

**'YOU'RE ONLY AS OLD AS YOU FEEL': OLDER  
WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AND  
THEIR LIVES**

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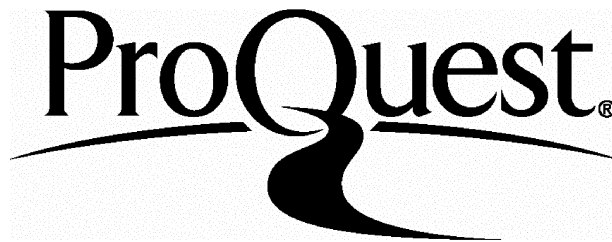
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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine how older women construed being 'woman' and being 'old', how they negotiated the contradictory representations of what it is to be both 'woman' and 'old' and to draw out the discourses they adopted. Fifteen women aged between sixty-five and seventy-seven were interviewed individually, using semi-structured interviews, about how they perceived themselves and their lives as older women. The women were all interviewed in Jersey, Channel Islands. A discourse analytic technique (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) identified five major themes, each containing several sub-themes, around what it meant to be both 'old' and a 'woman'. These discursive themes were not mutually exclusive, but often overlapped, were occasionally contradictory and were taken up by different women to varying degrees. The themes were 'too busy to be old: woman as 'do-er', 'the failing body: the immobile body', 'relationships: the company you keep', 'others as old' and 'wearing well'. Women drew upon these themes to frame their experiences of themselves and their lives and negotiated the contradictory representations of being both 'woman' and 'old' by challenging these negative constructions, resisting them by applying them to 'others' and by 'warding off' old age by keeping busy.

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As a much loved 'friend' of my Dad's once said, 'I did it my way'!!



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Ageing and the 'gendering' of later life**

*'A man's face is his autobiography, a woman's her greatest work of fiction'*  
Oscar Wilde, cited in Arber and Ginn, 1995, p. 174.

Despite later life being inevitable for all of us, its study has been relatively unheeded by psychologists and sociologists. Salient features appear when we are looking at ageing. Firstly what do we mean by ageing, what is 'later life' and secondly we must also take into account the gender differences in ageing. Women are outliving men by around 50% among those aged over sixty-five. Women outlive men by an average of six years, however the gender difference is most salient in people over eighty five years of age, where the ratio of women to men is 3:1 (Arber and Ginn, 1995). Ageist conceptions of later life are that the elderly are one homogenous group but fail to notice how the construction of old age may be a different experience for men and women and of course for individuals. What research has failed to really explore is how being 'older' has consequences for gender identity, relationships and roles in later life. Again this is especially important for women as about 75% of older men are married whereas around 50% of women are widowed and living alone (Arber and Ginn, 1991).

We can only start to understand what ageing means to people by looking at the inherent different meanings, such as physiological, chronological and social ageing and how these might be gendered. Chronological ageing obviously refers to age in the years that we have lived and reflects 'cut off' points for men and women in terms of structural positions in Society (Ginn and Arber, 1995) such as eligibility for pensions, retirement etc. Sixty-five has been the adopted cut off for 'old age' however this grouping of people, who are mostly women reflects an ageist and sexist attitude and does not observe that there are differences in people's health, physiological and social age, employment status, lifestyles and social networks. Physiological ageing refers to the physical ageing of the body, a medical construct, manifesting itself in various levels of functional impairment (Ginn and Arber, 1995) although not mutually exclusive from chronological ageing, differences are also related to gender and social class. Social ageing is socially constructed in that it refers to notions of what is 'expected' of someone of a 'certain' age; norms that are based on ideologies that are hard to change and are gendered, as I will go on to describe.

There is no clear definition of 'later life', however boundaries are usually drawn up in terms of chronological age. Wells and Freer (1988) class those aged sixty-five to seventy-five as the 'young elderly' and those over as the 'old elderly'. Laslett (1989) also makes distinctions between 'the third and the fourth age' seeing the former as a time of personal fulfilment and the last as a time of 'dependence, decrepitude and death' (p. 4). The 'third age' highlights

the greater longevity of people, especially women, and calls for new attitudes in terms of personal growth, choice and creativity and the development of new roles. However despite Laslett identifying the 'positive' choices and opportunities of the 'extended' years he is in danger, by his negative descriptions of the 'fourth age', of merely shifting the ageist stereotypes from the 'young' elderly to the 'old' elderly; again with women being the salient 'victims'.

### **Ageism and the stereotyping of later life**

Crabbed age and youth cannot live together:  
Youth is full of pleasance, age is full of care;  
Youth like summer morn, age like winter weather....  
Age I do abhor thee; youth I do adore thee.

(Shakespeare sonnet: The passionate Pilgrim: 12).

In this sonnet, we see the recurrent theme of the mourning of lost youth and the period of old age as something of immense sadness. Negative attitudes to old age are found in many societies, however the stronger the traditional culture generally the more positive images abound (Arber and Ginn, 1991). Gibson states that although we can find the occasional positive reference to old age in literature and fiction, 'the overwhelming message is that old age is a horrible spectre, and we show our fear of it by mocking at it, and those who are perceived as old' (1992, p. 65). Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) suggest that in some societies traditional respect for older people has remained in the twentieth century, however, that in the West, there has been

an elaborate increase of constructions of life cycle stages which has resulted in a much more evident value laden age consciousness.

Ageism can be referred to the 'stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old' (Lewis and Butler 1972, p. 223) these stereotypes are usually representations of older people that are totally out of keeping with the person's own self perceptions, their everyday realities and aspirations. These stereotypes are very powerful and are constructed from an extremely complex interplay of discourse and visual images which usually only present biased representations reflecting a narrow view of older people's potentialities and activities. It is suggested that these discriminatory images are rationalised by assumptions that minority groups generally have actual inherent body characteristics that make them different. Therefore 'they are not only less competent, but recognisably so: they look different, they speak differently, they even smell differently.....the latter has a particularly powerful emotional force especially when the smells are associated with dirtiness and lack of control over the body, which connotes childhood dependence and even animality' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995, p. 5). Hence we get the ageist stereotypes of the 'smelly old man' or infantilization images, where certain features such as incontinence, being 'wrinkly' and immobile are used to describe older people, defining them as being in 'a second childhood'.

Ageism is not merely to do with attitudes held by individuals but is perpetuated by culture and institutions (Scrutton, 1990). For instance there are societal imposed age barriers on employment whereby older people are excluded from the work force through age defined compulsory retirement. Many institutions have fixed age segregated requirements of entrance, for pension eligibility, membership of voluntary bodies, for treatment in either adult mental health or elderly services - all of which add to the image of older people being possibly socially devalued, incapable and dependent after a certain age - somehow 'different', a different species.

### **Images of ageing - a linear journey of decline ?**

Growing old is like being increasingly penalised for a crime you haven't committed

Anthony Powell, *A Dance to the Music of Time: Temporary Kings*, Chapter 1.

We also see these negative stereotypes of older people filtering into medical thinking which results in limited assumptions about what we can expect to be like physically when we are older (Henwood, 1990). Firstly the media has great influence in how the old are portrayed. Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) comment on how younger people, especially women are constantly faced with images and warnings of getting older and how when older people who have preserved signs of youth, e.g. beauty and fitness, they are praised by positive images of ageing. However there are many less positive images whereby older people whose bodies have 'betrayed' their self perceptions, are portrayed as frail, cantankerous and dependent. This material betrayal of

old age as seen in the wrinkling of the skin and the changing elasticity of the joints and muscles can result in the further stigmatisation of older people - the 'mask of ageing' whereby the body does not adequately represent the inner self (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995; Goffman, 1968).

Secondly a pathology model has predominated in which ageist generalisations have been made about older people who are seen in terms of their declining mental faculties and physical health, poverty and financial dependency, bereavement, loneliness, isolation and loss of roles (Kart, 1987). However chronological age is a poor predictor of someone's actual intellectual abilities, health status or ability to work (Laslett, 1989; Parker, 1982). This rigid chronological segmentation derives from biological concepts of development (Bernard and Meade, 1993) whereby we are all seen as following a universal deterministic journey through life, ending in decline, along the way negotiating the different stages that we pass through and taking on and relinquishing the 'prescribed' roles of each stages such as marriage, having children and retirement. However, this linear view neglects the social, cultural and gender influences that all play a part in how someone ages though the life-span.

We need to reframe age and old age as social constructs, so that age is not understood solely as a biological process but that age and old age 'are certainly real, but they do not exist in some natural realm, independently of the ideals, images and social practises that conceptualise and represent them'

(Cole, 1992: xxii). No one can avoid the biological processes of ageing and eventual death, however the social constructions, that are the meanings we give to these processes and the assumptions and generalisations we make of people when they are physically older, represent the values and beliefs of a particular culture at a particular point in history.

There are numerous ageist stereotypes about elderly people which treat 'them' as an homogenous group but which miss the important experiential differences of ageing for men and women.

### **The social construction of gender and what it means to be 'woman'**

One is not born a woman, one becomes one.

Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxieme Sexe*.

People's self narratives, that is, the stories that people weave about themselves to account for their lives, their past and future, depend heavily on the co-operation of others (Burr, 1995). Any telling of our stories, our personal accounts, have to be negotiated with others and therefore we can see that these personal accounts emanate from social interaction. This 'positioning' (Davies and Harre, 1990) is a term used by social constructionist writers to refer to the process by which as persons, our identities are produced by the social and cultural discourses that are available to us. These discourses give us hypothetical repertoires to describe and represent ourselves and others, for example as 'old' 'feminine' and 'mad'. However we only have the discourses available and inevitably these are limited. Every

discourse has implicit in it a number of subject positions that are available for people to 'occupy' when they draw on a particular discourse. What 'voice' we have in the world and what we can do depends on how one is positioned within the existing discourse; we come to view the world from that perspective and the limited concepts available to us (Burr, 1995). Therefore, the discourses that form our identities have implications for what we can do and what we should do and therefore can be a potential area of confusion and conflict. However there may be room for choice and manoeuvre within these discursive practises and discourses (Davies and Harre, 1990).

Prevailing discourses on femininity often construct women as nurturing, emotional, negatively affected by hormones, intuitive and vulnerable (Burr, 1995). These discourses are very closely tied up with the practises and structures that are lived out in society and therefore it is not surprising that some discourses receive the stamp of 'truth' over others as it is in the interest for that relatively powerful group. The social construction view of gender is that women are 'made' not born, it is something intrinsic, that it is something we learn to 'do', which is learned through representation and language (Ussher, 1994). Focus of attention is not on the biological or individual level but on how female sexuality and identity is constructed and represented, culturally and historically. There are various 'scripts' of femininity that circulate discourse and the symbolic sphere. The social construction of female sexuality as either 'voracious and dangerous or as absent' (Ussher, 1994, p. 148) positions women within the discourse on female reproduction



and associated 'qualities' of femininity, which are regulated and controlled by phallogentric practises. To be 'woman' is to be youthful, fertile and physically attractive.

Sexuality is one aspect of gender identity, that is we talk of 'femaleness' and 'maleness' to simply signify psychological and social features of femininity and masculinity through biological behaviour (Choi and Nicolson, 1994). However, sexuality is also the means by which maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity are themselves defined, in that 'human behaviour and gendered characteristics are defined and enacted through the discourses surrounding sexuality' (Choi and Nicolson, 1994, p. 2). Sayers (1986, in Choi and Nicolson, 1994) suggests that implicit in the discourses on gendered behaviour, is anatomy as having very clear social meaning. Ussher (1989) describes how when looking at a woman, it is as if the female body symbolises an entire social history, through which others can understand her and through which she makes sense of her own life. Representations, meanings, gender and sex are communicated through the physical symbols that anatomy provides. Choi and Nicolson (1994) suggest that the social meanings given to these 'anatomical symbols' operate deterministically, so that 'whether the argument is based upon biological, social or psychological factors, anatomy *is* destiny' (p. 3). Concepts such as gender, sexuality and sex become constrained under the concept of female reproduction and the female reproductive life.

Ussher (1994) suggests that 'woman' is the outcome of competing and contradictory discourses and is created and regulated through processes such as representation and material control. 'Woman' is a signifier. In semiotic theorising, such as that of Saussure (1974), communication is seen as involving systems of both imagery and language, wherein particular meanings are created through the use of 'signs'. Saussure argued that the meaning of language is based on the relationships between the elements of the signs themselves rather than the words of the speaker. Within language, Saussure suggests, that there is inherent both the 'signified', the object, in this case the biologically female person and the 'signifier', the collection of phonemes which make up the word 'woman' and act as the sign for a person born with a vagina, breasts etc. Semiotic theorising would go on to argue that the signifier 'woman' is a social construction and that everything we 'know' and experience is actually constructed by the sign systems (Ussher, 1994). However, these signs do not refer directly to real objects in the real world but are 'myths'. Ussher (1994) argues that 'woman' as signifier denotes much more than gender and female sexuality. It also takes on whole umbrellas of meaning, created out of the ideology and culture in which the language or image is produced. The signifier 'woman' 'can then become the sign for weakness, danger, fertility, or sexuality (each a signified), creating myths about 'woman' that directly affect the actual experience of women' (Ussher 1994, p. 156).

To return to the idea of 'anatomy as destiny', 'woman' as signifier connotes concepts of female reproductive life. Nicolson (1992) suggests that when we see a woman we make assumptions about her characteristics, personality and see her in some relation to motherhood, whereby in patriarchal cultures her biological capacity to conceive, give birth and feed children are seen as the defining features of what is 'natural' and feminine. Qualities to the contrary of being nurturing and caring, such as not having children and achieving social power are seen as distinctly 'unfeminine' (Ehrenreich and English, 1979).

Choi and Nicolson (1994) argue that women are positioned and also position themselves within the discourses on 'femininity' and female reproduction. They suggest that patriarchal exploitation of the intimate relationship between reproductive function and what is seen as acceptable womanhood, constantly regulates femininity. In this next quote from their book, Choi and Nicolson go on to suggest that 'it is the presence of the ova and the potential to have babies that is taken to define female health and sexual desirability. The desirable/acceptable woman has the capacity to reproduce, is attractive and alive. The post-menopausal woman, particularly if she has not had children for some reason, is undesirable/unworthy/dried up' (Choi and Nicolson, 1994, p. 4).

## **Cuddly grandma or old hag: the double standard of ageing**

As men see it, a woman's purpose in life is to be an erotic object, when she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a *monstrum* that excites revulsion and even dread.

Simone de Beauvoir. *The Coming of Age*.

A man is as old as he's feeling,  
A woman as old as she looks

Mortimer Collins, *the Unknown Quantity*.

Ageism affects both older men and women, but yet there also exists a 'double standard of ageing' (Sontag, 1978) whereby such stereotypes and negative attitudes are more pronounced for women than for men as they are combined with sexist attitudes. Arber and Ginn (1991) also argue that ageism affects men and women differently, making growing older a very different experience. They argue that these profoundly distinct attitudes have existed for a long time, in representation and images of women, reflecting a widespread, long-standing prejudice against elderly women. In popular culture, such as in fairy tales, older women have been portrayed as old hags, witches and crones, such as in Snow White, Hansel and Gretel and Cinderella (Arber and Ginn, 1991). These representations of older women still exist and are seen in marginalising and contemptuous attitudes disguised as 'jokes', the tongue-waging mother-in-law (who even has a plant named in memory of her) who is seen as domineering, meddling and incessantly talking, the old frigid spinster that nobody ever married or the 'old bag' that moans about everything. This negative portrayal of the older

woman as the mother-in-law stands alone as there is no male counterpart, e.g. the father-in-law. This image also serves to 'remind' us of what young women 'become'.

These attitudes affect all women, but are especially prominent in relation to older women. Sontag comments on the centrality of bodily presentation in being a woman, which can be seen in the representations of women who are constructed in terms of physical appearance. Within this discourse, sexuality is inseparable from reproduction. Itzin (1990, in Arber and Ginn, 1993) argues that this double standard of ageing has emerged from our patriarchal society, from the sets of conventional expectations of age-appropriate roles and attitudes for men and women. She describes how there are both male and female 'chronologies' that involve the social defining and sanctioning of roles and attitudes. However when these roles or chronological timing are contravened, there are penalties of disapproval and lost opportunities (Arber and Ginn, 1991). Whereas men's chronology has pivoted on employment, women's chronology has been defined in terms of the reproductive cycle, with her age status closely linked with these reproductive events, e.g. getting married, having children, the 'change' etc. Itzin argues that women are valued according to their sexual attractiveness, availability and usefulness to men' (1990, p. 118) and that older women are socially devalued as no longer being economic contributors or sexually valuable beings.

There are many areas where this wrinkle between ageing men and women widens into deep furrows, as in the societal ideal of physical attractiveness and youth. Arber and Ginn (1991) suggest that because women's value is sexualised, in a positive way in the first half of life and then in a negative way in the second, it hangs on a young and youthful appearance (Arber and Ginn, 1991). Ugliness and ageing is heavily penalised in our society, we only have to look at the ubiquitous array of anti-wrinkle creams that supposedly 'delay ageing' and keep us youthful, connoting how possibly hideous and fearsome the 'face mask' of age is to us. Although the major cosmetic companies are now starting to include men in their campaign to 'combat ageing', generally there is an acceptance of men ageing whereby it is seen as character enhancing, distinguished and attractive. Sontag (1972) argues that whilst ageing women attract revulsion, men are allowed to grow old 'naturally' without social penalties. The value that society places on youth and physical attractiveness is discrepant with the actual ageing of women and can be seen in society's endorsement of men marrying younger women, throughout the life course. Society has endorsed the coupling of older men and younger women with men deserting their same aged wives for 'a younger model'. However, the woman that marries or partners a much younger man is faced with scorn and feelings of unease. Arber and Ginn argue that 'unlike the older man who is admired for his capture of a young bride, the older woman is condemned because she has broken the convention that men remain dominant' (1991, p. 42).

## Women outside the boundaries of 'woman'

She'd weighed them [the pros and cons] and made her bargain, trading a job she loved and good money, and a comfortable home with her mother, whose company she found more congenial, for marriage to a man she cared for, but for whom she did not feel overwhelming attraction, in order to fulfil her destiny as a woman and have those children for whom she yearned.

Margaret Forster, *Hidden Lives*.

As I have discussed, an important feature of ageing is the greater longevity of women than men, with a 'feminisation' of later life and yet the question of what it means to be both 'woman' and 'old' receives little attention from psychologists. Sontag (1978) comments on the 'double standard' of ageing and on the centrality of bodily presentation in being a woman, which can be seen in images of women who are constructed in terms of physical appearance. Within this discourse, sexuality is inseparable from reproduction. Therefore what happens when a woman's mirror image no longer reflects youth and physical attractiveness? The images and representations of post menopausal and 'older' women include that of the cuddly knitting grandma and of the old crone, both of whom are usually seen as declining in mental and physical health and who are no longer valued as sexual beings or as economic contributors (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Itzin, 1990).

There has been vast research on women and the menopause, whereby 'the discourse which defines women through their reproductive function conceptualises the biological event of menopause as the end of a woman's useful life' (Ussher 1994, p. 104). Femininity and fertility are closely linked

and therefore many women may experience a sense of loss of their femininity, a major part of what it is to be 'woman', with the menopause. Ussher (1989) argues that the menopause tends to be blamed for everything, psychological and physical, that happens to a woman during this climacteric period, the period of life from forty-five to sixty-five, the phase which women pass from 'middle age' to 'old age'. Again we can see the 'female chronology' define women according to their positions surrounding fertility and reproduction. Women are defined as being pre-menopausal, menopausal and post-menopausal in relation to being in their thirties, forties and fifties (Levine and Doherty, 1952 as cited in Ussher, 1989).

Hunter and O' Dea (1997) explored women's accounts of menopause and commented on an emergent theme of 'staving off the unknown: menopause as unspoken taboo', that women were attempting to control 'it' or avoid the experience by keeping busy and taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Tacit references to fears and concerns were replaced by this busyness, getting oneself in order, not succumbing to 'it' and taking HRT. Hunter and O' Dea (1997) also describe other themes which drew upon discourses around ageing and gender, reproduction and the positioning of the middle aged and older woman as 'other' in relation to the ideal 'woman', that is to be young, fertile and attractive. Some women had challenged these negative constructions of the menopause and ageing, others had negotiated the negative images by seeing others as being more problem prone, avoiding or staving off the menopause.



The discourse that defines women through their reproductive function, therefore defines post menopausal women as no longer valued, but 'dried up', despite having potentially twenty-five years of life ahead of them. Therefore a woman's value is sexualised, negatively in the latter half of life and with the loss of youth is social devaluation. To be an older woman is to step outside the dominant image of 'woman' which circulates in discourse.

It is important to explore how far women have positioned themselves within these double standard stereotypes of elderly women or whether they have maintained positive self-perceptions refusing to accept the image of old age as a necessary phase of bodily decline and being 'past it'. This self-perception and the interaction of other important factors, such as the existence of intimate relationships, friendships, health and life events may determine whether a woman will experience difficulties in later life. Ussher (1989) argues that in the 'empty nest syndrome' women who have internalised the belief that femininity is equated with fertility and devoted themselves as mothers then they may suffer a crisis at this time. To define one's identity in terms of femininity, that is to see appearance and sexuality as one's main sense of identity and 'core' asset may result in women experiencing a huge loss of self esteem, confidence and 'self'. However, as Ussher (1989) points out, there is a positive side to the menopause, where for some women there is a new experiencing of life away from pregnancy and years of child rearing, where they are able to look outside of their reproductive roles and find identities and meaning in life which is not restrained by biology.

Yet where does this leave those women deemed as being the 'young old', women also outside the boundaries of 'woman' who are chronologically 'different' to these menopausal women. These women share different experiences of life, they come from a different period of history, a different cohort. Margaret Forster writes about the different generations of women in her own family in her book 'Hidden lives: A family memoir' and describes the different assumptions, beliefs, roles and identities of women across four generations. The choices for women become different in each cohort, as illustrated by this reference to her mother:

She'd made her choice and that choice was to have a home and children and a husband, and it was no good pining after alternative careers.

Margaret Forster, *Hidden Lives*.

### **Clinical implications of being on the 'outside'**

Given the hazards of passing and the fact that so many old people themselves have lived a lifetime of fear, contempt and patronising of the old, it is easy to see why most old people share with other members of society the stereotyped view of old people and also refuse to define themselves as old.

Rich, (1990, as cited in Hunter and O' Dea, 1997, p. 219).

As there is a feminisation of later life, then widowhood could also be seen to be a more salient issue for women. Although around fifty percent of older women are widowed in comparison to 16.6 percent of men (Arber and Ginn, 1991) there is a huge paucity of research on how these women actually adapt to life as a widow, how their lives and relationships change, how this affects their identities and roles and how they cope with the changes in the material aspects of living alone. A study by Patterson (1996), which employed quantitative and qualitative methods to interpret data, suggested that after

widowhood, both older men and women reported not being able to relax but that they found passive leisure activities helpful. The most useful and most frequently participated in activities were home based ones, comprising of social gatherings with family and friends.

In a recent study, based on in depth qualitative interviews with Caucasian and African-American widows, Salah-Din (1996) found that there were significant differences in women's coping strategies, such as in the use of social support networks, financial security and issues of control. African-American women tended to rely more on their families and friends for emotional, concrete and task support than the white Americans who were more likely to stress the need to regain control over their lives after their husband's death. Although the death was seen as devastating, most of the women reported that they had also experienced 'growth experiences' that they might never have had if they had not been widowed, becoming more confident, independent, but also able to ask for help. This raises the question of how come these women experienced such personal growth following the death of their husbands. This study looked at American women aged between nineteen and fifty-three years old. We need to understand how older women cope with life as a widow, as their experiences of life and marriage may be very different.

Marriage is given the central place as a basis of social relationships yet it is surprising how little research there is when we start to look at how older

women continue to live their lives, following widowhood, divorce or by rejecting the socially sanctioned heterosexual institution of marriage and remaining single and/or choosing a lesbian relationship. For women born at the beginning of the century, post-widowhood or divorce might make adaptation more complicated given the pre-existing 'traditional' beliefs about marriage and divorce. For these women, marriage is 'till death do us part' and therefore widowhood may represent a time when the memory of their husbands become 'enshrined' (Gibson, 1992). Parkes (1986) in bereavement counselling found it extremely difficult to get realistic accounts of widow's deceased husbands as they were idealised. Remarriage may be an option that some choose, however it seems that this option, if actually wanted, may not be 'available' to older women. Firstly, there is a 'shortage' of men who are of a similar age, secondly, as they are 'outside' of the boundaries of 'woman', available men may look to the younger women, a socially sanctioned system, choosing younger partners. Thirdly, women may feel that their marriages are 'to death till us part' and never consider remarriage or sexual relationships with other men due to a sense of loyalty to their dead husbands. Lastly, although this is not exhaustive, women may find intimacy in other areas, in relationships with family and friends or in lesbian relationships.

As mentioned earlier, if women follow the female chronology (Itzin, 1990) of marriage and motherhood and construct their identities around reproduction and traditional roles then what happens to these women when they are older

and possibly widowed? Itzin found that some women had resisted the social construction of their identity around this chronology and had established positive self-perceptions, which emphasises maybe that low self esteem and confidence in later life are related to social submergence into femininity. Other studies have highlighted this relationship between femininity and poor self perceptions and coping in later life. Evers (1984, cited in Arber and Ginn, 1991) interviewed fifty women over the age of seventy-five and found that women who had based their lives around their families and homes, the 'passive responders,' were more likely to be dependent and feel less in control of their lives, whilst women who had kept up outside interests, hobbies and employment, the 'active initiators,' were more likely to feel independent and self-reliant. Harrison (1983) also found that those women who had 'conformed' more closely to the 'home making' model in earlier life, most fully 'internalised' the perception of themselves as 'useless' in old age and described their lives as 'unimportant' despite seemingly full of activity and interest. The other women, who described their lives as being less centred on the home, had taken up voluntary and political interests and activities in later life and had maintained positive self perceptions.

With a lifetime of being face to face with the negative stereotypes of old age and being socialised into femininity, how do older women maintain positive self perceptions in later life. MacDonald and Rich (1984) suggest that older women do not reject such stereotypes in general, but deny that they belong

to this group, that old age becomes something that happens to 'others' not them.

### **Social constructionism and the material-discursive approach**

Social constructionism provides an alternative to the traditional psychology paradigm. This perspective eschews the concepts of realism and essentialism, denying that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality, eschewing objectivity and the search for validatable truth, which exists in the 'real' world waiting to be discovered (Burr, 1995). It rejects the notion of given, determined natures of people or objects, of inner truths and essences inside that determine what people or things are. It also rejects the idea that the world can be understood in terms of grand theories but instead endorses pluralism, the coexistence of a multiplicity and variety of ways of life that are situation dependent. Social constructionism is concerned with the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge, how people are constituted by the social world, the world of language and symbols that people acquire in a culture. It is also concerned with the way people construct their sense of themselves through the discourses available to them (Gergen, 1985, in Burr, 1995).

By adopting a discursive approach, 'old age' and 'woman' as identities, are socially constructed through the discourses that are available to us and it becomes possible to explore the ways in which women use these discourses

to define and find meaning in their lives and investigate the way old age is discursively constructed. However, there is a paucity of qualitative studies of how older women discursively construct their experiences of being 'old' and being a 'woman'. Maintaining the research polarities, of adopting either a discursive approach or a positivistic one, that focuses solely on the material, does not seem to be the most useful way to approach research (Ussher, 1997a).

Ussher discusses adopting a material-discursive approach, which has grown out of dissatisfaction with polarities, with the traditional psychology epistemology of positivism, which focuses solely on the material aspects of experience and secondly the discursive approaches which at times negate the material aspects, resulting in there being 'nothing outside the texts.' She argues that instead of supporting the material-discursive divide, we should be focusing on the interrelationships and interaction of the two, what unifies them and distinguishes them from each other, without privileging one over the other. This shift in epistemology has been taken up by researchers in psychology in areas such as, sexuality, reproduction and mental health (Ussher 1997a; 1997b). By 'material', I am referring to the biological changes of old age, health problems, social and financial factors, social support and relationships.

The narratives of the older women, who I have interviewed in this study, have encompassed many aspects of life and history. Adopting a material-

discursive approach, which draws upon a social constructionist perspective and does not ignore the material factors, will enable me to analyse the women's accounts, by drawing out the contradictory discourses that they adopt, whilst acknowledging the existence of 'real' physical and psychological symptoms and material factors that exist for the women outside discourse, symbols and signs. However, as Ussher (1997c) points out, these material factors or symptoms do not exist as separate entities, separately from the women's cultural and historical context that they are immersed in. These material factors are always positioned within discourse and culture. To study the ageing body, we cannot reduce culture to the biological or to the social constructionist blank slate (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995), we need to take into account the interplay. We need to study women's lives in a multidimensional way, analysing the discourses that surround 'woman', madness and reproduction, but also take into account the material factors, such as the biological symptoms and material factors that women still experience.

### **Aims and rationale of study**

With women outliving men, there is now a pronounced feminisation of later life, yet there is such a paucity of research looking at how women view themselves and their lives over the age of sixty-five, when one is categorised as 'old'. In fact, in general, there is an entire gap of contemporary research that addresses the issues of ageing from the point of view of the elderly



person (Jerrome, 1992, in Reed and Payton, 1996)). We abound with stereotypes of old age, many of them negative, that class old age as a time of decline, decrepitude and dependence. Although these negative connotations affect both men and women, for women there is a double standard of ageing, which combines both ageist and sexist stereotypes. Therefore, ageing may reflect very different experiences for men and women. While there are numerous issues for men in later life, the present study focuses on women, in particular those women classed as the 'young old'.

The present study focuses on how getting older may have a range of connotations for women, in that they have to somehow negotiate these ageist and sexist stereotypes and also the discourses that surround what it means to be 'woman' and 'old'. Women are positioned within the discourse of female reproduction and associated 'qualities' of femininity which are regulated and controlled by phallogocentric practices. To be 'woman' is to be youthful, fertile and attractive. Bodily presentation is central to being a 'woman,' whereby women are represented and constructed in terms of physical appearance. Within this discourse, sexuality is inseparable from reproduction, anatomy is destiny. What I am interested in is how older women negotiate these contradictory representations of being a woman and being older. The discourse that defines women through their reproductive function therefore defines women who are post-menopausal as 'dried up' and no longer valuable despite having potentially twenty-five years of life ahead of them.

Older women are outside the boundaries of 'woman' and I am interested in the clinical implications of this.

There has been much research on the menopause, looking at how women position themselves in relation to the discourses surrounding menopause, ageing and gender, exploring women's accounts of these bodily changes amidst the often negative and conflictual surrounding discourses. However there has been very little research on women who are 'post' post-menopausal, who are over sixty-five. Research on the elderly has focused more on issues such as levels of care, dementia, social support and bereavement, however most of these have been using quantitative methodology, using pen and paper measures. Again there has been a lot of research on bereavement and social support but very few qualitative studies of how women discursively construe being an older woman, looking at how women actually survive widowhood and how they maintain positive self-perceptions.

Understanding women's negotiations of the contradictory representations of what it is to be both 'woman' and 'old' cannot really be captured by such pen and paper measures, trying to fit their experiences into pre-defined categories. What is needed is to listen to these women's stories and give them a 'voice.' I am interested in whether these women position themselves within the different discursive representations of 'woman', e.g. biology as destiny, and whether they have they looked outside of their reproductive roles and

ageist/sexist stereotypes and found identities and meaning in life which are not restricted by biology.

Not only have older women been somewhat neglected by psychologists and sociologists, but they have also to some degree been excluded by feminist researchers too. Arber and Ginn (1991) quote from MacDonald and Rich (1984) and describe the case of a sixty-five year old woman who was angered and shocked because she was physically excluded from a Woman's movement march by a younger woman, as it was felt that she would not keep up. She states:- 'All my life in a man's world, I was a problem because I was a woman; now I'm a problem in a woman's world because I'm a sixty-five year old woman' (MacDonald and Rich, 1984, p. 30).

Why are there so many negative constructions of old age, when the people concerned themselves, 'the older people,' do not necessarily see themselves through the same wired spectacles? Feminists are not in a social vacuum out of sight of these negative constructions and images and so maybe there is something about fear, fear of our future selves, fear of an imagined nemesis of 'lined beauty' and declined power.

My aims in this study are to let the women's voices guide the direction of the research within the overall framework of the study. The study aims to explore women's accounts of being an older woman, using a feminist, material-discursive approach, which draws upon a social constructionist perspective, whilst acknowledging the material body and material factors.

The social constructionist perspective, which is concordant with feminist theory and research, is concerned with women's experiences and 'the social meanings and power relationships within language (Hunter and O' Dea, 1997).

My research questions are as follows:-

- How do these women construe what it is to be 'woman' ?
- How do they construe what it is to be 'old' ?
- Do these women position themselves within the different discursive representations of 'woman' ?
- How do these women negotiate the contradictory representations of what it is to be both 'woman' and 'old' ?

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

Fifteen women aged between sixty-five and seventy-seven were recruited and interviewed in Jersey, using semi-structured interviews. Thematic discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) was used to analyse the data. This chapter will describe the methodology used in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the joint University College London and University College London Hospitals (UCL/UCLH) committees on the ethics of human research (see Appendix A).

#### **Participants**

Participants in this study were recruited through the snowball sampling procedure (Patton, 1990, in Barker, Pistrang and Elliott, 1994). This involves interviewing two or so participants and then asking each participant to name one or two other people that they know, who they think would be interested in taking part and who fit the inclusion criteria. In this study the inclusion criteria were women aged between sixty-five and seventy-five and who lived in Jersey, Channel Islands. One woman aged seventy-seven was inadvertently recruited as one participant, who had suggested that I recruit this other woman, gave me her wrong age, supposing she was seventy-five. I found out her real age when I met her and as she was enthusiastic to take part and ironically 'challenged' my 'cut off' age, so it was decided that she

should remain in the study. All participants were from a non-clinical population as the study's focus was on how 'ordinary' women negotiated the contradictory representations of being 'woman' and being 'old' and what strategies they used to maintain a sense of 'well-being' throughout their lives. All fifteen women who were approached agreed to take part in the study.

The mean range of the participants was 70.5 years (range: sixty-five to seventy-seven). Ten of the women were born in Jersey and five were originally from England but had moved to Jersey in their twenties. Five of the women were married and living with their husbands, seven were widowed and living alone, two women were divorced and also living alone and one woman was single, having never married. The women's occupations included farming, office work, teaching and working at home, bringing up children.

### **Procedure**

After speaking to each woman individually on the telephone I arranged to see each participant at her own home. Before participating in the study, each woman was given an information sheet which briefly described who I was, my area of interest, the interview and issues of confidentiality and option to not take part (see Appendix B). I also told them that I was happy to answer any questions or concerns that they may have before and after the interview.

Participants were then given a consent form to sign (see Appendix C). I conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews (e.g. Mishler, 1986) with each participant.

All interviews were conducted in the participants' homes as this was agreed to be the most comfortable and convenient setting, creating a more informal and relaxed atmosphere. The interviews varied in length from sixty minutes to ninety minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Notation of intonational features were kept to a minimum, as a high level of detail was not necessary for the type of analysis intended. This approach to transcription emphasises readability rather than detailed reproduction of speech features. Therefore the guidelines for transcribing the interviews were taken from Barker and Pistrang (1995) which were adapted from Potter and Wetherell (1987). In all transcripts, the interviewer is referred to as 'I' and the participant as 'P'. In the transcripts, expressions of emotion such as laughter are noted in the text [e.g.(laughs)] as were pauses [(.)]. Special emphases were indicated by underlining and exclamation marks. Inaudible material were indicated as a question mark in parentheses [e.g. (?)]. Square brackets were used to indicate a person's name or place so that confidentiality was preserved [e.g. (her friend)]. Square brackets were also used to indicate 'back-channel over-talk' that does not interrupt the speaker's flow [e.g. I: keeping busy and doing things [P: oh yes] keeping active.]. three dots [...] were used to indicate the trailing off of a sentence and two slashes [e.g. //]

indicate when a speaker is interrupted so that her speech is cut off by the following speaker.

To preserve confidentiality and anonymity, each woman was given a code number, so that at no time were these women referred to by name.

### **The interviews**

Two pilot, semi-structured interviews were conducted to get an idea of what areas participant's considered to be important in their lives. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed enough framework to focus the topics of conversation, whilst continuing to give the participants the freedom to describe their lives in their own words. There was a gradual evolutionary development of the interview schedules. They all contained open-ended questions asking the women how they see themselves as a woman and what are the positive and negative things about being older. However, the first three schedules were also concerned with comparing how participants coped now and in the past by asking them to describe their lives and situations in terms of current age, when they were in their fifties and thirties. This style of looking at the women's lives did not seem to work as it halted the flow of conversation and women were not able to really differentiate or talk about such specific time markers.

The earlier interviews also included how women saw their femininity across different time periods but as the interviews went on it became clear that



these areas were not considered to be the main areas of focus. The final questions covered the major areas of what these women considered to be the main concerns in their lives now and in relation to the past, how they construe 'old age' and how these constructions might differ for men and women and what these women 'do' to keep 'well' now and in the past. Also I wanted to explore these women's expectations of their lives and ageing. Questions were open-ended and were asked in different orders, following the leads given by the women. In the final interview schedule (see Appendix D) the following questions were used as a framework:-

### **Main concerns**

- what are your main concerns now
- how are these different to when you were younger
- what are the positive things about being an older woman
- what's difficult now, being an older woman
- what helps you to feel good now
- what made you feel good when you were younger

(how do you think this is different for a man)

### **expectations**

- when you were younger how did you imagine your life at e.g.70
- would you have liked your life to have been any different, how.

### **General probe questions and prompts**

could you tell me more about that

how did that feel

can I ask you about...

let's now go onto...

would you feel happy to talk about...

Talking to these women about their lives at times involved reminiscence which may have re-stimulated memories that were emotive and painful. Loss is such a ubiquitous concept in the elderly as not only had most of these women lost their husbands, but they were also losing their friends and peers. Therefore it was important in the interviews to establish a good rapport with the participants, facilitate trust and be supportive and empathic to the sensitive issues being spoken about. Coyle and Wright (1996) argue that ethically, researchers interviewing people about sensitive issues, should really be equipped to deal with the distress that could result from such questioning and expression and that therefore using counselling skills within research interviews could effectively address such problems. Research interviews conducted within a feminist framework also emphasise the importance of avoiding the 'objectification' of the participant by there being an understanding and supportive interaction between interviewer and interviewee, which emphasises sensitive and meaningful engagement (Coyle and Wright 1996).

## Analysis

The texts were analysed using thematic discourse analysis (Hunter and O' Dea, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Weaver and Ussher, 1997) to explore the ways in which discourses around gender and ageing are reconstructed in women's stories. I was interested in how being a woman and ageing affects a woman's perception of herself and her life, what discourses are accessible to women over sixty-five and whether these women positioned themselves within the different discourses that surround being both 'woman' and 'old'.

The term discourse analysis covers an assortment of qualitative, language oriented approaches to research (e.g. Burman and Parker, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and is interested in both written and spoken language and focuses on discourse as the item of investigation. What all approaches share are the views that firstly, language does not represent a direct, neutral means of reflecting an underlying reality of the world, experiences, attitudes or cognitions and secondly, a conviction that language is central in constructing social life (Gill, 1996). Discourse analysts are concerned with not only language being constructive, but also the action and function of talk. Language is performative, that is we use language to 'do' things, for example to make excuses, blame others etc. All discourse is occasioned, it does not occur in a social vacuum. We are constantly attuning to the context that we find ourselves in and constructing our discourse so that it fits that context (Gill, 1996).

Variation is also central to the discussion of discourse analysis as people are constantly subjected to numerous discourses operating in their society and people construct their worlds according to the limited discourses surrounding them. Postmodernism rejects the notion that the world can be understood in terms of universal grand theories but instead focuses on plurality, the coexistence of a variety of situational ways of life and multiplicity (Burr, 1995). Therefore discourse analysts are looking for variation in people's accounts, the different subject positions, not merely consistency of accounts.

I have chosen discourse analysis as the most appropriate methodological approach for the data in this study as there will be not only consistencies in the discourses adopted by the women, but there will be, more importantly, contradictions. Also discourse analysis, allows me to not only explore the meanings ascribed to ageing by the women, but also the discourses and cultural practises that create those meanings. As discourse analysis takes talk or texts as its object of investigation and does not see these as a 'pathway to underlying cognitions' (Silverman, 1997, p. 158), this study also takes the interview transcripts as the object of analysis rather than the participants' attitudes and cognitions.

The transcripts (see appendix E) were analysed using Potter and Wetherell's (1987) ten stages of analysis, a method adopted by Weaver and Ussher (1997). The transcripts were read and reread and broken up into manageable

chunks, relating to the main areas of interest in the study. These chunks were then subdivided and coded within each subject area, with different codes at times being used for the same piece of text. I continued this process of subdivision, until I ended up with lists of pieces of transcripts under each code, which were then stored as categories. There was then a search for pattern in the data, for differences in the form or content of accounts and shared features. Themes then started to emerge in the data.

To ensure that I had not taken participant's accounts out of context I referred back to the original interview transcripts when creating codes and categories out of the data.

Mays and Pope (1995) suggest that one can increase the reliability of qualitative data analysis by obtaining independent assessments of interview transcripts by other skilled researchers and comparing agreement between the raters. In this study a fellow psychologist, who was familiar with my area of research, literature and discourse analysis, was asked to read four of the interview transcripts and carry out the steps of coding as suggested by Potter and Wetherell (1987) to evaluate how similar or different her findings were with my own. I will now go on to briefly discuss the level of agreement and disagreement of findings.

The following themes were suggested by the second rater, independent of my own findings. The second rater felt that the discourses that the women adopted involved 'protective factors' against old age, that is they adopted

discourses that contradicted the discourse of old age as a time of mental and physical decline. The first main theme was that of 'others', that is that old age does not happen to 'me' but to 'others'. Within this theme were various sub-themes. The women positioned others as old in terms of 'not wearing as well' and stating that they did not look like these 'old others'. In this sub-theme women were resisting the dominant discourses of old age as decline by positioning others as 'different', as not wearing well and looking 'old' and positioning themselves as separate to these 'others'. The second sub-theme involved some women positioning others within the decline discourse of old age by talking about infirm and disabled friends as 'other' as old. Disability was also talked about in terms of deafness, whereby these friends were now positioned as old due to ill health or loss of sensory functions. A third sub-theme was that of 'sitting'. Women defined those that sat about as 'old' as different to them, as they were active and always 'on the go'. Sitting was defined in terms of something that must not be done if one is to remain young and not old. For most of the women sitting was talked about in terms of being old, ill and immobile, something that was intolerable to them. The fourth sub-theme involved women positioning others as old if they suffered with dementia or gross memory problems and were in 'homes'. Women positioned themselves within the carer role, as different to these other old people who now needed to be cared for. Two women also adopted this change in discourse by talking about their relationships with another in

terms of being friends in the past but now positioning the friend as different, as someone that was dependent and needed care.

The second major theme that emerged for the second rater was that of 'keeping busy'. Women spoke about themselves and their lives in terms of keeping busy, active and going out. Some women spoke about their marriages in terms of always going out with their husbands and felt that this was the biggest loss once widowed, missing these outings with their husbands. However, these women continued to position themselves as going out as much as they could, whether alone or with friends, as the alternative was to 'sit about waiting to die or get old'. Going out and keeping busy also involved being mobile and being able to walk. For some women who were not able to walk as far as they previously could, this was construed as being frustrating and something intolerable that had to be overcome. This was spoken about in terms of adaptation and compromise whereby some of the women had bought themselves scooters or had started to use their cars more in order to get out and then they were able to walk knowing that they could get back home. Keeping busy also involved women positioning themselves as actively being involved with new or old interests and hobbies that involved maintaining old friendships or creating new ones. Activities and interests were construed as essential to stop one becoming old, sitting or becoming ill.

The third theme was 'creating new companions'. Friendships again emerged as a prominent theme in the women's accounts of themselves and their lives, whereby they construed friendships as a main source of intimacy, throughout life and/or since being widowed. Again the women defined themselves in relation to friends, feeling good about themselves and keeping active. A couple of women talked about the difference between male and female friendships in terms of only being able to be really intimate and have conversations about politics and sport with men. Whilst most of the women construed female friendship as central to their lives, providing support, intimacy and companionship for interests and holidays.

The fourth main theme was 'dressing well and hiding faults'. Some of the women construed keeping well as dressing well and not letting oneself go, as this implied a slip into decline and 'old age'. Most of the women defined dressing well as something that was done for themselves to make them feel good. Some women also spoke about dressing well and feeling good in terms of covering their faults, especially legs that were 'unsightly' e.g. due to veins etc. Other women construed themselves as feeling good in terms of not caring what others thought about how they or looked.

The fifth theme that emerged for the second rater was 'pride in generation'. Within this theme, was criticism of 'new ways' of doing things. Some women construed their generation as 'getting it right' compared to the younger generations. Violence and drug taking were talked about as things that



belonged to the young. Women positioned themselves as different to the young of today, as belonging to a generation of discipline, community spirit and of 'making do', qualities that the young do not have. This resulted in some of the women positioning themselves as members of the older generation in a positive way, with pride and value. In this context, youth was placed as 'other'.

These themes were discussed and incorporated into my analysis, as many were very similar to my own findings. As the second rater assessed only a sample of four of the interview transcripts, my own analysis of the fifteen transcripts provided a more varied and detailed analysis and interpretation with more sub-themes emerging in the analysis. These will be identified and discussed in the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

Five major themes were identified, each containing several sub-themes. The themes were overlapping, rather than mutually exclusive categories and there were commonalities as well as contradictions and variations in the women's accounts. The main themes and their sub-themes will be listed below.

#### **TOO BUSY TO BE OLD: WOMAN AS 'DO-ER'**

- sitting as sick
- sitting as old
- sitting as lonely
- a time of freedom: sitting as guilt
- being busy: a compromise

#### **THE FAILING BODY: THE IMMOBILE BODY**

- these legs were made for walking
- immobile as old
- being independent

#### **RELATIONSHIPS: THE COMPANY YOU KEEP**

- old friends and new friends
- friends and interests: 'there's always someone older than you'
- widowhood and friendship

- till death do us part

### **OTHERS AS OLD**

- stereotypes of old age
- old as 'them' not me

### **WEARING WELL**

- you're only as old as you feel
- mirror mirror on the wall: is that really me?
- wearing well: looking younger than others
- keeping up appearances: not letting yourself go
- making the best of what one's got

### **TOO BUSY TO BE OLD: WOMAN AS 'DO-ER'**

Nearly all of the women positioned themselves within this discourse of being busy, when talking about their lives years ago and now. One of the questions - how did women think about their own old age when they were younger, tended to elicit accounts of busyness, which was construed as stopping women from thinking about the future and age, busyness was also construed as preventing them from feeling their age. These next two women construct their earlier lives as extremely busy, 'doing' things. This busyness was constructed as all consuming leaving them no time to think of the future. Old age was constructed as something that just 'crept up', a gradual process.

Throughout the analysis, at the end of each quote, (P) represents the participant by code number, e.g. (P 7).

I never really (.) thought about much about what it would be like (.) um I think you're so busy at the time (.) you've got so many things that you're doing you know you're involved with (.) you don't really have time to think 'I wonder what it will be like' you just (.) well I I (.) I never really thought about what it was going to be like when I was older it just sort of crept up on me [I: Mm it's such a gradual process you know that you don't notice the changes...] Yes mm yes I mean as I say I just don't know where the last ten twenty years have gone to really I mean it just sort of (.) happened and that's it (P 7)

I don't think I would have thought about it (laughs) you're so busy doing things that you didn't think about it really you never sort of I I don't I can't ever remember as a child or a teenager or (.) um up to about I don't know what age (.) you never thought about it you never we never thought about twenty years hence I suppose there was so much happening in in the you know in the the (.) the today of that time that you were busy doing you know (.) hurtling around doing this that and the other [I: Yes] that you didn't think about it no... (P 9)

Within this theme of 'keeping busy' were other sub-themes, those of 'sitting'.

Sitting was constructed as having several meanings which are presented in turn below.

### **Sitting as sick**

A lot of the women constructed old age as a time of keeping busy and sitting was given as the unacceptable alternative. Sitting was constructed as something to be avoided, to not admit to, as it implied passivity, giving up and illness. This woman talked about enjoying her own company in terms of having lots to do. She does this in a way that apologises for any sitting,

giving it a reason, e.g. that if she is depressed then she will sit but only for a limited amount of time and then will continue to 'do'. Sitting was constructed as something that was unhealthy, for the ill and for the depressed, something that must be avoided if one was to remain well:

Yes I mean I don't mind my own company because I've always got (.) so many things to do I just don't sit (.) sometimes if you're not well you get a bit depressed (.) like the other day I had this wretched sneezing and I sneezed and sneezed and blew and blew and I you know I really got fed up with it er I really got depressed um (.) well for a short time you know and then I thought 'oh goodness' and put the television on and did my stamps (laughs) and that was the end of it. (P 13).

She then goes on to construct herself as someone who walks a lot in comparison to sick friends who sit. She constructed sitting again as something not to be tolerated, as something that sick people do, people who make a fuss and complain of being ill. Being well and remaining well is achieved by positioning oneself outside of the failing, immobile body discourse and positioning 'others' as within it:

...well a lot of my friends you see they just sit in a lump thinking of their ailments which is awful and so boring (.) I can't be doing with that I'm afraid I'm not very sympathetic (.) in that respect I mean if people are you know ill okay but to be moaning all the time and to hear all about that oh I don't want to know I really don't (.) I mean we've all got our aches and pains and all the rest of it you know at times but to go on about it (.) well this friend of mine I mean she's never been ill in her life and her husband well between you and I she speaks of him very very badly anyway he left her very well off (.) and er (.) all of a sudden (.) she had heart trouble (.) well I've never known anything like it she was terrified (.) and er now she oh she 'can't do this she can't do that' and I said 'you're all right now it's only angina it's not a coronary it's not a coronary (P 13).

This woman also constructed sitting as a negative thing, something that was only done when one was fed up. The aim however was to get back to normal as quickly as possible, returning to the role of 'do-er'. Sitting was also only tolerated if one was 'doing something', keeping busy, such as in this case, whereby this woman mended things as a way of relaxing:

Yeah I know we used to do it during the war (.) if you had a ladder in your (.) stockings (.) you get one of those very fine crochet hooks and crochet up the ladder (.) I still do them if I feel cheesed off (.) and I've got perhaps a nice pair of black tights or something and there might be just a little run there and I'll stop it with nail polish and then out will come my crochet hook when I'm fed up and I've picked it up [ I: So how does that help you when you're fed up?] Well it relaxes you I find mm and then before you know where you're back to normal again (.) that's what I find [ I: So it distracts you?] It does (.) I couldn't (.) be like (.) some who you know (.) sit in the house all day long (.) I've got to do something. (P 3).

### Sitting as old

Sitting was also constructed as something that 'old' people do, therefore to sit was to be old. Keeping well and not old, was construed as keeping busy, having aims to do things, having interests that kept mind and body active and being positioned outside of the failing, immobile body discourse. This woman constructed activities as essential to life, positioning 'others' as old, as 'retireds', as passive and not busy. Old age was constructed as something that happened to 'others', 'them' as they sat and did not keep busy or have interests. Sitting was constructed as a sign of old age and something that must avoided by keeping busy in clubs specifically for the 'old':

Yes yes I I you know um (.) that's right I mean I think again if you if you've (.) um if your mind (.) if you're occupied in something that (.) um you think is

worthwhile um and you keep (.) I think activity is very necessary and to have something an aim to you know to do things um (.) I think that if people just sort of (.) retire and a lot of them do and then sort of live in an armchair literally don't they (.) um they're not I think for people like that the lot all these sort of clubs and things (.) are very good um I mean [ I: There's a sense that if (.) if people are retired people get older and they kind of (.) sit really then that's really when people start to go down hill some ways?] Oh I think they do I think that this is where (.) if they haven't got interests (.) um of their own then these associations and clubs for retirees (.) are good because they do do an amazing amount of things (.) I mean you know I mean (.) and it motivates them they they go away for holidays and all sorts of things (.) yes. (P 5).

This woman also constructed inactivity as old, as 'non-do-er'. She also positioned herself outside of the dominant discourse that defines old as dependent and declining in health and mobility, by defining herself as different to the 'old people', who 'don't do anything'. Keeping busy and not old was defined in terms of doing something 'active' having interests that were not passive. Old age was defined as something that she felt out of place with as she was not ready to become a 'non do-er' as she had so much more to 'do', to fit into her life:

For instance at the W.I. [women's institute] (.) I feel completely out of place cause there are a lot of old people there that don't do anything (.) well they're very good with um (.) er (.) embroidery and all that sort of thing (.) but they don't er do anything active you know (.) I feel out of place and yet (.) I'm probably quite as old as most of them you know [ I: But there's a difference in how you see yourself and feel?] Yes, I feel differently, I want mind you I think that fundamentally I'm trying to make up for lost time. (P 5).

Sitting was also defined as something that old people did when they were 'finished with.' She positioned herself outside of the old age as a decline discourse herself by defining herself as someone who shocked others, by not fulfilling the stereotyped image. Stereotypes were talked about in terms of

others defining the old in terms of needing mobility aids, sitting and engaged in passive activities. These stereotypes were also taken up by this woman in referring to her imagined future self. There was a sense of urgency, of being held back and deprived, of needing to make up for lost time and being busy with the things that she wanted to do:

Um (.) yes in a way I think there is because the way people are (.) so shocked when I say I play badminton (.) or tennis and the way they make a thing about it (.) so they must expect me to be walking round with a zimmer frame or something you know (laughs) really (.) so I think that they look on older people as um you know (.) finished done with (.) only fit to sort of er sit in their chair and (.) crochet which is what I thought I'd be doing at this age [ I: I was going to ask you when, when you were younger, how did you see, what type of things did you think you would be doing now at seventy-seven ?] Well I had a rocking chair and I never had time to sit in it and I thought well when I'm older I'll sit in there and do my crochet, you know (laughs) I never got round to sitting in it even (laughs). So that's how I must have seen how it would be (.) you know (.) I never thought I'd be playing tennis and badminton at this age but I was determined I wanted to play because I'd been deprived of that for so long you know (.) not been able (.) the time to do it (.) to be able to do what I wanted to do (.) I've always been so busy you know. (P 2).

### **Sitting as lonely**

Some women constructed 'sitting' as loneliness, of passivity which was to be avoided by keeping busy. This woman constructed sitting as giving up in some way, of feeling sorry for oneself, which was defined as unacceptable. Self pitying was constructed as something indulgent, something undesirable. She goes on to construct coping as keeping busy and having interests as a way of replacing the time that she spent with her husband when he was alive. Keeping busy was constructed as a duty, as feeling sorry for oneself was seen as indulgent and unacceptable. This woman also constructed sitting



as something that was associated with depression and bereavement, following the death of her husband, and as a way of not coping:

The only thing's now I'm alone now and of course that's changed my life completely because I mean he died two years ago [ I: right so fairly recently] er yes yes and we were in business for years and er worked together all the time and of course now although I've got a very good family I've got brothers and sisters but um (.) you're still alone sort of thing you know and that's how my life but you see there again (.) I keep myself occupied (.) I mean I had an answer phone given to me as a Christmas present because er (.) they could never get me (.) I was always out I was always gone and er [son and wife] said that (.) they gave me this er which I'd said I'd never have in the house but they gave it to me because they said 'you're never there you're always gone we never catch you in' (.) but personally I think when you're left alone that's the best thing to do because I'm interested in things I do flower arranging I do er in the summer I go bowling and I do my garden and I think (.) er you have to keep yourself because otherwise you could easily sit down and (.) feel sorry for yourself (.) that's not right anyway but er I think you should always keep yourself occupied. (P 8).

Again, these two quotes from another woman suggest something intolerable about not keeping busy, linking this with not coping and being 'old'. Implicit in this narrative was also a greater intolerance of older people being inactive than young people:

[ I: So I mean it sounds like yes life is very hectic] // Yes it is (.) it is because um there's nothing worse than when you hear people say 'I'm bored' (.) and I've heard those words so many times with older people (.) you hear it with the very very young people (.) er but with the older people I get really cross because there is so much one can do on this island (.) um such a lot (P 11).

[ I: I was going to say do you ever get lonely because it sounds like there's not enough time to ever get lonely in some ways or] // um no not really because I can occupy myself um (.) I've got friends now I've got one friend actually and she hates being on her own (.) and in the house (.) she feels that she can't cope with it (.) and (.) you see there's always something to do (P 11).

### **A time of freedom: Sitting as guilt**

A lot of the women spoke about having more freedom, freedom from traditional roles of wife, mother, housekeeper and employee, yet this was constructed in several ways. Women constructed old age as a time of more freedom, being better off financially and having more time for leisure. For some however, this increased freedom was constructed as something that they felt guilty about, as sitting was constructed as not keeping busy and which was incongruent with traditional roles as wife, mother and housekeeper. This next woman positioned herself as having much more time to do the things that she wanted to do, making up for lost time and time spent fulfilling her roles as wife and employee. However, she constructed this new stage of choice, freedom and relaxation in terms of 'sitting' which she felt guilty about. Resting was constructed as 'sitting' and not being busy. She also positioned herself in relation to her husband, defining sitting as lazy, not being a good wife, not doing one's duties. Again sitting was positioned as indulgent and relaxing was avoided if it entailed sitting:

Well I was working full time in the office and I was helping my husband in the fields (.) mornings before I went to work and when I came back (.) and for much time at St John's ambulance as well see (.) um taking people away and that sort of thing (.) so now I'm trying to make up for lost time I think by doing the things I want to do (.) but I feel guilty about it sometimes (laughs) [ I: and what's that about?] If I sit down and just read (.) or just listen to the television or um (.) just sit (..) I feel that I should be doing something because I've been so busy all my life (..) that I feel guilty if I rest (.) you know (...) I think that the problem was that (.) my husband was a very busy man and er (.) um if he came back from work (.) you know and found me sitting down and I felt that he thought that I'd been sitting down all day (.) you know [ I: right] I think I used to feel guilty about sitting down all the time (.) you know (.) not doing anything (.) even if I'd just sat [ I: so how do you cope with that ?] Well I just make myself think that well (.) you know (.) at your age you must be entitled to sit down for a little while (.) yes you know. I think (.) well

I'm 77 (.) yes I do find it hard to relax (.) I used to read a lot and write a lot (.) I found writing (.) I used to keep my diary and write a lot of letters and I found writing was very (.) you know (.) what shall I say (.) relieves the tension. (P 2).

Old age was also constructed as a time of more freedom, freedom from traditional roles of wife and mother and as a time for developing new and taking up old interests again. Regret was also implicit in several women's accounts, that this time had not been made available to them earlier. This next woman constructed old age as a time of more freedom due to not being restricted by children, but also talked about regret and anger at not having freedom earlier. Here again, sitting was constructed as something to feel guilty about as it implied freedom from domestic duties. Failure to position oneself within the house-making discourse resulted in guilt, guilt from desiring freedom of time which was seen as indulgence:

Real freedom you see (.) because they haven't got children to hold them back anymore...[ I: Have you found that that there's been a sense of freedom or...] Well painting yes yes I kick myself that I didn't (.) get down to it years ago (.) having had all my equipment and keep meaning to do it (.) I do kick myself for that but you know you (.) if you do then you feel a bit guilty you know if you sit down and do things like that there's no reason why we should but we're brainwashed into thinking that we should be cleaning something or (.) and I'm not a great cleaner actually but you still feel you should (laughs) you know and...[ I: Mm so the actual domestic...] keeping busy with the domestic things but er (.) I mean nobody's ever stopped me but once you get down to painting (.) like the odd half hour isn't enough you want several hours you know...(P 14).

This same woman then goes on to position herself differently, as controller of her time rejecting guilt. However, she positioned herself outside of the freedom as indulgence discourse by including her husband in her narrative

and talking about how he also does what he wants now. Implicit was some tacit agreement from her husband, that both could do what they wanted, that then allowed her to enjoy her 'special time':

[ I: So you're saying there's a sense of (.) um wanting to do things that you haven't had a chance to do or time to do but also (.) it seems like a slightly (.) feeling of guilt maybe (.) as a woman yes to be sitting and relaxing where (.) 'maybe we shouldn't or'...] Yes (.) well I don't have it now I've jettisoned all feelings of guilt (laughs) they've gone (laughs) as I say you look at (.) at the fact that you haven't got endless time anymore and you become aware of it and you think 'I'm not wasting my time doing things I don't like doing' apart from doing things that you must do from duty I mean (.) everyone has to do things they don't like I mean (.) I've got a little granddaughter now and I look after her two afternoons a week [talks about arrangements]. As I say apart from my duty to (.) her (.) this is the time (.) my special time and I don't feel guilty about doing what I like (.) and my husband was very good because he helped me with the housework (.) yes he was very good so that um (.) we each do what we want you know. (P 14).

This next woman constructed old age generally as a time of more freedom but defined herself as not enjoying this freedom as much due to being less mobile and more restricted by health problems. She positioned herself as someone who sat more and enjoyed her 'soaps' on television, yet described her unease with this by describing how she and her husband tried to go out as much as they could. By comparing her past life as being busy with duties and roles with her present sense of restricted freedom, is implicit a sense of regret of not being able to enjoy her time more:

A sense of freedom yes you know (.) you lose you sense of freedom (.) we've got the freedom in well everything we've got more sense of freedom now but (.) if my back was all right (.) I'd enjoy it more you know... I sit about a lot more now (.) I sit at home and watch tele or (.) reading or. (.) that's why we try to go out as much as we can (.) we didn't have the time before (.) we had the kids and I worked in the fields (.) pram and all eh (.) I had to get on with it (.) when he was in the fields I might have to bring in the cows and milk them and all that (.) the kids came and all that you know. (P1).

Following on from this, old age was also construed as a time of increased financial freedom and security, with more time and money to 'do'. One of the meanings given to this was that of freedom coming 'too late'. Several women talked about wanting to 'have another go' at life, but this was construed by some as 'greedy'. In the quote below, old age was constructed as a time of more freedom, financially to 'do,' but also as paradoxically restricted by old age:

Well yeah I suppose you've got more freedom haven't you because now you've got (.) you haven't got the worries of (clears throat) of mortgages and things like that so now you feel (.) you've got quite a bit of freedom you've got the money (.) haven't you to do things now which you didn't have then (.) so you can (.) and you've got the freedom it's just that (.) just the bad news is the age (laughs) basically if we could (.) reverse and have (.) everything and forty (laughs) that would be the answer wouldn't it and er (?) so I doubt (.) I mean (.) don't know about. [I: So being freer financially and being able to deal with things...] That's right yes and having the time (.) because you've retired and (.) and you want to er although you (.) you don't always want to do things then because (.) you tend to look at holiday brochures and think well you know ' I don't really want to go there (clears throat) you haven't got the inclination (laughs) you've got the money but not the inclination (laughs). (P12).

Another aspect of old age as a time of increased financial freedom was that of freedom from domestic duties and routines. This next woman positioned herself as having increased financial freedom which enabled her to have choice and freedom in terms of domestic roles and routines, however, implicit was her regret at not having this freedom earlier:

Well for the good I mean now we're retired more or less retired (.) it's just a little hour and a half a day job we do (.) but otherwise we go where we like (.) come back where we like (.) if you don't want to cook a meal that evening you don't cook one (.) boil an egg or something like that or go to the chinkie across

the road on a Friday night [ I: And how is that different from say (.) quite a few years ago?] Well for a start we wouldn't have been able to afford it (.) you bring up your family (.) you know you've got them around you you've got plenty to do (.) the time goes by (.) you enjoy it (.) you still enjoy you know (.) the time now (.) but you think 'I wish I was young again and could have done some of those things you know [ I: So enjoying the things you've done but also wanting another go at them] That's right yes you know (.) like being born over again. (P 1).

For two women, who were widowed, old age was defined as a time that was more difficult financially, as they only had their widows pensions to depend on. Another, a single woman, positioned herself as better off financially to those women who were married, at home and 'not in business.' She positioned herself outside of the discourse that defines women as less confident and independent in later life, if they have conformed to the homemaking tradition in earlier life:

Yes (.) that's right yes [ I: being able to do things you want to do] Um but again (.) anybody that hasn't (.) been in business all their life and hasn't got a pension then hasn't got the freedoms because they haven't got the finance so I mean you know... (P 4).

This next woman positioned herself as slowing down with age but was also quick to redefine herself in terms of having lots of energy. She then constructed sitting as something that caused her anxiety and not something that involved relaxation. Instead, being woman as 'do-er', keeping busy and mixing domestic duties with leisure, was her construction of relaxation:

[ I: And do you feel any different to how you did when you were fifty or (.) thirty in in yourself do you think ?] Oh no (.) I have you know (.) what I feel now (.) what I feel now I get er er I get annoyed with myself because what used to take (.) half a day (.) takes a day now well that's age isn't it (.) it's to be expected (.) but I have (.) I have got a lot (.) a lot of energy [ I: it sounds like

you have] (laughs) and I you know I'm on pins if I sit too long (.) [ I: And are you also able to relax and have time...] Oh yes (.) oh yes I love music (.) I love music (.) when I came in on Saturday night I well I put the ironing board up full of 'all right you're had a rest this afternoon (.) er come on start on that ironing' the ironing board went up in the (.) in the er sitting room (.) on with my extension lead (.) and I sat and watched 'the Proms' and I thought this is great this is great. (P 5).

### Being busy: a compromise

For some women, keeping busy and active involved recognition of some 'slowing down' with increasing age and so old age was then redefined in terms of a compromise between being woman as 'do-er' and not being as active as when they were much younger. This compromise was talked about in several ways. Firstly, in the quote below, a decrease in active interests was admitted but then denied by positioning as not wanting to do these activities. Coping with this was defined in terms of being active in other activities and not sitting, as this implied being old and unable to cope:

Well just that you can't do the things you want to do all the time (laughs) I mean I used to be out in the garden from morning noon till night and I used to play two rounds of golf well I know perfectly well that I can't do that now (.) but then you just think 'oh all right I can't do it I don't want to do it (laughs) [ I: mm and then that takes away the disappointment maybe] yes but then I've got my bridge so I mean er (.) that's a good thing and I do quite a lot of entertaining because I like cooking... I'm a great home bird I like my home and er (.) I like looking after it you know (.) same as the garden and I think to go out into the garden it's very relaxing I go pruning away and (.) keep busy and [cousin] comes along and says 'aren't you tired' (.) 'mm no' I say 'no' (.) sometimes I think well 'silly old thing you'll over do it' you know and I'll go and sit down and watch 'neighbours' (laughs)...(P 13).

Adjusting to this decrease in activity was also constructed in terms of being 'crafty' by one woman. Not being so agile was constructed in terms of using wisdom over agility with younger players, getting them to do the hard work:

At the moment we go Thursday well yes we've been going Thursday evenings during the summer (.) very you know (.) I don't skip around like I used to because I'm a bit too crafty for that now so (.) I've played well (.) for more years than I care to remember I can sort of be a little bit crafty with returning the shot and have a nice young partner to do the extra running (.) having said that it's just as well to be a bit sensible but um yes it does it releases the er (.) tensions we all like to have a (.) you know a good go I played tennis for many, many years that was my game but (.) not in recent times for...(P 4).

This change of activity and ability was also defined in terms of acceptance and normalised as also happening to others. This next woman positioned herself in relation to a friend and other people who were older than her, normalising this loss and maybe partly denying her anger by constructing this compromise as part of the course of life and death, something that is inevitable for everyone:

Yes yes I mean [friend] well her knees are very I mean they don't stop her getting about and they don't stop me getting about but you get up off this chair and they're all stiff and (.) I can't climb or walk up mountains whereas I once could I mean that (.) as I enjoy you know I'm lovely on the flat but up and down is a great trail now I (.) you do feel cross about it you know (.) things that you can't do but you would like to do [ I: so it's frustrating] very annoying but you just (.) you just have to accept it and (.) I was saying the other day, very few people get to live to eighty, live to eighty without (.) things being wrong with them (.) you just it's just part of life really (laughs) part of death really if you want to be a bit morbid yeah yeah...(P 14).



## THE FAILING BODY: THE IMMOBILE BODY

The most common theme that emerged from women's accounts of their main concerns in their lives now was that of being mobile. Most women spoke about how walking was such an important element in their lives and how they still fought to carry on walking as much as possible. Old age was constructed as being immobile, not being able to walk and this was resisted by most of the women, by not applying this to themselves, but by defining 'others' as old, as those who were not as mobile or who needed sticks to walk.

### These legs were made for walking

Health was not spoken about generally but indirectly, in terms of the change in the women's ability to walk as far or as quick as they could previously. This change was defined as a marker of old age, that resulted in frustration and a redefinition of one's identity as 'old' and viewed as the worst thing about getting older. These next two women defined themselves as getting older in terms of not being able to walk as far, despite being active in other activities, walking was defined as the most important activity of being younger, something that was taken for granted when young:

The worse thing about getting older (.) is not (.) being able to do physically the things you want to do (.) I'd like to walk a lot (.) and although I play badminton and tennis (.) walking is a real chore for me (.) really hard you know (.) and I'd like to be able to walk (?) I see young people ahead of me walking and I think 'make the most of it whilst you can' because when (.) it's a real chore for me to walk (.) even to go to town I go to town Saturday with

my Grand daughter (.) I found it really hard going (.) and I think that's the worse thing about getting old. (P 2).

Not being able to walk as far as I'd like to (.) I've always liked walking (.) I'd walk miles and miles with my dog (.) all along the beaches (.) I used to really enjoy it (.) but I can't walk like (.) and yet I do walk to town instead of taking the bike (.) I still do it [I: Right so you still...] Oh yes I still do it I thought 'oh no I can't rely on that bike'. (P 3).

Some women resisted the discourse of old as immobile by positioning themselves as 'walkers', in contrast to the views of others who attempted to position them within this discourse. The next woman talked about walking in terms of challenging others restrictive views of her agility and although compromising at times, expressed anger when unable to do as much walking as she wanted:

Yes yes now I walk down to town from here I walk down (.) and if I do a lot of shopping I'll bus back or I'll get my bike and I'll cycle down but if I've got a lot of shopping I won't walk because that's stupid I mean you've got to use your common sense but I'll often walk down (.) I mean it doesn't bother me er to walk down (.) and then people turn round and say 'you can't walk down there' and I say 'well yes' you know they're absolutely amazed um (.) to think that (.) you know you can you're walking down or you're cycling down (.) um I mean two years ago I walked twenty-three miles nearly all the way round the island with our walking group (.) that was about two year and we haven't done it since (.) but I would have done the twenty-five only my socks started to see (?) (laughs) and they were rubbing you see and I had to give in and I was cross with myself because I had to give in (.) but twenty yeah I did twenty-three (.) so I er... (P 11).

Some women talked about the gap between their perceived future and their actual life presently, in terms of being shocked at having problems with their legs. This woman below, talked about how having problems

with her legs was a shock and something that she had never expected to happen, when younger:

I didn't think (.) I thought I'd be still more agile than I am (.) I used to think you know years ago 'oh people have got pains in their legs they've got this they've got that (.) how the devil (.) there's nothing in a leg to hurt' (.) I didn't think you could have such things as varicose veins and arthritis and osteoarthritis and (.) every arthritis going you know (laughs) you don't think of those things you think well but how can they, you've got two legs as long as you move them up and down and (.) walk around you're all right you know (.) until you're getting actual pain in the leg and then you think 'oh (.) I thought wrong' you know. (P 1).

This next woman described herself as healthier than when she was younger.

She defines this in terms of the mobility of her arms and legs and being active throughout her life:

Yes I think so in some ways yes I think so yes (.) yes my arms and legs are moving reasonably well I think (.) maybe a lot of people (.) they talk a lot of this osteoporosis don't they (.) but I've always played sport all my life and (.) I wonder maybe that's possibly a help um (P 4).

### **Immobile as old**

Many of the women spoke about themselves and others as suddenly 'becoming' or feeling old when mobility decreased. Old was not something thought about until the person was unable to 'get about' or had to use a stick. This next quote came from a woman who talked about her neighbour in terms of not seeing her as 'old' until she had a fall. After that she then perceived this woman as 'old', calling her 'a poor old soul' and then talked about her immobility in contrast to 'walking':

Oh (.) well I've got an old lady upstairs of ninety-one (.) till Christmas I never would have thought of her as that age (.) she would (.) fell poor old soul coming back from [school Christmas dinner] (.) they'd taken her for Christmas lunch and that and when she got out the car of those who picked her up (.) she fell (.) and I mean that's put her life (.) old now (.) because she can't get about the same (.) I mean till then she used to go walking into town down the road there (.) twice a day. (P 1).

Despite positioning the neighbour as old, this participant then 'defended' her by defining her as still independent, resisting positioning her totally within the discourse that defines older people as dependent physically and financially. Despite all of the serious illnesses mentioned, this woman was not defined as 'old' until she was no longer as mobile:

That seems old, but I mean (.) she's er still independent (.) she won't take a thing off you. [husband] brings her her post everyday (.) but she's ninety-one I mean she used to dance in eh (.) she's had breast cancer (.) she's had her eye (.) she's got a glass eye (.) she had cancer behind the eye (.) she's had (.) skin cancer on her face (.) but you can't notice it (.) yeah but I mean her hair's coiffured everyday you know (.) but you know (.) now I consider her (.) I think of her as her age you know before I never did. (P 1).

Here again, decreased mobility was seen as a marker of old age. The use of walking aids, especially a walking stick was defined as representing a visible sign of old age to others, as it visibly positions those that need the help of a stick within the discourse and representation of dependency and bodily decline as old age. The person who needs to use a stick can no longer define themselves within the healthy body discourse, as they then possess visible symbols of old age, of a 'failing body', that are used frequently in our culture to represent old age. This next woman perceived her own mother as being

older than another woman, despite being the same age, because she had a stick to help her walk:

my mother was about the same age but I thought of her as old because she wasn't mobile .... when somebody has to start like myself (.) that you need a stick to walk (.) that I think then (.) age is telling. That seems (.) you know you can't get around the same. (P 10).

Two of the women positioned themselves within the discourse of immobility as old, but only in terms of not being able to walk as much, other illnesses were not talked about. Both women positioned themselves within the discourse that defines old age chronologically, that being seventy equals being old. The first woman, despite having back problems which had limited her, talked about 'going downhill' because she could not walk or run as fast:

Only recently you know since I've (.) I've come up to seventy that's (.) I suppose I think oh I'm (.) on the way downhill now (.) and there are loads of other things that I wanted to do and I can't do sort of thing and it's frustrating you know... well just that you can't do the things you used to do (.) you can't run (.) you can't walk quickly ( P 1).

The next woman actually had quite a swollen leg and had a history of circulatory problems in her legs. She also defined herself as feeling 'old' when she could not walk as much and related feeling old to her chronological age. However, she resisted this discourse of decline as old by only positioning herself within it temporarily, by saying that she only felt 'seventy-one' when her leg was serious enough to need elevating. She then defined herself through the healthy body, as agile and busy:

That's when you feel 'Oh I'm seventy-one now' (.) you still can't do what you did when you were thirty (.) you know (.) but otherwise (.) you know I'm not too bad really (.) not too bad (.) no only when there's something like this happens (points to leg elevated on pouffee) but otherwise I'm like a cricket you know I'm here I'm there I'm gone. (P 3).

Stereotypes of old age were taken up, at times by some of the women, when used to define how frustrated they were with their lives at different periods. This next woman defined herself as old and past it when she was widowed quite young. Being alone and not working was seen as something that had to be fought so as to 'get mobile again.' Therefore, mobility was seen as signifying health, both physical and psychological. This woman refused to position herself within the discourse of 'sitting as old', by doing anything in her power to regain mobility and get on with life:

I said 'well' I said 'I'm fed up' I said um well I was fifty-four when I was widowed (.) and I said (.) I said 'I'm too old I might as well take up my walking sticks now and and (.) curl up in the you know in the (.) in an easy chair' (.) she said 'don't be so silly' (.) I said 'oh' I said 'well (.) I don't want to go and do housework' (.) and do you know (.) she said 'I'll see what I can do' (.) she sent me to (.) a young (.) lady who was in charge of personal (.) and I'd never done office work (.) never done office work in my life (.) she said er 'do you mind working unsociable hours' I said 'not at all (.) I said 'I'll try anything (.) so as to get mobile again ...(P 5).

### **Being independent**

Some of the women spoke about being immobile as signifying dependency on others, needing help from others, but resisted this discourse by not applying it to their own experiences. Dependency was spoken about in terms of it happening to 'others', something that signified old age and the failing

body. This next woman draws upon the themes of others as old and old people as dependent, to frame her own fears of losing control:

I think some (.) I think that (.) a lot of old people probably resent (.) not I think this is why they they sort of um seem to be a bit crabby you know sometimes you think 'oh you're miserable' but possibly (.) they well I think it's resentment so much as (.) that they're not in charge you know they're not able to do things that they want to do and I think that if they've been I think that would (.) be one thing that one would loathe I mean I can't think of anything that I would loath more than you know being where poor old [neighbour] is you know um (.) not to be (.) not to be in charge I think that that yes yes in control of one's you know ...(P 6).

Another women who defined herself in terms of being less mobile, referred to her frustration and lack of understanding that something like that should happen to her. She also talked about the change in roles that her decreased mobility had caused, resulting in her redefining herself in terms of 'from carer to cared for'. Also implicit was her shock and frustration that she should 'be like this':

I want to kick myself (.) I feel well why am I like this (.) you know when the others say 'get moving get yourself mobile' (.) but when your back sort of seizes up you just can't eh [...] I was the type that never waited for anyone to do anything for me (.) I'd have done it myself but now (.) it aggravates me because I've got to rely on [husband] to do everything (.) whereas a few years ago when [husband] was so ill with emphysema (.) it was me doing all the main jobs and heavy work. (P 1).

Most of the women spoke about not wanting to give up their homes and maintaining their independence at all costs. For some this discourse of decline and dependency was avoided by positioning themselves as busy, keeping active and being different to 'others' who may like being in a 'home'. This next woman drew upon the theme of dependency as old, by applying it

to another, and positioned herself within the healthy, active and independent discourses:

That's it (.) that's it not being independent (.) that (.) that's the big thing I think (.) if you can hold your independence as long as you can (.) as long as you can (.) that is the (.) the main thing oh yes definitely definitely (.) my neighbour says (.) she's eighty- five now and er (.) the one that lives two doors from here and she said 'oh as long as I can keep my independence that's one fear that one has' (.) if you've got to go into a nursing home (.) I mean some people don't mind I've got a neighbour up the road and she's just gone into a nursing home as happy as a lark (.) now personally (.) I want to stay here as long as I can mm but I think that is the main fear as you get older (.) as you get older (.) touch wood I'm (.) quite active you know (.) I'm quite active now so a blessing I can keep going. (P 8).

Two women talked about how they would go into a home, reluctantly, if they 'had' to. Being independent was construed as not carrying on with traditional roles that they were expected to by their parents, that of being expected to look after older parents. These women spoke about not expecting their own children to look after them like they had their own parents. They constructed old age as a time of paradoxical independence, of retaining their own independence and freedom from traditional roles by going into a nursing home if they really 'had' to and not being looked after by family. This woman talked about retaining her independence, in the context of not wanting her children to look after. She also drew upon the theme of old people as unwanted and as a burden for others:

No no no (.) I used to always say (.) because I think if you've looked after your parents you think (.) well let's hope I can look after myself (?) much younger than that and if I (.) I can't I'll go in a home to be looked after (.) why should your kids be saddled with you (.) and I always think that even now (.) I'd sooner go in a home (.) unless there was a granny flat that I could look after myself (.) but I don't want to expect my kids to have to look after me (.) why should they (.) they've got a life of their own (.) my mother didn't think that



(.) my mother the more you did (.) anything for her (.) and if you went you expected, didn't matter where you went, to go with you (.) which (.) oh well it wasn't always you know (.) we had our friends to go out with and it wasn't always practical eh. (P 1).

## **RELATIONSHIPS: THE COMPANY YOU KEEP**

The next major theme that was drawn upon by most of the women, to frame their experiences of themselves and old age, was that of intimate relationships. Intimate relationships were talked about in terms of being central to the women's lives and part of how they defined their own identities. The most common intimate relationship talked about was that of friendships with other women. All of the women spoke about friendships and how important they had always been but how they were even more important in later life. For most of the women, friendships were seen to fulfil many roles, especially after widowhood, defining themselves as members of various groups of friends. One of the questions was 'what made women feel good about themselves now' and most of the women spoke about themselves, their identities and increased confidence in terms of positioning themselves amongst their friends. Confidence was spoken about in terms of friendships, living with the 'strength' of their husbands (alive and deceased) and in becoming independent financially and socially, living alone.

## Old friends and new friends

Friendships with other women were spoken about in terms of old friends that had been maintained throughout life and new friends that women had met by being part of different groups or being involved in different interests and activities. Friendships were defined in some cases as being the most important thing in women's lives. For some women, mostly Islanders, friendships had been maintained since childhood and were spoken about in terms of 'family':

Oh yes (.) I've got one girlfriend (.) we've been friends for forty-five years now (.) and every Thursday she comes here for lunch [ I: And has it been hard to maintain friends or has it been easy (.) the two of you to keep in touch?] Oh no we've always (.) we're like sisters (.) no (.) we've always considered her as one of the family really (.) we were very close when (.) my son was young and her (.) girls were young. (P 3).

Three women spoke about how their old friends had started 'dying off' and of the implications this had for them. The woman below talked about these lost friends in terms of losing collective memories that could never be regained with others and as something that had to be accepted:

you just (.) you just have to (.) accept it might happen (.) that's one of the nasty things about getting older (.) outliving all your contemporaries who have (.) who have memories that are the same as yours (.) you know you can no longer say 'do you remember when we did so and so or when such or such a thing happened' even if you didn't do it together you you knew about it. (P 14).

This next woman defined herself as alone as her peers were dying all around her. Although she talked about this in terms of acceptance and as inevitable

event of old age, implicit was the notion that one must not dwell on these things. Dwelling was defined as something unbecoming and which further isolated one, which she resisted by drawing upon the themes of the healthy, active and independent body to frame her experience. She also positioned herself outside of the discourse of sitting as lonely, as this was construed as something indulgent and unbecoming, by defining herself in terms of being active, adventurous, independent and able to make new friends. She talked about her new friends in terms of interests and hobbies that she was involved in but defined these as different to her old friends:

Well I'm on my own and all my friends are sort of dying around me but I mean you've got to (.) you know I mean it's got to happen when you're when you're a certain age I mean it's no use moping around nobody wants you if you mope around (.) so you've just got to be sensible and er (.) as I say I go away a lot (.) very often I go with friends but um (.) I don't mind going on my own because I always seem to make friends you know [...] I mean there's sort of the present friends (.) well my real old friends have all died (.) you see those are the old friends (.) these are the sort of new friends if you know what I mean (.) the friend that lived with me she was seventy-eight which these days isn't old but she was about the oldest you know (.) all the others (.) a lot of school friends have died too but it's just these (.) sort of bridge friends really (.) they're not the bosom friends as you might say er they're either bridge friends or golf friends um (.) but they're not the old friends. (P 13).

### **Friends and interests: 'there's always someone older than you'**

Common in most of the women's narratives was the theme that interests and hobbies were extremely important as a way of meeting new friends with common interests or as a way of keeping in contact with old friends. Being part of a group of women had several meanings for the participants. The woman below was widowed seven months before this interview and she

spoke of her life in terms of the friends and interests that she shared with them. She defined herself in terms of being a member of various groups of friends, drawing upon the themes of woman as 'do-er' and active as not old:

[...] and I'm talking now of people in their eighties (.) eighty-three this lady had just been swimming these are the sort of people I've still been very friendly with on another fortnightly basis (.) this friend I spoke about earlier she's the youngest of our little group of seven she's only fifty-four, fifty-five (.) [friend] doesn't come into this particular group again I'm speaking of all the badminton people from the club and we've kept (.) together (.) meeting out at the (.) one who's just died it was a beautiful house um (.) these are all (.) active people and (.) the fun (.) we've had on these Tuesday mornings (.) um usually once a fortnight...(P 4).

Some of the women defined themselves as being in friendships with other women of various ages, not positioning themselves within the chronological and social expectations of age, that was, having friends only from their own peer group. Age was not considered by some to be the gravitating factor in joining groups, but instead, interests were defined as the important factors. Implicit in several accounts were the changes in how these women constructed themselves as older women, in terms of being more confident and able to get on with lots of different people of different ages. Many women defined themselves as 'lucky' that they should have lots of friends. This next woman constructed herself as 'lucky' on numerous occasions when talking about her ability to maintain friends and to meet new ones. The continuity of friendships throughout the life span was construed as the important factor in having friends, not the amount or even having the same ones, but always having someone:

um again age (.) to me (.) doesn't seem to make any difference (.) I guess maybe I've been pretty lucky in that way I don't know (.) perhaps some people want (.) um (.) lady or (.) lady friends if you like of their own age but (.) I think I'm pretty easy going (laughs) in a way that I can sort of (.) er (.) well shall I say mix and match [...] Oh yes well as I say whatever (.) I can't stress strongly enough (.) um (.) not the same ones not the same people (.) but there's always been someone (.) one or two have sort of (.) come through (.) but not the one's I'm speaking of (.) as present day ones (.) but one or two sort of (.) threaded through shall I say from the twenties to the thirties (.) and then (.) sadly either one (.) one has died or moved away or whatever (.) but um (.) I can't stress it as I say (.) friendships yes of all ages. (P 4).

Age was also spoken about in friendships in terms of being younger than others and in terms of women not defining themselves collectively as 'old.' Age was not the element that seemed to be resisted by these women, but the stereotypes about what older women 'should' be like. Also, by constructing old age as something that happened to 'others', having people around that were older, resulted in always being in the position of 'younger'. One woman described herself as 'going downhill' only after she lost her mother, who was in her nineties. She positioned herself then as 'old' as she was now the 'ceiling' in terms of the ages of people around her that she was close to; there was no buffer anymore in terms of being the 'younger'. Another woman spoke about never thinking of getting older 'because as you go through life you stay with your own age group as it were' (P 7). Losing friends of the same age, one's peer group, had several meanings for different women which may therefore have implications for how women then construct themselves and their lives. The next quote comes from a woman who constructed herself as always being the youngest of her friends:

I mean (.) er I (.) I'm one of the youngest of my friends you see (laughs) except for well a couple who are a bit younger but it's only sort of nine months and

(.) six months younger (.) and then the other night I had some friends in here (.) and one is (.) he's eighty-nine (.) and the other one's eighty-seven (.) and then another who's eighty-three (.) and so er I was the child really obviously and um (.) then (.) most of my friends have always been older than me (.) men and women always. (P 13).

Although the next woman defined herself as part of a group of widows, she drew on the theme that old age is for 'others' by defining herself as one of the youngest and talking about 'them' collectively. She then defined herself as being part of the group, but positioned them as not old. Old age was talked about as something that could be accepted if it was normalised and 'lost' amongst the group, where one would not be singled out and defined as old, as there would, for most of the time, be someone older:

Yes I mean I can tell that from my (.) my group of friends I mean (.) they're they're (.) I say they're mostly widows well (.) no four of us five of us are widows out of um (.) we're all well (.) one younger than me the rest are all in er (.) seventies (.) but you know when you say they're in their seventies you know (laughs) you can't imagine that they are in their seventies you know you don't sort of think (.) 'we're a bunch of old ladies' (laughs) [...] yes it's er (.) and as I said (.) the oldies are taking over as you might say there's more there's more of us so (.) so you don't feel that you're the odd one out because there's um there's always somebody around that's (.) older than you (laughs) there won't be one day I know but ...(P 7).

### **Widowhood and friendship**

Friends were talked about as important sources of support by nearly all of the women. Again, this support was seen to come from friends of all ages and from across different stages of the life-span. The supportive element of friends was especially talked about in terms of women's bereavement. For some women who had lost their husbands in the previous year or two,

friends were talked about as being essential to their lives. The next quote comes from a woman recently bereaved who defined herself as lucky to have supportive friends:

[...] which um (.) that really was (.) not totally unexpected but er (.) you know when that happens it's just marvellous to have (.) to know that (.) I've got friends (.) well of varying ages really (.) some younger than me and again some older so support wise and that in that respect I've just have been lucky in fact all my life ... (P 4).

A lot of the women spoke about themselves in terms of being part of a group of other widows. For some, this group was construed as a collective support system, women taking it in turns to help each other whenever help was needed. This same woman, as above, also constructed her group as a positive group, actively supporting each other and not dwelling on 'morbidity'. She positioned herself within the discourse of woman as 'do-er', keeping busy and not dwelling on things. Sitting was again referred to as something negative, something to be avoided:

Yes they've all rallied round yes about seven months it's only seven months now (.) and er (.) you know they couldn't do enough and (.) even those that are sort of on the fringe that I don't see (.) on a regular basis there's always been the telephone calls or visits to the houses or they've come here so (.) it's come back to the same thing yes friendships of all ages (.) it's very important [...] and coming back to that same thing (.) we don't sort of sit around in a huddle or whatever and you know get all morbid I mean (clears throat) they've all they all sympathise with me but (clears throat louder) we didn't all sit and (.) you know (.) flowers and things that came and that and trying to raise one and so I say again support and (.) you know comfort from everybody (.) whatever the situation (.) we all say well 'we're all there for whoever's turn it is we're all there to help and support' mm yes I'm sorry to be (.) sort of (.) coming back with the same basic things but that's how it is with me I can only speak for my side of things. (P 4).

Another aspect of this friendship theme, was of women considering widowhood as something that they had in common. It was construed as a great change in their lives that could only be appreciated by others once it happened to them. This next woman had lost her husband two years before the interview and again talked about how important friends were to her and how 'lucky' she was. Friends were talked about in terms of being there to reminisce with about husbands and to confide in about 'anything':

Friends? oh gosh yes oh yes I've er a lot of friends that's one good thing I've got a lot of friends I mean er two or three have (.) lost their husbands like me I mean um (.) well [husband] died in the May (.) and in the er October (.) great a great friend of mine phoned me up one morning and she told em she said 'I'm in your shoes now' and I said 'what do you mean' and (.) her husband died in his armchair (.) and I've got another friend down the bottom and we often pop in and out you know oh yes I've got a lot of friends a lot of friends I've been very lucky (.) that's what my sister says (.) she often tells me she'll say 'I've never got the friends you've got' and er (.) friends are important // [ I: Mm in what ways what is it about having friends that's helped really?] Well I find you can talk to your friends (.) er you've always got the odd one or two that you can talk to a lot more (.) er things about the past I mean when our husbands were with us and things like that now I've got two or those and we're great pals (.) and we tell each other anything you know and er (.) which is I think (.) a great help a great help. (P 8).

Some of the women talked about how they saw their friends more than their families, again stressing the importance of having widowhood in common, as something that united them. For one woman who was recently bereaved, friends were talked about in terms of helping her work through her grief, by revisiting special places, going on holiday to places that were important to her and her husband. This next woman stressed the importance of friendship



in widowhood but also 'apologised' for this new freedom, identity and emergence of new friendships:

I know it sounds awful but (.) I've been a widow for ten years nearly (.) well you have to (.) you've got to I mean you've got to sort of adjust to these things and um (.) I find that I sort of got to know people that were in a similar situation and we're all in the same boat so we (.) we were all friends together (.) well I used to belong to the women's circle which was the Evening Post thing and of course that was very good because it er a lot of er er widows well even women that were married even you know used to (.) go to that and that's where I met some of these friends that I have now (.) apart from this (.) the one friend I had (.) said before I'm still friendly with her (.) so I think your friends are very important to you yeah I mean at this stage I would say although your family's important to you (.) I see my friends more than I see my family. ( P 7).

### **Till death do us part**

Intimacy and relationships had several meanings for different women. Most of the women at some point talked about the centrality of friendships when defining themselves and their lives currently. For some women, intimacy was talked about in terms of being with their husbands or their families. For some women, marriage was 'till death do us part' and dead husbands were kept 'alive' and spoken about in terms of them still being with them. One divorced woman, who talked about the essential nature of friends, described how she 'put all her love into her family' rather than friends (P 11). Another woman, who was still married, defined intimacy and companionship in terms of being with her husband:

Well yes because I think our (.) our views as you say of being a woman are different in the (.) the fact (.) that (.) when you marry (clears throat) really your parents have probably said to you (.) 'right well you're married so (.) your husband comes first' if you (.) like your children (.) are there you look after them you love them (.) but your children are going to leave you this is

what I was always told your children are going to leave you (.) and you you'll need your husband when they've gone so basically he is the centre of er your universe really isn't he and er [ the young] they forget about (.) getting older because it's now (.) it's now when you're sixty (.) that you need your husband you need companionship you need someone there I mean your generation haven't got into that area yet so you don't know (.) if you're lonely (.) um you can't have just flitted about from man to man and then find that you've got nothing at the end of it because it is an important part of your life at being sixty. (P 12).

For two other widowed women, although friendships were spoken about as being central to their lives now, they constructed their identity and strength in relation to their dead husbands, both stating that they 'talked' to their husbands daily asking for strength and help. Both women spoke about how relationships with men were different to their friendships with women. One woman positioned herself as being different to other women because she enjoyed sport and politics and described how she could only confide in her 'husband' and another male friend about these topics:

they would think I'm crackers eh (.) they think you're crackers if you (.) the majority of female, women I don't find er (.) don't seem to worry about what's going on in the World (.) but I do (P 3).

These next two women also spoke about their loyalty to their husbands, how they missed having a man to 'confide' in, but how they would never have another relationship. One woman spoke about how she had male friends but would never want a sexual relationship with any of them, despite her husband wanting her to be remarried after his death so that she would not 'be alone':

Oh yes my husband is here (.) oh my husband's behind me all the time (.) and it may it might sound stupid to you or some people must think she's going round the twist but (.) I I feel that er (.) you know when I'm down I say 'oh [husband] please help me' [...] I've had you know (.) quite a few (.) friends well (.) I had three different men that have come one was a close neighbour as a child (.) a very nice man (.) a very nice charming (.) he'll come and he'll cut the hedge and (.) and things like that and he would have liked a permanent relationship (.) but I don't want that (said in a laboured angry way) I don't mind being taken out for a meal (.) er and or anything like that but (.) to have any sort of close relationship I wouldn't like to share a bed (.) with anybody else (.) my my my relationship was that good...(P 5).

The other woman also positioned herself in relation to her husband and his continual 'presence' in her life. She talked about how being with her husband was central to her feeling good about herself in the past and she how would remain loyal to him in the future:

That's been my worst thing in life (.) yet I've never looked to (.) find anybody else (.) I think I'd feel guilty (.) if I started going out with anybody (.) I'd be thinking all the time '[husband's] watching me' (.) and I always think to myself ' I believe in the hereafter and I always think to myself (.) 'when I die (.) he's going to be up there waiting for me (.) I haven't been knocking around with somebody else (.) it's funny that (.) it's always on my mind. (P 3).

For most of the other women, widowhood was spoken about in the context of becoming independent financially and personally. Widowhood was constructed as a time of becoming more confident, which a lot of the women had put down to taking over roles that were traditionally those of their husbands. One of the biggest achievements talked about by these women was owning their own houses and being in sole charge of their finances. Although these changes in roles and responsibilities were constructed as something positive, as were the women's new sense of confidence and sense of achievement, for some, these were talked about in terms of guilt, as these

changes had grown out of their husbands death. This next woman positioned herself as a 'do-er' as having to just get on with things. She also drew attention to the change in how she defined herself, from being 'two' to being 'alone':

Oh yes oh yes I find even since my husband's died (.) um I've had to fight things well you have to (.) er you know different things pop up don't they er I mean for instance in January I've got to change my car and er (.) I have to (.) I wanted some new garage doors but I mean time past I would have never seen to all that and I it would have been my husband that sorted it out (.) and then er you know have estimates so you've got to see to that yourself insurance's and all things like that you know [ I: And how does that feel doing being able to do all these things now?] I'm all right now but at first (.) oh it was (.) really hard at first but um (.) I've got used to it now (.) I know I've got to do it and that's that (.) oh no you get you definitely get more confident in anything and you can face up to a lot of things (.) whereas when you're two of you you've got (.) you share it but when you're alone you just get well (.) you just have to face up to it yourself. (P 8).

This new found confidence was constructed by some as something that was not understood or achieved unless women had also been widowed themselves:

Oh gosh yes (.) it makes a big difference when you're two than just when you're alone a big difference (.) but er people don't realise (.) even the friends a great friend of mine she told me she said ' I never realised how bad it was when you lost [husband] till when she lost her husband and then found out (.) that er (.) she had to fight for things herself (.) and you know oh you do you gain confidence definitely you gain confidence mm so...(P 8).

One woman spoke about going back to work after her husband had died as something that 'gave her her confidence back', as well as buying her own house and learning to drive. She talked about 'having something of her own' for the first time in her life:

A positive change (.) yes it was, yes (.) and being on my own and er buying this house I was sixty when I bought it, you know (.) and learning to drive when I was sixty [ I: So that was after your husband died?] After he died (.) he wouldn't let me do (.) drive before (.) he said I'd be thinking what I was cooking for dinner instead of what I was doing in the car (laughs) [...] that gave me a lot of self confidence (.) because I've always wanted to have something of my own you know, even the thought of buying a little plot of land even (.) you know (.) just to have something of my own. (P 2).

Another aspect of this 'till death do us part' sub-theme in widowhood, was that of guilt, guilt at feeling more confident and secure financially. One woman construed herself as being more independent since widowhood but also talked about her guilt and regret at not having this freedom and control earlier on. Old age was constructed as a period of making up for lost time and doing things that she felt unable to do before, because of limited finance and traditional roles that precluded her taking more control:

Pleased to take control of my own affairs, yes much better (.) I was independent then you know (.) it sounds an awful thing to say but I was [ J: What makes you think it's an awful thing to say?] Well, saying I was better off when he was dead (laughs) you know, because I missed him for a long time but um I did enjoy doing my own finances (.) and I didn't want anybody sort of interfering with it I wanted to do it myself (.) 'cause er I never had the opportunity I mean I had quite a good brain you know 'cause I'd been in office work for a long time (.) and I wanted to control my own affairs you know (.) and I think what I regret most of all (.) is that I was so late being able to control my own affairs (.) there's such a lot of things I feel I've missed out on you know (.) like playing tennis and badminton and (.) early on I was stronger (P 2).

## OTHERS AS OLD

One of the main themes that emerged from these women's narratives, was that women talked about not feeling any different to when they were

younger, but constructed old age as something that happened to 'others'. Others as old had several meanings for the women and these will be discussed below.

### **Stereotypes of old age**

Representations of old age and old people were talked about in terms of younger people's perceptions. These were seen to be negative in content by some of the women and bearing no relation to these women's perceptions of themselves and their lives. The stereotypes were positioned within the discourse of decline and dependency, defining old people as 'past it and useless' after a certain age. This next woman drew upon the representation of old as 'past it' when framing young people's experience of 'old':

As a bloody nuisance (laughs) it's funny sometimes I mean (.) young people you know (.) they think that we've got no feelings at our age (.) a lot of young people are like that (.) you know they think 'oh (.) they're only (.) ready for the scrap heap when they get over sixty I think even before then eh (.) I mean young kids at school they think that when you're thirty, forty you're old eh (.) so that's (.) life now. (P 1).

Positive representations of older people were described by some women, positioning the elderly as valuable and respected members of society, who were helped by younger people. Some women spoke about the positive aspects of getting older as being the offer of help from younger people who perceived them as 'old'. Here, the women resisted the discourse of old people being helpless and needing assistance, by playing the role of 'older

women', as they appreciated the respect and value given to the old, but again did not really position themselves as elderly. This women positioned herself as grateful but at the same time, resentful because for her the mask of ageing, that is the white hair, lines etc. and the stereotypes of dependency and decline, did not match up with her perceptions of herself and age:

I tell you one thing I've noticed and that is (.) the offer of help (.) from the younger generation (.) I notice this when I've been away so I've had white hair and um (.) when I've gone away (.) the um (.) what can I say the youngsters (.) will step to one side (laughs) and help you off the bus and things or some of them standby and help you off but I feel 'oh my god I'm getting old' (laughs). You see that again um (.) whether it's a good thing or not I don't know but in one way I think it's lovely to have that help but in another way I resent it (laughs) because I think 'oh god I'm getting old' (laughs) or um and people are more up to offer help (.) um (P 11).

For others, old age was something that was actively avoided, something that was not thought about as it would entail slipping from youth and health. This woman resisted the discourse of old age as the failing body, by not applying it to her own experience:

I never start worrying (.) about 'oh gosh I'm going to be seventy- five' and you know I never say I'm getting old I never do because I think if you start saying that (.) you start feeling old mm you do because if you put in your mind that 'I'm getting old' you start feeling like it and then you sort of (.) let yourself go you know mm still there you are... (P 8).

### Old as 'them' not me

Most of the women spoke about old people in terms of 'them', resisting the discourse of old age by not applying it to themselves or their own experiences. Women positioned others as old by applying general negative

stereotypes to 'them'. This next woman positioned others as old and within the discourse of old as mental and physical decline, talking about 'them' as being limited and old in their thinking. Implicit was her disappointment at not being stimulated by these others. She also positioned herself within the healthy, active body discourse by construing her initial membership into the 'older group' as active, to find a partner for tennis, differentiating herself from the others:

when I get with other people (.) now (.) and older people (.) I find them very limited in their conversation.... limited conversation (.) I'm not younger than they are (.) but I feel they're very old for their age (.) you know (.) very nice people (.) they're very nice people but we've got an older group you see where we go (.) and they are an older group (.) I mean I am supposed to do the things for sport and leisure (.) but nobody's that interested (.) I must confess (.) that I joined the W.I. because I wanted to play tennis and I thought that was the only way (laughs) to get a partner (laughs) (P 2).

Some women positioned themselves as helping 'old people' and defined themselves as carer opposed to being in the position of cared for. Being part of the 'homogenous dependent old' was spoken about in terms of 'terror' and humour by a few women, who visited elderly people in nursing homes, on a voluntary basis. One woman resisted this 'fear' of the 'future self' by not thinking about her own future, by widening the gap between the cared for and her own experience. She also positioned others as old, as 'them', positioning old age as something that does not relate to her own experience. Again, the old are positioned within the discourse of old as mental and physical decline and as a representation of possible future selves, something which must not be thought:



as I said I do remedial work with the patients there (.) now I've watched those age (.) they've lost they've lost five this last fortnight (.) um I've watched them age (.) I've watched them sort of go from (.) mentally perfect (.) not senile they're not not senile but on that way you know on that road and that again I've come away from there and thought 'oh god you know this is what's in store' sometimes (.) not always and then I think 'oh forget it you know you've still got a long way to go' (.) so you do forget it you don't (.) dwell on it (P 11).

Women also drew upon the theme of youth as mobile, woman as 'do-er' to frame their experiences of working with the 'old'. This next woman positioned 'others' as old if they did not have interests or 'do' things to get them out of their armchairs. Again, 'old' was defined as passive and as an homogenous group - the 'retireds' and not being active was something not to be tolerated, but instead, old was to be fought by getting these people active. This woman positioned herself as 'carer and not cared for', by defining herself as helping the 'old'. The idea of becoming one of 'them' was fought off with humour and 'horror':

if they haven't got interests (.) um of their own then these associations and clubs for retireds (.) are good because they do do an amazing amount of things (.) I mean you know I mean (.) and it motivates them they they go away for holidays and all sorts of things (.) yes um they're not I think for people like that the lot all these sort of clubs and things (.) are very good um I mean I don't I don't mind going along and helping them to do something (laughs) I don't want to be (laughs) (P 6).

Age was also defined as a 'state of mind' by many women, resisting the construction of 'old' around chronological age. Women positioned themselves outside of this, by defining those who were construed as 'old', as thinking old. This next woman recoiled in 'horror' from the suggestion that

she should join a group for the old, by not positioning herself amongst the 'old'. Instead, she positioned herself within the woman as youthful, healthy discourse, in framing her own experience, and suggested that she had more in common with the young. She also distanced herself from her mother, who was construed as always old, buffering her from being 'old' herself by being the ceiling object of age, when she was alive:

I was quite horrified actually (.) somebody said to me about a year ago 'why don't you join age concern now that your mother's died' and I said 'age concern you're joking of course' (laughs) because I just (.) didn't relate it to myself (.) but I suppose it's always been (.) um involved with young people (.) maybe (.) maybe that's you know (.) the the attitude I er (.) um so I I (.) I don't think (.) at least I hope I don't think I do (.) um you know I don't think old (.) my mother was always old even as a child (.) I can look back now and realise that my mother was (.) old in her thinking (P 6).

Following on from this, another aspect of 'old' as others theme, was the positioning of 'old' as the 'older generation'. In relation to friendships, some women defined themselves as 'younger' in their groups, remaining buffered from being the eldest. This construction of 'others as old' was also evident in women's narratives, in terms of positioning themselves as different to the 'eighty year olds'. This next woman constructed old age within the failing body discourse and the sitting, passive discourse. Old age was also constructed as the older generation:

but the quality of life you know we are they are living a longer life but the quality I'm wondering about the quality because (.) it (.) they still (.) their bodies I mean I'm talking about you know we say they're living longer right fair enough but the majority of eighty year olds they're worn [...] I I always feel (.) there's no quality of life really (.) they're sitting there (.) with nothing to do... (P 11).

Keeping this decade between themselves and the 'old', some of the women positioned themselves within the discourse of health and youth. Old age was constructed as happening to those of the next decade. This next woman started off by not wanting to define anyone as old and recoiled from thinking about herself as old. To think about how she would construe old age, she had to construct it in terms of chronology:

Somebody (long pause about 8 seconds) um well I certainly don't think people in today's world (.) are old (.) um (.) and I certainly don't think of myself as elderly (laughs) er I'm trying to think age-wise (..) well I always (.) tend to think of elderly people as sort of eighty-plus you know (laughs) (P 6).

This next woman talked about retiring as a marker of old age, resisting this by positioning herself within the healthy, woman as do-er discourse. She talked about only feeling her age once she had stopped work and positioned herself briefly within the immobile as old discourse. However, this was not tolerated for long as she then construed herself as healthy and fit and the 'sixties' as the beginning of new activities. The 'seventies' were also then constructed as a marker of becoming 'old', something to be avoided and not thought about:

Er yes and (sighs) I think there's a big there's going to be a big gap for me or a big jump (.) on the seventy mark (.) you see sixties (laughs) aren't quite so bad but I don't quite know how I'm going to feel when I reach seventy um (.) I don't know [ I: Is that something that you think about] yeah no I'm not going to think I don't think about it I know it will hit me (laughs) um like when I retired I suddenly realised I as sixty I hadn't felt age at all and suddenly because I had to stop work you were sixty but then I said to myself 'now life begins at sixty' (.) um as long as you've got health you see this is the main thing you've got to be healthy to be fit (.) to do what you want to do (.) you've got to do that (.) but er I don't know what I'll feel like when I'm seventy (laughs) but anyway we'll see [ I: cross that barrier when you ...] yeah I don't

know um I I'm not going to think about I'm not thinking about it (.) I don't want to think about it um (.) but um (.) (sighs) I wonder how I will feel. (P 11).

## WEARING WELL

The older woman has to negotiate the contradictions of what it is to be 'woman', that is, to be young, fertile and attractive and the inevitable physical signs of ageing, the mask of ageing, which society penalises heavily. Women spoke about ageing along a continuum, as a gradual process, which did not entail them feeling any different to years past. The discrepancies between how women felt 'age-wise' and how they felt they looked, in terms of ageing, had different meanings for the women. Some of the women challenged these negative assumptions of appearance and ageing, stating that they did not feel any older. Other women negotiated the negative representations by seeing 'others' as looking old, whilst others only partially positioned themselves within this discourse of old as wrinkled, by construing their perceptions of themselves as old only when they saw their own mask of ageing, their mirror reflection.

### **You're only as old as you feel**

Most of the women spoke about not feeling older and not feeling different to when they were younger. Old age was not constructed as something that one 'felt'. This next woman construed old age as something that was acceptable as long as one did not have to also accept other stereotypes; being older was

construed as having more experience and not thinking about oneself in terms of negative representations of old age:

You don't I don't mind being old (.) but you know what I mean you do not feel inside you don't feel that different [ I: yes] you've got a lot more experience but you don't really feel that different...(P 14).

Old age was again construed as a state of mind, a construction:

No (.) no (.) you know a lot of people (.) say you know how do you feel and I often say ' well you're as old as what you feel I suppose' and I don't feel any different (P 3).

### **Mirror mirror on the wall: is that really me?**

A lot of the women spoke about age in terms of the contradictions between their perceptions of how they felt and looked and the negative images of old age, the mask of ageing in mirror images. This next woman spoke about not recognising herself when seeing herself in the mirror, as this image did not match up to how she perceived herself in terms of getting older. She also drew upon the theme of woman as youth and physical attractiveness when framing her experience and positioned herself as taking responsibility to ward off the signs of ageing:

No I don't feel you know (.) some days (.) you do (.) but obviously I don't feel as if I'm 72 (.) until I look in the mirror (laughs) [ I: So when you look in the mirror what kind of feeling do you get is it...] Is it really me you know [ I: And are you disappointed?] Yes (laughs) I have to start thinking the wrinkles are coming you know (.) I never used soap on my face and I never use a lot of cream (.) now and again but not very often (.) just powder and makeup or something. (P 1).

This woman attempts to negotiate the contradictory constructions of ageing and 'woman'. Old age was construed as something that was not thought about until confronted with the mirror image. The mask of ageing was not accepted as representing how this woman perceived herself:

and one of the things that I think young people never grasp (.) and you don't grasp it till you're old yourself is that in your head you're still about (.) I was thinking just this morning (.) not twenty but about twenty-five maybe (.) you know what I mean you're and you're still silly in some ways you sort of laugh at things and think and (.) think things are funny but (.) you look at yourself as you go (.) passed shops and you see yourself reflected in the (.) windows and you think 'is that me' you know because (.) that isn't how you feel how you look (P 14).

The next two quotes come from two women who also construed old age as a conflict between the mask of ageing and self-perceptions of age. Both drew on the theme of old as physical unattractiveness in framing their experiences but negotiated the contradictions between this and how they saw themselves by constructing ageing as involving inevitable bodily changes which they did not want to reverse:

Well sometimes I get a bit of a shock when I look in the mirror I think 'oh God is that me ' you know but um [ I: what do you see do you think you look different?] Well I I don't feel any different from when I (.) was younger it's only when I see (.) as I say when I see my reflection and I see this old woman walking along (laughs) a large lady you know I I think 'oh' that's my I suppose I should do something about it but I never do of course (laughs) um (.) I I don't sort of think of myself as being old I don't think about age sort of thing I mean...(P 7).

Oh no the only time you feel it is when look in the glass and you see all your (.) your lines but (.) but I mean I've always had lines here when I got married [...] I bought them masses of these creams and lotions and god knows what (.) and every night I'd stand in front of the mirror and go like that (laughs) and this is years ago and then I looked in the mirror and I thought 'if he wants me he's got to take my Clapham junction as well (laughs) so that's it you see and

I've never bothered but you look in the mirrors and you think 'oh gee whiz' (.) you have got lines you are ageing but I mean (.) you can't do anything about it and you don't want to do anything really. (P 11).

This next woman positioned herself within the old as lined discourse, by defining herself as different to when she was younger in terms of how she looked:

Well you look older [ I: Do you feel that you look older?] Oh definitely (.) oh gosh yes I mean if anybody said they didn't surely (.) no yeah (P 4).

Another woman construed herself as not looking any older at all, by comparing self-perceptions to images of herself in photographs. Staying youthful was constructed as retaining the symbols of 'woman', the sexual attractiveness of youth:

[I: Do you think you look much different?] No not really (.) no when I look at photographs and I think 'God I don't look any different (.) yep I don't look any different... Mm my face (.) I don't think my face has changed that amount except my (.) I used to have big full lips (.) and I haven't got those full lips now [shows me photo of when she was eighteen] ...and I thought God I haven't changed that amount (.) here it is (.) now (.) I was eighteen (.) my hair was lovely in them days (.) but I was very (.) and everybody used to say to me 'cor don't we (.) wish we had your lips for lipstick' (.) how your mouth gets (.) in some how eh (.) yeah I've always had longish features (.) and I had (.) lovely shaped (.) lips. (P 3).

### **Wearing well: looking younger than others**

Some women resisted the theme of old as lined and unattractive by applying it to others. Women construed themselves as looking younger in relation to their peers. Looking younger than others was given several meanings by the

women. This next woman construed looking younger than others as something that made her feel good about herself.' In 'wearing' better than others she positioned herself within the healthy body and outside of the old as unattractive theme. Implicit was some element of competition with others:

well I tell you what makes me (.) one thing is when I meet somebody and I haven't seen them for a long time (.) and in town and I'll come back home and I'll think (.) I look at myself in the mirror (.) I said 'she 's only the same age as me so and so (.) cor I don't look that old (.) I don't look that old (.) you know and I have to admit to myself well I don't look as old as her [ I: And that makes you feel... ] Yeah you know and somebody said to me 'oh (.) hello ' you know and (.) I say yes I know how old you are because I was at school with you same class (.) blimey and I've said 'well you've worn well' (.) it makes you feel on top of the world eh when you think you've worn well (.) yeah (laughs lots).(P 3).

This next woman also negotiated the negative images of old age by applying them to others. She defined herself as feeling younger than others of her own age, but with these 'others' knowing that really she was 'just like them':

Er (.) no um I think (.) you always see yourself (.) as you were you don't think to yourself well (.) you go out and you think (laughs) you see someone and they say they're (.) they're sixty-five and you think 'gosh you know do I look like that am I' and you don't feel that and you do look like that obviously people other people know that you're like that but (.) you don't feel it inside (.) you just feel you're still (.) you're still the same (.) it doesn't happen to you (laughs) yes that's right (.) you think well like well you know I haven't aged (laughs) they've all aged but I haven't age (laughs) (P 7).

### **Keeping up appearances: not letting yourself go**

Many women drew upon this sub-theme when framing their experiences of what made them feel good about themselves. Looking 'presentable' had



several meanings for different women. A lot of the women construed old age as a time of being more confident in terms of not caring what people thought about them. This woman constructed old age as a time of different priorities and of self confidence:

Well (.) one's more able to cope with life (.) um (.) the same things are not important (.) when you get older (.) you know? [ I: In what ways, what would have been important before that isn't now?] The way you look, the way you dress (.) the positions you have...Well I'm not so worried about what people think about me (.) as I used to be (.) you know (.) I think well if they don't like it then it's just too bad you know (.) if they don't like the way I look or the way I am (.) you just don't have to put up with it (.) you know (laughs).(P 2).

As well as drawing on this sub-theme in framing their experiences, some women also drew upon the themes of looking good for 'oneself'. Feeling good was construed by some women in terms of clothing and appearance, but this was construed as being 'for oneself' and not for others:

Yes that isn't important no that's not so important as long as (.) as long as you're you know you feel (.) er presentable and you know you've done the best for yourself shall I say because you're obviously going to do the best for your hair and your (.) your makeup aren't you and (.) and you're not going to go all (.) out all scruffy and (.) you know (.) down trodden er I think (.) you do but it's not important (.) I don't think (.) I don't think you go all out thinking that er (.) I don't know (.) I don't know what I can say about that (.) yeah I mean you don't go out thinking 'well I might be walking past this building site and somebody might whistle at me (laughs)' you're not worried about things like that any more (laughs) but er (.) so you don't (.) you don't bother about that and as I say you you look presentable and (.) and you feel good. (P 12).

Old age was also constructed as 'letting go', something that must not be done, if one was to remain youthful. This woman draws upon the theme of

woman as youthful and attractive in framing her experiences. Not letting oneself go in terms of appearance was also construed as keeping 'well':

Yes yes well (.) yes look after yourself um (.) keep yourself nice in clothes if you can keep your hair (.) you know things like that (.) don't let yourself go (.) otherwise you you can but um personally um (.laughs) it might seem funny but I use a lot of moisturising cream anything like that to (.) to keep you looking (.) yeah my mother did she was ninety-three and my mother did the same and er (.) but I do things like that to keep myself (.) young (.) well look young (.) try (.) and keep your hair done and (.) I think that's very important (.) very important to keep yourself going definitely definitely mm because er (.) and treat yourself occasionally to (.) you know a suit or anything like that (.) to give yourself an uplift (.) you know that's what you have to do (.) give yourself an uplift. (P 8).

### **Making the best of what one's got**

Some women, mostly widows, construed themselves as not worrying about physical attractiveness, but defined themselves positively in terms of making the best of 'what they had':

Oh I like to even if I am overweight I like to (.) you know try and make the most of what I've got (P 1).

This next woman constructed changes in physical attractiveness in relation to societal trends and fashions, positioning herself outside of this:

I mean I've never been (.) fashion conscious or anything like that so I've never really (.) had to worry about (.) me getting fatter and er getting looking older or anything like that I mean some (.) some people might (.) think that they're losing their looks or (.) that doesn't really worry me particularly I mean I don't look like an old hag but one has to (.laughs) cope with what you've got haven't you um (.) mm I can't anything else mm...(P 7).

A woman, who was still married, construed feeling good about herself in terms of having more time to do things with her husband. She constructed physical attractiveness as important for women who 'were left on their own':

Nothing really (laughs) I don't think of anything really I think just being (.) able to do things together more because (.) if your husband's working well that's different kettle of fish you've only got your appearance haven't you but (.) I think apart from that (.) I don't feel any compensations of being old (laughs) (P 12).

Some women construed changes in physical appearance, in old age, in terms of putting on weight. Most women described this in terms of focusing on their 'stomachs' but still construed themselves as making the best of things. The next two women spoke about dieting and trying to keep their weight down. One of these women constructed her body image and identity around being active and sporty. The other woman construed old age as not feeling any different about herself except in relation to the shape of her body. She talked about her shape in contrast to the past, in terms of the ideal 'womanly' figure:

[ I: How how do you feel about how you look now (.) and your body does it feel any different do you feel any different?] Well (.) um I've got fatter on the stomach but then I mean I think that's probably (.) I do a lot of walking I mean I go for walks on my own er (.) I like it... Well I try and keep down as much as possible but I've never been slim I mean I'm size fourteen and er (.) the least I've been is a twelve (.) I'm big-boned apart from anything else you know and of course with sport you put on muscle you see that's the thing especially like (.) badminton um (.) it's all sort of muscle (.) my legs very much my arms aren't funnily enough but er (P 13).

Well apart from being (.) a bit overweight here (points to stomach) which I've put (.) probably their the operations I've had (.) you know I feel fine (.) otherwise you now (.) you dress accordingly I suppose (.) but um (.) yeah (.) I

don't feel any different [I: So how do you feel about (.) about you body now?] Um apart from this part (touches stomach again) I wish I could get rid of that tummy and even though I've hardly eaten all the week I don't think I've lost an inch (.) so it must be normal for me to be like this (.) 'cause I used to be nice and slim (.) yeah I used to be nice I was slim (.) big bust tiny waist (.) and quite nice around there. (P 3).

Although some of the women positioned themselves outside of the discourse of beauty and femininity, some women still defined themselves through the body beautiful and were not satisfied with their own bodies, shape or weight.

The five themes of 'too busy to be old: woman as do-er', 'the failing body :the immobile body', 'relationships: the company you keep', 'others as old' and 'wearing well' overlap at times and include contradictory discourse and variations in women's narratives. The women in this study challenge the ageist and sexist stereotypes and resist them, by keeping busy and applying them to 'others'. These five main themes and their sub-themes will be discussed in the next chapter in relation to the relevant literature.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

#### Summary

Fifteen women aged between sixty-five and seventy-seven were interviewed individually, using semi-structured interviews, about how they perceived themselves and their lives as older women. The women were all interviewed in Jersey, Channel Islands. The aim of the study was to examine how these women construed being 'woman' and being 'old', whether they positioned themselves within the different discursive representations of both 'woman' and 'old'.

A discourse analytic technique identified five major themes, each containing several sub-themes, around what it meant to be both 'old' and a 'woman'. These discursive themes were not mutually exclusive, but often overlapped, were occasionally contradictory and were taken up by different women to varying degrees. These discursive themes involved old age being construed as a time for keeping busy, as the failing body and the immobile body, as a time of friendships and interests, as 'others' as old and as 'wearing well'. Women drew upon these themes to frame their experiences of themselves and their lives and negotiated the contradictory representations of being both 'woman' and 'old' by challenging these

negative constructions, resisting them by applying them to 'others' or by warding off old age by keeping busy.

Two main overarching themes, that of keeping busy to ward off old age and positioning others as old, seemed to underpin all of the five themes and sub-themes. These will all be discussed below.

### **The findings**

The first discourse, 'too busy to be old: woman as do-er', centres on the women's construction of their identity around keeping busy and active. This was spoken about in terms of their younger lives, whereby old age was never thought of. Women defined themselves, in later years, as keeping busy but construed others as old, sick and lonely if they were passive. The sub-themes of 'sitting' had several meanings for the women, all of them negatively connoted with not 'do-ing'. Sitting was constructed as being depressed, old and lonely, something that must be fought and not indulged in. Sitting represents passivity and links with the discourse of old as the failing body, immobile and dependent. The pathology model of old age positions old people as declining in mental and physical health, poor and dependent financially, bereaved, lonely, isolated and without roles (Kart 1987). Women did not position themselves within this discourse, but actively challenged it or avoided it by applying it to

'others'. Sitting was something seen to epitomise this discourse, of the old sitting in chairs, alone and inactive.

Part of this theme is also the positioning of woman as 'do-er', constantly on the 'go', the multiple, juggling roles of wife, mother, daughter, employee and housekeeper.

These women come from a cohort of people who have lived through war and the post war years, which in themselves must have added more strain to a woman's life by adding even more responsibilities to her already busy life. Gendered roles were also less fluid than perhaps today. Harrison (1983) found that women who more closely followed the route of 'homemaker' in earlier life, perceived themselves as useless and role less in later life. Most of these women described very domestic earlier lives, working on farms with husbands, raising children, home-making as their main job usually, but most of these women challenged this discourse. Women did not position themselves as useless but actually as 'do-ers' who had interests, increased confidence and who were 'making up for lost time' by continuing old interests or taking up new ones. These women construed later life as a time of more freedom, financially and from traditional roles. Women positioned themselves as active 'do-ers' within this theme, using the time for hobbies, new interests and meeting friends.

Contradictory discourses were evident in relation to this freedom. For some women, having more freedom and relaxation time was not accepted

easily, but construed as something that they partially felt guilty about. Although these women positioned themselves as more confident and able to take up longed for interests and move away from traditional domestic roles, relaxation was something that was construed as something positive as long as it did not involve sitting for long periods of time. This may indicate that women did not feel totally free from their perception of themselves and their identities in terms of their domestic gendered roles and taking time for oneself was construed as something to feel guilty about.

Arber and Ginn (1995) state that gender roles become more flexible in married couples in later life, but this can also be seen in women who are single or widowed. Being the good wife, the good mother and grandmother has to be negotiated with this new fluidity of roles from more financial security and leisure time. Women who identified partially with the homemaking model, negotiated their new freedom and guilt by constructing their identities around activity and interests that were construed as relaxing.

This theme also is in partial contrast with that of the research of Patterson (1996), which stated that widowers and widows most frequently participated in home based leisure activities such as reading, watching tv, arts and crafts, walking, gardening and physical activity. The least common activities were outdoor exploits such as camping boating and



membership of cultural and sporting clubs. Patterson's categories of home based and outdoor activities are somewhat mixed and walking and physical activities could be considered to be outdoor. The women in this study positioned themselves as being active, socially and physically, with most belonging to some kind of sports club. One woman who did not define herself through the healthy, busy body, defined herself as 'sitting' more, due to being less mobile and being cared for more by her husband.

The second major theme, 'the failing body, the immobile body', centred on women constructing their identities in terms of the healthy body and included the sub-themes of failing legs as signifying getting older and immobility and dependency as old. The discourse that defines 'woman' as fertile, attractive and youthful therefore positions the older woman as 'other', as dried up, past it and undesirable (Choi and Nicolson, 1994). Itzin (1990) also argues that the double standard of ageing involves female chronologies, whereby women's identities are constructed in terms of chronological stages of the reproductive cycle. However, in this study, the women defined themselves through the healthy body, not through the reproductive body. Health becomes the salient currency in later life and defining oneself through it, challenges the discourse of 'woman' as youthful, fertile and attractive.

Women talked about not being able to walk as far, as the worst thing about getting older, although some of these women also constructed

themselves as sporty and involved in tennis, badminton and riding scooters, not being able to walk as far as they could was construed as signifying 'old'. Old age was also construed as something that happened to them or to 'others' once they were not as mobile. Chronological age does not signify what is termed 'old' but decreased mobility and having to use visible signifiers of this, such as a walking stick, definitely denoted old age for these women. Women defined themselves through the healthy body, as they did also in the first theme. Walking is essential if they are to keep busy. The alternative to that is to position oneself within the old as immobile discourse, which hobbles into the pathology discourse of old age as dependent and declining in all faculties.

Having problems with their legs and feeling restricted in how much they could walk, could also have implications for the women in terms of independence, control and power. To define oneself through the failing body, especially failing legs, could denote powerlessness and helplessness and most importantly perhaps, visible signifiers of this to others. Other ailments can be hidden, sometimes, but having to use sticks, or not appear as sprightly or as active, may signify the failing body to others, who can then define 'us' as old.

Women also defined themselves through the healthy body in the first theme, and as with 'sitting', not being able to walk as far, was construed as something that had to be fought, mobility had to be regained and old age

warded off. Retaining independence was also a sub-theme of this second main theme. Challenging the discourse of old age as dependent and in decline, the pathology model of old age women positioned others as dependent, as old, warding off old age themselves by framing their own experiences through the healthy, independent body.

The third theme, 'relationships: the company you keep' focuses on intimate relationships. Friendships with other women were construed as central to most of the women's lives, through which they created and maintained their own identities. Friendships had several meanings for the women. Being active and keeping busy and joining clubs, where one could be active, were seen as avenues to meet other women with similar interests. Women did not consider age to matter in terms of friendships, with most women defining themselves outside of chronological and social ageing 'restrictions'. There were contradictory discourses, as some women negotiated being amongst other 'old' women by positioning themselves as the youngest, placing others as the ceiling of age, therefore 'buffering' themselves from old age. For women who constructed their identities around being younger than their friends, friends dying might have a considerable impact on their lives and their self perceptions. Old age cannot be warded off if one becomes the oldest member of the group, therefore this might be one of the reasons why women position themselves as able to 'mix and match' with friendships of varying ages.

Ussher (1997c) suggests that femininity has always involved subordination to men which results in competition between women in the catching of a man and envy of others. 'Other' women are put down and defined through the same stereotypes that the women themselves are challenging. Ussher gives the example of women rejecting the assumption that they wear sexy clothes for men, but wear them for themselves, whilst at the same time defining other women as being 'tarts' for wearing the same kind of clothing. Maybe this sense of competition and envy can be applied to older women. In this study, women defining themselves through the healthy body, may be competitive and envious of others who are seen to have the visible symbols of health. Instead of women competing for the man, women are competing for health, as health is construed as not old.

Women also spoke about maintaining friends throughout their lives and meeting new friends as a result of joining clubs and organisations. Widowhood was also construed as a defining factor in women coming together in activities and in friendships. These friends were construed by some women as a collective support system, with women helping each other, with the understanding and experience of what widowhood entailed. Again women defined themselves through the busy, healthy body, pro-actively planning and organising and providing emotional, concrete and task support. For some women, these friends became their main relationships, providing intimacy, someone to confide in, to go on

holiday with and spend their time with generally. As a result, many women spoke about 'feeling good about themselves' in terms of these friendships and the activities that were enjoyed together. This contrasts with some of the literature that connotes marriage as the central basis of social relationships whereby it might be more difficult for women of this cohort to adapt to widowhood. For these women, marriage probably meant something different to what it means today, as it was more closely defined according to traditional social norms and for most, their experiences were framed in terms of marriage, whether they were married or not (Gibson, 1992; Giddens, 1992).

Two of the women in this study did conform more to these traditional beliefs and 'enshrined' their husbands' memories, living the oath 'till death do us part'. These women still defined their identities partially through their relationships with their dead husbands and through femininity. However, most of the other women defined themselves through their friends and through the activities and interests that they had. In accordance with the results of Salah-Din (1996) and Calhoun and Tedeschi (1990), these women construed widowhood as a time of increased self-esteem, independence, confidence and empowerment. Increased control was constructed as women taking over certain gendered roles and increased financial security. For most women this meant being in charge of their own finances for the first time in their lives, as before this had been done by their husband, with or without their consent.

Materially, a lot of the women spoke about an increased sense of control in making decisions regarding money and property. For some women this meant buying a house, this represented something which they considered to be the fulfilment of a lifetime's ambition and great achievement in 'having something of their own'.

The fourth theme, 'others as old', is one that threads through most of the other themes and sub-themes. There were variations in women's accounts of stereotypes of old age and these were mostly talked about in terms of younger people's perceptions of 'them'. Supporting Featherstone and Wernick (1995), most of the women challenged the negative images of old age and spoke about the incongruity between these images and perceptions and their own experiences of age. The mask of ageing certainly did not reflect constructions of how women felt themselves, their inner selves. A few women, however, spoke about the younger generation in terms of being helpful and respectful of the 'elderly' and construed their experiences as playing a role that was in their favour, when singled out due to the mask of ageing, e.g. their white hair. Although it was positively connoted, it might be that these women constructed their stories in terms of humour, to reflect possible fears of old age.

Some of the women positioned themselves within the discourse of old age as homogenous decline, dependency and immobility but only in terms of defining 'others', this is in accordance with that is suggested by

MacDonald and Rich (1984). Women defined themselves through the healthy body, as being mobile, busy and engaged in interests and hobbies in contrast to 'them', the old. Women also defined others as old, chronologically and socially, positioning the old as 'the eighty year olds'. By keeping a decade between 'them' and 'us', a ceiling of age was created, possibly buffering these women from old age in terms of their self perceptions. Again, old age could be seen as being warded off by these women, by applying it to others. Ussher (1989) uses the psychodynamic term 'splitting' to describe the division of woman and 'herself' in all stages of the development of her identity. She suggests that there is 'a splitting of the menopausal woman who cannot reconcile the archetype of uselessness and redundancy with her own experiences' (p. 140). This separation of the good and the bad parts or objects, to preserve the good parts from the destruction of the bad, may also be applied to the older woman. Old age is generally connoted negatively and for women, ageing is a double edged sword, as they have to negotiate the ageist and the sexist representations and discourses (Sontag, 1978). To 'split' these off and attach these to 'others' positions them as the good, the healthy and the young.

The last theme that emerged from these women's narratives is 'wearing well', which focuses on women's accounts of how they did not 'feel' or look their age, how women negotiate their mirror image and their perceptions of themselves and how they compare themselves to others in terms of 'wearing well' and making the best of themselves. Old age was

constructed by some women as a state of mind, refusing to define themselves through chronological or social age boundaries.

Women have to negotiate the contradictions of being 'woman' and being 'old'. The discourse that defines women as fertile, attractive and young therefore devalues older women, who are outside of this, as unattractive, useless and dried up. Older women have to negotiate society's compulsive drive towards remaining youthful and attractive. Society defines ageing men as distinguished, rugged and eligible, whilst women are heavily penalised for having lines, wrinkles and sagging skin. Older women have to negotiate both the contradictory myths of the masks of ageing and beauty. Women focused on the physical signs of ageing in several ways. Most women defined themselves as not feeling any older inside, but talked about only realising that they were getting older when they saw their reflections in mirrors or shop windows. For most women this mirror image did not reflect how they felt, the mask of ageing was seen as incongruous with their own experiences of themselves and how they felt they looked. Women talked about being shocked and unable to recognise themselves. Women are under immense pressure to remain youthful, whether this is attempted by using the myriad of anti-wrinkle creams or subjecting oneself to the surgeon's knife, women are under pressure to conform to male standards of desirability and suitability for marriage (Daly, 1979).



There were variations in women's narratives, with some women challenging the discourse of femininity, whereby women are socially valued according to physical attraction and youth, positioning themselves outside of this, by talking about the inevitability of ageing and not accepting the mask of ageing as central to their identities. Some women positioned themselves as trying to combat wrinkles and hold on to youth by using face creams, whilst others did not think that they had changed at all.

Again, women resisted the discourse of old age as wrinkled and unattractive by not applying it to themselves but to 'others'. This was construed as 'wearing well' and looking younger than friends and peers. Positioning others as not 'wearing well' and looking 'old' was construed as making some women feel good about themselves. Again, possibly competition and envy were evident, with women competing with other women in terms of looking younger. Yet although, women partially positioned themselves at times within the discourse of 'woman', they also resisted it by finding meaning and purpose for their lives outside of reproduction and youth. Although younger women appear to be more trapped by the discourses of beauty, femininity and the ideal body, older women are still not totally free. Although, some women challenged these discourses by creating their identities outside of these discourses, defining themselves as confident and not caring what people thought of them and

how they looked, others, still defined themselves partially through their ideal weight, clothes size and size of their stomach.

One point of interest is that for these women, in their twenties, feminine 'role' models were people like Ava Gardner, Lana Turner and Jane Russell who actually had the 'hour glass figures'. Having the ideal body, meant having that voluptuous shape, which is quite in contrast to the body beautiful of today, the days of the 'waif' and the 'anorexic-looking' super model. Some of the participants defined themselves in the past according to having or wanting this hour glass, voluptuous shape, yet still talked about wanting smaller stomachs and wanting to get rid of the 'curves'. This could imply that women are defining themselves through a collage of what it means to be 'woman', that is through the constructed 'ideal' body of different points in history, the eclectic collage of Kate Moss and Jane Russell. Older women are not passive recipients of the innumerable number of women's magazines that are on sale and although women may challenge the images of modern day 'ideals', at some level they may assimilate these images into their historical version of what the 'ideal' body 'should' be like.

### **Warding off the stereotypes: a time of positive identities**

By positioning others as old and older and keeping busy, women seemed to be avoiding or warding off the negative stereotypes of old age. This is

in accordance with the research of MacDonald and Rich (1984), who state that older women accept the stereotypes in respect of others but do not accept them themselves. However, MacDonald and Rich go on to suggest that women then construct a false sense of identity, focused on avoiding signs of ageing which estranges the women from their true identities. In this study, women did position others as old, and yet they were also able to take up other positions. The subject positions that we occupy, provide us with our sense of self, our own psychologies (Burr, 1995) and for these older women, identities were defined through friends, through interests, through widowhood and through freedom from traditional gendered roles. These women could survive looking in the mirror and seeing the mask of ageing, therefore are not totally defining themselves through the discourse of beauty, of 'woman'.

There was also a move away from heterosexual relationships being central to life. Most of these women were out of relationships, coping with widowhood, adapting and rebuilding their lives by replacing the support and intimacy with friendships and activities, with 'do-ing'.

Consistent with Itzin (1990) whose study involved talking to a group of women from North London, the women in this present study seemed to be resisting the social construction of their identities around the female chronology, which defines women through reproductive events, such as marriage, having children and the menopause and are sustaining positive

perceptions of themselves in later life. These older women defined themselves through the healthy body, not the reproductive body and were resisting the pathological discourses of old age as decline, dependency and isolation. Out of the ashes of widowhood, women were experiencing growth, in terms of independence, a greater sense of control and freedom, social, psychological and material. These women were the 'home-makers' of previous years, yet in contrast to Evers (1984) and Harrison (1983), these women are also 'active initiators' of today.

### **Methodological limitations and suggestions for future research**

Traditional ways of evaluating quantitative research and issues of reliability and validity are not easily transferable when evaluating qualitative research. However, there is a growth of criteria evolving from the work of researchers such as Henwood and Pigeon (1992) and Stiles (1993), to attempt to do just this. Stiles (1993) suggests that part of good practise in conducting qualitative research involves procedural trustworthiness. He suggests that researchers should disclose their personal orientations, that is, their expectations for the study and epistemological position, explication of social and cultural context, description of internal processes of investigation, engagement with the material, iteration and grounding of interpretations. This study has gone some way in attempting to fulfil these criteria, but has not matched others. I will discuss these below.

Burman and Parker (1993) suggest that a discourse analytic study cannot make broad empirical generalisations although this has also been suggestive, to some extent, of most areas of psychology. The interviews in this study were a specific product of the women, the interviewer and the historical point in which they were conducted. Therefore it is important to recognise that the positions engaged in by the women in the present study may not inevitably be applicable to other older women. Another interviewer interviewing the women from the present study would give different meaning to the interview style and readings of the data and subsequently produce a very different piece of research. However, I am interested in other women and the main findings are consistent with other research and I think that the findings of this study can help professionals to gain a broader understanding of how older women construe themselves and their lives.

Stiles (1993) suggests that one of the features that distinguishes qualitative research from 'received view research on human experience' (p. 594) is empathy as an observation method. Stiles suggests that 'empathic understanding draws upon on the investigator's own experience and self-knowledge and on the intersubjective meanings shared within a society, as well as on participants' speech and behaviour' (p. 595). Interviewing people about their lives, especially older people where there may be multitude of losses and other painful issues, obviously involves some amount of empathy and openness by the interviewer. An element of trust was also needed from the participants, to facilitate them to tell their stories. Although the

interviews were semi-structured and guided by certain research questions, the participants shaped the direction of the interviews on many occasions. This involved, for some, reminiscing about painful issues such as loss and bereavement and the space to 'let go' of some emotional burdens was welcomed by some of the participants. This placed the researcher in various positions, as listener, counsellor and interviewer. Retaining the overall structure of the interview but being receptive to the participant's feelings was sometimes difficult.

At times, women spoke about their deceased husbands and seemed to use the interview as a forum for reminiscence and reflection and it was difficult at times to then fulfil some of my needs as interviewer and be receptive and sensitive to the participant's emotional position. Interviewing older people generally does involve talking about emotional issues such as loss and loneliness and to not be empathic might obstruct the flow of the interview or leave the interviewee more traumatised as they were not allowed the space to 'off load' (King, 1996). Coyle and Wright (1996) and King (1996) compare the research interview to the counselling interview and discuss the ethical implications and the need for adequate training for interviewers. As a clinical psychologist in training, I am aware of the basic skills of counselling, of empathy, warmth and genuineness (Rogers, 1951) and I felt that the use of these skills was inevitable and helpful in the interviews. King (1996) suggests that although the researcher can never experience the participant's reality, rather than contradicting a post-structuralist approach, skills like these can

actually enhance it, by 'increasing the researcher's own awareness of how their responses and mannerisms may affect those of their own participants' (p. 184).

I will now discuss some of the sampling issues. By adopting a snowballing sampling procedure, there was some element of self selection in the sample as some women recruited friends or acquaintances, who probably came from similar backgrounds and had common interests. The women in this study were also white, middle-class Jersey residents; a particular sample of women. They also come from a particular period of culture and history and therefore cohort effects also need to be taken into account. Living on a small island has different implications in regards to community relationships, distance between people, social support, safety and quality of life. Therefore research conducted with women from different parts of London, England and elsewhere would have resulted in completely different studies. However, the results of this present study were consistent with that of Itzin (1990).

I have tried to fulfil what Stiles (1993) called 'procedural trustworthiness' and have attempted to describe the data collection method and construct a clear path from this to the interpretation of the data. I have described my interview schedule in this study and have arrived at and reproduced consistent guidelines to transcribe the interviews and followed a rigorous method of analysis, as that of Potter and Wetherell (1987). By conducting two pilot interviews, time was given to developing the interview schedules, so

that leading questions were not asked, and open ended questions allowed participants to tell their stories.

I have informed the reader that I have conducted the study from a material-discursive position, which draws upon a social constructionist perspective. I have also drawn from a feminist theoretical framework, focusing on the experiences of women and have analysed the data, drawing out the social meanings and power relationships within discourse. In collecting the data, I have partially described what Stiles would call 'description of internal processes of investigation' by describing some of the evolving issues for the collection of data, in terms of revising the interview schedules, as certain areas of questions did not initially seem salient for the women. However, the same subject matter was drawn upon at other times in the context of different areas of questioning. I feel that I have engaged myself intensively with the data, reading and re-reading the transcripts, so as to understand, code and categorise the text and draw out emergent themes. One way of gaining a greater depth of understanding of the participant's perspectives would have been to repeat interviews, so as to elaborate on issues previously discussed and to further develop evolving interpretations.

Another important issue in qualitative research is reflexivity. Burr (1995) defines reflexivity as 'the term used by social constructionists to refer to the application of the theory back onto itself and its practises' (p. 185). Barker, Pistrang and Elliot (1995) talk about this in terms of 'openness', whereby



researchers clarify and describe their own theoretical orientation and biases. Bannister et al (1994) suggest that research is always carried out from a particular standpoint and that claims of many quantitative researchers to neutrality are false. Reflexivity has traditionally been seen as a hindrance to objectivity and neutrality, however, researchers need to make their own position clear in relation to the research. Bannister et al (1994) suggest that reflexivity should be seen as a resource, not a problem and that it is important to consider the researcher's position, in relation to how they define the area and problem of study in the way the researcher interacts with the material and how he/she makes sense of it.

As a female psychologist in my mid-thirties, I obviously approached the interviews and analysis from a particular perspective. I, like the participants occupy various subject positions, for example as interviewer, as a younger woman and as a fellow Jersey citizen. This and the setting of the interviews and the content and style of the questions asked, all probably influenced the women being positioned and positioning themselves as 'older women', thereby only reflecting a small part of their identities. Therefore, in evaluating qualitative research, it is essential to consider the issue of the perspective of the interviewer.

My reading of the data in this study, in collection, analysis and interpretation, should not be presented as final or definitive, as there is no 'true' reading of the interview transcripts, because the same text can be read

and interpreted in many different ways (Gill, 1996). However I attempted to enhance the reliability of my data analysis by organising an alternative analysis of a sample of four interview transcripts by a second rater. In future research it might be better practise for transcripts to be read in a group, by more experienced qualitative researchers, providing a livelier and more diverse discussion, as there are many readings of the text. Also, I hope that I have presented a coherent story for the reader, as this is a form of validation, suggested by Spence (1982 cited in Stiles, 1993). Spence suggests that qualitative interpretation should have coherence, in 'narrative truth' in that it engages the reader, rather than 'historical truth' (p. 608).

Concerning issues of validity, especially external validity, one needs to view this from a qualitative standpoint. Burman and Parker (1993) and Gill (1996) suggest that discourse analysis, alongside most research in psychology, cannot make broad generalisations. As the text of an interview is particular to the participants at that time in history, it is important to recognise that the viewpoint taken by the women in this study may not necessarily be pertinent to all women. Also how and what people say in interviews do not have invariable relationships with how they behave in naturally occurring situations (Silverman, 1993). Fielding and Fielding (1986 as cited in Silverman, 1993) suggest that 'researchers who generalise from a sample survey to a larger population ignore the possible disparity between the discourse of actors about some topical issue and the way they respond to questions in a formal context' (p. 150).

Another issue of validity for qualitative research is that of possibly selecting text that 'fits' with the researcher's perceptions and preconceptions of what is being studied and the tendency to select the more 'exotic' over the less dramatic data (Fielding and Fielding, 1986, in Silverman, 1993). Silverman (1993) and Stiles (1993) both suggest various forms of validation for the interpretations of qualitative data, for example triangulation and respondent validation. Triangulation is the assessment of convergence of multiple data sources, theories and interpretations (Stiles, 1993) that is, the researcher can compare different kinds of data, e.g. qualitative and quantitative, and different methods, e.g. questionnaires and interview, to see whether there is corroboration. In future research to enhance validity of analysis and interpretation of data it may be important to compare different kinds of data and methods. One such way would be to use discourse analysis to analyse the interview transcripts, as I have done in this study, as well as another form of data analysis such as the construction of a conceptually-clustered matrix for identifying patterns within and between groups (Miles and Huberman, 1984). This way of organising qualitative data can reveal how different groups of women, e.g. women who are married/widowed/single, voice similar experiences and how their experiences have different qualities.

Another way of assessing validity of interpretation in discourse analysis is respondent validation (Silverman, 1993) or testimonial validity (Stiles, 1993). This involves taking the data and interpretation back to the participants, in order to verify narrative interpretations. However, there are problems with

this, as 'the original experience that produced the text (or the tape) no longer exists, and the participant does not necessarily have better access to it than the investigator does' (Stiles, 1993, p. 611.) Yet, as Kotre (1984 as cited in Stiles, 1993) suggests there is verification if participants make allusions to being understood, if their reactions are consistent with story subjects and themes and if they are reveal new, richer material. These last three points are important as they illustrate some general understanding by the participant of the researcher's interpretation of the text and can enrich and give new meanings to previous interpretations. By being reflexive, (seen as reflexive validity by Stiles, 1993) the researcher can then incorporate these new understandings into their evolving research.

Stiles refers to Heidegger's (1927; 1962) characterisation of the opposite of reflexivity, which suggests that an interpretation loses all power and immediacy if this is not inherent. Reflexivity is needed for a theory or interpretation to stay alive, as it must 'continually renew it's content - that is, it must continue to be changed by new observations and new observers' (Stiles, 1993, P. 613). Throughout this research, I have intended to send the transcripts of individual interviews back to the women involved. Their comments and possible verification of different interpretations may be too late for this particular presentation of the research. However, it would be extremely useful, in later research, to speak to each women and verify or reinterpret the findings of this study.

In terms of validity, I think that I have attempted to meet some of the criteria and not others. Smith (1996) suggests that not all of the reliability or validity features are present in all of the discourse studies. He also argues that, in accordance with science generally, they do not guarantee the validity of analysis, either by themselves or in combination. However, what they can do is start to shift the evaluation of qualitative research, from the positivistic goal of 'objective truth of statements' to 'understanding by people' (Stiles, 1993, p. 593).

### **Suggestions for future research**

Older women face major discursive tasks in later life, having to negotiate the contradictions between maintaining positive self perceptions and identities and feminine socialisation. This active group of young old, the third age, also have to negotiate the ever prevailing images of old age as decay and decline. However, how women discursively construct old age and being a woman is something that will have variations for any group of women interviewed. It would be extremely interesting to speak to women, from different parts of, England and, of course, from different cultures and countries to draw out the discourses that they adopt. This could be done with individual semi-structured interviews or in focus groups. Conducting a longitudinal study with the women I have interviewed in this study, would be an extremely valuable way of exploring how women's perceptions of themselves and their lives change over time.

To re-interview these women when they were in their 'next decade', in 'the eighties' also would be valuable, as at times in this study, the eighty year olds were placed as 'other' as 'old' and the 'oldest of the group'. What implications does this have for the present women, when they no longer are 'younger' and are the 'other'? Future cohorts of older women, who have lived in times of feminism, greater available education and careers would all have different stories to tell. The outlook is positive, in terms of women challenging the negative constructions of themselves around femininity. They have looked outside of their reproductive roles and ageist stereotypes and have maintained positive identities and found new meaning and independence in life, which are not restricted by biology.

Another area for future research is to interview older men about how they construe themselves and old age, as they also are positioned within the discourse of decline and decay, something that does not fit with the discourse of 'man' as virile, youthful and physically attractive. It would be extremely interesting to interview men between sixty-five and seventy-five about how they negotiate these contradictory discourses. Another area of interest, would be to interview older gay men and women, to explore what discourses they adopt in relation to being old and being a gay man or woman.

## **Clinical implications**

This study has important clinical implications for those working with older women, either in the field of clinical psychology, psychiatry or related fields. Older women are a neglected group. Professionals need to listen to these women's needs, to how they conceptualise themselves and their lives, to understand the problems that occur in old age. The self-perceptions of these women, who were taken from a non-clinical population, may shed some light on issues that bring older women into contact with the health services.

Being able to walk, being mobile and keeping busy were extremely important issues for these women, giving them power, confidence and independence. 'Sitting around' signified depression, sickness, loneliness and isolation. Older people experience multiple losses, of partners and friends, of the use of their legs and their senses. Professionals need to consider how great these losses are for the women presenting in clinical settings. As walking was so highly valued by these women, one can start to understand the impact that the sudden or gradual loss of this ability, might have on them. The loss of independence and the freedom to move around quickly on one's own, could lead to feelings of disempowerment, powerlessness, helplessness, dependency and subsequently depression.

These women defined themselves through their friendships and keeping busy with activities and interests. What happens when they are no longer able to 'do' or able to see friends as frequently, due to decreased mobility,

illness or loss of sensory abilities? Not only is there the physical loss of movement and ability, but there is also the loss of identity, of 'oneself'. These important issues need to be listened to and heard by professionals working with older women and older people generally. Another issue that might have implications for older women, is the issue of friends and peers dying, resulting in the ceiling of age gradually being eroded away, leaving 'them' as the 'old'. Again, there is the loss of identity of oneself as 'younger' and as 'not old'. As friendships are so important, women could feel intense loneliness at being left, at suddenly becoming the 'oldest' and having no 'buffer'. Warding off old age might get more difficult if women have lost friends, peers, mobility and therefore maybe the ability to take part in the interests and activities that are valued. These women have construed immobility and sitting as depression, loneliness and sickness. We need to understand the importance given to these issues by the women and think about the impact on their lives of when they are no longer able to resist these constructions. That is, when they become the less mobile and the 'sitters'.

This research also has implications for how older people are positioned and constructed by psychology and health care departments, in services that segregate the 'old' from the adults once they reach sixty-five. Whilst working in clinical psychology departments, I have often heard staff debating about what should be done with clients who reach sixty-five and those that were previously known to the adult service, but have been re-referred when they are over sixty-five. Although there is not the space and opportunity here to



talk about how a service should be divided, this is representative of the difficulties older people face once they reach a certain, nominal age, where they are suddenly deemed 'old' and different to adults, to others. People over the age of sixty-five then become integrated into the homogenous elderly section, despite not actually feeling or behaving any older than they might have done one year earlier.

We need to broaden our views, assumptions and attitudes about what it means to be 'old' and be aware of where we position older people and what discourses we adopt when talking about the old. We are all surrounded by these stereotypes and negative images and we are not immune to their persuasive, prejudiced effects. Anybody working with older women or older people generally need to be aware of and receptive to these stereotypes, becoming the flagship of change, taking the stigma of homogenous decline and devaluation away from ageing and later life.

In researching the literature for this present study, I was able to find copious quantitative research on older women, which focused on caring and carers, social support, bereavement and loneliness, yet I was shocked and surprised at the paucity of qualitative research that actually gives the older woman a voice. As I have mentioned earlier, the older woman has also largely been ignored by contemporary feminist writers. Whilst in the early stages of this study, in talking to a prominent feminist writer, she reflected on how she had not included these age groups of women in her own work and in fact how

she never really actually spoke to 'old' women. The older woman, is for every woman, 'us' in the future. Women maintain continuity throughout their lives, in terms of age and identities, by not accepting the stereotypes and not living their lives according to what the social ageing literature deems they should. Therefore, feminist literature and research also needs to take up the case of the older woman and not segregate her from contemporary research and other women.

The negative cultural images of older women, that are manifested in jokes and patronising attitudes generally, need to be challenged. The women in the present study can provide role models for 'us', giving younger women the confidence and optimism that old age does not necessarily have to be a time of decline and decay. Women can then have higher expectations of old age and not position the current 'old' within these negative discourses. As women move into later life, they will be taking with them the different cultural and historical experiences of their own cohorts, of greater freedom from traditional roles and better educational opportunities and careers. In interviewing these women I was filled with optimism about the future and I hope that these women can stand as role models for others, giving other women confidence that meaning, identity and independence can be found in later life, free from the reproductive body and biological restrictions of 'woman'.

As women we need to protect our own futures and challenge the stereotypes of old age that stigmatise the old generally, but especially women. We are, have always been and will be - 'them'.

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## APPENDICES



The University College London Hospitals

The Joint UCL/UCLH Committees on the Ethics of Human Research

Committee A Chairman: Dr F D Thompson

Please address all correspondence to:  
Mrs Iwona Nowicka  
Research & Development Directorate  
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Dr J Ussher  
Senior Lecturer in Psychology  
Psychology Department  
UCL  
Bedford Way

16 July 1997

Dear Dr Ussher

Study No: 97/0263  
Title: Older women's perception of themselves, their lives and old age.

I have reviewed the above proposal and approved it by Chairman's Action. You may therefore go ahead with your research.

Please note that it is important that you notify the Committee of any adverse events or changes (name of investigator etc) relating to this project. You should also notify the Committee on completion of the project, or indeed if the project is abandoned. Please remember to quote the above number in any correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Dr F D Thompson  
Chairman

cc.

Ms Julie Crocker  
Clinical Psychologist in Training  
UCL  
1-19 Torrington Place

## Appendix B: Information sheet for participants

CONFIDENTIAL

### Information sheet.

I am a clinical psychology student at University College London and am currently interviewing women between the ages of 65 and 75 as part of my research project. I am interested in talking to women about how they view themselves and their lives currently in relation to the past. The interview will take about an hour and will be partly structured in that I have some questions to guide our discussion. I would also like to audio tape the conversation so that I am able to capture the essence of what is spoken about. Each interview is confidential, as every participant will be given a code number as soon as they agree to participate in the research. At no time will women be identifiable by name. Also, the audio tapes will be destroyed after the research is complete.

You do not have to take part in this study if you do not want to. If you decide to take part you may withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. You also do not have to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable about.

Thank you very much for talking to me and helping me with this research.

Julie M. Crocker  
University College London,  
1-19 Torrington Place,  
London.  
0171 380 7897.

## Appendix C: Consent form for participants

**CONFIDENTIAL**

### CONSENT FORM.

Researchers:- Dr. Jane Ussher, University College London.  
Julie M. Crocker, Sub department of Clinical Psychology, University  
College London.

Before taking part in this semi-structured interview, I would like you to answer the following questions.

- Have you read the information sheet about this study?
- Have you received an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?
- Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?
- Have you received enough information about this study?
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw at any time from this study, without giving a reason?
- Do you agree to take part in this study?.....
- Date:.....
- Signature:.....
- Signature of researcher.....
- Date.....

Thank you,  
Julie M. Crocker,  
University College London,  
1-19 Torrington Place, London.  
Tel: 0171 380 7897.

## Appendix D: Interview schedule

### Interview Schedule

I would like to thank you for letting me interview you today. We have up to one hour.

What I'm interested in is women's perceptions of themselves now, their main concerns now and how they manage these. I'm also interested in how women find meaning for themselves and their lives in later life.

### Main concerns now

- What are your main concerns now ?
- How are these different to when you were younger ?
- What are the positive things about being an older woman ?
- What's difficult now, being an older woman
- What helps you to feel good now ?
- What made you feel good when you were younger ?

(how do you think this is different for a man ?)

### Expectations

- When you were younger how did you imagine your life at e.g.72 ?
- Would you have liked your life to have been any different, how ?

### General probe questions and prompts.

could you tell me more about that  
how did that feel  
can I ask you about...  
let's now go onto...  
would you feel happy to talk about...

**Julie Crocker, UCL.**



1 **Appendix E: An example of an interview transcript**

2 I: I wondered what your main concerns were now in life what areas that may  
3 be different to perhaps to your forties fifties (.) have concerns changed what would  
4 be your main concerns now?

5 P: Now well er (.) my main concern now is the way (.) about the youngsters  
6 actually how their lives have changed and er there's so many drugs as we know  
7 um (.) my two grandchildren have been involved with (.) thankfully they're out  
8 now and er (.) I do worry quite a lot about them and um because personally I feel  
9 that the older people are well looked after (.) now I mean they get you know er (.)  
10 well they get really well looked after but there again (.) I feel that a lot of parents  
11 today er (.) um they sort of don't give their time to their children as they should  
12 you know. They let them do their own thing (.) now that's one attitude I do not like  
13 and er (.) this is what I find you see children now and it does (.) I I sort of got it on  
14 my mind quite a lot because I see children about ten twelve years old coming back  
15 when I'm coming back you know and they're out that night and I think a lot of that  
16 is a great concern really because it is causing quite a lot of trouble in the Island (.)  
17 the way of life has changed so much (.) there's not the family life there used to be  
18 you know and I think children (.) I mean there's lots of things for children to be er  
19 entertained I mean there's all kinds of clubs and all sorts but there's still a lot of (.)  
20 er a lot of parents do their own thing and leave their children to which is all wrong  
21 very wrong.

22 I: It sounds very different to when you were//

23 P: Oh quite different quite different I mean I'm the eldest of eleven and um (.) I  
24 mean our lives were well (.) our parents well we wouldn't have been allowed to do  
25 what (.) it's such a shame I I think it's really you know um (.) it's very worrying I  
26 often say I'm glad now that my son is grown up because er I think it's very very  
27 worrying.

28 I: How does it affect your life now what what kind of effect does it have on  
29 you (.) living in Jersey.

30 P: Well oh not (.) really (.) the only thing's now I'm alone now and of course  
31 that's changed my life completely because I mean he died two years ago [ I: right so  
32 fairly recently] er yes yes and we were in business for years and er worked together  
33 all the time and of course now although I've got a very good family I've got  
34 brothers and sisters but um (.) you're still alone sort of thing you know and that's  
35 how my life but you see there again (.) I keep myself occupied (.) I mean I had an  
36 answer phone given to me as a Christmas present because er (.) they could never  
37 get me (.) I was always out I was always gone and er [son and wife] said that (.)  
38 they gave me this er which I'd said I'd never have in the house but they gave it to  
39 me because they said 'you're never gone you're always gone we never catch you  
40 in'. But personally I think when you're left alone that's the best thing to do because  
41 I'm interested in things I do flower arranging I do er in the summer I go bowling  
42 and I do my garden and I think (.) er you have to keep yourself because otherwise  
43 you could easily sit down and (.) feel sorry for yourself (.) that's not right anyway  
44 but er I think you should always keep yourself occupied.

45 I: So were you able to to take time sometimes to sit sometimes and relax and  
46 to...

47 P: Oh yes I do (.) I do tapestry and I do a lot of reading...

48 I: And doing the garden can be very relaxing ...

49 P: At this time of year it's different but even then (.) er I enjoy doing the  
50 garden and as you say you forget you sort of get involved into the garden you  
51 carry on and on and er you forget about things mm...

52 I: So that's one of the main ways that you've coped really over the past two  
53 years like keeping busy and//

54 P: Oh definitely definitely oh yes if I hadn't had my hobbies and er er (.) sort of  
55 well I do a lot of flowers at Church and they charge for the flowers at church but of  
56 course next week it's busy er getting the holly and everything else and getting the  
57 following week getting the flowers and do that you know and then I've got all my  
58 helpers (.) we had a funeral this afternoon well the person that er husband died er  
59 we worked together the two of this well I went and did a pedestal this morning get  
60 some flowers and you know it's surprising and do things for people (.) that's  
61 another big help (.) not being selfish um I'm no better than anybody else but I mean  
62 I love you know (.) helping out (.) I think that's the main things just to keep going  
63 (.) keep going.

64 I: So was that a way that you coped before when where you someone who  
65 always kept busy and ...

66 P: Oh I always kept busy (.) we were always because being in business for so  
67 many year [J: what business did you do?] groceries wines and spirits and we had  
68 two businesses then and um well I worked I used to work from goodness knows  
69 what time work work work that's all we did and um (.) my husband was the same  
70 (.) when he retired (.) well he put his heart and soul in the garden as well (.) you  
71 know (.) he was working till the day he died because he died so suddenly I mean  
72 he hadn't been well he was never really strong person never but er (.) I mean his  
73 legs were giving him trouble but we were both in the garden I was in the back and  
74 he was in the front and he died having (.) just finished his tea (.) he didn't expect it  
75 at all not at all

76 I: It must have been a great shock for you

77 P: It was a shock it didn't hit me till the Christmas funny enough (.) he died in  
78 the May and I kept going kept going until Christmas (.) and I collapsed in Church  
79 (.) and I don't remember a thing (.) I don't remember at all and they took me (.)  
80 [son] I was at [son's] and I didn't even know it (.) I don't remember a thing. After  
81 that (.) that that's the way I've coped (.) to keep busy.

82 I: And were you able then to think about (.) you know and able to I suppose  
83 (.) grieve

84 P: Oh yes I've never cried a lot I I don't know why (.) I've heard of others (.)  
85 some people cry a lot the doctor told me (.) he said 'you should have a good cry' it's

86 funny really I just can't (.) it's funny but (.) we're all different aren't yeah we're all  
87 different but er anyway (.) it's one of those things.

88 I: And two years isn't isn't (.) long really you know there's still (.) you know  
89 people grieve for different periods of time and in different ways you've just got to  
90 follow//

91 P: How you feel mm Christmas is hard er because (.) we always loved  
92 Christmas and we used to (.) shopping that's what I find hard er (.) going shopping  
93 for the children for [son] and for the grandchildren because that's one thing we  
94 always did together I mean and er (.) it still hits when I do shopping because even  
95 to get something for [son and wife] I still in my mind I think 'oh if dad was here  
96 he'd (.) you know he'd do say this or say that' because he was the type who would  
97 have spent more than I would I used to say 'oh no that's' 'oh no come on that's all  
98 we've got' and you know he'd be the type that would and of course (.) er I pass the  
99 jewellery shop funnily enough I did that yesterday (.) and I was looking in the (.) at  
100 ornaments actually and I thought 'if [husband] was here' you know and things like  
101 that but there again (.) you you have to cope you just have to (.) I mean otherwise  
102 people won't er (.) you don't (.) I think that's one thing why I didn't cry a lot (.)  
103 because I used to always say 'don't make other people miserable' (.) if you're  
104 miserable don't make others miserable and I think that's helped me quite a lot  
105 actually hum so there we are.

106 I: Mm what about have (.) have friends played an important part

107 P: Friends? oh gosh yes oh yes I've er a lot of friends that's one good thing I've  
108 got a lot of friends I mean er two or three have (.) lost their husbands like me I  
109 mean um (.) well [husband] died in the May (.) and in the er October (.) great a  
110 great friend of mine phoned me up one morning and she told em she said 'I'm in  
111 your shoes now' and I said 'what do you mean' and (.) her husband died in his  
112 armchair (.) and I've got another friend down the bottom and we often pop in and  
113 out you know oh yes I've got a lot of friends a lot of friends I've been very lucky (.)  
114 that's what my sister says (.) she often tells me she'll say 'I've never got the friends  
115 you've got' and er (.) friends are important

116 I: Mm in what ways what is it about having friends that's helped really

117 P: Well I find you can talk to your friends (.) er you've always got the odd one  
118 or two that you can talk to a lot more (.) er things about the past I mean when our  
119 husbands were with us and things like that now I've got two or those and we're  
120 great pals (.) and we tell each other anything you know and er (.) which is I think (.)  
121 a great help a great help.

122 I: Mm so do you think it would be different for a man you know

123 P: Oh yes I feel sorry for (.) if the man's left alone (.) I I think a man is very (.)  
124 must be very lonely very lonely (.) unless he's the type to go out a lot I mean I've (.)  
125 quite a few widowers I know that (.) I belong to the Jersey French society and  
126 there's quite a few of them there (.) but they come and they join in oh yes

127 I: In what ways do you think they'd be more lonely?

128 P: Well (.) I mean when you've never run a home (.) when you've had your  
129 wife there all the time (.) there's the cooking and er the cleaning okay I suppose my  
130 husband he would have coped with the cleaning never coped with the cooking I  
131 mean he (.) I don't think he ever (.) I don't remember even (.) now he'd clean the  
132 house right through but cooking (.) no way nothing at all and I think that's where a  
133 man finds it hard (.) the cooking. I had an uncle he used to go to a hotel everyday  
134 because he couldn't cook but he used to go (.) he had a hotel that knew him (.) and  
135 he used to go there for his meal everyday...

136 I: And company I suppose as well//

137 P: And the company yes (.) [talks to cat] she's great company you know [ I: do  
138 you find the cat's...] oh yes she's great company because she talks to me (.)  
139 anybody would think I'm daft but er she talks to me yes [talks more about cat]

140 I: So (.) so what would be you know your concerns now as a woman who's  
141 widowed and you know do you have concerns that are different to before

142 P: Yes loneliness can be a great concern (.) as I say I'm lucky I've got (.) friends  
143 and family and that but er loneliness can (.) catch up with you if you if you're not  
144 careful (.) I can drive so I'm lucky but anybody I've got a neighbour two doors  
145 away and oh she finds it very very lonely and er (.) so occasionally I pop across and  
146 spend the evening with her you know but anyway she's er (.) she goes out quite a  
147 lot but she finds the evenings so boring but maybe she doesn't read or (.) that's  
148 another thing (.) one should take up take up a hobby of some kind knitting er  
149 sewing anything I do my tapestry (.) and but I read quite a lot (.) but loneliness can  
150 er (.) catch up with you. I had a neighbour next door and she's gone and oh gosh  
151 she was so lonely terrible and of course she turned to drink you see (.) where  
152 there's quite a lot that do (.) because they're so lonely they turn to drink and which  
153 is very very sad very sad (.) she used to be at my door five o'clock in the morning  
154 (.) knocking at my door (.) I mean even when [husband] was alive (.) um she (.) if I  
155 wouldn't answer the door she'd be ringing the phone and I wouldn't answer and  
156 so she'd go across the road (.) now I've got wonderful neighbours (.) I've got the  
157 most wonderful neighbours you could ever come across (.) the ones in the big  
158 house across the road (.) they're always there if I need them (.) and I know I can go  
159 to them (.) if they don't see me for one day (.) one of them's across the next  
160 morning 'you all right' 'yes fine see you later' you now and er (.) take all my  
161 rubbish everything goes over there (.) oh they're (.) and they've got my keys you  
162 know if anytime if (.) well (.) for Christmas I'm going to [son's] two days before  
163 Christmas Eve and staying right through till Christmas and er (.) they'll come and  
164 look after the cat (.) I've no worries about coming back (.) and look after the cat  
165 they'll come in and see to [cat] feed her and everything else and er (.) when I go on  
166 holiday (.) er they er I've no worries I mean they've got the keys they come in check  
167 bring in the letters [phone rings].

168 I: So what are the positive things about being you know an older woman now  
169 being the age you are now (.) the positive things that perhaps weren't so years ago.

170 P: Years ago (.) well you feel more secure yes (.) for one thing I mean you you  
171 sort of er (.) well I feel when you're young you sort of well (.) do your work  
172 business and then you know but right now well um (.) I'm positive about (.) my life

173 sort of thing you know I (.) I'm lucky enough to be able to (.) er have what I want  
174 and that (.) things like that don't worry me which is a blessing (.) because there are  
175 many poor people you know that haven't got what I have you know (.) I often say  
176 I'm far better off than a lot of poor people worst luck so ...

177 I: So having more confidence in some ways as well...

178 P: Oh yes oh yes I find even since my husband's died (.) um I've had to fight  
179 things well you have to (.) er you know different things pop up don't they er I  
180 mean for instance in January I've got to change my car and er (.) I have to (.) I  
181 wanted some new garage doors but I mean time past I would have never seen to all  
182 that and I it would have been my husband that sorted it out (.) and then er you  
183 know have estimates so you've got to see to that yourself insurances and all things  
184 like that you know...

185 I: And how does that feel doing being able to do all these things now

186 P: I'm all right now but at first (.) oh it was (.) really hard at first but um (.) I've  
187 got used to it now (.) I know I've got to do it and that's that (.) oh no you get you  
188 definitely get more confident in anything and you can face up to a lot of things (.)  
189 whereas when you're two of you you've got (.) you share it but when you're alone  
190 you just get well (.) you just have to face up to it yourself.

191 I: Mm so perhaps a sense of being more in control of things as well you know  
192 because there's only you to look after things (.) obviously you have family too but  
193 ...

194 P: Yes yes (.) but as much as I can I do it on my own because I don't want to er  
195 (.) worry them about anything and er I mean (.) they'll willingly help me if I need  
196 the help (.) but (.) as much as I can I like to do it on my own (.) make my own  
197 decisions and if you know (.) and they appreciate that because they know that you  
198 know I'm doing what I want to do sort of thing which is good.

199 I: So that's different to how things were really

200 P: Oh gosh yes (.) it makes a big difference when you're two than just when  
201 you're alone a big difference (.) but er people don't realise (.) even the friends a  
202 great friend of mine she told me she said ' I never realised how bad it was when  
203 you lost [husband] till when she lost her husband and then found out (.) that er (.)  
204 she had to fight for things herself (.) and you know oh you do you gain confidence  
205 definitely you gain confidence mm so...

206 I: So what are the worst things about getting older are there things which are  
207 worse?

208 P: About getting older ? [I: yes] well I think (.) er one thing I do dread (.)  
209 is having a stroke (.) now that is one thing I do dread er (.) another thing [ I: what  
210 aspect of that] well I mean when you have a stroke you can't do things yourself

211 you have to be looked after if you get a bad one (.) and I've got a fear of (.) er I want  
212 to stay here and hopefully be able to stay as long as I can (.) I mean er (.) you know  
213 if er (.) as long as I can do my house and do my cooking and (.) even if I've got to  
214 have some help later on (.) it doesn't matter er (.) as long as I can stay home and a  
215 lot of people have said 'oh fancy staying here it's so big' to me it's not big it's home  
216 and um I sort of (.) but I do fear um (.) being ill (.) and anything serious (.) but then  
217 I think to myself 'well it comes to all of us' so you just have to face it.

218 I: So it's perhaps not about the illness as much but actually (.) being (.) not  
219 having the freedom and not being independent //

220 P: that's it (.) that's it not being independent (.) that (.) that's the big thing I  
221 think (.) if you can hold your independence as long as you can (.) as long as you can  
222 (.) that is the (.) the main thing oh yes definitely definitely (.) my neighbour says (.)  
223 she's eighty- five now and er (.) the one that lives two doors from here and she said  
224 'oh as long as I can keep my independence that's one fear that one has' (.) if you've  
225 got to go into a nursing home (.) I mean some people don't mind I've got a  
226 neighbour up the road and she's just gone into a nursing home as happy as a lark  
227 (.) now personally (.) I want to stay here as long as I can mm but I think that is the  
228 main fear as you get older (.) as you get older (.) touch wood I'm (.) quite active you  
229 know (.) I'm quite active now so a blessing I can keep going.

230 I: Mm so what about when you were (.) I don't know (.) in your thirties or  
231 forties or fifties (.) did you ever imagine how you'd be when you were seventy-four  
232 did you ever have (.) wonder what you'd be like?

233 P: Never thought about it no (.) I never think of age I never have done (.) even  
234 now (.) I mean as I say I've got the fear of if I have a stroke or things like that but (.)  
235 I never sort of (.) like you get some people who'll say 'I'm too old to do that' no (.) I  
236 won't say I'm too old (.) I mean last year I went to (.) um er oh gosh in America (.)  
237 Long Island not Long Island (.) Florida (.) I went with [son and wife] now (.) they  
238 said er they weren't going to hire a car (.) they were going to cycle (.) so right I just  
239 er [son] just hired bikes for all of us and I went cycling everyday (laughs) the Keys  
240 that's where we went and er (.) I went cycling with them everyday (.) and you  
241 know I thoroughly enjoyed it and when I told them over here (.) I've been cycling  
242 everyday they couldn't believe it (.) so I said 'well I might as well join them'  
243 (laughs) and I enjoyed it too I really enjoyed it I really did.

244 I: And how did that make you feel, obviously //

245 P: Oh I felt good (.) but I thought to myself 'at least I'm doing something' you  
246 know and um (.) oh the young ones (.) oh very often I do tell them [phone rings]

247 I: Okay so we were talking about um (.) just thinking about when you were  
248 younger if you ever thought about (.) kind of being older

249 P: No no no I never gave it a thought never I think it's just well (.) I never even  
250 thought about it no (.) even now the only dread I've got as I say is if I fall very ill or  
251 but otherwise (.) I never start worrying (.) about 'oh gosh I'm going to be seventy-

252 five' and you know I never say I'm getting old I never do because I think if you  
253 start saying that (.) you start feeling old mm you do because if you put in your  
254 mind that 'I'm getting old' you start feeling like it and then you sort of (.) let  
255 yourself go you know mm still there you are...

256 I: So would that be something and (.) you said about keeping busy to keep  
257 you feeling (.) much younger

258 P: Always oh yes always keep yourself (.) I had fourteen for dinner the other  
259 Sunday yes and the children and son [mentions all] I had fourteen of them for  
260 dinner yeah and so um (.) I used to have forty - five for New Year's day that's when  
261 I was younger and I was in business then and then I didn't work after Christmas (.)  
262 I didn't work for a couple of months or so cause they weren't busy anyway and er  
263 (.) I used to have forty-five (.) I used to we used to (.) my husband we used to turn  
264 the garage into a dining room (.) we had an old carpet and all the children used to  
265 go in there and then (.) the grown ups (.) in the dining room (.) no one was allowed  
266 to get told off that day.

267 I: So you're used to being part of a big family really

268 P: Oh yes I think it's very sad you know people who haven't got (.) a family  
269 especially at Christmas time mm but...

270 I: So what are the things that perhaps make you feel good about yourself now  
271 things that make you feel good about the way you look and feel

272 P: Yes yes well (.) yes look after yourself um (.) keep yourself nice in clothes if  
273 you can keep your hair (.) you know things like that (.) don't let yourself go (.)  
274 otherwise you you can but um personally um (.laughs) it might seem funny but I  
275 use a lot of moisturising cream anything like that to (.) to keep you looking (.) yeah  
276 my mother did she was ninety-three and my mother did the same and er (.) but I  
277 do things like that to keep myself (.) young (.) well look young (.) try (.) and keep  
278 your hair done and (.) I think that's very important (.) very important to keep  
279 yourself going definitely definitely mm because er (.) and treat yourself  
280 occasionally to (.) you know a suit or anything like that (.) to give yourself an uplift  
281 (.) you know that's what you have to do (.) give yourself an uplift.

282 I: So it's about spoiling yourself sometimes [P: yes] but also doing  
283 keeping that femininity?

284 P: Yes yes that's right as you say (.) spoil yourself occasionally (.) sometimes if  
285 I've felt a bit down sort of thing then I'll (.) oh I'll go and buy a pair of shoes  
286 (.laughs) I've got a craze for shoes (.) hats and shoes (.) oh because I always wanted  
287 a hat shop always (.) and during the occupation I used to make hats you see I used  
288 to turn hats back out of old hats I used to put (.) cause we had nothing else did we  
289 so I used to make hats it was funny but er (.) what we had to do during the  
290 Occupation eh was different (.) but I often say the youngsters don't know what it's  
291 like today (.) to live because (.) they never had (.) thankfully what we had to put up  
292 with (.) Germans here and mm ...

293 I: So very very different.

294 P: Oh it was different yes (.) completely different mm they (.) but if you didn't  
295 bother them they didn't bother you (.) they threw us out of our house (.) because  
296 we used to live down [place] during the Occupation and the German's wanted it so  
297 er they just told us that we had to get out so we (.) we managed to find somewhere  
298 else and they took it over because it was right on the coast you see so that's why  
299 they wanted it.

300 I: so do you think kind of being here (.) and being alive during the war has  
301 that changed you as a person do you think

302 P: No (.) no it doesn't change us at all no not at all (.) we just you know lived  
303 our lives like we did but it didn't change us not at all no (.) thankfully.

304 I: And going back to you were saying about femininity and appearance being  
305 still important really (.) what do you see when you look in the mirror do you feel  
306 that you look any different do you feel kind of any older?

307 P: yes yes sometimes I do (.) when I look in the mirror (.) er sometimes I think  
308 to myself 'oh god I am sort of getting old now' and I think to myself 'keep up with  
309 the er moisturising cream' (.) now for instance last week (.) my hair (.) and I  
310 thought 'oh gosh something's got to be done about this' (.) I went to the  
311 hairdressers yes I usually go on a Friday but I went when I went to the funeral I  
312 went yesterday and I told [hairdresser] I said 'for goodness sake do something to  
313 these hairs because they make me look so old ' so she said 'right you want it  
314 chopped off and I said 'yes chop it off' and she did (.) and I think you know  
315 because oh it made me look so and I look (.) the trouble is if my hair grows my face  
316 grows with it (.) I always say that 'if my hair's long (.) my face grows as well' and  
317 that's where I've got to be very careful (.) so she chopped it off and I felt better then  
318 (.) I felt a lot better. It was er (.) now (.) a lot of people (.) um now (.) young ones  
319 and old ones too now they (.) don't wear hats (.) they'll go to a funeral they'll go to  
320 a wedding (.) without a hat (.) now to me (.) no (.) no you are never I'll never go to a  
321 wedding I'll never go to a funeral without a hat never because to me I think that's  
322 part of (.) you know (.) you should keep up appearances I think so anyway. I mean  
323 there was a quite a few remarks passed about my hat you know in fun a friend told  
324 me 'your hat's going to blow off' you know so I said 'well run after it' (laughs) and  
325 er things like that I mean oh (.) last winter this is going back to last winter I had a  
326 red coat and I loathed red I loathed red and it's funny how these things happen (.)  
327 the last time I was in town with my husband and er (.) he saw this coat (.) and he  
328 said 'oh look at that coat' so I said 'I wouldn't wear red not for anything' and I was  
329 a red head years ago and he said um 'try it on' and the assistant knew me really  
330 well anyway and she said 'try it on' so I said 'I like the bottle green' so she said 'try  
331 the red one on' and I had it on and I liked it and I bought it and I was so chuffed to  
332 think I'd bought it because he loved that coat (.) so I bought a little red hat (.) the  
333 vicar told me when I went to church 'oh I do like your bonnet' (laughs) . That's the  
334 type of things that help you and make you feel good [ I: so people actually taking  
335 notice of you that you're... ] yes yes that's right and er people saying just those little  
336 remarks but it does help it a lot.



337 I: And what ways does it help how does it help?

338 P: Well you know it makes you feel good it makes you feel good you think  
339 'well at least people do sort of notice what you're wearing' and things like that yes  
340 (.) I think so anyway.

341 I: Yes yes (.) it sounds like you know obviously by taking care of yourself and  
342 making sure that things you know (.) not letting things slip in some ways [P:  
343 yes that's right] that's the fear it sounds like

344 P: You mustn't let no (.) you must never do that never (.) like for instance my  
345 neighbour two doors away (.) the other Sunday (.) because I take her to church  
346 every Sunday (.) and she had some shoes on and she said 'oh [participant] have I  
347 got the right shoes on (.) with this outfit?' and I said 'no you haven't' (.) so she said  
348 er (.) 'oh (.) you don't think' 'no no' I said 'you got a pair of brown ones?' 'yes'  
349 'well' I said 'you've got Summer shoes on (.) put your brown winter ones on (.)  
350 they'll look much nicer'. The following Sunday she had her brown shoes on  
351 (laughs) you know she told me 'I'm glad I asked you' and I said 'you can ask me  
352 anytime (.) it doesn't bother me but' I said 'you'll get a straight answer' (.) 'well'  
353 she said 'that's why I asked you' which is true (.) she wanted a she was talking to  
354 me about a hat on Sunday so she said 'you wouldn't mind going to town (.) and  
355 buy a new hat' 'well' I said 'why don't you' I said 'get yourself a hat' she said 'I  
356 always used to wear one' (.) I said 'that's right but you've given that up though  
357 haven't you' (.) so I said 'go on get yourself a hat' (laughs) so you know...

358 I: You've obviously made an impression

359 P: Well most probably I have yes.

360 I: It sounds like something which you know which you've always been  
361 interested in (.) in clothes and hats and //

362 P: Yes yes my husband was worse than I was [ I: was he?] oh yes he used to  
363 make me buy things yes where I (.) where I used to say 'oh no no I've got enough  
364 come on' and he used to give him his due he was wonderful for things like that oh  
365 yes (.) that's why I've never given up I've always you know (.) sort of kept myself  
366 going (.) but it does mind you we've got all my family (.) really have got it in us (.)  
367 my mother had it (.) even up to ninety-three she still (.) her clothes were always (.)  
368 clothes uh so here we are (.) never mind...

369 I: Just on more question tying it up really (.) if you um (.) is there any way that  
370 you would have wanted your life to have been any different you know if you look  
371 back now would there be any way...

372 P: Not really no (.) um (.) the only way I wish my husband would have been  
373 stronger (.) a stronger person cause I had to (.) help work hard very very hard (.)  
374 because he wasn't strong [J: emotionally or physically?] yes yes both actually (.)  
375 but to change my life (.) no I wouldn't er want to change it (.) when I was the eldest  
376 of the eleven as you know and it was hard to be the eldest (.) but I still wouldn't

377 change it for the world because I mean (.) now I appreciate my family more than  
378 ever so er you know (.) I don't think I (.) would really would change anything no (.)  
379 maybe (.) there's one thing I would (.) in a way (.) not work so hard no that's one  
380 thing I would change (.) um let's put it this way (.) I'd enjoy life more (.) my  
381 husband um (.) er was (.) work work work and er (.) to go out was very difficult to  
382 get him to go out and difficult and difficult to get him to go on a holiday (.) very  
383 difficult (.) but we did we did but er (.) he was never happy to leave (.) he always  
384 felt (.) if he left the business the business wouldn't run without him (.) so he  
385 realised in the end it did run (.) just as well (.) but um of course we had wonderful  
386 staff (.) a matter of fact one of them died this week (.) we had wonderful staff and er  
387 but otherwise for changing (.) anything no (.) I wouldn't want to...

388 I: So having a bit more leisure time//

389 P: Yes yes that is one thing that I would have loved to have had more time (.)  
390 yes because er (.) you know we didn't really (.) enjoy life (.) a lot (.) we were very  
391 lucky in business very very lucky but we didn't enjoy it oh we enjoyed the business  
392 but we never enjoyed er (.) we could have had more fun out of it (.) let's put it that  
393 way (.) we could have had a lot more fun and a lot more time off but...

394 I: And were you able to before he died (.) you say he worked right up to ...

395 P: Oh no no he was retired for a few years yes (.) oh yes he put his heart and  
396 soul in the garden but we did go away oh yes yes we did go away (.) there's um he  
397 was he wasn't a confident person (.) definitely not (.) a confident person (.) he  
398 lacked confidence a great deal but um (.) lucky I was a strong character so you  
399 know it helped a lot (.) but there we are we (.) we got by (.) there was worse than us  
400 we got by but um there you are so...

401 I: That's really helpful really really helpful thank you. it must have been a  
402 very tough two years for you

403 P: It has been tough it still is (.) it still is very tough but um (.) well I always  
404 put in my mind (.) although he wasn't well (.) he wasn't well (.) but I didn't see him  
405 suffer (.) you see people I've seen my father (.) friends of mine with cancer (.) now  
406 um (.) three weeks before he died (.) he was told he had Parkinson's (.) now I've got  
407 two friends I've got a sister-in-law (.) who's got Parkinson's and when I see them I  
408 thank God that he didn't go (.) he could have never put up with something  
409 humiliating because he was a very private person (.) if it was me okay otherwise he  
410 was very very proud (.) and he would have never put up with that humiliation  
411 never (.) and her that's one thing I'm always thankful (.) and another thing as well  
412 funnily enough you get some people (.) the person I've been talking about (.) um (.)  
413 she begrudges which I think is terrible er she begrudges other wives with their  
414 husbands er (.) er she (.) why has she got her husband and I haven't' (.) now I  
415 think that's a horrible attitude (.) because to me (.) when I see church and I see  
416 husbands and wives together (.) my one thought is 'oh thank God they're still  
417 together' (.) now which is true (.) now my mother was very bitter very very bitter (.)  
418 for years because my dad died (.) and she used to go to church and she used to (.)  
419 come back very bitter because (.) she saw others with their husbands [ I: So very

420 envious] yes yes but I (.) I think to myself well 'thank God they're still together ' (.)  
421 I mean it's nobody's fault that mine died ...

422 I: And perhaps it's because you've filled your life with lots of er things you  
423 have your friends you have a good family (.) so therefore you've not (.) feeling  
424 resentful or left you know alone and feeling lonely because I think sometimes you  
425 know people are jealous and envious when they're actually lonely themselves and  
426 obviously you know it sounds like you you have obviously filled your life with you  
427 know people have been very supportive [ P: Oh yes very much so] and you've  
428 helped lots of other people too and um ...

429 P: Cause I'm thinking now (.) now that funeral I went today well she the one  
430 who we do the flowers together (.) well right up (.) she helped me a lot when (.)  
431 [husband] died and I think to myself 'well right now it's my turn (.) I can help her'  
432 you know (.) and er (.) we'll get on fine together (.) we we can go do the flowers we  
433 can chat away (.) and say different things which (.) which is a great help (.) a great  
434 help mm (.) and of course I belong to (.) I belong to a choir as well [acts proud of  
435 herself and laughs] and er but I'm afraid I can't sing not at the moment [has  
436 laryngitis] no no

437 I: And I'm conscious that I shouldn't be making you talk anymore either  
438 because of your throat er ...

439 P: No er I can't er Sunday (.) um the Tuesday night we had choir practise and I  
440 then got [friend] and oh she said ' you can't come with that throat' I said 'I can't  
441 sing let alone come you know' (laughs) so she said 'be there on Sunday' and I said  
442 'well I'll be there but I don't think I' I think I'll have to go back because it doesn't  
443 seem to be (.) it's much better but it's much better but (.) have I been of help?

444 I: You've been a great help thank you.