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The Negotiation of Midlife: Exploring the Subjective Experience of Ageing

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

Department of Sociology

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2010

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In memory of Jane Brown

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Abstract

This thesis explores the subjective experience of ageing with a particular focus on midlife. I argue that midlife signifies an important phase of transition in the life course which is often characterised by essential changes in personal circumstances. Although many of these changes are anticipated their impact can still come as a surprise, reawakening old psychological threats and anxieties as well as creating new ones. The death of parents, children leaving home, changes at work and an awareness of an ageing body: these changes are usually anticipated at a practical level but can create a sense of emotional instability and insecurity. The three central themes of this thesis include the way the ageing process is experienced physically and how this in turn, effects the individual psychologically, the way personal and family relationships change during this period and the impact this has and finally how people evaluate their lives and compare this evaluation to their imagined sense of what they thought their lives would be like.

I highlight how the social experiences and cultural expectations which influence attitudes and pragmatic reactions to ageing are necessarily intertwined with unconscious psychic processes, conflicts and ambivalence. My method involves interviewing twenty-two men and women aged between thirty-nine and fifty-eight years old using a psycho-social approach. This method focuses on how individuals emotionally and psychically deal with age-related changes.

I conclude that midlife is a time of complex emotional and psychical conflict which is triggered and challenged through a culmination of natural and anticipated losses. In order for people to negotiate midlife and move forward in a positive and productive way they

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must first acknowledge and then accept the natural losses and disappointments that life inevitably brings.

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Introduction

Midlife signifies an important phase of transition in the life course often characterised by significant changes in personal circumstances. Although many of these changes are expected their impact can still come as a surprise, reawakening old threats and anxieties and creating new ones. The death of parents, children leaving home, changes at work, awareness of an ageing body; these changes are usually anticipated on a practical level but the emotional and psychological impact that they have can create a sense of instability and insecurity.

This thesis explores the subjective experience of ageing with particular focus on the social and psychological issues which affect people in midlife. The overarching aim of this study is to bring a unique level of understanding of the key psychic conditions which operate at an unconscious level, which arise in response to the social and personal life experiences which occur in midlife. Taking the lead from Elliot Jaques' (1965) association between the *Death and the Midlife Crisis* I develop an underlying theme and question whether midlife is indeed a time of existential crisis, or are there other psychical processes are operating in midlife? To answer this requires a method which takes into account and also goes beyond social explanations and insights from popular psychology in order to understand the subjective and emotional experience of midlife.

This thesis uses a psycho-social approach to explore the psychological negotiation of the midlife period of the life course. It looks at the way in which social and cultural experiences influence the attitudes and pragmatic reactions of those in midlife to the experience of ageing and how this is intertwined with the unconscious psychic processes,

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conflicts and ambivalence that they experience in their inner emotional worlds. The psycho-social method allows for an exploration of the complex inner psychic conflicts and defences which are evoked by the experience of ageing but which are not necessarily recognised or expressed directly through straightforward conscious narratives.

The four empirical chapters of this thesis examine the way in which midlife is subjectively experienced. They draw out some of the common themes that were identified in the literature and from the empirical investigation; issues including the way the ageing process is experienced physically and how this effects the individual emotionally, the way family relationships change and the impact of this, and finally how people evaluate their lived lives and compare this to their imagined sense of what they thought their lives would be like.

The first analysis chapter *Situating Midlife* sets the historical and current social context in which midlife is positioned in modern Britain. Ageing is not something which can be merely expressed in chronological terms and to do so would be an oversimplification. People of the same chronological age can lead very different lives with significant differences in personal experiences and life expectations according to their class positions and generational specificity. This chapter looks at demographic changes and social factors which explain what kinds of experiences might be expected as a norm for British born men and women aged approximately between forty and sixty-years-old in the twenty-first century. It looks at a number of different demographic features - for example the effects of an increasingly delayed entry into parenthood, rising life expectancies, dilemmas around care demands, work and retirement issues and increasing divorce rates - potential issues which could affect the way in which midlife is experienced.

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The second part of this contextual chapter investigates the concepts of 'midlife', 'middle-age' and 'ageing' and how they can be defined by drawing upon my interviewees' own definitions and the way in which they related to these terms. Where did they see the age brackets around midlife? How did they define it? Did they consider themselves to be in midlife or middle-aged? If so, what was it that placed them in that category? And if not why not? Certain age/life markers can place the individual into a vague categorisation of midlife but the boundaries are far less certain in chronological terms. Society, through socio-cultural narratives sets out generally the expectations and characteristics of particular age categories which can then be negotiated on a more individual basis. This chapter challenges the categorisation of midlife and sees it as problematic because the boundaries within which its definition is situated are fluid and changeable according to the historical, cultural and individual context.

The second analysis chapter *"The Fittest Corpse on the Block": Exploring the Subjective Experiences of the Ageing Body* looks at the way in which ageing is experienced physically and psychologically through changes in the body in midlife. It first explores how bodily changes can become triggers for recognising the ageing process. The body becomes a reminder of age which in itself can be quite unsettling and trigger anxieties about ageing and mortality. The recognition of resemblances with others, particularly ageing parents, can also have an interesting psychological effect on people who are concerned about the ageing process too. Resemblances become reminders about how one has aged and how one might become in the near future. This chapter examines how people manage their bodies as they age. I look at how people cope with difficult feelings about their bodily changes on a practical and on a psychological level. Ageing "successfully" is often a precarious business requiring a constant negotiation on a micro-

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interactional level about how it can be achieved and moreover how it can be maintained. This links in with the debate about the performativity of ageing and whether age is performed through bodily presentation. This chapter argues that ageing involves a process of change in the individual over a period of time which in turn serves to situate people within certain age-related social categories. Age is often indicated by the physical appearance and the social situation of the person. So, in our everyday lives we make simplistic judgements about age-relatedness and age-appropriateness of behaviour and relationships. For those who fail to fit with the expectations that society has prescribed for that particular age category there is a sense of dissonance, incoherence and even morality judgements. Examples of this would be dressing in an 'inappropriate' way for one's age. These situations may arouse suspicion, ridicule or moral judgements simply because they fail to conform to the conventions and norms of that particular age category.

Growing Up and Growing Old: Negotiating the Generational Shift is the third analysis chapter exploring the generational shift which is the ageing and death of the parental generation above and changes in the lives of the younger generation below. It looks at how these changes in relationships are negotiated during this time and how they impact upon the lives of people in midlife and how they consider their own ageing process. I explore issues of increasing care demands or difficult decisions that have to be made with regards to older parents. Separation and attachment is an important theme; the death of a parent can mean revisiting some of the earlier anxieties previously experienced in infancy. As Pritchard puts it 'the loss of a parent evokes all the old fears and threats of the lost child' (1995, 153) which rouses an interesting debate about the definition of adulthood and what it means to be one. The second part of this chapter looks what impact an awareness of a new emerging generation has on those in midlife. It explores the emotional

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impact that children leaving home has such as feelings of an empty nest or even feelings of liberation. Moreover, with people tending to enter later into parenthood it looks at how having young children in midlife affects how people experience ageing.

The final analysis chapter *Remembered Lives and Imagined Futures* recognises midlife as a period of reassessment and re-evaluation. I suggest that as a result of the midlife transition and its accompanying life changes people tend to reflect upon and review what they have achieved in their lives so far. I am interested in the extent to which dreams and aspirations are established earlier in the life course and how people in midlife come to terms with the disappointments and regrets if these are not fulfilled.

This thesis contributes to the wider academic literature on ageing by looking at a new perspective on midlife, in that it explores the emotional experience of midlife, going beyond the conscious level narratives of ageing and investigating the way in which psychic defences operate in order to deal with age-related anxieties.

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Chapter One

Literature Review

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Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more; ...

(Dante, 1307, 1)

In the fourteenth century the philosopher Dante, at the age of thirty-five, described midlife as wandering lost through a dark forest. In 1965 the psychologist Elliot Jaques described midlife as a crisis point in the life course, occurring at around age thirty-five, which is motivated by an underlying fear of death from which he saw creative impulses arise. Gail Sheehy's *Passages*, published in 1976, also gave a rather pessimistic outlook on the midlife experience but it became one of the best-selling books in America in the 1970s and raised the awareness amongst the general public of midlife as an important life stage. However, there has been a key shift in recent decades though with popular literature and personal development guides now writing about the *The Middle-Aged Rebel* (Lambley, 1995) and *Re-firement* (Gambone, 2000) as new ways to conceptualise midlife as a more positive, life affirming period, rejecting the idea that midlife is simply about a pessimistic outlook and decline. Much of what has been written on midlife has come from self-help guides designed to 'ease middle-class readers through the anxieties of their middle years' (Benson, 1997, 3).

Another key shift has occurred as to when midlife chronologically occurs. Earlier accounts of midlife tended to situate midlife in the mid to late thirties whilst the

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boundaries of later definitions have shifted later into the life course as a result of an increasing average life expectancy. Moreover, there has been a tendency for academic research and literature to focus on either end of the life-course spectrum, on childhood and on old age. Benson argued that this is perhaps because, unlike old age and childhood, midlife has no fixed start or end point and that it is the middle-aged 'who provide the norms and values against which other groups seek to assert their separate identities' (1997, 2) and it wasn't really until the 1980s when Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth really started to take midlife seriously in the social sciences and placed the previously under-researched area of 'midlife' firmly into the academic consciousness.

The one thing that is generally agreed upon by those who have focused on this period is that midlife signifies an important point in the life course. Midlife is often described in terms of a transitional period in which significant life changes can occur. Midlife became synonymous with the term "midlife crisis" following Jaques' coining of the phrase in his 1965 paper *Death and the Midlife Crisis*, yet generally the definition of the term "midlife crisis" is unclear. Commonly the midlife crisis has been defined through popular myths and cultural stereotypes. Generalisations are commonly upheld about 'middle-aged' men leaving their wives of thirty years and seducing women of half their age with a new convertible red sports car, and generalisations of lonely, bored women despairing and suffering at the loss of their mothering role as their children leave the nest. One only needs to look at the range of 'humorous' birthday cards for those turning forty or fifty to get an idea about the way in which British culture has generally mocked this period of the life course and how stereotypes about what happens during this period have been characterised. There are often jokes and derogatory remarks made about physical

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appearance, or a lack of drive or interest in life and relationships (Demos and Jache, 1981). However, there have been recent efforts to counter these cultural age-related stereotypes by the promotion of positive ageing models portraying midlife as a time of boundless opportunity, freedom, and security (Gambone, 2000; Lambley, 1995).

This chapter and indeed thesis will make a unique contribution in that it will set out what is subjectively involved in the "midlife" period of the life course. What defines this period as a life course stage? I am interested in setting out some of the ways in which the concept of age has been defined and how then we can begin to define the concept of midlife. If it is defined chronologically when does it happen? What implication does the shift in chronological positioning of midlife have on its definition and the way it is subjectively experienced? If it is defined through characteristic experiences, what are they? It will question what midlife is about and how is it subjectively experienced in the twenty-first century Britain. Moreover, I am interested in the psychological processes and states which operate in conjunction to these social-level experiences. This thesis will be exploring whether midlife is a time for personal development or whether it is indeed a time of crisis.

The empirical chapters of this thesis will be exploring the characteristics of midlife from the subjective view points of those who could perhaps be defined as being within the midlife age brackets. I am interested in the application of life stage models and their relevance to understanding midlife. I will investigate how midlife can be characterised, not just through chronological definitions but more through experiences and through

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common life events, particularly related to changing relationships, issues related to physicality and also to the emotional and psychological experiences of ageing. Midlife, as I see it, is a transitional period of the life course; a period of change, transformations, turning points and sometimes loss. I would argue that one of the greatest challenges the middle-aged individual faces is readjustment in their lives which have undergone important transformations and where their identity, roles and demands have changed. Some of these changes are intergenerational in nature for example the shift in generations which occurs with the death of parents and the changes in the lives of the generations below. The midlife transition is about the reconfiguration of roles and relationships and potentially a sense of loss with these changes in positioning, particularly in the family or workplace. The body is another important site of change. Midlife is arguably a period in which age-related changes become more noticeable and often more problematic. With such a great deal of value and emphasis placed upon beauty and youth in Western society, age-related failings in the physical body have become increasingly undesirable and unacceptable on both a personal and societal level. I am interested in the extent to which these cultural stereotypes are internalised and accepted and the extent to which they are incongruent to the inner experience of ageing.

Many theorists may have attempted to locate midlife within its chronological definitions or more widely as part of a developmental life course model. However, the focus for this thesis is primarily on the emotional experience of ageing, in particular during midlife. I am interested in the psychic state during midlife and the emotional changes which occur. What life events cause fluxes in the psyche and how do these then manifest themselves in everyday life?

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Defining Midlife

Age can be experienced in a number of different ways. Chronological age refers to the number of actual lived years. Social age is an age attributed by official or legal means and also by one's friends and family (Laslett, 1996). It has also been argued by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens (2001, [1991c]) and Mike Featherstone (1991) that subjective or personal age becomes a matter of choice in post-modern society. Age is also culturally, historically, and independently defined. Some cultures such as the Boran Gada tribe in North East Africa, for example, do not specify a 'midlife' period but rather they conceptualise the life course in eight year cycles and during the ages of forty to sixty-years-old (the period in which the Western midlife might be expected), this is a cycle in which the Boran Gada tribesman is ideally expected to first enter fatherhood (latest age of forty) and also reach the peak of their 'social and political career' (Nicholas, 2009). Nicholas described the expectations and definitions of this period of the life course explaining,

> The permission to raise sons is given only with the beginning (ideally at the age of 40-32) of the following stage of *raaba doorii*, which is marked by the ritual "cutting of *daanisa* sticks" (*daanisa muratani*). The *raaba* live in a joint village under the leadership of the leader they had elected during the previous *kuusa* period.
>
> After a further eight years the man finally reaches the stage of full political maturity (*gadaa*). The ceremony of the "taking of authority" (*baallii irraa fuudhani*), in which the outgoing leader of the Boran takes his ostrich plume and hands it over to the incoming leader, the new *abbaa gadaa*, marks the set's taking over of power in the country.[1] In the following *jarra* ceremony, which involves the man's circumcision, the transition to the stage of *gadaa* is completed.[2]

[1] T Leus, op. cit., pp. 270, 482; 409-410; 548-549; 41-43. Literally, the name of the ceremony means: "taking over the feather(s)."

[2] There is some disagreement in the literature about when exactly the transition between the *raaba doorii* and the *gadaa* stages would take place. While Legesse and Haberland take the *balli* take-over ceremony, Hassen and Leus take the *jarra* circumcision ceremony about three years later as a reference point. In the first model, the *raaba doorii* stage would last five years only, while in the second model it would last, like all other stages, regular eight years long. A Legesse, op. cit., pp. 88, 90, 127-128; E Haberland, op. cit., p. 180; T Leus, op. cit., p. 241; M Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia. A history 1570-1860*, The Red Sea Press, Trenton, NJ, 1994, p. 15.

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> Together with his age-mates, he lives in a joint settlement; his leader has now been officially invested as *abbaa gadaa* ("father of the Gadaa") and has been entrusted, together with a number of officers (called *aduula* and *hayyuu*), with the responsibility of ruling the country. This represents the peak of the social and political career of a man. (Nicholas, 2009).

The way in which the Boran Gada tribe conceive of the life course is entirely different from western cultures. In contemporary western society it is generally accepted that the life course is defined in the following way: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, midlife and then into a period of old age (which itself has been divided into various other stages of young old age and finally old, old age). The age brackets around entry into adulthood from childhood are clearer cut than those that follow because they are defined through the legal and social responsibilities that this transition brings with it. Britain classes the entry into adulthood from adolescence by the significance of the eighteenth birthday, though even then 'true' adulthood may not be fully achieved either if certain age markers are not attained, such as parenthood and entry into the workforce (Cuzzocrea and Magaraggia, 2009). Beyond this chronologically based entry into adulthood the definitions become increasingly less defined.

So when can we suppose that midlife begins and when does it end? If we consider the literal definition of 'midlife' as being half way through one's life then this will alter according to the life expectancy of the population or individual. For example, in a country where a life expectancy is fifty-years-old, middle-age might be considered twenty-five-years-old. Dante (2005, [1307c]) wrote about his midlife crisis at age thirty-five. For Jaques too the midlife crisis occurred around the age of thirty-five but he claimed 'the exact period will vary among individuals' (1965, 502). However, he was writing in the mid 1960s and in the UK between 1972-1976 the average life expectancy for men from birth was 69.2, so midlife would have been 34-35 years old and for women in 1972-1976,

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the life expectancy from birth was 75.2, making midlife 37-38. According to the Office of National Statistics, in the UK today the average life expectancy from birth is 77.2 years old for males and 81.5 years old for females[3]. So, to go by this definition a median point of life would be 38.6 for men and 40.8 years old for women. The increase in life expectancy has created a demographic transition which has shifted the definition of midlife considerably over the last century. However, I argue midlife is a transition phase or period which does not simply occur and pass by in a single moment at the centre point in life course. For example, Daniel Levinson's study of middle-aged men in the US. in the late 1960s and early 70s, identified the midlife 'transition' as beginning at age forty or forty-one and lasting about five years (1978, 191). In terms of ages he states that he doubts that the midlife transition can 'begin before age 38 or after 43' (1978, 191).

For my study it is extremely difficult to place age brackets around a sample group. So how can I study a group of people in 'midlife' if it is not clear exactly when midlife is? Cultural conceptions of midlife suggest that 'life begins at forty' and that when you get your bus pass that qualifies you as 'old'. So it could be suggested that midlife falls someway within the rather wide-ranging brackets of forty to sixty years old. But what do people in that age bracket think? Do they see themselves as middle-aged or in midlife? How would they define it themselves? What experiences would they say were common to this period? Perhaps then it is more important to consider what the characteristics life events are of midlife are rather than turning to chronological age as a marker; perhaps midlife is not about being a certain age but rather about the experiences of that time.

[3] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=168&Pos=1&ColRank=1&Rank=374

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Models of the Life Course

The plurality of definitions of ageing and a desire to find common themes amongst experiences at different times in the life course has led to many theorists, including Peter Laslett (1996), Robert Peck (1968) and Erik Erikson (1963) to create models which are used as templates for defining the characteristics of certain age groups. These stage models aim to set out distinct and defined characteristics for the course of the ageing process. Developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson developed perhaps one of the best known stage models in *The Eight Stages of Man* chapter in *Childhood and Society* in which he proposed that life was divided into eight distinct stages, each requiring the individual to fulfil its requirements before successful transition into the next was possible. 'Each individual, to become a mature adult, must to a sufficient degree develop all the ego-qualities mentioned' (1963, 269).

Middle-age can be located in the seventh stage of Erikson's model. He argued that the seventh stage includes the ego-qualities of generativity and stagnation. Generativity involves paying back society for the things it has given to you through working hard and raising a good family. Generativity encompasses 'procreativity, productivity and creativity, and thus the generation of new beings as well as of new products and new ideas, including a self generation concerned with further identity development' (Erikson, 1963). Interestingly Jaques (1965) also noted increased creativity in many people during midlife. He studied 310 artistic geniuses and he found that although the process of creativity is more laboured it was often the time when the greatest works of art were produced. Midlife requires a degree of urgency for some aspect of generative achievement or else it risks entering into an existence of self-absorption and isolation.

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This is generativity's opposing ego-quality which Erikson termed 'stagnation'. Erikson's final two stages (stages seven and eight) are those most associated with the period reaching from midlife to old age and death. 'Ego-integrity' is the requirement for the final stage of Erikson's model which is primarily associated with old age. Ego-integrity involves coming to terms with the inevitability of death. Unsuccessful attainment of this task is 'signified by fear of death' (1963, 268) and is known as 'despair'. This stage involves coming to terms with the past and the inevitability of death. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Erikson proposed that each stage is conclusive yet many changes which come with the ageing process are gradual and unnoticeable until an event or experience triggers a realisation that one has changed quite dramatically without realising. Ageing and growth are continuous and fluid processes which are never fully completed and only end through death. Viorst argued that 'we are never a "finished product"- we refine and we rearrange and we revise' (1986, 299), and Gruen encouraged us to view growth as a continuous process which is 'neither stabilised nor completed when the individual reaches physical maturity' (in Neugarten, 1964, 2). Moreover, identities have become increasingly malleable and revisable in post-modern society and whereas in previous decades stages may have been more clearly demarcated they have become increasing blurred. For example, the behaviour and dress of someone in their forties may not be that drastically different from their teenage children's generation. It is also not uncommon to experience these stages out of the order that Erikson has suggested; it is possible that an individual may experience many of the stages simultaneously. The changes do not necessarily follow a strict sequence but are more gradual and subtle. Issues surrounding identity, for example, which are usually experienced in adolescent years may be experienced or re-

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experienced again in midlife particularly if it follows a significant shift such as a divorce or bereavement. Finally, it is not made evident by Erikson who this model applies to as it does not take into account gender, social class, or historical context, which suggests that personality characteristics are prioritised in development.

Robert Peck was also interested in human developmental psychology and he was critical of the fact that Erikson's final stage was 'intended to represent in a global, non-specific way all of the psychological crises and crisis-solutions of the last forty or fifty years of life' (1968, 88) and he suggests this stage needs further dividing. Peck set out more specific challenges which should be met in the stages of midlife and old age. For him, the four challenges of middle-age are, 1)'valuing wisdom vs. valuing physical powers', 2)'socialising vs. sexualising in human relationships', for instance 'redefining men and women as individuals and as companions, with the sexual element decreasingly significant', 3) 'cathectic flexibility vs. cathectic impoverishment', that is having the 'emotional flexibility' and 'the capacity to shift emotional investments from one person to another and from one person to another, and from one activity to another' (1968, 89). This he suggested was crucial because for those in midlife the circle of acquaintances often becomes disrupted due to children leaving home, parents dying and changes in friendships following retirement, but also during this period the middle-aged person is able to relate to older generations above as well as relating well to younger generations too (1968, 89). The fourth stage of midlife is 4) 'mental flexibility vs. mental rigidity'. Mental rigidity is about becoming set in their ways 'they take the patterns of the events and actions which they happen to have encountered, as a set of fixed inflexible rules which almost automatically govern their subsequent behaviour' and mental flexibility refers to mastering 'their experiences, achieve a degree of detached perspective on them,

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and make use of them as provisional guides to the solution of new issues' (1968, 90). In old age Peck claimed the three defining features are, 1) 'ego differentiation vs. work role preoccupation', 2) 'body transcendence vs. body preoccupation' that is either being preoccupied with the problems with the body and health or forgetting these troubles and still living a fulfilled life and thirdly, 3) 'ego transcendence vs. ego preoccupation' (1968, 90-91). This final stage appears to face similar challenges to Erikson's final stage of ego-integrity vs. despair.

Peter Laslett had an academic background in history but as he moved into his retirement years he developed an interest in the study of old age. He had particular interest in dividing the definition of old age into more appropriate categories of what became known as the 'third' and 'fourth' ages. In his book *A Fresh Map of Life* Laslett developed a stage model of the life course, in which 'first comes an era of dependence, socialisation, immaturity and education; second an era of independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and saving; third an era of personal fulfilment; and fourth an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death' (1996, 4). Laslett was critical of the modern notion of judging age by the number of actual lived years and he was careful to point out that these stages are not representative of ages as in number of years old, but rather are based upon life experiences, and feelings (1996, 5). He instead proposed that individuals possess a number of different ages simultaneously. Firstly the biological age (the number of years lived), a social/public age (an age attributed to you by your friends, relatives and people you meet), and a personal age which is the age that the individual feels they have reached. For Laslett the 'Third age' and 'Fourth age' generally refer to the 'collective circumstance' of the middle to later age stages of life, but he recognises that the third age can be lived alongside first or second ages (1996, x, 99). Laslett claimed however that the

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Third age - the age of personal fulfilment - is most commonly lived out in the period just following retirement (1996, 100).

The psychologist Daniel Levinson was one of the founders of the field of Positive Adult Development and in his key work on the life course *Season's of a Man's Life* (1978) he identified a series of tasks or 'polarities' which need to be resolved as the principal task of the midlife individuation process. He claims that the primary task of the midlife transition is to work through the polarities, which 'animate and divide him' (1978, 245). Levinson's polarities are '(1) Young/Old; (2) Destruction/Creation; (3) Masculine/Feminine; and (4) Attachment/Separateness' (1978, 197). In the Young/Old polarity, the person may be so anxious about ageing and dying that they make serious attempts to stay young, perhaps through leading a life without commitment, attachment and responsibility (1978, 212). Levinson said that during this period a man should 'give up certain of his former youthful qualities - some with regret, some with relief or satisfaction - while retaining and transforming other qualities that he can integrate into his new life. And he must find positive meanings of being "older"' (1978, 210). The Destruction/Creation polarity, sees a preoccupation with issues of death; the death of other and the death of self. The person may also feel guilt at having hurt people in their lives. On the creation side of the polarity, the middle-aged person may have a strong desire for producing and creativity, just as Jaques also argued in his 1965 work. The Masculine and Feminine polarity is about accepting both gendered parts of the self, and the attachment and separateness polarity relates to the middle-aged person's need for attachment to others, but equally emphasises the need for separateness too (1978, 197).

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In general life stage models which involve the passing through of certain defined stages can be somewhat problematic in that they tend not to consider or contain the ambiguities and the generally disordered nature of real life. They imply a sense of order and predictability which is not entirely in keeping with the dynamic nature of a lived life. Moreover, it can be problematic to apply a single set of stages to accurately describe the development of the adult personality, where individuality and subjectivity are important factors for consideration. They do not fully consider individual variability; each person's experience is different, and each person has their own unique way of understanding the world. Life stage models have created a universal model of development rather than taking into account individual difference. Moreover, the problem of defining midlife chronologically or universally is that is neglects consideration of differences in class, history and gender.

However, they do provide a useful guideline which enables comparison between individuals. They also facilitate an understanding of an otherwise chaotic and confusing series of emotions and crises throughout the life course and contribute to an understanding of different phases of the life course. One of the key tasks of this thesis is to explore challenges and characteristics of the midlife stage, bringing a new dimension of understanding to the current life stage models.

The Psyche in Midlife

Midlife is often witness to a series of natural 'losses'. It is a period which usually sees the growing up and leaving home of children, the ageing and death of parents, the reassessment and re-evaluation of dreams, ambitions and the meaningfulness of life, changes to the body and physical capabilities, and an increasing awareness of personal

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mortality. Whilst these changes and losses are experienced during this period of the life course, I suggest that there is also a revisiting of these psychic states and a reworking of the infantile experiences of loss and mourning.

I would like to argue that inherent in the process of growing up and growing older is the threat of object loss. Processes of separation and individuation occur throughout the life course and this can include losses within relationships, experiences or physical objects and can evoke states of mourning or melancholia. Melancholia, according to Freud (1991, [1915c]), relates to the depletion of the ego and the sublimation of loss-related anxieties. In this psychic state it is difficult to identify exactly what is lost but there is a sense that something is missing. This is related to Ian Craib's emphasis on *The Importance of Disappointment* (1994) which will be discussed in more detail throughout this thesis and particular the final chapter *Remembered Pasts and Imagined Futures*. Freud (1991, [1915c]) also referred to a state of mania. The manic element is psychically situated in opposition to melancholia and involves public displays of activity which only serve to highlight the loss, for example in the more obvious and stereotypical characterisations of the midlife crisis. I argue that the midlife crisis is the experience, expression and articulation of loss through manic activity.

The psychic states which originate in infancy can reoccur throughout the life course in particular during periods of change or loss, such as those commonly experienced in midlife. Kleinian psychoanalysis argues that in early infancy there are two primary psychic states, the paranoid schizoid position and the depressive position. The underpinning anxieties of these positions are the fear of loss, the fear of annihilation (which Hinshelwood, 1991, argues is the 'core anxiety of the human condition') and the

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anxiety arising from the death instinct. In the infantile state dependency on the primary caregiver is so overwhelming that to lose her would be catastrophic and could threaten the infant's very existence, yet the child still needs to face this fear and detach itself in order to lead an independent existence and become responsible for its own survival (Klein in Bott Spillius, 1988, 321-322). In order to achieve this detachment there must be a split, physically and emotionally. Anxiety leads the infant to split the loved object (the mother) into two- the good object and the bad object. In this idealised state the infant attacks the bad object in violent phantasies whilst psychically believing that they are defending the good loved object. This defence of splitting occurs in the paranoid schizoid position; and can either involve a split either as a dualistic opposition that of good and bad, or can occur as multiple splits and fragmentations, leading to a sense of disintegration. Multiple splitting 'is a defensive attempt, engineered in phantasy, to obliterate a feared object by fragmenting it into bits' (Hinshelwood, 1991, 419). Yet despite this seemingly relative safe preservation of the good object during a split, the paranoid schizoid position is not a comfortable position to be in. Once the realisation occurs that the object is both good and bad then this can lead into the second psychic state- the depressive position. In terms of the infant's experience the depressive position arises when the infant realises that its mother is a single person or object. Fluctuations between loving and hating the same person or object can create enormous anxiety. It can be quite traumatic for the infant when it realises that the mother that they hate is also the person that they love and they could even imagine that they have actually harmed the loved object through their destructive phantasies, leading to intense feelings of guilt and loss.

Guilt then becomes a 'central feature of the depressive position (Hinshelwood, 1991, 310) and it results from the internal conflict which occurred in the paranoid schizoid position.

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Hinshelwood described it as 'an anguished state of mind arising out of an internal conflict, particularly over the worth of the self' (1991, 310). On realising that the good and bad elements of an object both originate from the same object, the unconscious fears that the good, loved object was somehow damaged or lost when the bad part of the split was subject to aggressive attacks. This leads to feelings of guilt and phantasies and wishes to repair the damage which has been done. [4] It also creates anxiety that introjected bad object could still pose a threat to internal good objects. One of the primary tasks of the depressive position involves establishing and securing good internal objects and repairing the damage created in the violent physic attacks resulting from the paranoid schizoid position.

Reparation in the depressive position involves an acceptance of the losses which have occurred and not a denial of them (Craib, 2001, 77). This acceptance of loss comes through a process of mourning, which is another central feature of this position.

> The frustrations and losses of life and the constant threat from destructive sources within the personality make the depressive position an achievement that is repeatedly lost and in need of re-establishing. [Klein] described the work of mourning which is required with every major loss and disappointment as 'rebuilding with anguish the inner world (Temperley, 2001, 50).

Another feature of the depressive position is that it involves reality testing. Whereas the paranoid schizoid position tends to function with phantasy and reality intertwined, the depressive position begins to separate out the phantasy from reality and begin to accept the consequence of this.

[4] Introjection is another way of coping with this need to restore and repair. Introjection involves taking an external object in as part of oneself (as part of the ego) in order to make a restorative effort.

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It is important to recognise that these positions are psychic structures of the mind and not discrete stages which are experienced as a one off in infancy rather they are re-enacted throughout the life course, frequently entered and re-entered. Both positions are characterised by a number of defences which Klein describes as psychotic defences. In the paranoid schizoid position the defences include the annihilation of persecutors, expulsions (projection, including projective identification), denial, flight to the good object, and splitting (Hinshelwood, 1991). Defences in the depressive position are manic and consist of omnipotence, denial, triumph and control (Hinshelwood, 1991).

So what relevance do these psychic states have for the midlife period? Jaques argued that in midlife 'the depressive position must be worked through once again at a qualitatively different level' (1965, 505). These positions are not solely experienced during infancy; they are frequently experienced and re-experienced at different intensities throughout the entire life course. Midlife is particular in that during this period there are a series of natural 'losses' which occur. It is a period which usually sees the growing up and leaving home of children, the ageing and death of parents, the reassessment and re-evaluation of dreams, ambitions and the meaningfulness of life, changes to the body and physical capabilities and an increasing awareness of personal mortality. Whilst these changes and losses are experienced during this period of the life course there is also a revisiting of these psychic states and a reworking of the infantile experiences of loss and mourning, which allow the individual to continue with a sense of ego-integrity into the next phase of their life. This discussion will be continued in more detail throughout the substantive chapters.

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The Fear of Death in Midlife

Anxieties often arise in response to changes and instability. I argue that existential anxiety is particularly heightened during the midlife period when questions arise about the purposefulness of life so far and fears about the future and death are also brought to the fore. Jaques (1965) first established a link between death and the midlife crisis and according to his theory the midlife crisis is advanced by the increasing awareness of the inevitability of one's own death. He suggested that midlife signifies a period in which the individual starts to realise the inevitability of their own death. The psychological self-deception of immortality begins to weaken and there is an increase in time awareness and a realisation that death is a more realistic possibility. He said 'the reality and inevitability of one's own eventual personal death, that is the central and crucial feature of the midlife phase' (1965, 506). He also argued that 'the paradox is that of entering the prime of life, the stage of fulfilment, but at the same time the prime and fulfilment are dated. Death lies beyond' (1965, 506).

Many different theorists across many different academic disciplines have noted an increase in mortality awareness during the midlife period. The psychologist Daniel Levinson noted an increase in death awareness in midlife. He said 'at 40 a man knows more deeply than ever that he is going to die…His death is not simply an abstract, hypothetical event. An unpredictable accident or illness could take his life tomorrow. Even another thirty years does not seem so long: more years now lie behind than ahead' (1978, 215). The historian Peter Laslett also wrote about a 'sense of a collective future' which is 'held by those whose personal future is inevitably short' (1996, x-xi). Psychoanalyst Pearl King addressed some of the 'pressures which seem to operate as sources of anxiety and concern during the second half of the life cycle' which included

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‘the inevitability of their own death and the realization that they may not now be able to achieve the goals they set for themselves, and that what they can achieve and enjoy in life may be limited, with consequent feelings of depression or deprivation’ (King, 1980, 154). The psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1930) described midlife as the peak of the sun’s crescent, with only a desent into sunset beyond, ‘at the stoke of noon the descent begins’ (Jung, XVIII, 397) and finally the sociologist and thanotologist Michael C. Kearl argued that midlife represents a period in which the individual starts to realise the inevitability of their own death and for some people this means that the countdown to death has begun (1989, 465).

So why is mortality awareness such a significant feature of midlife? Certainly much has been written about the denial of death throughout the life course. Freud wrote about how people tend to ‘shelve death’ (1915) and avoid thinking about it. Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, in his highly acclaimed book *The Denial of Death*, expanded upon this to argue that human beings have a unique insight into their fate; that they know with certainty that they will one-day die. This generates an enormous responsibility to preserve life and a conscious knowledge of this responsibility can lead to great anxiety. Becker claimed that this knowledge is so unbearable that virtually all of our daily activity is an attempt to deny and overcome our fate. He claimed that the individual ‘literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, and personal preoccupations’ (1973, 27). Despite the anxiety death provokes, Becker pointed out that to fear death constantly would hinder the effective functioning of human life, so for the most part of their lives people keep busy in their daily routines: they think about other things, they ignore death, they deny death, they leave thinking about death until another day and they think of death as something which always happens to someone else.

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In midlife however, death becomes harder to deny as the psychological self-deception that Becker referred to begins to weaken and the middle-aged individual begins to realise that time is passing by more quickly and death is becoming a more realistic possibility. I propose that a fear of death in midlife is increased not simply because of the number of years that have passed and through counting how many are left, because this would simply mean that we became increasingly fearful the older we become. Rather it appears that a fear of death is particularly intensified during this midlife period with the implication that it is weakened or experienced in a newly transformed way beyond midlife and into old age. One argument that I suggest is that midlife is often experienced as a series of anticipated 'losses'. Jaques acknowledged that changes and losses, in particular the generational shift can contribute to an increased fear of death in midlife. He stated that 'a new set of external circumstances has to be met' and that 'the sense of the agedness of parents, coupled with the maturing of children into adults, contributes strongly to the sense of ageing-the sense that it is one's own turn next to grow old and die' (1965, 506, 510).

This standpoint portrays a rather depressing and pessimistic view of midlife and one in which I am particularly interested in. Can we really argue that a fear of death arises with more prominence in midlife? If so, what is it specifically about midlife which evokes this fear? Are all people in midlife so aware and as afraid of death as these theorists would lead us to believe? Moreover is the fear of death always a negative psychological state to be in? Certainly midlife is a critical transition period in which loss is often a prominent feature and it is possible that these losses along with other contributing factors could potentially develop an increased awareness of mortality in midlife. This is something I will be returning to throughout my analysis. Moreover, I also support the argument that

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an awareness or fear of death is not always a negative state. It has been argued that the fear of death is a prime motivator for human activity. Becker stated that 'of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death' (1973, 11). Viorst asserted that 'the emotional knowledge that we surely will die someday can heighten and fine-tune our sense of the present moment' (1986, 306). Singh et al. also argued that 'if people realize that they are mortal, they know that they do not have an eternity to complete their projects and that each present moment is crucial. In this way the awareness of death can be the source of zest for life and creativity' (2003). When emotional knowledge is broadened in midlife, through physical and mental changes, this can lead to an increased sense of the present moment and an acknowledgment that one should make the most of it.

Reassessment, Re-evaluation and the Life Dream

I suggest that the progressive ageing process and an increase in existential anxiety serve to motivate people in midlife; compelling them into a period of reassessment and reflection upon one's life so far and what one would like to achieve in the future years ahead. These fears serve to clarify ambitions but also highlight fears about time limitations in which to achieve them.

Jung, in his writings on the midlife crisis, stated that between the ages of thirty-five and forty profound psychological changes occur. He claimed that the first part of the life course involved important tasks of raising a family, establishing ourselves in the world, earning a living and developing a credible reputation, whereas the second half of life is far more introspective and involved reflectively looking towards the inner self. It is a time of crisis and self-doubting as one begins to take stock of how one's life has developed up until this point (XVII, 399).

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Erikson (1963) claimed however, that reassessment occurred later on in the life course and he places it in the final stage of his developmental life stage model. He argued that it was in the final stage that the individual re-evaluates their life and this results in one or the other of two ego states - 'ego-integrity' or 'despair'. During this reviewing phase the person may feel despair at their life choices at missed opportunities and unachieved goals. He claims that this despair is often signified by a fear of death; that one will die without having achieved everything they had hoped for. At the opposite extreme of Erikson's ego-state of despair there are those who have achieved 'ego-integrity' and who are satisfied with their lives. This is signified by a sense of achievement and an acceptance of life with its imperfections and about finding meaning in it. Erikson said 'despair expresses the feeling that the time is now short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity' (1963, 269). A sense of integrity arises from the individual's ability to look back on his life with satisfaction. At the other extreme an individual who looks back on their life as a series of missed opportunities, may feel a sense of despair at the realisation that there is little time left to do what you want; it is 'too short for the attempt to start another life and try out alternate roads to integrity' (1963, 269). Although Erikson proposed that this was a feature of the final stage of life, I argue that this is actually a feature of midlife too which I will come to explain shortly.

In a similar way to Erikson, gerontologist Robert Butler (1963) also contended that in the face of imminent death many people tend to review and reappraise the life they have led. He calls this a life review in which those who realise that there is limited time left in their lives will assess and evaluate the lives they have led so far. They may examine the relative success or a failure of their lives and consider what kind of person they feel they

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have become. This provides an opportunity for the resolution of conflicts and the reparation of past mistakes and regrets; it is about putting one's life in order. Whereas it could be argued that the process of reminiscence is a normal developmental task of later adulthood, the life review as Butler (1963) set out is not reserved for only those in old age; rather he argued that it can occur at any point in the life course and that it is impending death rather than old age which is most likely to trigger a review. However as with Erikson's argument, I would suggest that the life review is something which could occur in midlife too not because there is a real and imminent danger of death but because there is an increased awareness of the ageing process and of mortality more generally.

Based upon his empirical findings, Levinson (1978) further suggested that one of the primary tasks for men in the midlife transition was to reappraise their life. He claims that midlife was a period of reflection on one's 'Dream'- that is how life and ambitions were envisaged as a young adult - and to what extent youth's 'Dream' had been fulfilled. Levinson defines a 'Dream' as 'more formed than pure fantasy, yet less articulated than a fully thought out plan' (1978, 91). Levinson (1978) claimed one of the greatest challenges that men have to face in midlife was the loss of the 'Dream'. He observed that 'a man finds that much of his life has been based on 'illusions' and the midlife period is about the 'reduction of illusions'' (1978, 192). He called this process 'de-illusionment', and claimed that it is a normal feature of maturity (1978, 193). He says that it is particularly distressing because it may be the realisation that the person will never fulfil their potential or worst of all realise that the potential was 'never really there' (1978, 202). Midlife, for Levinson involved coming to terms with and reconciling the loss of these earlier dreams. It involved questioning and reflecting upon the lived life asking questions such as 'what do I really want? How do I feel about my life? How shall I live in the future?' (1978,

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241).

Kohut set a similar pessimistic tone to Levinson and argued that the individual, in midlife, is 'confronted with the question of the meaning and the value of his life in its totality', he said,

> Later in life, a specific point that can be seen as crucially significant—a point in the life curve of the self at which a final crucial test determines whether the previous development had failed or had succeeded … I am inclined to put the pivotal point … to late middle-age when, nearing the ultimate decline, we ask ourselves whether we have been true to our innermost design. This is the time of utmost helplessness for some, of utter lethargy, of that depression without guilt and self-directed aggression, which overtakes those who feel they have failed and cannot remedy the failure in time and with the energies still at their disposal (1979, 252-253)

Kohut's and Levinson's accounts of the depression and anxiety felt when the midlife individual's reassessment of self reveals lost opportunities and the loss of a 'dream', and is similar to the 'despair' that is suggested by Erikson's stage model. Erikson claimed that when re-evaluating our lives the individual may feel unhappy at the way they have led their life and despair at the thought of never completed their life's goals. This he said is commonly signified by the fear of death; a fear that you will die without having achieved everything you had hoped for. I am interested in the extent to which earlier life dreams, plans and expectations match up to what is actually achieved by the midlife stage of the life-course and to what extent those in midlife actually reflect and/or act upon this.

The sociologist Margaret Archer argued that we all develop life dreams in early adulthood - some realistic and some unrealistic. People develop ideas about what they want to do with their lives and what they wish to become. In her 2007 publication *Making Our Way through the World* she argued that the way that a life dream is formulated is dependent upon the social situation, cultural conditioning, and individual personality types. She

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argued however that ‘as maturity approaches, certain elements advance in importance and others recede’ (2007, 236). In other words, despite our earlier plans and dreams certain elements of those are often relinquished as we get older.

Furthermore it is important to recognise, as Ian Craib (1994) does in *The Importance of Disappointment*, that you can’t always get what you want. There are limits to individualism due to societal constraints. Archer talked about ‘the micro’ which is the ‘individual’s nascent proclivities and skills’ vs. ‘the macro’ which is the ‘social distribution of occupational openings’ (2007, 208), in other words the ability to achieve certain dreams and goals is dependent upon the structural constraints which surround it. Over the last few decades, the social, cultural and political framework conditions for the life plans made by young adults have changed quite significantly and so too has the ability and conditions they require in order to implement their particular life plans. The current midlife cohort (as I identified it) is situated at the very youngest end of the baby boomer spectrum. The baby boomer cohort was born post WWII, (beginning in 1946 and continuing through to 1964). This cohort was born at a time of significant social change, which is often associated with the rejection of conservative and traditional cultural values. As young adults growing up in the 1960s, a time of increasing liberalism, individualism, and self-expression, they developed a self perception unique to them. Since the 1960s, globalisation has increased geographical, labour and leisure related mobility, and in conjunction with the increasing prominence of new technologies, the media and the Internet has increased exposure to different life styles and different life opportunities. As Archer stated, ‘information technology quintessentially provides a diversity of cultural exposure, in contrast to the standardised offerings of television when it took over the living room in the 1950s (2007, 320). There has also been a diminished stock of public

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housing, significant economic shifts and a widespread decline of organisational careers and jobs for life (2007, 319). Educational opportunities have also increased with four percent of age cohort going to university in 1960s, compared to thirty-seven percent at present (2007, 319). Cultural and social changes can alter the expectations of life and can influence the way in which dreams are formulated and actioned. I am interested in how those people currently in midlife evaluate the success of their lives, particularly when comparing it with the younger generation who generally have a wider range of opportunities for travel, careers, and education available to them. I will be exploring how these socio-cultural factors have influenced the choices my interviewees' have made or not made in their lives, for instance did they go into further education? If not, did they return to it later in life? Do they regret their earlier life decisions and are those regrets based on a lack of opportunity or do they blame it on a lack of personal motivation? Are there moments of nostalgic reflection for the liberal expressionism which defined their youth? These are topics which are discussed in more depth in the *Situating Midlife* chapter and throughout the substantive chapters, but particularly in *Remembered Pasts and Imagined Futures*.

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Summary

Midlife is often discussed as a critical transition period, a period of heightened sensitivity to one's position within a complex social environment and the reassessment of the self is a prevailing theme. At its best, it is viewed as a period of new challenges and re-evaluation of the direction and purpose of life. It can be an impetus to change and a period of growth, freedom and increased opportunities. However, it is frequently portrayed with a pessimistic tone with the individual facing a series of significant bereavements and other losses.

This chapter has reviewed some of the key literature on the life course, ageing and midlife. I have considered multidisciplinary approaches to how the life course can be conceptualised and thus how midlife can be defined. I have highlighted the multidimensional nature of ageing, taking into accounts issues of the self, identity, the body, psychological elements as well as societal and cultural influences. I demonstrated the complex nature of attempting to define midlife and have shown how its definition is culturally, historically and individually variable. Human development theorists have made various attempts to capture the life course within stage models, which have proven a useful guide to characteristics of varying life stages such as midlife. However, these models are not entirely satisfactory in terms of giving a clear and comprehensive definition of each stage and indeed put into question the logic of viewing life as a series of stages when the nature of the life course is so necessarily disorganised and messy.

Finally this chapter took into account the psychological aspects of ageing and looked at how these might be applied and/or experienced in midlife. In particular I touched upon the anxieties which surround issues of reassessment, disappointment, loss and existential fear. I explored how these anxieties might be managed and how these might motivate or influence individual thoughts and actions. These are all themes which will be developed throughout this thesis.

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Chapter Two

Methodology

Working with Defences:

Constructing a Psycho-Social Approach to Sociological Interviewing

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Introduction

As I have already established the aim of this study is to explore the subjective experience of ageing with particular focus on the midlife period. I interviewed twenty-two men and women[1] aged between thirty-nine and fifty-eight-years-old[2] and in order to access subjective and emotional responses I employed a psycho-social approach. This method takes into account the sociological explanations and demographic trends to explain the life course but in addition focuses on how individuals emotionally and psychically deal with age-related changes. I investigated questions such as 'how do people feel about getting older?' 'How do they feel about life changes in the midlife transition?' and 'to what extent do other earlier life experiences impact upon the way in which they feel about ageing?' I also questioned the more complex inner psychic conflicts which are evoked by the experience of ageing but which are not necessarily expressed directly through language.

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There are more than one 'psycho-social approach' but the objective of my research was to use a psycho-social method in a similar way to which Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson used it in *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000) and the way Sasha Roseneil used it in her study and subsequent publication *The Ambivalences of Angel's Arrangement* (2006) in which she claimed

> The point of a psycho-social analysis is to direct attention to the interplay between the social and the psychic, to provide a rich analysis of the complexity and locatedness of individual experience of social and cultural processes and practices,

[1] Some interviewees were based in Essex and Suffolk counties and some were from South and Mid Wales.

[2] See appendix 1 for interviewee profiles

> rather than to straightforwardly suggest generalisability across a larger population (2006, 851)

For this study I wanted to explore the emotional lives of my interviewees. My interest lay in the specific social experiences and cultural expectations which influence my interviewee's attitudes and pragmatic reactions to ageing and how this is intertwined with the unconscious psychic processes, conflicts and ambivalences that they experienced in their inner emotional worlds. I argue that our conscious narratives are screened by our unconscious and mediated by social norms. A psycho-social approach seeks to access motivations, drives and impulses which operate at an unconscious level.

As a psycho-social researcher I am interested in the material held in the unconscious part of the psyche. It is thought that the unconscious makes up around eighty percent of the psyche (wilderdom.com[3] and Freud, 1933). It is like a treasure chest of information about the individual's psychology, which psychoanalysts and psycho-social researchers think is too significant to ignore. The material held in the unconscious consists of impulsive urges, primitive drives and deep-rooted anxieties, all of which our psyches would rather keep psychologically contained there. Our minds employ a number of psychological tactics called ego-defences in order to keep these destructive and demanding impulses under control. These ego-defences operate at the level of the unconscious and they prevent the ego from becoming overwhelmed by denying or distorting the reality of the situation. Some of the ego-defences include (amongst others) denial, repression, regression, projection and sublimation. Moreover, unconscious material can be observed through parapraxes such as jokes, Freudian slips of the tongue or pen, or through

[3] http://wilderdom.com/personality/L8-3TopographyMindIceberg.html

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unconscious body language, and through dreams. Psychoanalysts and psycho-social researchers are interested in accessing unconscious material in order to give a comprehensive understanding of the emotional experience of the individual they are observing. In this study I wanted to research the topic of ageing and midlife in a holistic way, taking into account more than just the words that the interviewee expresses in a verbal and conscious way, but also the emotional experience of the encounter.

In my research I emphasise the importance of psychodynamics in the interview relationship and use this to access the unconscious level material. Hoggett argued that 'we communicate affectively as well as discursively and we do this precisely because of the inherent limitations of language in expressing experience' (2008, 381) taking on Bion's claim that the 'I' is a sensuous experience (Bion, 1970; Hoggett, 2008, 381). In other words language is not always sufficient in understanding human emotional experience. Some feelings are beyond words and it is only through affectively feeling the emotion that some things can be truly understood.

In order to access the unconscious material in the interview I used psychoanalytical techniques such as observing the transference, counter-transference and projective identification in the interview encounter. I took into account the slips in the narrative, the inconsistencies and the silences. By employing a psycho-social approach it enabled me to look beyond the words and wider discourse, and to understand unconscious motivations and emotions. I argue that this in turn provided a more illuminated analysis of the emotions which accompany the ageing process.

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In the initial stages of this study my aim was to investigate Elliot Jaques's (1965) claim that there existed a discernable link between death and the midlife crisis. As outlined in the literature review he suggested that the midlife crisis was advanced by an increased awareness of the inevitability of one's own death which reawakened earlier fantasies of annihilation and abandonment. Jacques' innovative but relatively limited and reductive theory has yet to be developed in any great detail in any other social research and whereas there is an abundance of literature relating to experiences of midlife. Many of these have taken the form of 'self-help' style manuals or purely examine midlife from a practical and embodied perspective. This study aimed to steer away from popular psychology and explore midlife at a more psychical level; venturing into the territory of the unconscious world and exploring the psycho-social relationship between midlife and the fear of death.

I initially proposed an exploration of whether or not death anxiety is indeed universally and innately present in everyone and to what extent are these fears shaped by our past experiences, past relationships and our own individual life experiences. Although I am, to some extent, still partially wedded to the idea that the fear of death acts as a motivational and unconscious force which can drive action, such as in the way of a 'midlife crisis' or other behaviour in midlife, I have broadened my thinking to include other psychic processes which might be at work. For instance, Ian Craib's (1994) appeal for us to recognise the *Importance of Disappointment* has helped build a more general understanding of the nature and significance of loss in everyday personal life. So, the fear of death may not be the sole motivating force which builds up and gains in forcefulness as we travel through the course of our lives and there are also other important issues of loss, existential struggles and internal conflicts which need to be taken into consideration as they arise through the experience of the ageing process. Moreover, linked into these

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existential anxieties is the motivating, generative drive in midlife which arises as a result of mortality awareness but which essentially has the potential to be spoiled by the fear of dying.

This chapter discusses how two traditionally divergent disciplines, psychoanalysis and sociology can be complimentarily deployed to create a psycho-social method and the value this method holds when researching the subjective attitudes of research participants. I begin with a discussion of the practicalities of my fieldwork, sample selection and the experiences of conducting psycho-social interviews. I then present a brief history into the origins and debates surrounding psycho-social studies and some of the key psychoanalytic concepts that are commonly used in a psycho-social method. I conclude with a critical reflection on the method, including the consideration of ethical issues and of its overall effectiveness at accessing inner emotional lives.

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Fieldwork

Due to the high level of detail and amount of data generated by a psycho-social method I decided to work with a relatively small number of people in 'midlife' and conduct intense repeat psycho-social interviews with each of them. I selected twenty-two men and women whom I interviewed on at least two occasions each. I decided to interview British born men and women aged between forty and fifty-five years old who had children. I selected the majority of my sample group through a convenience and snowball sampling method. Contacts often referred me to people or friends who they felt had enough time to be interviewed. This was therefore mainly women who worked primarily in part-time jobs. Men in general and women of a higher educational level were harder to access. I then

advertised at the university in the hope of obtaining a gender and educational balance in my sample but the only people to respond were highly educated men and unfortunately no women. Another problem with this sampling method was that two of the respondents did not fit the sampling criteria precisely - Jeff did not have children and Theresa was originally from Australia - however these facts were not discovered until part way through the interview. I decided to keep them in the interview sample however, as Jeff provided an interesting contrast in terms of the markings of his life events (which is discussed in more detail in the chapter *Growing Up and Growing Old*) and Theresa had lived more than half her life in the UK and her experiences of midlife showed no significant difference from the other women I interviewed despite her differing upbringing.

Despite some of the problems of a snowball sample it proved to be a fruitful way to access people who are in the midlife period. That said, with one of the key foci of my thesis being the exploration of definitions of midlife it was therefore difficult to decide how to select a 'middle-aged' sample group. By selecting an age range for the category of midlife I was predefining midlife before the interviewees themselves had defined it. I considered that it would have been better to ask for volunteers who considered themselves 'middle-aged' but this would automatically exclude those people within the targeted midlife age range who do not feel 'middle-aged'. This posed a conundrum which I do not feel was ever satisfactorily resolved. I decided that since modern definitions tended not to categorise midlife in the thirties I would place the lower age bracket at forty. The upper age bracket I set at fifty-five years old simply because I had initially planned to make reference to Paul Thompson's study *On the Edge of Later Life* which was later written into a book entitled *I Don't Feel Old* (1991) and looks at the experiences of ageing

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amongst though aged fifty-five to sixty years old. However, I eventually chose not to use Thompson's study in this thesis as I wanted to focus primarily on my own primary data. Furthermore I became more flexible about the boundaries of the age categories and eventually interviewed one person who was fifty-eight and one who was thirty-nine.

I felt it was important to look at the midlife experiences of both men and women and so I tried to interview an equal number of men and women. In the end the sample consisted of twelve women and ten men. I wanted to investigate the different ways in which men and women experience and think about ageing, whether there are any common elements between their experiences and sampling from both genders offered me an interesting point for comparison. Moreover, gender affects life expectancy and the position people see themselves in the life cycle so this too was an important factor. There are some experiences which are stereotypically gendered, for instance the "empty nest", care-roles and the physical changes to the body. I wanted to see whether these presuppositions about ageing and gender still hold true. I felt a study simply on one gender or the other might have taken the study in a particular direction, for example towards a history of work with the men, or a history of the family for women. Sexuality was another variable to consider and although I recognised that it would inevitably be an important factor to consider, particularly in a comparative study of ageing, there was not enough scope in this study to encompass the experiences of different sexualities. The resulting sample was entirely heterosexual. I did not deliberately factor in or out the issue of sexuality, but rather sampled on the basis of whether the interviewee had children or not and if the issue of sexuality arose in the interview then it would have been taken into account. As it was there were no interviewees who self-defined as other than heterosexual.

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I chose to interview people who had had children, whether they lived with them or not. I suggest that having children is an important factor for a number of reasons. Firstly, the experience of an 'empty-nest'[4], when children become old enough to leave home and become independent, is an aspect of midlife which I thought would be an interesting aspect for investigation. Secondly I suggested that having children is an important element of the generational shift (which is discussed in more detail in chapter five) and often gives the parent a different outlook on life and also on death. Finally, there is a strong likelihood that having had children presumes that there had been an intimate and most likely serious relationship or marriage at some point in that person's life. I proposed that looking at personal relationships could be a significant and interesting point of exploration in the life stories of my interviewees, particularly in terms of how a sense of loss or anxiety may be evoked by the death of parents or by children leaving the family home.

Although 'place' was not a factor which I accounted for, all interviewees came from towns similar in size and profile, from South Wales, Mid Wales, Suffolk, North and South Essex. There were no interviewees from large cities. This perhaps may have had added another interesting dimension to the sample in terms of their inter-personal relationships and lifestyle choices. I did however specifically sample those people who were born or were raised in Britain since at least the age of three years old. One interviewee (Jeanette) was a black woman, who had lived in the UK all her life. All other interviewees could be classed as Caucasian. One interviewee (Anna) was born in Cyprus, but had been raised in the UK. Teresa had been born and raised in Australia but had lived

[4] http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/womenshealth/features/ens.htm

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in the UK since the age of 25. I did not realise this information until half way through the interview, but I decided to include her anyway as her background in Australia did not appear to have any significant influence on the way she viewed her midlife experience. Rob was British born but spent some time living in Singapore as a child. All other interviewees were British born and raised. To take into consideration other cultures would be very interesting for further studies to consider, but one reason for choosing only British people is due to the feasibility of the study and access to participants. Another reason for this group is that there have been fairly recent demographic changes in Britain with regards to an increasingly aged population and changes in the ages at which people become parents, both of which have an interesting effect on the experiences which occur in the midlife period with regards to when parents die or need care and also in terms of when children might be expected to leave home.

Although I suggest that religion was another potentially very important factor to consider, particularly in relation to how people think about death issues, loss and bereavement, I decided not to factor this specifically into my sample. I chose not to factor it in because in previous research which I have conducted on this topic I found that faith was very idiosyncratic and that even when people were part of a wider religious organisation the way that they used religion in their everyday lives varied significantly. I therefore thought it was important to ask about people's beliefs in the interview but not pre-determine the sample based on particular religious groups. Furthermore by stratifying my sample it implies that that aspect of the sample was significant and in my case I am not looking for differences and similarities between ethnicities and religions and it would create the a priori assumption that they think differently, whereas I am looking for commonality between interviewees' experiences.

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The final variable for consideration was class. I felt that this was an important factor for consideration in a study on midlife for a number of reasons. Firstly, life expectancy is slightly lower for those of a lower socio-economic status[5] and although this may not change the midlife individual's subjective viewpoint of their exact position in their life cycle according to the average number of years they have got left, the chances are higher that they may have witnessed the deaths of more people at younger ages thus this may increase their awareness of personal mortality. Secondly, people of a lower economic status are more likely to have children at a younger age and to have more children than those of a higher economic status[6]. These factors could all impact on the family structure and have a significant impact on the experiences of those in midlife. For example if those of a higher socio-economic status have fewer children is the experience of the empty nest more profound because they put more investment in their smaller family?

I found that there were many different ways of classifying class. Most commonly class can be identified through occupation and I decided to generally define the class of my interviewees according to an occupation classification scale (The Market Research Society (MRS) 6th edition, 2006). In the post-interview stage I established which of these occupational categories my interviewees could be placed in. I took into consideration the occupations of partners as they could be placed in a different category, particularly if a woman has stayed at home with the children and her partner has a managerial role. Class was not a predefining factor of my sample group but was rather a factor which I

[5] Table 1 Life Expectancy at birth and at age 65 by social class, men, England and Wales 1972-2005, in Trends in Life Expectancy by social class 1972-2005 <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/Life_Expect_Social_class_1972-05/life_expect_social_class.pdf>

[6] The Office of National Statistics (ONS) reports that people of a lower economic status are more likely to have children at a younger age and to have more children than those of a higher economic status in its *Geographic Variations in Health - Decennial Supplement DS16*

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established after each interview and kept in mind throughout my analysis. See appendix 2 for a more comprehensive profile of my interviewees' class composition. Most interviewees fitted into a lower middle class or working class category.

Conventional social science sampling takes into account a certain set of characteristics such as 'age, sex, class, ethnicity, occupation and specific life experiences' (Mason, J, 2001, 86) however as Mason pointed out,

> …a representative sample constructed in this manner is representative only in terms of these known and specified characteristics of these known and specified sampleable units (that is, people). It is not necessarily representative in every possible sense (empirical or theoretical), but only in relation to the particular classification system used (2001, 86).

In other words, I cannot attempt to cover and explain every variable which may have an effect. Nevertheless I decided to take into account the variables which could be important for consideration in selecting my sample group as I think the study could become increasingly complicated and subsequently weakened by a completely ad-hoc group. The diverse experiences which may arise from factoring in variables such as culture or religion may render the process of establishing links and identifying commonalities a very difficult process and with such a small sample group there is little room for huge diversity at this level amongst the respondents. My results relate specifically to this sample group and cannot be made fully generalisable to the whole population; nevertheless they offer an important insight into the experience of midlife.

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Implementing the Method

I used a psycho-social method as developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) in *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, in which they suggested that the incorporation of psychoanalysis into social research methods required a very specific interview technique and new ways of analysing the information gathered. In their own research they conducted two interviews with each interviewee. To begin they used a free association technique in a life story or biographical interviewing technique keeping the questioning style as open as possible and letting the interviewee's ideas, views and story to emerge as much as possible in their own words. This free association method follows the direction of the interviewee's 'ordering and phrasing' of their story (2000, 53). It also allowed the interviewer to look critically at any inconsistencies and contradictions, which could then be checked in the second interview through a series of narrative questions based upon the first interview. The second interview was an opportunity to ask some more structured questions in order to make some comparisons between interviewees. It involved asking 'tailor made' questions based on issues which seemed to cause the conflicts in the narrative. The interviewing process was then followed by a detailed analysis of the experience as a whole including the relationship between the interviewee and myself, the emotions involved, examining the words in the transcript and a careful consideration of the narrative construction.

Like Hollway and Jefferson I also conducted two interviews with each interviewee and on occasion I conducted three interviews. I originally aimed for the interviews to be one week apart but due to practical and geographical constraints this was not always possible and the gap between was sometimes up to a couple of months. This method of double

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interviewing my participants was a valuable one as it enabled me to explore some of the psychodynamics of the first interview and to take into consideration this in the second interview. I was able to follow up on leads, hunches and ideas which arose in the first interview. The first interview was more open-ended than the second. Although I took inspiration from Hollway and Jefferson's method of interviewing I did not follow it rigidly. A free association method requires a certain amount of courage and it is too easy to revert to the security of the interview schedule and its predefined questions. In the initial stages of interviewing there was the constant worry and danger that without this safety net the conversation will dry up and I would not know how to develop a certain lead. I think using a schedule gives the interviewer a degree of control over the interview, control over the interviewee and even control over themselves to ask the right questions in the right way. It took a few attempts with my own interviewees to relinquish some of this control over the interviews, and although I asked some questions I tried as far as possible in my later interviews to allow the interviewees' narratives to develop according to their own line of thinking.

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I also found that a free association method is quite an anxiety provoking experience for both the interviewer and interviewee. Asking someone to tell me their life story with little or any interjection can be a difficult and uncomfortable process. I felt that to use a purely free association method would have been counter-productive. I was interested in the anxieties related to the topic of ageing rather than the artificially induced anxieties that were heightened in the interview process. Of course, I recognise that any interview can be anxiety-provoking when neither party knows precisely what will happen and they do not know one another. The anxiety that the interview situation necessarily evokes unfortunately cannot be completely controlled for in such a study, but being aware and

reflexive about this possibility can go some way to differentiating it from anxieties relating to particular issues related to ageing. The free association method however induces, in my opinion, unnecessarily high levels of stress which need not be experienced and could potentially hinder the whole process. I felt instead it was more important to let interviewees speak quite freely but to gently guide them down particular areas of interest (for me) without using too many predetermined questions. Although the schedule was dispensed with at an early stage, naturally it became partially internalised and I often ended up asking similar questions or guiding a topic in a certain direction.

My first interview was with Jack, and too insecure to rely simply on his free associations, I used a detailed interview schedule[7]. My interview schedule consisted of questions relating to childhood, education, information about family members and the relationships with them, work history and future work plans, attitude to retirements, experiences of and attitudes towards ageing, physical changes in midlife, general health throughout the life course and particularly now in midlife, attitudes towards physical appearance, experiences of bereavement, thoughts about their own deaths, religion throughout their lives and now, early ambitions and future ambitions, how they felt about their life choices and what were their future plans.

I found Jack's interview to be one of the least successful interviews that I conducted. The conversation was rather stilted and I felt that my schedule had almost become a questionnaire. I was firing questions with Jack responding in brief, to the point answers. There was little room for him to elaborate and I did not get much of a sense of his story.

[7] See appendix 4 for full interview schedule, but this was adapted for each respondent.

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He was just answering my questions. This left me little room in the analysis to look at his narrative construction or for understanding more subtle nuances in his story which could give an indication to his unconscious thought processes. In my next interview with Rob I took along my interview schedule again, but this time dared to venture from its structure. This proved to be an interesting interview because although the safety net was still there, Rob still led me through his life story instead of me predefining it. In the interviews that followed I took along the schedule but used it very loosely, more to cover particular areas of interest and to ensure certain biographical details were covered rather than to determine the interview's direction. After the third interview I only used the schedule in the follow up interviews, whilst allowing for a more open-ended method in the first.

I was aware however, that the interview still remained slightly structured according to my internalised agenda. Moreover, it was important to remember the focus of the interview too as I found that in using a free association method it risked developing possibly irrelevant leads, which although they might be interesting and say something about the interviewee did not relate in any way to the initial research question. I became slightly concerned that perhaps the issues that I wanted to get covered might not come up, because the interviewee just had not thought about it in that period of time. I was critically aware that although Hollway and Jefferson's insights into the lives of their interviewees were very interesting and they made some useful links between the narrative inconsistencies and the unconscious process at work, they did not always make the connection explicit between the way they use this method and what it told them about the fear of crime.

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During the interview I took mental notes about my interviewees' body language, verbal and bodily expression, the use of the physical space, demeanour and presentation of self, which I then wrote down immediately after the interviews. I also kept a comprehensive record of my own impressions and feelings about each interview. A psycho-social approach requires critical reflection by the interviewer in order to monitor the process. The psycho-social interviewer needs to be constantly questioning 'why has this person said this?', 'why at this moment?' and just as importantly 'why did I respond in this way and how did it reflect the interview?' (Roper, 2003, 27). This is where the issues of transference and counter-transference come into play; the psycho-social interviewer needs to be constantly questioning their reflexivity asking 'why did they make me feel like that?' and 'how did I deal with it?' and 'how did that affect the interview?' Frosh and Baraitser described reflexivity as requiring the researcher to

> keep an honest gaze on what s/he brings to the research process: how s/he sets it up, what is communicated to the subject, what differences of race, class, gender etc might prevail and what impact they might have, and how her/his actions might influence the subject's own active meaning-making activities (2008, 359)

Both interviewer and interviewee necessarily bring in their own personal and emotional biographies into the interview encounter and they will form impressions about each other based upon these backgrounds. This however these positions are not fixed and are constantly adapting throughout the encounter. It is the exploration of these dynamics which can be a valuable technique for supplementing the analysis. I have to agree with Wendy Hollway's response to such criticism. She said,

> I am one of those who believe that psychoanalysis is key to a psycho-social approach. I have found no other body of theory that so illuminates experience, action, and subjectivity in ways that enrich otherwise reductively social accounts (2008, 386)

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I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

The Analysis

All my interviews were transcribed in full, but I believe that by simply examining the words in a transcript the researcher risks missing out on a rich level of data which comes through taking into account the emotional experience of the interview at the time and through an exploration of their own emotional reactions to the data post-interview as well. I propose one of the key principles of psycho-social research is a full immersion into the data, that is, getting 'under the skin' of your interviewee and analysing the smallest gestures or moments of counter-transference. As Holloway and Jefferson said in their analytic process, they felt 'inhabited by that person in the sense that our imagination was full of him or her' (2000, 69). However, due to difficult personal circumstances during this period although I would have liked to have spent more time on this process, I was limited as to what was realistically possible. As it was, I fully transcribed a few of my interviews myself but the rest I paid to have transcribed. Once I had my transcripts returned I read through and annotated them in great detail. I also listened back to the tapes again allowing myself to again become immersed in the interviewees' stories and feelings. I made self-reflexive notes during this process of revisiting the transcripts asking 'how did I feel at particular points in the interview?' 'How do I feel now when looking back over it?' I also read over the post-interview field observation notes to situate myself back in that experience.

By the time I had read through all my transcribed interviews, the amount of information I had gathered seemed overwhelming. Holloway and Jefferson discuss the principle of

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Gestalt, stating that it 'is based on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' and that 'we can appreciate better the Gestalt principle if it is understood also as the internal capacity for holding those data together in the mind' (2000, 69). At this stage it is tempting to revert to qualitative computer software to help cope with all the information that needs to be systematically organised. Hollway and Jefferson warn against such analytic procedures as they feel that the fragmentation of data means that the complete picture is often lost (2000, 69) They warn that qualitative data programmes 'offers increasingly sophisticated ways of not holding the data as a whole in the mind, precisely as it affords ways of holding it outside of the mind' (2000, 68-69). I did use a qualitative data analysis package (MaxQDA), which I think was an indication of the early anxiety I felt about the overwhelming nature of the data. The process of using a CAQDAS package such as MaxQDA involved uploading the interview transcripts, reading through them and identifying themes in the data. These chunks of data were then extracted and analysed. Whereas an entire analysis could be based on this process, I used the system very sparingly to code people according to where they were in the life cycle and to look at patterns in the biographical situations of my interviewees. Instead the majority of my data analysis was done through a process of free association on the transcripts. This involved having a transcript in front of me, immersing myself back into the situation of the interview, reflecting upon the feelings that are evoked and also reflecting on what I am reminded of when I am reading through the data.

I was mindful of fragmenting my data and losing sight of the interview as a whole. I did not want to lose the subtleties between the links within the interviews nor did I want to lose to emotional experience of the interview which formed the very basis of a psycho-social approach. The basic coding and categorisation of my data proved useful but I was

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also careful to re-examine and re-focus my analysis back on to the interviews as a whole once this initial coding was completed. Moreover, I learnt to trust myself to be able to hold and contain my interviewees' stories in a more affective way. Their stories and emotional transferences had already been experienced be me and were already in my mind, it was just about me trusting myself to cope with this initially overwhelming experience.

Although I recognised their value in terms of the richness of data that they can provide, I did not use detailed case studies in my analysis. This is firstly because of practical limitations; they would have taken a huge amount of my word count. Moreover, this is a sociological thesis and without the thematic analysis I could be accused of presenting a thesis which is too psychoanalytical in its format. Instead I wrote my analysis in a thematic way but also incorporated rich descriptions and some mini cases studies throughout.

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Another important factor that I had to remember in analysing my data was the recognition that biographies are by their very nature multifaceted and messy. They are full of incoherencies and contradictions, which as a researcher I had to relinquish control over. Sometimes two parallel and contradictory arguments could come together in the same biography and instead of me trying to make the story sound polished and correct, it is important to recognise that the story naturally contained these opposing sides. For instance in Patricia's interview she described her childhood growing up in East London as 'idyllic' yet goes on to describe how her father accidentally ran over and killed her younger brother when they were children. In my post-interview notes about her interview

I wrote ‘I was thinking what is so idyllic about that?’ There were many other examples in all the interviews where contradiction was rife. However, this is the nature of life stories and narrative generally; they are naturally messy and complicated. There may well have been elements of Patricia’s childhood that were idyllic but one element of it that clearly was not. Moreover, interviews and all social encounters are to some degree about impression management (Goffman, 1959). I wrote about Patricia that

> She likes to give the impression that she is ‘fun’ or ‘mad’. Her daughter had a job interview that day and when Patricia spoke to her on the phone she found out that she had been asked to say three words that describe herself. Patricia said that if she had been asked that question she would have said “a bit mad”, “talks too much”, and “nice-or something to that effect”.

The fact that she is trying to present a fun, happy image I think contributed to her telling me that her childhood was idyllic. It presented to me a happy, safe picture, which was then contradicted through her other stories, revealing a more traumatic and emotionally difficult level to the narrative which I felt was being masked somewhat by her conscious self-presentation. It was this multifaceted nature of life and the balance between positive and negative experiences which became an important theme, particularly in the third final analysis chapter in which it was argued that one of the important developmental elements of the midlife period is the acknowledgment of the imperfections of life and the acceptance of these inadequacies and failings.

Psycho-Social Studies: Origins and Debates

Acknowledging and understanding the complexity of the relationship between the society and individual psychology is far from being a new idea and is one that has been rigorously debated in the social sciences and in psychoanalysis. It is therefore important

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at this point to briefly note the disciplinary location of psycho-social studies and the way in which I am using them in this thesis.

There has been a long history of debate between sociology and its relationship with psychoanalysis, as Clarke points out that 'psychoanalysis as both a discipline and practice has been at the centre of a long-standing philosophical and sociological debate regarding its epistemological basis' (2002, 191). The main point of contestation is that Freud, as a result of his academic background as a doctor or medicine and a neurophysiologist, developed psychoanalysis as a scientific practice and viewed drives and instincts as essentially biological in nature. This did not fit comfortably with the more subjective sociological understandings of human emotion, and as Clarke (2006) pointed out this left psychoanalysis open to criticism from the discipline of sociology.

Freud did eventually, in his later work, acknowledge the link between the psyche and society and indeed he explored the way in which societal norms, values and control were psychically internalised within the unconscious in the form of the superego, and moreover looked at the way in which society and culture were also forms of embodied psychic processes (Freud, 1927). Writing in his book *Civilisation and its Discontents* (2002, [1929c]) Freud recognised the integrated nature of the relationship between the individual and society. He stated 'just as a planet revolves around a central body as well as rotating on its own axis, so the human individual takes part in the course of development of mankind at the same time as he pursues his own path in life' (2002, [1929c], 88). In this seminal book he illustrates the conflict which he sees as existing between the instinctual urges of the individual and the ways in which society controls them.

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The term ‘psycho-social’ historically has tended to refer more specifically to sociological explanations for psychological conditions, for example Karl Figlio claimed that James Halliday in 1948 coined the new term ‘psychosocial medicine’ (Figlio, 1998, 80), which took into account sociological explanations for seemingly psychological conditions such as shell shock. The field of psycho-social studies began to recognise these conflicting forces and the tension which exists between the internality of the individual and the external, social world. Clarke points out that it was the work that emerged from the Frankfurt School which presented the first real ‘synthesis between sociological and psychoanalytic thinking both in theory and practice’ (Clarke, 2006, 1156). Horkheimer and Adorno (1994 [1974]) offered one of the first psycho-social accounts of racism, and there were other Frankfurt School scholars also made significant psychoanalytic contributions to sociology, such as Bauman (1989), Fromm (1941), Marcuse (1956), and Habermas (1968). It was in Habermas’ (1968) *Knowledge and Human Interests*, where the importance of self-reflection was first recognised as a means to free ourselves from the constraints imposed on our internal forces through repression and on our external forces through ideology (Habermas, 1968 and Clarke 2006). Furthermore, he highlighted the way in which psychoanalysis can help uncover distortions and meanings in everyday language (Habermas, 1968 and Clarke 2006). These are important founding techniques in psycho-social studies, particularly as set out in Hollway and Jefferson’s method. This is discussed further throughout this chapter.

Psycho-social studies have begun to re-emerge in more recent scholarly practice and contemporary debates, and have developed and advanced psychoanalytic sociology, perhaps as a further conciliatory attempt to bridge this divide between the two

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disciplines[8]. Hollway and Jefferson's book *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000), has influenced a relatively small but significant number of studies using a psycho-social method, which include Simon Clarke's studies into racism (2000a, 2000b), Stephen Frosh et al.'s study of masculinities (2002, 2003) and Valerie Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) study entitled *Growing Up Girl*. Despite being a highly influential source for many sociologists seeking to integrate psychoanalysis into their sociological method, Hollway and Jefferson's psycho-social approach has also attracted its critics. Despite his earlier favour with Hollway and Jefferson's method, Stephen Frosh along with Lisa Baraitser wrote a highly critical paper *Psychoanalysis and Psychosocial Studies* in the 2008 edition of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, which sparked a great interest and wide ranging debate from across sociology, psychoanalysis and psycho-social studies. It was followed (in the same issue) by commentaries from Paul Hoggett, Derek Hook, Michael Rustin, as well as from Jefferson and from Hollway (writing individually). These commentaries both further critiqued or came in support of Hollway and Jefferson's contribution. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) were critical of psycho-social studies generally and particularly targeted Hollway and Jefferson method. They disliked 'the loose and sometimes pious way in which psychoanalysis has been theorized within psychosocial studies' (2008, 346) as well as its 'strong individualizing tendencies' and the '"top-down", expert-knowledge epistemological strategies' which are accompanied by 'an interpretive practice that seems always to know best, or at least to know subjects better than they know themselves' (2008, 347). In a later follow-up commentary Burman (2008) also agreed with Frosh and Baraitser's disapproval of the way in which Hollway and Jefferson's psycho-social method (mis)use 'psychoanalytic discourse, such as transference and counter-transference' and argues that it can in fact 'close down the very arenas for interrogation it

[8] Clarke makes the distinction between psychoanalytic sociology, which he states has 'tended to be based in social theory' (2006, 1161), and psycho-social studies which 'has had more of a focus on practice' (ibid).

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was invoked to address' (Burman, 2008). I believe that these debates have reawakened psycho-social studies and have brought back into academic consciousness (eight years after the original publication) Hollway and Jefferson's relatively pioneering psycho-social method and the influence it has had in this field.

Hollway and Jefferson wrote *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000) almost like a methodological 'how to guide' for psycho-social methods. I would now like to turn to my understanding of their method and explain how I have applied their ideas to my own research. I conclude the chapter with a discussion, which addresses some of the critiques of their method.

A psycho-social method, as set out by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) adopts some techniques commonly employed in clinical psychoanalysis and applies them to the social research interview and its subsequent analysis. It pays close attention to emotions, thoughts, motivations and whereas some sociological interviews tend to acknowledge these features only at a conscious level, a psycho-social interviewer would also take into account unconscious dynamics and processes. The production of data in a psycho-social interview comes from the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, both of whom come to the interview situation with their own anxieties, defences and histories which can affect the material that is created in the interview. Hollway and Jefferson stated that in their research using this method they,

> …intend to construe both the researcher and researched as anxious defended subjects, whose mental boundaries are porous where unconscious material is concerned. This means that both will be subject the projections and introjections of ideas and feelings coming from the other person. It also means that the impressions that we have about each other are not derived simply from the 'real'

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> relationship, but that what we say and do in the interaction will be mediated by internal fantasies which derive from our histories of significant relationships (2000, 45).

I suggest that being aware of the unconscious processes at work in the interview can give the researcher a deeper insight into the motivations of the interviewee in the way that they construct their stories. I support the idea that in all interviews the interviewee is, what Hollway and Jefferson call, 'defended'; and this is particularly true in interviews dealing with highly sensitive or emotional topics, such as the themes that I am interested in- that of ageing, loss, disappointment and death. I would argue, as Hollway and Jefferson have, that a defended subject may not tell you the full story, whether that is a conscious or unconscious effort. Some things are too difficult to talk about or to express often because they threaten to break down emotional defences. By becoming aware of the defences and the underlying reasons for these can also result in an enriched understanding of the interviewees' deep rooted feelings and enables the interviewer to recognise the undercurrent of emotions which underpin the socially acceptable front which is performed on a much more conscious level. Every interviewee is necessarily psychically defended - everyone has an unconscious which contains motivations, instincts and impulses which are constrained by the social world in which they live. In different social situations this struggle between the inner and outer world fluctuates, making the individual more or less defended depending on the circumstances. The interview setting is a unique one. It is not every day that you are sat in front of a stranger as an interviewee and expected to reveal intimate details of your life and feelings. For some people this creates a deep sense of anxiety. An example of this comes from my interview with Jeanette in which I made some field notes which reflected this defensive attitude. She was a difficult person to interview in that she gave very succinct and short answers and did not offer up any information whilst the tape recorder was on, yet as soon as the 'formality' of the

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interview was over she started to talk freely about her relationships. I spent longer with her after the interview than I did in the interview encounter. This is one of the notes I made following our meeting.

> [After the interview] She started talking about her relationships. She was with a man for ten years who she bought the house with and had the twins with. I said "perhaps we could talk about that in more detail next time" and she replied "oh perhaps not. I am very guarded about things like that. When I don't want to talk about something I block it out". She put her hand to her face like a shield as she said that.

In this extract Jeanette recognises her almost deliberate attempt to be evasive and defensive in the face of my questions, yet it was interesting how she opened up to me once the 'interview' was over. The presence of a tape recorder and the formal format of sitting down to talk made her particularly defended on this occasion. However, interviewees can be defended in a number of ways. Jeanette's defence was more recognisable than most and even tangible in the way that she held her hand like a shield in front of her face. Some people may appear to be open, helpful and talkative in an interview but they may be defended at a more psychical level. For example being too talkative could be a way of controlling the situation and not letting me in to question anything. Shirley's interview was like this in that she wanted me to follow her agenda in the interview. Moreover, defences tend to operate more rigorously when they approach the most difficult and sensitive elements of the unconscious. Certain topics will evoke psychic defences such as denial, repression, sublimation and projection. In this study I found that themes which touched upon the experience of loss, grief, fear and disappointment often evoked defensive mechanisms which I needed to analyse in order to access this unconscious level of emotional material.

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One example of this came from a rather unusual experience with my interviewee Rob (aged 50). Rob was one of my father's former work colleagues whom I had never met before. At the end of the interview when the recorder had been packed away he said 'right the spotlight's on you now', literally turning his spot lamp onto my face. He then said 'I have some questions for you'. 'Your dad', he said 'what do you think of him?' That took me aback a little and I asked him what he meant more specifically. He said 'well he is a bully' and 'he is very driven and gets other people to do things and then takes the credit for himself'. He went on to talk more unfavourably about my father's character. He said he admired him but it was a 'two-edged sword'. He also said he did not know why my step-mother was with him and how she puts up with him. I was quite shocked by his comments and surprised by his audacity. The interview itself had been very emotional throughout and it had raised some aspects of his past which he had never spoken about before to anyone. Looking more closely at the transference and counter-transference in this interaction about my father. It was a conscious verbal attack on my father, but why did he do that and why did he do that at that moment? He was making some quite bold comments but they were not said in a particularly nasty manner, instead there was a negative undercurrent of ill-ease, frustration and aggression. It felt as if my father and I were both being attacked in this unconscious negative transference.

My father had suggested Rob as a potential interviewee, I had then contacted him and he was then willingly interviewed. Although Rob claimed to find being interviewed an interesting experience, I suggest that his unconscious attack on my father was retaliation for putting him up for this experience. He wanted, in part, to get at my father through me. It was also an attack on me for arousing painful memories which he had felt more comfortable keeping hidden in his unconscious- I had lifted the lid on a boiling pot of

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emotions and he wanted someone to blame for the discomfort he was feeling. In fact through this encounter Rob revealed important elements of his experience of being in midlife.

One interpretation that I made was that he had spoken very openly about very intimate matters such as the tragic death of his first "true love" when he was in his twenties and his consequent inability to form and maintain romantic relationships. This has led to him feeling quite bitter and cheated that he should be single and lonely at the age of fifty, when he should have had his wife there with him and with children and grandchildren around him. He had a vision of what midlife should have been for him and he needed someone or something to blame for the fact that he was not where he thought he would be and for not having achieved everything he wanted to have done by this point in his life. This is an example of what Ian Craib called a *Bad Faith Narrative* (2000); Rob blamed his past for his current problems and seemed unable to move forward with his life, which frustrated and angered him. His attack on my father seemed an envious attack. Unconsciously he was saying 'why has this guy, who is a bully and who I don't like, got more than me? He has his children and grandchildren close, a better job than me, a nice house and most of all he has a lovely wife and daughters'. 'Why is it that he can have a nice wife, family and a contented mid-life and I can't?' The envy seems evident and it is as if he needs to destroy the good that my father has, as if Rob is saying unconsciously 'if I can't have these things then why should someone else, least of all someone less deserving'. Moreover Rob's feelings of guilt and anger about the loss of his fiancé turned into anger and guilt at revealing emotions from his past which have been kept deeply buried and defended against. These feelings of anger and guilt become too much of a

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burden and so they are projected onto my father and me, which in turn leads to feelings of guilt about having interviewed this man and anger against his remarks.

In the immediacy of this post-interview interaction I found it difficult to be empathetic to Rob's situation. Whereas I had empathised with him previously over the death of his fiancé, as it resonated with my own experiences, this was now spoilt by his projections and transference and my reacting counter-transference. I had become psychologically split- I did not want to deal with this negative material and transference. Abend stated that 'it can be extraordinarily difficult to maintain an empathic, non-judgmental stance toward an analysand who is caught up in expressing hostile, derogatory, or embittered feelings toward an analogous figure in his own life' (Abend, 1986). At this moment with this interviewee an empathetic approach did not and could not operate, yet this did not mean that the interview relationship could not continue successfully. When receiving such a negative transference it would be quite easy to abandon the interaction or retaliate irrationally or impulsively. In moments like this though it is still important, and perhaps more so, to contain and work through the counter-transference, later developing an interpretation on the negative emotional material which was brought to the interaction in order to maintain and continue the relationship with the interviewee as well as to interpret the revealing undertones of the verbal narrative. This example helps to highlight the importance of examining the 'total situation' (Joseph, 1983) in a psycho-social interview. His defensive mechanisms, which were operating in response to the difficult emotions that had been evoked by the interview, were played out in a most dramatic fashion. Had I not been aware of the psychodynamics features of projective-identification, transference and counter-transference, I might have sought to lead Rob onto less hostile and safer ground in the encounter or simply dismissed him as offensive.

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It should also be noted that my account of this encounter with Rob runs the risk of being accused of over-interpretivistic. There are of course other possible explanations, such as my own defence of my father in creating this account. There may have been other factors that I am unaware of which could have contributed to a strained relationship, particularly from the work environment and the relationship between Rob and my father. Nevertheless, I believe this was an unconscious attack and I argue that this demonstrated and highlighted some of the more unconscious emotional dynamics which were encountered in this interview.

Using Psychoanalytic Tools: Exploring the Transference and Counter-transference

In the previous example I introduced some of the tools by which psycho-social interviewers can help gain access to the unconscious emotions that animate psychic defence mechanisms. Psychoanalysis works on the acknowledgement and awareness of defences and resistances and seeks an interpretation of them. Badcock described resistance as existing 'in order to prevent the conscious mind from becoming painfully aware of some unpleasant mental conflict' (1988, 107). Perhaps one of the most important techniques for identifying and interpreting defences in psycho-biographical interviewing involves analysing the clinical terms transference and counter-transference.

There is much debate between the schools of thought about the precise definition of the terms transference and counter-transference. Freud, who discovered and defined transference, first claimed that transference referred to a re-enactment of a significant sexual relationship in the patient's past, he later suggested that it went deeper than that and could be associated with primary love objects from infancy during the Oedipal

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period, and it was this love relationship that was being projected onto the analyst (Freud, 1912 and Symington, 1986, 107). For Freud the point of analysis was to trace back antecedents to childhood experiences and Freud's early definition of transference was that 'the term transference connotes the amalgamation of repressed, infantile, object-libidinal urges with (pre) conscious strivings that are related to objects in the present' (Kohut, 1971, 24). For Kleinian theorists everything that is brought to the session is transference i.e. dreams, experiences and everything that is said. Kleinian theorists believe that in the process of transference, internal object relationships are externalised. The analyst temporarily represents the internalised parent in order for the patient to project their unconscious feelings and phantasies onto him. Klein suggests that 'in the transference on the analyst the patient repeats earlier emotions and conflicts' (Klein in Mitchell, 1986, 46). However, unlike Freudian analysis the emphasis for Kleinians may be more on the situation 'now' rather than the situation as it was in the past.

Modern definitions of transference, such as those used by Roper (2003) and Craib (2001), generally refer to the projection of past experiences and relationships onto the analyst and their reactions to them as experienced in the here and now, present-day situation. Transference could then refer as Roper says of the clinical setting, 'to the enactment of emotional fragments of past relationships in the present, and the manner in which they re-appear in the immediate situation of the analysis. Counter-transference by contrast is concerned with the analyst's feelings' (2003, 21). These transferences are most evident when the emotional content of the particular interaction is significantly high.

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Freud viewed counter-transference as a hindrance to the analytic process. He said that the analyst should be a 'blank screen' and refrain from showing the patient his feelings or sharing his experiences with him. Many psychoanalysts would argue that it is virtually impossible for the analyst to remain completely objective as he brings into the analysis his own 'active conscious' (Craib, 2001, 201) and his own emotional issues and insecurities. However some would agree that it is necessary to remain as neutral as far as possible in order to recognise the counter transference and to use it as a 'therapeutic tool' (Sandler, 1973, 69) in the interpretation, as well as allowing the patient's own material to be given priority (Craib, 2001, 201).

If we consider how this operates in an interview setting, the emotions that the interviewer experiences become an important element of insight into the relationship and the issues that have become the focus of the encounter. The interviewer is able to question why the interviewee aroused these emotions in him and what it says about the situation. Also if the interviewer is able to tolerate these feelings, it enables the interviewee in turn to realise that they can be experienced without serious negative consequences (Brenman Pick, 1985). Brenman Pick said that in the clinical setting 'the analyst allows himself to have the experiences, work through and transform them into a useful interpretation' (Brenman Pick, 1985, 166). It is important that the analyst or interviewer is comfortable in experiencing strong emotions and is able to use them in a constructive manner for interpretation. One of the roles of the psycho-social researcher (like the analyst) is to recognise the counter-transference and manage it in a controlled way. Just as an analyst does, the psycho-social interviewer 'contains' the emotions and creates a safe environment in which the interviewee is able to access and express parts of their subconscious without the risk of being judged, criticised or mocked. By adopting a

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psycho-social approach to the analysis of an interview encounter and the resulting data, it allowed me to take into consideration the incoherencies, gaps and contradictions in a story and highlights the 'emotional sub-texts' which are often unaccounted for in other forms of sociological analysis (Day Sclater, 2000, 132). Frosh and Baraitser stated that

> An object-relational psychoanalytic reading therefore goes "behind" the text, as the positions that individuals construct through their talk are taken to be indicative of anxieties, defences and particular ways of relating that develop in infancy and recur throughout their lives (2008, 353)

It is for example interesting to look at what is included and what is excluded in a narrative. It is important not to see these silences as obstacles, but rather to analyse slips between recollections as the key to the interpretation. Silences can provide clues to the subjectivity and to the way the memory is framed. Craib wrote in his paper *Narrative as Bad Faith* that narratives are often defensive and used to conceal 'difficult aspects of subjective life, or subject's 'true' feelings of, for example, guilt, shame or envy' (2000, 8). This is where the interviewee will compose a narrative which Roper said 'papers over the psychic reality' (2003, 29). The psycho-social researcher's role is to then peel back the layers of the 'paper' to reveal and understand the emotions beneath the narrative construction. I will return to these themes later in this chapter and throughout this thesis offering examples of how a psycho-social researcher can begin to peel back the layers of narrative in order to access more complex emotional and psychical issues.

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Considering Ethical Issues and Difficulties with this Method

The aim of a psycho-social method is to access powerful emotions which are often deeply hidden in the unconscious and in some cases they are so obscured that they may not even be acknowledged in conscious thought. Sometimes these thoughts are consciously

recognised they may also be too sensitive or intimate to share verbally with other people. There may be emotions which arise in an interview situation such as anxiety, guilt, triumph, terror, grief, fear, anger or fantasies of a sadistic or sexual nature. These are not things people will usually want to verbalise in an interview or even consciously recognise for themselves. However, dealing with and arousing such difficult emotions, or implying their existence through the observation of the transference and counter-transference can have significant ethical implications for the social researcher.

The first point for consideration when using this method is my skills and training in psychoanalytic theory and practice. Psychoanalysts train extensively in theory and practice, so the extent to which a sociological interviewer like me can lay claim to understanding unconscious processes in the same way is an open question. I think some training in psychoanalytic theory is essential for this method because the interviewer needs to be aware of the process taking place in the interview situation and in the analysis stage. Psychoanalytic practice is more difficult for a sociological interviewer to consider as it can take many years of training. Personally, I attended many departmental seminars on psychoanalysis, read, wrote and published articles, presented extensively on the subject and audited two courses on psychoanalysis in the Centre for Psychoanalytic studies- one at an undergraduate level and one at a masters' level. However there is a fundamental difference between psycho-social interviewers and a psychoanalyst that should be noted. Whereas the psychoanalyst might offer interpretations, my aim as a psycho-social interviewer is not to offer interpretation with a therapeutic objective and I refrain from making such interpretations in the interview session. The interpretation should only happen for an interviewer in the process of recording their field notes during the transcribing process and in the analysis of this material.

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In one of the interviews that I conducted, the interview raised some very deeply buried emotions for my interviewee and he was looking for answers from me. It was important for him and me to remember that I am not a counsellor, nor a psychoanalyst, so when I revisited him for his second interview I asked him how he felt about his previous interview. He admitted that he had confided in a friend who proved rather unhelpful and that he did indeed think he needed to work through some of his unresolved issues. As I had been concerned about him I found out about some local counselling/psychoanalytic centres and once he himself asked me for details about counselling I offered him the addresses.

However, a point to be noted is that I felt that difficult feelings were an important part of the interviewing process and as a psycho-social researcher I valued the importance of 'holding' and 'containing' the emotions that were aroused in the encounter. My key ethical concern was how far should one go with difficult subjects? As a researcher I felt I should provide a safe space for the expression of difficult emotions, but I wondered how far my encounters could be and should be 'uncomfortable'. Roper acknowledged the importance of 'sitting with difficult feelings' instead of pushing on through an interview schedule (2003, 29). This entails the ability to contain the counter-transference, processing it, making an interpretation about the unconscious dynamics at that point in the interview and finally making an inference about what this says about the interviewee's inner feelings about a topic. The role of the analyst or in this case the interviewer is, according to Heimann, not to just produce 'mechanical' interpretations but rather to sustain the feelings that are aroused in him rather than discharging them (1989, 82). One example of needing to contain difficult emotions and having to work through the counter-transference came from my interview with Rob, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter.

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The end of his interview was distinctly uncomfortable and it would have been easy to react or to leave the situation, dismissing his emotional 'attack' as simply part of a character trait rather than a psychological state which has been evoked through revisiting painful memories.

It is also important to acknowledge some of the criticisms a psycho-social method and the difficulties of applying techniques from one discipline onto another. Firstly, there have been criticisms about the empirical validity of using psychoanalysis and its basic flaw of unverifiability. Psychoanalysis runs the risk of 'infinite regression' whereby the researcher or analyst keeps looking deeper and deeper into the unconscious for an answer. Hook states for instance, 'we might admit that psychoanalytic interpretation remains always poised on the verge of wild analysis' (2008, 399). So it is very easy for me to ask 'do you fear death?' and if they reply 'no' for me to say it is hidden in their unconscious and if I cannot discover it through my methods saying 'oh it must be a bit deeper then'. However, I am looking for clues which appear through inconsistencies and manifest as parapraxes (such as slips, jokes, body language) or through the behaviour they display in their everyday lives. For example, I suggest my interviewee Rob overfilled his life with activity in order to deny or gloss over the anxieties and sadness he feels about the series of losses he has experienced.

Psychoanalysis also runs the risk of *meaning* becoming so deconstructed that it loses all value. Holloway and Jefferson (2000) dealt with issues of verification by triangulating their interpretations. Ideally I would have liked to triangulate my interpretations, perhaps through small group sessions with fellow academics in which we could have free

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associated on the presented data, yet due to practical restrictions this was unachievable. However, my data has been discussed in detail in supervisory sessions and conferences in which my interpretations have been considered in detail and counter-interpretations offered. Frosh and Baraitser were highly critical of the practice of reflexivity in psycho-social methods in their recent article *Psychosocial Studies and Psychology: Is a Critical Approach Emerging?* They claim,

> Psychoanalysis would regard this kind of reflexivity as both too restricted and too general, in that it recognises social structures and can track interpersonal relation, but has a deeply impoverished vocabulary for describing the inter-subjectivity of the research process- the ways in which each person "uses" the other, unacknowledged and unconsciously (2008, 360)

They go on to say 'there are likely, for example, to be complex unconscious processes interacting with the research work, encouraging some ways of going about things, inhibiting others' (2008, 360). Their argument is that the psycho-social researcher's own interpretations are necessarily constricted and limited by language. So for example, if I was to write reflexive notes about how an interviewee made me feel at a particular time language would restrict how this was expressed and there will be feelings that cannot be captured in this expression. However, I argue that a reflection in a psycho-social interview begins with 'feeling' the emotion that is transferred, firstly in the immediacy of the situation and then in the reflective practice afterwards. Then the expression of that transference will always have to be put into language, whether that is written or oral, and whether that is a psycho-social researcher or an analyst who is offering the interpretation. This is a fundamental and unavoidable flaw of language which unfortunately cannot be overcome if we wish to offer and disseminate these interpretations. The best that can be done by psycho-social researchers and indeed analysts generally is to recognise this

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weakness and maintain their confidence in the expression they give to these unconscious processes.

There are also a number of fundamental differences which should be noted between the sociological interview and the therapeutic encounter. Firstly, whereas in analysis the patient seeks out the analyst, in the interview the researcher seeks out their participant. This has major implications for the ethics of this method for sociology, after all the interviewee has not come to me to be analysed and this may also raise issues about developing interpretations that challenge how people understand themselves. Also in an analytic session the patient pays the analyst for the analysis, which alters the relationship to some degree. The patient expects to get something from the relationship. The act of making a payment creates the patient as a consumer and guides their expectations to some degree, whereas the interviewer/interviewee relationship is voluntary and is based upon trust and generosity. I gave my interviewees a five pound gift voucher after the interview and made no mention of any kind of incentive prior to interviewing them. However, some people were very adamant that they did not want the voucher and that they had not done the interview for that reason, that they had instead done it to help. Rodney was one interview who initially did not want the voucher, but eventually did accept it. I wrote in my post- interview reflections,

> He cried when I gave him the gift voucher...When I gave him the voucher he cried and said "you are just like my daughters you are". I was surprised by his reaction. He was so over the moon.

Reflecting upon that decision to offer a gift voucher I think said something about my own feelings about interviewing. These people gave me so much of their time, energy, hospitality and access to their private worlds that I felt overwhelmingly indebted to them.

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By offering a gift voucher, no matter how small the monetary value, it somehow paid them back but also it closed a mental door for me. By paying them a voucher at the end it cut off that relationship and my guilt of indebtedness felt assuaged. Perhaps this is why some of my interviewees like Rodney were so reluctant to take it- perhaps once they had opened that door to their emotional world, they wanted to keep that open for a bit longer? Perhaps the tears were not about being 'over the moon' as I once thought but rather they were tears for the end of the intense relationship we had briefly formed.

Finally and related to this, is the intensity of the relationship that is developed in psycho-social research interviews. Clinical analysis constructs an interpretation over time based on counter-transference and transference. Analysis often continues for a number of years in numerous intense encounters, whereas the interview is often a one-off experience or at best only a couple meetings. This does not leave much chance for modification and development of emotions around a subject. There is also little opportunity to revisit subjects and attempt to validate certain interpretations.

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One final reflection I have had on this method is the psychological functioning of projective identification in the interview situation. It is not every day that someone sits down and wants to know the intimate ins and outs of your life story and relationships, and this- as I mentioned earlier- can be anxiety-provoking. Moreover, in the interview situation the interviewer does not know their interviewee and vice-versa, so in the interview itself the scope for projective identification is enormous. Each person needs to situate the other in relation to a past relationship as they have no other point of reference. As an interviewer in this state of projective identification a past relationship is psychically

pushed into you by the interviewee and at the same time you project a past relationship into the interviewee. I would now like to turn to an example of how this projective identification was highlighted in one particular interview encounter.

In forty-three-year-old Adrian's interview I found his attitude quite childish and at times he came across like an angst ridden teenager who felt it was so unfair to have parents who held him back from doing what he wanted with his life. He even likened himself to a child at one point saying 'I still think of myself as being really quite young. There is still an eighteen-year-old, ten-year-old inside me' (Adrian aged 43). He had described how he felt his parents had held him back and implied that his life would be easier without them around (this account discussed in more detail in the *Growing Up and Growing Old* chapter). There was also an interesting exchange between us which I think highlighted some of the unconscious feelings he had about this issue with his parents and my own reactions to this. I felt it highlighted the projected identity of an inadequate mother that I felt was being pushed into my psyche and perhaps I had adopted too readily because of my own emotional state at the time.

To put this example into context, at this point in my own life I had been fostering three children, whose mother had died. One of teenage boys I was looking after had been causing me some problems with regards to authority that particular day. I was contending with feeling the need to be a nurturing and disciplining mother figure to the child, but at the same time not particularly wanting to be a mother to him and him not wanting me to take the role of his mother either. When I was confronted by a 'grown man' who I felt was acting like a spoilt teenager, who wanted his parents out of the way for more selfish

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reasons, I felt rather aggrieved with him. It felt as if I had to deal with yet another problematic teenager. I also felt that in this interview I seemed to be positioned in the place of a mother figure to Adrian, but this was the position of an unsatisfactory mother as I was to the child I was looking after. The transference and counter transference in the following exchange was interesting to note. He was remarking on how he could not relate to his parents because they had had worked in the counselling/ self-help field and could never move away from that position to being having just natural conversations with him and having a laugh. This also linked back to his feelings of being oppressed by them and his reasons for wanting to break away from them altogether. He said,

> Adrian:…they don't give me the kind of parental support that I want, they kind of do the counselling thing and I'm not sure I want that.
>
> Interviewer: Because they have done that sort of counselling work?
>
> Adrian: And I used to do it and I did it to [my ex girlfriend] and people in the past and I'm trying not to do that myself. It's nice to feel that you can help everybody like that, and even friends don't want it, and to be told "why don't you get some help", and "how are you feeling right now?" and I notice it, even with [my daughter], you kind of have a tendency to ask questions that are probing rather than, for the wrong reasons probing, I say, 'how you feeling?', you know, 'what do you think about this?', rather than just like having a good laugh.
>
> Interviewer: How do you feel about this session actually, just out of interest because it's not a counselling session but it does some have similarities?
>
> Adrian: No, it's a kind of outpouring, I don't mind the talking because I understand the need for you to make it confidential and I know that nobody is going to take this in, any information they have got anywhere, generally, I don't mind about people knowing what I have done, you know, I am not dealing with a crisis...I've been open about who I am, just telling my story really, I haven't really spoken a lot about feelings, I feel quite comfortable, telling the truth. Erm, yeah.
>
> Interviewer: It just struck me that you are uncomfortable with the way that your parents are saying "oh, how do you feel about that?" and I am asking quite similar questions, like, how do you feel about that?
>
> Adrian: Well, yeah, but your coming from a completely different point of view, you don't mean to me what they mean to me, yeah, it's different relationships that puts a different colour on what you expect.
>
> [TRANSCRIPTION OVER]

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I was surprised by my overwhelming feelings when he said 'you don't mean to me what they mean to me'. I was surprisingly hurt and felt rejected when he said that, but was also confused by my reaction- why *would* I be offended? I hardly knew this man and of course I would not mean as much to him as his own parents. I also noticed when transcribing that I then ended the interview immediately afterwards, something which I had not noticed that I had done in the interview. Usually I would have concluded the interview a bit more carefully and thanked him for his time. This, I suggest is a result of the overwhelming counter-transference experienced in the interview situation.

Failing to recognise or contain the counter-transference can have disastrous consequences for the analytic session or interview as it did in this instance. When transference and counter-transference were first recognised in an analytic session the psychoanalyst Breuer was analysing a woman called Anna O and he was so taken aback by the strength of the emotions that were aroused he abandoned the session (Breuer and Freud, 1974, [1895c]). He was shocked by his reaction and questioned why the difficult emotions that had been aroused in him had caused him to call the session to a halt. He failed to recognise the counter-transference at this stage and subsequently failed to contain it. In this interview I could not hold and contain these feelings so the interview was abandoned abruptly. This is comparable to the way in which Breuer abandoned his analysis of 'Anna O'. I suggest that the premature closure of the interview is transparently reflective of the workings of counter-transference when I could no longer contain the projections that Adrian was putting into me.

After the interview he also commented that next time he would 'get himself a cup of

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coffee' before the interview. Again I felt bad - like a bad mother I had failed to look after him properly because I forgot to offer to buy him a drink. I also felt that his attitude towards his parents and wanting them to die so he could get on with his own growing up was selfish and childish. However it could be argued that there was projective-identification from him to me too. In many ways he had treated me like an incompetent mother, which enforced my own insecurities about this. Moreover his own deep-seated insecurities about his dependence on his parents could have been projected to me creating this counter transference of inadequacy and failure. This experience and interpretation of the projective identification helped me to better understand Adrian's relationship with his parents, which is explained in greater detail in the *Growing up and Growing Old* chapter. Moreover, as explained later in the *Growing up and Growing Old* chapter in the section on children leaving home, I described how Adrian was someone who became a parent later in life. His relationship broke down once they found out they were expecting a child. His young daughter did not live with him and I felt he was quite bitter about this. By unconsciously treating me as an incompetent parent he may have been projecting his own insecurities about his own sense of inadequacy as a parent. I think this example also highlights the nature of projective identification in an interview and opens an interesting debate as to how far we can take this interpretation. I argue that projective identification is inevitable in the interview situation and it is only through reflexive practice and the awareness of the psychodynamic processes at work in the interview that it can be identified. It can offer an added level of interpretation to the narrative of the interview and give a further, more subjective insight into the experience of midlife.

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Summary

This chapter has explored the psycho-social method (as set out by Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), highlighting the contrast between the very different teleological concerns of these different disciplines. Psychoanalysts argue that a great deal of our motivations, emotions and feelings are unconscious and are not always regulated or screened by our conscious self. Sociology however only really takes into account the conscious motivations and emotions. I suggest that the use of psychoanalysis reveals another layer to the study of the individual that sociology sometimes overlooks. In this chapter I introduced some of the key psychoanalytic concepts that I found useful in my research and demonstrated how I practically applied this method. I explored what makes a psycho-social method different from other reflexive methods in sociology, such as narrative construction and life stories, and considered some of the limitations faced by this inter-disciplinary approach. I questioned how psychoanalytic techniques can or should be applied to sociological research beyond the clinical context. I found that valuable information can be gathered through examining the emotions and dynamics of the interview relationship. This chapter has highlighted the way that a psycho-social method can reveal a hidden level of emotions and thoughts, which are often inaccessible in a more traditional sociological interview.

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Chapter Three

Situating Midlife

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Introduction

Middle age is not a fixed reference point. Its definition and the way it is subjectively experienced changes with social, economic and historical shifts. For instance the average life expectancy has been steadily rising over the last century, and this has implications as to when the mid–part of the life is perceived to occur. This chapter sets out the wider social and cultural changes in Britain over the last few decades and the implications these changes have for the way that midlife is defined by wider society and moreover how it is subjectively experienced by those in midlife.

I found that in the literature search many of the common conceptions about midlife were outdated in that chronological definitions of midlife have shifted in recent decades. Many conceptions in the literature were established predominantly in the 1960s, 70s and 80s and very little has been written about midlife in the twenty-first century. This chapter situates midlife in relation to the current population structure and trends in the UK. Part one establishes some of the key demographic patterns, primarily in relation to how this has shaped the modern British family. I examine fertility trends, the increase in the ageing population, family and kinship structures, and the effect of the increase in dependency demands of ageing parents and young children may have on many middle-aged people.

One recent study on the life course and midlife was carried out by The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC). Published in 2007 it was a comprehensive report on *The Freetirement Generation* which examined the trends across the life course. They used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative in-depth interviews with a survey of 3,400 British citizens aged between thirty-five and ninety-five-years-old in 2007. They

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focused their report on five particular cohorts: those born pre-WWII, those born during the WWII years, the Baby Boomer generation who were born between 1946 and 1954, the Shadow Boomer generation born between 1955 and 1964, and then Generation X born between 1965 and 1981. As noted in the literature review my sample group were born between 1949 and 1968, which encompasses the Baby Boomer (seven interviewees) and Shadow Boomer (twelve interviewees) generations primarily with only three interviewees, Sarah, Janet and Jack, at the top of the Generation X cohort. The baby boomer and shadow boomer cohorts in which a significant proportion of my interviewees are situated have been characterised as a period of significant social change. In particular the baby boomer cohort is often defined by its liberal ideology, anti-establishment mentality as well as being a time of significant changes in popular culture- with the baby boomers spending their formative years in the 'swinging sixties' (SIRC, 2007). Part one uses SIRC's findings and statistics from the Office of National Statistics in order to discuss the implications of the population trends and cultural influences on those in 'midlife'.

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The second part of this chapter considers my interviewees' subjective attitudes to ageing. It investigates how midlife and middle-age was defined by my interviewees- asking where did they define the boundaries of midlife and did they consider themselves within them? I also look at the cultural and personal significance of milestone birthdays questioning why decade changes are so important and what effect do they have on those who reach them? This section establishes the interviewees' feelings about chronological ageing process as opposed to the characteristic experiences which will be discussed in more detail in the following three analysis chapters.

Part 1: Setting the Demographic Context

To begin it is important to establish the shape of the British family in this chapter as this will set the context for many of the everyday experiences which my interviewees had during midlife. General trends, for example the age at which people first become parents, the number of children they have per family, the age at which children leave home; these features all serve to paint a picture of expectations people may have about midlife and also some of the common experiences they might share. Furthermore certain demographic trends could potentially have a significant impact on the current midlife cohort; for instance the later age of first childbirth results in some people in midlife having relatively young children to care for compared to earlier generations. This too has resulted in increased generational spacing and the opportunity to become a grandparent often does not come until much later in life compared to the norm in previous generations. Periods of extended habitation of adult children, or children returning home after university for example, may also mean that people in midlife are more likely to have a child at home until late midlife, and possibly even into the approach to 'old age'. These are all features which will now be discussed in more detail.

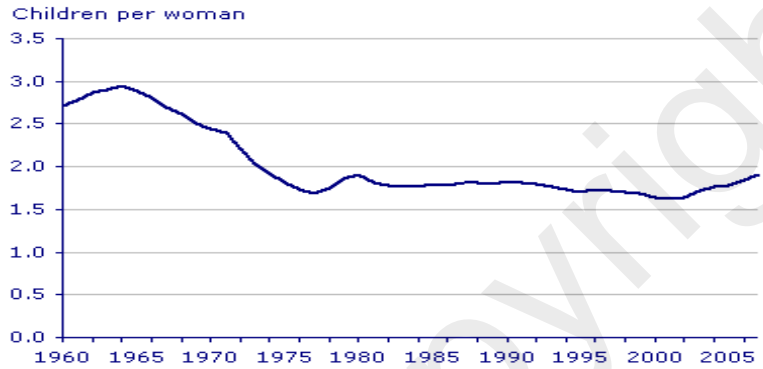
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The Shape of the Family

The shape of the average British family is changing and this can impact upon the experience of those in the midlife period. Compared to the years in which my interviewees were born, families now are generally smaller and parents are, on average, slightly older. As illustrated by the Office of National Statistics (ONS)'s table 1 the UK's total fertility rates since 1960 show evidence that the size of the average British family is decreasing. This trend has reversed slightly with fertility rates very slowly rising since

2001 to 1.9 children per family in 2005.[1] However it should be noted that class or deprivation levels[1] can also have a significant effect on the fertility rate. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) reports in its *Geographic Variations in Health - Decennial Supplement DS16* that between 1991 and 1993 in the most deprived areas of Great Britain the fertility rate was around 2.9 children per family compared to 1.7 in the least deprived areas[1].

Table 1: Total fertility rate, UK[2]



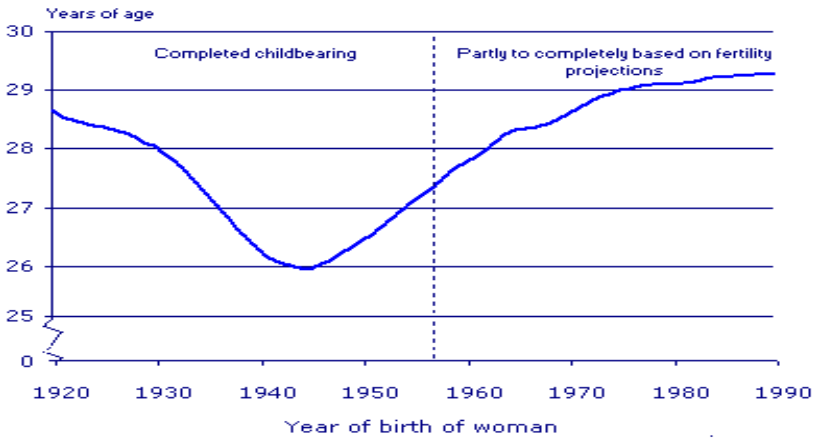
The age at which mothers have their first child has also increased. As shown in table 2 produced by ONS the most notable period for this increase is during the years in which my sample group were born (1949-1968). The dramatic decline in the age of the women at the birth of first child, born in the 1940s could be attributed to the post war baby boom in the 1950s and 60s.

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[1] This increase could be explained by the number of foreign-born women having children in this country, which has risen from 13% to 15% between 2004 and 2007. Their higher than average fertility rate could be responsible for raising the fertility rate in the last few years

[2] (http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?ID=951).

Table 2: Mean age of childbearing for women born 1920 to 1990, UK[3]



The 2007 figures produced by ONS and shown in table 2[4], show that the average age for women to have their first child is currently 29.5 years old, although this is quite significantly lower amongst those who have children outside of a marital arrangement when the average age then drops to 27.1 years old. Socio-economic class and deprivation can again have a significant effect on the variation in age of first entering parenthood. ONS report that between 1991 and 1993, in the least deprived areas the average age for mothers having a first child was around 29.5 years old, whereas in the most deprived areas it was 24.4.[5] Similarly if we were to look at the figures in terms of qualifications, Agree, Bissett, and Rendall claimed that 41.4 per cent of women between the ages of thirty-five to sixty-nine with higher qualifications have children at home, compared to 30.8 per cent of those women without qualifications (2003, 32). According to ONS in 2004 the average age of first becoming a father is thirty-two and one in four babies were born to a father over the age of forty. These figures relating to fertility rates and age of

[3] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downlaods/theme_population/FM1_33.pdf
[4] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downlaods/theme_population/FM1_33.pdf

[5] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=6638&Pos=1&ColRank=2&Rank=144

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parenthood show a trend across my interviewees' life courses towards smaller families which are started later in life. This could potentially have implications for my interviewees in that should they compare their experiences to those of later generations they may question their own significant life events- for example 'did I have children at the right time?', 'did I do all I wanted to do before entering the responsibilities of parenthood?' My interviewees' parents were less likely to be parents to young children in their own midlife years than they are. From that we can also infer that people in midlife now are less likely to be grandparents during these years compared to their parents' generation.

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Recent figures produced by the UK's Office for National Statistics show that many people in midlife have young children. They report that in 2004 19,884 babies were born to mothers aged between forty to forty-four-years-old, 861 babies born to mothers aged between forty-five and forty-nine, and 48 babies born to mothers over the age of fifty. The statistics show that there were 15,486 babies fathered by men aged forty to forty-four-years-old, 4,869 fathered by men aged forty-five to forty-nine, and 1,454 by men aged fifty to fifty-four. Fatherhood is not as biologically restricted as motherhood is, so there were also 541 babies fathered by men aged fifty-five to fifty-nine and the sixty to sixty-four-year-old bracket fathered 141. Forty-one babies were fathered by sixty-five to sixty-nine-year-olds and there were, perhaps surprisingly, 16 babies fathered by men aged between seventy and seventy-four[6].

[6] http://www.mothers35plus.co.uk/olderfathers.htm and http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downlaods/theme_population/FM1_33.pdf

This data is significant in furthering our understanding the experience of midlife. An increasing average age of having a first child means that whereas previously parents might expect their children to leave home whilst they were in 'early midlife', parents now might still expect their children to leave much later or some people may even still have very young families. It was difficult to identify any data on the age at which the last child was born, I think simply because there is no definitive age limit on becoming a parent, and certainly for men fertility can reach into later life. Indeed as I have shown this can even go beyond the age of seventy-five in some cases. For women, the menopause biologically limits natural conception and according to the British Medical Association, the average age of natural menopause is fifty-two years[7]. However with advances in fertility treatments it is possible to have children beyond this time. For example, Elizabeth Adeney, Britain's oldest mother, gave birth to a baby boy on 26th May 2009 aged sixty-six-years-old following fertility treatment in Ukraine[8]. Some of my interviewees had very young children or had become parents in midlife, for example one interviewee Sarah was approaching her fortieth birthday and was six months pregnant with her second child. Forty-year-old Janet's youngest son was nine years old. Fifty-year-old Rob became a parent for the third time and forty-three-year-old Adrian became a parent for the first time, after the age of thirty-seven.

Table 3 shows the ages at which my interviewees' own mothers and fathers were when they became the parent of my interviewee. The average age at which my interviewees' mothers had them was 25.5 years old and their fathers were on average 27.3. However,

[7] http://www.thebms.org.uk/factdetail.php?id=1.
[8] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1189068/Britains-oldest-mother-Elizabeth-Adeney-gives-birth-5lb-3oz-boy.html.

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this is not comparable to the national average statistics because this table has not taken into account the age at which the parent first became a parent, rather only the age they became a parent to my interviewee. There may be older siblings in each case which would bring the average age down. It is also difficult to precisely compare these figures to the national average because there was a quite dramatic decline in the age of motherhood during the post war baby boom. It is interesting to note however, that despite this, the average age at which my interviewees became parents is notably older than the age at which their parents had them. The average age at which my female interviewees became mothers was 26.8 and the average age of my male interviewees becoming fathers was 29.

Table 3. Age of parenthood

Int.ID.	Interviewee	Int. Age now	Mother	Father	Interviewee became a Mother	Interviewee became a Father
1	Jack	42	18	19		unknown
2	Rob	50	27	34		32
3	Kathleen	46	22	24	29	
4	Lisa	45	26	29	26	
5	Janet	40	30	33	24	
6	Anna	46	20	23	22	
7	Sandra	51	26	28	25	
8	Patricia	55	30	28	30	
9	Shirley	54	24	30	24	
10	Theresa	55	26	28	25	
11	Raymond	58	31	33		25
12	Adrian	43	22	23		37
13	Rodney	55	28	19		19
14	Diane	55	22	24	22	
15	Matthew	55	23	23		31
16	Trevor	51	26	34		27
17	Alex	52	24	28		30
18	Joe	49	33	34		31
19	Jeff	48	35	Unknown		No children
20	Angela	49	25	21	24	
21	Jeanette	45	17	Unknown	35	
22	Sarah	39	26	31	35	
Average age of parents			**25.5**	**27.3**	**26.8**	**29**

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The increase in men and women going into higher education and entering the workforce could be a precipitant of later childbirth and indicates that this trend towards later births will continue into the near future. This was certainly the case with my interviewee Sarah who had spent until the age of thirty-five pursuing her career as a personal assistant in London and travelling the world. She felt pressured by biology and cultural expectations to relinquish her career in order to have children after the age of thirty-five, and now seems slightly resentful about it[9]. Britain's oldest mother, Elizabeth Adeney, also reportedly left childbearing late because she was pursuing her career. However it may also be the case that in some instances some older parents feel that they at least had their freedom earlier on in life. Jeanette (aged 45) was perhaps one example of this as she seemed very content to have entered motherhood at age thirty-five. She said that she regretted having not travelled but overall she was generally very happy to be an older parent.

Empty Nest or Crowded Nest?

As well as children being born later, they also tend to stay longer in the familial home than they have done in previous decades and even if they do leave they are likely to make a series of returns, particularly following the completion of higher education (Goldscheider, Thornton, and Young-De-Marco, 1993 in Botting and Dunnell, Summer 2000). 'Leaving home is rarely a one-off event, but is more appropriately treated as a process, often involving multiple departures and returns' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Children often leave and then return to the family home, post higher education, as a result of failed relationships or due to financial difficulties. This to-ing and fro-ing from

[9] This is explained more in the Growing Up and Growing Old chapter.

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the family home has become known recently as the 'boomerang effect' (Iacovou and Parisi, 2008) and these children known colloquially as the 'Bungee Brood' (Telegraph.co.uk 24/02/09).

It is increasingly difficult for young people to enter the housing market and increasingly expensive to rent, and these factors have prolonged the time which young people need in order to save to obtain their own accommodation. It has been reported that 6.8 million over-eighteens still live with their parents. The rising cost of education, difficulties in climbing the property ladder and limited state support are all identified at reasons for this developing trend[10]. The traditional expectation of having an empty nest in midlife is actually now giving way, in Caucasian British and US households to the new phenomenon of the 'cluttered' or 'crowded' nest (Shaputis, 2003). There is a cultural and gender difference between those children who do stay at home. In certain cultures living at home for an extended period is much more common. Also there are differences between the proportions of men and women living at home. Table 4 shows that in 2003, fifty-six percent of men aged twenty to twenty-four lived with parents compared with thirty-seven percent women of the same age (Babb et al (eds) ONS, Social Trends 36, 2006, 23). Offering an explanation for this is purely speculative, but perhaps may be explained by the socialisation of female children to be more independent in terms of running a household.

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[10] Connolly, H and White, A, in Babb et al (eds) ONS, Social Trends 36, 2006, 23 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends36/Social_Trends_36.pdf> and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3276039.stm

Table 4. Adults living with their parents: by sex and age[11]

England				Percentages
Males	1991	2000-01	2002	2003
20-24	50	56	56	56
25-29	19	25	20	21
30-34	9	9	8	8
Females	1991	2000-01	2002	2003
20-24	32	39	37	37
25-29	9	11	10	10
30-34	5	4	2	3

At spring. These estimates are not seasonally adjusted and have not been adjusted to take account of the Census 2001 results. See Appendix, Part 4: LFS reweighting. Source: National Dwelling and Household Survey and Survey of English Housing, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

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Many of my interviewees had older children living at home, some of whom had returned after university or after an unsuccessful living arrangement. Some parents still carried out chores and lent money to their now grown children. For example, Sandra said about her son, 'he can't even get himself a drink at night, he phones me if I'm sitting watching the television, he'll ring the home phone, even though he's just up stairs! [Laughter]' I asked Patricia too about whether her daughter had plans to move out again. She replied,

> No, not in the foreseeable future, I said I'll give her another twenty-five years and she has got to go. [Laughs] it is not a problem actually, she loves it. I do everything for her. I cook her dinner, wash her clothes, iron them, and it is like

[11] Babb et al (eds) ONS, Social Trends 36, 2006, 23 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends36/Social_Trends_36.pdf> and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3276039.stm

> "Have you got...?" "Can you lend me a pound?" She's got two purses her own purse and my purse and yeah she has got a life of riley and she likes it[12].

A basic internet search for the definition of 'empty nest' will produce results such as this popular perception,

> Empty-nest syndrome is the name given to a psychological condition that can affect a woman around the time that one or more of her children leave home. It's not a term you'll find in many medical text books, but it has become a useful phrase for encapsulating the feelings of sadness and loss that many women experience when their children no longer live with them or need day-to-day care...It can also happen when a child gets married, because matrimony is a clear signal that Mum is no longer needed in the same way she once was. (Webber and Delvin, 2009)

But can we really claim these as common reactions? Is the 'empty nest' a myth or a reality for midlife parents? Empty nest syndrome is a recognised psychological condition in which the individual is depressed and feels they have lost their identity as it is constructed through solely being a parent. However, this is not the case for every midlife parent. The implications of having older children at home might be that the 'empty nest' period is actually less traumatic when it happens as parents may want their older children to leave home; particularly if the parent feels that the grown child is ready for economical and practical independence. Similarly this delay of leaving home also delays the time at which the 'empty nest' period would occur. Furthermore if a child is born to older parents and also stays at home longer, the 'empty-nest' period may occur when the 'midlife' parents are in their mid sixties.

[12] Further discussion of my interviewee's experiences of children still living at home is given in the chapter Growing Up and Growing Old.

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Some studies actually report that the midlife parent may actually look forward to the freedom from child-raising. 'Longitudinal data indicate that both men and women respond to the empty nest period with a sigh of relief and freedom from responsibilities' (Robertson, 1978, 378). The increased life expectancy offers to the healthiest adults a considerable period of opportunity and growth beyond the child raising years if they have them young enough. Hiedernann et al found that in some cases there is actually an increase in marital well-being associated with empty nest as parents are freed from child care responsibilities and are able to pursue more personal interests (1998, 221). They claim that 'the empty-nest phase' should in some circumstances be 'labelled as a period of euphoria in marriages that have survived the demands of child raising' (1998, 221). However, they also recognise that in some cases it is marital breakdown which causes the child to leave home.

The literature on the empty nest usually addresses the concerns of women when their children leave home and there is relatively little written about the effect the 'empty nest syndrome' has on the father. However, Hunt does argue that perhaps the continuity of employment prior and following the departure makes it relatively 'easier for the male' (2005, 180). This I would argue is not entirely convincing and I found that it was often very emotionally difficult for some men to come to terms with children leaving home, amongst those who I interviewed. The men I spoke to had mostly played an active role in raising their children on a practical and emotional level (as opposed to the out-dated stereotype of fathers simply being detached breadwinners). Moreover, many of the men had expressed ways in which their children had kept them feeling young, telling stories about how they played or attended music concerts together. Perhaps their children keep them feeling mentally and physically younger and this is something which is lost when

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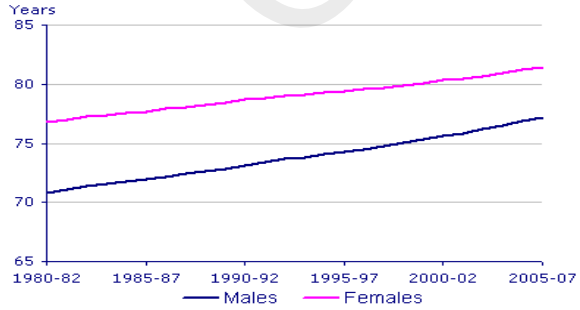
they leave home? These are issues which are explored in more detail in the chapter *Growing Up and Growing Old.*

The Ageing Population and its Implications for Generational Relationships

Another significant demographic feature which has an effect on the experience of midlife is increasing life expectancy, which not only affects the midlife individual's expectations for their own future, but also means an ageing parental population. Coupled with the demands from adolescent or older children, the demands for care from parents can create a considerable burden for some people in midlife.

Life expectancy has now risen to its highest level on record, according to the Office of National Statistics. They state that 'a newborn baby boy could expect to live 77.2 years and a newborn baby girl 81.5 years if mortality rates remain the same as they were in 2005–07'.

Table 5[13].



Females

Males

Life expectancy at birth, UK, from period life tables, 1980-82 to 2005-07[14]

[13] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=168&Pos=1&ColRank=1&Rank=374

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One significant implication of an ageing population and a decreased fertility rate is that resultantly, the number of elderly people in Europe and the USA has increased considerably, whilst the number of young people has decreased. In Britain specifically, The ONS claim that in 2004 there were 11.6 million people under sixteen, a decline of 2.6 million (18%) since 1971 and 9.6 million people over sixty-five, an increase of 2.2. million (29%) since 1971 (Babb et al (eds) ONS, Social Trends 36, 2006, 12). It is also predicted that by 2014 in the British population there will be more people over the age of sixty-five than under sixteen for the first time in history (Babb et al (eds) ONS, Social Trends 36, 2006, 12). There will be further increases in the older population, particularly in the years 2010-2030 as an effect of the 1950s and1960s baby boom. An increasing elderly population clearly requires an increase in care work, a responsibility which burdens the state and the younger generation of relatives, primarily the generation directly below. In British society today when the responsibility is not put on the state care system, it is often the generation of midlife children who bear the task of caring for the older generation. Furthermore as a result of having children later in life, more and more midlife couples have dependent children during this period and coupled with the increasing agedness of the generation above they may find themselves doubly burdened with informal care responsibility for two generations of family simultaneously. This scenario is becoming more commonly referred to as the problems of the ‘sandwich generation’.

The most significant feature of my interviewees’ children’s generation was that due to more children returning home after university, and more young adults struggling to get a foot onto the property ladder, more of the interviewees’ children’s generation are at home

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than they were perhaps in previous generations. Eight of my interviewees still had young children, under the age of sixteen living at home.

Table 6. Where interviewees' children are living.

Where children are living (number of children of interviewees)				
Children aged under 16		Children aged under over 16		
8		15		
Living at home	Living with another parent	Living at home		Left home
5	3	Never left 3	Returned 5	10

There were five instances amongst my interviewees of children who had returned home after a period away. There were very few instances in which my interviewees found themselves caring for both a parent and child simultaneously. Patricia was one of the only people who currently had a daughter living at home as well as providing some small care duties for her elderly father. Rob (aged 50), Shirley (aged 54) and Janet (aged 40), had all been in that position of dual care in the past few years.

In 2001 it was reported that there were 5.9 million informal carers in the UK, with a higher proportion of those being female (3.4m) rather than male (2.5m). Around twenty-five percent of all informal carers were aged between forty-five to fifty-four years old and a fifth of carers were between thirty-five to forty-four or fifty-five to sixty-four-years-old. Informal carers were classed as people who provided 'unpaid care for family members,

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friends, neighbours or others who are sick, disabled or elderly'[15]. Informal care can include some personal care, shopping, cleaning, and cooking meals for relatives. This care can vary in its intensity and duration in each different circumstance. The figures in the table below show the number who are providing care for over fifty hours a week, as well as those who provide unpaid care to family members, neighbours or relatives.

Table 7

Informal carers who live in households: by age and sex, 2001					
United Kingdom					
	All providing care1 1 Those who provide unpaid care (looking after, giving help or support) to family members, neighbours or relatives.			Percentage providing 50 or more hours a week	
	(thousands)				
	Males	Females		Males	Females
5 – 15	53	61		7	8
16 – 24	125	165		8	13
25 – 34	230	376		15	23
35 – 44	422	665		17	21
45 – 54	613	896		15	17
55 – 64	519	697		19	23
65 – 74	319	370		31	34
75 – 84	155	149		44	44
85 and over	24	20		54	47
Total	2,460	3,399		20	22

Source: Census 2001, Office for National Statistics; Census 2001, General Register Office for Scotland; Census 2001, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Agree et al claimed that the 'peak ages for caring for aged parents and parents-in-law ('parent care') are between 45 and 54, for both men and women' (2003, 31). Research

[15] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7396

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and government statistics suggest that women are instrumental in providing the majority of the care work. The Observer (01/08/2004) claimed that 'one in four women aged from fifty to fifty-nine provides unpaid care for a family member. One million spend more than fifty hours a week doing so, whether for their own children or for an elderly parent.' The ONS report that the number of women providing twenty or more hours of care increased with each ten-year age band which reached a peak at ages fifty-five to sixty-four, thereafter the percentage providing care decreased due to the death of the dependent generation above (Babb et al (eds), 2006, 118). Men do also carry out care work, but it tends to be more in the role of a secondary provider (Fredriksen, 1996; Marks, 1998; Miller & Cafasso, 1992 in Pavalko, and Gong, 2003, 5).

Agree et al noted that the demands of 'two-way care' are typical of 7% of women aged between 35-39 and only 3.4% amongst men' (2003, 31). A small minority of carers occupy three simultaneous roles; coping with the conflicting demands of two generations of dependents, whilst also employed in paid work. Evandrou and Glaser stated 'very few mid-life individuals hold all three intense roles at the same time and men are equally (or more) likely than women to face such multiple intense roles. This reflects their higher labour force participation in addition to family commitments, although the impact of combined work and family roles may actually be greater for women given their more active involvement in family life' (2002, 27). They further claim that 'only one in nine women, and one in ten men, aged 45–49 occupy all three roles concurrently, [however] the extent of multiple roles is increasing among younger cohorts' (2002, 29). They also suggested however that actually continuing in paid work can act as a 'buffer against, or respite from, the stresses and demands of care-giving' (2002, 28). Evandrou and Glaser noted that men aged forty-five to forty-nine from the 1941-45 cohort are more likely to

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occupy a paid employment role and a care role simultaneously (45%) compared to 29% of women (2002, 24). This is most likely due to the fact that males tend to occupy the key provider's role.

Out of my interviewees both Rob and Patricia have worked and cared for a parent and child simultaneously. However, in Patricia's case the care work provided for her father is minimal- simply shopping with him, visiting, small cleaning tasks and having him over for dinner. Rob provided quite a lot of care for his mother but she did not live with him. He still worked full time and looked after his children up until they left home recently. Around a quarter of my interviewees had a parent who required informal personal care. Over a third carried out menial chores for either an elderly parent or for a parent-in-law, but this varied in its intensity and commitment. Most people paid extra attention to ensuring they made visits or calls a couple of times a week. Parents were often taken shopping at least once a week or shopping was taken to them. Other chores like cleaning, gardening, cooking or DIY would also be done.

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Table 8 (Agree, Bissett, Rendall, 2003)

Women and men's parent care and having children under 18 in the household						
	Parent care provided			Children co-resident	Two-way care	
Age at Survey	Percent caring for parents	Percent caring for a parent in household (may include also out of household)	Percent caring for parent outside household only	Percent with any children <18 living in family unit.	Percent caring and with any children <18 living in family unit	Sample Number
Women						
35-39	9.0	1.0	8.1	80.2	7.0	2,390
40-44	13.7	1.5	12.2	66.5	8.1	2,262
45-49	18.0	1.6	16.3	39.1	6.7	2,192
50-54	19.0	2.2	16.8	12.6	2.1	2,003
55-59	15.0	2.6	12.4	3.7	0.5	1,749
60-64	9.7	1.8	7.9	0.7	0.1	1,776
65-69	3.9	1.0	2.9	0.5	0.0	1,706
All ages (35-69	12.8	1.6	11.2	32.8	3.9	14,078
Men						
35-39	5.6*	1.0	4.6*	66.9*	3.4*	2,143
40-44	9.3*	0.8	8.5*	63.7	5.3*	2,007
45-49	13.2*	2.1	11.1*	49.2*	6.0	1,919
50-54	14.0*	1.7	12.3*	22.3*	2.7	1,861
55-59	12.7	2.7	10.0*	9.2*	1.3*	1,640
60-64	9.3	1.2	8.2	3.7*	0.4	1,606
65-69	5.0	1.0	4.0	1.3*	0.1	1,511
All ages (35-69	9.9	1.5	8.4*	33.9*	3.0*	12,687
Source 1990, 1995 and 2000 General Household Survey						
Note*=p<0.05 when comparing with women of same age group						

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Many of my interviewees had given thought to the more intense personal care that their parents may need in the future. Most were not too keen to take on the caring role or have their parents live with them at home. This is discussed in more detail in *the Growing Up and Growing Old* chapter.

Intimate Relationships

Amongst my respondents thirteen were currently married and six had been divorced or separated. In the representative sample produced by SIRC seventy percent of those in midlife were married and six percent remained single throughout their lives. Marital status is an important aspect to consider when characterising the midlife period. Midlife is often a time of reassessment and re-evaluation of personal circumstances and marriage is sometimes a key life-style constituent which comes under review during this period of the life course. Studies such as those reported by Hiedernann, Suhornlinova and Rand have shown that marriages are most unstable during the midlife period and particularly when children leave home. 'For their children's benefit, couples may remain in unsatisfactory marriages until they reach the empty-nest phase (i.e. until the last child leaves home or until the youngest is old enough to leave home)' (1998, 223). They claim that for many couples who have been married for twenty years at the onset of empty nest, the risk of marital disruption is tripled with the last child's departure from the home and the youngest child's eighteenth birthday further increases this risk by 56%' (1998, 228). Twyman also noticed a significant correlation between children leaving home and marital breakdowns. He claimed that when children leave home, parents faced new and unfamiliar situations.

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> It will have been many years since the couple has been on their own, and they are certainly not the people they were 20 or more years ago…It is not surprising that some couples find this too difficult a task and that is a prime contributory factor in marital breakdown at this phase of life (Twyman, 2005, 273).

Three of my interviewees, Rob, Sandra and Shirley got divorced after the age of forty. Diane had recently become separated in her fifties and Raymond and Adrian divorced in their mid to late thirties. None of these instances was as a direct result of children leaving home. In fact in Rob and Adrian's cases it was the birth of a new child which created new problems in their relationships. In the cases of Diane and Shirley their partners had extra-marital affairs. However, some of my interviewees have not yet reached the point at which their children have all left home. Certainly I felt that some problems were anticipated by some interviewees. For instance, one of my interviewees, Joe was expecting changes in his relationship when his son leaves for university. He said

> Joe: We're trying to get used to the idea of [our son] going off next week, week after next. [My wife] is very concerned about it, because it's a big change in our life….We get on pretty well…. I have always been worried about not getting on and we do get on, I mean I'm a grumpy old git, there's no two ways about it. I'm not just saying that, I really am, I drive [My wife] up the wall. I'm a bit of a grumpy old git.
>
> Interviewer: What do you think the main changes will be when he goes?
>
> Joe: Trying to spend more time together, doing things together, going out more, just actually spending time sitting down in the evenings and you know because an awful lot of what we do, even now, though he is eighteen, a lot of the focus is on what's [our son's] doing. How's he getting home? What's his day been like?

Despite the fact that couples may still have their children at home during midlife and that empty nest may not be as significant as it once was, dissolution of marriages is still quite common during the midlife period. Haskey also showed in the *Demography and Health ONS report* that there is growth in the numbers of people who have divorced over the two

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decades 1976 to 1996 (in every age group) and that between 1976 and 1996 the divorced populations have become older (1999, 19). The peak age of the 1976 profiles occurs at twenty-nine for both men and women, and at forty-nine for the 1996 age profiles (1999, 20). Generally across the life course there has been an increase in divorce. In 2001 the census reported that more than one in ten dependent children live in a step-family' (Babb et al (eds) ONS Social Trends 36, 2006, 28), and in 2005 the ONS reported that nearly one in four dependent children lived in a lone-parent family in Great Britain. This is compared to one in fourteen children in 1972 (ONS Statistics census 2001, population[16]).

For those who divorce earlier midlife may be a period in which they enter a new relationship and new family circumstances, perhaps with new younger step-children. Only one interviewee - Shirley - had step children, and in Angela's case her long term partner was a step-parent to her two daughters. Harper observed that 'dissolution in younger life often leads to remarriage or cohabitation by one or both partners, introducing a variety of complex reconstituted family structures, which impact upon both the reciprocal family care, and intergenerational transmission' (Harper, 2004, 24). Furthermore the breakdown of marriages and the event of remarriage have significant implications for the way that the division of care labour is distributed amongst midlife carers as they may find themselves caring for not only their own parents but that of in-laws, ex-in-laws or step-parents. Newly remarried mid-lifers may find that although their children have 'flown the nest' they are suddenly in the position of caring for new younger step-children. A more detailed study on care - to investigate the extent to which the fragmentation, reconstitution of families and geographical distancing between relatives has affected care work - would be an interesting area for study in future research.

[16] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/population/families/families-and-adoption

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Work and Retirement

The final assumption about midlife to be addressed regards that of work and retirement. Much of the literature on the approach to retirement in midlife assumes a long and stable work history, and it does not always take into account the plurality of experiences and multiple trajectories that people have had in their work careers. It is true that retirement does, for many people, signify a major transition in their life. Pavalko and Gong claimed for example that 'retirement is probably the most definable events in midlife and the one that marks the transition from "midlife" to "later life"' (2003, 12).

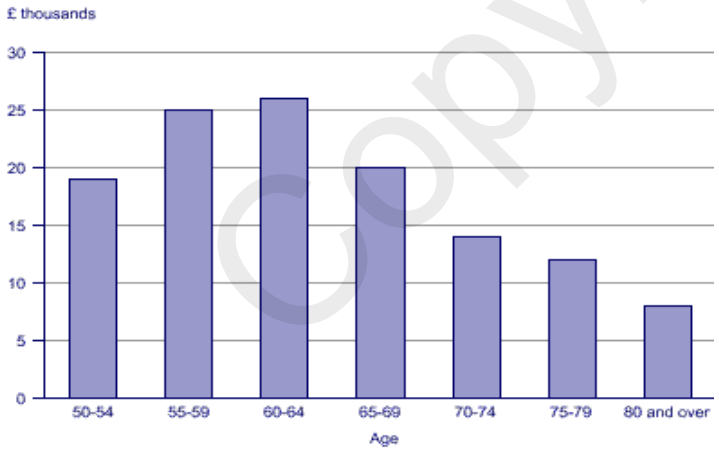
However the boundaries between work and retirement have become increasingly blurred. Part-time work can phase a transition to retirement, so too can changing jobs or duties to a role more suited to retirement years. ONS report that a higher proportion of men than women are in work before State Pension Age, but that this trend reverses with more women than men in employment beyond the SPA (12.3 of women compared to 10.7 of men). The majority of employment beyond SPA is part-time work. 'In April-June 2008, 6.8 per cent of men and 8.6 per cent of women of SPA and over were in part-time employment'[17] (ONS Pension Trends, Labour Market & Retirement). It is not always the case that there is an exact end point to a work life and a start of retirement. Moreover, retirement may not be positively anticipated. Work is often more than a set of necessary duties and economic means; it also serves to maintain social networks, friendships and personal fulfilment (SIRC, 2007).

[17] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=1273&Pos=3&ColRank=1&Rank=192

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The approach to and entering of retirement often sees a peak in income. According to the SIRC's sample eighty percent of the UKs wealth is held by the over fifties (SIRC 2007). Increased financial security, coupled with increased freedom from work commitments and childcare, as well as relatively good levels of health and fitness can mean that early retirement is something to look forward to. Table 9 shows that the ages sixty to sixty-five show the highest wealth levels in later life and the fifty-five to fifty-nine-year-old have the second highest. However SIRC also reported that thirty-two percent of those approaching retirement expected to struggle financially, so despite these optimistic economic figures for the early years of retirement, the decline in wealth in later retirement years does cause some anxiety for those in midlife.

Table 9: Median net financial and physical wealth: by age, 2002, England[18]



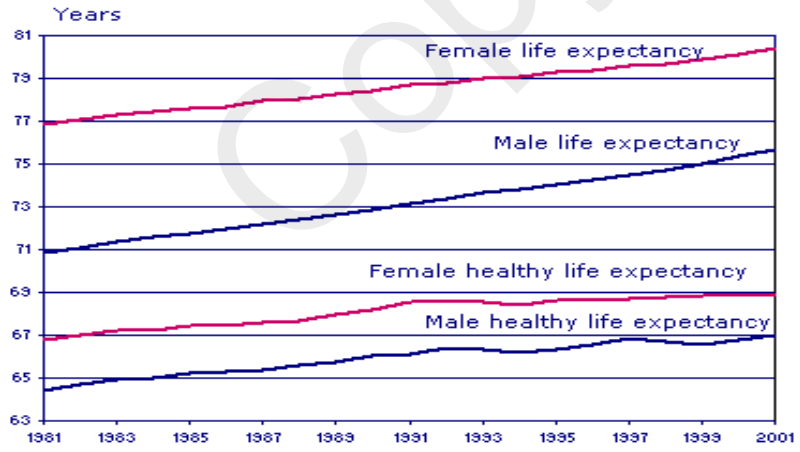
[18] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1269

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ONS report that between April to June 2008, the average age at which men withdrew from the labour force was 64.6 years and 61.9 years for women (an increase from 60.7 in 1984). This is the highest level since records began in 1984. However, if we consider the information in Table 10, the healthy life expectancy for women in 2001 was only 68.8 years old and a mere 67 years old for males. This technically would only allow for a 2.4 year window of opportunity between retirement and poor health for men, and a 6.9 years gap for women. Perhaps even more worryingly, the 'State Pension Age (SPA) in the UK will increase from sixty to sixty-five for women between 2010 and 2020, and from sixty-five to sixty-eight for both women and men between 2024 and 2046', thus potentially offering little opportunity in retirement years to enjoy the freedom of retirement without the risk of poor health.

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Table 10[19]



Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy at birth: by sex, GB

[19] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=918&Pos=4&ColRank=2&Rank=560

Many of the men that I spoke to expressed a desire to retire early and but they saw themselves as having only limited time in which to do everything that they wanted[20]. SIRC reported more positively that 'baby boomers are not just facing the prospect of giving up work, they are looking forward to Freetirement- a period in their lives characterised by choice and, perhaps for the first time, the opportunity to do the things they really want' (SIRC, 2007, 8). However they also questioned their respondents about what they worried about most with regards to their retirement years. They found amongst the baby boomers and shadow boomers, poor health was the biggest worry with fifty-four percent of baby boomers and fifty-eight percent of shadow boomers worried about this. The next biggest worry was becoming physically dependent on others- forty-nine percent of baby boomers and fifty-percent of shadow boomers reported this. Financial worries were also reported by forty-five percent of baby boomers and forty-eight percent of shadow boomers. The next biggest worry was 'running out of time' with twenty-nine percent of baby boomers and twenty-two percent of shadow boomers reporting this. The other concerns included 'state provision', 'being financially dependent on others', 'worries about the same things as before', 'losing touch with friends' and 'losing touch with family'. These results come from a survey which predefined these worries and so cannot claim to be a fully comprehensive list of concerns. Nevertheless it is interesting that the biggest concerns relate to health and bodily matters which will be discussed in the next chapter. It is also interesting how 'running out of time' is a significant cause of anxiety for many people. Rodney was the only interviewee who had partly retired as a result of having to give up work to care for his wife, but none of my other interviewees had yet reached retirement. Most of my interviewees expected retirement to be a time when they will be free to do all the things that they wanted to do such as pursuing

[20] This is discussed in more detail in the chapters *Growing Up and Growing Old* and *Remembered Pasts and Imagined Futures*.

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hobbies, spending time with family or travelling. They anticipated new freedoms but they were equally worried about how long their health will allow them to do that. They identified that there was only a small window of opportunity in which they can expect to be in good enough health to sustain an active life style during retirement years.

Summary

The first part of this chapter has revisited some of the assumptions and preconceptions of midlife and re-contextualised them in the current British population structure. It can be surmised that the delay of certain life transitions, for example the age at which people first become parents, and the later ages for marriage and remarriage, all have a considerable impact on family structure and relationships. It was shown that there have been changes in fertility trends towards later births and that this challenges the idea that midlife couples are about to face an 'empty nest'. In fact it shows that midlife couples are actually likely to have younger children in the family home and in addition older children are also remaining longer at home due to difficulties in obtaining their own accommodation[21]. This extension or delay of the 'empty-nest' period could actually overlap and disrupt the 'period of creative fulfilment' and freedom 'from the constraints of the Second Age', that Laslett (1996) set aside as possibilities in the 'Third Age' of early retirement. However, it has also been shown that people are living longer and although for the healthy midlife adult that potentially means an extended period in which to achieve one's ambitions beyond work and childrearing, this also has implications for the midlife adult in terms of caring for ageing parents.

[21] This will be discussed at more length in the fifth chapter 'Growing Up and Growing Old

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Part 2 Attitudes towards Midlife

Introduction

It is possible to establish how midlife has been defined within the literature and to characterise the period according to the demographic structure of the population and the cultural expectations within it. However what does this mean for those actually in midlife? In this section I consider how interviewees defined the terms 'midlife' and 'middle-aged' and whether they consider themselves within these categories. What are the popular conceptions of 'midlife' and 'middle-age' and how do they shape the way people in midlife think about their ageing process?

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Defining Midlife

Definitions of when midlife occurred, and what the characteristics of this period were varied amongst my interviewees. I asked each of them to place brackets around when they thought midlife began and when it ended. Some people calculated by the traditional and biblical 'three scores years plus ten' then halved (Psalm 90:10). However this works out at only thirty-five-years-old which seems rather too young and would place many of them too close to the furthest edge of their brackets, verging into what might be considered 'old age'. For example Lisa (aged 45) said, 'I am past thirty-five so I must be middle-aged yeah, yes, not old, but I am not young, I am not young but yeah I suppose it is middle-age isn't it?' Interestingly many people were hesitant to consider themselves within the midlife brackets once they were defined. Jeff (aged 48) for example said, 'Funnily enough I suppose I do see the boundaries that include my age but I wouldn't count myself in it'. When I asked fifty-five-year-old Patricia if she considered herself to be middle-aged she replied, 'No, no, [laugh] I am I know but I wouldn't consider myself to be'. Kathleen

(aged 46) even went as far as to classify middle-age as a significantly later period of the life course. This was framed in humorous terms but it also served as a way of denying that she did actually consider herself to be middle-aged. I asked,

> Interviewer: Do you consider yourself middle-aged?
>
> Kathleen: Not!
>
> Interviewer: No?
>
> Kathleen: Not at all! [Laughter] I always, well, I suppose I am, because um if I recall my mum and dad, they were called middle-aged at fifty odd but I think now, I'm approaching middle-aged and I would call that sixty, not fifty! [Laughter]
>
> Interviewer: So do you think middle-aged starts at sixty then?
>
> Kathleen: Well, I think people are living a lot older now as well aren't they? Everyone's into their nineties now most people, well not most people, but a lot of people late eighties and nineties. So, yeah I'd like to think it's sixty onwards. [Laughter] Thanks very much!

It also seemed that for some people once they considered themselves to be in midlife, the duration of this period seemed to extend so that old age came much, much later in the life course. Theresa (aged 55) said, 'now that I'm fifty-five I think that I don't want to be old when I'm sixty, so maybe I'll be middle-aged until I'm seventy!! [Laughter]. When I asked Matthew (aged 55) 'If you feel in middle-age, when do you think it would turn into old age?' he replied, 'Oh, ninety! Yeah it just all depends on how lucky you are, doesn't it?' The youngest interviewee, Sarah, thirty-nine, said that midlife would turn into old age at the age of fifty, but then later changed her mind to her retirement age, when she realised that fifty was not too far away.

The term 'middle-age' was often distinguished from term the 'midlife' by my interviewees. 'Middle-age' tended to evoke negative connotations which people did not

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identify with, whereas midlife was considered more as a chronological positioning. I asked people to tell me what characteristics they associated with middle-age and the answers ranged from 'people losing an enquiring mind' (Jeff aged 48), 'complacency' (Adrian aged 43), 'their depressive, half-full attitude' (sic.) (Patricia aged 55), to getting 'less tolerant of modern things' (Kathleen aged 46). The general consensus was that middle-aged connoted a negative attitude. Patricia for example said 'I think it is just literally someone's attitude to life, how they see it and some people, I don't see middle-age as being miserable, but some people are miserable and it makes them seem much older you know'. Anna (aged 46) dramatically said,

> For me middle-age is such a horrible term. It just smacks of some ways, conservativism, narrow, sometimes just plodding, you know narrow minded, that sort of thing. No!! No, no, no, no, no. Tell them to ban middle-age as a terminology.

Physical appearance also played a factor in defining middle-agedness. Kathleen (aged 46) said generally 'they don't care about their appearance when they get older'. Patricia (aged 55) said

> For me middle-age means I have visions of old and I know I have got my slippers on, but old and slippers [laughs] and middle-age to me seems old, to be middle-aged today, like most people I know people you work with, they are not middle-aged and they are even older than me because they are trendy and young and working and they are vibrant.

Other people, such as thirty-nine -year-old Sarah define middle-age in terms of style and fashions. She says people in middle-age 'start having their hair done a bit curly and wearing tweed skirts'.

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It was agreed that a youthful attitude meant an avoidance of the label of middle-aged, but only as long as there was not an embarrassing attempt to be too youthful: 'you should be perhaps a little bit more restrained than when you were young and not pretend to be down and with it with the kids' (Matthew, aged 55). Matthew pointed out how there was also a generational difference in how midlife is experienced and that his parents' generation would not have participated in some of the activities that people of his generation do in midlife. He said,

> I don't know how students or how my children view me. They probably view me as middle-aged, but I like to think that they don't. I mean, I like to think that they would still think of me as being relatively youthful in a middle-age sort of way because you know many of the things that I do are perhaps not typical, certainly not of previous generations of middle-aged people, but I think people's expectations have changed.

It should be pointed out that not all definitions of middle-age had negative connotations. Middle-age was sometimes viewed as a time for sharing wisdom and self-confidence. I also found that when the association with the term midlife was more positive then there was a greater tendency to identify with it. When I asked fifty-two -year-old Alex, 'Do you consider yourself to be middle-aged?' He responded,

> Alex: I suppose I do yeah.
>
> Interviewer: What would you say are the characteristics of middle-age?
>
> Alex: Erm, giving people the benefit of your experience. I mean I'm always telling my sons that, you know, they should do this or they should do that or they should, or when I did this or when I did that, erm, and I can't help myself, erm, so I think that's a clear characteristic. Middle-age is trying to, is trying to share your experience with somebody else but they don't necessarily want your experience really. They want to do it for themselves, so I think that's um, you know, and I suppose middle-age people tend to think they know better, which is part of the sharing the experience. So I think that's one of the characteristics of middle-age but with middle-age you do have, you do have life experience, probably more than some people although some people cram a lot in to a few years. So you know, you tend to be more self confident I think, because you've done a lot of stuff you've seen a lot of stuff, you know. So I think that's a sort of characteristic of middle-age really.

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These discussions about how my interviewees felt about being considered 'middle-aged' or being in 'midlife' provided a useful tool in terms of being able to orientate their attitudes to wider cultural expectations about midlife. In other words what did they feel they were expected to feel about midlife? What were the common perceptions about this period in the life course? The majority of interviewees framed this in a very negative discourse, one that I think challenged some of the positive ageing discourses that have been fairly recently written (Gambone, 2000; Lambley, 1995). Midlife and particularly 'middle-age' were associated with depressive and old-fashioned attitudes and not with the 'middle-aged rebel' types that Lambley evokes or the 'ReFired' characteristics that Gambone wrote about. At best midlife was about self-confidence and passing on wisdom but very little, if anything, was mentioned or anticipated regarding the opportunities, positive expectations, generativity (Erikson, 1963) and/or creativity (Jaques, 1965) which might have been expected from this cohort. This is illustrated in more depth throughout my following analysis chapters.

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Milestone Birthdays and the Significance of the '0'

There is significance in milestone birthdays: turning thirty, forty, fifty or sixty can have a significant impact on the way in which someone views their age. The change in the decade triggers an increased awareness of advancing age. I was interested in how my interviewees felt about turning these particular ages and what difference the decade change made to their lives?

I found that milestone birthdays could be particularly emotionally challenging, and they were approached with dread by many interviewees, particularly amongst the women I

spoke to. For example, when I asked Kathleen (aged 46), 'How do you feel about being the age that you are now?' She replied, 'Horrible actually! I don't like it very much um I guess it comes and goes... I don't like getting older and I don't like thinking the thought that I'm nearly fifty! I can't believe I'm coming up to fifty'. Similarly Sandra (aged 51) also describes being over fifty as 'horrible', she says 'I am over fifty and it's horrible, I don't like it! I don't know why, but I don't like it! Even though people say to me "oh you don't look your age", that's not the point, I'm still fifty at the end of the day … no, fifty-one! It's horrible!' Angela (aged 49) was possibly the most notably anxious about turning fifty. She said that she could cope with being in her forties because fifty seemed 'miles away' and that she could 'balance it mentally', but this changed once she went over the age of forty-five.

The changing of a decade was viewed very negatively, but why exactly is the '0' so significant? Why is turning forty or turning fifty such an important (and in these cases such a dreaded occasion)? There is a cultural script in the Western world which signifies ageing through these decade markers and milestone birthdays therefore become emotionally invested deadlines. For some interviewees, turning forty carried with it certain stereotyped cultural expectations. The term 'life begins at forty' was taken quite seriously in terms of expectations, particularly in the case of fifty one -year-old Trevor. He said, 'I don't know what I expected, but whatever I did expect didn't happen any way'. He was extremely disappointed by his forties, mostly because he experienced some health problems during that time. He said, 'I won't say I felt bitter because nothing happened but I just didn't enjoy it. I just didn't enjoy the period at all. I don't much think about my forties'. 'Forties was rubbish'. As a result of being unhappy in his forties, he was one interviewee who was very glad to be in his fifties. He said, 'but the fifties,

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coming into the fifties, I couldn't wait. I'm just in my fifties really, fifty-one and a bit'. I thought it was interesting that he quantified extra 'bit' on his age with a sense of importance, it was almost like a child who is very proud of their age. He hated his forties so much that the extra 'bit' just helped to situate him further into his fifties.

Some interviewees felt that in midlife half their life was now over (which in realistic terms it is). When I asked Sarah about how she felt about turning forty she replied 'I think I'm going to try and shut it out that I'm forty because I'm going to think otherwise it's a slippery slope. It's half of my life gone. That's how I look at it'. Jeanette also mentioned that she felt half her life was over but was more accepting of the fact. She said, 'I do think sometimes "Oh half my life has gone" and I've got to this stage in my life and I realize that I'm quite realistic but there's nothing else I can do about it. I know I'm getting older, I know I'm ageing but that's the way it is'.

Milestone ages on some occasions triggered an awareness of time limitations and thoughts of death. Kathleen said, 'When you get to fifty, I think, you know, how much longer have I got?' Rodney also said, 'At times I wake up and I think "God I've got another day on the planet, is it my last?" …when you get to my age because you know, fifty is half a century, so touch-wood I've had a good life, so if it goes it goes … when the light goes out you can't stop it'. For Trevor though reaching midlife was seen as an achievement in terms of being alive. He said 'I'm middle-aged and not too worried about that. At least I've reached it'.

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The common theme throughout all these accounts was a sense that time was running away with them and that they lacked control. The image of the slippery or downhill slope is one commonly used in popular culture when describing midlife in negative terms. A further discussion about mastery and control is given in the next chapter which discusses the ageing body.

Qualifying for a free bus pass was also seen as significant as milestone birthdays, and became a representative feature of having reached 'old age'- more so than the sixtieth birthday amongst my British interviewees. The thought of becoming eligible for a pass was quite unnerving for some interviewees. Diane (aged 55) for example said that the bus pass would mean that she has reached old age. She said 'I think when I reach sixty, I'll think to myself well right sixty and not long you'll get your bus pass then don't you? You think that's it then, isn't it. You know free bus. Yeah. It'll probably hit me then actually'. Sandra (aged 51) worried about getting her pass. She said 'I lie in beds some nights thinking "Oh my God, it's eight or nine years before I get my pass" That's if I get a pass at the age of sixty, I don't know'. She went on to say 'A bus pass. It's horrible, it makes me feel ill, but still, I can't do anything about it!' Sarah (aged 39) also said that getting her bus pass 'frightens' her as it signified being old. Only Theresa (aged 55) noted the positive and practical aspects of getting a pass, she said 'I think it'll be great. I'll be catching buses and trains and go all over the place'.

Interestingly turning thirty was also remembered as a very significant milestone birthday, with some people stating how this was perhaps the most traumatic birthday and the one that signified the end of youth. Shirley said 'thirty was the one that I shed some tears

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over'. 'I think there was that sort of feeling of youth going past you or something when it came to thirty'. Kathleen hated turning thirty too but in her case she had just had her daughter four days before her birthday. She did not get any presents because all the attention was on her new daughter, so this was a big factor in her unhappiness at that time. She said that forty did not 'bother' her. She said 'it didn't feel like any other day, in fact thirty made me more umm. I thought thirty cor blimey I just thought I've got to be grown up now'. However this was perhaps due to some of the anxiety of new motherhood. Despite some of the uncertainty of turning thirty many people described the thirties as the best years of their lives. The thirties were often described as a period of increased responsibilities, mostly as a result of starting a family. There were also more expectations to be more responsible during this period and some people described how they started to feel more grown up. Sarah said for example, 'I didn't feel young any more but I didn't feel old. I just felt I was at the right age, you know thirty I was responsible, had a good job and you know people could talk to me as if I was a proper adult at thirty'. She went on to say, 'all of a sudden you are thirty and you are somebody and I think at thirty you pretty much have got an idea in your head of where your life is going'. Lisa described a similar feeling when she turned forty. She explained how at forty she felt more grown up and assertive. She said,

> After I was forty there were times when you know in conversations with people they would say, something someone had said to you, and you'd say blinking heck I am a grown woman. I am forty years old and I am going to deal with it. I am not going to take your rubbish anymore, you know that kind of attitude I suppose and yeah I know on more than one occasion I have said to people, like I was forty before I had any self-confidence, but that is a psychological thing and blimey I am not a child now, I have got to speak up for myself.

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Tim also explained how he would not put up with much from other people now that he was fifty. When discussing how his younger colleagues talk to him he said, 'I tell you what I'm fifty right…You know, they do look after me but I'm not going to be shit on'.

Summary

This chapter situated midlife in its demographic context; exploring how wider social changes influence its definition and the way it is subjectively experienced on an individual level. Wider social changes such as the increase in life expectancy, the decreasing size of the average family, or the increasing age of parenthood all influence the expectations that people have about midlife and the experiences they have during this time. I found that the chronological definition of midlife had shifted to later in the life-course over the course of the last century as a result of increasing life-expectancy and improvements in health. Families have decreased in size and have often been started later in life. This means that whereas previous cohorts of midlife might have expected midlife to be a time of liberation from childcare responsibilities or a time of mourning an empty nest, midlife is now, for many, a time of raising or simply starting a new young family. Moreover, there were notable anxieties amongst some interviewees, particularly women, about the balance between achievements in work and raising a family. Expectations for women to measure their success through their career is increasingly commonplace and this often conflicts with biological, social and emotional demands to start a family. It was also shown that care demands on the middle age cohort were an important factor for consideration. These were not always full-time personal care duties, but often small but frequent acts of care such as shopping, cooking and cleaning for elderly parents. These care expectations in some cases limit the extent to which midlife 'liberation' can be

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achieved. Positive ageing messages often talk of the freedoms of midlife and of the 'third age' but responsibilities such as those towards elderly parents, can restrict midlife and early retirement plans.

Midlife cannot be viewed as a static concept and its definition is culturally, temporally and individually shaped. This chapter examined the trends in birth and death rates, intimate relationships, as well as work, income and retirement patterns; collectively this data creates a profile of the characteristic features of midlife and the relationships which can be expected. However, the subjective definitions of midlife create a multilayered definition of this period. Midlife can be defined chronologically as a middle phase of the life course but the boundaries vary significantly. Interestingly, once brackets were defined by my respondents, they sometimes altered the definition in order for them to be outside of that categorisation, or if it was inevitable that they were to be included in their own definition of midlife, they shifted the upper boundary to ensure that reaching old age was a long way off. The term middle-aged, for some, carried significantly negative connotations, yet was not considered a universal state that everyone passes through but was dependent upon attitude and beliefs. It was sometimes believed to be a state of mind and behaviour that should and could be avoided with a youthful attitude. Ageing generally was viewed very negatively by my interviewees, with milestone birthdays causing the most upset and serving as one of the biggest reminders of ageing. The following analysis chapters will now discuss in more detail the way in which my respondents subjectively experienced some of the issues of midlife which have been raised in this chapter.

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Chapter Four

"The Fittest Corpse on the Block"

Exploring the Subjective Experiences of the Ageing Body

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Introduction

Although the body continually changes and ages throughout the life course, in midlife these changes may become more obvious or seemingly accelerated in their progress. They are sometimes experienced as a sudden shock, a moment of realisation jolting the individual into increased self-reflection and awareness about their age. For example a flippant remark, a glimpse in a mirror reflection, or a sudden change in health can all alter the way in which someone thinks about their age. This chapter looks at how an awareness of ageing through bodily-changes impacts on the individual emotionally and how this is then acted upon. I argue that sudden triggers of age-awareness can not only create general anxieties about health and appearance but reveal a deeper level of existential anxiety and concerns about ageing and the future.

Bodily reminders of age can disrupt what Giddens termed the 'body project'. He argued that the body in late modern society is a 'plastic', malleable object which can be fashioned in a number of ways if the person has the means and inclination to do so (2001, [1991c]), but I argue in this chapter that the success of a body project is often disrupted by age.

Along with Giddens' concept of the 'body project' comes a certain expectation to conform and manage one's body in a socially acceptable way. This chapter considers whether there is a social and moral duty to be performed in the maintenance and performance of bodily appearance in midlife. What happens when the body can no longer be maintained in the way in which the individual would like or feels it ought to be? What adjustments have to be made to the way in which body projects are conducted? If it has

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come to the point at which the individual feels that their body can no longer be maintained in the way in which they would like, how do they negotiate this emotionally?

The Body as a Reminder of Age

Most people expect their bodies to change to some extent as they get older, but it can still come as a shock or surprise when they notice changes actually happening to them. Bodily changes are often so gradual that they appear to 'creep up' but occasionally there are moments in which the individual is confronted with their ageing process, catching them unaware. French novelist Marcel Proust wrote in his 1927 semi-autobiographical work *Le Temps Retrouve* about his own ageing process and described these shocks as 'a cruel discovery'. He eloquently states that 'we do not see ourselves as we are, our age as it is, but each of us sees it in the other as though in a mirror' (1927c, Tr.2009, Cp. 3). He also goes on refers to these sudden moments of realisation that can trigger our awareness of ageing and the unsettling nature of this. These changes can be distressing as they symbolise the passing of time and can exacerbate the sense of ageing. The ageing body physically reminds the person themselves about their position in their life span, about the loss of certain abilities and about the approach to eventual old age and death.

The term 'ontological security', first introduced by RD Laing (1961) and later used by Giddens, refers to the repetition of taken-for-granted practices which give people a sense of order and continuity in relation to everyday events. I think that this term helps to explain some of the distress or anxiety caused by these triggers of disruptive moments of realization. The psychological mechanism of ontological security plays a fundamental role in creating what Giddens termed a 'protective cocoon' (2001 [1991], 3, 40) from existential anxieties threatening the individual's integrity of self and the effective

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functioning of society in general. 'Ontological security "brackets out" potential occurrences which, were the individual seriously to contemplate them, would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment' (2001 [1991], 3). If an individual has a strong sense of ontological security they can proceed in their lives with a sense of safety and security about their lives and the world around them. Giddens suggested that life-styles and the body project are maintained through the repetition of taken-for-granted practices, which serve to create a sense of ontological security. However, this ontological security can be disrupted by contingencies, moments of realisation or what Giddens called 'fateful moments'. An extreme example would be an unexpected or untimely death, which calls into question all that the social order is based upon. Such breakdowns in ontological security can open the floodgates to existential anxiety which until that point had been held at bay. On a less dramatic level, I argue that ontological security could be potentially disrupted by more minor triggers, such as catching a glimpse of an unrecognisable reflection of oneself in a shop window or through the pain and inconvenience of restricted mobility. However, Giddens was rather divorced from the reality of restricted mobility and did not really take into consideration the effects that pain has on people's quality of life. In fact these kinds of changes in health can dramatically impact upon people's lives and sense of age.

The people I interviewed often noted moments which they said served as reminders about their age. These varied from being fairly minor occurrences with relatively low psychological impact, such as Rob (aged 50) who said,

> At one time I could go down the shed and open up the combination lock and see the numbers and then over a period of about three months it degenerated. So now I have to wear glasses for reading…and they are little reminders along the way.

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Matthew (aged 55) said he was shocked by how his face had aged when confronted by a promotional DVD he had made for work. He recalled 'I was quite amazed by how much sort of flappy skin there is'.

Reunions with old friends can also have an interesting impact on the realisation of the ageing process. Both Jeff and Raymond recalled the effect that meeting up with old acquaintances had on their body image and attitudes towards ageing. For forty-eight-year-old Jeff the reunion had led him to reconsider his own ageing:

> I did have a bit of a shock when I met a friend who I'd known for about twenty years and their weight had stayed consistent and I hadn't seen them for four years and they're in their mid-fifties and they suddenly got fat! So I realise now that especially as I don't get as much time for exercise, that I will have to look out for that a little bit…It would be one reason why I try and have an active lifestyle.

Raymond (aged 58) also said 'I did go to a reunion once with exactly my contemporaries …And that was a bit weird I must admit…Because obviously they were all my age…And uh they seemed old'. One of the most dramatic and psychologically disruptive fateful moments occurred to Kathleen (aged 46). She recalled an incident which happened when she was about thirty-eight-years old, which seemed to dent her confidence about her sexuality and made her more aware of her age as she approached her midlife phase. She said,

> I remember going in to an insurance company a few years ago and there was a young man on the desk, and he was really chatty and really flirty and he was flirting away and chatting away and I was getting all "oh this is nice!" you know, and then he said "so, whose mother are you then?" [Laughter] and so I thought … so that was a bolt from the blue, it was like wow! You know, and I thought "cheeky bugger, my children, you wouldn't know my children they're much younger than you!" [Laughter]

She further described this experience as a 'slap in the face' and this is a common way of phrasing the feeling of shock that people feel when they are confronted with their age in

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an unexpected way. This phrase was also used frequently in previous interviews which I have conducted on experiences of midlife.

Noticing changes in the body can be, as Rob (aged 50) described them, 'small reminders along the way'. These 'reminders' can be of the ageing process itself or can even, in the case of natural bodily changes, symbolise our primal state of being and can serve as reminders about our own eventual deaths. Moreover, a decline in health or perceived attractiveness signifies loss, most notably the loss of the capability to do the things you want. Even if there is no real ambition to run a marathon, climb the highest mountain, or be a top model, the loss of choice can be upsetting. Coming to terms with this loss of the 'dream' is discussed in more detail in the final analysis chapter *Remembered Pasts and Imagined Futures.*

Nearly all my interviewees reported health problems and many said that this was has made them feel old, and has in some cases forced them to reconsider their abilities and slowed them down. The most common health complaints were arthritis, 'aches and pains', lack of energy, gynaecological complaints and symptoms relating to the menopause. Changes in the body as it ages can serve as reminders of the reality of death. Shilling noted,

> Unfortunately, one look in the mirror while shaving or making-up confronts us with furrowed brow, crow's eyes, and bags under the eyes. We can reassure ourselves that a 'lived in' face is a sign of character, that it is not simply the existential sign that death is coming close that disturbs us (Shilling, 2003, 195)

The equation of age-related bodily changes with death was evident among a few of my interviews. Previously insignificant symptoms suddenly become more worrying. For example Raymond (aged 58) had a throat problem which he previously would not have

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been too worried about but went to the doctor about because he suspected it was cancer. He said,

> I had this problem with me throat…which we suspected might be cancer or something but I went to the hospital and they said it was fine so… I think I have said this before where you are aware that because of your age and in my particular case, because of smoking anything that is slightly minor…You know it could be something serious.

Adrian (aged 43) directly related the decline in his joint functioning to increased death awareness. He said,

> Death, as I have begun to notice my knees going and stuff like that I have begun to think that I should do something about smoking and generally just being a bit more healthy so that I am around for a bit longer than I am likely to be. [My daughter] will be, when I'm fifty-five, [she] will be eighteen, and there's a strong chance that I might not see some fairly major things in her life if I don't do something about it now.

Rodney (aged 55) said,

> You know it's going to happen, you're getting old, you're changing, your body's changing and you … I'm so happy at the moment, do you know what I mean? I don't want anything to happen but I know deep in my mind that it's there and it's going to happen at some time. But no, I don't think of [death] all the time, just when I wake up in the morning.

And sometimes it is simply the small things which act as a reminder. For example Joe (aged 49) has noticed a change in his hands. He said,

> Its little things that make you aware of your own mortality I think. You know, it's like when you look … funnily enough, just looking down, hands have a big thing. You just start to notice the odd liver spots starting to show up and you think oh gosh getting on a bit now and er I get a bit obsessed about not wanting to be the horrible pasty white colour that people get when they've never ever see the sun and I think it's the deterioration side of it more than anything else

All of these extracts demonstrate how bodily deterioration acts as a reminder about death, ageing and dying.

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Resemblances

Just as bodily changes can serve as reminder about age, so too can resemblances to the older generation of family, for example beginning to look like one's mother or father. As Schalin commented, 'an important part of the middle-age crisis is that a man is definitely forced into becoming 'his own father' just as a woman into becoming 'her own mother'' (1985, 126). The effect of this transformation of course is quite dependent on the relationship one has with one's parents, perhaps too with how they look and whether that is considered successful ageing or not. I found for example that if the resembling characteristic was a positive one then people tended to identify with it. For example Matthew (aged 55) said 'Our dentist assures me for my age [my teeth] are all okay and I think as far as I'm aware both my parents have got their own teeth, so that must be a good sign'. In this case there is the belief or hope that good genes have been passed down to him in terms of his teeth. It is seen as a 'sign' that he will follow in their path.

On the whole resemblances to members of the older generation were considered in mostly a negative way particularly by the women. Patricia (aged 55) said 'I look in the mirror and I think "Oh no!" and when I go and try clothes on now and now that I am obese, I am medically obese and I think "Oh God, is that my sister or my mum looking at me?"' Sarah (aged 39) said she is beginning to look more like her mother and says 'it bothers me because my mum is lovely, but to think that I'm going to look like my mum! Do you know what I mean?' and Theresa (aged 55) said 'I have noticed all this lately, all these wrinkles. I think "Oh no, I'm getting like my mother and my grandmother!"'Hands were often noted as a feature of resemblance. Theresa (aged 55) noted how she thought her hands showed the generational shift in her family. She said

> I can remember how I used to see my mother's hands and she would have these little age spots or whatever and I would look at my hands and think how mine

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> aren't like that, but now I look at them and I see [my daughters' hands] and think that now my hands are like mum's used to be.

An awareness of an increasing resemblance can be unsettling for some people, particularly if there are aspects about one's parents that one had previously objected too and these features are now becoming part of them and cannot be separated off from. Resemblances to ageing parents can also be reminders about their own potential futures, which can be quite unsettling.

'Falling Apart' and the Fragmentation of Self

Amongst some of my interviewees there was sometimes a desire to psychologically and physically distance themselves from the negative aspects of ageing. The most striking example of this comes from Matthew (aged 55). His job involves human biology and so he does have some academic interest in the functioning of the human heart; however his descriptions of his body focus very intently on the functioning of his own heart. He was recently diagnosed with a minor arrhythmic heart condition and he talked of his feelings about this.

> I push my heart as hard as it will go and it's never let me down. Although I did used to get really cheesed off. There was one occasion I can remember when I woke up in the middle of the night you know how when it's completely quiet you can sometimes hear your heart beat and it felt as if it was pounding and racing away and really irregular and I couldn't sleep. So as soon as it got light, it was in the summer about 5am, I decided to get up and go for a run to see if I could stop it really from misbehaving. I was really outraged that my heart should let me down like this when I had spent so much time and effort trying to make it healthy and this is the way it repays me. You know, by screwing up. I really thought that that was terribly unfair.

He described the rage that his body, and in particular his heart, should betray him. He felt that despite his best attempts through his lifestyle management and various body projects, his body still let him (and his self) down. Instead of experiencing his body and self as one,

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he seemingly objectified his heart and his body when it started to fail him and when it can be no longer controlled and managed effectively. It could be that this disassociation with the body when it does not function as you would want it to is a defensive and psychologically protective function against anxieties. This can be likened to the splitting which occurs in the paranoid schizoid position. It could be suggested that the psychological experience of age splits off the loved, nostalgic and youthful body which has undergone a great deal of investment throughout the life course so far, from the ageing, socially and morally unacceptable, primal, biological and ultimately dying body. With the realisation that the body is changing as it ages, the body and its 'age' become split as a way of coping with the ageing 'bad' body.

Another extreme example of this splitting came from Janet (aged 40) who spoke about the extreme lengths which she had contemplated to change her body. She had a small excess of skin and fat around her stomach area which she saw as being so repulsive and against her idea of the perfect body that she had thought about drastic actions to change it.

> [I have] quite a bit of what they call a jelly belly and it has a lip, an apron that hangs and you can't do nothing about it no matter how much you exercise it doesn't do anything because the muscle is dead and you can't reform it, so it needs to just come off. I have thought about it myself, just doing it myself, get the scissors out and just cutting it off.

This desire to cut of the lip of skin of course is a phantasy of Janet's. In reality she would not have taken such extreme action but she did describe this desire in all seriousness and talked about eventually saving for a tummy tuck operation. Despite being from a working class background, with very little spare money, she and her husband had looked into the cost of such an operation and were willing to save up for it. Her husband had said that he would support it 'if it means that much to you'. In this extract it is also significant that she says 'it *needs* to come off', which suggests this idea of the need to cut off the disliked,

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bad part of the body. It could be suggested that this desire to separate off from or split from negative aspects of the ageing body could be a response to a deeper inner fear of fragmentation. Her desire is to control the split and fragmentation rather than letting her body contain bad elements or letting it fall apart on its own. Frequently in everyday communication people who are worried about ageing say 'I am falling apart' and I suggest that this could also be reflective of these anxieties. Referring to 'falling apart' was common in my interviewees' narratives when faced with either an age-related body problem or an emotional crisis. Matthew (aged 55) mentioned 'I have got this horrible feeling that I am not going to be able to do [what I want in the future] because I'm just going to fall apart physically'. Shirley (aged 54) said that when she first got divorced 'I used to fall apart quite regularly'. Sandra (aged 51) talked about how 'at my fortieth it all started to fall apart didn't it? They were bad, not good times'. Finally Anna (aged 46) said that when the doctor 'diagnosed me and he said its not good news, its not bad news, its arthritis. And I think my whole world fell apart'.

Another way that the body becomes split is through the relationship between the physical body and its performance of age. There was often a disjuncture between what my interviewees considered to be their 'true selves' and the body in which that self resided. Hepworth and Featherstone (1991) argued that the ageing process is like a mask, which it could be argued serves to cover up the authentic self or in this case the 'true age' underneath. The idea of a mask suggests that there is an external layer to the body which conceals beneath it an essential self. It also suggests a great deal of control and free will that the individual has over the performance that this mask can offer. This links to Erving Goffman's work in *The Presentation of Self* (1959), in which he suggested that people are able to manipulate their bodies to present a desired image. He developed the

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dramaturgical approach, in which he suggests that social actors can all be likened to actors on a stage. He suggested that we perform front and backstage roles; the front role being a performance, which is used to create a desirable impression and the backstage role refers to the actions that people do in private. However, these models of front and back stage performances or the wearing of the 'mask' do not take into account the inner and outer experience of ageing, which I will draw out now.

Many interviewees spoke of their ageing experience in terms of a split between the inner and outer self. This was most notable amongst the women in my sample, who often described the body as separate from the 'true self' underneath. Sarah (aged 39) said for instance 'I'd like to think that mine [middle-age] would never show through, showing that I'm middle-aged'. Using Hepworth and Featherstone's argument we could argue that Sarah is producing a youthful looking shield or mask which she has worked at and which now serves to conceal how old she really is. From this statement it seems as though this is something which should be maintained and it would be a failure if her 'middle-agedness' did show through. Lisa (aged 45) mentioned that there is a disjuncture between the outwards appearance and her inner sense of self. She said 'sometimes when you look in the mirror, what you see is not what you think you are going to see, you feel younger than you are I think'. She goes on to say 'I don't feel old, I think your attitudes change a bit and your ideas change, but I don't feel, I don't know how old I feel, not as old as I am [laughs]'. Lisa's account brings in another dimension to this split, highlighting the different experiences of age. There is the social age which is the mask showing a particular age to the wider world. This social age is also the one that is reflected back in the mirror - it is the one that you believe that the wider world can see. There is the chronological age which is the age which is biologically true and the age that is signified

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by birthdays. Finally there is the personal or emotional age which refers to the age that you subjectively feel inside. These ages are conflicted with one another, which is highlighted in Lisa's account. The mirrored reflection shows her social age, which she says is not the same as the anticipated personal/emotional age that she expects to see. Also the personal/emotional age does not correspond the age that she actually is.

Creating a mask to conceal an inner identity seems a deliberate attempt to mislead or misrepresent oneself by creating a false impression for the world. Shilling said 'the presentation of self implies that individuals seek to deceive and manipulate others' (Shilling, 2003, 197). Thirty-nine-year-old Sarah claimed to regularly mislead people about her true age, but at the same time it could be argued that Sarah is expressing a true, more youthful identity through presenting a 'false' age.

> Interviewer: Yeah if they actually knew. But you still keep it quiet?
>
> Sarah: I do actually. They'd say how old are you? Thirty-two?
>
> Interviewer: I was going to say what age would you put yourself at?
>
> Sarah: No I'd probably say thirty-five. May be I should say a bit older because thirty-five, no maybe thirty-six?
>
> Interviewer: Just make it sound a bit more plausible?
>
> Sarah: Yeah a bit more. Thirty-six.
>
> Interviewer: Does that sound right to you?
>
> Sarah: Yeah. Thirty-six is a nice age. You've still got a few years to go. Yeah I think I'll say thirty-six and laugh. I always say how old do you think I am? Because it's nice to hear people say oh, thirty-four? I can be however old.

I suggest that the performance of age is not usually so deeply internalised that the person actually thinks of themselves as being the age that they perform. Rather it can be used as

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a tool for the conscious deception of others. Sarah (aged 39) mentioned her deliberate deception of others and her indignity if she was asked to reveal the true age. She said,

> I don't think people treat me any differently. Mainly because, I don't know if this is my vanity, but mainly because most people don't know how old I am. My friends, but my friends have never treated me any differently, but you know new people I meet, not many people say how old are you? Do they? If they do, they're rude! I'd lie anyway.

In Sarah's case she actually recognised a benefit of revealing her true age to one woman who she knows from the school gates. She described the woman as only a couple of years older than her, but to quote Sarah 'she is a bit frumpy'. She found the woman can be a bit patronising towards her and said 'maybe if she knew how old I was she might approach me differently'. However, at the same time Sarah remained unwilling to tell her and still masked her true age, as the benefits of physically looking younger than this woman out weighs the disadvantages of being treated as younger.

Sexual Attractiveness and the Ageing Body

Giddens argued that in a consumer society where the body is judged, monitored and displayed, it also become 'closely tied to the regular appraisals of others' and it is this display of body for others which gives the person a sense of embodiment and a sense of 'the self being safely 'in' the body' (2001, 57, 58). The importance of being noticed was something which was mentioned by some of my interviewees. Kathleen notes a number of occasions where she has been disappointed by the lack of male attention she has received. She said for example that when she was younger,

> Any bloke I fancied, I got! You know and of course when you hit forty-six, you don't even get a sort of nod in your direction and it is a shock! And I can honestly say that's the truth and I'm not saying that in an arrogant way, but it is!

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Often a sense of physical attractiveness and youthfulness was described by interviewees in terms of their sexual attractiveness, even if that was not for the benefit of their current partner or husband. Kathleen further commented

> [I] don't get any attention off the blokes … I know I'm married, happily married but… I always had attention as a young woman. Walking in to [town] you'd get a wolf whistle or something but now you just… you don't get anything and that's a bit unfair! I quite miss that. I don't get many compliments at all if you're ever dolled up and you know that's quite noticeable you know that um … and that's not pleasant

According to Shilling 'women have constantly to wrestle with a normative mask which reflects male notions of female essence. Women are 'trapped' in a visual space which defines them in terms of their body and appearance, yet which opposes this essence to the superior male spirit of the mind' (2003, 194, 195). Women's body-projects remain structured beneath the pressure of patriarchal ideas about idealised femininity, rather than possessing the so-called free will which Giddens suggested individuals have in the way their bodies are presented. However, it could also be argued that this voyeuristic gaze (from men and women) can be a positive and pleasurable for women in a culture of narcissism. For example Partington argued that 'female subjectivity is acquired through learning-to-look as well as learning-to-be-looked-at' (1991, 54)' (Partington, 1991, cited in Jagger in Hancock et al., 2002, 57). Benson also quoted an editor of a journal who describes the experience of the sexual female body becoming increasingly invisible as it ages. She said 'the real horror of being forty and female is that you know full well that your chances of being called a sex kitten again are slim. Building sites remain eerily silent as you swing past' (1997, 146). This, I suggest, was the case for Kathleen.

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Furthermore, age appropriateness could also be related to sexual attractiveness and again the stereotype of 'dirty old man/woman' is used when it is felt that the age is a factor in the inappropriateness of the relationship. Kathleen (aged 46) said

> I do like Jonny Depp! He's pretty girly, but there's something about him that's quite sexy!...I went to see the ballet Edward Scissorhands … it was excellent, absolutely excellent! … but he was just gorgeous in it. That leather little suit he wears and that little bum, Cor! Fab! [Laughter] See what I mean, dirty old women! [Laughter]

She also said,

> I still see the young blokes and you think 'cor they're gorgeous!' and you don't think of yourself as any older and then you're looking at them and they're probably thinking 'what's she looking at me for!' you know! It's scary!

Kathleen, although she talks about her passing attraction to younger men, worries about being seen as a 'dirty old woman' or 'silly'. Some other interviewees also mentioned how they felt about flirtatious interest with younger people. Sandra (aged 51) even when she attracted younger male attention still held back from pursuing it. She said,

> Fifty is horrible, especially if I go out, you know, if I go to a dance and I get chatted up by someone a lot younger than me and I think that's just … if I could turn back the clock, but I can't, no. I wouldn't bother taking the offer up because that doesn't appeal to me, these older women with younger men, you know I just think … you know, that just doesn't appeal to me at all, I would do it to boost my ego and all that, I just wouldn't be interested.

Some of the men also discussed the attention they had received from younger women. Joe (aged 49) recalls 'three scantily clad young women' at a promotional event and

> One of them came up to me and gave me this thing and I just walked off and [my friend]…rushed over and said "You're in there mate! She just turned round to her mate and said "He's cute!"" I said "yeah, yeah" and he said "No, it's true", so I said "oh alright then fair enough, you know" [Laughter from both] She must have needed glasses, I think. So anyway. Yeah, it's interesting.

Another interesting case was with Shirley (aged 54) who as a younger woman was considered a "trophy wife" by her ex-husband and felt under great pressure to present a

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mask of class, femininity, wealth and beauty. Now divorced from this marriage, working in a new skilled job and being in midlife she feels much more relaxed about her body image.

> Shirley: It was leaving the old lifestyle…because I could be much more myself, instead of being some sort of … I don't know what I was, but any way … someone who always had to be entertaining and funny and thin and you know, and intelligent and a good conservationalist and those sorts of things [slight laugh] … I wouldn't say I've lost all of those things, but um … so yeah, that … the work that I did, which was very sobering and um … yeah, it was really, over time, although I missed it, was quite a relief actually.
>
> Interviewer: Was it kind of like being a trophy wife or something?
>
> Shirley: Oh, yes, it was.

She says that her 'feminine good looks' could be used to her 'advantage' as 'a weapon'. She described the feelings she felt as she rid herself of this highly stylised performance,

> It was quite freeing really in a way … I missed it! I'd be a liar to say I didn't miss it. There was a time, probably in my forties … as I say, it's a bit like the ageing of a movie star really, I used to think 'oh God, what's happened to my audience', because I used to know a lot of people and do a lot of socializing and all that stuff, and so it was quite interesting really, that transition … I did miss it, but actually it's nice to be able to throw it off really!

Originally I read this account as a story of liberation, that she was free from her trophy state, but in many ways what she is saying reflects the loss that she felt when she was no longer able to depend on her looks to get what she wants; in this short extract she mentions how she 'missed it' three times.

Body image and sexual attractiveness is something which is very often thrown into a state of flux in midlife particularly for women. It becomes almost a balancing act between being flirtatious and sexy and being seen as age-inappropriate and ridiculous. For some women it can be a little unsettling to find that a reliance on appearance no longer works in the same way as it might have done in the past. Whereas for others like Shirley, no longer

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being defined solely by appearance and actually being recognised and appreciated for more substantive qualities may become, in some respects, quite a liberating experience for her in midlife.

The Body as a Project

According to Giddens (2001) late modernity has created new opportunities and a plurality of choice about how a life could or should be led and how a body should and could look. However this more individualistic way of life which developed in late modernity has brought with it new insecurities. As Bryant and Jary said 'modernity confronts the individual with an infinite number of choices but offers only limited guidance in how to make them' (2001, 105). This is what Shilling terms the 'paradox of modernity', he said 'we now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over our bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into doubt our certainty of what bodies are and how we should control them' (2003, 159). The proliferation of consumption choices and ways in which to play with the aesthetic qualities of the exterior body profoundly impact upon the individual's inner self-identity to the extent that 'we are not what we are, but what we make ourselves into' (Bryant and Jary, 2001, 104). Dworkin and Wachs described the body as being made up of 'cumulative purchases, internalised cultural norms, interactions with others and social practices' (2008, 15).

Giddens (2001) believed that late modernity has seen an increased significance, prominence and preoccupation with the body, particularly with its appearance and performance. Through consumer culture in high modernity bodies have become 'objects of cultivation' or 'reflexively organised projects', which can be moulded, shaped and sculpted through consumption choices and technological interventions (Giddens, 2001

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[1991]; Shilling, 2003, 188). In *Modernity and Self Identity* (2001 [1991]) Giddens introduced the concepts of 'body-regimes' and 'life-styles'. Body projects involve developing a plan for the modification, alteration or maintenance of the body. 'Life-styles' are patterns of behaviour which have been developed in order to organise, to make sense of and to negotiate this plurality of choices and to establish a sense of security, stability, meaning and moral guidance in the individual's life.

Despite some obvious social constraints, for the most part it has become increasingly acceptable and common to modify one's body according to one's desires. Consequently, as part of this, in order to achieve a successful body project it has become increasingly acceptable for people in middle-age to modify their bodies and to try to reverse the 'biological clock' (Hunt, 2005, 182). If one's body does not fit with an idealised image then there are multiple ways of rectifying, altering and manipulating the body so that it does. There is no longer any need to display to the same extent the natural changes in the ageing body. Superficial appearances such as greying or thinning hair, weight-gain, wrinkles can be all be transformed if you have the means, time and motivation to do so.

Some of my interviewees mentioned invasive cosmetic procedures that they would like to have but very few had actually gone to any extreme lengths to change anything drastically, mainly because of fear of it going wrong, financial considerations or the time involved in recovery. The desired procedures varied from lip injections, tattooed makeup, laser eye surgery, tummy tucks, and face lifts. Patricia (aged 55) worried about the results of having her eyebrows tattooed on 'I have got sort of visions of when you are eighty-five and you have these eyebrows, white hair and these tattooed eyebrows. It fills me with a bit of dread. I don't know what they do when you get to that age'. She fears looking

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ridiculous and the obvious attempts to change her body being revealed to everyone. The contrast between the white hair and tattooed eyebrows is interesting. This shows one of the limitations of the body project. As someone who currently dyes her hair brown in order to hide her age, she is highlighting that her hair will one day be displayed as grey and so by cosmetically altering another part of her body to look younger this would only serve to emphasise her age rather than disguise it.

Patricia (aged 55) also mentioned that the cost of procedures would inhibit her from going ahead with them.

> If my eyes started drooping over so much it was affecting my eyesight then I might have them lifted, but I just think it is just a lot of money to spend on yourself, you know what I mean? We could spend it going away together, but then he might want me to spend it on botox I don't know yet! [Laughs], he might say "sod the holiday, have the botox".

Trevor (aged 51) spoke of the financial considerations of surgery and said he would rather spend it on other things. He said,

> I often go like that [pulling up the sides of his face]. I used to look like that. I was looking at photos the other day and at the time I thought "Oh what a terrible photo", but I think it's quite nice now compared to what I look like now, put it all back. No. I'm not going to spend any money on face lifts. I'd rather have a holiday.

Similarly Matthew (aged 55) worried about the jowly skin on his neck, but said that if he was to spend that kind of money he would rather use it to improve the function of his hips rather than to improve his cosmetic appearance. He said,

> If I really did get jowly, very jowly like one or two people I know that look like turkeys, you know, if you could take out a bit of that skin then I might be tempted. I'd be much more tempted to, if I was paying for anything, I'd pay for hip replacements, anything to keep me going for a few years longer, but the appearance things no I suppose I'd like to think it could be worse.

The following interaction with Sarah (aged 39) was also very interesting. I asked her

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'would you ever consider any kind of surgical procedure?'

> No but I'd never knock it. I don't how [my husband] would feel about it but I think if you want to do it, you should do it. I don't know about this botox thing, because I think once you stop having it, it makes you look worse. But you know if I was that vain, which I'm not, I could almost be there I think. I'd think of having a little facelift or something… I think at the moment I'm alright. But perhaps in ten years knowing how I'm going to look from looking at my mum, I think I could be very tempted. But what's it going to do? I'm still going to be the age I'll be. [My husband] always says grow old gracefully. Yeah, but it's dull isn't it? I want to be young forever.

She too is worried about the results of having cosmetic interventions. More interestingly she related this desire to make a change to her appearance based on the anticipated changes she envisaged, with regards to looking like her mother when she ages. Sarah did not have a particularly close relationship with her mother and she sees her as quite ridiculous in the way that she has aged. Her mother had joined the Red Hatter's Society and Sarah was deeply embarrassed by this. She said,

> She does really bizarre things. I think they're really bizarre for my mum. She doesn't tell me an awful lot about it because I scoff at it to be honest, which I shouldn't because she is having fun doing it. But they meet for coffee and then they go off and do mad things. Like they have to wear purple, like plum colour and a bright red hat.

She described them as 'crazy women' and said 'they do mad things like they all go to town together on a mission to do something bizarre, I don't know what, I don't ask and I've seen my mum in town before and I've hid because I can't bear it'. This is very interesting in that Sarah said, when talking about cosmetic surgery, that she wanted to be 'young forever' but acknowledges 'I'm still going to be the age I'll be' whether she has surgery or not. Her mother as a member of the Red Hatter's is challenging her ideas about age. The Red Hatter movement encourages women over fifty to embrace their youthful side, engaging in activities which are often reserved for the young such as building sandcastles on the beach. The official website says, 'The Red Hat Society began as a

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result of a few women deciding to greet middle-age with verve, humour and élan...' (Sue Ellen Cooper, Queen Mother [of the Red Hat Society]). Sarah wants to engage with things which will hide, distort and deny her age. As mentioned previously, she is also quite happy to deceive people about her true age. However, she sees herself in her mother and fears becoming like her; perceiving her as a figure of ridicule. Her mother is also engaging in behaviour and activities which challenge the stereotypes of her age category. Sarah fears looking like and becoming like her mother and would like to do something about that, but she also fears the consequences of trying to be younger than she actually is because this could result in looking 'crazy' or silly.

So to turn back now to the concept of the body project and its applicability to the ageing body. Giddens argued that the body is 'plastic' and infinitely malleable, in that it can be shaped however one chooses within a body project. However, the concept of the body project has its limitations and the body can seemingly reach a point beyond 'repair'. Sometimes my interviewees described how the changes in their bodies were uncontrollable or difficult to keep on top of, interestingly often relating to hair. For instance Lisa (aged 45) talked about how her bodily hair was becoming harder to manage,

> …things like your hair changes and you get bits which are receding and then you get new bits coming through, um and then you spend half your time battling to keep the hair from other places where you want it, and your legs get all hairy and it comes on your face.

Adrian's (aged 43) also said 'I think my first grey hairs started when I was twenty-one it was like bloody hell, but it really started with a vengeance in my early thirties'. Changes in the body as it ages seem accelerated and cannot always be sufficiently controlled or maintained through set routines. Another example is that there comes a point when the individual realises that the fashions that they had always relied upon or the makeup

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routine they have always used is no longer age appropriate. Angela for instance commented that said she would like to try new hairstyles and makeup and wear more fashionable clothes but worries about looking stupid. She said the reason for this was because 'outwardly, the shell is deteriorating with however you want … [from] how you actually want to be'.

Body projects also involve health care routines and I found particularly amongst the men that I interviewed- that exercise regimes and body projects become a way of defining identity, often providing the sense of control and mastery over the body which in turn was necessary for maintaining a sense of ontological security and routine. When these routines are disrupted by health problems, there can be significant consequences for the way in which people relate to their bodies and self identity. Rob (aged 50) enjoyed Morris dancing but stated,

> Yeah the dancing has really crippled me really and I have, I tend to be a sort of person who tends to go at things probably a bit too hard and I give it one hundred percent and especially if I have a passion for something and I have always danced. I dance as much as I can and I got to the point where I just picked up some injuries, so I have had to stop for a couple of years and it is very hard to go and watch something that you want to do so I didn't go and then I got myself to a point where I can dance a little bit more so if I go out for an evening I can do two or three dances and then I'll stop whereas before I would have danced twenty dances straight off.
>
> I think the hardest part about it all was, I had a few physical problems and that is harder to cope with than the actual ageing and how I have adapted to that in terms of changing what I do and how I behave and so things that I might of enjoyed or I have looked forward to doing later in life I have had to have a rethink.

Faced with the pressure to invest in oneself and to make sense of the numerous choices one is faced with, can lead to a sense of anxiety and instability about one's identity, and whilst it may appear that these choices and changes are only played out superficially on the outer level of the body, these insecurities can destabilise the sense of self and lead

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people to question who they really are. Moreover, the choices may be available to alter the body but in many cases people are reluctant to take them up for fear of ridicule.

It has been argued by some theorists that another function of a body project could be as a way of insuring oneself against death. Body projects or health routines are built upon bodily routines and taken-for-granted expectations about how the body operates in terms of fitness, health, appearance etc. They are also often time consuming and could serve to preoccupy the mind against existential anxieties, thus creating a sense of 'ontological security'. Bodily projects concerned with health and fitness in particular often require a great deal of investment, which Shilling argues helps to 'defer thoughts of death'. He states that 'when these projects begin to go wrong, however, as they inevitably must, when the body refuses to be reconstructed in line with the designs of its owner, then this investment in the body can itself serve to make the prospect of death particularly real and terrifying' (Shilling, 2003, 167). Glover and Shepherd's *The Runner's Handbook* report that 'Americans by the tens of thousands are stripping off their clothes, pulling on shorts, lacing up their shoes, and running…They are running for their lives. They run because their friends are dropping dead from heart attacks' (in Hepworth and Featherstone, 1982, 106).

Matthew (aged 55) was perhaps one of the most health observant interviewees. He enjoyed regular exercise at the gym, competed in various athletic events and was most aware about his food consumption habits. As previously mentioned in a discussion about Matthew's heart, his job also involved advanced knowledge about human biology so he was perhaps more aware of his bodily health than many other interviewees. The

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following extract from Matthew's (aged 55) interview is very interesting to consider in terms of managing his body project and staving off thought of death.

> Interviewer: What supplements do you take then?
>
> Matthew: Oh God where shall I start? Well actually no I've cut down a bit. I take cod liver oil and glucosamine and calcium supplement for my joints…It's kind of an insurance policy, so yes glucosamine and chondroitin in a combined tablet which you are supposed to take three times a day but I very rarely remember. Um and then I had been taking vitamin C, but I stopped doing that just because I've run out and I can't be bothered to order any more yet…Vitamin E which is supposed to be cardio protective because it's an anti-oxidant and another anti-oxidant with some vitamins in them and a multi-vitamin. So it's them. You know I rattle a bit in the morning, taking them at first and I yeah I'm a bit ambivalent towards it I'm not sure that the evidence is really very strong that they do you some good but it just empowers you to some extent. You feel as if you are doing something to perhaps try and improve the odds because that's all it is at the end of the day, I mean I know I'm going to die everybody's going to die there's nothing more certain but I just as I said earlier I'd like to be the fittest corpse on the block and so um little things that I can do and the big things as well like exercising a reasonable amount.

In terms of death anxiety it is interesting that he said that the vitamins are a type of insurance policy. He recognised and admitted 'everybody's going to die' but by taking these vitamins he feels he is at least trying to do something about it and is trying to raise his chances of surviving just a little bit longer. It is also an insurance policy in terms of maintaining his moral standards as being a 'good' and 'healthy' person. He says it is 'empowering', which suggests a form of mastery and sense of control which is being maintained through the body by taking these vitamins.

The fact that Matthew said he would like to be the 'fittest corpse on the block' is highly significant. This oxymoron I think says something about his anxiety about the realities of death. He does not want to be a part of the deterioration which naturally accompanies death. But by romanticising death or joking about it he is actually defending against its reality. Hepworth and Featherstone noted 'many experts have argued that the chief benefit

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of exercise is that you die fitter' (1982, 100), but no matter how much you exercise and follow your body project death still remains a certainty. Moreover, Matthew was suggesting that the body project and presentation of self are still equally as important even beyond death. I suggest that this is because for Matthew there can never come a time when the body project fails as this would mean a break in his carefully managed regimes, his controlled world and would mean that death would catch up with him.

The central point to the concept of the body project is control. In midlife, one of the functions the body project is involved with is controlling the effects of age on the body. Dworkin and Wachs state that 'control of the body remains a central organising principle in post-industrial society. The need to control the unruly body emerges in post-industrial world as a marker of the self' (2008, 38). Maintenance of a body project requires a certain degree of reflexivity and control over the body and anxieties can arise if the individual feels that they are losing some of that control. By keeping busy, developing routines and focusing on the body, these every-day activities keep anxieties away.

Angela (aged 49) was someone who viewed her body as out of control as she got older. Interestingly, (although I realise that this is a subjective judgement) she could be considered a very attractive woman. For Angela youth was something to be maintained and kept hold of but she felt it was slipping away from her:

> I feel like I'm running out of time, so that's really … yeah, that frightens me because I suddenly realize I've come over that hill and I'm now on the down hill bit and times running out…And it frightens me and I don't … yeah, I am really frightened of it... I've got to lift it or otherwise I'm going to waste a lot of the years, a lot of time worrying about it and not enjoying life. And that's what worries me.

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She also said ‘you’re frightened because your thrown into this state of panic of oh my God life is slipping away from me, my youth is slipping away, I wont … I can’t do, I can’t look, I can’t feel like I used to and you want to try and still want to, because it’s scary getting older’. She consciously expresses a fear of being ‘out of control’. It could be suggested that she feels as though her body project has reached its limit and now she is subjected to the damages of time and biological inevitability. This links to what Levinson claimed when he says ‘a man’s fear that he is not immortal is expressed in his preoccupation with bodily decline and his fantasies of imminent death’ (1978, 215). Angela is explicit that it is the link between this feeling out of control and the fact that she feels then that time and age are catching up with her. Youth is something which had been prized and is now ‘slipping away’. Angela (aged 49) described herself as having ‘come over that hill and now ‘on the down hill bit’. She is however, far more reflexive about her sense of panic and about her fear of death than many other people that I interviewed. She was quite direct in confronting her mortality, which could suggest that she is perhaps less psychologically fearful than many of the other people who I interviewed who perhaps deny death. This reflexivity and admittance of her fears about death could actually be suggestive of a more accepting attitude towards her death and evidence that she is psychologically located in the Kleinian depressive position.

The Moral Body

In the 1920s media advertising became more prominent and particularly after the Second World War consumer culture became more widespread. With the rise in advertising and the Hollywood scene since the Second World War, there has been an increased cultural demand for people to develop demanding and complex body projects. There is a

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proliferation of beauty products, techniques and surgeries which one is encouraged to engage with everyday in order to maintain the self to a socially acceptable level.

Imperfections in the physical appearance are no longer considered 'natural' and 'inevitable' (Hepworth and Featherstone, 1982, 90) but rather something that the individual has a duty to do something about. Imperfections in the body are often denigrated in terms morality and a lack of self-control. There is a significant amount of discussion in the literature about the morality of maintaining the body in a socially acceptable order. Goffman stated that stigma referred to the 'bodily signs' which exposed 'something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier', which often 'disqualified from full social acceptance' (1990 [1963], 9, 11)'. The ageing body is seen as a sign of immorality and failure of its adequate care. Hepworth and Featherstone state that through advertising '…notions of 'natural' bodily deterioration and the bodily betrayals that accompany ageing become interpreted as signs of moral laxitude (1982)' (Featherstone et al, 1991, 178). They further suggest that advertising is responsible for the creation of emotional vulnerability, increased reflexivity and searching the body for imperfections no longer to be considered natural (Featherstone et al, 1991, 175). 'Advertisements were often designed to make people feel ashamed of themselves and inadequate' (Jagger in Hancock et al., 2002, 49). Dworkin and Wachs observed that 'the once narcissistic body obsession has not only become a marker of individual health, but a form of social responsibility and civic participation' (2008, 35). Giddens states, 'bodily discipline is intrinsic to the competent social agent…routine control of the body is integral to the very nature both of agency and of being accepted (trusted) by others as competent' (2001 [1991], 57). Hepworth and Featherstone say that the battle against ageing become a 'social duty' (1982, 95). Dworkin and Wachs claim that maintaining

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health and the appearance of health is 'no longer viewed as a personal choice, but as an obligation to the public good and a requirement for good citizenry' (2008, 35). They go on to exemplify this point stating that it is often the 'fat body' which is stigmatised as lazy or undisciplined, whereas the 'fit' or healthy body is considered successful and imbued with increased moral worth. It is often the youthful looking old that are considered more successful and morally upstanding than those who look older than their years.

I found that some interviewees were highly critical of those whom they perceived to have mismanaged their bodies or who have 'let themselves go'. Sandra (aged 51) said

> Yeah, I can't understand it. A couple of people who I've known over the years, who you go to school with, not got to school with, but you work with and see and look terrible, and I'm thinking "God, they've just let themselves go!" and I'm shocked, I just, I don't know, they're just like huge, in fact my ex-sister-in-law, who is only fifty? I think she's fifty-five now and she's told me she's a size sixteen and I just can't, there's no need for it!

In particular there seemed to be little excuse for bodily deterioration especially in relation to those with the greatest consumer power and capital to invest in themselves. Kathleen (aged 46) was particularly scathing of a female celebrity whom she considered to have let her ageing body take its course.

> Yeah. Um, I can't believe that women say they are very happy you know at their age and all that at fifty! I was looking at Helen Mirren on the television the other day and she's never had any surgery or anything, but um, she just looks like an old women now to me, especially as she's got bags, fat ankles and big flabby arms and I think 'God, all the money you've got, you could at least …' you know, I don't, not so much have a nip or a tuck, but she could go to the gym or something! You know, yeah, she's a great actress and everything but, and her face is still attractive, but um, the old bod isn't looking so hot! [Laughter].

Furthermore, it is interesting to see Kathleen's attitude towards someone who is in the financial position to afford these procedures and for them not to choose them. Kathleen found it quite shameful that Helen Mirren had not made the most of the choices and

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opportunities which are available to her in the management of her body. In order to be judged as morally acceptable the individual needs to be seen to be doing something about their flaws. The message advertisements offer is that there is always room for improvement and change. Sarah (aged 39) mentions how advertising has affected her, she said

> I'm a bit of one of those people that if someone advertised something on the telly that said that this is going to remove all your wrinkles, I'd buy it…But it doesn't happen and you are never going to remove your wrinkles, are you?

So even though Sarah knew that the creams were not going to work she still felt a pressure to purchase it and at least show that she was making an effort. It is through advertising and consumption that Sarah is convinced into believing in the products that she is buying. At the same time this positions her as a moral actor, as she is seen to take up the opportunities that are available to her and is seen to be 'doing something about' her age. Dworkin and Wachs noted that 'as the body becomes a negotiable commodity for men as well as women and multinationals seek increasing profits, males are increasingly being sold bodily problematization which can be soothed through continual purchases' (2008, 8). As Jagger stated, goods are often consumed for their 'sign value' and what they signify rather than their actual 'use-value' (2002, 46) Many products that are purchased under the promise that they will counteract the ageing process are bought so that the owner can at least feel like they are doing something about the ageing process and be seen as being morally good because of it, rather than for the benefits that the products say they can offer. Sarah (aged 39) said 'I think my face has changed quite a lot from wrinkles and there's no miracle cream will ever get rid of any of them. It's an ageing process unfortunately'.

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There is pressure to manage and keep under control natural bodily changes, for example minimising wrinkles and sagging skin, maintaining a healthy weight, not letting one's bodily hair grow out of control or not maintaining hygiene. Some of the people I spoke to showed considerable distress at their feeling that the battle had already been lost. Angela (aged 49) gave many examples like this, she said

> Like I've not put my make up on and I think God I look so awful now and I didn't look like this ten years ago and what am I going to look like … and I cant stop it, I am really looking old now! All that sort of thing, so. Do you know what I mean? I just don't … it's just horrible. Yeah, horrible. Like if I go out I think oh do people look at me and think how old I look now! Like she looks horrible!

Angela's concerns lay with what other people might think of her and how she looked. She felt her body was on display and under the scrutiny of others. It could be argued that women tend to be particularly vulnerable to these cultural demands to achieve physical attractiveness and this creates considerable pressure on them to create a morally acceptable body image, but this leads in turn to increased dissatisfaction with their bodies. Stokes argued that 'being physically attractive is far more significant in a woman's life than in a man's, but beauty is associated with relative youthfulness…and thus does not stand up to ageing' (Stokes, 1992, 27).

Fennel et al suggested that women suffer a 'double burden of ageism and sexism' and that their 'visibility invariably restricted to portrayal of negative stereotypes, as "old hags", "mutton dressed as lamb", "crones" and so forth"' (1988, 98). Also despite the possession of an ageing body it is often the case that the inner self feels younger than its physical container, thus sometimes leading to the faux pas of acting or dressing inappropriately for your age. Angela (aged 49) highlighted this in the following extract from her interview. She said,

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> I'd like to wear short skirts, I just like them and er … I used to wear them a lot of them when I was younger and I see [my daughter] wearing one and it's like yeah, it looks really nice and you know it looks good. But of course I'm now conscious that as an older person how silly would I look! Because you know you'd look at other people and think oh God you look really ridiculous, an older women wearing a short skirt! And there's things like that, that I find upsetting because again, it's that mental thing, inside you're just … it's capturing that youth I suppose, you still want to be twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, but the outside is saying that you're not and you have to … dress and act accordingly.

The performance of age is particularly precarious. There are tacit, but fairly constraining social rules which relate to age-appropriateness. Midlife requires a renegotiation of the rules to ensure that the performance is appropriate and this can cause a sense of anxiety about getting the performance right. Angela (aged 49) expressed some of these anxieties, she said

> I'm worried now that my make up on is too heavy or too thick … I don't want to look like a painted doll … um you've got to get it just right and …Whereas I was very cautious again with the make up [when I was younger], didn't wear a lot … whereas now I'd love to do that, I can't! Because I'd just look stupid! You know like I'm out of a mad film!

Fashion is also a particularly complex arena for negotiation. The phrase 'mutton dressed as lamb' is a commonly used saying to denigrate those who have dressed inappropriately for their age. This was something that nearly all my interviewees took into consideration as they got older. This particular phrase was used frequently throughout many of the interviews, particularly by women. For example, Janet (aged 40) said 'I have to think I am forty plus now and you have got to be careful about what you wear, you know you don't want to be mutton dressed as lamb'.

Diane (aged 55) said

> I've walked around and seen my age sometimes older wearing things like that and I'm thinking oh do they realise what they look like. Mutton dressed as lamb really. No. I don't think I would wear things like that any more

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Many of the women were aware of maintaining age appropriateness in the way in which they dressed. Lisa (aged 45) said 'I realise I am not as young as I used to be so I would wear what is in fashion but for my age group if you see what I mean?' Patricia (aged 55) said 'I don't want to look like the back of a bus or anything, but I am trying to keep within my limitations for my age and things'.

Although I found that women were concerned about their ageing bodies, I also found some men who were equally unhappy with their appearance in a similar way to the women and who shared the same insecurities about age appropriateness in the way they display their bodies. Dworkin and Wachs found in their research that men are increasingly dissatisfied with their physical appearance (2008, 7). They state 'male body panic joins female pathologies of imperfection, self-esteem troubles, and loss of control in the post-industrial landscape' (2008, 8). Amongst my interviewees Matthew (aged 55) said,

> You don't want to be seen as mutton dressed up as lamb…I wouldn't do gel in my hair [laugh], because when you see people my age that are like that, I do find that a bit sad that people are I don't know trying that overtly to hold on to something.

Others, like Alex (aged 52) consulted his wife about his fashion sense. He said 'my wife advises me on whether I look ridiculous in or not'. Joe also remembered how he felt about his dad dressing appropriately when he went beyond the age of fifty and how he feels about that now he is approaching that age. Joe (aged 49) said,

> I think it's a shame if you get over a certain age you have to start wearing, you know… My dad, if I used to go out to the pub with my dad, it didn't happen very happen, only once or twice, and I admit it didn't happen very often because I used to be a bit embarrassed he'd go out to the pub in a suit because that is what he did and feeling that because you are over fifty you can't wear a pair of jeans. Then on the other hand, you don't want to end up looking like Peter Stringfellow or someone like that, desperately trying to look like you know, it's just kind of getting the balance right, trying to look reasonably smart but not looking like you've just stepped off a Marks and Spencer menswear catalogue.

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I found that many interviewees used joking as a way to cover up anxieties about their perceived failings in their bodies. There were many examples of this occurring in the interviews. Janet (aged 40) said 'your body, I think, does change and I am getting shorter, that is very unnerving, why do you grow to shrink? [laugh] I hope I don't get any shorter though because my bum will be dragging on the floor [laugh]'. Men also made jokes about their bodily changes, Matthew said 'I'm getting shorter, I think, centimetres, which is a bit worrying because if I live to ninety I shall disappear completely into my shoes, which would be a bit awkward' and Jeff (aged 45) said 'I would be nice to have more hair again I suppose. But then only for physical reasons like the rain not slapping on the top of my head'. I found that often people made a joke or pointed out their flaws. Patricia (aged 55) often made jokes or framed discussions about her body in a humorous way, it was as if they needed to point out their imperfections before they could let me, as the spectator, discover them for myself. For example Patricia (aged 55) opens her interview with the following:

> Interviewer: Ok could you start by describing yourself and telling me a few words about yourself
>
> Patricia: About myself? Oh my God, I'm fifty-five and the mother of three daughters, um I therefore dye my hair constantly, I have still got one daughter still living at home and I am happily married. I have been married for thirty-one-years. I know I don't seem like it [said in a breathy jokey voice]

She then makes little remarks such as 'I dye my hair, I know you would never know [breathy, joking voice]' and later when I asked 'Sorry how old did you say you were? She responds 'fifty-five. Botox is a wonderful thing'.

Often jokes hinted at a deeper level of anxiety about people's insecurities about their bodies and the way they present them. Arber and Ginn for example noted that in order to deal with anxieties people sometimes 'make a spectacle of [their] agedness' (2002, 78).

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Jokes are also often manifestations of repressed unconscious thoughts which have slipped past the subconscious barriers. They often reveal hidden and sometimes difficult personal meanings and sometimes painful emotions leak through unconscious defences which then need to be disarmed through joking (Freud, 1905). These particular jokes from my interviewees perhaps do not go as far as to reveal anything very deeply buried but I suggest that they are often used in order to deflect from some of the more uncomfortable descriptions of age.

'Jogging for their Lives': Health, Fitness and Mastery over the Body

Successful management of an ageing body is often expressed through a sense of pride and mastery over the body, as Giddens stated 'the reflexive project of the self generates programmes of actualisation and mastery' (2001, 9). It is the sense that one's body is in control and that the bodily regimes are being upheld at a satisfactory level.

Sandra (aged 51) was one person whom I felt at times seemed almost boastful and triumphant at the apparent mastery and control she has over her body. She seems to mostly relate this to her weight and body shape and interestingly she was the only woman who told me how much she currently weighed. She said,

> I used to be nine stone five, I have been as big as ten stone, but now I've gone right down. I can go from anything … the other day I was down to eight stone four … I fluctuate from eight-four to eight stone eleven, now.

Body weight is a typical sign of morality or immorality and whether someone has adequate control over their bodies in the modern western world, so it is not surprising then that this is one way of measuring the success of a body project. Furthermore when discussing their bodies most people mentioned their weight as being an issue for concern or something they should be doing something about. Whilst denying an eating disorder,

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Sandra did admit 'I just don't eat properly. Sometimes I can go without food all day, I don't bother'. This seemed like an attempt to control her body through food. She was also the woman who said that there was no excuse for her sister-in-law to be a size sixteen at age fifty-five. She came across as quite self-satisfied about the fact that she has a slim figure at her age. She said 'My daughter can't believe it … my daughter said to me "mum, you haven't got cellulite and Nina's got cellulite! Yet, she's only a size eight!" So … [laughter]'.

Mastery over the body I suggested was most notably expressed through health and fitness regimes particularly amongst the men whom I interviewed. I would argue that exercise is a more socially acceptable way of expressing, discussing and displaying the male body. In general my male interviewees tended to engage in much more physical activity than the women. Almost all the men, regardless of background or class, participated in some form of exercise regime. Jogging is one of the most popular activities, Trevor (aged 51) explains his routine, he said 'I go out running and I go out may be three or four miles… I enjoy that. I put my headphones on and I don't need somebody to run with. I prefer to run on my own and I go where I want and I enjoy it'. Alex (aged 52) also goes jogging regularly, he said

> I mean the jogging is, is to get me out, is for a whole variety or reasons, I mean it gets me out of the office, its quite a good stress buster erm and it sort of feeds into my health as well. So some days it's a big effort to go and do it but um it almost becomes like a routine now and if I don't, if I don't go and have a jog then I get irritable in the afternoon and so its um, I suppose for some people they go and have a cigarette or a pint of beer….well during the day I go and have a jog, you know.

Men were far more proactive in their participation in health regimes, whereas women would be far more critical and generally unhappy with their bodies and attempts to change the physical condition of their bodies was far more likely to be put off. Shirley

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(aged 54) for example, first began her justification for needing to lose weight by explaining that she would like to lose weight for health reasons, but then went on to describe in more detail how she would rather lose weight for more cosmetic reasons. She said

> I'd like to be thinner. I think that I need to lose weight, not only for that, which is superficial, but also for my health … and plus the fact that there's still a part of me that likes to look nice and I don't think that I do, because I look far too chubby for my height, so er … there is that part of you that actually when you try clothes on you just think "Oh God, I wish I was thinner and then I'd look better in this" but I think it also comes down to health reasons as well, so I'm going to have to tackle that one.

What is interesting is that when I asked 'have you made any attempts to lose weight?' she replies 'No. [laughter] None at all at the moment, but it's definitely in the pipe line! That I'm actually talking about it means that it's actually higher up the agenda than it was a while ago'. In contrast men would generally do some exercise, no matter how small that was. For example Raymond and Rodney would lift weights first thing in the morning when they woke up. Rodney (aged 55) said,

> I can go down to the gym and I shift a couple of weights when I get up every morning, you know just to keep the old. I don't want the old chest going flat, not flat, but you know what I mean, as you get older it starts to crumple up.

Raymond (aged 58) also said 'I do exercise in the morning yes, doing weights. Nothing serious but just to keep ticking over, as it were'.

Men tended to measure their age according to their physical abilities, stamina and strength; comparing these factors to younger people who could run faster or further, swim faster, lift heavier items etc. or to their own previous performances. There were many examples of amongst the male interviewees. For example Alex (aged 52) described when he played football the previous evening, 'I was a bit slow catching somebody running round, I thought God I'm getting on!' Raymond (aged 58) has also noticed a change, he

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said, 'I had to chase him [his fifteen-year-old son] recently and he's never been able to outrun me over a short distance. He probably could now. Just trying to remember why I had to chase him now! [Laughs]' Matthew (aged 55) noted

> If they are doing something to do with endurance then I usually compare well with most of the students because they are unfit, rather than I am super fit! But then there is no doubt that there has been a deterioration, it's not had much impact on what I can do, it just changes the speed with which I can do it and how frequently and so on.

The following defeat was of particular significance to Matthew as he was beaten by someone younger and also female. This was a particular blow to his masculinity as well as his sense of youthfulness.

> I was beaten [in cross country] by one of our female students and I mean I like to think that I'm not in the slightest bit um of a male chauvinist pig but clearly I think it's a bit of a blow to your ego really when a young female, I mean I don't mind being beaten by one of the female students now but those few years ago I really felt that that was a bit of a negative step really. Um, so any way that showed me really how your ability to do these things can be compromised by health problems very quickly just overnight really can change from you know you being fairly vigorous physically and being able to doing all these things to not being able to do some things. Um, you have to accept it as an incremental process that you obviously are going to get slower in your running but that's, I don't mind that as long as I can still stay within the top how many percent of my competitors in my age group and I'm quite happy with that. So that's a priority really for me I think.

Hunt contended that

> Middle-age is the time when the person recognises a reduction in energy and often begins to favour less strenuous activities. Physical breakdown is a terrifying experience for many men since it connects the masculine body with weakness, dependency, and passivity- all the supposedly 'feminine' qualities they have spent a life-time defending themselves against. Thus the decline in sexual desire, illness, and injury can mean a renegotiation of dominant, heterosexual masculine identities (2005, 178).

Naturally, the physical changes and challenges are quite different for a woman's body compared to a man's body. It could be argued, and it is certainly apparent from my data, that men and women manage these changes and their body projects in very different ways.

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Exercise for women was more about trying to alter the cosmetic appearance of the body rather than about maintaining or improving their health. Moreover, Benson noticed that in research into midlife 'women proved a great deal slower than men to follow the promptings of those urging the need to adopt a more healthy diet and take more regular exercise. They knew that they should change, but found it exceptionally difficult to do so' (1997, 142). This was equally evident in my own research, where women complained more about bodily changes and said that they must do something about them, yet few had to motivation to participate in exercise regimes to the same extent to which the men did. There were a number of examples of how reluctant women tended to be to initiate a new bodily regime. Patricia (aged 55) stated,

> Oh yeah, […] I could lose weight I know I could lose weight and I am going to tomorrow and when I am slim and I am going to uhuhuh next week, but in the new year I do intend to lose weight, hoping to, over a long term. That's why I am going to walk more because I don't want to change my diet particularly so I think if I do more exercise and lose weight that way. That's what my sister is doing, she hasn't changed her eating habits at all, but in the last six months she has lost about ½ a stone just by walking a lot. So I shall be walking from here to Basildon [sarcastically] to lose this weight, because I do intend to, because I don't like being, I don't like where the weight is put it that way. It is all this middle bit, and it's horrible. And I am not thin [pulling at her stomach]. It's an ageing thing. It makes you look old when you carry your weight on your tummy, which people my age do, all my girlfriends moan about it. It's this bit here you can never get rid of you know.

Kathleen (aged 46) was cross about her own lack of motivation, she said,

> I keep making these excuses and I see these holiday programs and I see these lovely young ladies walking around with these fabulous figures and I think I could be like that. But why don't I? and it's just because I just don't. So, I'll have to get the motivation and I'll have to get cracking! [Laughter]

Angela (aged 49) is also critical of her perceived 'laziness'. She said,

> I'm lazy and like I say I like walking, but I just don't do that very often. I know I should do exercise because it's good for your heart rate and good for everything and I know as you get older that you should do um and that bothers me that I don't, but my laziness or whatever, or [what] I don't like far out ways knowing what I should do.

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Women's exercise tended to be more of a social event than a serious attempt to improve upon their fitness levels. For example Janet said

> I go belly dancing which I thoroughly enjoy. Its more of a social event, you know just to get you out of the house more than anything, but it's something, a bit of exercise with a bit of fun attached to it. I am not one for going, I don't mind going to the gym but I prefer going to aerobics and that sort of thing. It is just no fun to me. It has got to be a bit light hearted then, you know a bit of fun

There are a number of possible suggestions as to why there is a gender split with regards to bodily regimes and the difference in psychological reactions to bodily changes. One explanation is offered by Vertinsky (1998) who studied women going through the menopause. She found that there were stereotypical beliefs that women who were passing through the menopause should not participate in strenuous activities as it was believed to wear out the body (Vertinsky, 1998, cited in Tulle-Winton in Hancock et al., 2002, 77). Many women in the sample did speak about life being calmer and settling down in midlife and these tended to be the women who were menopausal or post-menopausal so there may be some relevance in Vertinsky's claims. The super fit body is also not considered to be particularly feminine, and a muscular appearance was not something my female interviewees were striving for.

The most likely explanation is I think to do with women having time for leisure. This was often more difficult for women with children, due to the family and home responsibilities. There was sometimes a feeling of guilt about participating in activities which were 'for themselves' and not for the family. Janet (aged 40) felt guilty for going out to do her exercise classes on week nights. She said that her nine-year-old son complains when she goes out. He said 'well it's not fair because you are never here' and she said that when he says that

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> It hurts. You think I have got to have a life of my own as well now. I am here when they go to school in the morning, I am here when you come home at tea time and I am here to cook your tea. I am here on a Monday evening and I am here on a Friday evening and I am here on a Wednesday evening. But Tuesdays and Thursdays are the nights when I do something for myself. And I have begun now feeling as if I am out every night. It is making me feel as though I am never here you know because it is two nights a week and I am thinking. I said to Chris [husband] he worse than having a husband. He is watching over me closer than Chris does and now he is making me feel as if I am abandoning them.

Other women also expressed a sense of duty to their families which takes priority over the changes they would like to make to their bodies. For example, Patricia (aged 55) said when discussing cosmetic surgery

> I think I would be too frightened, even to have my eyes lasered because I would be the one percent where it all went wrong. I was going to say tits up but that's probably the wrong expression! I think I would love to have me bum, all the fat taken off me bum and me boobs and liposuction in me stomach but I wouldn't, because I just feel, I don't know, apart from money, well it's a lot of money to spend on yourself, you know when you have got a family and I think I would be a bit frightened.

Janet (aged 40) also mentioned a similar thing when talking about the realities of cosmetic surgery, in particular the tummy tuck operation that she really would like to have. She said,

> You can't bend for a long time either and when you've got kids you've got to you know. I have had two sort of biggish operations in my life where I have had to rely on people for long periods of time and I don't want to have to do it on a cosmetic thing, and I know that it is a bit selfish.

Summary

The ageing process is perhaps most evident through changes in the physical body. It is perhaps obvious to state that the body changes as it ages; but whilst most of the time these changes often go unnoticed there are sometimes triggers or moments of realisation that can create a psychological reaction and increased awareness of the ageing process.

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The body, I argue, becomes a reminder of the ageing process, which not only impacts upon the psychological attitudes the individual has towards ageing but also presents to others a message about how the ageing process is managed. Symbolic interactionist approaches such as those argued by Goffman, suggest that we perform with our bodies and that age-related behaviour and age-related appearance are states which can be performed to other people. We saw evidence of this amongst the interviewees with attempts to conceal true age-identities and through the attempts to appear younger with cosmetic treatments. Interestingly we also saw that morality played a role in this, in that some people felt they ought to be doing something about the effects of ageing on their bodies and they felt a moral duty to at the very least to be seen to be doing something.

Giddens claimed that in modern western society we tend to manage our bodies through 'body projects'. I argued that whilst it is evident that most people do have particular idiosyncratic routines within which they manage their bodies, the idea of a rational, intentional and controlled body project is not something which can necessarily be upheld with the progression of the ageing process. It is true that there is now a plethora of ways in which to manage one's age should you have the time, means and inclination to do so. However, ageing is inevitable and even in spite of the consumption choices available, changes will still occur to the body as it ages. There will be changes to one's health and changes to reproductive capabilities with age and even if one buys into all the cosmetic and beauty treatments available to ward off the effects of ageing, it is still a fine balancing act between actually looking young and trying too hard to look younger. Bodies are therefore not as 'plastic' as Giddens suggested. Furthermore, Giddens implied a level of rationality about bodily choices and feelings about the body but often the way in which the ageing body is experienced psychologically is far less coherent. I argued by contrast

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that an awareness of age through signs in the physical body can have an effect on the psychological attitude the individual has towards their ageing process.

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Chapter Five

Growing Up and Growing Old: Negotiating the Generational Shift

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Part 1: The Death and Ageing of Parents

Midlife is a transitional period which often sees a shift in generational positioning, that is the loss and increasing ageing of the generation above and changes in the lives of the generation below. Life events such as the death of parents and other older relatives, as well as children reaching adulthood and leaving the family home are commonly associated with and experienced in midlife. Writing in 1965, Elliot Jaques considered these changes to be a fundamental element of the midlife period, claiming that

> A new set of external circumstances has to be met. The first phase adult life has been lived. Family and occupation have become established (or ought to have become established unless the individual's adjustments has gone seriously awry); parents have grown old, and children are at the thresholds of adulthood. Youth and childhood are past and gone, and demand to be mourned (1965, 506).

In this chapter I am interested in exploring what Jaques termed 'a new set of external circumstances' which, for him, include the establishment of family and career, ageing parents, maturing children and coming to terms with the end of the first phase of adult life. Particular attention will be given, in this chapter, to the relationships people in midlife have with significant others which come with changing family roles, responsibilities and dynamics. Jaques was writing in mid 1960s so it is interesting to contextualise his idea of the 'new set of external circumstances' within the current demographic structure of the UK. For example can we still expect the children's generation to be at the threshold of adulthood when their parents are in midlife? Furthermore this chapter explores the psychological challenges, gains and losses which are faced within these changes.

In the first half of this chapter I pay particular attention to how people in midlife feel about becoming the next older generation and how this impacts upon their own sense of ageing and awareness of mortality. I am interested in how people in midlife deal with

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changing relationships with their parents and how the emotional and practical changes which occur with their parents' increased agedness and death are managed. I look at how anxieties about ageing are evoked and how psychological defences are triggered as a response to the upward shift of the generations. The second part of this chapter discusses changes in the children's generation and how issues such as empty nest syndrome or having children later in life affects the way people in midlife negotiate and re-negotiate their relationships with the younger generation and the effect this has on how they think about their own ageing.

The Generational Shift

The generational shift sees the upward movement of the generations which for those in midlife places them higher up in the hierarchy of the family tree. This can have consequences for the way in which family roles and relationships are arbitrated. A shift to the oldest generational position in the family when parents die can evoke a range of emotions, from increased sense of responsibility, maturity and wisdom to feelings of vulnerability, insecurity and anxiety. It can also have an effect on the way people think about their own ageing process and mortality. When the older generation dies and the midlife individual moves into the older position, there may be the sense that they are next in line and the generational buffer between them and death has now gone.

A number of sociological and psychological theorists have recognised the significant impact that a parent's death can have on someone in midlife, particularly regarding the feelings of vulnerability that result from increased mortality awareness. Spillius, for example suggested that until this point the individual has unconsciously believed in their immortality, but at this point death becomes 'a more realistic possibility' (1988, 234).

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Umberson asserted that 'the death of a parent highlights the reality of our own individual mortality, especially since it is most likely to occur in middle adulthood, when our concerns about death are already on the rise' (2003, 131). Sprang and McNeil added that 'such a death brings to the fore one's own mortality…when a parent dies the adult child is next in line, the buffer is gone' (1995, 21). If, as the literature suggests, the death of the parental generation leads to a breakdown of the psychological barrier which stands between midlife and death, what impact does this have on the individual? What are the psychological implications of moving up a generation and of witnessing the death of the generation above?

Many interviewees did recognise a shift in the generational structure of their family when their parents died. Both of fifty-two-year-old Alex's parents died suddenly from heart attacks. His mother died in 1984 when he was in his twenties and his father two to three years prior to the interview. Now that both his parents have died and his children are becoming young adults Alex was starting to feel part of an older generation. He said,

> It sort of makes you feel, you know, that you're older. You know, 'cause when your parents are not there… in a sense taking their place in the scheme of things. And then you look back and my children are now, well they're not children anymore, they're adults, you know. And you just think we've all moved up one…. so if you dwell too long on that sort of thing, it doesn't do your well-being any good really. But it does, you know, you do think about it from time to time.

Although getting older and becoming part of the older generation naturally relates to getting closer to death, Alex does not explicitly mention any anxieties about death or ageing. However, it is interesting to note that he doesn't want to 'dwell on it too long', which suggests a more unconscious denial of his anxieties. He tries not to allow painful thoughts about ageing and death any prolonged time and mental space, yet the fact that

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he thinks about it from ‘time to time’ suggests that these thoughts are not easily pushed away, or he allows the mental space for them only at particular times.

For interviewees who had one or more healthy parents, I found that there was more reason to deny thoughts about their own deaths and to postpone thinking about ageing and death, because of the expectation that death will occur in the natural order, with the oldest in the family tree dying first. It is as if healthy parents represent a psychological buffer stands between them and death. Schalin also noted in his study that ‘the omnipotence of the young is unbroken and their self-confidence unrealistically great’ if ‘both parents - often fit and sound- stand between one's own grave and one's own self’ (1985, 115-116). Forty-six-year-old Anna was a particular interesting example of this. Anna’s parents were divorced and lived separately. Neither required any care assistance from her. Her dad had lived in sheltered accommodation since the age of sixty despite being in good health and now at age seventy he still works full time, he also has a female friend and spends a lot of time travelling abroad with her. Her mother became a nun in 1996 and presently lives in a convent in Cyprus. Her health is relatively good and she also has the security that the convent will take care of her for the rest of her life. Anna’s parent-in-law are still alive and in good health and unusually she also has a grandmother who is still alive. Her generational buffer is relatively robust in comparison to many other people I interviewed. For Anna it seems unnecessary to be giving any thought to her own death because, with a generation above her, if nature acts as expected, they will die before her. This safety net served to protect her from existential anxieties. She said,

> I mean in some ways, with my parents still, I think well my parents are still here, so for us to be discussing death and things for our own deaths seems a bit I don’t know, not stupid but irrelevant because my parents are still here. We haven’t taken the mantle up, so to speak, to become the older generation yet, that is the only way I can put it. There is a line to follow.

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This natural order is further enforced by her grandmother's existence, she said,

> …I have got a grandmother. So you see I am third in line! [Laughs]
>
> Interviewer: Back of the queue!
>
> Anna: Back of the queue! Do you know what I mean?

Sometimes, even when both parents have died other members of the older cohort such as aunts, uncles and in-laws remain partly representative of the older generation. However, they do not always provide a satisfactory substitute for the parental buffer and the anxieties about moving up a generation are something which still needs to be contended with. Forty-nine-year-old Joe, for example, lost his father in 1981 to cancer and his mother a few months prior to the interview. He said,

> [My wife's] mum and dad are about ten years younger than my parents, so I still kind of see them as the older generation, but they always had a slightly more youthful attitude to things than I think my parents did….what I am starting to come to terms with now is that I am now moving into the bracket of what other people think as 'old' and that's, I don't know how I'm going to deal with that one. That's just kind of a bit uhhhh, I'm getting into that bracket now. It doesn't… I'm conscious of it and I'm not alarmed by it necessarily. I guess it's just one of those things.

For Joe the awareness of a generational shift has still occurred even though he recognises that there are people in his family who are older than him. It is the death of his parents which has elevated him into the next age 'bracket' and led to an awareness of his own ageing.

The response of Patricia (aged 55) to talking about the generational shift was also interesting. Her mother died four years prior to the interview and her dad was alive but had some health concerns. When I asked, 'sometimes people feel that when their parents go that they feel like the older generation, have you felt anything like that?' her first response is, 'No, no I am Peter Pan'. This was partly said in humour, which can often be

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used as a psychological defence to detract from more underlying and difficult feelings. In *"The Fittest Corpse on the Block*" chapter it was shown that Patricia often turns to humour when discussing topics which are potentially quite distressing and it could be argued she uses it to detoxify the anxieties she feels about these issues about her age (Freud, 1905, 1960; Thompson, 1992, 10). Her Peter Pan joke was almost an admission of her difficulty in answering my question, which would have required a level of thought that at first she was unwilling to entertain.

Angela (aged 49) was anxious about the generational shift and about becoming the older generation. In her case, although both her parents were alive and reasonably healthy, evidence of their ageing had begun to create anxieties about her own ageing and eventual death. It was a seemingly insignificant trigger which sparked Angela's anxiety. She recalled,

> I saw my dad last week for this day out, for the first time I, the way he was walking and the way he was looking, he's lost a lot of weight you see, and I thought "my God dad, you look old!" and that's the first time I've really taken stock of how he was walking and how he was looking and that frightened me because I'm thinking, especially because of the way my thoughts are, I thought "Oh my God!" because I see everything happening in stages and everything and I think everything and everybody moves on a stage to another level don't they? And I thought "Oh my God, my dad's moved on to that next level!" which means I now shunt up and take his place! And that frightens me!

Angela has become acutely aware of 'shunting' up the generations and she seems fearful of what that implies. Although her parents have not yet died, it is the recognition that they have aged which triggers Angela's anxieties about the generational shift. She also later said, 'I suppose they've always been immortal, which is silly because they're ageing in front of me'. This statement is almost like a child-like phantasy about the indestructibility of her loved object; phantasy of immortality for those she loves and immortality for herself. However, the reality of her parent's ageing and in parallel her own ageing has

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now begun to disrupt her phantasy and this frightens her. This quote is reflective of her fears for her parent's mortality as well as her own and the feelings of loss and bereavement that these changes are inevitably going to bring. Parents may be taken for granted in everyday life and it can be frightening to realize that this relationship will not continue indefinitely and in fact may come to an end in the near future.

Becoming a Parents' Parent

It can be unsettling to witness the ageing of one's parents. It raises the prospect of the loss of a loved one and of the consequent grief and mourning. Witnessing the ageing of parents can also create worries about their health, worries about the end of an era and more egocentrically perhaps worries about one's own future. In midlife some people find themselves in the position of having to make difficult decisions for increasingly dependent parents. For some there is a role reversal in which the middle-aged individual may have to become their parents' parent.

Patricia (aged 55) noticed that the roles have become reversed with her father. She says, 'in later life when your roles reverse a bit...you are doing more for them than they are for you'. Patricia had recognised a change in her father's character and sometimes found this changing role difficult to deal with. She described an incident when her father found out he was going blind, she said, 'I was holding him and cuddling him and he was sobbing and he was just frightened of going blind. And he says "what will I do, what will I do?"' She also described how her father had gone from being a strong character who would speak his mind to a quite meek man and this has come as a shock to her. She invites him round for dinner a few times a week and he watches TV with her family. However he started complaining that he could not hear his television programmes when the family

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were talking, which ended up in a mild disagreement. But it was the way in which her father reacted to her challenge, which made Patricia more aware of how he had changed from his younger days:

> I said "why do you come round here, because you come round here for conversation. You have been on your own all day and watching the telly. You can't expect to come round" I said "and people not talk. You can't tell people to be quiet". And he said [in a quiet, meek voice] "I couldn't hear my telly shows". And I [high guilty-sounding laugh] felt really horrible. [In an even quieter, meeker voice] "But I couldn't hear my programmes" and I said "well you see your programmes any time" and if that had been ten years ago, [strong voice] "here I can tell you what you can do, you can fuck off", that way he's changed. He's got old is what I mean really.

This interaction is poignant and there is a real sense of guilt from Patricia, which was reflected in her uncertain laugh. She is no longer able to interact with her father on the same level as they once did. The dynamics of the relationship have shifted from him being a dominant, forthright and strong father figure, to being a meek and weak character. This is something which Patricia now has to come to terms with.

Fifty-year-old Rob has also noticed that he is becoming more like a parent to his own mother. When I interviewed him we were interrupted by a phone call from his mother. He said to her on the phone, '"no I can't come down now, I will come down later, I can't come now. Listen now don't panic, please don't panic I will be down to see you a bit later on"'. It was evident that his mother was in some kind of distress and urgently wanted him to go to her, but despite this he did not appear rushed to finish the interview early. Two hours later when we had finished, he said 'yeah I better had see my mum'. He said about the call, 'there is that transition now, we had a phone call just a few minutes ago, she can't put the TV on so who's responsibility is it to sort it out, its mine. There comes a point in one's life when it all shifts around'.

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He described it as a transition in which 'it all shifts around' which means that there has been a shift in responsibilities and Rob has started to take on parenting roles for his mother. He does a variety of small jobs for her and sees her regularly, but despite having had a fractious relationship all his life with his mother, he still sees it as part of his duty to pay back what she has given him. He said, 'It's all those things, but the amount of energy she put into me and also my family, it's a small payback really'.

There has been extensive discussion and research carried out into the care of parents in midlife (See discussions in Neugarten (ed), 1968; Babb et al (eds) ONS Social Trends 36, 2006; Pavalko, and Gong, 2003). A useful discussion into care work comes from Young, H., Grundy, E., and Jitlal, M (2006) from The Joseph Rowntree Foundation who carried out an extensive and comprehensive study into the 'Characteristics of Care Providers and Care Receivers over Time'. Amongst their key findings they found that those people of a lower socio-economic status were the most likely to provide care for an elderly parent, particularly in the forty to fifty-nine year old age group (2006, 44). They also found that midlife individuals in full-time employment at both 1991 and 2001 were less likely to be providing extensive care for a co-resident parent than those with a history of less employment (2006, 34). Furthermore they found that twenty one per cent of their sample of midlife adults who lived with an elderly parent provided care for more than 20 hours a week (2006, 38), moreover twenty one percent of the never-married men that they surveyed in 2001, aged between thirty-five and forty-four, lived with an elderly parent (2006, 36). Their results showed that the 'odds of being co-resident with a parent were very much higher for the never married and were also higher overall for men compared with women, and for those in owner-occupied housing compared with rented housing' (2006, 43). Moreover, among men aged forty to fifty-nine, the never married were most

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likely to be providing extensive care, yet among women of the same age group, the never married and married were equally likely to provide care (2006, 44).

In my sample, the majority of my interviewees provided some form of care for either an elderly parent or for a parent-in-law, but this varied in its intensity and commitment. Most people paid extra attention to ensuring they made visits or calls a couple of times a week. Parents were often taken shopping at least once a week or shopping was taken to them. Other chores like a bit of cleaning, gardening, DIY or cooking meals would also be regularly done. Though figures quoted in the *Situating Midlife* chapter suggest that women often do the majority of care work, amongst my interviewees it seemed fairly evenly distributed in terms of the smaller chores, and in the cases where there was a more intense care commitment it was generally the male respondents who did this care work. However, I am aware that this is a small sample and it is not necessarily completely reflective of wider social practices.

Many of my interviewees had given serious thought to the more intense personal care that their parents may require in the future. Many were not too keen to take on the caring role and were even less enthusiastic about inviting elderly parents to live with them at home. Joe (aged 49) for instance said, 'Oh I could never have had mum in the house. No way'. Thirty-nine-year-old Sarah's dad had asked, only the day before the interview, 'Why don't you have an annex built'. Her response was 'I thought "Oh God no. Love you to death but no you're not living in my house when you're old"'. She also said, 'I couldn't have them; I couldn't give up my life to look after parents'. It can be very difficult for people to turn away parents who ask to live with them. Kathleen (aged 46) for example said, 'my dad's made a few, couple of flippant comments before now like "Oh, when we

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sell our house, we'll move in with you" and I think "no, no don't go there!"' Rob (aged 50) has also had to put his mother off the idea. He said 'the right thing to do is to actually have her to either live with myself or with my sister, but I mean that is a very big step'. He explained how he had to dissuade his mother,

> Rob: I said "well look I live by myself and I have stairs which you can't get up and you would be as isolated here as you are at home, although you might have some company in the evening. I would like to go out in the evening as well, would it necessarily work?" However you might phrase it, when people think to themselves that that is what they want it is very hard to dissuade them to think otherwise.
>
> Interviewer: How did she react when you told her?
>
> Rob: Well she shrugged her shoulders; they [mother and father] were both quite accepting, [sounds emotional] quite accepting people.

Rob really wanted to do the best for his mother and already dedicated a lot of time and energy into looking after her in her own home. His sense of guilt that he cannot offer more is evident. His emotional tone suggested that this is an issue that is having a significant impact on him at this time and turning his mother down had been a very difficult decision for him to make.

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Separation and Attachment in Midlife

Since infancy most loving parents will have offered protection, security, comfort and guidance. Parents provide the ultimate security and the infant is dependent on them for survival. In the psyche of the defenceless infant the loss of parents has the potential to lead to their own demise, yet this fear of separation from someone on whom they are so dependent is something which still needs to be faced. In the early stages of development, psychological separation must occur in order for the child to develop and lead an independent existence, becoming responsible for its own survival (Klein in Spillius 1988, 321, 322). This process of separation and individuation shares some similarities to the

mourning process, and I argue is something which is in part revisited when the middle-aged child faces the ultimate separation from their parents through death. As a mature adult, even if they do not need the direct practical and emotional provisions from a parent, a certain comfort can be derived from knowing that they are still there as a safety net or psychological backup. Just as parents provided a generational buffer against existential anxiety they also play other important roles.

Anna expressed concerns about how she will feel when her parents do eventually die:

> I know they are going to, I don't know when and it is going to be extremely hard, because you know that is when we lose our sense of being a child, because at the moment it is mum, dad, and you are an adult and you have taken on the responsibility of bringing up [children], but that small link, that there is someone there before you and when you lose that and I think I talked about it briefly earlier and I think that is when it will hit home and that is what is going to hit home for me and for people it will hit home knowing that we are the next in line. Unless God forbid someone walks out and the natural cause of action would be if all goes well that they will be the next ones to go.

Anna emphasised how the generational buffer is for the moment holding back her anxieties about ageing and death, but it is also interesting here that she says that she will find it hard to cope with losing that sense of being a child. She said 'we lose our sense of being a child'. A middle-aged friend of mine also cried 'I am now an orphan' after having lost both of her parents within six months of each other. Satisfactory relationships with parents help maintain a sense of childishness and youth in the middle-aged child, whilst offering a sense of security and dependability. But how do people respond when this buffer is lost through the death of parents, or when it becomes inadequate due to the changed nature of the relationship with parents as they have aged?

I found that for some people the presence of their parents had hindered them from a full transition to adulthood. This presented an ambiguity: people might be afraid to move up a

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generation for reasons of existential anxiety or because of the fear of loss, but at the same time this is something that needs to be faced in order to progress and develop in the life-course. It is a necessary loss and a necessary anxiety to overcome.

I found that midlife is a period in which some people finally felt they had a chance to be 'grown up' and once the parental generation has died this is now the first opportunity to feel free from their parents' constraints. Just as conflicts arise with parents in early infancy and again in adolescence about becoming more autonomous, there seems to also be a process of separation and struggles for autonomy which occur in midlife: a struggle to be 'grown up' and free from parental influence, particularly amongst those who realize that time is passing by and that they are getting older. Carl Jung noted that having parents alive can delay the transition to maturity, he stated that if the 'parents of the person in question are still alive' then 'it is then as if the period of youth were being unduly drawn out. I have seen this especially in the case of men whose fathers were long lived. The death of the father then has the effect of a precipitate and almost catastrophic ripening' (Jung, 1930, 396).

Sarah (aged 39) provided an interesting case study to illustrate this struggle with being 'grown up' in midlife. She mentioned a couple of incidents in recent years which have increased her realization that she is getting older and more 'grown up'. She was quite ambivalent about feelings about being grown up. She recalled her first realization about growing up came after she got married and her husband started saying 'this is my wife' instead of 'this is Sarah' and she said 'it used to make me really giggle'. She goes on to say that it still feels strange. She said,

> Sarah: …And still now it sounds odd if I say my husband. I always say my other half or my partner. I feel I don't know. May be I feel old saying this is my

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husband. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: It's all grown up.

Sarah: Yeah it's all grown up and I think I'm in denial about being grown up.

The most recent event which has created a sense of being grown up comes from her recent move to her new house. She lived in a beautiful, very large and expensive looking house. However, the house did not have a comfortable feel to it and she seemed uncomfortable there. It lacked a personal touch and was quite sparsely decorated. I commented on her lovely house when I visited her but she remarked that she did not particularly like it and that she just felt it was too big, too much and just too grown up. She gave me the impression of a young girl playing at being grown up and not really enjoying it. She said,

> For a long time we couldn't find anything we liked and [my husband] basically wanted to move out into sort of country, more so than town, and to have a big garden and a garage and you know normal things which I call really grown up things...when you live in flats and things you feel not so, I don't know, you don't feel so old and all of a sudden you've got you know it's like that thing 2.4 children. We've got two garages and a big garden and to me it's like we've got the grown up adult things.

She also talked about how her parents, who are both alive and have no major health problems, still treat her as a child. She recalled how her dad acted when she said that she would be going away for her fortieth birthday. She said, '…my dad giggled and said 'oh you're going to be forty next year'. My mum and dad will always treat me as their child, which I think parents do, not childishly but they will never consider you as getting old if you know what I mean'. She seemed indignant and frustrated by the way her parents treated her as a child but in other ways she seemed to feel more secure in that role. This was evident in the following exchange,

> Interviewer: … do you ever think about them when they go and how your life will change?

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> Sarah: Yeah I'll have to do so much more. Selfishly. I do work. I've got two older brothers and they really rely on my mum, particularly one of them. I think he's going to really struggle without my mum around. I mean he's married with kids but between him and his wife they're fairly useless at organising lives and stuff and he really relies on my mum and dad and I think he's going to struggle a lot more. I think I'll just miss them, because I know they are there to help me out and they are my parents at the end of the day, you know. Yeah I do sort of think "Oh God", but then I think you also sit there and you don't believe it is ever going to happen anyway. It will be a big shock when it does and I think I'm old enough to deal with it. This is going back to I want to be around for [my daughter]. I think at forty if you lose your parents it's not… Not that you want to lose your parents, but you can deal with it easier than if I'd lost them when I was twenty.

In this extract her first response to the question is 'yeah I'll have to do so much more', which refers to her reliance on her parents as on-call babysitters. However, when realising how selfish that starts to sounds, she quickly deflected the problem to her brothers and explains how they will struggle without their parents to rely on. She then moves on to say 'you don't believe it is ever going to happen anyway', but then hints that it will not be so bad after all, but stops herself before she can fully admit that ('I think at forty if you lose your parents it's not…'). It is generally socially unacceptable to admit that you will not particularly miss one's parents after their deaths. It appears in this extract from Sarah that this is how she feels but she stops herself slightly short before fully admitting that. Sarah is torn between wanting to be treated as a grown up and as an adult, but still demonstrates that she is dependent on her parents too.

As was previously argued, the parental generation hold a significant position and their loss can have profound implications for the midlife generation. But, what if parents live longer than anticipated? Do middle-aged children resent not being able to take their place at the top of the family hierarchy? How does the middle-aged child feel when the parental relationship does not fulfil its usual function of protecting and providing, and shifts to a new relationship where the child becomes their parents' parent? How are feelings of

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separation, attachment and loss negotiated when there exists a struggle between the need to live a fulfilled life as a grown adult, and still also feeling oppressed, dependent or an obligation towards one's parents?

In some cases the burden of care of elderly parents can be quite significant during the midlife period. If that care has been prolonged or particularly difficult then there is often relief at the parent's deaths due to the end of suffering for the parent but also due to the end of care duties. Jeff (aged 48) for example had a heavy care responsibility for his mother and he felt he needed his mother to die in order for him to start having a life of his own. Along with his sister they have cared for their mother their entire adult lives as she suffered from severe mental health problems and now has severe physical and mental disabilities. Neither he nor his sister had lived away from their mother and neither have formed a serious romantic relationship with anyone, never had children and Jeff had never been able to achieve his main life ambitions.

He talked about his ambivalent feelings about his mother's death. On one hand he would have liked her to die, but then found himself shifting to a fear of her dying. He said,

> I suppose I want her to die really. I mean I will be sad. I will be sad in some ways and I think I've purposely distanced myself from the emotional bond sometimes. I think people are very flexible. I could easily find myself getting back into more of a sort of son/mother relationship and being terrified of her dying.

It is as if Jeff could not separate himself from his child-like role. Despite having lived with and been the carer for his mother all his life, his mother was still his mother and he was still her son. His roles seemed confused; his caring parenting role, his vulnerable child role, his grown up independent adult role were all conflicted with one another.

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It seemed he had not moved on from his childhood role and although he had a deep desire to grow up and be independent, he also had a fear of separation. He was battling with a strong attachment to his mother and a need for separateness, which is one of the polarities Levinson established. Levinson claimed this is a challenge which can affect people of all ages:

> If we become too separate, our contact with the world is lost and our capacity for survival jeopardised. If we become too attached to the environment, we endanger our capacity for self-renewal, growth and creative effort. Although a balance of attachment and separateness must be found at every age, it will necessarily change from one era of the life cycle to the next (1978, 240).

Jeff himself was aware about the ambiguity of his feelings towards his mother. When I asked 'was it ever an option to put her into institutional care?' he replied,

> It's a very difficult option. It's still an option. It's almost an impossible option. I know people who understand our situation and wouldn't have contemplated it themselves, again I'm going back to Muslim friends, they just wouldn't contemplate putting a relative into care. Um, but also working in the care sector I've heard such a lot of stories about abuse. I know it sounds a bit over reactive but abuse due to negligence is really more likely than not I think. Abuse to ignorance and also her complex needs physically and mentally. It doesn't seem an option which is a great pity in various ways because I feel trapped. I feel I can't offer someone the sort of relationship that they might want and I haven't been able to for twelve or thirteen years but in the same way that's been an excuse for me. But if I can't get involved with people, I can step back a bit. So it works both ways.

In this extract he listed the reasons as to why he should not put his mother in care, but also recognised that by looking after his mother it provided him with a good reason not to participate in grown up life and have a serious, intimate relationship with anyone. He was looking after her out of a moral duty and if he truly wanted to be independent from her it is a move that he could have made a lot sooner in life. I suggest that this is something which Jeff had been struggling with for many years, a yearning for an independent life, but also a sense of duty and guilt about separating from his mother. It is something which

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he had given a lot of thought. He talked about earlier lost opportunities due to caring for his mother,

> I think I was expected to go to university but I think I felt the need to help look after my mother who has always had a certain amount of mental illness. So I stayed at home and started working for [the] council as a trainee accountant and then finding more or less straight away that I didn't really like it.

He also described how his mother had been a controlling influence all his life and I think this explained some of the guilt he felt about leaving her.

> So things that were threatening that I might go away, things like getting friends, being with friends, she wasn't supportive of. She was very negative. So quite controlling in certain respects. She was very controlling because her fears, I think, her fears were the main thing that affected how she acted. And still do.
>
> Interviewer: So she was worried that she would lose you like…
>
> Jeff: Yes. Either lose me to illness or lose me to going away

According to Freud, in his account of the Oedipus complex, the infant male child has an unconscious aggressive fantasy about killing his father in order to exclusively have his mother's love (1899). I think this is interesting to consider when looking at Jeff's relationships. Jeff's father died when he was five years old, which could be significant in that it is as if he won his original oedipal phantasy. As a young child he may have felt in some way responsible for his father's death and guilt that he had now won his mother all for himself. His mother's behaviour seemed to enforce this by not allowing him to leave or have relationships or friendships. Their relationship seemed exclusive and insular, based on guilt, love and fear. Jeff spoke of being 'trapped' and often dreamt of a life without his mother. He considered plans for the future but did not think they could be realised until his mother has gone.

> I am at home looking after my mother. I still have ideas of moving in with people but it doesn't seem practical at the moment but I sometimes think that I have got other close friends in Uganda and I sometimes think of moving with her but probably not. I suppose I am quite open-minded about the future. The fact that

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> my mum's health is stabilised might mean that she lives for another ten years or more when in fact last year I thought that she couldn't last the year. So that affects things practically.

He also spoke candidly about the phantasy of his mother dying and the brief excitement he felt when he thought she would die.

> For my mother's health, one of the GPs diagnosed that my mother had bowel cancer from the blood tests and this was about a year back and I suddenly thought I had a thrill go through me, that this is an escape, an escape for me from all this being tied down not being able to go on holidays and things like that. But it's an escape for mum from all the pain and all the other things that she has to go through. But of course the GP got it wrong so it was nothing of the kind [laughs] I suppose that's a good test of my reaction to mum.

It is interesting that Jeff is unapologetic about this reaction. I suggest that the passage into adulthood is something which both intrigued Jeff and was something to fantasise about but at the same time it also frightened him and he retreated into the security of being close to his mum through her care. He mentioned 'yes, even though physically I'm quite trapped in a way. There's lots of things I can't do. Then again that makes life less stressful in certain ways'. Jeff was torn between a loyalty towards his mother and a realisation that his own life is passing him by. He was also split by the security he felt with her and his need for autonomy and independence. He fluctuated between the different emotions, which I suggest are evident of being in the paranoid schizoid position. Roth stated that 'as adults we can retreat to a paranoid-schizoid state of mind when we are threatened by too much anxiety, or by illness, or by traumatic events' (2005, 52). Splitting is a primary feature of this position, and Jeff certainly had split feelings about his situation and relationship with his mother. Throughout the interview he fluctuated between the 'good breast' of the security providing mother, and the 'bad breast' of the mother who controls his life and holds him back. It is perhaps the guilt he felt about the psychological attack on the bad elements which ultimately kept him in a reparative state

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of trying to make his mother better, and his prolonged care role. Also by focussing his energies on her dependence on him, he did not have to confront his own dependence on her. This kind of behaviour from Jeff could be seen as a defence. By wishing his mother dead he does not have to face the loss in its full and devastating entirety, instead he devalued the loved object (his mother) and this served to make the loss psychologically easier to cope with.

In some cases though it is not just care responsibilities which hold people back from achieving their full potential or becoming fully fledged adults. For example, forty-three-year-old Adrian's parents were both healthy, independent, only in their mid-sixties (which was relatively young compared to the rest of the sample) and were not a burden to him in terms of care. However, in response to the question, 'how do you feel your life would change when your parents die?' He responded,

> Adrian: I would expect a certain amount of relief actually, that I will not have an obligation of any sort to anyone then. They held expectations of me, that sounds a bit narrow, I have been struggling with the idea with my parents' expectations, felt kind of oppressed by them for many, many years, it's only recently that I have shaken that off. When they are gone, if they were to go tomorrow I would feel that, I would miss them, but I would feel that.
>
> Interviewer: In what way do you feel oppressed and what expectations do you think they have of you?
>
> Adrian: Well, there's the academic achievement one and a sense that whatever I did was never good enough.

Jeff and Adrian's situations and feelings about their parents dying were reminiscent of the separation from parents which most people experience in young adulthood, when they first leave home. Jeff had not left home for a significant period of time and Adrian felt that he has always been oppressed by his parents' presence, even though he does not live with them. When asked 'Do you worry about them getting older?' he replied,

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> Adrian: I'm beginning to, I have done recently, there have been some changes where you think, this kind of is the last phase for them, more forgetful and deaf and stuff like that, I am worrying about it for the impact it will have on me rather than for them. Them passing on is going to happen and so I'll get over that relatively quickly although it will be sad and stuff but, in terms of living without them, I'm much happier about that than I was say three or four years ago. I would have missed them more in a sense of reliance on them than I would now.
>
> Interviewer: You said that you worry about the impact that it will have on you?
>
> Adrian: Yes, I don't relish the prospect of bed baths, fighting with social services, care or anything like that.

Adrian's attitude towards his parents' future care needs seemed callous and he only commented on the impact and inconvenience that their ageing and death would have upon his life. It is also interesting to note his need to ensure that he had as much time as possible without his parents' presence or burden, so that he can achieve all that he wants to with his remaining time. He said,

> I think care com[ing] in would be the sort of solution I would prefer, I know they, it is what they have stretched for other people all of their lives. It's just how much I will be able to, it's how much it will be a stretch for me for the things I want to do, given that my late onset midlife is all about enjoying what I can do with the time I have got left. I do worry about that a bit, I'm a bit selfish in that respect, I don't suppose anyone else is different.

Adrian's anxieties about doing all that he wanted to do with his life seemed to outweigh his relationship with his parents. Yet despite the narrative in which he would like to become separate from his parents, there were also clues in the rest of his story which suggested that Adrian depended on the security, that attachment to his parents gave him. Moreover by being dependent on them also kept his parents' role more defined and alive. He had the opportunity to move away from his parents and if they were that oppressive, it is surprising that he had not taken up that opportunity. He said 'I've never really kind of moved away from them, I've lived around here for most of my life'. I asked 'A lot of people have dreams of moving abroad and things like that, have you ever thought of

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that?' He replied,

> Yeah, I kind of thought of it as an idea but at the same time I stopped myself because it would be all the upset and upheaval and loss of security, again that would be easy to do with somebody who I thought, this is going to go somewhere for all time, and you've got that, that is the ultimate security for me.

Although his response was framed in terms of the security that a long term relationship can offer I think it is more pointed towards the security his parents can offer. After all why would he only move if he were in a relationship?

In some ways the generational shift can be a liberating opportunity for some people in midlife. As we have already seen, the death of parents is on occasion preceded by a period of dependency upon the middle-aged child and in this role reversal they may find themselves in a position of becoming their parents' parent. The relief from this responsibility may result in a sense of liberation and a chance to achieve all that could not whilst one's parents were alive. Jeff believed that when his mother died it would also grant him more freedom than he currently has, in order to enjoy things which he felt he was missing out in his life. He said,

> …what I'm hoping for when my mother dies, or when we can't look after her any more, that [there] will suddenly be a lot more freedom than I've had. Yes, I'm hoping that it will be a comfortable time where I can do a bit of travelling and do the things that I want and feel that when I'm going to work I don't have to. I can just do that.

Viorst takes up this notion of liberation; she says that 'the loss of parents in the course of adult life can serve as a developmental spur, pushing sons and daughters into becoming full grownups at last, imposing a new maturity on those who- as long as they remained So-and-so's child- could not achieve it' (1986, 263). I suggest in some cases there was urgency for parents to die, as there was urgency for the midlife individual's life to become fulfilled before time ran out for them too. This, I argue, is true for Adrian who

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felt he would become more grown up when his parents died and he would be able to live his life as he wanted. Similarly Jeff spoke about how when his mother dies he would like to move out of the family home, travel to Africa, perhaps live with a lady pen-friend that he has, change career and many other ambitions. He had a packed agenda for his future years but this was all on hold until his mother died and he felt that his own time is running out.

For those people who feel the death of a loved one is imminent, this could be experienced as an impending loss which requires mourning before the bereavement itself occurs. According to Freud this mourning process requires a certain level of separation from the loved object; it involves 'severing' each attachment one has to the loved object. He stated 'mourning occurs under the influence of reality-testing; for the latter demands categorically from the bereaved person that he should separate himself from the object, since it no longer exists' (1917, 172). Freud also stated that

> Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it … when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again (1917, 245).

When an individual is faced with the demise of their loved one they sometimes need to detach themselves in order to protect themselves from the pain of loss. This could be one reason for Adrian and Jeff's seemingly callous need for detachment from their parents. The process of splitting may serve to protect them from the imminent pain of losing their loved object (parent) and by starting to psychologically break the bonds which bind them, the loss of parents would be lessened. This unconscious detachment and anticipatory grieving from parents could be a result of anxieties about their own ageing process, fears and mourning for the parents which they fear losing, combined with their own insecurities

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that they had failed to be fully dependent from their parents and could not yet consider themselves fully 'grown up'.

Roth discussed the depressive position and asked 'why would we hate people we love'. She answered:

> We hate them because they inevitably frustrate us. But we also hate because we have hateful feelings inside which are part of our very nature, which we frequently direct towards the most important people in our lives. And we hate them because we need them so much (2005, 53, 54).

Both Adrian and Jeff's parents frustrated them. Adrian's parents asked the wrong questions and Jeff's mother was demanding of his care and attention. Ultimately though, they are both close to their parents even if this is something which they did not explicitly admit. If they did not have some kind of close bond why would their parents matter so much and why would they not, up until now, have made the break for independence and moved away? It could be also argued that both men needed their parents as they filled the generational buffer which protects them from considering their own ageing and mortality. They depended on their parents for support and love. They could not face the pain of separation. At the same time both resent this dependency on their parents. They wanted to make the break, to become fully fledged adults and to ensure that their own lives were fulfilled as much as possible before they got too old or died themselves.

Pritchard stated that 'the loss of a parent evokes all the old fears and threats of the lost child' (1995, 153). Archer argued that to lose a parent in adulthood is 'difficult to cope with because they make the individual's personal world an unsafe and unpredictable place' (1999, 213). Just as a child first ventures from the security of its mother, so too must the middle-aged child renegotiate the world around them alone after their parents'

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deaths. Although aspects of this separation process from parents are reminiscent of earlier infantile experiences, it is now experienced in a qualitatively different way. Jaques suggested that one of the differences between earlier infantile experiences of loss and of those experienced in midlife is that midlife 'calls for a re-working through of the infantile depression, but with mature insight into death and destructive impulse to be taken into account' (1965, 505). In midlife people have an understanding and awareness of the reality of death and mortality which they do not have as a child. When the young child or adolescent gains independence from their parents, they would always be there in the background and there was always the option to revert back to a child-like position in relation to them; now in midlife the child faces the ultimate and final loss of their parents. There is no option for the middle-aged person to revert back to the child-like role, they themselves are becoming the older generation.

Many of my interviewees were anxious about the ageing of their parents. For Sarah (aged 39) and Angela (aged 49) this created fears about their own ageing process and deaths. Sarah said,

> That frightens me as well, thinking what about when I'm really old. It's going to be sort of [my children] to think about things like that, like I am for my mum and dad. What am I going to do with them when they are old and dribbling in their wheelchairs? And you know you get older, and having sort of nursed older people as well, you know, I just think "God I hope I never end up like that", which is what happens doesn't it?

This quote shows how witnessing parents and the older generation ageing can trigger an awareness of and a concern for those in midlife's own futures; how parent's can offer a glimpse of perhaps what is to come.

In my interview with forty-nine-year-old Angela, I asked whether she thought about her

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parents dying and what would happen when the time came:

> I have done, not often, but I have done. But it's a bugger because I push it away. So I have you know, I think "Oh my God how will I cope or what will I … or what …" you know, I even think how would they die? Um, ok my dad naturally I think it could be his heart, but my mum because there's nothing, apart from the one kidney she's fine. Yeah I've often thought, "Oh how?" I hope they're not in pain, what would I do, how, you know, you go through scenarios of how you'd be if you were told and it was announced to you, where would you be and how old will they be when that happens, but when these thoughts come in my mind I sort of just chuck them back out again!

It is interesting that Angela said that when she gets close to thinking intensely about her parents' deaths she 'push[es] it away' or 'chucks' the thoughts back out again. This could be seen as a form of psychological resistance which Badcock described as existing 'in order to prevent the conscious mind from becoming painfully aware of some unpleasant mental conflict' (1998, 107). Although it may seem that Angela was denying her anxieties about ageing the fact that she was able to reflect so openly upon her feelings about this suggested that perhaps she was more conscious and in control of her feelings than she thought she was.

Summary

The generational shift is partly signified by the death and ageing of the parental generation. The death of parents is arguably the most common bereavement suffered in midlife; it is a bereavement which is often anticipated at some level, yet can also have a profound effect on the generations left behind. For those in midlife the death of parents can serve as a reminder of age and can trigger associated anxieties. By contrast those in midlife who still have parents that are alive and healthy, seem to view the older generation as a buffer against existential anxieties, they feel that in the natural order of life, the older generation are likely to die before them.

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It was shown that some people in midlife find themselves in the position of having to care for an elderly parent, which can be psychically and mentally challenging. The intensity of this care varied significantly from small shopping tasks to personal care. There appeared to be no distinction between the genders in terms of the types of care that was provided by my respondents, however this is not necessarily reflective of wider social practices in which women generally provide most of the primary care for elderly parents. For those who do have elderly parents many interviewees found that the roles and relationships with them have changed as they have got older.

In normal child-parent relationship, parents are often seen as omnipotent figures who represent security, protection and love. Early infantile development is associated with the child's realisation that it will have to detach itself from its parents in order to gain its independence. In effect it has to deal with a changing identity and a 'loss' of its mother. In a comparable sense the middle-aged child often has to face the definitive loss of a parent and notices significant changes in his or her own identity. Anxieties about separation and attachment are sometimes experienced, and although these are reminiscent of earlier infantile anxieties. However they are experienced in a new form in midlife in that at this stage of life the separation through their deaths will be permanent. Psychological mechanisms, such as splitting and denial, were used to assuage anxieties about the fear of ultimate separation from parents, from the realisation that time is passing by, and that they have now become part of the older generation.

Part 2: The Emergence of the New Generation

The generational shift not only sees the death of the generation above but also the emergence of new generations; a generation of children becoming adults and the birth of

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a new generation of grandchildren. These changes also impact upon the midlife generation and their own positioning in the life course. This section looks at how people in midlife relate to their children's generation, how these relationships alter as the generations move upwards, and what impact an awareness of a new emerging generation has on the middle-aged person.

Empty Nest? The Transition to Post-Parental Life

It is unclear who coined the phrase 'empty nest' but it has become a commonly recognised term used by psychologists, the medical field, and within popular culture, and refers to the sense of loss which comes when the family structure is altered by children leaving the familial home. Although the event of children leaving home is something which both parents experience, it is generally used in reference to the psychological distress felt by women. A number of quantitative sociological studies, however, have sought to disprove this commonly held belief that the experience of the empty nest is a necessarily unhappy one. Glenn for example, was particularly dismissive of this and states 'this view that the 'empty nest' or post parental stage of the family life cycle is a traumatic and unhappy period for the typical woman has not disappeared entirely from social scientific circles, but negative evidence from a few small-scale studies has lessened its credibility' (1975, 105). Glenn showed that in actual fact there was a greater degree of happiness in the post-parental groups than the parental groups he studied and that 'children's leaving home does not typically lead to an enduring decline in the psychological well-being of middle-aged mothers' (1975, 109). Harkins also disproved the popular understanding of the empty nest. She argued that 'it may well be that for some, if not many, the empty nest is an expected and, in fact, favourably anticipated period' (Harkins, 1978, 550). She showed that 'the empty nest is not a particularly

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stressful period in most women's lives, and hence, is not a major source of threats to psychological or physical well-being' (Harkins, 1978, 555).

I found in my own research that for many of my interviewees whose children have left home it was often a very traumatic experience. Not only was the child itself missed, but also a sense of loss came from the feeling that a particular phase of life was now over. Not only mothers, but also fathers found this experience distressing and in fact it was the male interviewees who appeared most upset by this topic. One example of this came when I spoke to Lisa and she talked about how her husband Trevor, who I later interviewed, was particularly affected when his children left home for the first time. Trevor and Lisa's two children both left home to go to university a couple of years prior to the interview but have now both returned home. Lisa (aged 45) gave a detailed account of how they felt when their son left home for the first time and their daughter at this time was still living at home. She said,

> When he went, I think Trevor was worse than me, talk about empty nest syndrome. Trevor was terrible, he really was, he was really upset. He tried not to show it, you know, but I could tell, he really missed him, really missed him. But Trevor's parents are divorced and he had sort of been between the two of them and he liked having this, you know, when we got married and had the kids, the family sort of thing and he could see the family falling apart and I don't think he liked that at all. I mean, I was upset mind, I just resigned myself to the fact that he was growing up and should be glad that he was independent enough to do it and everything and, but we did miss him.

When I spoke to Trevor about the same issue this was the exchange that followed,

> Interviewer: They both still obviously live at home, do they?
>
> Trevor: Yes. I've given them hints and that but …… I offered them money to move out!

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Trevor starts by making a joke, which could be a resistance to his true feelings about how he felt about them leaving. However he quickly admits, but not in as much detail as his wife had offered, that it was a difficult time for him.

> Interviewer: Can you remember how you felt when they moved out and you perhaps thought that would be the end of it?
>
> Trevor: Horrible.
>
> Interviewer: Can you tell me in what way?
>
> Trevor: Well I don't know. I suppose I'm a bit of a, I don't know, what's the word? I like to have the family here…teenagers- you don't see eye to eye…But actually when they moved out and I thought "Ah it's horrible".

Lisa (aged 45) described the period as 'a bit like a bereavement', but felt that she and her husband had dealt with it differently. She found ways of keeping herself occupied: 'whereas I could busy myself, not that he talked about it a lot, he would just sit there and be very quiet and I just knew that it wasn't right and I just knew what it was'. For Trevor, keeping and holding a family together was what he saw as *his* role, particularly since he came from a difficult family background and a broken home. By contrast even though Lisa participated in more active daily care of the children, she describes being 'resigned' to them going and she felt glad that they were becoming independent. I believe that for Lisa, her son leaving to go to university indicated a success. She had achieved her goal of successfully raising a child to reach independence.

I found this to be a fairly typical pattern between the men and women who I spoke to. Men tended to become quite upset about their children leaving home, whereas although women said they were upset or worried by their children leaving, this was coupled with a sense of achievement that their children were now fully independent. This I suggest may be representative of wider social patterns. With mothers generally playing a more active

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practical role in the daily care of their children, this sense of achievement may be an experience most commonly felt by mothers. Kathleen (aged 46) is another example of a mother who was upset about her children growing up, but who recognises that her children's independence is her ultimate goal.

> It's already started to worry me, because like I say, they're less dependent on me now and they're out with their mates…when she [her daughter] goes, I shall be gutted, but then I'm going to smother him [her son] to death, which is going to kill him, and he's going to go mad you know! And when he goes, I shall be even more gutted! But, like I say I am desperate for them to have you know, a good independent life and fun, that's what I want them to do.

Many of the men that I spoke to had very defined roles as fathers and provided a significant, and perhaps atypical, amount of the care for their children. For instance fifty-year-old Rob was a single father with dual custody of his children. They lived part of the week with him and part with their mother nearby. Rob seemed to play a very active role in his children's lives and very much enjoyed living with them. Rob is divorced and for part of the week he now lives alone in what was his marital and family home. His six-year-old daughter tended to stay at his house a couple of nights a week, his sixteen-year-old middle son was primarily based at his mother's house, and his eldest eighteen-year-old son had recently left for university. Rob had gone from a home with a wife and three children to essentially living alone in a four-bedroomed house. He became very emotional when he started to discuss his eldest son leaving home. He said 'I am quite conscious of the fact that potentially we will never live together again and also he is a super guy, very intelligent'. He continued,

> I wasn't particularly worried about anything it's just about the idea of him going. It's that business of that end of that particular point in one's life. Just seeing that point looming, same as, just as we'd just talked about parents, you know that change in relationship, and be it and also like when parents die that's a significant point in one's own life.

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This is an interesting extract as it shows how Rob viewed his son leaving as a natural part of the life course and likened it to the death of the parental generation. He went on to explain that he is going to redecorate his son's room for his daughter to use and decorate another one for him. He said 'there is no point in having something static, from a point in time that has gone'. I suggest that the redecoration of his son's room is symbolic of proving that he is able to move on from his loss.

When we discussed his son's departure in more detail I asked,

> Interviewer: Can we go back now to when Jake moved out, did you make any preparations for him moving?
>
> Rob: A celebration you mean [laughter]. No, no not particularly I said that the same things as what I had said to my dad really that you know living with him had been a great joy, [pause- composing his emotions and slightly crying and wiping his eyes] and it wasn't that I wasn't pleased for him to go or anything like that I just wanted to say [emotional tone] that it had been a really, really good time [crying] you know and I gave him a hug.

This was an extremely emotional moment in our interview and I found it hard to maintain my own composure. Rob quickly shifted to making a brief joke, trying to deflect the painful emotions which were threatening to overwhelm him. He then likened the experience of saying goodbye to his son as he left for university, to the parting words he said to his father on his death bed which were 'well at the end...I said things like I would miss him, [emotionally] and basically just saying you know about how you felt about him as a person'. The loss of his son through leaving home reminded Rob of the loss of his dad and the emotions that that experience evoked. The contrast between the laughter and the crying is evident of the struggle Rob has to keep his feelings under control.

This example served to highlight the depth of emotions that can be felt by those whose children are leaving home. Rob, like Lisa and Trevor, compared this loss to

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'bereavement'. Fifty-five-year-old Rodney's description of how he felt when his children left was also reminiscent of how people might describe a bereavement. He said,

> You do miss them, you know what I mean, because they're not there and they've been part of your life for so long and then you wake up the day after and you feel that there's something missing out of the house, you know what I mean? That bubbly feeling, you know what I mean.

He also recalled setting the table for his children, even when they had left home. He said,

> Dinner times you know, we always used to put four plates out and I was still doing it when they weren't there. She'll [wife] tell me to go set the table and then she'll come in and say 'What's them for? Have we got visitors?' and then I'd take it back off. But it's a habit; it's what you were doing all the time if you know what I mean.

The loss of children was often described as something missing, like the empty nest the metaphor describes, but as something other than the child's physical presence. Rodney described a 'bubbly feeling' which was missing and Angela described how when her daughter left; 'it left quite a vacuum, quite a hole'.

When children leave home it can also signify the loss of a defined role, and a way of life (although as discussed later in this chapter the demographic changes regarding the length of time stay at home has had a significant impact). Rodney (aged 55) had played a big role in raising and caring for his children. He found it particularly upsetting when they left, describing himself as 'gutted'. He also became visibly upset in the interview when discussing this. He said,

> You know I got tears in my eyes if you know what I mean, I wasn't really cry crying, but you got the tears there because that's part of your life gone. You've looked after them for what, twenty odd years, seen them grow, seen how they act you know what I mean…And then of course it's all taken away from ya, you know what I mean, just gone. You wake up the next morning and you think "well, they've gone". But that's life, you've got to get used to it.

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Although he becomes very emotional and nostalgic when talking about his children leaving home, at the same time he also seems quite accepting of the fact that they have grown up and moved on. When children leave home it can often signify an end of an era and a transition into a new phase of life. Rodney said 'it made me realize that life is going by, do you know what I mean. Things are changing and I'm getting older'.

Although Angela's daughters (aged sixteen and twenty-four) still lived at home, they were coming to an age when they would soon move out. She also remarked on 'it makes you feel so old because you just think "well that's another stage in your life isn't it? That's another stage closer to being older and dying and not being able to do things"'. She continued, 'I know I've got to let go and let her move on because the part of it, going back to the age thing at the very beginning, I know it's another stage of my life which means I'm getting older'. For Angela, the transition highlighted her ageing process and fears about dying and death, and this helps explain some of her reluctance to let her daughters go.

When children leave home this signifies a part of life which has now passed and signifies a new phase of life. Angela talked nostalgically about how she felt when recalling the early experiences of parenting. These experiences she felt are becoming irretrievably lost as her children are getting older and are preparing to leave home. She said,

> It's that sort of not being able to have your little experience and times like when children are so young they believe in Father Christmas, protecting Father Christmas you know?...Or them being like little sods during the day but that the nighttime you go and see them in bed and they just look so cute. You know, I think I'll never have that again, I can't catch it, I can't have it again. So that all comes flooding back as well. So, and er, her little feet and lots of little things really, taking them to school with their little lunchbox and all the cute things.

For Angela, her children growing older and preparing to leave home has coincided with

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the onset of the menopause. This makes the end of the parenting phase seem even more final and even though she said she would not have any more children she mourned the fact that the option to have more is now coming to an end. She said,

> It's funny because I'm also thinking like [about] having children, I'm like I know I'm past all that I can't, I know I can have children if I put myself to it, do you know what I mean, it's not like you know if you were actually going to be scientific and factual, yes I can, but realistically I can't, and I'm talking about being twenty-five or thirty and having a child, that's what I'm talking about. I think that's gone now!

Coupled with her children reaching adulthood Angela was clearly nostalgic for the days of having young children about.

Angela's anxieties about her children leaving were framed in terms of loss and of fears about her own ageing. However, not all the stories of children leaving home were framed in terms of loss. Some interviewees saw practical advantages to this change in family structure. For some it signified a period of liberation, personal freedom and quite simply a reduction in daily chores. Fifty-eight-year-old Raymond claimed he was entering a new period of freedom from childcare. He said, 'I'm about to start a new period because this is the first time I haven't um haven't had any children to uh look after'. Raymond is a single father of three. He had little contact with his eldest two children (one is a step-child) who are independent adults with children of their own. However he also had dual custody of his fifteen-year-old son, who has lived with him alone for the last ten years. The child's mother lives in Sweden and it was recently decided that he should move back with his mother so that he could finish his education there. I felt that Raymond was quietly anxious about his son's departure, which occurred a couple of weeks prior to the interview. He said he had not yet had time to think about how he felt about his son leaving and said that he is in regularly daily contact through the internet. Instead

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Raymond focused on the practical advantages to now living alone. He said it was easier to keep the house clean,

> At the moment I am enjoying the good sides of it which are when you clean the house [laughs] it stays clean...Yeah. And uh you are not continually picking up clothes up off the floor and that sort of thing.

He also noted that his eating habits had changed,

> Since my son left because basically he determined what I cooked because he would want feeding and feeding a fifteen -year-old, you need lots of food [laughs]. So I think I tended to eat more because I was cooking every night for him than I do now. And I eat more salads and things now than I used to. You know with a fifteen-year-old, you can't fill them up with salad, whereas I can fill me with salad.

Patricia (aged 55) also noticed an increased sense of freedom from child care now that her daughters are grown up and that two of her three children have now left. She said,

> What I like most about my age is that we have got the freedom now to do what we want to do and if we want to go away for the weekend we don't have to worry about the kids.

This demonstrated the sense of personal freedom which comes as an advantage to children leaving home.

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Returning Home or Never Leaving

In Harkins' study into children leaving home, one of the most interesting findings was that although women showed a positive sense of well-being after the departure of their children- thus dismissing the reported extent of the 'empty nest' - the only threat to well being was 'having a child who does not become successfully independent when it is expected' (1978, 555). It could be argued that when children fail to leave home by an expected time or have returned home after a period of time away, this can cause frustration and anxiety for their parents. There may be frustration for parents in terms of

not being about to organise their daily lives and future plans in the way they had hoped to by this point in their lives. There may also be concerns or frustrations that the child has yet to become an independent adult and this could create a sense of having failed in some way as a parent.

Amongst the parents I interviewed the majority had a child still living at home. Of course 'midlife' as a chronological period covers a wide age range and I found that the experiences within this cohort varied quite considerably. Amongst even those of a similar chronological age, there are those who are seeing the end to parental life and those who are only just entering into it.

Out of the twenty-two interviewees[1] there were eight who had children under the age of sixteen. Five of these had children living at home and in three cases the children lived with their other parent. There were fifteen interviewees who had a child over sixteen years old, ten of whom had a child over the age of sixteen who had left home, and eight who still had a child over the age of sixteen still living at home. Out of the eight interviewees who had a child over sixteen at home, five of those were cases of the children returning home after already having left once before. In only three instances had the child never left home, in two of those cases one child had learning disabilities, another had mental health problems[2].

I found that in the five instances where children over the age of sixteen had left and then returned home, the children had tended to leave in their late teens or early twenties and the majority of cases there was a 'yo-yo effect' in which the child left home, returned and

[1] See Appendix, Table 12.
[2] These figures may not appear to add up, but this is because in some instances a parent may have had one child who has left home and another who still lives at home, thus being counted twice.

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then left again. This is an increasingly common phenomenon, recently researched and written about by Iacovou and Parisi in *Changing Relationships* (2009*).* They refer to a 'Boomerang Generation' and claim that among young adults between sixteen and twenty-nine, four percent of those who have previously moved out then return to live at home with their parents.

I found that in some instances families welcomed their children home and enjoyed having their now grown up children around. I also found that this had the effect of lessening the impact of the loss and of the experience of an 'empty nest'. The yo-yo effect resulted in a more gradual leaving process and when it came to the children finally leaving home, many parents were quite happy for them to do so. All of fifty-five-year-old Patricia's three daughters had left home at some point, but then returned and left again at various intervals. Currently only her middle daughter lives with her. She said,

> When they moved out they were spending less time here anyway…so over a gradual period of time we have been on our own more as they have got older and so I can't say it has been a big change.

Patricia had a very close relationship with all of her daughters and when they left it had the potential to be particularly distressing but because they kept returning it seemed to lessen the effect. She said, 'it was like a gradual process with [my eldest daughter] I didn't feel [in breath] "she's gone" [dramatic emphasis]'. It is of course plausible to argue that children may also return partly in response to their parent's own need and desire to have them around. This is a distinct possibility in Patricia's case and also for Lisa and Trevor.

Lisa and Trevor's children both returned after going to university and both currently live at home. Trevor was initially very upset by his children leaving but it seemed that things

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had changed whilst they had gone with Trevor and Lisa settling into their own routine without them. Although they were happy for their children to be back at home they felt that their relationship with them had changed. Lisa explained that the relationships between the children, her and Trevor had to be renegotiated when they moved back in, in order for them all to live happily together as a group of four adults instead of two adults and two children. She explained,

> I can remember when they both were here, I said, "right, you've got to realise now that you're both", you know Jason having been away and come back, I said "you're adults, you want to be treated like adults, so, it's not mummy and daddy with two children anymore, we've got four adults in this house and if you were living in a house with three other adults you would all have to do your share", so I said "I think it's only fair that as I'm not going to take a lot of money off you because neither of you are earning a lot that you at least help out with the household chores". So, yeah, in a way we did draw a line and say that things are going to be different.

In this family, the return of the adult children saw a renegotiation of the economic and domestic arrangements within the household.

Shirley's daughters were also typical of the 'boomerang generation'. Shirley (aged 54) was initially very upset when her daughter first left home. She recalled how she felt when she left for the first time to work on a cruise ship.

> Oh, awful! Just devastated! Absolutely devastated. It was dreadful, absolutely dreadful! I can remember phoning her on the satellite phone when she was in the Atlantic and it cost be fifty pound for about five minutes talk, but I had to speak to her.

She described how both her daughters left returned and left many times over,

> They used to take it in turns. I mean, one would go away, and within a couple of weeks the other one would be banging on the door saying "can I come in" and so we'd have her for a few months and then so on … then Laura would move out and then Ella would come home and that sort of yo-yoing effect went on … yeah, for most of the years we've been married actually. I think the longest time we've ever been on our own was about fourteen months when we first got married. That's the only time we've ever been on our own!

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Although this series of returns helped Shirley in some ways to deal with her children leaving, she also found it quite difficult especially as it created some arguments with her new husband. I asked whether it was easier or harder with them returning to her. She replied 'Yeah, harder I think' however she was willing to tolerate the disruption and uncertainty that their visits caused because she felt she was helping her children to move on. She said, '….if they needed that yo-yoing to be able to move on, then that's what they needed and I wasn't going to let them down'.

Matthew also found he was growing increasingly impatient with his children after they had returned home after university. He and his wife had started to settle down after their children had left and had entered a period of life in which they had their own space and freedom. They had even bought the children houses of their own but these are currently being rented out to other people. He explained,

> One year before Charles came back when they were both at University during term time. We thought that had been it, that we were now in the Derby and Joan era phase of life but of course one realises that nowadays it is quite common for children to live at home until their late twenties or God forbid even longer. We haven't decided when to put an absolute limit on it, but we don't want him to feel completely unwanted, but on the other hand there has to be a time and I suppose as he is going to be twenty-four now, twenty-five might be a bit soon. But you hope that he will go of his own volition not have to be pushed. The houses weren't actually a hint, it would facilitate them, but if Charles wanted to he could, although it's our money, it's his house.

His daughter had plans to move into her house in the next couple of months which was an event Matthew eagerly anticipated. He shared his hopes for his children, he said,

> It would be nice to see them in their own homes with a partner that they are happy with and probably in both their cases with the dogs that they have always wanted but we have never been able to have and just yeah content with life and on a reasonably secure and prosperous and healthy pathway really. Just what every parent wants for their kids.

My interviewees' children often returned home, either following a period of travel, a

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failed relationship or at the end of a university course. With four children who have come and gone Theresa (aged 55) sometimes found it difficult to keep track of who is coming and going from her house, making life fairly chaotic and unpredictable for her and her husband. Her children often returned home from university during the summer holidays and she was unsure as to whether they will return when they finish. Although she does not seem to mind the comings and goings of her children she does find that it can be a bit unsettling in terms of her routine. I asked her 'Do you find it easier or harder with them keep coming back and forth?' She replied

> Probably easier. Yes. It's a bit of a mixture. It's easier in some ways when you get used to not having other people in the house it's hard to readjust to get used to having others in the house again.

She also said,

> You just sort of get used to having the house to the two of you and getting into a routine and then all of a sudden you've got someone back again for a while. That's happened a few times, from when they first started leaving home.

'Granny at the Gates'? Being an Older Parent in Midlife

Eight of my interviewees had children under the age of sixteen and I found that amongst some of them, namely Jack, Sarah, Rob and Adrian, there was a high level of resentment and frustration. For them there was an acknowledgement that time had become more limited as they had got older and that young children were hindering them from living their lives to their full (and egocentric) potential in midlife. The first example of this was with Adrian (aged 43). As I have already shown Adrian had also expressed resentment against his parents holding him back. He had unexpectedly become a father when he was thirty-seven but the relationship with the child's mother did not work out. He said,

> I was over the moon that I was going to be a dad but really, really angry as well because of the circumstances as much as anything, because it really meant the only thing I should do for me was to move back to [my home town] and give up what I was doing in terms of working [in the city].

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He framed his anger in terms of what he has had to give up. He went on to say,

> I was about thirty-seven when Naomi was born….I suppose, so my time of looking at that period is not for another six or seven years when I will be well into my forties and I think that's one of the parameters, that your looking ahead to a time when quite soon you are going to be free to do all those things again but have the relative youth to do stuff and find your interests whereas I will be, when I am at that point in my life I will be quite a bit older and may not be quite so capable.

In this extract, it is evident that he was expecting a period in his life in which he could be free to do as he wanted, but due to the arrival of his daughter this has now been postponed for at least another six or seven years. However, he was also worried that if he waited that long he may not be physically capable to do the things he would like to do.

Rob's (aged 50) story was similar to Adrian's. He too unexpectedly became an older father:

> Within a very short time [my girlfriend] got pregnant and I did not deal with it very well, I was horrified. I know, I love children to bits, but I know what children do to relationships, it changes the dimensions totally and I wasn't ready to even consider that side of life and I wanted, I suggested that she had an abortion, we looked into it and she said she didn't want to do it, and I couldn't force anybody to do anything they didn't want to do, so Isobel came and I couldn't forgive [my girlfriend] and it, and I wasn't able to, I was bitter and it really, really, really fucked up the relationship and the end result was that [my girlfriend] had enough and she left one day and I regret that immensely.

Like Adrian, Rob also felt that he only had a limited opportunity to enjoy himself and fulfill his ambitions, and that this was disrupted by having another child later in life. He said,

> It was beginning, and I was coming out of it and I could see the end of that time, so in terms of that midlife crisis or whatever you want to call it, that business about being, the lack of responsibility towards children and more responsibility towards parents, I could see go out and enjoy myself as well, because that has always been high on my list, enjoyment. I have not been one who has stinted on wanting to enjoy myself.

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In this extract he emphasizes how he felt that he was coming to the end of his parenting days and had plans for a carefree, enjoyment-filled life without the responsibility of parents or children. However, the birth of his daughter disrupted this. His daughter lived with her mother and Rob saw her regularly. He felt torn between this need for freedom and liberation from childcare and his intense love for his daughter now that she is here. I also think he feels an enormous amount of guilt about his initial reaction to news of the pregnancy. He described his feelings about being a new father again:

> Having a daughter is very different. I mean it is a lovely experience. Can you turn this off?
> [Turned off tape and he cries].
> Well I should finish talking about my daughter first. Well having a daughter is very different. Um, the two lads, are to show emotion is not really their cue about whether they are happy or, but she will quite happily come and give me a hug [Crying]. She is fantastic. She tells you that she loves you, she is fantastic, the bitterness about it all is that I am not with her now, but that's how it goes. Because when I see her I love her and I feel that the business of having a child when you are fifty is very hard, and I didn't know... I wasn't convinced I could do it again...I love her to bits but I don't have to do all the nitty gritty you know.

Both Rob and Adrian were emotionally divided between an undeniable love for their children but also a need to pursue their own personal interests in midlife, free from childcare responsibilities. Rob's description of loving his daughter 'to bits' could indeed represent the psychological fragmentation of his emotional relationship with her. I suggest he is splitting his love in order to defend against the feelings of intense loss, guilt and even anger that he feels about not being with her.

It is arguably more common for men to become parents in midlife, due the biological limitations the menopause creates for women and the social stigma of becoming an older mother. One of the women who I interviewed who had become an older mother was Sarah. When I interviewed her she was pregnant at the age of thirty-nine with her second child. She had postponed having children in order to focus on her career as a personal

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assistant, which she thoroughly enjoyed- describing it as 'the time of my life'. She had pursued her career for fourteen years before having her first daughter aged thirty-five in 2003. It seems she felt rather pressured into having children and, like Adrian and Rob, she felt becoming a parent would disrupt her life and the many opportunities and pleasure her career gave her:

> I remember thinking "do I really want to go ahead with it, is it the right thing?" I'm having so much fun, I've got to give it all up, my life's going to change and then I think Dan was over the moon obviously and then no I sort of pulled myself together and said get on with it. It's part of, you know, I'm going to do it.

As a stay-at-home mother she quickly became bored and frustrated and began working part time to fit in around her first daughter's schooling. I asked Sarah about whether she was looking forward to her new baby and she responded,

> I am not looking forward to having number two child at my age to be perfectly honest, because I don't want to be the granny at the gate, which I'm going to be. I'll be nearly forty-five by the time it goes to school. I think that's old.

It seemed that having children is something she considers as necessary but also an inconvenience which is disrupting the life she had planned for herself. She explained her plans for when the new baby arrives,

> I don't know why I am actually but I'm going back to work after six weeks, I think to get away and try to get my life sorted again. We've got a nanny for two days a week while I go back to work. So hopefully I won't be as tired, because I'll be two days away from a small baby. Not that I want to be but you know the quicker I can get myself back on track again, the better.

It is interesting that she describes the need to get 'back on track' as if the child is a disruption to her plans as opposed to changing her plans to fit around having a child. Sarah is also concerned for a number of other reasons about being an older parent. Her own mother had commented to her 'You sure you're not too old for this?' But Sarah replied to her,

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> "You've missed out on so much. You became a mother at nineteen. What did do you do? You didn't ever do anything". But then their generation was different wasn't it? They didn't really do anything anyway, did they?

Here she is defending the fact that she is having children later and justifies it by arguing that she had experienced other things such as travelling and having a career before entering parenthood, as is an increasingly common social pattern amongst young women in recent years. However, Sarah seemed to fluctuate between feeling selfish and guilty for being an older mother and feeling that she needed to make the most of her career whilst she was young. She was also very aware of being an older mother and that being noticeable compared to other mothers. She said that her age will be most noticeable to other people when she takes second child to school. She said, 'you can see them all thinking "well should have done it earlier"'.

Being an older parent can create anxieties about being there for one's children as they grow up. For example Sarah reported how when they had young children later in life, they became more concerned about their own deaths and how this might impact upon their children. She said,

> It's just thinking when even Lilly, she's not even five yet, she's five in August, what bothers me I think is the fact that this baby particularly will be twenty and I will be sixty and I want to be around for them and I think if I lost my parents when I was only twenty that would have been really hard. Luckily I've still got both of my parents but you know people do die at sixty/seventy…People can sort of die early so that's why it's a mistake we made having babies too late.

Some interviewees enjoyed being parents to young children during midlife. This was shown in forty-five-year-old Jackie's story. She was a single mother to ten-year-old twins. Their father left whilst she was pregnant and she has raised them with very little/or no support from family and friends. Jackie is seemingly content with the independence of raising the children alone. Unlike Sarah, who was motivated and ambitious in terms of

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developing her career, Jackie seemed to lack such ambitions. She said 'I'm not kind of adventurous' and when asked what kind of adult she thought she would become when she was a child she said,

> I wasn't career minded and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I thought that I'd maybe … I don't know, you get a job, probably go out travelling, meet a partner, get married, buy a house, just the normal things that go on in life. I had no expectations, no. No I wanted to do this, I wanted to do that, that's the path I thought I'd follow.

Jackie seemed to have a relaxed and pragmatic attitude towards life. She was simply content to just enjoy motherhood and not worry about her age or anything else for that matter. She was adopted by her great-aunt (whom she called mother) when she was two years old. Her great-aunt was in her forties when she took custody of Jackie. She remembered,

> I was conscious growing up as well that my mother wasn't a young mother, I was conscious of that at times and she didn't do a lot of things with me but went with me to a lot of things…and I want to be seen with my children, yeah as a young mother.

Jackie was self-conscious to some degree about being seen as an older mother but when I asked her if she worried about that, she disagreed 'because I don't look my age'. She was generally very unconcerned about her age, saying 'I've always accepted the age I've been, it's just a number… it's never been an issue because I just am what I am, I haven't got a problem'. She said though that having the children has made her think more about her own mortality - before she tended to take 'life for granted' - but she said that now 'I know I will die at one point, but I just hope that I'll go when the children are a lot older, because I had them older'. However, she had no regrets about having children later in life. She said, 'I had them when I was ready for children, I didn't want children any earlier, I didn't want them any younger so I … you know, I'm just grateful to have them'.

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Summary

As was shown in the first part of this chapter, the relationships we have with other generations can often act as a reminder of time and of the ageing process. Just as parents ageing or dying can remind us of our own ageing and deaths, so too can the younger generation remind us of our position in the life-cycle. For those who are parents, midlife is the period in which many will witness their children reaching maturity and leaving the family home. This transition can lead a renegotiation of relationships, not only a configuration of parental roles with one's children as they become responsible and independent adults, but also within other significant relationships within the family. The move to a post-parental phase of life is also sometimes tinged with a sense of loss, sadness and a feeling that this is the end of an era. However it also creates gains, such as increased personal space, privacy, time and freedom from childcare responsibilities. Amongst some of those who have become parents in midlife or have young children during this time- regardless of whether they live with them or not- there is a sense that their anticipated period of liberation from childcare has been disrupted or postponed. Furthermore, amongst those families whose children have returned to the parental home after a period away, there was sometimes a sense of unpredictability and frustration, particularly when the parents had felt that they had entered a new phase of life, only to find themselves back in the old one.

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Chapter Six

Remembered Pasts and Imagined Futures

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‘If there is an afterlife I would be very upset if I didn’t feel that I had got to the point that I was satisfied with what I had done’ (Adrian aged 43)

Introduction

In our youth we imagine our futures. We might ponder the question: what will I be when I grow up? What kind of job will I have? Will I get married? Will I have children? Where will I live? What kind of a person will I be? Most people establish life plans or ‘dreams’ for their imagined futures. ‘Dreams’ do not necessarily refer to unrealistic aspirations but can also refer to mundane and potentially achievable goals such as living in a particular area, becoming a fireman or dancer or simply becoming a good parent (Archer, 2007, 233). Life dreams do not have to be extravagant or outrageously ambitious, but rather could refer to certain expectations one would have about how you envisage your life will turn out. Dreams might also be, in some circumstances, fanciful and fantastical, for example if you are a good swimmer you may dream of one day achieving an Olympic medal for swimming or breaking a world record. As Snowden stated ‘suddenly at the midpoint of our lives it dawns on us that time is beginning to run out. We still haven’t been to Australia, won the Nobel Prize or travelled to outer space’ (2006, 77). But how do people feel when they get to a point in their lives when they start to realise that these dreams (realistic or not) have not yet been achieved and perhaps never will be? This chapter explores earlier dreams and life plans and how midlife individuals feel that these correspond to the way their life has actually been lived. It looks at how people try to make amends for lost opportunities and create new future life plans in midlife. It also looks at the importance of disappointment and how coming to terms with the loss of life dreams can be an important process in the acceptance of limitations, as well as an important developmental stage in the life course.

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Midlife is often a time of reflection. Other significant life changes such as the death of parents, children leaving home, the approach to retirement, or bodily changes can often trigger a reassessment of the direction one's life is taking. These life events tend to disrupt the everyday routine of daily life and can lead to thoughts about the future and achievements to date. Many theorists have written about midlife as period of reappraisal. Jaques argued that the midlife crisis is about accepting personal limitations and mourning the end of some of the things that were strived for in earlier adulthood, stating that in midlife 'much would have to remain unfinished and unrealised' (1965, 507). In midlife, the individual may relinquish some of their earlier ambitions and begin to realise that time and opportunities are running out. Hildebrand suggested that this can lead to 'acute depression' 'when they realise that they have achieved a great deal but failed at the last fence' (Hildebrand, 1981, 19). But can we argue that despair and regret are the only emotional responses to this reassessment of life? Is it really as negative as suggested? What about those people who feel a sense of Erikson's 'ego-integrity' and fulfilment? I suggest that there are a number of responses to the reappraisal of life dreams in the midlife period which I will outline throughout this chapter.

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The 'Dream'

I found that amongst my interviewees there were two types of life dream, the first being a realistic and achievable dream that could reasonably be expected to be achieved should things take the predicted course of action. The second is based more on fantasy, wishes and vain hope. I found that unrealistic dreams that are formulated in childhood or young adulthood, such as dreams of being a pop-star or a famous footballer. Although secretly wished for or hoped for these dreams are usually expected to be unrealised and are therefore less disappointing when they do not come to fruition. When the dream starts as

a more realistic possibility however, the failure to realise it is so much more disappointing. I found that the re-evaluation of a dream therefore involves making judgements about how realistic and achievable the dream really was to begin with.

Some of the dreams that were mentioned by my interviewees were recognised as unrealistic. Trevor (aged 51) for instance said,

> Nothing exciting is going to happen that I know of any way…I don't think I'm going to be a long distance runner, but I love my running, but I'm not going to break any records. I don't break records and I'm not going to climb Everest or swim the channel or that sort of thing. But yeah I'm enjoying life as it is.

Whereas Trevor might previously have held secret dreams of becoming a record breaking runner, he had become realistic in his ambition and more accepting of his life. Many people hold within themselves dreams of great and heroic achievement. These dreams are most potent during youth but lose their strength as they get older. Forty-year-old married mother of three Janet gave an example of this. Janet works mainly as a housewife but does the occasional home hairdressing job, but she mentioned how looking back she would have *liked* to have been a forensic detective, she said,

> If I'd had my time over again I would work very much harder in school and I would love to do the job that they do on CSI […] Forensic side of things […] But yeah it's a bit late now. I think I am a bit old now to go back to school and to study for something like that.

Although this was described as Janet's dream job and a secret fantasy career, she does not seem to have been particularly driven by it throughout her life and indeed this dream may only have come about through watching the programme in the first place. She treated the dream as an unrealistic fantasy and did not demonstrate strong regrets about not achieving this life dream. In fact she said 'I have got no expectations about myself later on, what will happen, will happen, I don't want a different role in life really. I am happy the way I

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am'. Freud discussed in his fifth lecture on repression the generally unsatisfactory nature of life and how people have a tendency to create a phantasy life which compensate for the insufficiencies of real life. He stated that we

> ...find reality generally quite unsatisfactory and so keep up a life of fancy in which we love to compensate for what is lacking in the sphere of reality by the production of wish-fulfillments (1910, 65).

I suggest that Janet dealt with the relatively mundane and predictable nature of her everyday life by retreating every Tuesday evening after having her bath, to bed to watch CSI. She described as 'my time'. Locked away from the demands of her family, Janet could (at least temporarily) satisfy her wish for more in her life. Practical constraints of child-rearing also played a part in holding Janet back from achieving all that she wanted to achieve. She talked about a more potentially realistic dream of a future as a clothes shop worker, which she hope will become a possibility when her youngest child old enough to look after himself. She said,

> Something that has always been on my mind and it sounds pathetic but I would love to work in a lovely clothes shop, a women's clothes shop. I would just love that. […] maybe over the mall or maybe Ruby Tuesdays in town selling clothes, no somewhere that sells clothes. I haven't got high expectations I know. It is just a change. Something just to earn a bit of money. When he is not so dependent on me as he is. When he is old enough to come in on his own, which he won't be on his own because he will have the boys who will be a lot older again, but you know, when I could do a little bit more I would like to find something different.

Fifty-two-year-old Alex also gave an example of how dreams can be divided into realistic and unrealistic. When he spoke about his youth's dream of becoming a professional footballer he weighed up the likelihood that this dream was really achievable and made a realistic judgement about his failing to become a footballer.

> I was disappointed yeah but I wasn't good enough really, you know. Also if I think I'd have played professionally I wouldn't have gone to university…Because there were lots of kids who could have gone to university that I knew, that did sign on with the club and then when they get to eighteen or nineteen, they discard them you see. And they end up at a lower league club and then they end up not playing,

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> they play semi-pro and then they haven't got a job, you know. So I mean nice thought but with hindsight, but if you had asked me when I was nine or ten, I would have told you that's what I want to do. It was big but that's what I wanted to do.

He later went on to say, 'The life I've led has gone reasonably ok. I mean, you know, I was disappointed I wasn't a professional footballer but that was by the by'. Revealingly his disappointment is not as tangible as his unachieved more realistic career targets. He explained how two years ago he had applied for the top position as director in the company he worked for. He said, I've been Deputy Director [of the company] now for about six years…I applied for that job but I didn't get it…Its one of my big disappointments in life really and I think I'm over it now'. Yet he went on to say that he was still quite hurt by it; 'I'm still slightly disappointed round the edges that I didn't get the job' and 'I think it probably took me about nine months to get over it really. But I mean it's still a residual hurt, I have to say, but I think I'm, you know, I think it's gone now, so'.

If a dream was seen as realistic and achievable but remains unfulfilled, it can lead to the sense that one's life has been wasted or damaged in some way and this can become quite overwhelming. Amongst my interviewees, this was most evident in Lisa. Forty-five-year-old Lisa was a married mother of two, who worked part time as a home hairdresser. She seemed quite angry with herself for not having a particular dream or ambition as a younger person. She felt that her life was directionless and unfocused. She said,

> When I look back at my childhood I must have been a real drifter because I just didn't have any aspirations about anything. I must have been stupid because I just can't believe that I went along in my life and I had no direction at all, no direction at all and I can't understand it, I just can't understand it.

She recalled how she sees her major life decisions as having been made for her,

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> I came home from school one day and my mum said "I've got an interview for you at the hairdressers", "oh", so I went for the interview and got the job…I left school and went straight there….I just went along and did it and I stuck with it ever since and I thought "God, I never made any decisions for myself" and I mean I did make, like with Trevor and I there was no big engagement or anything like that we just decided to get married and when I look back now my bloody dress was horrible [laughs] well it was and I just couldn't have had a brain.

She went on to say,

> I am just one of those people who has just gone along doing things and I have never really thought, and I didn't think, I didn't think "Oh I want to get married", "Oh I want to have children", I just went along and did it and I feel sometimes, I don't know, I can't explain it, I don't know whether I was just satisfied and I am an imaginative person and when I read and things I can imagine things and I have got quite an imagination and yet, when I try to think about ambitions it's just kind of blank. So I can't work out whether I am that thick that I can't have any ambition, I have just been fairly satisfied with what I have had or what I have done, but I can't really think of anything, I have never been one, I am not very, I don't live on the edge.

She also related this re-evaluation of her life as a 'midlife thing'. She said,

> I suppose it is another thing like a midlife thing and it's like you wake up and think I haven't done anything with my life, what am I going to do and I wished I could have done this, and I wished I could have done that, and then it's having the confidence to go and try something else...I don't really want to know what I want to do [laugh] I am forty-five-years-old and I still don't know what to do with my life.

Lisa did not establish a particular dream or set of ambitions earlier in her life and it is this lack of a dream in the first place which was causing her the most distress. The lack of direction she felt her life had taken seemed to have resulted in a similar emotional response to those who have felt that their life dream was unfulfilled. It was not Lisa's 'dream' that was unfulfilled but rather her life feels generally unfulfilled. It is only now in midlife that she has realised that she perhaps wanted a bit more. She felt that she had gained confidence with age and this had given her more impetus to change. At one stage I asked, 'did you say your self-confidence has grown?' She replied, 'Yes, got better as I have I've got older yeah, definitely'. She later said,

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> Although I didn't realise at the time and things like when you have got a fear of doing something and now you think "Oh pull yourself together, I am forty years old, for God's sake just do it" you know and I have never thought like that before forty.

I found that it was women who most often tended to feel disappointed by their lack of ambition and opportunity in young adulthood. Many, like Lisa, felt that they had just drifted into jobs and a settled family life. In reaching midlife this taken-for-granted way of life for some becomes a regret or something which needs to be changed. Other women also seemed to regret their lack of direction. Fifty-one-year-old Sandra said,

> I'd like to be doing something else I just feel like now that the years are just ticking over, but it's frightening really, you get to a certain age and you think oh I've got to, but now I've got to this age and I don't know, I don't know where I am going with my life.

Forty-nine-year-old Angela also said 'I regret getting married early, I wish I had gone on with my education, I wish I had more of a career and been on my own, stood on my own two feet for a few more years! I think that would have put me in good stead'. She continued,

> I wish I'd done what [my daughter] has done, that's one of my biggest regrets. I wish I'd had a life, I wish I'd done more on my own first before I started a family. That's sort of one of my biggest regrets. I'd have liked to have done some more. And I feel it's too late now. I can't, you know, I can't do those things.

Forty-six-year-old Kathleen frequently mentioned throughout her interview that she wished that her life had been more exciting. She said 'when I was younger, we did I suppose, we were going off to Oz and everything, and that was fab, but I wish I'd done a bit more of that, but then again, you can't do that when you've got kids'. She was also disappointed by her career choices and by lost opportunities:

> I don't think I should have gone into Lloyds bank, that was four years, not wasted, you know, because I earned good money, it was … it looks good on the CV, people know I'm trustworthy, but um … I just wish I'd had a passion about something that I loved and I wish I'd gone and done A levels and gone to Uni and

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> had my own flat…I wish I'd gone off and I wish I'd had the teenager thing of living with other girls in a flat, I'm sorry that I didn't do that!...don't get me wrong, I had a good, no-one's every stopped me from having a good time, but I didn't have the um confidence, you know, if I was a teenager now, that would be like "wow!" [Laughter].

I suggest that these types of regrets amongst women, about not having achieved much, stem from the fewer opportunities that were afforded to them in their younger days by contrast with what is now available to young women. The impact of globalisation, the internet and the media in general have opened up a world of potential to recent generations. In the 1960s and 70s, there was arguably less expectation upon women to get a career and the focus tended be on raising a family. In more recent years, women have actively pursued careers and delayed starting a family. So for the mothers of girls who have lives full of opportunity, their own lives can seem comparatively unexciting.

Angela expressed an almost jealous attitude towards her daughter and to me. Her daughter had recently completed her training to become a solicitor and Angela said 'You know I look at other people, there's yourself, there's my daughters, and you just think "Oh God, you've got all your lives ahead of you and I'm running out of time!"'. My own presence may also have influenced Angela in this respect. She - along with other female interviewees - was obviously aware that I was doing my PhD at university and had a career ahead of me. This may have led to some feeling that they had comparatively underachieved academically. It is interesting in this respect to note how many time Lisa described herself as 'stupid' or 'thick' to me, I perhaps made her feel insecure about how much she had achieved. Yet, I argue that it is not necessarily about an innate lack of ambition and drive on her part, but rather a consequence of social conditioning.

In Western society today, men and women have greater expectations placed upon them

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about personal achievement, fulfilment and growth. These expectations can be difficult to manage if earlier opportunities were not offered and if they feel that it is too late to change things. However, just as opportunities for travel, education and personal fulfilment may have apparently opened up to the young, midlife in the twenty-first century is also potentially a period for growth and opportunity. Whereas many opportunities are targeted at the younger generations, often they are in the financially less privileged position than those who are approaching their retirement years.

Fifty-four-year-old Shirley offered an interesting case study of one woman who had made significant changes to her life in midlife. She had been forced to reassess what she was doing with her life because her husband left her when she was in her early forties. At the time of the interview she was happily married to her second husband and was the mother of two daughters aged twenty-six and thirty from her first marriage. She worked full time as a social worker and her husband was retired. The dynamics of her interview were especially interesting to analyse and revealing about Shirley's attitude towards ageing and her attitude towards her life changes. I found her to be quite intimidating and she appeared to want to take control of the interview. She came across as a strong woman, with confidence which verged on arrogance. This was compounded by her body language, as she sat with her legs pointing at me on a chair between us. She drank wine and smoked throughout the interview, blowing her smoke in my direction, and on one occasion she sat down for dinner at the same time as I had been scheduled to arrive, eating without apology. Prior to the interview I wanted to write down some contact details that she was giving me regarding another matter, but she took the pen from me and insisted on writing things down for me - demonstrating her dominant behaviour and her attempt to gain control. She seemed used to being in control; she later revealed 'I've

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never really been very happy with authority'. Moreover in the interview she seemed keen to impress me by introducing sociological and psychological theories that she had learnt in her own social work studies, in order to explain experiences from her life and how she felt about them, and she frequently framed her life story around a theoretical structure. She kept saying things like 'I ask questions like this at work'. This made me more nervous though because the more she said things like that the more I felt she was monitoring my performance. I felt there was a strong element of competitiveness and at times I definitely felt I was losing the competition. Whereas some women felt almost insecure in themselves in my presence (being a university student), describing themselves for example as 'thick', Shirley's insecurities played out in a more challenging way with me. She had a strong view about the way she wanted her life story to be told - she tended to compartmentalise the various stages of her life. She seemed to be protecting the life that she had created for herself over the last ten to fifteen years. She kept telling me that she was 'reconciled' and even commented on her own over-use of the word, saying 'what's all that about with the reconciliation thing?' I started to think that she was not as reconciled as she was making herself believe. Following her divorce twelve years ago, she was left as a single mother of two children with no money and nowhere to live. In her marriage she had lived almost as a 'trophy wife'. She later met and married a man older than her. She went on to gain a degree and start a new and successful career as a social worker. She bought a house with her new husband and raised her children well. She described her achievements,

> I think it was quite remarkable really, in a sense … not that that it's remarkable because I'm a clever person, but I think um I feel a huge sense of achievement in the face of adversity, I dragged myself out of that and scrabbled together a career and sort of weathered all of that and moved on.

Having come from a situation where she felt she had underachieved and was viewed

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solely in terms of her appearance and status rather than for her true personality or intelligence, it is now those latter achievements of which I would argue she is so protective and defensive. She says it is not because she was a 'clever person', but because she had the strength of character to fight. She is someone who lived out earlier dreams of being wealthy and beautiful but found that, when those dreams were shattered by her divorce; that they did not actually satisfy her desires and she needed to create new dreams and ambitions for herself. Unlike many of the other women whom I interviewed who had not had such as a significant trigger in their lives, Shirley was available to take up the new opportunities which confronted her, resulting in her feeling that she is settled, content and 'reconciled' with her current life.

Kathleen (aged 46) was another interesting example of how early life dreams had been transformed in adulthood. She had arguably the strongest and most motivating life dream, which she felt has now almost lost. She discovered, along with her increasing confidence in her thirties, that she was a talented singer and performer. Since then she had appeared in theatre productions but she had dream of being a pop star since her early thirties. In recent years she had even auditioned for the television talent competition, 'The X Factor', but without success. Her perceived failure of the pop-star dream is, for her, a result of ageing and physical appearance. She was very disappointed with her looks and talked at length about them throughout her interview. However, she has not relinquished her pop-star dream completely. She has involved herself in lead roles in theatre productions, which served to transform her dream into something more realistic and reduced some of the power of the dream. She also seemed to be trying to live out her dream through her daughter. Her daughter was a very talented dancer, and despite their relatively limited finances, she paid for her to have professional dance lessons in London (despite living in

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Wales). Kathleen wanted her daughter to have a job that she loves, instead of the 'a dead end job' like she had. Kathleen has seemingly relinquished some of her own dream to her daughter and seems aware of her tendency to live vicariously through her daughter. She said,

> Kathleen: Obviously having the kids and …went really well, touch wood! [Laugh] And then … they're going to achieve all my ambitions for me.
>
> Interviewer: Are they?
>
> Kathleen: Yeah, they're going to live my life … the one I wanted … the one I should have had!

The Window of Opportunity

I argue that midlife is about accepting personal limitations and mourning the end of some of the things that were strived for in earlier adulthood, but also that it can be a period of growth, freedom and increased opportunities. In fact in modern society, with its increasing life expectancy and with medical advances, the middle-aged individual can potentially expect a long and relatively healthy retirement compared to previous generations. This means that some people still feel there is time to complete their dreams particularly if they are financially stable, healthy and have more freedom following the departure of children from the family home. The early stages of retirement also offer more time to complete the dream. It is sometimes the case that instead of old dreams being lost this is actually a period of fulfilment and a time when new dreams are created. As I have suggested previously, often a trigger or shock in terms of physical health can serve as a motivating force to complete a dream, or medical treatment such as an operation may restore failing health, leading to the sense that dreams can now have their opportunity to become fulfilled. This increased motivation I suggest may give rise to increased creativity and generativity in midlife. It is also the opportunity to rectify any past mistakes.

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Amongst my interviewees the most common dream for future years was the freedom to take more holidays and short breaks. Anna said 'I can't wait for my sort of retirement. I am looking forward to going on short breaks and doing things'. She added, 'actually what I would like is, if we had enough money to buy a little flat in Spain or France and to go there and to be able to drive down there and spend time there and you know not have to worry about anything'. Many of these dreams of travelling are based on the idea that they will be free from child-care responsibilities. But despite the anticipated freedom from childcare responsibilities, in fact many people in midlife are faced with caring and emotional responsibilities for elderly parents and prolonged dependency of older children, and even grandchildren. This can hamper some dreams rather unexpectedly. Patricia illustrated this, 'we've got my dad so it's sort of we have to consider him now, but I wouldn't want to leave the country or anything, but we wouldn't emigrate and leave my dad sort of thing'.

Kathleen would like to emigrate to Australia but she cannot because of her parents: 'that's the only thing that's keeping me here'. Lisa would like to go to New Zealand to live but felt that, realistically, she could not leave her mother. These interviewees seem to have begun developing new dreams in midlife because some of the old dreams cannot be realised. They also recognised constraints on them, namely the emotional or practical responsibility for parents. The dreams therefore often become reduced. For example, Lisa may not have been able to emigrate to New Zealand but she was planning a holiday to New Zealand instead.

In reviewing their lives so far and thinking about the future, the majority of my interviewees spoke about things they would like to achieve or dreams they would like to

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fulfil before they got too old. Sometimes these were vague or nondescript aspirations, others spoke of achievement at work, achievements in terms of sport, and ambitions such as travelling and/or moving house. But I also found that particularly amongst male interviewees there was an increased sense of urgency to get things done. They often felt that there was only a small window of opportunity, between being free from work and family commitments, poor health and old age. This I suggest is illustrative of how a fear of getting older, a fear of poor health and ultimately a fear of death, motivates some people during this period of the life course. Matthew (aged 55) evens quantified this period of opportunity:

> I know what the effect of ageing is on your body and um it's going to be a bit touch and go really. There is only a small window of opportunity when you are old enough to retire and young enough to do these things. If you're lucky you know you may have five years.

Kathleen (aged 46) and Lisa (aged 45) also mention getting things done before time runs out. Kathleen said,

> If there's things you want to do in your life, you've got to get on with it and get it done in the next ten years really because otherwise you're always going to regret not having done it.

Lisa said,

> I know it is not old now, but no I am more concerned about fifty because I think you have probably had the most of your life you know. And I know people do live a lot older today but if you were thinking about seventy and that's only twenty years and the last twenty years have gone by so quick, you start thinking oh, anything we want to do we better do it now.

I found that this 'window of opportunity' had become prominent for some people, particularly amongst the men (who demographically have naturally shorter life expectancies than women in the UK), and some had become quite resentful of obligations which threatened its fulfilment, often leading to a sense of underlying panic and

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frustration which then manifested itself psychologically in the interview. In the previous chapter I showed how people negotiated anxieties about ageing and death which arise from the generational shift. What I found particularly interesting was how some people emotionally responded to a perceived threat to this 'window of opportunity' and personal fulfilment and how this threat often came from personal relationships, such as from partners, parents and children. It was particularly interesting to see how some people felt towards parents who they perceived had held them back and hindered them in some way from making the most from their lives. Most of the men that I spoke to ideally wanted to bring their retirement forward. This could be partly about control and feeling empowered by choosing their retirement date rather than the decision being made for them, but it could be that this desire for early retirement actually links to their fear that time will run out and that an early retirement will actually increase this window of opportunity. Adrian (aged 43) for example said,

> I have a feeling that if I don't retire before the retirement age I will find it physically difficult to enjoy my retirement in the way that I want to, I would love to have. I would like to feel that I was as young and as fit as I am now when I retire, which means I have got to do something about it. Whether I do or not is watch this space I suppose, but um, yeah…I have a kind of sense of unease that I will kind of miss that boat entirely for the years that I care to remain.

There were some people who indicated contentment with their achievements and acceptance of any limitations they faced. Jeanette (aged 45) said, 'I've got a lot more peace and calmness in my life now' and Anna (aged 46) said 'On the whole I think I am well adjusted, I am happy, and I love where I am at the moment, and long may it reign [laughs]'. A couple of people, Patricia and Roger, felt that they had done all that they wanted to do with their lives so far and were content with how their lives had worked out. Patricia (aged 55) said for example, 'I didn't ever want to regret not doing anything and I have tried most things. Saying that, I haven't even tried a drug but [laughs] [you] know

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what I mean? I have done everything I've wanted [laughs].' Roger similarly said, 'I suppose I am one of the more fortunate people in that I have managed to do most of the things that I have always wanted to do….And like um everything else is a bonus'. Jeff (aged 48) also said,

> At the moment no strong regrets, which again how much do I believe that? Or how much do I think that's a way of seeing, of becoming, content with how you are now. By not having regrets and not thinking "oh I wish I'd done things differently". I think less and less that I regret things.

This is an interesting quote. As has been shown in the previous chapter, Jeff had felt held back by his mother and displayed regrets about not having relationships or a career as a result. However, he had made plans for his future when his mother dies. He observantly pointed out that his lack of regrets may actually be something which has been unconsciously forced as a defence, a way of coping with disappointment of accepting his life as it is.

I also found that for many people age brings a new attitude towards life. Many found that they had become more tolerant and more confident. Shirley (aged 54) said, 'you tend not to care so much about what people think of you' and also

> I think it's fairly typical for a lot of women actually, because you mature a bit, you're probably not as beautiful as you were, so your starting to … you know, have … be a bit more assertiveness I suppose and may be your not prepared to put up with some of the things.

Adrian said,

> As a person I have always weighed up things before ever going into them anyway, given it a lot of thought and sometimes I have thought of myself as reserved, reserved in the sense that I wouldn't try anything new. The older I have got the more likely I have been to try new things in a kind of sense of devil may care attitude, so now I've kind of done things in reverse.

It seems that for some, with age comes assertiveness and this can mean an increased

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confidence to try new things and create new dreams for themselves.

The Loss of the Hero Self

Alongside mourning for the lost 'Dream', Levinson argued that 'a man must grieve and accept the symbolic death of the youthful hero within himself' (1978, 215). Macadams and Ochberg (1988) argued that we develop a heroic myth about ourselves and that we have a need to see ourselves as a hero. Becker also argued that all humans have a 'heroic drive' which is the 'varied and culturally-contoured drive to excellence, by which individual's 'make their mark', prove their larger worth and value, and thereby earn self-esteem and symbolic immortality' (Becker, 1973 in Leichty 2005, 16). It refers to a sense of 'cosmic specialness' which means we hope to be 'of ultimate usefulness to creation' (Becker, 1973, 5). He argued we tend to repress these desires to be heroic in order for social life to function successfully, that if people admitted their heroic dream it would be a 'devastating release of truth' in which people would 'demand that culture give them their due' (Becker, 1973, 5). He said that we disguise this 'struggle' through accumulating material wealth 'but underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness, no matter how we mask it in concerns of smaller scope' (Becker, 1973, 4). Levinson talked about the omnipotent hero self and how that for men in midlife the heroism of youth is lost or relinquished. He said 'A man must begin to grieve and accept the symbolic death of the youthful hero within himself' (1978, 215).

Fifty-five-year-old Rodney's interview provided a very interesting case study of the loss of a hero self, or in his case a hero self that had become demasculinised. Rodney was married to a woman who has in recent years become disabled through a crippling back condition. His children had all left home but one of his teenage grandchildren lived with

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him. Rodney recently had to give up work and become an official carer for his recently disabled wife. His wife had not worked and had always been the one to look after him but the roles have now reversed. On the surface he appeared not to mind, but this situation appeared to dent an already fragile sense of masculinity.

> I thought to myself, I can do one of two things now, I can walk out and leave her because I don't want to look after her and stay in my job which I like or I can go home now and do what a husband and a father should do, look after her. That's what I did. But I did think about walking away, believe me…

He was particularly upset when recounting this story of having to give up his job as a truck driver. He explained this loss,

> Interviewer: Did you enjoy your work?
>
> Rodney: Yeah loved it. They gave me a going away present, one for her and one for me, it was touching. I cried that day, really cried.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, you didn't want to go?
>
> Rodney: No. I mean I'm welling up now over that. [Sniff, tears in his eyes] It's … it's one of them things, they just made me feel so proud, I mean I done me work, always done me work, whatever they asked of me. If somebody wasn't there I always turned in. And they said "No, we're going to let you go. We don't want to; believe me we don't, because you're a bloody good worker".

Rodney's job had given him a sense of pride. It was something he claimed he was good at and provided him with a masculine role. Rodney had been quite accepting of many of the changes which happened during midlife, and although he claimed he was accepting of the fact that he had to give up work to look after his wife, it was a painful loss which he is still mourning. Having to give up work with no prospect of ever having the opportunity to return has heightened Rodney's anxiety about loss and getting older. In order to cope with these anxieties, Rodney needed to establish a new role for himself and find new ways of demonstrating his masculinity and youthfulness.

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Rodney's anxieties about ageing and this loss of the hero self were played out through his body. He put a great deal of emphasis on sexual matters throughout the interview. I was exasperated by his ability to turn every topic and question I asked to sex. There was an element of flirtation towards me, but I considered that there might be something beyond the attempts to impress me and that sexuality might be being used by Rodney as a psychic defence against ageing. He said when describing his current sex life with his wife,

> I mean we have sex three or four times per week, but the rest I take myself in hand. But I do that to keep it from dying, if you know what I mean, so … I don't want that dying, that's the last thing I want dying! [Laugh]

I thought it was particularly interesting that he says he needs to keep as sexually active as possible to prevent 'it (his penis) from dying'. This seems like a kind of manic defense against a fear of death and that if his penis dies, then the rest of him will die too. Maintaining control and maintaining his sexual habits helps him to maintain the sense of being alive. Neimeyer (1994) argued that in midlife, 'some people may become sexually withholding in order to escape an awareness of being connected to their body, which is vulnerable to illness, ageing and death' (1994, 229). It could be argued that the opposite is true in Rodney's case and that the basic sexual urges and feeling of connectedness with his body help to remind him that he is still alive. For Rodney sexual prowess was a measure of youthfulness. He said 'I've got the mind of a thirty-year-old, the body of a thirty-year-old, and I think the sex drive of a thirty-year-old at the moment! Touch wood it stays like that!' His belief is that as long as he can remain sexually active he can keep hold of his youth and prevent death catching up with him too.

Another interesting point about Rodney is that he was very small in stature, probably weighing no more than nine stone and is around 5ft 3 tall. Rodney felt that his small physique had held him back throughout his life. Despite this he is keen to point out on a

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number of occasions that he has nothing to be ashamed of 'down there'. He said, 'I'm not frightened you know, I'm not … how can I put it? I'm not small down there! You know, I've got nothing to be afraid of like'. He puts a great deal of emphasis on demonstrating his sexual abilities and his body. At one point in the interview he lifts his shirt to show me how flat his stomach is and he also told me a story of how two years ago he sniffed a drug in a pub toilet and walked into the bar naked. The most revealing incident however was when he went to see his doctor,

> Rodney: I had to have a vasectomy done, years ago, you know, the snip? And, how can I put it? It's, they said you'll either go one way … you'll either go off sex or you'll, you know, you'll want it more and I went the other way and I want it more. I mean I went to the doctors; I think it was about eight weeks ago and she said, am I allowed to say this by the way?
>
> Interviewer: Of course you can.
>
> Rodney: I said "I got a problem!" and of course it's a female doctor see and she said "Well, what do you mean?" and I said "Well, I keep getting erections!" and she said "What do you mean?" and I say "Well, first thing when I get up in the morning" and she said "Yes, well that's normal for a man because that's a man's thing" and I said "yeah, and about eight or nine times in the day!" and she said "Oh!" and she said "Well, what do you mean?" and I said "It just comes up for no reason". I've never been so embarrassed. And anyway she said "Drop your trousers" and so anyway I dropped me trousers and up it come didn't it! "That's alright!" she said "I'll ignore it, don't worry!" and anyway she checked around where they cut you down the side of the balls and she reckons that it's pressing on the nerve and she said "Well, I'll have you back in" and I said "You bloody won't!" and she said "Why?" and I said "Come on, a man of my age!" you know some people of my age can't even get one on, never mind bloody have eight or nine a day! So I said "You bloody are not, you'll leave it as it is!"

This extract highlights the pride he has in his sexual ability. I would argue that he had not gone to the doctors because he thought it was a problem, but rather he just went merely to demonstrate this. It is interesting that this increase in sex drive happened in response to a vasectomy which could have demasculinised him further, stopping his ability to produce sperm. Instead it has given him an increase in erections. I suggest that it is through his pride about his sexuality, he is proving his mastery and control over his body.

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Rodney, in his youth, was once a talented footballer and almost selected for a top national team but did not make it because he was told he was too short. His dreams of being a fireman were also thwarted by his size. 'I always wanted to be a fireman…But I never got there because I never had the build or the height'. He expresses his disappointment at not being given the opportunity to prove himself as either a footballer or a fireman. He said, 'I'm a bit disappointed that I didn't achieve what I wanted to achieve as a kid really … you know from a kid to a grown up, you know what I mean … all because they said I was too small. Got the capabilities!' Rodney's heroic dreams of being a fireman or professional footballer or simply even in a masculine role as a truck driver have all been lost in various ways and I suggest that his effort reinvigorating and regaining this heroic masculinity is played out through his sexual bravado.

The Importance of Disappointment

Many of my interviewees seemed fairly dissatisfied with the direction their lives had taken; some because they felt they lacked direction and purpose, some because they had not quite achieved all that they had originally dreamt or hoped for, and others because of circumstances which had broken or taken away their original plans. A sense of disappointment was common. Craib acknowledged the importance of this emotion and described the definition of disappointment as referring to 'what we feel, when something we expect, intend, or hope for or desire does not materialise (1994, 3).

Trevor (aged 51) was an interesting example of someone who appeared disappointed by his life, but seemed to be entering a period of acceptance. He had had great expectations that his life would change when he reached forty, believing the old adage that life would

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then begin. He described this period in his life.

> I hated my forties. Hated it…They said life begins at forty and I waited. After a couple of years nothing had happened so I got ill in my forties. Things that normally, things that you know you get like a knock or an ache and it would go within a day or two and it went on and on and on. Problems with my stomach and that dragged me down. But once I turned fifty I thought well that's it. I was glad to turn fifty. I was quite happy. I don't mind being fifty-one, I don't want to be sixty but I don't mind being fifty, it's quite good.

In this passage we see that health can play a significant factor in the extent to which dreams can be fulfilled or achieved. Health problems can disrupt the dream and life plans. Trevor did not dream of big changes or extravagance in midlife but he seemed to yearn for more excitement in his life almost willing a trauma to happen. He said,

> I've seen people who have had mid-life crises. I've seen it where they've just blown everything out. There's got to be something more out there. At forty, like I said, life begins at forty. I wasn't looking for like a change of you know, buying a sports car and having an affair, nothing like that. But I did think something was going to change, I didn't know what. Midlife crises, yeah, people have…you know where you go through and you do change. People leave their steady boring existence because they think that they've got to this age. I thought like that, you know, what have I done? I'm fifty and I have had this and that and I've got a family, but what have I got to show for it? People say "well I've been divorced twice", you know, "I've lost a house", "I've had this happen to me" and I think "yeah maybe I should be happy with what I've got".

He then said, 'I think well I've lived just a basically boring mundane life. I've just got up, gone to work and come home all these years', to which I said 'That's better isn't it?' and he replied in a heavy and defeated tone 'Yeah, I suppose so'. He went on and said 'it's easy just to plod along and as long as there's nothing serious to upset it, just carry on plodding along that way and just let things be'. He seemed to lack confidence in his ability to make changes in his life and although he desires change he is also frightened. When I asked him what his childhood ambitions were he replied, 'Never thought about it. Frightened probably. Frightened of the future. I know when I was at school I was frightened to leave because it's a cozy existence'. I do not think he has fully moved on

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from these feelings and still seems afraid to make the changes necessary to make his life feel more fulfilled. Craib, 1994, stated that

> Disappointment comes not only from having to restrict ourselves, from having to share with other people and from having to make choices in our lives; it also comes from the recognition of what we are, and it is not a world-shattering announcement that we are not always what we might like to think we are (1994, 44).

Trevor felt he had been quite restricted by his life choices, but he seemed resigned to the life that he has. He has had to come to terms with the 'world shattering' announcement as Craib puts it, that his life and his self are not going to be completely as he hoped they would be.

From 'Punk' to Sheddy': Dealing with Disappointment

Forty-nine-year-old Joe gave quite a poignant story about dealing with disappointment and loss. He was particularly nostalgic about his youth and talked animatedly about his years as a punk in the 1970s. He said, 'so punk came along, changed my life completely. The first Clash album, The Barricades, all this stuff. No really seriously fantastic. Amazing situation'. He described his appearance during this time, 'I turned up one day, first holiday back from University, jet black hair, green side and purple sideburns and oh God, but yeah lots of good times and gigs like that'. He talked at length about his clothes and style, in particular his jackets became significant symbols of his youth. He said

> I'd got an old denim jacket which was my brother's old denim jacket and I'd had sewn into it twenty-one zips myself. The sleeves came off and most of them had pockets behind them, there weren't any old rubbish like. I used to get terrible pains in my hands, like arthritis, from doing all that sewing. Joe Strummer once offered to buy my jacket from me. My proudest moment, Joe Strummer, at the Ramones New Year gig in Rainbow offered to buy my jacket.

He talked animatedly about his punk years and his narrative at this point was exciting, fun and vibrant. He appeared to be in another world as he spoke, one which he was drawing

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me into. As he talked about the gigs he went to, I was captivated by his descriptions of the clothes he wore and the images of him sewing zips into them until his hands hurt. Yet, I also felt an overwhelming sense of sadness in his story. There was an undercurrent of nostalgia. He talked about how age had taken away the punk identity, which he so deeply identified with. He said, 'I think because the whole punk thing was so much about teenagers and youth and all this, that getting to thirty you were all kind of past it'.

The most poignant and significant moment of his story was when he described the death of celebrity Radio DJ John Peel. Joe described what John Peel meant to him, and how attending his funeral in 2004 signified a final end to the punk identity which he had held dear.

> When I used to be in my grotty old bed-sit in Reading, [John is talking about his younger years here, when he was in his late teens and twenties], I used to get home at night and the first thing I used to do was put on the radio and in those days John Peel was on 10pm to midnight every night of the week. He was like part of the family and when he died I was so upset. I went to his funeral. I got my old leather jacket out and, not the zipped one, I gave that away to a younger punk, I think that was the right thing to do being a punk. I got this lovely old mascot Douglas leather jacket. It's a classic biker's jacket. Used to get them from Lewis Leathers in Mile End. [I] took my old jacket, drove all the way over to Bury St Edmunds. Couldn't believe it, I expected there to be people there, but the town centre was just gridlocked. I promised I was going to sing with gusto, got half way through the first line of Abide with Me and I just blabbed. It was awful.

Joe could not fully understand the strength of his emotions,

> I know this sounds silly particularly in the post-Diana country but John Peel's funeral really did, had a huge affect and I couldn't believe quite how much of an effect it had. It really was like losing, I can honestly say when my brother and sister die I won't feel like anything like it. And it was just quite astonishing and it's because it's this voice that you've had inside your room for, you know, twenty-odd years and it's just… yeah it had a huge effect.

Joe's mother had died a few months prior to the interview and he said 'I felt bad about the fact of my mum dying because I didn't cry. I didn't cry once and I got angry at the

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funeral'. He was surprised at how upset he was at John Peel's funeral in comparison. My interpretation of this is that John Peel's funeral was more than a bereavement of someone whom he admired and whose work he enjoyed. Peel's death symbolised the end of an era and the end of Joe's youthful identity as a punk. It is interesting that the leather jacket which represented a part of his punk youth days was brought out and worn for the last time at the funeral. It was as if that part of Joe was dead and buried too. He has since yearned for an opportunity to wear his jacket again, but feels he is too old to do so. He said with sadness,

> There have been a couple of times when we've been going out places and I'm thinking 'I'll look an idiot if I put my old leather jacket on', things like that. And I thought no, what the hell. John Peel's funeral was a good example. I thought that was appropriate. Bit like wearing a uniform. But I mean there's been other things, going to see REM at Ipswich, well that's what you wear, you're going to a rock gig and no one wears leather jackets any more. They used to say in my youth, 'oh you never look out of place with a pair of jeans and a leather jacket', well you do, well you do.

I think that this last sentence is particularly moving. I argue that Joe is mourning his past through these nostalgic reflections. He is also trying to move into a new period of acceptance as a way of coping with this loss, he said for example,

> What I am starting to come to terms with now is that I am now moving into the bracket of what other people think as 'old' and that's, I don't know how I'm going to deal with that one. That's just kind of a bit uhhhh. I'm getting into that bracket now. I'm conscious of it and I'm not alarmed by it necessarily. I guess it's just one of those things.

It is interesting to contrast Joe's previous identity to the new identity he has prescribed himself now in midlife, particularly the contrast in the clothing descriptions. He said,

> When I turned forty [my wife] said "oh we'll have to go out and start buying beige". And she did actually buy me a beige fleece and it is very warm I have to say. It's one of these things I wear in the winter when I want and sit and watch the telly and we haven't bothered to light a fire…it's like a snuggle jumper.

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He described himself now as a ‘classic sheddy’. He had swapped his creative pursuit of sewing zips onto punk styled jackets, for making things out of wood - particularly bird boxes - in his garden shed. ‘I like to sit down and listen to the radio and potter around in the shed’. In many ways Joe seemed fairly satisfied with this new identity, but there was still a sense of yearning for his punk years. He is coming to terms with the loss of his past. Yet there is an underlying yearning to return to his punk years and deeper sadness at their loss. He said,

> I always used to wear boots, didn’t used to wear shoes, zip up boots that sort of thing. [My wife] hates them. They’re very much a bloke seeking his youth and last year we actually found a pair of boots that she liked and a nice pair of jeans and she actually conceded the other day that yeah they look smart. Because the trouble is I wear them all the bloody time now.

I suggest this discrete wearing of a version of his old boots offers Joe a more creative solution to dealing with the loss of his old, discontinued identity. The boots suggest a satisfactory compromise and a way of integrating his past and present.

In *The Importance of Disappointment* Craib argued that ‘we can only make life better if we can recognise and incorporate the dark side, the side of disappointment and death’ (1994, viii). Craib suggested that true integration is the ‘acceptance of a process of being unintegrated’ and ‘of depression, internal conflict and a normal failure to contain these within the boundaries of the personality’ (1994, 176). He argued that one must come to accept the bad elements of one’s personal relationships and of oneself in order to achieve happiness, integration and satisfaction. He developed Klein’s notion of the depressive position which contains precisely this state of psychic ambiguity- that happiness lies in disappointment. Joe is coming to terms with the fact that the punk years are now over. He is coming to recognise that the loved and good part of his identity is also part of the less favoured element of his identity as someone who is moving into the ‘old’ bracket. To put

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it into psychoanalytic terms Joe has moved through the splitting and idealisation within the paranoid schizoid position and is now moving into the more mournful, more accepting stage of the depressive position**.**

Summary

Modern, Western society encourages the belief that opportunities for personal fulfilment and self-expression are not only possible, but a necessary requirement to achieve a meaningful life. It became evident amongst many of my interviewees, in particular the women that expectations about what constitutes a fulfilled life have changed. Many felt that they had meandered through their lives with little in terms of ambition or career, only to find that their own children's generation are seemingly more motivated and have many more opportunities open to them. This seemed to lead to feelings of inadequacy and unfulfilment amongst some of my interviewees.

I argued that the review of life choices is a prominent feature of midlife. During midlife people begin to examine the purpose of their life so far, assess their self-worth and consider their futures more carefully; they evaluate their achievements, assess their present circumstances and think about the type of the person they have become. At this point of reassessment there is both a realisation that some earlier dreams and ambitions may have been achieved and that others have yet to have been fulfilled.

Levinson suggested that midlife sees the loss of the dream, and I argued that in many cases this was true. Many people became disillusioned by their previous ambitions and recognised their own limitations. There were different ways of coping with this realisation, from mourning and acceptance, to reducing the power of the dream to a more

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realistic ambition, to a vicarious dream in which children would achieve it on their behalf. I suggest that in midlife the purpose of reflecting on one's life is to assess what has been achieved so far and what needs to be done in the next phase of life, before time does actually begin to finally run out. These reflections arise as a result of triggers, changes in circumstances and other losses in midlife which serve as a reminder of the limitations of time.

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Conclusion

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General Summary and Assessment of Study

This thesis has explored the subjective experience of ageing with particular focus on the social and psychological issues which affect people in midlife. In order to study this period of the life course I firstly needed to identify what midlife actually is and when it occurs. Chapter one reviewed the literature on midlife and ageing, identifying the difficulty of capturing an explanation as to what midlife is and I am not sure any firm conclusions can be drawn as to whether age brackets can be definitively placed. I considered cross-cultural differences in defining the life course and evaluated the different ways in which theorists have chronologically positioned midlife. In reviewing these definitions I found that many theorists have conceptualised the life course in terms of its different life stages and the ego tasks to be accomplished at each point. These, I found, provided a good foundation on which to base my understanding of some of the psychological challenges faced at various points in the life course.

The basis of this thesis was to weave a psychoanalytic understanding of different social and personal issues in midlife, so the next part of my literature review introduced some of the key psychoanalytic features which I found useful. These psychoanalytic ideas were then developed further, with illustration from practical fieldwork examples in my methodology chapter. In this chapter I discussed the advantages that a psycho-social method could bring to this study in that it allows for an enriched understanding of the subjective opinions and understanding of my interviewees' psychic defences. I acknowledged the limitations of this inter-disciplinary approach such as the generalisable nature of the data and the ethics of accessing the emotional worlds of interviewees.

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Chapter three set the demographic context for the study. I created a profile of the factors which might impact upon the experience of those in midlife today and showed how social and family structures have changed across the generations such as the increasing age of parenthood, increasing life expectancy and the decreasing average size of the family. I found that the life-style expectations of midlife were partially based upon these demographic factors, for example guiding expectations about when children left home, or expectations about when parents might need care or might die.

Chapter four discussed the way in which ageing is an embodied process. I highlighted how age-related changes in the body are often noticed via particular moments of realisation rather than an overall awareness of the process. I challenged Giddens' (2001, [1991c]) notion of the body project and argued that although to some extent the body is 'plastic' and malleable, there does come a point in which the body project can no longer be managed in the way in which you would like, for example when health issues limit the body's abilities. On a psychological level I found that when people felt that some aspect of their body was out of their control they were able to disassociate themselves from the problem through the psychological defence of splitting, in which the body is felt to be in parts. I argued that in the psyche's paranoid schizoid position the loved, physically healthy and youthful body which has undergone investment throughout the life course so far, is split off from the ageing, biological, primal and unwanted aspects of the body. With the realisation that the body is changing as it ages, the body and its 'age' become split as a way of coping with the ageing 'bad' body. Moreover, mastery and control operated as part of this psychological function in order to try and defend the body from age-related changes. I highlighted in this chapter the way in which the midlife body mediates between

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the individual sense of self (and its sense of ageing) and the wider societal expectations about how the body should be presented.

My next chapter explored the generational shift and showed how the death and ageing of parents could have a significant emotional effect on those in midlife. I found that the parental generation were positioned as a buffer which often defended those in midlife from facing up to existential anxiety. However, once the parental generation showed signs of getting older or dying this could be quite anxiety provoking on many levels. It could trigger an awareness of personal mortality as well as evoking earlier psychological conflicts regarding the way in which feelings of loss, abandonment, separation, attachment and the need for independence are negotiated. The second part of this chapter looked at the relationships those in midlife have with the generation of children below them. It considered the practical as well as emotional side of children leaving (or indeed not leaving) the family home. I also looked at the impact becoming a parent later in life has on those in midlife and what that means for them and their visions of the future.

The way in which people reflect upon their pasts and envisage the future was the focus of the final chapter. I looked at early ambition and the development of the life dream, and showed how midlife was a period of relinquishing or reframing some of those earlier ambitions. I also found that it was a time when new plans and dreams were formed with other limitations being taken into consideration, so for example although the midlife individual may not become a record breaking Olympic athlete, they may be able to take up and enjoy running. Or they may not become a world famous explorer or even emigrate

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abroad, but they may make plans to take more holidays. Midlife, I found, was a period of re-evaluation and re-assessment of life's achievements to date and of forming of new achievable ambitions for the future. Most importantly it was a time of coming to terms with disappointment, which I will come to again shortly.

The overarching aim of this thesis was to bring a unique level of understanding to the ageing process with particular focus on midlife. I aimed to combine an analysis of the social context in which my sample was situated and the life events which they faced, with an in-depth look at the key psychic conditions which operate at an unconscious level in response to these social and personal life experiences. This built upon the stage models that were identified in the literature but with a new understanding of the emotional defences and subjective opinions of those in midlife.

Overall I believe that this thesis has gone some way to achieving the aim of creating a multidimensional understanding of the ageing process (I will come to my overarching conclusion shortly). If I am to reflect upon something I would have done differently, or a limitation of my thesis, I would perhaps suggest that a more rigorous sampling procedure could have generated a more representative sample group. Moreover, I think it would have been neater to have based my midlife chronological brackets on those already predefined, for example studying the 'baby boomers' or 'shadow boomers' (SIRC, 2007). Nevertheless, I believe that this research offers a valuable contribution in the way it attempts to bridge the divide between the social and the psychological, bringing to

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attention the ways in which life changes can emotionally impact on the individual's psyche.

The potential avenues for future research could include a comparative analysis of midlife with other life stages in order to further verify and strengthen the analysis of the psychic states identified in this study. For instance, many interviewees and people who I have spoken to mentioned the significance of turning thirty, and as someone who has turned thirty myself during the course of this study, this has been highlighted as another important shift in priorities and reflection of life choices. It is also often experienced as a period when important choices about work and family have to be taken into account, as well as a period of responsibility and independence. It would be interesting to see what psychical conflicts and emotional challenges are experienced at thirty.

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Concluding Thoughts

I began this study with Elliot Jaques' (1965) association between the *Death and the Midlife Crisis* firmly in mind; was midlife indeed a time of existential crisis? To answer this required a study and a method which would take into account, yet also go beyond, social explanations and insights from popular psychology in order to understand the subjective and psychical experience of midlife. I showed, through theories such as those of Ernest Becker's (1973), how existential anxiety is a deeply defended psychological emotion, one that is actively denied in everyday life, but yet is played out through behaviour and unconscious revelations. It was through using a psycho-social method that I was able to partially access some of these defended emotional states, and it was through

this analysis of unconscious processes that I discovered that existential anxiety was not the only psychological issue that required negotiation in midlife.

I found that midlife is about coming to terms, not only with death and existential anxiety, but with loss and disappointment. Losses are faced sporadically throughout the life course but it is the unique state of culminating losses which is a feature of midlife. It is a time when parents are becoming elderly or are dying, the children's generation are growing up and moving on and the body cannot be always be managed as effectively as it once was. There is a loss of physical capabilities, and limitations of achievement and personal goals have to be acknowledged or redirected. The losses which arise from this period of change and instability often reawaken old threats, anxieties and defences which were first experienced in the early infantile stages. Feelings of abandonment, threats to attachment juxtaposed by the need for independence and autonomy, are the original dilemmas of infancy but are replayed in midlife. Midlife is about the resolution of this conflict, as was once necessary in infancy, but it is now with a new insight into and understanding of death. It is about recognising the potentially revised position in the generational hierarchy, that independence from parents is a necessary part of being grown up and that parents can no longer provide a safety net. The threatened and impending loss of parents however, is often overwhelming and the state of anticipatory mourning can create a range of different psychological reactions, which can include attacks on the emotional connections with a loved one in order to deal more effectively with the anticipatory sense of grief.

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Related to this emotional management of loss is the acknowledgement that midlife is about coming to terms with disappointment. As Craib compelled us to recognise, the importance of disappointment comes from the recognition that we can't always get what we want, and that the key to emotional equilibrium and a contented life is the acceptance of the 'un-integrated' nature of life, that 'integration is the acceptance of a process of being un-integrated' (1994, 176). Midlife is about coming to terms with the disappointment of ordinariness and it calls into question whether some of the cherished ideas people hold about themselves and their lives will really come to fruition. Midlife highlights human limitations and it is through the recognition and acceptance of these limitations that people are able to reach a new psychological state of contentment, renewed creativity and generativity.

Although at first glance I may be accused of developing a pessimistic portrayal of midlife, but in actual fact my conclusions about midlife are not about encouraging a dichotomy between a positive and a negative perception. I argue instead that the intrinsically complex nature of life always contains elements of positive and negative and indeed this account of midlife is about the importance of the incorporation of both sides. Craib's concept of disappointment (1994) and Klein's psychoanalytic theory of the depressive position (1984) promote the idea that in order to reach a point of contentment and satisfaction, both positive and negative elements of life must be incorporated. My account challenges some of the positive ageing models which claim to show the process of getting older in a socially positive way, yet ignore some of the deeper psychological conflicts that are occurring. To put it more succinctly, in order for people to negotiate midlife and to be able to move forward in a positive, creative and productive way, one of the tasks is to first

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acknowledge, come to terms with and accept the losses and disappointments that life brings. Unlike classic stage models the task of reaching the depressive position is not about reaching a final end point of a stage. The depressive position is recognition and an acceptance of the 'un-integrated' nature of the paranoid schizoid position, the acceptance of the feeling of 'being in pieces', and the acceptance that there is the possibility to revert back into the paranoid schizoid position later in the life course. Midlife is a time of complex emotional and psychical conflict, which is triggered and challenged through a series of natural and anticipated losses, yet must be negotiated in order to move forward to the next stage of life.

I argue that this point of conclusion is reminiscent of Erikson's stage model (1963) and the ego-challenges that he claims were faced at different points in the life course. I suggest, like Erikson, that midlife is a significant life stage and it is the challenge and resolution of psychic conflict which is the key defining feature. As in my critique of the stage models in general, it could be that this 'stage' is sometimes experienced 'out of time' and indeed a loss such as the death of a parent earlier in the life course may present similar challenges to those I am proposing here. However, what I am arguing is that the concatenation of events that occur in midlife, such as the generational shift, bodily changes and re-evaluation of life, present people with a particular psychical challenge- one of coming to terms with grief, loss, death and disappointment. Like Erikson's stage model I propose that once these issues have been psychically negotiated the midlife individual can move on into later life with a sense of ego-integrity (Erikson, 1963), self-assurance, acceptance and confidence. Those individuals in midlife who are able to accept their personal weaknesses and their sense of ordinariness (or lack of 'cosmic specialness'

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as Becker, 1973, termed it), by accepting the person they are and the life they have - warts and all - are the ones most able to move forward in a positive direction into later life.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1

Table 11				
Where children are living **(number of children of interviewees)**				
Children aged under 16		Children aged under over 16		
8		15		
Living at home	Living with another parent	Living at home		Left home
5	3	Never left 3	Returned 5	10

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Appendix 2

Table 12: Interviewees' profiles

Int. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Children	Grand-children	Parents	Interviewee's level of Education	Interviewee's Occupation	Socio-economic Classification Group	Head of Household Occupation	Class based on HOH
1	Jack	42	Married	Twins aged 7	No	Both died young	MA	Researcher	B	Researcher	B
2	Rob	50	Divorced/ Single	3 Children. 2 boys (18-at uni) (16-with mother) and daughter (6-with mother)	No	Dad died recently. Mum is elderly and needs care	O levels	Self employed computer technician	C2	Self employed computer technician	C2
3	Kathleen	46	Married	2 children, girl (16) and boy (14). Both at home	No	Both parents alive and independent	O levels	Part time beauty therapist	D	Tunnel builder	C2
4	Lisa	45	Married	Two children, boy (24) and girl (19). Both have already left home for uni, but have both returned.	No	Dad died recently. Mum does not need care	O levels	Part time home hairdresser	D	Stud welder	C2
5	Janet	40	Married	3 boys, aged, 16, 14 and 9.	No	Dad died recently. Mum does not need care.	O levels	Part time home hairdresser	D	Manual worker at racecourse	D

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Int. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Children	Grand-children	Parents	Own level of Education	Interviewee's Occupation	Socio-economic Classification Group	Head of Household Occupation	Class based on HOH
6	Anna	46	Married	One girl (24), who has learning disabilities and one boy (18) in college.	No	Both parents alive and independent	MA	Editor	C1	Book-keeper	C1
7	Sandra	51	Divorced/ Single	2 children in 20s- daughter lives independently. Son has mental health problems and lives at home.	No	Dad died aged 73 and mum is alive and independent	O levels	Self-employed cleaner	D	Self-employed cleaner	D
8	Patricia	55	Married	3 girls in their 20s- all have left home at one stage but the middle daughter has now returned.	No	Mum died a few years ago. Dad lives independently but needs some care	O levels	Personal Assistant and CAB receptionist	C1	Painter/ decorator- self-employed	C2
9	Shirley	54	Divorced/ Remarried	2 daughters aged 27 and 31.	No	Dad died recently. Mum is independent	MA	Social Worker	B	Social Worker	B
10	Theresa	55	Married	4 children. All in 20s and 30s. All live independently	Yes	Mum died a few years ago. Dad lives independently	O levels	Market researcher	C1	Teacher	B

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Int. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Children	Grand-children	Parents	Own level of Education	Interviewee's Occupation	Socio-economic Classification Group	Head of Household Occupation	Class based on HOH
11	Raymond	58	Divorced/ Single	3 children. One daughter in her 30s. One son in his 30s. No contact with either. One son (15) moved to Sweden 2007 to go to school there.	Yes	Dad is elderly but alive and needs some care which brother provides. Mum died	BSC	Computer Technician	B	Computer Technician	B
12	Adrian	43	Divorced/ Single/ dating	One daughter aged 6 lives with her mum	No	Both parents alive and independent	Technical quals.	AV technician	C1	AV technician	C1
13	Rodney	55	Married	4 children. All left home- 2 boys and 2 girls. Has 15 year old grandson living with him.	Yes	Mum died very young. Dad has also died.	None	Unemployed	E	Unemployed	E
14	Diane	55	Separated	2 daughters (late 20s, early 30s)- both live independently	Yes	Dad died a few years ago. Mum lives with Diane's sister and needs care	NVQ2	Care worker	D	Care worker	D
15	Matthew	55	Married	2 children in 20s. Son returned home after uni.	No	Both parents alive- but not close emotionally or geographically	PhD	Director of academic department	B	Director of academic department	B

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Int. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Children	Grand-children	Parents	Own level of Education	Interviewee's Occupation	Socio-economic Classification Group	Head of Household Occupation	Class based on HOH
16	Trevor	51	Married	Two children, boy (24) and girl (19). Both have already left home for uni, but have both returned.	No	Dad died. Mum is alive.	Technical quals.	Stud welder	C2	Stud welder	C2
17	Alex	52	Married	2 sons. (Teens or early 20s) Not at home	No	Both parents have died	MA	Human resources deputy manager	A	Human resources deputy manager	A
18	Joe	49	Married	One son aged 18. Going to university 2007	No	Dad died in 1986. Mum died 2007	MA	Management Information Services	B	Management Information Services	B
19	Jeff	48	Single/ Never married	No Children	No	Dad died very young. Mum needs a lot of care	A levels	Care worker	D	Care worker	D
20	Angela	49	living together	Two daughters aged 24 and 16	No	Parents both still alive	O levels	Self-employed in ironing and cleaning business	D	Logistics manager	B
21	Jeanette	45	Single/ Never married	Twin children aged 10- boy and girl	No	Adopted by aunt who is now dead	O levels	Unemployed	E	Unemployed	E
22	Sarah	39	Married	One daughter aged 5 and one baby due in April	No	Both Parents alive and independent	Nurse's training	Aerobics instructor	D	Underwriter for an insurance firm	A

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Appendix 3

Letter of Agreement

Research Project: PhD thesis into a study of midlife

Research institution: Essex University, Department of Sociology

The purpose of the study is to achieve a greater understanding of midlife, and it will look at how life events shape the subjective experiences and attitudes towards ageing during this period.

I am aware that I can leave the interview at any point and that I am not obliged to give any information that I feel uncomfortable with. I can also withdraw my consent at any time.

The interview will be recorded onto audiotape and the tape will be kept secure. The interview will be fully transcribed.

I consent to my interview recording and transcript being deposited in the UK data archive after this project has been completed. This means that they will be held on record within the archive and may be made accessible to other researchers and academics.

I also consent to extracts from my interview being used in future presentations and publications which may develop from this project.

I understand that all identifying information will be anonymised. I am aware that my name will be changed to protect my identity and that any information I give will be used only for the purpose of this thesis and future publications and presentations relating to it.

I ……agree to participate in this interview conducted by Bethany Morgan

Interviewee……

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Appendix 4

Interview Guide

Introduction

- Thank interviewee for taking part
- Introduce myself
- Introduce the nature of the study
- Read and sign confidentially agreement
- Explain that interview will be recorded
- Check recording

1. Interviewee Background Information

1.1 Can you say a few words about yourself?

Prompts

- Name
- Where are you currently living?
- Date of birth
- Age now?
- Place of birth
- Marital status?
- Where were you raised?

1.2 We can return to explore different parts of your life later but for now to begin with can you try to tell me about your life?

2. Grandparents

We are going to go back a bit and start by talking a bit about your background and family history.

2.1 Do you remember your grandparents? Can you tell me about them?

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- Where did they live?
- What did they do for a living?
- Did they have enough money to live comfortably?
- How did retirement affect them personally or as a couple?

2.2 What role did your grandparent's play in your upbringing?

- Were you close?
- How often did you see them?
- Have they been a strong influence on your life?

2.3 Are they still alive?

If not…

- When did they die?
- What do you remember about it?
- Did you go to their funeral?

3. Family life.

Now can we talk about your immediate family when you were growing up?

3.1 Could you tell me about your childhood, up until your teenage years?

3.2 Do you have any brothers or sisters?

- What are the age gaps between them?
- When was the last child born?
- Were you close to your brothers/sisters?
- What activities would you do together as brothers and sisters?

3.3 What were your childhood ambitions?

- How does that compare to your ambitions now?

3.4 As you a teenager what were your visions of what adulthood would be like?

- How does it compare to how your life has turned out?

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3.5 What hobbies did you have as a child?

- Have you kept up with any of these interests?

4. Education

4.1 Can you tell me about your school years?

- Did you enjoy school?
- Do you have any particular memories of your school life
- Friends
- Teachers
- Subjects
- How old were you when you left school?
- Did you go on to further education?

5. Parents

If you don't mind we will now we will go back to talk about your parents

5.1 Can you tell me a bit about your parents?

- How old were your parents when they had you?

5.2 Were they the main people who were responsible for bringing you up?

- What was your relationship with your mother/father like in childhood?
- How has it changed since you have got older?
- Were you closer to one parent more than the other?
- Did you have an affectionate relationship with your parents?

5.3 Have there been any other older people who you particularly related to, like a parent? Can you tell me about them?

5.4 What was your home life like as a child?

- What interests did your parents have outside of work?
- Were there any activities you did together as a family?
- Can you remember family holidays?

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5.5 Did parents remain married or have they remarried?

If remarried…

- Can you tell me about your stepparent?
- How did that affect your relationship with your mother/father?

5.6 What did your parents/carers do for a living?

- Do you know what educational qualifications your parents had?
- What work did father do? Where, hours, enjoy it?
- What work did mother do? Where, hours, enjoy it?

5.7 How did your parents feel about retirement?

- Were they happy to retire?
- How did they manage financially?
- Did retirement alter their life style to any extent?
- Did they take up any new interests or hobbies?
- Did it alter their relationship to one another?

5.8 Are your parents still alive?

5. 9 If yes

- How old are they?
- How is their health?
- Do they smoke/drink?
- Are the physically active?
- Do you worry about them getting older?
- Are they reliant on any forms of support for their everyday living? If not, have you considered how they will be supported in the future?

Parent's death

- Do you ever think about your parents dying?
- Do your parents ever talk to you about death?
- How do you think your life will alter after their death?
- Are there aspects of your relationship you would like to change before they die?

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Parent's care

- Do they need full time care?
- Who provides this role?
- How do you feel about this?

If in supported housing

- How do you feel about your parents living in care?
- What was that decision like for you?
- How often do you visit?

5.10 If no

Can you tell me what happened when your mother/father died?

- How long ago did they die?
- How did they die?
- How did your mother/father/in-law cope with their partner's death?
- Had they nursed them?
- How did you feel when they died?
- Can you tell me about their funeral?
- Had they prepared for their deaths in any way?
- Has your relationship with your mother/father (surviving parent) changed since the death?
- What impact has their death had on your life?
- How often do you think about your (deceased) parent?
- What effect, if any, did your parent's death have on your relationships with any other members of your family, or your marriage?

5.11 Is your parent's home still in the family?

- What has happened to their possessions?
- How do you feel about this?

6. Family

Now we are going to talk a bit about your current home life

Copyright

Marriage

6.1 Are you married?

- How did you meet your husband/wife?
- When did you get married? 1st marriage?
- How old were you? How old was your partner?
- What is your partner's occupation?

Marital relationship

6.2 How would you describe your relationship with your partner?

- Do you feel that your relationship has changed over the years?

Household responsibilities

6.3 How are the household responsibilities divided up in your household?

- Who is responsible for household finances?
- Who is responsible for housework?
- Has this changed over the years?

6.4 Can you tell me about you day to day life at the moment?

- Is your routine different at weekends?

6.5 What do you do in your leisure time?

- Do you and your partner share any hobbies/interests?
- Has your social life changed in recent years?
- Do you and your partner go out more or less than you used to?
- Have you developed any new hobbies in the last few years?
- How often do you do them?
- Are you a member of any group/society?
- Do you do any community work?

6.6 Do you have any pets? How long have you had them?

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6.7 Do you have many close friends?

- How often do you see them?
- Do you entertain at home?
- Do you go out together?
- Are they friends of a similar age to you and your partner?
- Can you talk to them about your problems/worries?
- How important is friendship to you?

7. Children

7.1 Do you have any children?

- How many?
- Girls/boys?
- How old are they now?
- Age gaps?

7.2 Can you tell me about how you felt when you first became a parent?

- How long was it before you had children after getting married?
- Did you plan your family?

Practical issues

- Did you do paid work whilst your children were small?
- At home, who did what in caring for the children?
- Do you participate in or encourage any hobbies/other activities with your children?

Emotional issues

- What difference did having children make to your life?
- In what way did having a child change your sense of who you were?
- Did becoming a parent change your attitude towards your own parents?
- In what ways did your attitudes towards life/ death change?

If grown up children…

Copyright

7.3 What are they doing now and how do you feel about that?

- Have they achieved the things that you hoped they would?

7.4 Do your children still live at home?

7.5 If yes

- Are they planning to move out soon?
- How do you feel about this?

7.6 If not at home…

7.7 How did you feel about them moving out?

- How old were they when they moved out?
- Did you make any preparations for them leaving?
- How did your partner/other family members feel about them moving out?
- How did it make you feel when they moved out?
  (Did it make you feel old? Did it make you feel unwanted/needed?)

7.8 How has life changed for you and your partner since they left home?

- When your children left home did that lead to any other major changes in your life? (Change of job/moving house)
- Have you taken up any new/old hobbies since your children have left home?
- Do you still carry on doing things for your children since they left home? (Cooking/ cleaning/washing)
- How has your relationship with them changed since they left home?

7.9 What do your children do for a living?

- Are any of your children married/living with someone?
- How do you feel about their partners?

8. Grandchildren

8.1 Have you got any grandchildren?

- How many

Copyright

- Names
- Ages

8.2 How did you feel when you had your first grandchild?

- Does it make you feel older/younger?
- Do they treat you as old?

8.3 What do they call you?

8.4 How did your relationship with your child and their partner change?

- Did you help out at all when the baby was born?
- What do your grandchildren call you?

8.5 Are you particularly close to any other children? (How do you regard them?)

- Do you do any activities together?
- Do you give them any advice?

9. Work

9.1 What do you do for a living?

- How satisfied are you with your job?
- Do you plan to stay in this job for the foreseeable future?

Starting work

9.2 What was your first job?

9.3 Can you tell me about your early work experiences?

- Did working make you feel differently about yourself?
- Did your relationship with your parents change after you started working?

9.4 What have you liked/disliked most about you working life so far?

- Do you feel proud of what you have done in your work?
- What would you like to achieve in the remaining years?

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9.5 If you don't work, what is your long-term future plan?

9.6 Have you given any thought to retiring?

- How do you feel about retirement?
- What plans have you made for retirement?
- How do you feel your life will change during retirement?

10. Ages

10.1 How did you feel about turning 30/40/50 years old?

- How did you celebrate your birthday?
- What conscious changes have you made to your life, since you turned 30/40/50?
- What changes do you feel have happened since you turned 30/40/50?

Experience of ageing

10.2 How do you feel about being the age you are now?

- How old do you feel?
- What was your favourite age and why?
- At what age were you most happy/ least happy and why?
- Is there anything you begin to think you should not or cannot do because of your age?
- Do people ever treat you differently?
- What age group of people do you feel most comfortable with?
- What do you like and dislike about being your age at the moment?

10.3 Do you consider yourself to be 'middle aged'?

If so,

10.4 What is middle age and what makes you feel middle aged?

10.5 Was there a specific moment of realisation that you were middle aged?

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10.6 What characteristics do you associate with middle age?

If not,

10.7 When do you think middle age begins?

Midlife crisis

10.8 Do you think there is such a thing as a midlife crisis, if so what is it?

- Do you feel that you have experienced or are experiencing a midlife crisis?

11. Physical changes in midlife

Health

11.1 Would you say you were health conscious?

- How good, would you say, your health is now?
- Have you noticed any health changes in the last five years?
- Do you worry about your health?
- Do you exercise?
- Do you smoke?
- How healthily do you eat?

11.2 Have you ever been seriously ill? (Physically or mentally)

- How far do you feel these changes affect the way other people see you or act towards you? Can you think of a specific experience?

11.3 If you have a partner, what changes have you noticed in them in the last five years?

- How have these changes impacted upon your relationship?

Menopause

Women…

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11.4 Have you experienced the menopause?

- How old were you when the menopause began?
- What kind of physical symptoms did you experience?
- Did it affect the way you felt about yourself?
- Has it affected your relationship with your partner in any way?

Men…

11.5 Do you think there is such a thing as a male menopause?

- Has your wife been through the menopause?
- How did you feel about your wife's menopause?

12. Physical appearance

12.1 What physical changes in appearance have you noticed in your body, as you have got older?

- How far do you feel these changes have affected you?
- How far do you feel these changes affect the way other people see you or act towards you? Can you think of a specific experience?
- How happy are you with the way that you look?
- Is age a factor in how you feel about your appearance?
- What do you think about clothes fashions?

Death and Dying

13. The death of others

13.1 What was your first experience of death?

- What impact did that have on you at the time?
- What long-term impact did this death have on your life?
- How has that affected the way you think about your own death?

13.2 Have you experienced any bereavement since turning 40 years old?

- When did they die?

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- How old were they?
- Did their death affect your health?

If partner is still alive…

13.3 Do you and your partner ever discuss who might die first?

- Have you made any plans for your own death?

If widowed…

13.4 When did they die?

13.5 Can you tell me about that?

- How old were they?
- Who nursed them?
- How long did it take you to adjust to the loss/to living alone?
- How has their death affected you?
- Has their death made you think about your own?

13.6 Have you experienced bereavement of anyone else close to you at any other time in your life?

- Can you tell me about that?

- Do you ever visit their resting place?
- Has their death made you think about your own?

13.7 Have any other significant events had an impact on the way you think about death? (i.e. 9/11, London Bombings, Princess Diana etc)

14. Own death

14.1 How often do you think about death?

14.2 How long do you think you will live?

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14.3 What kind of funeral would you like for yourself?

14.4 What preparations have you made for getting older and or for death? (Life insurance, pensions, a will, talking to friends or family, donor cards?).

- If not, when do you think you will start thinking about these issues?

14.5 Since turning 40 years old, have you noticed a change in the way that you think about death and do the deaths of others impact upon you in a different way?

15 Religion and Faith

15.1 How much did religion mean to your family?

- Were your parents religious?
- Did you attend a place of worship as a child?
- How often did you go?

15.2 What do you believe happens to a person when they die?

Religion now

15.3 What role does religion play in your life now?

- Do you attend a place of worship now? How often?

16. Future

Ambitions

16.1 What are your main ambitions?

- What would you most like to do or achieve in your lifetime?
- How likely do you think it will be that you will achieve these ambitions?
- How satisfied are you with your life at the moment?

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Life choices

16.2 Are you happy with the way that you have lived your life?

- Would you change anything about the way that you have lived your life?
- What has been your biggest regret or mistake?
- What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

16.3 What plans do you have for the future?

- How far would you like your later years to be like those of your parents and grandparents?

17. Ending Question

17.1 Is there anything you think I have left out or is there anything else you would like to contribute?

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