of the initial interview without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
4.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix E: Interview schedule

Could you tell me the story of your life so far?
What has happened in your life to get you to this point?

Could you tell me your experiences so far as a woman?
How have you found growing up and living life as a woman in this world?

Could you tell me what growing older means to you?
How have you experienced ageing so far?

How have you experienced changes related to growing older?
Do you feel yourself changing?
How have you experienced physical changes as you age?
How have these physical changes affected you?
How aware are you of the physical signs of ageing? (On the face, body?)

How do you think ageing might mean for men, as opposed to for women?
Is there a difference?

How do you react to ageing?
Do you do anything to prevent or delay ageing? What do you think is the best way to grow older? What does growing old 'gracefully' mean to you?

How does growing older make you feel?
What kind of emotions do you experience when you think about growing older?

How do you experience pressures on women to stay young?
What do you think about the messages society send to women, related to ageing?
What do you think about the portrayal of ageing in the media?

How do you think ageing affects your family or professional life?
Does growing older affect your professional identity?
Has growing older affected or changed your relationships? (Romantic and non romantic?)

How does growing older affect your social world?
How do you think ageing affects the way you relate to people? (Private social world? Wider society?) How do you view older people in society?
How do you feel, seeing older people living their lives?

How do you feel about growing older and the future?

Appendix F: Debrief information

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

Ageing experiences of younger women: Narratives of embodied female identities.

DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished we'd like to tell you a bit more about it.

The research aimed to better understand how younger women experience and make sense of growing older, as they first become aware of physical changes related to ageing. It was acknowledged, however, that individuals experience ageing differently; some may take action to resist physical decline and some may see it as potentially positive, a sign of maturing and a source of empowerment. I was also interested in the impact of society's messages related to youth, beauty, and ageing; how they may influence or pressure individual women to act or think in a certain way. Most importantly, I was curious about how women form and communicate their evolving sense of self in the form of stories, which I tried to capture during the interview process.

While it was not my intention to do so, if anything discussed in the interview did cause you distress, please refer to below for organisations that may be able to offer help and support. These include counselling and support services. Alternatively, please contact your GP for professional psychological support.

Samaritans
116 123
www.samaritans.org
24-hour phone service offering emotional support.

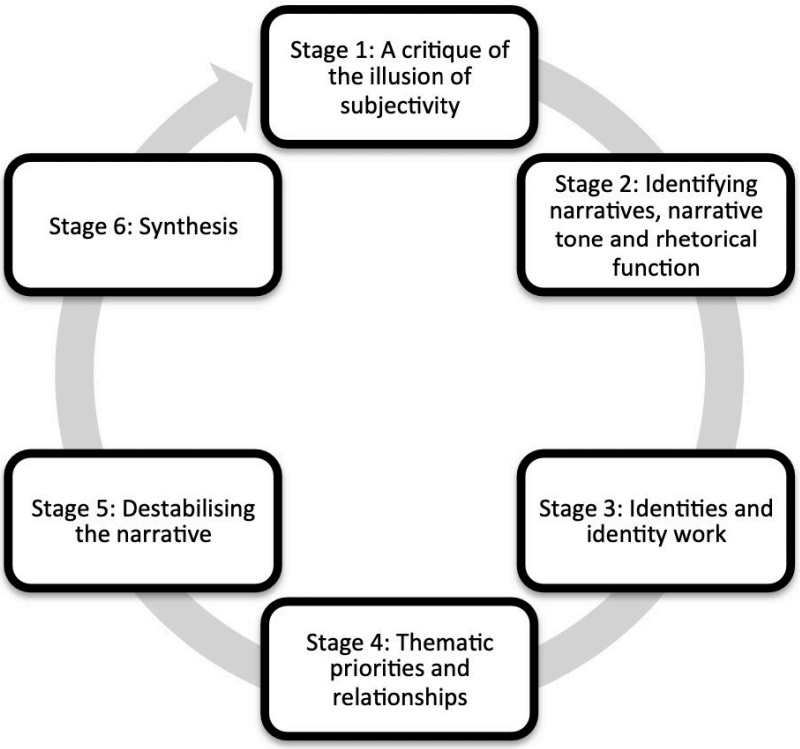
MIND
0300 123 3393
www.mind.org.uk
Provides information, advice on all aspects of mental health, including local counselling services in many areas.

We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Researcher: Anne Li (Anne.Li@City.ac.uk)
Research supervisor: Dr. Daphne Josselin (Daphne.Josselin.2@city.ac.uk)

Ethics approval code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 76

Appendix G: Langdridge (2007) model of Critical Narrative Analysis



Appendix J: Reflexivity interview

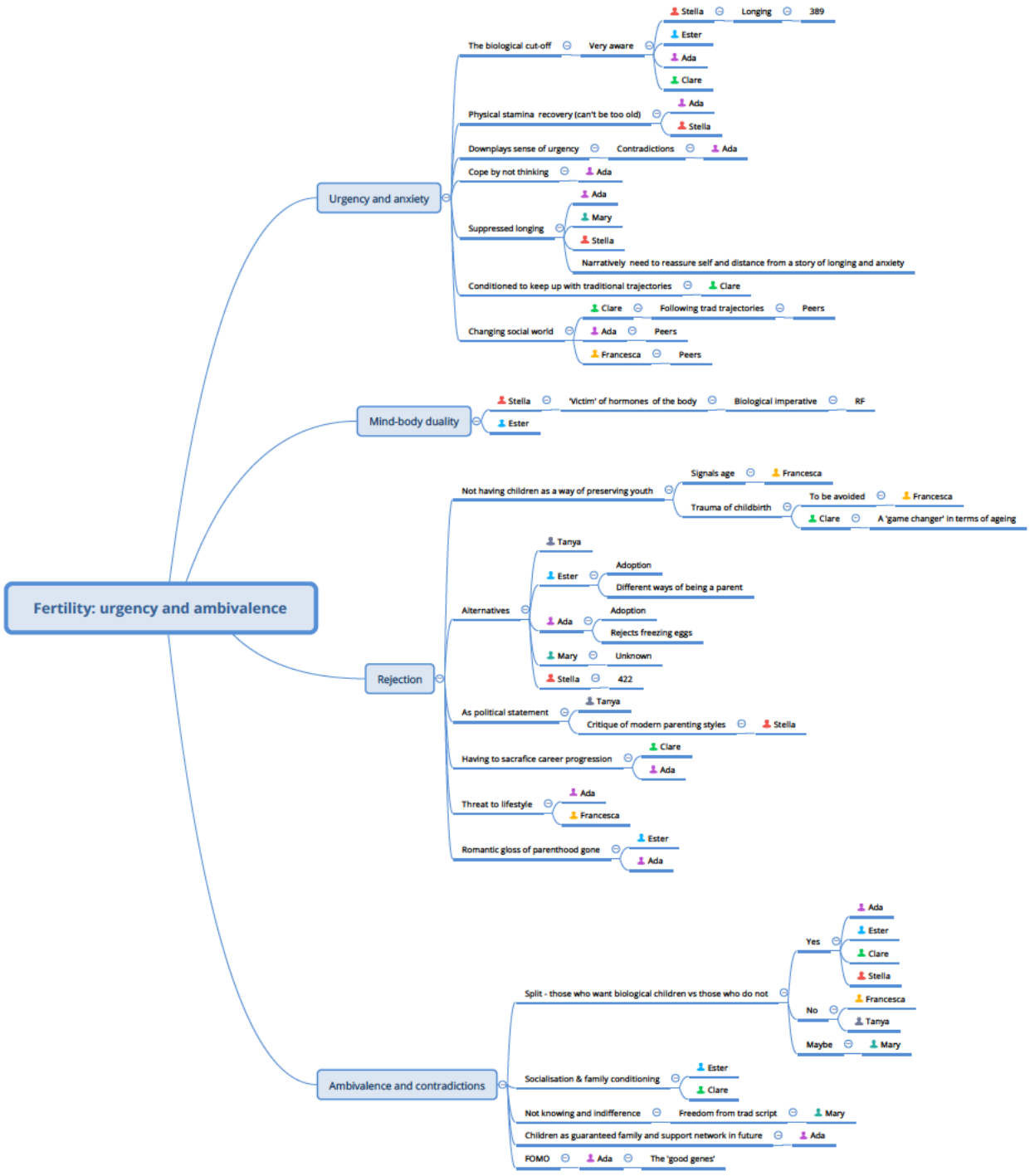
Below are a series of questions that a researcher might wish to reflect on in the context of a research project taking reflexive issues seriously:

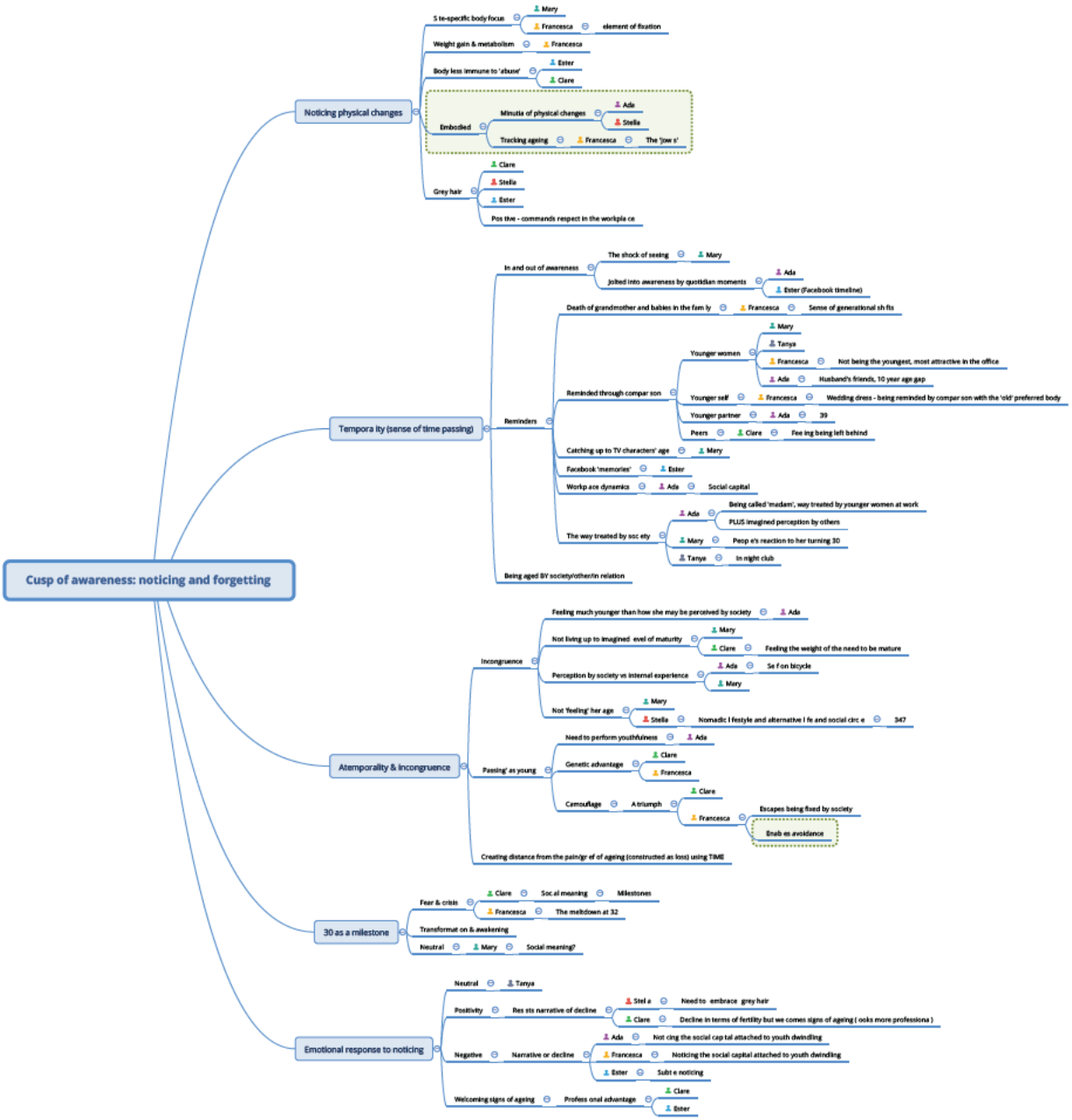
1. Why am I carrying out this study?
2. What do I hope to achieve with this research?
3. What is my relationship to the topic being investigated? Am I an outsider or an insider?

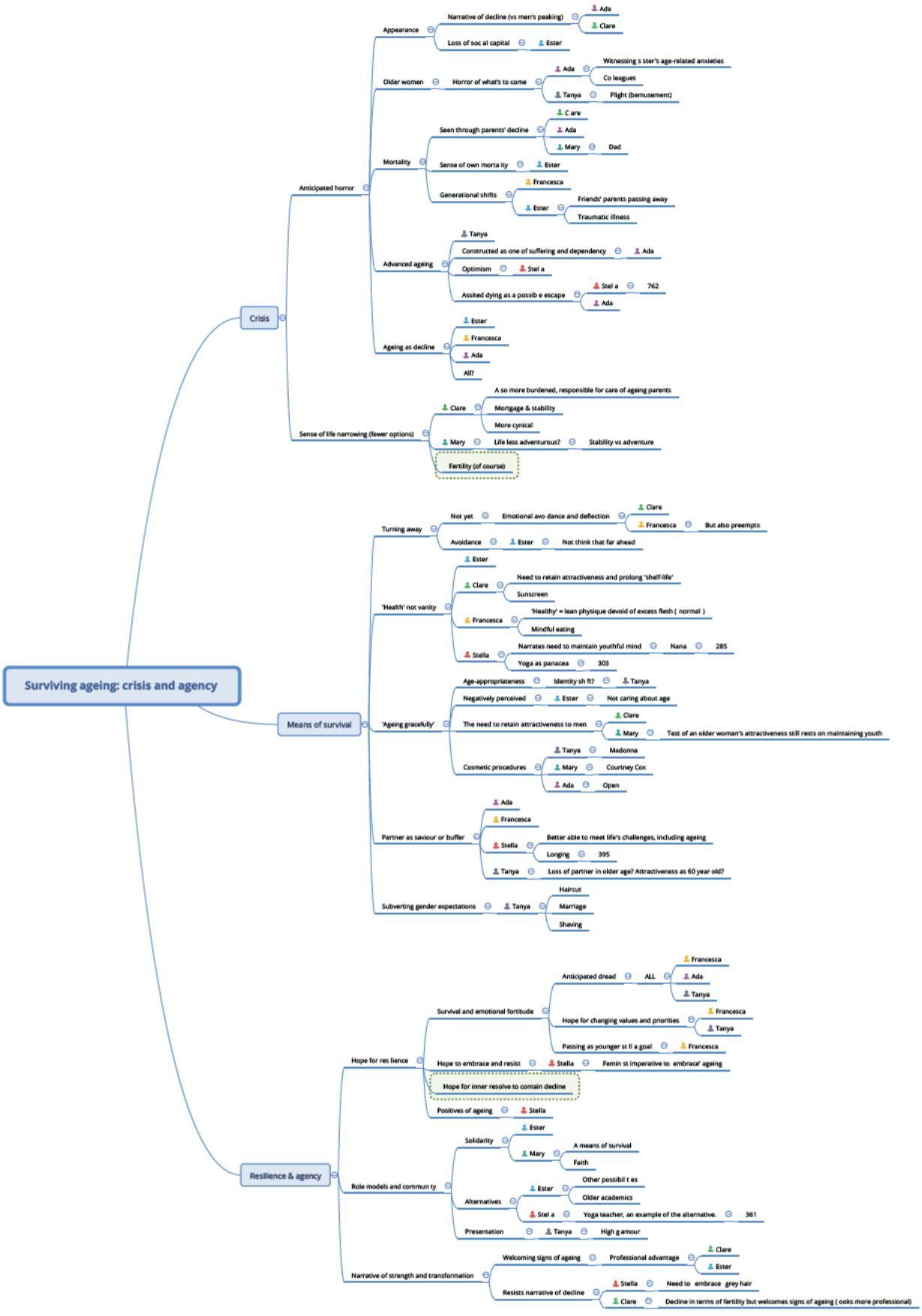
   Do I empathise with the participants and their experience?
4. Who am I, and how might I influence the research I am conducting in terms of age, sex, class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and any other relevant cultural, political or social factors?
5. How do I feel about the work? Are there external pressures influencing the work?
6. How will my subject position influence the analysis?
7. How might the outside world influence the presentation of the findings?
8. How might the findings impact on the participants? Might they lead to harm and, if so, how can I justify this happening?
9. How might the findings impact on the discipline and my career in it? Might they lead to personal problems, and how am I prepared am I to deal with these should they arise?
10. How might the findings impact on wider understandings of the topic? How might your colleagues respond to the research? Does the research have any implications for future funding (of similar research and/or related organisations? What political implications might arise as a result of the research?

From: Langdridge, D. (2007). Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method (p.59). Pearson Education.

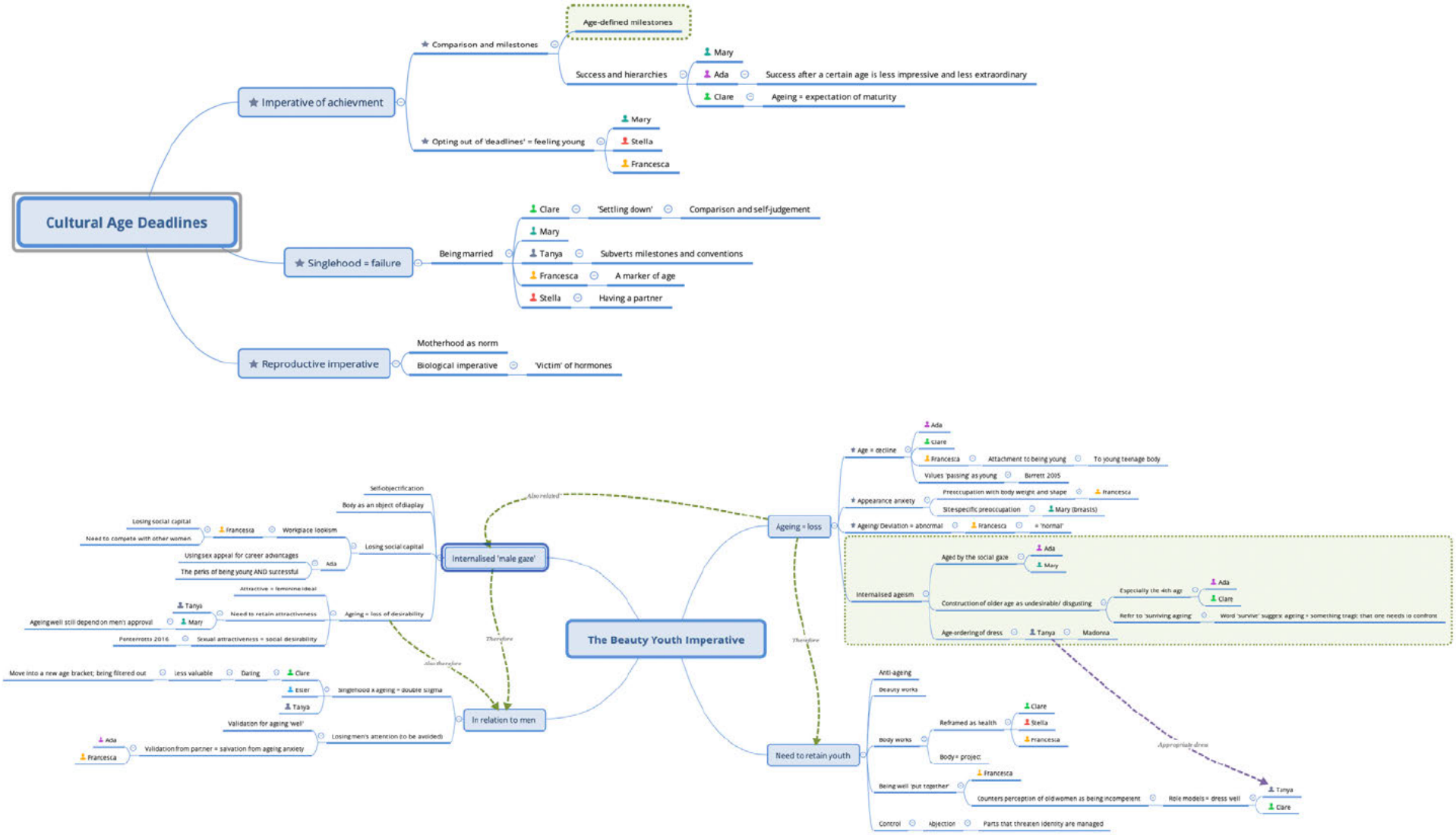
Appendix L: Thematic priorities mind maps

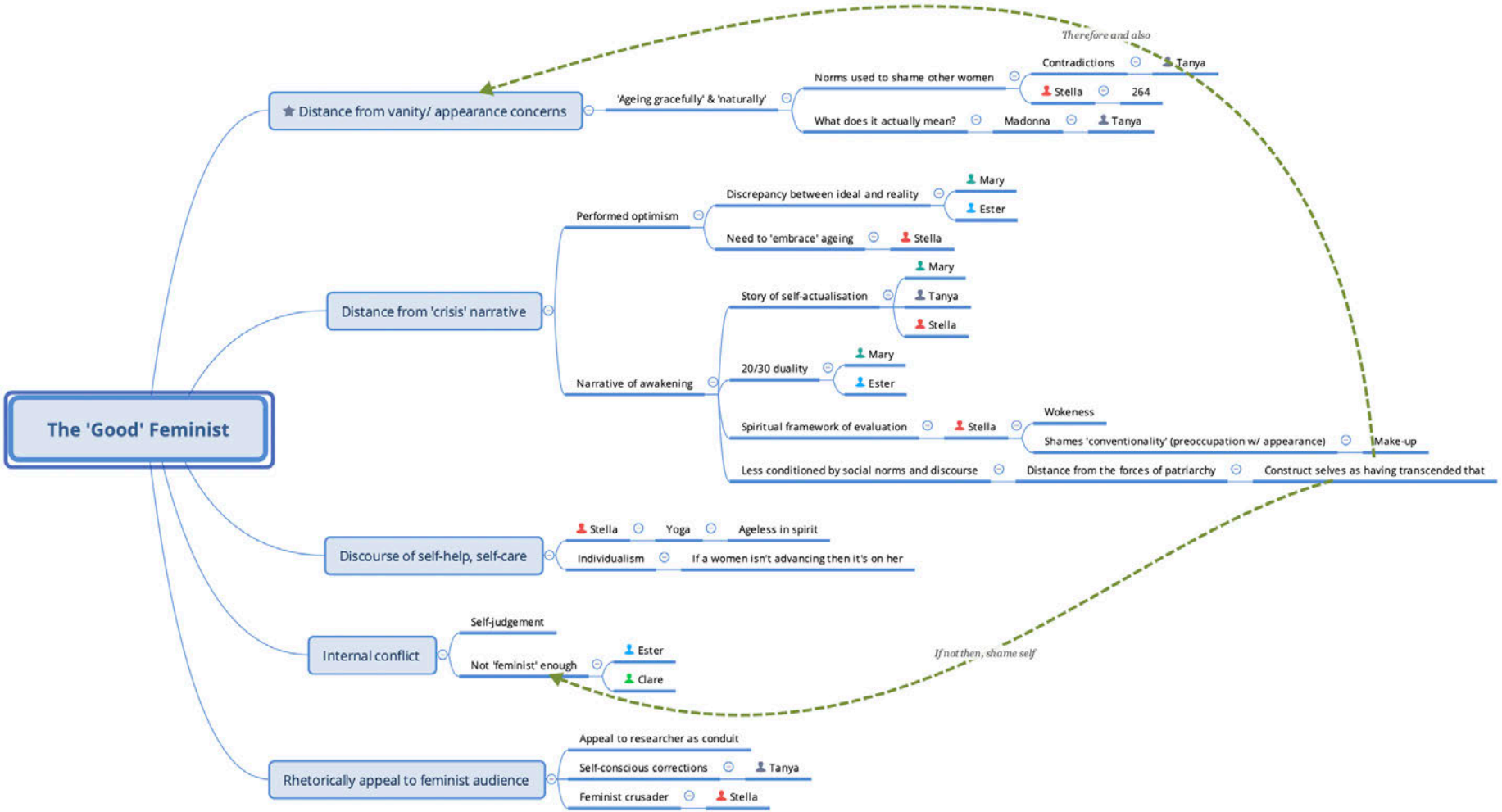



Cusp of awareness: noticing and forgetting
Noticing physical changes
S te-specific body focus
Mary
Francesca
element of fixation
Weight gain & metabolism
Francesca
Body less immune to 'abuse'
Ester
Clare
Embodied
Minutia of physical changes
Ada
Stella
Tracking ageing
Francesca
The 'jaw s'
Grey hair
Clare
Stella
Ester
Pos tive - commands respect in the workpla ce
Tempora lity (sense of time passing)
In and out of awareness
The shock of seeing
Mary
Jolted into awareness by quotidian moments
Ada
Ester (Facebook timeline)
Reminders
Death of grandmother and babies in the fam ly
Francesca
Seme of generational sh fts
Reminded through compar son
Younger women
Mary
Tanya
Francesca
Not being the youngest, most attractive in the office
Ada
Husband's friends, 10 year age gap
Younger self
Francesca
Wedding dress - being reminded by compar son with the 'old' preferred body
Younger partner
Ada
39
Peers
Clare
Fee ing being left behind
Catching up to TV characters' age
Mary
Facebook 'memories'
Ester
Workp ace dynamics
Ada
Social capital
The way treated by soc ety
Ada
Being called 'madam', way treated by younger women at work
PLUS imagined perception by others
Mary
Peop e's reaction to her turning 30
Tanya
In night club
Being aged BY society/others/in relation
Atemporality & incongruence
Incongruence
Feeling much younger than how she may be perceived by society
Ada
Not living up to imagined evel of maturity
Mary
Clare
Feeling the weight of the need to be mature
Perception by society vs internal experience
Ada
Se f on bicycle
Mary
Not 'feeling' her age
Mary
Stella
Nomadic l festyle and alternative l fe and social circ e
347
Passing' as young
Need to perform youthfulness
Ada
Genetic advantage
Clare
Francesca
Camouflage
A triumph
Clare
Francesca
Escapes being fixed by society
Enab es avoidance
Creating distance from the pain/gr ef of ageing (constructed as loss) using TIME
30 as a milestone
Fear & crisis
Clare
Soc al meaning
Milestones
Francesca
The meltdown at 32
Transformat on & awakening
Neutral
Mary
Social meaning?
Emotional response to noticing
Neutral
Tanya
Positivity
Res sts narrative of decline
Stel a
Need to embrace grey hair
Clare
Decline in terms of fertility but we comes signs of ageing (ooks more professiona)
Negative
Narrative or decline
Ada
Not cing the social cap tal attached to youth dwindling
Francesca
Noticing the social capital attached to youth dwindling
Ester
Subt e noticing
Welcoming signs of ageing
Profess onal advantage
Clare
Ester


Surviving ageing: crisis and agency
Crisis
Anticipated horror
Appearance
Narrative of decline (vs men's peaking)
Ada
Clare
Loss of soc al capital
Ester
Older women
Horror of what's to come
Witnessing s ster's age-related anxieties
Ada
Co leagues
Tanya
Plight (bemusement)
Mortality
Seen through parents' decline
C are
Ada
Mary
Dad
Sense of own morta ity
Ester
Generational shifts
Francesca
Ester
Friends' parents passing away
Traumatic illness
Advanced ageing
Tanya
Constructed as one of suffering and dependency
Ada
Optimism
Stel a
Assited dying as a possib e escape
Stel a
762
Ada
Ageing as decline
Ester
Francesca
Ada
All?
Sense of life narrowing (fewer options)
Clare
A so more burdened, responsible for care of ageing parents
Mortgage & stability
More cynical
Mary
Life less adventurous?
Stability vs adventure
Fertility (of course)
Means of survival
Turning away
Not yet
Emotional avo dance and deflection
Clare
Francesca
But also preempts
Avoidance
Ester
Not think that far ahead
'Health' not vanity
Ester
Clare
Need to retain attractiveness and prolong 'shelf-life'
Sunscreen
Francesca
'Healthy' = lean physique devoid of excess flesh (normal)
Mindful eating
Stella
Narrates need to maintain youthful mind
Nana
285
Yoga as panacea
303
'Ageing gracefully'
Age-appropriateness
Identity sh ft?
Tanya
Negatively perceived
Ester
Not caring about age
The need to retain attractiveness to men
Clare
Mary
Test of an older woman's attractiveness still rests on maintaining youth
Cosmetic procedures
Tanya
Madonna
Mary
Courtney Cox
Ada
Open
Partner as saviour or buffer
Ada
Francesca
Stella
Better able to meet life's challenges, including ageing
Longing
395
Tanya
Loss of partner in older age? Attractiveness as 60 year old?
Subverting gender expectations
Tanya
Haircut
Marriage
Shaving
Resilience & agency
Hope for res lience
Survival and emotional fortitude
Anticipated dread
ALL
Francesca
Ada
Tanya
Hope for changing values and priorities
Francesca
Tanya
Passing as younger st ll a goal
Francesca
Hope to embrace and resist
Stella
Femin st imperative to embrace' ageing
Hope for inner resolve to contain decline
Positives of ageing
Stella
Role models and commun ty
Solidarity
Ester
Mary
A means of survival
Faith
Alternatives
Ester
Other possibil t es
Older academics
Stel a
Yoga teacher, an example of the alternative.
361
Presentation
Tanya
High g amour
Narrative of strength and transformation
Welcoming signs of ageing
Professional advantage
Clare
Ester
Resists narrative of decline
Stella
Need to embrace grey hair
Clare
Decline in terms of fertility but welcomes signs of ageing (ooks more professional)

Appendix N: Destabilising the narrative mind maps




The 'Good' Feminist
Distance from vanity/ appearance concerns
'Ageing gracefully' & 'naturally'
Norms used to shame other women
Contradictions
Tanya
Stella
264
What does it actually mean?
Madonna
Tanya
Therefore and also
Distance from 'crisis' narrative
Performed optimism
Discrepancy between ideal and reality
Mary
Ester
Need to 'embrace' ageing
Stella
Narrative of awakening
Story of self-actualisation
Mary
Tanya
Stella
20/30 duality
Mary
Ester
Spiritual framework of evaluation
Stella
Wokeness
Shames 'conventionality' (preoccupation w/ appearance)
Make-up
Less conditioned by social norms and discourse
Distance from the forces of patriarchy
Construct selves as having transcended that
Discourse of self-help, self-care
Stella
Yoga
Ageless in spirit
Individualism
If a women isn't advancing then it's on her
Internal conflict
Self-judgement
Not 'feminist' enough
Ester
Clare
If not then, shame self
Rhetorically appeal to feminist audience
Appeal to researcher as conduit
Self-conscious corrections
Tanya
Feminist crusader
Stella

Appendix O: Ethical approval

Psychology Research Ethics Committee
School of Arts and Social Sciences
City University London
London EC1R 0JD

9th December 2016

Dear Anne Li and Daphne Josselin

Reference: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 76
Project title: Ageing experiences of younger women: Narratives of embodied female identities.

I am writing to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted approval by the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

Period of approval
Approval is valid for a period of three years from the date of this letter. If data collection runs beyond this period you will need to apply for an extension using the Amendments Form.

Project amendments
You will also need to submit an Amendments Form if you want to make any of the following changes to your research:

(a) Recruit a new category of participants
(b) Change, or add to, the research method employed
(c) Collect additional types of data
(d) Change the researchers involved in the project

Adverse events
You will need to submit an Adverse Events Form, copied to the Secretary of the Senate Research Ethics Committee [redacted]), in the event of any of the following:

(a) Adverse events
(b) Breaches of confidentiality
(c) Safeguarding issues relating to children and vulnerable adults
(d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues (a) and (b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than 5 days after the event. Issues (c) and (d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries then please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards

[redacted]
Course Officer
Email: [redacted]

[redacted]
Chair
Email: [redacted]

Appendix P: Literature organisation (Zotero screenshot)