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**Sexuality and self in old age:
exploring the intersection of gender and age
through the framework of older women's sexuality**

By:

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature is challenging understanding of sexuality in later life. The dominance of a biomedical perspective on sexual (dys)functioning has led to significant knowledge gaps and contributed to the construction of the oppressive binary of 'asexuality' versus 'the sexy oldie'. This has silenced the voice of older people, particularly older women, and in turn limited development of learning on sexualities in later life.

Using a feminist gerontological perspective, this thesis aimed to explore older women's experiences of sexuality within the context of ageing, focusing on changes in relation to sexuality, and their impact on sense of self. Subsequently, participants' accounts of sexuality were used as a lens through which the age/gender intersection was examined.

The two-phase research design was qualitative, inductive and participative. In Phase 1, 6 older women and 8 researchers were interviewed about methodological issues in researching ageing and sexuality, which informed the focus and methods of the second phase. In Phase 2, 16 older women discussed their experiences of sexuality in in-depth interviews, which were thematically analysed.

The resulting over-arching themes, 'expressing' and 'revisiting' sexuality, encompassed changes relating to practices, relationships, societal attitudes and sense of self. Older women's narrations challenged the notion of a fixed sexual identity and the asexual/'sexy oldie' discourse. Their experiences were far-ranging and nuanced, while shared characteristics of fluidity, heterogeneity and diversity were prevalent. These characteristics played an important role in countering the structural invisibility and regulation of older women's sexuality, by enabling participants to 'do gender' differently and to assert a sense of continuity regarding their sexuality. Consequently this thesis contributes to knowledge development in three areas: (1) understanding of sexuality in later life; (2) feminist perspectives on women's sexuality in later life, with emphasis on an intersectional approach; and (3) methodology around researching ageing and sexuality.

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I have published parts of this thesis in the following chapter:

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I have presented parts of this thesis as papers/poster presentations to the following conferences:

Jones, R. (2015) The Experiences, Meanings and Challenges of Older Women's Sexualities, and the Application to Social Work Practice, *Paper to the Making Research Count Conference*, 17 June, Keele University.

Jones, R. (2014) The Experiences, Meanings and Challenges of Older Women's Sexualities, *Paper to the 8th International Conference on Cultural Gerontology*, 10 -12 April, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Jones, R. (2012) Older Women's Sexualities: Experiences and Transitions, *Paper to the British Society of Gerontology 41st Annual Conference*, Keele University, 11-13 July.

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Jones, R. (2009) 'Older People Have a Lot to Say About Sex and Sexuality': Issues in Researching Sexuality and Ageing, *Paper to the British Sociological Association, Ageing, Body and Society Study Group*, British Library, London.

Jones, R. (2009) 'Older People Have a Lot to Say About Sex and Sexuality': Issues in Researching Sexuality and Ageing, *Poster Presentation to the 19th IAGG World Congress of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, Palais des Congres, Paris.

Jones, R. (2008) Researching Sexuality and Ageing, *Paper to the British Society of Gerontology 37th Annual Conference*, University of West England and Bristol University.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introducing the study

This study is based on an exploration of older women's experiences of sexuality within the context of their own ageing. The research differs from the majority of earlier work in the area of ageing and sexuality in two ways: first, the focus has been to identify changes in sexuality experienced by older women, and how these changes have impacted on their sense of self; second, the research adopted a participatory approach in that older women and researchers within the field of ageing and sexuality informed the focus, methodology and findings. This introductory chapter includes: a description of the structural/cultural context within which ageing and sexuality are situated; a brief summary of the extant literature in the area; an identification of the gaps in, and rationale of, the area of research focus; and a brief outline of the analytical and methodological aspects of the research study. It concludes with an outline of the thesis together with notes about terminology.

1.2 Ageing and sexuality: the context

Sexuality has been predominantly viewed as the prerogative of the young (Calasanti and Slevin 2001) and has therefore been conceived as incompatible with older age (Gott 2005; Goodfellow 2004). Historically, ageing well in the 19th century involved sexual abstinence, which was maintained by fear from the threat of damnation, and by reward from its association with wisdom and power (Gilleard and Higgs 2013). The perpetuation of this 'asexual'¹ old age' myth has been recognised as a "socially harmful stereotype" for many years (Rubin 1968, p86), and continues to be a dominant, although not hegemonic, sexual script for older people (Montemurro and Siefken 2014). There is no empirical support for older people being or becoming asexual (Gott 2003) and therefore it has, and continues, to be maintained by socio-cultural and political aspects of Western society. For example, in Britain over the last 25 years there have been three large-scale research studies undertaken as part of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviours. The upper age limit for the first two were 44 and 59 years of age (Johnson et al 2001; Wellings et al 1994), with the age limit rising up to the age of

¹ The term 'asexual' is used throughout this thesis in reference to an unsubstantiated, usually derogatory, assumption made about a person's sexuality, with the intention of being dismissive. It is recognised that the term 'asexual' can also be used to refer positively to a unique sexual orientation, usually self-identified (Brotto and Yule 2017; Van Houdenhove, Enzlin and Gijs 2017), and it will be highlighted if used in this way within this thesis.

(only) 74 years, for inclusion in the last survey (Mercer et al 2013; Mitchell et al 2013). Sexuality and sexual activity in later life has often been the subject of cultural humour, ridicule and disgust (Butler and Lewis 1986), with older sexual men being referred to as “dirty old men” (Walz 2002, p99). Older women’s sexuality however, has tended to be constructed as “out of place” and “impure” due to their loss of ability to reproduce and their perceived unattractiveness (Bildtgard 2000, p181), or it is ignored (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). Commenting on the menopause, de Beauvoir (1977, p104) stated that, “it is the fate of woman to be the object of eroticism in the eyes of man, once she has become old and ugly she forfeits her assigned place in society; she is a monster that arouses aversion and even fear”.

There has been over the last couple of decades a challenge to the asexual image of older people fuelled by: Viagra and the biomedicalisation of sex and ageing; the positive (sexualised) ageing images and discourses driven by baby boomers and ageing celebrities; sexual activity being regarded as the key to ‘successful’ and healthy ageing; and sexuality research focusing on or including older people (Hinchliff and Gott 2016; Gilleard and Higgs 2013; Flycht and Kingsberg 2011; Marshall 2010; DeLamater and Moorman 2007; Gott 2005; Potts et al 2003). These changes have given rise to the emergence of the “sexy oldie” (Gott 2005, p8), “sexy seniors” (Marshall 2010, p211) and “sexuality as lifelong” (Sandberg 2013a, p264). The emergence of this countervailing discourse is directly linked to ‘successful’ ageing, which in turn is driven by notions of ‘youthfulness’, which subsequently implies that remaining sexually active is a means of defying older age (Katz and Marshall 2003). On first examination Viagra could be viewed as a positive example of defying old age in relation to sexuality. On closer inspection however Viagra, which is marketed as a fix for (male) sexual dysfunctions (Potts and Tiefer 2006), has served to reinforce a narrow definition of ‘normal’ sexuality by enforcing and perpetuating a masculine ideal within a heterosexual context (Loe 2004). Its use is based on an assumption that sexuality through the life course should ideally remain unchanged and youthfully defined. In the fields of gerontology and sexology the link between sexual function and successful ageing is seen as integral to responsible and successful self-management (Katz and Marshall 2004).

The ‘sexy oldie’ discourse can be argued to be an equally negative stereotype for both older people who ‘unsuccessfully’ age and older women. The two discourses, asexual and ‘sexy oldie’, could be viewed as a dichotomy, but they are in fact interrelated in that older people who cannot adhere to a youthfully defined and problem free sexual image of the ‘sexy oldie’, forfeit the right to a sexuality by

being perceived or rendered asexual. For example, “definitions of older people as asexual are heightened” for those whose sexuality intersects with chronic illness, disability, mental frailty and “general loss of physical attributes” (Langer 2009, p754). In turn their (hetero)sexuality is delegitimised and they struggle to be perceived as sexual citizens (see also Haeslar et al 2016; Rowntree and Zufferey 2015; Ward et al 2006). Older women’s experiences of sexuality in particular may fail to fit the framework of the ‘sexy oldie’, driven as it is by the emphasis on a ‘functioning’ penis and the ability of the man to perform (hetero)sexually (Loe 2004). For older women, the ‘sexy oldie’ is a difficult stereotype to live up to as, within Western society, the ageing female body is still regarded as repulsive (Hurd Clarke 2011; Slevin 2006), and yet attaining ‘sexiness’ is being demanded. It can also be suggested that older women are in danger of being marginalised with the emergence of the ‘younger’ “sexy midlife woman [who] is sexually agentic, desiring and desirable...[and] is not constrained to sex only within committed relationships” (Hinchliff and Gott 2016, p23). For older lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women the ‘sexy oldie’ discourse is problematic as it compounds their invisibility in relation to their sexual experiences. The emergence of the ‘sexy oldie’ stereotype does not increase choices for older people’s expression of sexuality but instead, places responsibility on them to conform to its parameters. There is therefore a continuing difficulty of theorising sexualities in older age, which is credible and meaningful to a diverse population of older people (Goodfellow 2004).

1.3 Ageing and sexuality: brief overview of the research in the field

The aforementioned socio-cultural developments have also been paralleled with an increasing amount of empirical research within the field of ageing and sexuality. An overview of the latter shows that it is dominated by a long and continuing tradition of using large quantitative studies (see also Lauman et al 2006; Masters and Johnson 1970; Kinsey et al 1948), which have tended, up until recently,² to use a narrow definition of sexuality focusing on sexual behaviours, activities, techniques and dysfunctions (Gott 2005). In relation to ‘operationalising’ sexuality, there has been a tendency to adopt a biomedical and heteronormative standpoint. The other salient aspect of this body of research has been the limited or ‘distant’ contact between the participants and the researchers owing to a heavy reliance on surveys and questionnaires as data collection methods. Despite these limitations it must be recognised that their findings do continue to support and build on the concept of a

² Some recent quantitative research has broadened the focus of its research into ageing and sexuality by also including sexual relationships and sexual attitudes (see also Lee et al 2016, Waite et al 2009).

sexually active later life (Gott 2005), which is invariably linked to successful and healthy ageing. Within quantitative research, and running parallel to this discourse of a 'sexually active older age', are studies that have concentrated on sexual issues that are viewed as a problem and are, in many instances, purported to arise with ageing (see also Bretshneider and McCoy 1988). The sexual problems are considered in two ways: first, as medicalised 'dysfunctions', which can be 'cured' (see also Montosiri et al 2002; Gupta 1990); and second, as 'problematic' when older people express their sexuality within the context of dementia (see also Archibald 2002), disability or residential care (see also Shuttleworth et al 2010; Sherman 1999). The literature within the area of 'dysfunctional' or 'problematic' sexuality is prolific particularly in the health and social care field (Bywater and Jones R. 2007) and continues to dominate the ageing and sexuality research agenda (Delamater 2012; Malta 2008). It is argued that the sexuality of "typical, healthy older persons is a relatively neglected topic of research" (DeLamater 2012, p125).

The historical and continuing emphasis on sexual (dys)functions, both biological and social, constructing a homogenous and exclusive view of sexuality in later life has been challenged by a growing number of qualitative studies (see also Fileborn et al 2015a; Sandberg 2011; Vares 2009; Hinchliff and Gott 2008; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b; Loe 2004; Jones,³ R.L. 2002; van der Geest 2001). The body of literature within which these studies are situated has captured the diversity of older people's sexuality, whilst also recognising socio-cultural, political and historic influences. The successful challenge to biologically deterministic notions of sexuality has contributed significantly to the initial development of a nuanced knowledge base in relation to ageing and sexuality. This research study begins here, and positions itself within this particular body of qualitative literature.

1.4 Ageing and sexuality: positioning and rationale of study

The identifiable gaps/areas for development within the extant literature on ageing and sexuality on which this thesis builds, and to which it contributes, include population group, topic, and research method. With regards to population group, there is a discernable gap in the representation of women over the age of 70, with studies predominantly focusing either on older men, driven by the Viagra phenomenon (Loe 2004), or women in midlife (see also Montemurro and Siefken 2014; Rowntree 2014; Sandberg 2013b; Winterich 2007). Additionally, the cultural

³ When referring to an author who has the last name of 'Jones' the initials of their first names will also be included to alleviate confusion over who is being cited.

extension of midlife into later phases of ageing (Biggs 1997) has served to give the illusion that 'old age' is being researched in relation to sexuality, but in reality, older women in their 70s and above, have been further marginalised and excluded by 'younger' older women. This point is discussed further in Chapter 4. The voices of older women in relation to ageing and sexuality discourses are not heard sufficiently (Minichiello et al 2004; Calasanti and Slevin 2001). It was therefore important for this study to recruit older women participants who were aged 70 and over. Although the majority of the recent qualitative research has used a wide definition of sexuality to include practices, desires, relationships, orientation/identity, and beliefs (Weeks 2003), there has been a tendency for studies to focus on one aspect of sexuality. A small number of studies have considered sexuality as a whole (see also Hurd Clarke 2006; Loe 2004), but there has not been a strong focus on examining how, and if, older people's sexuality changes in older age (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). As such, this study's focus provides additional insights about how older women cope with any changes, and what impact these changes may have on their lives and selves. Turning to the research method, it was important that the study was qualitative and inductive so that the experiences, meanings and processes of changes within sexuality could be explored and led by the data. A significant aspect of this study was its participative approach and, at the time of the study, there was very little research (see also Fenge 2010; Fenge et al 2009; Gay and Grey 2006) demonstrating how older women/men themselves would research sexuality.⁴ The main rationale for including older women's input into the methodology was as a response to their invisibility generally vis-a-vis the ageing and sexuality research agenda. Their 'increased' presence within the research was an attempt to challenge, albeit in a small way, the oppressive structural/cultural context that has driven and controlled the focus of research within this area for many decades (DeLamater 2012).

The gaps in knowledge in relation to older women's sexuality and changes they may be experiencing within the context of their own ageing, have been demonstrated. So why is this focus important to research? First, on a policy level, the silence and invisibility around ageing and women's sexuality undermines issues of sexual health, well-being and safety (Connelly et al 2012; Githens and

⁴ There has been a recent feasibility study, which consulted care home residents, spouses and care home staff on what the key issues were in researching sexuality and intimacy and how such a study should be designed and conducted (Simpson et al 2017).

Abramsohn 2010).⁵ This denies older women the opportunity to acquire information that is based on experiences as opposed to the dominant discourses (Burgess 2004). Second, older women themselves are also requesting more knowledge, in light of changes to sexuality over the life course. For example, the readership of Gransnet⁶ has restated the need for more nuanced information that deals with the losses and gains that come with sexual transitions (Bedell 2012). There was also a strong message coming from the older women who took part in the first phase for this research that ageing and sexuality research should be undertaken, which one participant summarised by stating,

I do think that the research should be done and published and talked about. I do feel that the images of older women and sexuality are incredibly important.... older women and their sexuality should be open much more to expression. (OW6P1)

Third, within the context of an ageing population, new discourses and theories are needed in relation to ageing and sexuality, as it has been recognised for some time that, “sustaining pleasure into older age is a key sexual developmental task in later life” (Levine 1991, p259). There has been support for the view that the ageing process involves change, adaptation, growth and development, but because of a lack of attention to old age, theories are less than fully formed (Coleman and O’Hanlon 2004). Recent research (Sandberg 2013a, 2011) exploring older men’s sexuality, has highlighted a move away from ‘penile functioning’ towards a wider and more fluid sense of sexuality that challenges the dominant discourses. It is therefore important that older women’s sexuality is also recognised as influential in creating new pathways of understanding for older people’s sexuality.

1.5 The research study

As already stated, the intention at the outset of this research was to undertake an exploration of older women’s sexuality within the context of their own ageing. An

⁵ The gap in knowledge has also been recognised to exist in relation to information for health care professionals by the IntimAge Project (<http://www.intimage.eu>). This project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme, is a partnership of European medical, social and education research organisations and institutions that specialise in ageing and sexuality. One of its developments has been an e-learning platform of awareness raising materials for health care professionals focusing on sexual health education and individual sexual needs of older people.

⁶ Gransnet is the largest social networking site for grandparents in the UK.

integral aspect of this research study was its use of a participatory approach, and this is reflected in the way that the study was structured into two empirical phases. The aims of Phase 1 were to identify the methodological issues in researching ageing and sexuality. The findings of this first phase contributed significantly to the second phase by informing and shaping its research methods, as well as identifying the focused area of research within the aforementioned broad aim. The aims of the principal part of the study, those of Phase 2 were:

- To explore older women's experiences of sexuality within the context of their own ageing with particular focus on:
 - What were/are the changes?
 - How have the changes been dealt with?
 - What impact have these changes had on their view of themselves?

During the course of the research, and specifically undertaking the data analysis work, the possibility of using the older women's stories of their sexuality as a lens through which to explore the intersection between age and gender became apparent. This developed into an additional aim of the research study, which is addressed fully in Chapter 9. The participants recruited for Phase 1 included six older women and eight researchers within the field of ageing and sexuality. For Phase 2 sixteen older women were recruited. In both phases of the research, the data collection and analysis methods used were individual interviews and thematic analysis respectively. The research process is described in detail in Chapter 5. The theoretical framework for the discussion of the themes were primarily based on the work of two gerontologists, that of Krekula (2016, 2009, 2007) and Sandberg (2013a, 2013b, 2011). The combination of their work offered this study an intersectional approach to age and gender, together with an affirmative approach to ageing. The perspective used throughout the thesis was an informed eclectic combination of feminism and social constructionism placed within a critical gerontological framework, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.6 Outline of thesis

This chapter has provided a context for ageing and sexuality and a brief overview of the existing literature, and has identified the gaps/areas for development within the field. The theoretical framework of the research study has been introduced, together with an indication of what the study sets out to achieve and how it contributes to existing knowledge. The latter is discussed more fully in Chapter 10.

The remaining chapters of the thesis are organised as follows:

- Chapter 2 positions both the researcher and the study by initially detailing the

personal interest, motivation and standpoint of the researcher vis-a-vis the field of study and then discusses the three main characteristics of the research methodology, namely qualitative, inductive and participatory.

- Chapter 3 and 4 contextualise the study within the relevant literature:
 - Chapter 3 is a conceptual/theoretical review focusing on the definitions, terminology and theoretical approaches of the three key concepts within this research, that of, ageing, gender and sexuality.
 - Chapter 4 is an empirical/methodological review based on existing literature focusing on older women's sexuality and methodological issues in qualitatively researching ageing and sexuality.
- Chapter 5 provides an account of the research methods undertaken within this research.
- Chapter 6, 7 and 8 discuss the findings of the research, with Chapter 6 presenting the findings of Phase 1, and Chapters 7 and 8 the findings of Phase 2.
- Chapter 9 is a discussion of the findings in Chapters 7 and 8 using an intersectional/affirmative ageing framework where an analysis is undertaken in relation to the intersection of age and gender, and structure/agency.
- Chapter 10 draws conclusions from the research and details the contribution of the thesis together with limitations and proposed future agenda for research within the area of ageing and sexuality.

1.7 Terminology

Within the fields of ageing and sexuality there are continuing debates about terminology with regards to 'sexuality'/sexualities' and 'older'/old'. The use of the term 'sexualities' reflects the significant shifts that have taken place over the past three/four decades with regards to sexuality. The shifts include an increased recognition and acceptance of diverse sexualities, as well as the development and establishment of critical understandings in relation to the construction of sexual and gender identities (Richardson 2000). Whilst fully supporting this perspective, the term 'sexuality' has been predominantly used within this thesis, and in doing so, care has been taken to challenge any suggestion of essentialism and homogeneity. The use of the term 'old' has primarily a reclamation purpose which attempts to challenge the stigma surrounding old age (Freixas et al 2012; Calasanti 2004b). Despite this, preference was given within this research to use the term 'older' for the following reasons. Firstly, 'older' is the more commonly used of the terms and more adequately reflects the fluidity of older age, whereas 'old' although challenging, does tend to conjure up an 'unchanging' stage of the life-course. Secondly, the term 'old' continues to be stigmatised and for many older people is regarded as an offensive term (Freixas et al 2012). For this latter reason the term

'older' was used on all the public research materials and therefore using the term within the thesis itself gave the research more coherency. Terminology in relation to ageing is discussed further in Section 3.2.1.

The quotations from the participants' interviews used within this thesis are referenced as follows: OW refers to the older women participants and R refers to the researcher participants. The number after the letters refers to the specific participant, for example, R3 is researcher participant number 3 and OW5 is older woman participant number 5. At the end of each reference there is P1 or P2 referring to Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research respectively. Appendices 3 (Phase 1), 13 and 14 (Phase 2), provide participants' demographic information.

CHAPTER 2: POSITIONING MYSELF/POSITIONING THE STUDY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss the theoretical framework that has informed this thesis by outlining the personal and theoretical perspectives that make up my standpoint as researcher, and in turn positions the study methodologically. Outlining the way that feminism, intersectionality and critical feminist gerontology are the main strands of my standpoint as researcher, I make the case for taking a moderate social constructionist approach combined with a critical realist ontology and explain how this presents a coherent approach towards the aims of the research. The research 'design' is qualitative and inductive in its methodology and I briefly summarise how these features have been applied within my research practice. Finally I discuss the participatory quality of the research and detail the research processes that have a participatory input from both older women and researchers within the field. This is a central element of the methodological approach to this study, and is featured and discussed throughout.

2.2 POSITIONING MYSELF AS RESEARCHER

2.2.1 Introduction

The role of the researcher within qualitative methodology presents a particularly robust challenge to the authenticity and domination of the traditional version of 'objectivity'. Led by feminist researchers, this challenge has been focused on critiquing the claim that within any credible research there needs to be a separation between the researcher and the participants, that is, "separation of knower and known" (DeVault 1996, p42). The critique resulted in championing researcher visibility and enabling researchers to positively regard their involvement within the practice of research. To avoid compromising the quality of the research itself, an important aspect of being seen to be part of the research process, is the researcher's ability to position themselves in relation to the axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions. I agree with Wilson (2001, p473) that "whatever the research paradigm, a full conceptual framework would acknowledge the political stances [of the researcher] implied by values, assumptions, implicit motivations, hidden biases and areas of silence." In order to address this I identify the philosophical and political positions, which I adopted to undertake this research. I discuss my personal biography and the theoretical components of my perspective as stated above, namely feminism, intersectionality and critical gerontology. Discussions of each of these components in turn highlight my

ontological and epistemological assumptions that acted as the basis to my research.

2.2.2 Engaging with reflexivity

I hold the view that no research is neutral or value free, and that engaging with reflexivity is an integral part of any research process. Although reflexivity has many definitions and interpretations, the activity involves the researcher in reflecting on their own background and location (social, cultural and political), biases, values and ambitions (Bryman 2016; Hesse Biber 2014b; Creswell 2012; Allen 2011), and how these aspects influence their research. I concur with Burns and Chantler (2011) that it is important that any reflexivity is undertaken within the context of critical reflections on the power relations between the researcher and participants. I document my engagement with reflexivity throughout this thesis in the following three areas of my research practice by: firstly, identifying my position as a researcher, referred to by Gray (2014, p606) as, “epistemological reflexivity where the researchers reflect on their assumptions about the world and about the nature of knowledge”; secondly, discussing the participatory aspect of this research with specific consideration to the issues of power and my relationship with the participants; and thirdly, recording reflections while undertaking the research, in particular the processes of data collection and analysis.

2.2.3 Personal biography: the initial influences in relation to my research

My life experiences are influenced by (self-defined) aspects of who I am: that is, female, white Welsh, 62 years of age, lesbian, middle class, and non-disabled. I worked for many years as a social work practitioner, predominantly with older people, and have since been employed at a number of British universities as a social work academic. Drivers for my research include a prolonged and professional interest in issues of older age and personally becoming and being an ‘older’ woman. I have had a lifelong interest in issues relating to sexual identity and orientation, and a political commitment to equality and challenging oppression.

Feminism has played a substantial part in my life enabling me, initially, to make sense of the world as a young woman, and then as a support and guide when I decided in my mid-twenties to identify as a lesbian. Subsequently I hold the beliefs that sexual orientation is fluid, and issues of sexuality are influenced by a range of societal and cultural structures and norms, as opposed to being biologically determined. I was active in the women’s movement for over twenty years and was involved in the debates when feminism was rightly criticised for homogenising women’s experiences and neglecting differences between women. This involvement gave me the impetus and commitment to support heterogeneity and

diversity in relation to women's experiences. These earlier experiences cemented my view that 'normality' is constructed and upheld by the process of 'othering', that is, "a way of defining and securing a positive identity through the stigmatisation of 'other' people's identity...this process can take place with a range of differences such as ethnicity, gender, class, age and disability" (Bywater and Jones, R. 2007, p17). I feel that this process of stigmatisation needs to be problematised and regard research as a way of undertaking this task.

The initial catalyst for my interest in researching ageing and sexuality came from a request early on in my academic career, some twenty years ago, to undertake a workshop for public health professionals on the subject of 'sexuality and later life'. A literature search revealed a plethora of quantitative research and theoretical material focusing on the sexual (dys)functioning of older people from a bio-medical perspective. There was little material focusing on the experiences and meanings of sexuality in later life from an older person's perspective. This influenced my decision to place older women in the centre of this research, both as consultants and participants. It was therefore important to undertake qualitative research so that experiences, meanings and feelings could be explored credibly.

As an older woman I have felt disappointed in the way that historically feminism has contributed to issues of older age in an insignificant way and that older women have struggled to feature in gender/women's studies (Freixas et al 2012; Cruikshank 2003; Macdonald and Rich 1984).⁷ The emergence of critical feminist gerontology strongly encouraged me to believe that feminism can enable older women to develop empowering, diverse and critical perspectives of their experiences of sexuality within the context of their own ageing.

I have identified above the salient aspects of my personal biography which I feel have not only provided me with a basis for my standpoint as a researcher, but also guided me in identifying the theories of feminism, intersectionality and critical feminist gerontology that have contributed to my research practice. These theories are now discussed in more detail.

⁷ In 1985 Barbara Macdonald addressing a National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference condemned the women present for their neglect of older women and their issues. It had taken her four years to get her speech accepted and 20 years later there is finally an acknowledgement from the NWSA of "the importance of aging studies and its centrality to women's studies" (Marshall 2006, pvii).

2.2.4 Feminism

2.2.4.1 Introduction

Within the overarching qualitative framework of this study, feminism has been the main influence in relation to my position as the researcher, hence my adoption of a feminist research approach. It is worth clarifying that feminism provides research with an interpretive perspective or lens as opposed to a specific method (Allen 2011; Devault 1996). Methodologically there are different strands reflecting the main contrasting and contested ontological and epistemological positions, from feminist empiricism and standpoint, through to feminist post-modernism, post-structuralism and critical theory (Harding 1991). Ideas from both second wave and third wave feminism⁸ permeate the philosophical debates and subsequently are integral to feminist knowledge production (Burns and Chantler 2011, p70). Despite its reach and dynamism I was drawn initially to using a feminist perspective because of the way feminist researchers have challenged, analysed and upset dominant models of knowledge building and understanding in relation to a range of issues (Hesse-Biber 2014a). Using older women's own experiences of sexuality, one of the main aims of this research was to examine the credibility of the two dominant stereotypes that dominate sexuality in later life, that of asexuality and the "sexy oldie" (Gott 2005, p23). A feminist perspective is particularly relevant in exploring issues of gender, oppression and marginalisation, as well as researching issues that have been left out of the social and psychological research agenda (Stewart 1994). In addition to providing this study with a challenging lens, feminism has the flexibility and ability to be combined with a range of different data collection and analysis methods (Allen 2011; Wuest 1995). Feminism may guide the practice of research but "no feminist perspective precludes the use of specific methods" (Hesse-Biber 2014a, p10).

⁸ The development of feminism can be viewed as having progressed through three waves: first wave (mid 19th century – 1945); second wave (1945 – 1990s); third wave (1990s to present day) (Burns and Chantler 2011). The waves, whilst building on preceding demands and campaigns, also have their own distinct foci. The first wave centred on basic rights in terms of suffrage, property and education. The second wave focused on employment equality, wages for domestic labour, women's reproduction rights and sexual 'liberation'. The third wave identified feminism's neglect of differences between women and how other social divisions impacted on women's experiences. With regards to gender and sex, second wave feminism established the former as a social construct and questioned the biological determinism of the latter. Third wave feminism built on this by establishing the social construction of sex. Both the second and third waves have influenced the development of feminist methodologies in relation to uncovering and establishing women's lived experiences, together with identifying 'difference' through the use of an intersectional lens (Burns and Chantler 2011).

2.2.4.2 General principles

Before discussing the particular strands of feminism influencing my ontological and epistemological stance, it is important to identify the main general feminist principles that have guided this study in relation to my research practice. Firstly, feminist research is committed to privileging women's issues and positively seeking women's perspectives in areas where their voices have been traditionally silenced (Hesse-Biber 2014a). This is particularly applicable in relation to ageing and sexuality, where the issues of male (hetero)sexuality have dominated through research and discussion focusing primarily on erectile dysfunction and the use of Viagra, resulting in older women's sexual needs being ignored (Vares et al 2007). Using a feminist methodology gave me the opportunity to shift this emphasis away from older men, place older women at the centre of this research and "find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, [as well as] to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible" (Devault 1996, p32).

It is important that this feminist principle of giving women 'a voice' does not prevent researchers from critically appraising their sample in terms of who has been included and who has been left out, and also that the participants who have spoken about their experiences are not disempowered by the research process (Burman 2003). However 'giving' participants a voice may be seen as rather top down and patronising (Littlechild et al 2015) and that not 'giving voice', that is, silence, can on the one hand be a powerful response within itself and used as a survival strategy (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). On the other hand, some research that respects this silence could be colluding with oppressive practice (see also Moore 2010b).

An important way of negotiating these tensions was through the participative element integral within this study where older women participants were specifically asked about their views on researching ageing and sexuality, and whether it should take place. All participants felt that researching sexuality should be an important part of the ageing and later life research agenda so as to 'establish a presence' and ultimately 'make a difference'. One older woman participant stated:

I think it's [*researching ageing and sexuality*] very important, it can break the silence and uncover the taboo. I think there needs to be much more interest and attention paid to older women, while we are very often invisible and inaudible so I was glad for a chance to take part in this [*research*] because I think it's all been neglected. (OW3P1)

Privileging women's voices in relation to issues where they have not been heard can be transformative (Webb 1993; Lather 1991), liberating (Lundgren 1995) and therefore instrumental in improving women's lives in one way or another (Duelli Klein 1983).

Although feminist research regards the private and personal as worthy of study (Letherby 2003), and places women voicing their experiences in high regard, it is important that this does not result in individualising the issues. The second main principle of ensuring that the research findings respect the personal, whilst situating the issues within a structural framework (Wuest 1995; Webb 1993), was key to this research. This research is presented in a way that prioritises the voices of the older women participants through extensive use of quotations from their interviews and then moving on to offer an analysis which enables a theorising of participants' accounts (Maynard 1994). The interpretation and theorising of the data must be informed by a critical feminist framework (Burns and Chantler 2011; Humphries 2008), which not only considers older women's experiences of sexuality in the light of feminist conceptions of gender relations (Ramazanoglu, 1989), but also takes into account the influence of the intersection of age with gender and vice versa. The discussion around intersectionality will be returned to in Section 2.2.5. This need to locate the experiences and meanings of women's lives within a critical feminist framework including aspects of the political, social, and cultural (Burns and Chantler 2011) was reiterated by all the participants during Phase 1 of this research study. The participants felt that what older women had to say about their own experiences of their sexualities could present a challenge to the commonly held assumptions and perceptions of sexuality in later life. However, this could only be achieved if the methodology employed was critical, challenging and empowering.

The third main feminist principle guiding this research involved reducing the power of the researcher and using methods that would establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships between the researcher and the participants (Creswell 2012; Letherby 2003; Stewart 1994; Webb 1993). This was undertaken within this research using a participative approach in relation to the different aspects of the research process. Issues of power and the participative approach vis-a-vis this research are critically explored in more detail in Section 2.3. As the relationship between researcher and participant is central to the research process and the issue of power, the researcher needs to be able to "recognise, examine and understand how their social background, location and assumptions can influence the research" (Hesse-Biber 2014a, p3). As well as identifying biases, engaging with the practice of reflexivity can also be a source of insight into the research process

(Letherby 2003) and challenges the notion of value-free research (Burns and Chantler 2011). I have, where relevant, been open and transparent about who I am and identified my role and influences as the researcher (Creswell 2012; Wuest 1995; Stewart 1994; Webb 1993) when discussing different aspects of the research process.

2.2.4.3 My position within feminism

Turning now to the different positions within feminism, I will identify the main tenets that make up my theoretical stance. It can be argued that feminism has a particular affinity with post-modernism (Creswell 2007; Waugh 1998), in that the latter offers a critique of the dominance of thinking and knowledge that has excluded many people's experiences. Post-modernism's recognition of the diversity of experiences and subsequent multiple voices and perceptions appeals to critics of feminist standpoint in relation to the latter's tendency to collapse all women's experiences into a single, common experience (Frost and Elichaooff 2014). As well as recognising differences between women and the way that particular women's experiences are excluded and marginalised by feminist empiricism and standpoint perspectives, feminist post-modernism and post-structuralism challenge the notions of objectivity, essentialism, grand theories, and an absolute single truth (Frost and Elichaooff 2014; Waugh 1998). Subsequently, the concepts of subjectivity, social constructionism, local narratives and multiple truths, inform my theoretical stance and engagement with the research process, but I have reservations about adopting a purely post-modernist position. The latter's relativism is its strength in that it recognises diverse voices, and also its weakness as it makes it difficult to move from an individualistic account of an issue to a position where there is a common and shared ground, that is, a unifying voice, on which to enable change and challenge to the status quo (Hawkesworth 1989). My intentions throughout this research were to respect the diversity of individual older women's experiences of their sexualities and identify shared themes, perspectives and strategies.

Recognising multiple and different realities in relation to experiences was important to my research practice as well as being aware that not all realities have equal status. Experiences and perspectives that are privileged need to be located within a social and political context, that is, a structural framework. This enables the location of power to be identified and, in turn, inequalities and social divisions within society to be highlighted. Research on ageing and sexuality needs to be receptive to a diverse and nuanced range of realities, as well as recognising the impact of ageism and sexism on older women's experiences. It was therefore important for me to explore the space between feminist standpoint and feminist

postmodernism (Henwood and Pidgeon 1995), by recognising the significance of ideas from both positions, identifying the ones relevant to my research, which in turn resulted in my adoption of an eclectic feminist approach.

It is worth at this point clarifying the shape of my eclecticism. Through my feminist approach I support constructionism mainly because of the way it can challenge the essentialist view of aspects of our lives (Sayer 1997), such as age, gender and sexuality. If it is shown that something is not natural or fixed but “socially constructed, it becomes clear that it could be constructed differently, and then we can start to demand changes in it” (Hacking 2000, p.6-7). In keeping with my views on relativism, discussed earlier, I have reservations about occupying a strong constructionist position due to its innate connection with an anti-realist ontology. Critical debates within sociology and psychology (see also Elder-Vass 2012; Nightingale and Cromby 1999; Cromby and Nightingale 1999; Willig 1999, 1997; Murphy 1995; Parker 1992) have made the case for the compatibility, and subsequent adoption, of a moderate social constructionist approach with a critical realist ontology. This stance is predicated on the need to challenge standpoints “that steadfastly refuse to engage with anything other than talk” (Nightingale and Cromby 1999, p222) and to look ‘beyond text’, thus enabling consideration to be given to extra-discursive influences such as embodiment, materiality and power (Cromby and Nightingale 1999). It is important however to recognise that although an analysis of power is inherent within a discursive analysis, there is a tendency for the latter to ignore power relations and to fail to situate power within a material and embodied context. This results in an inability to analyse the structures that support essentialist and ‘taken for granted’ perspectives (Willig 1999). One of the aims of this study was to analyse the age/gender intersection through an exploration of older women’s experiences of sexuality. Achieving this needed an acknowledgement of the influences of social structures, material world and agency, whilst recognising, but not privileging, the influences of language, discourse and culture.

A critical realist/social constructionist stance allows an analysis of how ideas and concepts are socially constructed as well as how these can be challenged by demonstrating, ‘that social constructions are grounded within, yet not directly reflective of social structures, and... identifies the opportunities for, as well as the limitations on, human action” (Willig 1999, p44). This gives people a degree of autonomy within the influences of their social context, together with the capacity to resist and exercise choice (Elder-Vass 2012), and in turn supports the idea of the human potential to transcend constraining constructions (Willig 1999). The notion

of the “agentic subject” (Elder-Vass 2012, p184)⁹ opens up the possibility of individual reflexive agency which was an important value for me as the researcher to hold as the study explored how older women experience their sexuality within the ‘constraints’ of two dominant socially constructed ideals. Throughout my research practice I therefore needed to be open to the possibility that through their experiences, the participants could be demonstrating resistance to the way older women’s sexuality is constructed and perceived. In relation to constructed identities Gavey (1997, p54) states that, “women can identify and conform to traditional discursive constructions of femininity or they can resist, reject and challenge them (to a greater or lesser extent)”. I would go further and argue that it is not necessarily an either/or choice as many older women engage with both conformity and resistance depending on the context.

Aligning myself with the ontology of realism does not mean that I adopted an empirical or naive realist position associated with positivism, where “through the use of appropriate methods, reality can be understood” (Bryman 2016, p25). I would agree with Elder-Vass (2012, p6-7) that arguing for social constructionist realism encompasses “the belief that there are features of the world that are the way they are independently of how we think about them... social construction is both a real process and a process whose products are real”. It is important to hold the view that although aspects of our lives are socially constructed the experiences are real (Gunnarsson 2011), thus enabling the researcher to engage with a participant’s ‘reality’, not in a positivistic way, but in a way that accepts “lived experience as significant” (Burns and Chantler 2011, p72).

Women’s experiences of their personal and private lives have been, and still are, regarded as central to feminism (Skeggs 1997). This enables knowledge and political understandings to be continuously developed and acquired in relation to women’s position in society, reiterating the phrase ‘the personal is the political’ (Hughes 2002). This raises the question of what we can know from experiences that are talked about, reported on and/or observed via a range of data collection methods. Ramazonoglu and Holland (1999, p388) state that, “it is perfectly possible to insist that knowledge is in practice informed by accounts of experience without insisting either that the experience simply tells the truth, or that theory/language constitutes all that experience is”. For me this is an important statement, which supports the view that feminist research needs to explore the

⁹ The “agentic subject” is a person who “has the capacity to experience, to reflect on his or her actions and circumstances, to make decisions and... although influenced by a social context, to act with some degree of autonomy” (Elder-Vass 2012, p184).

position between positivism, where reality/truth can be accessed through experience, and relativism where experience is created within language. In this research I created a space within the findings for the older women to speak for themselves by “giving a voice to participants, [by] documenting accounts of subjective experience” (Willig 1999, p30). I did this by writing a description, using themes, of what the participants have experienced in relation to their sexuality within the context of ageing. I then gave myself space to consider the themes using an analytical framework informed by aspects within the concept of intersectionality, which I discuss in more detail in the next section. This framework provided the basis for my critical reflection, theorisation and ability to consider the issues politically relating to age and gender, whilst responding to the justifiable concerns that, “having an experience is an insufficient basis on which to make claims to warrantable knowledge” (Hughes 2002, p156). By having different spaces within the findings I have drawn on research undertaken by Skeggs (1997) on the exploration of class and gender, where she noted that the researcher and the participants produce different knowledge and understanding of the issues under research. Although Skeggs (1997) negotiates the ‘differences’ with her participants, I felt it was important to capture these differences as best I could without denying the fact that the best description of what the older women participants had said, would involve me in a degree of interpretation. This inescapable aspect of data presentation/analysis made it imperative that my standpoint as a researcher was clearly presented (Law 2006). It is also important to recognise that accounts of experience given by research participants will be partial, and that my selection of their accounts to create themes offers further partiality, which then raises questions and “challenges to the belief that experience is an origin or foundation of knowledge that is more immediate and trustworthy than secondary knowledges” (Skeggs 1997, p29). During my research I recognised that perspectives are located within the social, economic and political conditions of the participants, thus creating a partial grasp on all experiences and knowledge which in turn, have been produced from a particular standpoint (Stanley and Wise 1993 [1983]; Collins 1990).

2.2.5 Intersectionality

Another important contribution to my stance as researcher involved using the concept of intersectionality, to which I referred earlier, regarding the intersection of age and gender. Due to many disputes and ambiguities surrounding intersectionality in terms of its definition and utilisation (Davis 2008), it is necessary for me at this juncture to outline my understanding and its application to my research. Intersectionality primarily challenges the notion that the lives of women could be adequately theorised by giving sole analytical consideration to gender

(McCall 2005).¹⁰ The concept is therefore used to examine the “interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis 2008, p68). This emphasises differences between women by recognizing multiple identities, and how these are intertwined and mutually constituted as opposed to being individually experienced (Collins 1998). Intersectionality is regarded as providing a bridge between disparate theoretical approaches within feminism in that it draws on standpoint, post-modernism and post-structuralism (Burns and Chantler 2011; Davis 2008), and can be referred to as a “joint nodal point” (Lykke 2011, p209), encouraging a degree of collaboration. Intersectionality offers a way of deconstructing social divisions, challenging essentialism and universalism, and exploring the issues of power without becoming too relativistic and removed from the material realities of the lives of women (Brah and Pheonix 2004). This aspect was particularly relevant to this research and offered supportive coherence to my critical realist/social constructionist stance.

Using intersectionality as a framework to interpret findings does not mean having to include all dimensions of identity (Frost and Elichhoff 2014). I took a narrower approach to focus on a marginalised group in relation to sexuality and concentrated on two social dimensions (McCall 2005), those of age and gender. The reasons for this decision included; first, the social dimensions of age and gender were more relevant to all of the participants and their subsequent dataset; second, I envisaged difficulty in managing coherently more than two social dimensions within the analysis stage of the research; and thirdly, the existing literature demonstrated that research into the age/gender intersection was an area for development. Although it is widely accepted that age and gender are systems that jointly influence lived experiences (see also Arber et al 2003; Ginn and Arber 1995; McMullin 1995), the focus on the intersection with age has been neglected within gender research (Krekula 2007; Calasanti 2004a; Twigg 2004; Ray 2003; Browne 1998; Reinhartz, 1997; Ginn and Arber 1995; Arber and Ginn 1991; McMullin 1995; Roseneil 1995; Woodward 1995; McDonald and Rich 1984), whilst within social gerontology there has been a failure to link its voluminous research

¹⁰ Intersectionality was initially discussed by the Combahee River Collective (1977), a black lesbian activist group (Levine-Rasky 2011), and later coined by Crenshaw (1989), to critically address the way that black women’s experiences had been ignored and marginalised through the process of homogenisation by feminist theories and discourses of the 1970s and 1980s. Although focused originally on the intersection of gender and ethnicity (see also Mohanty 2003, 1988; Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990; hooks 1981), it has been developed to include other ‘categories’ of social divisions, such as class, sexual orientation, disability and age (Davis 2008).

with older women to the theoretical developments within gender research, in particular, intersectionality (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Calasanti 2004a). This has resulted in age and gender being studied separately as opposed to intersecting systems with academics from both gerontology and sociology being regarded as “diners at separate tables... exchanging some meaningful glances but without pooling their conceptual resources” (Ginn and Arber 1995, p2). The relationship between age and gender is discussed further in the next chapter. Applying an intersectional lens enabled me to perceive age and gender as intertwining systems and the power relations between the systems as dynamic interactions (Krekula 2007; Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1993). This standpoint moves away from the ‘additive’ framework of the double (Dowd and Bengtson 1978)¹¹ or triple (Norman 1985) jeopardy approach and opens up the possibility that the participants’ experiences of their sexuality within the context of the intersection of age and gender may create a positive outcome, thereby challenging the assumption that lived experiences are necessarily twice as difficult (Sandberg 2013b; Krekula 2007). It also supports the notion of the “agentic subject” (Elder-Vass 2012, p184), referred to earlier in this chapter, in that although on a structural level the interaction of power relations from two systems, such as age and gender, may appear insurmountable, on a personal level older women may find strategies to challenge oppressive constructions and related perceptions of themselves (Krekula 2007).

Through my engagement with an intersectional approach I have not aligned myself with radical perspectives that reject the category ‘woman’ (Gunnarsson 2011). I contend that it is possible to separate out ‘gender’ as it is with, for example, race and class, as the power relations are different and must be given analytical separateness (Brown 1997). I support the view that my analysis and discussion can refer to the research participants as ‘women’, but that does not mean that I perceived them as only ‘women’, or as a fixed category. Although my analysis has focused on the age and gender of the participants, these social positions do not make up a ‘total picture’ of their lived experiences. I recognised that the older women participants occupied a range of social divisions and their identities were made up of a range of different dimensions, and that I, as researcher, had decided to focus on the social divisions that I felt were the most salient vis-a-vis sexuality. My main aim, as stated earlier in this chapter, was to analyse the older women’s

¹¹ The double jeopardy hypothesis was described by Dowd and Bengtson (1978) as a situation where “in addition to the disadvantages imposed by their minority group status, the minority aged are said also to experience the devaluation in status associated with old age in our society” (1978, p427).

contributions (see themes in Chapters 7 and 8) using an intersectional approach to provide an understanding of how older age influences gender and vice versa, using sexuality as a lens. Although different approaches to intersectional analysis have been put forward (see also McCall 2005), the practice of such an analysis to manage and describe the complexity of intersecting social dimensions has not been well defined (McCall 2005). With this in mind, I decided to base my analysis on the work of two gerontologists, that of Krekula (2016, 2009, 2007) and Sandberg (2013a, 2013b, 2011), a combination that offered this study an intersectional approach to age and gender, together with an affirmative approach to ageing. These perspectives were influential throughout this thesis and discussed further in Sections 3.2.4, 5.6.2, and used in my analysis in Chapter 9.

2.2.6 Critical feminist gerontology

The final contribution to my theoretical position involves the discipline of gerontology, in particular the strands of critical and feminist gerontology.¹² Although I focus on critical gerontology within this section, it must be noted that the strand of cultural gerontology with its emphasis on culture and agency, also makes a significant contribution to the experiences of later life and converges with critical gerontology in terms of its perceptions, attitudes and challenges vis-a-vis ageing (see also Twigg and Martin 2015b). I have identified the main tenets making up both critical and feminist gerontology that I feel gave additional support to my standpoint and which I have taken forward in my research practice.

Critical gerontology goes further than developing an understanding of the social construction of ageing with its commitment to change and empowerment for older people (Holstein and Minkler 2007; Ray 1996; Phillipson and Walker 1987). It involves challenging traditional research methods and supporting a “methodological bricolage” (Holstein and Minkler 2007, p22).¹³ Subsequently, it

¹² Ironically for feminist researchers within the discipline, ‘geron’ is the Greek for ‘old man’, and hence gerontology is literally the study of old men. Although the proposed alternative term of “gerastology”, the study of old women from a feminist perspective” (Cruikshank 2003, p174) has not been recognised in any effective sense, it does highlight the androcentric roots, branches and pathways that have and still do dominate certain strands of gerontology.

¹³ Methodological bricolage is one of the strategies used to reposition critical gerontology away from the margins towards a more central position. It requires crossing disciplinary boundaries and using “bits and pieces” of research strategies and approaches, as we broaden what we consider acceptable forms of knowing” (Holstein and Minkler 2007, p22). For example, no data source is ruled out; participatory research is valued as it involves older people in the research processes and agenda setting; and individuals’ narratives and meanings are more important than generalisations.

addresses the limitations of social gerontology by: first, giving older people a 'voice'; second, considering the impact of structural and related power issues on ageing; and third, challenging notions and hidden values of normativity and the construction of fixed identities (Holstein and Minkler 2003). Consideration is also given to issues that other mainstream strands of gerontology have excluded (Baars 1991). Developments that build on these principles come from critical feminist gerontologists (see also Freixas et al 2012; Calasanti 2009, 2008; Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Gullette 2004; Ray 2004, 1999, 1996; Cruikshank 2003) who state categorically that older women and their experiences have been neglected, marginalised and/or placed within models and theories that have been derived from older men. For example, the interest over the last couple of decades in sexuality in later life has been driven by the advent of Viagra use in 1998 to cure erectile dysfunction. Based on the heteronormative presumption that sexual relations are predominantly a man's responsibility, older women's viewpoints on the Viagra phenomenon and sexual relations generally have struggled to be heard (Loe 2004). Historically feminism has tended to ignore older age preferring to concentrate on issues of mid-life, for example, menopause, and therefore a partnership with critical gerontology "attempts to document the experiences of elderly women and to promote new interpretations of female aging" (Freixas et al 2012, p46). This partnership bases its research on the assumption of heterogeneity, discussing issues that have been ignored, and emphasising the importance of regarding older age as a political and social location that intersects with other forms of inequality (Calasanti 2009, 2008). I suggest that this approach would contribute to the understanding of older women's sexuality.

2.3 POSITIONING THE STUDY

2.3.1 Introduction

The design of this research includes three main components in that it is qualitative, inductive and participative. As stated in Chapter 1 the research is divided into two parts, namely Phase 1 and 2. Whilst each part differs in its aims, there is a tight interrelationship as the recommendations from the findings of Phase 1 informed the research focus and methodology of the main phase of the research, that of Phase 2.

2.3.2 Qualitative Research Design

Integral to qualitative research are some broad ontological and epistemological assumptions that have been identified by Guba and Lincoln (2005, 1988), which fit coherently with my own theoretical standpoint. I discuss the main assumptions and, in particular, identify how they were applied to my research practice.

Qualitative research supports the concept of subjective and multiple realities and through my data analysis and ensuing findings provided substantiation for different views, by using multiple quotations from a range of participants. Qualitative research assumes that part of the researcher's task is to minimise the gap between themselves and the participants, which is usually achieved through prolonged contact in the 'field' (Creswell 2012). Whilst I conducted my research using a 'naturalistic' data collection method, that is, one-to-one in-depth interviews, I did not achieve prolonged contact. I feel however that this limitation was offset by the participatory nature of this research, where participants took on a collaborative role in relation to the research process. Another philosophical assumption in relation to qualitative research is the acknowledgement of the value-laden nature of research and the existence of biases. I have identified my theoretical standpoint and continue throughout the thesis to identify my influence in any subsequent relevant discussions regarding my research practice.

The final broad qualitative assumption involves using a narrative style of writing and the first person pronoun when discussing the research. This is an important aspect of engaging with the concept of reflexivity, placing "the researcher into the research...signals how the knowledge produced is located in the perspectives of the researcher" (Hughes 2002, p167). Building on this I ensured that the research language was pertinent to qualitative research. A good example of this is within Section 5.7, where I engaged with the elements of trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Lincoln and Guba 1985) as a framework for assessing the quality of my research. It is important to recognise that qualitative research design has evolved and progressed to its current position where, it "is legitimate in its own right and does not need to be compared to achieve respectability" (Creswell 2007, p16).

I have engaged with the research process using a predominantly inductive approach, whilst also recognising that all forms of research are based on a mixture of induction, deduction and verification processes. Notwithstanding, this research was data, as opposed to theory, driven and I started out on this journey with a view of finding out and exploring how women experienced their sexuality within the context of their own ageing. The importance of this open-ended approach was supported by the literature reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4, where there was evidence to suppose that quantitative research had, up until recently, dominated the research agenda in the area of ageing and sexuality. Subsequently any nuanced or progressive understanding of older women's experiences of sexuality was in a fledgling state and ripe for an exploratory type of research study. Returning to the issue of the research being data driven, when undertaking the data analysis I took an active role in 'finding' the themes within the interview scripts and agree with Taylor and Ussher's (2001, p310) critical stance, that themes do

not

“...just lay about waiting to be discovered, they do not simply emerge..... The process, in terms of data collection and analysis, is unavoidably informed by the researchers’ disclosures, comments and choice of questions and by their preconceptions and their personal, theoretical and political orientations.”

As discussed in Section 5.6, I minimised my interpretative role by extensively using the participants’ own words to authenticate themes that were constructed through analysis, whilst also providing a separate space for my theoretical interpretation of the themes that have emerged from the women’s experiences.

2.3.3 Participative Research

2.3.3.1 Introduction

I employed a participatory approach as opposed to undertaking a piece of participatory action research. The terms are often conflated, with the latter enabling participants to become equal partners in all aspects of the research and focusing on social change and action (Aldridge 2015; Israel et al 2008). Within this study ‘participation’ was less inclusive as participants did not undertake certain aspects of the research such as, recruitment of participants, data collection and data analysis. However participants were recruited to contribute to the planning of the research, to consider methodological issues, and to scrutinise the initial findings, as well as making the typical substantial contributions to the findings of this research study. This section focuses on two main aspects of the participatory approach employed within this thesis that of shaping the methodology that subsequently informed Phase 2 of the research, and the examination of the findings from Phase 2. More detail of undertaking the participatory aspect within Phase 1 and subsequent findings are discussed in sections 5.3 and chapter 6 respectively.

As a feminist researcher I am committed to pursuing non-hierarchical research relationships and this was one of the main influences in introducing a participative element into this research study. One characteristic of qualitative research is the centrality of the relationship between researcher/researched, which has an inherent power imbalance in favour of the researcher, and can only be reduced as opposed to eradicated (Allen 2011; Law 2006). It is therefore important to use methods that attempt to reduce the power inequalities within the research relationship, by establishing collaborative and non-exploitative relationships (Hesse-Biber 2014a; Burns and Chantler 2011; Letherby 2003). Incorporating a participatory approach has the potential to shift and share power between

researcher and participant even if it is limited to happening on a micro level (Maguire 1996). Support for participatory research within gerontology has increased due to the significant repositioning of research vis-à-vis older people, where research was undertaken 'for', as opposed to 'on' older people (Warren and Maltby 2000, Warren 1999). This direction of research continued to develop towards establishing research 'with' or 'by' older people, but needs to be extended both in breadth and depth (Barnes and Taylor 2009). This study aims to reflect this progressive development.

2.3.3.2 Broadening participation: who and how?

In relation to researching ageing and sexuality, older people have struggled to be included on two interrelated levels. Firstly, funders and researchers have directed the research agenda in this area, which has resulted in the dominance of quantitative methods and proliferation of research focusing on sexual behaviour and technique, a point noted in Section 1.3 and discussed further in Section 4.2. Secondly, and as a consequence, up until recently older people's attitudes, views and experiences in relation to issues of sexuality have been absent, or at best marginalised, within this body of knowledge (Gott 2005). Subsequently, I decided that widening older women's involvement in this study was my attempt as the researcher to redress this balance, by increasing their visibility, both on a 'process' and 'data' level. I perceived the older women as knowledgeable experts on the experiences of ageing and that they influenced the research study in a number of ways. Firstly, their contribution produced research that was relevant and important to older women specifically, and older people generally. I concur with Maguire (1996, p108) who stated that "participatory research attempts to provide one way for those whose voices have been silenced or marginalised to name the problems and questions they deem worthy of investigating". Secondly, older women's participation in planning the research study both challenged stereotypical perceptions of ageing and highlighted older women's interest in sexuality. Thirdly, their participation created an empowering image of older women as advisors as well as active subjects of research studies.

Within Phase 1 of the research focusing on methodological issues of undertaking research into ageing and sexuality, my intention initially was to include older women only, but on reflection, the inclusion of qualitative researchers who worked in the field of ageing and sexuality was considered to be an invaluable source of information. This inclusion was particularly important due to the small, but increasing, amount of literature focusing on how to research sexuality in later life (see Section 4.3). Although not mutually exclusive, the two 'groups of interest', that

is, research users and research providers, had the potential to present a holistic view of the research process. It was important for me to ensure that the contributions from both groups were regarded equally and that the researchers were not seen as 'better experts' due to the power that came with their location as researchers within academia. As noted in Section 4.3.3, researchers within the field of sexuality have experienced, and continue to do so, stigma and marginalisation (Irvine 2014; Haywood and Mac An Ghaill 2006; Israel 2002; Okami 2002; James and Platzner 1999), and possibly this is exacerbated if combined with the study of ageing. The strategies that I put in place to ensure that the contribution from each of the participants was considered equally are discussed in Section 2.3.3.3.

Models of participatory research have been put forward (see also Pretty et al 1995; Biggs 1989; Arnstein 1969) which focus on the issue of differing levels of participation. Participatory research can usefully be perceived on a continuum, which reflects the scope of participants' control, collaboration and influence in relation to the research processes (Aldridge 2015). Although the level and type of participatory research depends upon the context and purpose of the research itself (Peace 2002), it is important that the participants are clear about the boundaries of their participation so that they do not hold unrealistic aims and expectations (Barreteau et al 2010). The level of participation that could be realistically achieved for this research study was 'consultation' (Hanley et al 2004), which involved asking the older women and the researchers about their views on researching ageing and sexuality in one-off semi-structured interviews. Consultation is at the other end of the continuum of involvement to user control and it could be argued that the effect in terms of empowerment for the participants concerned was limited. Peace (1999) identified a range of roles for the involvement of research participants in the research process including, "originators of research questions, advisors on methodology, fieldworkers, analysts and disseminators" (Peace 1999, p2). The consultation role that the older women and the researcher participants undertook involved an exploration of their views on the research aims/questions and on any methodological issues, in effect becoming "originators of research questions [and] advisors on methodology" (Peace 1999, p2). This consultation role was extended to form a critical reference group, which had a membership of two older women with whom I discussed my initial thematic findings from Phase 2 (see section 2.3.3.4).

2.3.3.3 Broadening participation: influencing the methodology

Although there were some limitations regarding the diversity of the sample of participants in Phase 1 of the research (see Appendix 3),¹⁴ in particular the lack of ethnic diversity, the strength of the sample was in the range of experiences vis-à-vis researching sexuality. For example, two older women participants had prior experience of being participants in researching issues of ageing and sexuality. A further two had experience of participating in other types of research and one of these participants also had experience of being a researcher focusing on long-term marriages. For the remaining two older women, their involvement in this research would be their first experience as participants. However I did not feel that they were any less able to contribute to the main aims of this phase of the research, as they would have experience of their own sexuality within the context of ageing. All the researcher participants had experience of undertaking qualitative research into ageing and sexuality. The context and purpose of their research experiences varied immensely from research conducted for PhD studies through to government-funded research studies. The other aspect of heterogeneity in relation to the researchers was the range of countries that they worked in, including Britain, America, Canada and New Zealand.

Returning to the issue of possible power imbalance between the two groups of participants, I employed strategies that would enable all to feel that they could contribute in an effective way. For example, I sent each participant a copy of the interview questions before their interview based on the interview schedule (see Appendix 4). I felt that this was particularly enabling for the older women who may have needed more time to think about methodological questions. As can be seen from the schedule, there were two sets of questions, one for each of the groups of participants. The question areas were the same, but the way that the questions were phrased reflected the position of the participant, taking into account whether the participant came from a researched or researcher position in relation to researching sexuality. Another example involved the decision to present the findings as a whole from all participants as opposed to a comparative study of the views of researchers and older women. I felt that both participant groups usefully offered different perspectives in the form of providers and users of research and

¹⁴ The numbering of appendices within this thesis reflects the chronology of the research process. For example: Phase 1 (ethics documentation/recruitment, participants, data collection, data analysis, and findings); Phase 2 (ethics documentation, recruitment, participants, data collection, data analysis, and findings); literature used throughout the thesis; and any other information pertaining to the thesis as a whole. See Appendices pp257-325. The numbering system does not follow the order that they appear within the thesis.

that these perspectives were pieces of the same picture giving an additional richness to the data. I identified in my findings any obviously unequal contribution from one group of participants to a particular theme. See Section 5.3 for an overview of Phase 1 and a summary of the recommendations informing the way the research in Phase 2 should be carried out and what the research questions should focus on. Chapter 6 gives a full presentation of the findings from Phase 1 of the research study.

2.3.3.4 Broadening participation: influencing the findings

I had planned to go back to the older women participants in Phase 2 of the research with themes that I had identified from the data set, as this would have, not only increased older women's involvement in another process of the research, but also would have enhanced its credibility through participant validation (Silverman 2014). I have referred to this in Section 5.7.2.1. Owing to the amount of time it took to recruit, interview and analyse sixteen interviews a length of time had elapsed that would have deemed it too time consuming in terms of resources available and possibly inappropriate. I had however collected names of women aged between 50–65 years of age who had wanted to be part of the research but were too young to meet the inclusion criteria. They showed a keen interest in reading and commenting on the findings and wanted me to contact them when I was ready for their input. In the end two women, one academic in gerontology and one health worker, formed a small critical reference group, and I asked them to assess the findings, which comprised of 10 themes, in two ways. Firstly, whether the findings as a whole were accessible, credible, interesting and useful. Secondly, identifying the connections between the themes so that the latter could be placed in groups and each group could be subsumed under a main theme. This consultation helped the analysis through to the development of the final five main themes (see Appendix 17), which produced cohesion, whilst also recognising the diverse elements of sexuality. This is discussed further in Section 5.6.3.

I would argue that, despite some limitations that have been identified in this section, the participative element within the methodological processes in this research study, has contributed to its strength and rigour. A range of different older women have been involved throughout this study from the planning stage, through to contributing to the data to influencing the final analysis.

2.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the main theoretical perspectives that informed my standpoint as researcher and the methodological position of the study were detailed. I presented

the case to adopt an eclectic approach in the research, involving a combination of feminism and critical gerontology. These perspectives enabled me to adopt a moderate social constructionist position and to use an intersectional/affirmative-ageing framework to inform my analysis of the data. The methodological position of the study was qualitative, inductive and participatory. These aspects are returned to throughout the thesis.

FOREWORD TO LITERATURE REVIEW – CHAPTERS 3 AND 4

The broad focus of this thesis, older women's experiences of sexuality, is made up of three key concepts, namely ageing, gender and sexuality. This literature review is an examination of these concepts, presented within two chapters and representing two distinct types of literature reviews.

Chapter 3 is a conceptual/theoretical review (Jesson et al 2011), where the definitions, terminology and theoretical approaches of ageing, gender and sexuality are critically analysed using a feminist and social constructionist lens. The aim of this chapter is to identify the terminology and approach applied to this research study in relation to the key concepts. The review focuses on the inter-relationship of ageing, gender and sexuality and by doing so sets the context for this research in foregrounding an intersectional focus. In order to present a coherent discussion, ageing and gender are critically analysed together in a separate section from sexuality and its relationship to ageing and gender. Connections between the two sections are identified in both the introduction and conclusion to the chapter.

Chapter 4 is an empirical/methodological review based on the traditional form of critical summaries of existing literature in the field (Jesson et al 2011) of ageing and sexuality. The first summary is based predominantly on qualitative empirical research that has been carried out with older women investigating their experiences of different aspects of their sexuality. The summary is used to identify gaps in knowledge. The second summary is based on current relevant literature focusing on methodological issues in relation to qualitatively researching ageing and sexuality. This section informed the decision to undertake participative research as well as identifying the challenges of undertaking research in this field.

Although the literature review is separated into two chapters there exists a strong inter-relationship. This is based on the different aims of chapters 3 and 4 reflecting two distinctive stages of the initial research process respectively: first, clarifying the terms contained within the research aims and the researcher perspective in relation to those terms; second, establishing the extant empirical literature within the proposed field of study in relation to topic and method.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF AGEING AND GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This conceptual/theoretical review is divided into two main sections covering ageing/gender, and sexuality. Each of the sections is structured around an initial presentation of the debates in relation to terminology and definitions followed by a critical discussion of the salient theoretical approaches. The theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, made up mainly of feminism and social constructionism, is used to interrogate the essentialist view that dominates ageing/gender and sexuality. The chapter aims to situate the thesis within a political framework by positioning age and gender as social divisions, and sexuality as a gendered concept. It also clarifies how the terms were used within this research study.

In section 3.2, ageing and gender are considered through an introduction to 'older women', indicating the intention of this thesis to research the intersection of the two signifiers. Key critical approaches within gerontology, those of: political economy, 'cultural', and feminist, are assessed for their contribution to the understanding of the impact of the age/gender intersection on older women's experiences of ageing. The review focuses particularly on the feminist contribution and argues for the adoption of an affirmative approach, which encompasses an intersectional analysis (Sandberg 2013b; Krekula 2007; Calasanti and Slevin 2001). The aforementioned gerontological approaches are assessed in terms of their influence on two research areas that are particularly relevant to this study, those of, the ageing body and sexuality. This section concludes with some observations for the practice of research including the marginalisation of older women within participant samples, and the challenge of undertaking intersectional analysis vis-a-vis research findings.

Turning to sexuality, the review in Section 3.3 begins by focusing on the connection between different definitions and the two dominant approaches of essentialism and social constructionism. This initial consideration enabled the identification of; first the oppressive and exclusive aspects of an essentialist approach and, second the connection of sexuality with gender. As one of the aims of this research became an examination of the intersection of ageing and gender using sexuality as a lens, the position of gender in the construction of sexuality is highlighted. Moving on, within this position the main concepts of sex/gender and sexuality are discussed with a particular focus on their inter-relationship. The issue of power is integral to understanding sexuality and Foucault's (1990 [1977]) views on discourse and power are given prime consideration in recognition of their

significant contribution. The review goes on to analyse heterosexuality in terms of its dominance and impact, maintaining that heteronormativity influences all people's lives in relation to sexuality. Throughout this section the connection to ageing is made through references to older women/men's situation vis-va-vis sexuality. A prominent issue for older women/men is the biomedical focus in relation to both age and sexuality. This issue permeates the thesis through frequent references to Viagra and anti-ageing products, which in turn are interrelated with the successful ageing paradigm, third age and agelessness. As the biomedicalisation of ageing and sexuality is an important thread that runs through many discussions in other chapters, a decision was taken not to devote a separate section to it within this chapter.

3.2 AGEING AND GENDER: OLDER WOMEN

3.2.1 Ageing

A useful starting point with regards to the concept of ageing is to give some consideration to the language used by academics, researchers, policymakers and other professionals when referring to people in 'later life'. The debate in the past has been around the use of the term 'the elderly', which is now regarded as ageist, pejorative and inaccurate, and has subsequently resulted in pressure from a diverse range of bodies to use the term 'older person/adult' (Avers et al 2011; Dahmen and Cozma 2009; UNCESCR 1995).¹⁵ The power of language and, in particular, medical discourses need to be recognised and it is heartening to read editorial steers for journals focusing on medical and health care for older people pronounce that, "the term *older adult* or *older person* is respectful and should be the standard term in this journal" (Avers et al 2011, p153). The current debate in relation to language is about whether, replacing the term 'older' with 'old' can help to challenge the negativism that the latter implies (Freixas et al 2012). Parallels can be drawn with the reclamation of the word 'Black' by people from minority ethnic communities, a process which instilled the word with dignified and political meanings. Calasanti (2004b, p305) uses this argument by stating that, "I use 'old' to recover and instil the term with positive valuation". The shock and discomfort felt by many of referring to people as 'old women' or 'old men' is revealing of the stigma associated with old age (Freixas et al 2012). Although the use of the term 'old' has been criticised for giving the impression of a fixed and essentialist notion

¹⁵ In a survey of major medical journals from 1996 through to 2006, all used the term elderly and 3 of the 4 major geriatric journals preferred the term elderly over older adults at a rate of 4:1 over general journals (Quinlan and O'Neill 2008).

of ageing, no other age category such as 'young', 'adult', 'middle-age' appears to be subjected to this type of criticism (Calasanti 2004b). Conversely it is argued that the use of the term 'older' reflects the fluidity and diversity of ageing as well as acknowledging its relativity and connection to the other 'stages' of the life course. Although 'older' is the more commonly used term within academic and professional circles when referring to people within later life, its use also as a comparative adjective can be problematic. The context of its use is therefore of paramount importance.

As well as use of language there is debate involving the definitions and meanings of ageing. Defining ageing chronologically has always been problematic and difficult to support as it has not been a good predictor of social, mental and physical capabilities (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Bernard and Meade 1993; Midwinter 1991). Paradoxically, while chronological ageing is meaningless it still holds immense, if varying, significance across different societies, bringing structural changes to people in terms of their conduct, status and position, which reflect societal expectations and regard. In spite of this, research continues to show that the aspects of older age are not only diverse but also influenced by people's structural, cultural and biographical contexts to such an extent that it is now generally accepted that older age is socially constructed (Venn et al 2011; Jones, R.L. 2006; Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Ginn and Arber 1995; Bernard and Meade 1993). Moreover the link between chronological ageing and social markers, for example retirement from paid work, are likewise socially constructed but also subject to on-going change, making ageing more difficult to define (Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Ginn and Arber 1995; Arber and Ginn 1991). Cultural gerontologists have contributed significantly to the view that boundaries between life course 'stages' are becoming more blurred as "aging has become a much more reflexive project" (Gilleard and Higgs 2000, p25) where people use strategies to reinvent themselves (Hockey and James 2003), an issue that will be returned to later in this discussion.

Despite the well-established view of a socially constructed and diverse ageing process there is still a tendency for older people to be seen as a homogenous grouping which has an exclusionary impact (Calasanti and Slevin 2001), where many experiences are inappropriately subsumed, ignored or silenced. Historically, this perceived homogeneity has been challenged by dividing older people into two chronologically defined categories of the 'young-old' and 'old-old' with an age span of 55 to 75 years, and 75 years and over, respectively (Neugarten 1975, 1974). There has been criticism that dividing older people into smaller chronological categories in terms of research practice can exacerbate sameness with variations being missed (Bernard and Meade 1993). It can equally be argued that within a

group of people whose ages span three to four decades, the level of diversity is such that it can be difficult to summarise findings meaningfully within a research project and the least powerful within the group, usually the people at the older end of the age span, may struggle to make their voices and views heard.

Although using chronological age as a meaningful tool to understand the ageing process has too many limitations, the earlier notion of dividing older age itself has taken hold and maintains present currency. The use of the concepts of third and fourth ages introduced by Laslett (1996 [1989]) creates a division within older age, which focuses on qualitative as opposed to numerical age distinctions.¹⁶ These distinctions are fitness and independence for the third age, and frailty and dependence for the fourth age (Higgs and Gillearn 2015). Transitioning from the third to the fourth age is premised on developing a chronic illness/disability, which focuses on the body and “nothing but the body” (Twigg 2004, p64). This creation of the fourth age, partly due as a response to the extension of life, has led to an increasingly stigmatised and segregated older old age, which is dominated by women (Venn et al 2011; Silver 2003).¹⁷ The division between third and fourth ages emulates that of ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ ageing and, it is argued, has usurped the significance of the (economic) divide that existed between paid employment and retirement (Gillearn and Higgs 2016). It is corporeal frailty “where one of the greatest social divisions of later life is now realised” (Gillearn and Higgs 2016, p2), which cuts across all other social divisions. It is further argued that social exclusion for older retired people is more likely to be linked to ‘failing’ health and ability, as opposed to economic and material hardship, which was the main division of the past (Prus 2007).

Critical approaches within gerontology regard age as a social organising principle or social division in which different age groups are relationally unequal in terms of privilege and power, which in turn are socially constructed and sustained through structural processes, cultural discourses and individual practices (Calasanti 2009; Krekula 2007; McMullin and Cairney 2004; Calasanti 2003). Within Western

¹⁶ Other academics such as Baltes (1998) used the third and fourth age concepts and attached them to numerical age (50-75, and 75+ respectively) building on the earlier work of Neugarten (1974).

¹⁷ The predominance of women to men in later life is falling, particularly for older people between 65 and 85 years of age, where there is a progressive numerical convergence in most developed countries. Although this trend is being repeated in relation to older people over 85 years of age, “the feminisation of later life” within this age group still persists (Arber and Ginn 2005, p527) and will continue to do so up to at least 2031 (Maynard et al 2008).

society older people experience a loss of power, authority and status, and consequently face discrimination and oppression (Calasanti 2003), all of which contribute to the stigma and negativity referred to in the earlier discussion on language. Ageism has been found to be the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe (AgeUK 2011) with far reaching consequences for older people including a denial of personal agency and voice (Cook et al 2004; Ginn and Arber 1998). The negative stereotypes of older age persist despite older people living increasingly active and diverse lives for longer (Gunnarsson 2008). Age discrimination has become more complex with the emergence of a new type of ageism, which is linked to the successful ageing paradigm constituting the third age (Calasanti 2016). Ironically Rowe and Kahn (1998) promoted their model of successful ageing as a way of enabling older people to combat ageism. However research with older people found that in order to attain the position of successfully ageing, the participants felt pressure to align themselves to looking younger and not ageing. They felt that strategies such as anti-ageing products gave them a choice about whether they wanted to successfully age but not succeeding in this endeavour was viewed as a personal failure (Calasanti 2016). It was suggested that the un/successful ageing framework acted as a division between older people which ended up “reinforcing ageism by not attacking the devaluation that accompanies old age itself.... and [places] a greater burden on individuals to avoid being marked as old” (Calasanti 2016, p8). Ageism does not operate in isolation as age intersects with other social divisions to create advantages and disadvantages in relation to people’s experiences of ageing (Calasanti 2009, 2003). The focus of this discussion now turns to ageing and its intersection with gender, and examines specifically the experiences of older women.

3.2.2 Ageing and Gender: Introducing older women

People experience ageing chronologically, socially and physiologically, all of which are influenced by societal processes as well as being gendered (Ginn and Arber 1995). As social divisions, age and gender intersect with each other in a dynamic way that has implications for social relations, access to power and ultimately how women and men experience later life differently from each other (Wilinska 2010). Research and the development of theory within gerontology and sociology have tended to be focused on the intersection at the points of inequality, illustrated by examples of older women’s experiences of ageism and sexism (Holstein 2015; Venn et al 2011; Calasanti 2010; Krekula 2007; Calasanti 2003; Ginn and Arber 1995; Arber and Ginn 1991). De Beauvoir (1996 [1970]) initially identified the intersection of ageism and sexism and argued how older women were constructed as ‘the other’, resulting in their lives being shaped by marginalisation, discrimination and inequality. Older women were regarded as experiencing a

double standard of ageing (Sontag 1972) involving “a gendered ageism that more severely and rapidly erodes women’s than men’s social valuation as they age” (Barrett and Naiman-Sessions 2016, p764). Although these inter-related systems of oppression do impact severely on women’s lived experiences of older age, the dominant focus on the “double jeopardy hypothesis” (Dowd and Bengsten 1978, p427) portrays older women as a “problematic object” where misery is foregrounded to such an extent that any advantages or assets or manifestations of agency are obscured (Krekula 2007, p159). This point will be returned to in more detail within the discussion of the age and gender intersection.

Critical discussions regarding the intersection can vary in their focus by considering either how gender is affected by ageing through the lens of gender relations (see also Calasanti 2010) or how ageing is affected by gender through the lens of age relations (see also Calasanti 2003). Owing to the fluidity and dynamism of both concepts and their subsequent interrelationship (Isopahkala-Bouret 2016), it is important that age is not viewed as consistently more dominant than gender, and vice versa, so that their intersection can be perceived as mutually constructed (Krekula 2007; Collins 1998). There are however situations where one may be temporarily more influential due to the context or topic under research. When considering the nature of age being gendered and of gender ageing, the concept of ‘performativity’ (Butler 2006 [1990]) can be usefully applied (see Section 3.3.4.3 for discussion on ‘performativity’). The fact that ‘doing age’ or ‘doing gender’ has to be continually performed and re-performed, the intersection between age and gender has the potential to construct new societal positions and roles in relation to these social divisions (Wilinska 2010). It is argued that the impact of ageing on gender norms has enabled older people to become genderless, or at least more androgynous (Biggs 2004; Silver 2003). This is seen as a consequence of older age encompassing transitions that free it from the tasks of production and reproduction thereby enabling a blurring of gender roles, greater freedom from societal expectations, and greater equality between women and men (Silver 2003; Ginn and Arber 1995). An example is in relation to older women who are reluctant to get remarried after a period of widowhood due to having given up their traditional gender roles in terms of sexual relationships and household duties and finding it a positive experience (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003; Davidson 2001; Ginn and Arber 1995). Conclusions that are drawn from this are that “gender as a marker of identification and constitutive of selfhood in old age becomes less salient compared to other features of the self” (Silver 2003, p389).

Contrasting with this perspective is the view that within older age, gender differences are maintained and, in some circumstances, strengthened (Wilinska 2010; Russell 2007; Wray 2003; Arber and Ginn 1991). Disparities between

women and men in later life have been identified on structural, cultural and personal levels of society. Inequalities in relation to material resources, such as finances, housing and transport, which in turn impact on social mobility, physical and emotional health, and personal relationships, have been recognised over a substantial period (see also Venn et al 2011; Maynard et al 2008; Estes 2005; Arber 2004; Ginn and Arber 1998; Ginn and Arber 1995; Arber and Ginn 1991). In addition to inequalities, there are also differences between older women and older men in terms of the meanings and significances they attach to different aspects of their lives. For example, a research study revealed that older women tended to identify with their family and home, as opposed to older men who identified more with the past and what they had achieved (Russell 2007). A further research study exploring the discourses in relation to ageing and gender within the media in Poland, found that gender was strengthened for older women who were referred to solely as 'grandmas' and age was emphasised in relation to older men who were referred to only as 'retirees' (Wilinska 2010). The subject positions of 'older women/men' were not referred to and the research demonstrated that older women have more opportunities within their 'grandma' role in terms of tasks and responsibilities than older men who are constructed as "people who used to, but no longer, do/perform" (Wilinska 2010, p888).

When considering the lives of older women within the context of the "intertwining systems" (Krekula 2007, p155) of age and gender, it is necessary to look further than the negative impact of the intersection towards possible advantages and assets. This requires moving beyond the arena of social, economic and political resources and including the "experiential dimension of culture and personal meaning" (Russell 2007, p147). Older women are recognised as being proficient about looking after their own health, developing social networks and friendships, and becoming involved in community activities (Freixas et al 2012; Maynard et al 2008; Arber et al 2003; Jerrome 1996). Older women are also the biggest consumers of culture in terms of books, films and exhibitions and have the ability to balance their connection to others with being on their own. It has been suggested that older women have a collection of survival strategies that have been accumulated during their lifetime from having been "deprived of personal, social, political, and economic power...[defined as] 'strategies of the oppressed'" (Freixas et al 2012, p51). Older women do report that they are experiencing new opportunities in terms of their roles, responsibilities and identities (Wray 2007). Therefore it is important that research captures positive experiences as well as the continuing inequalities in an endeavour to develop approaches to ageing that accurately represent lived experiences.

3.2.3 Approaches to Ageing and Gender

Up until the 1990s, dominant theories of ageing such as 'disengagement' (Cumming and Henry 1961), 'activity' (Havighurst 1963) and 'continuity' (Atchley 1987, 1971) gave little attention to older women and the issues that particularly affected them such as disability and poverty (Venn et al 2011). If gender was recognised within the ageing discourse, it was in relation to ageing discussed as a 'problem' that affected men in terms of retirement (Russell 2007). This is discussed further in Section 3.2.3.1. It has been argued that the lack of theoretical interest and resources in relation to older women's experiences emulated their powerlessness within society (Ginn and Arber 1998; McMullin 1995). The ageism that older women experience has been recognised for some time (MacDonald and Rich 1984), and has resulted in older women being constructed within research predominantly "as *objects* in need of care... a deviant, a burden and 'the other'" (Krekula 2007, p159).

From the 1990s approaches to ageing began to address the topic of gender but tended to 'add' older women to existing ageing research and/or use older men as the 'norm' from which to make comparisons or highlight differences in older women's experiences (Calasanti 2009; Krekula 2007; McMullin 1995). A similar process was mirrored within feminist research where younger or 'mid-life' women were used as the 'ideal' comparative reference, which subsequently led to 'othering' older women (Calasanti 2009; McMullin 1995). There is evidence that this practice continues in relation to recent research (Sandberg 2013b), and is referred to throughout the thesis. These concerns of using older women as an additive or variable within research and theory development has given rise to the approach of 'older women' being treated as 'doing' age and gender together, without either being emphasised to the exclusion of the other (McMullin 1995). The integration of both social systems need to be examined, a point raised in the previous section, in order to appropriately develop understanding of older women's experiences (Ginn and Arber 1995).

At this juncture, it is worth turning attention to critical approaches to ageing that can usefully be regarded as falling into three broad categories. There are those which prioritise structure in the analysis of ageing, such as political economy of ageing, those which prioritise agency, including cultural approaches, and those which, in the case of some feminist approaches, try to consider both the micro and macro aspects of society in their analysis (Bengsten et al 1997). These approaches are now reviewed with a specific emphasis on the contribution each has made towards the understanding of the age and gender intersection, and in particular older women's experiences and positions within society.

3.2.3.1 Political economy approach

The political economy approach (Phillipson 1982; Walker 1981; Estes 1979) towards ageing developed from the 'structured dependency' theory of the 1980s (Townsend 1981). In challenging the notion of a biologically or psychologically determined older age, the approach located the experiences of older age structurally by concentrating on the influences of retirement and the welfare state in 'constructing' ageing as a time of dependency (Bernard et al 2005; Bury 1995) with loss of income and social status impacting negatively on self-identity (Venn et al 2011). The initial focus tended to concentrate on men's experiences of retirement from paid employment, which was subsequently challenged for its neglect of older women and their disadvantaged positions in relation to pensions, health and access to care (Krekula 2007; Arber and Ginn 2005; Arber and Ginn 1991; Estes 1991). Older women's lives were recognised as being determined by their life-long inhabitation of traditional gender roles, which in turn were integral to capitalism through the structures of the state and family (Estes 2005; Estes et al 2003). Women had different experiences compared to men in relation to paid employment which involved 'breaks' in continuous employment due to caring responsibilities, undertaking unpaid 'caring'/'family' work, and undertaking part-time employment (Estes 1991; Calasanti 1986). This differential relationship with 'work' saw women in later life facing structural challenges in terms of fewer opportunities and fewer material resources than men (Bury 1995; Ginn and Arber 1995; Arber and Ginn 1991).

Criticisms of the approach include its central and sole attention to structural factors which, it is argued, "plays down human agency and places undue emphasis on social inequality" (Phillipson and Ahmed 2004 p160). With the focus on disadvantages and inequalities, it creates an image of older women as a homogenous group, "trapped in poverty" (Walker 1987, p191), lacking in agentic resistance and 'victims' of the afore-mentioned double jeopardy of ageism and sexism (Maynard et al 2008; Krekula 2007; Wray 2003; Bury 1995). Another criticism is that it offers very little analysis in terms of the power relations between older women and older men, and despite influences from feminist theorists, has found it difficult to move beyond its emphasis on class in order to include other social divisions within its analysis (Maynard et al 2008; Ginn and Arber 1998).

3.2.3.2 'Cultural' Approach¹⁸

The word 'cultural' is used here as an umbrella term to include concepts that have emerged as a response to the criticisms of the political economy of ageing, in order to create a more positive and less deterministic view of older age (Maynard et al 2008). In an attempt to foreground self-determination and agency, the approach revolves around the notion of a post-modern identity and in particular the 'reflexive project' of later life. Although this is a broad approach it can be regarded as being premised on two interrelated key concepts, that of the 'third age' and 'successful' ageing. Both of these concepts have been referred to in Section 3.2.1 in relation to the third and fourth age division within older age, and the creation of a 'new' ageism. A further discussion follows with specific attention being paid to the extent of their contribution to the age and gender intersection.

The third age is a period in later life within contemporary Western societies, which is constructed on the premise of fitness and independence (Higgs and Gilleard 2015). Retirement as an institution has undergone radical changes in terms of higher living standards, lower retirement age and many more years of healthy living (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011). The third age therefore is perceived "as a new life-course stage of extended and self-fulfilling leisure and community participation following retirement... a key development in the transformation of later life" (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011, p2). The third age discourse has developed as an antithesis to the political economy approaches by espousing a leisure lifestyle that can be individually achieved regardless of social divisions (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989). It is not a big leap to connect the third age lifestyle to the 'successful ageing paradigm' (Rowe and Kahn 1998), whose constituent aspects mirror those of the third age by including: "good health; independence; continued engagement in daily activity; and social connectedness" (McGrath et al 2016, p2). Successful ageing requires activity and specifically socially productive activity (Katz 2000) where older people resist the stereotypes of old age by aligning themselves to a youthful ideal. The aspiration towards "agelessness" (Andrews 1999, p301) is complemented by the biomedicalisation of ageing, anti-ageing industry and the 'encouragement' older people receive to build a youthful identity through consumption (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Gilleard and Higgs 2000).

The main criticism of this approach to ageing is its neglect of the impact of social divisions, such as gender and ethnicity, on access to the material resources that

¹⁸ The term 'cultural approach' is not referring to 'cultural gerontology' as a branch of the discipline as espoused by Twigg and Martin (2015a, 2015b).

are required to be able to take part in the 'activities' of the third age (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011; Maynard et al 2008; Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Ginn and Arber 1998; Bury 1995). Some time ago older women were identified as struggling to take part in leisure activities due to a lack of finances and resources (Bernard and Meade 1993). The successful ageing discourse excludes older people who live with illnesses and/or disabilities (McGrath et al 2016), which disproportionately affect older women's lives (Arber 2004). It is also argued that the emphasis on 'activities' is based on middle class, Western, male values, exacerbating the exclusion felt by many older people (Wray 2004; Bury 1995). In relation to gender relations there tends to be an emphasis on attitudes, as opposed to power, and historically the concept of 'retirement' was linked to 'retirement from paid employment', which has been identified earlier as excluding many women's 'work' experiences.

Despite these criticisms the discourses in relation to the third age and its link to successful and active ageing have gained normative status within different societies, to the extent that they now have an integral part within ageing policies (see also ILC-B 2015; EuroHealthNet 2012; WHO 2002). Nonetheless research is still identifying inequalities and disadvantages that impact negatively on certain social groups, continuing into and after retirement (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011). Although older age is changing in terms of increased longevity and, to a certain extent, quality, the images and stereotypes of 'old' still exist (Biggs and Daatland 2004). It is important that human agency is recognised but not at the expense of neglecting structural influences and constraints.

3.2.3.3 Feminist Approaches

This section focuses initially on a brief overview of the development and extent of feminist involvement in the aforementioned approaches to ageing. This is followed by a discussion of two concepts supported by feminists, which have made significant contributions to the body of knowledge on ageing and gender, and specifically in relation to older women's experiences. This includes a re-appraisal of the concept of double jeopardy, and an assessment of the contribution and influence of the intersectional approach.

As acknowledged in Chapter 2, feminists have been accused in the past of ignoring the invisibility of older women and their experiences of ageing (MacDonald and Rich 1984), and being slow to recognise and challenge women's experiences of ageism particularly within Britain (Arber and Ginn 1991). Feminist theorists' initial involvement was in forming a formidable and constructive critique of the male dominated positions taken by early proponents of the political economy approach.

Although this has been discussed in Section 3.2.3.1, it is worth reiterating that the feminist input demonstrated beyond doubt that the disadvantaged position of older women was directly linked to a lifetime of structural inequalities and oppression, which in turn, were exacerbated by ageing (Arber 2004; Estes et al 2003; Ginn and Arber 1995; Bernard and Meade 1993; Arber and Ginn 1991). Even with the recent changes to 'family' structures where women are more likely to be wage earners, feminists have argued that gender divisions in relation to, and the impact of, care 'work', and the lack of recognition from politicians, ensures women's structural disadvantages continuing into older age well into the 21st century (Arber et al 2007). Many gerontologists have viewed the cultural turn as an important development in ageing theory, due to the inclusion of the body, which has been traditionally absent within social gerontology (Oberge 1996). Yet feminists remain guarded about the cultural possibilities and opportunities to create and negotiate an ageing identity given the overemphasis on choice and agency. Although welcoming the debate on ageing bodies, a particularly gendered issue for older women, feminists have found it more fruitful to align themselves with critical gerontological approaches. This enables theorists to combine the structural focus with the personal in terms of meanings and experiences, and develop theories at a macro-micro level (Bengtson et al 2005; Biggs 2004).

Despite valid criticisms of the concept of double jeopardy, which have been outlined earlier in this chapter, it is important to consider how feminists have used the term in relation to older women. The concept itself is a term that refers to non-specified "disadvantages" (Dowd and Bengsten 1978, p427), making it widely applicable. Feminists have been clear in their analysis that the double jeopardy is based on the intersection of ageism and sexism, and that it is this intersection that creates higher levels of inequalities and oppression for older women in comparison to older men (Barrett and Naimen-Sessions 2016; Formosa 2005; McMullin 1995; Arber and Ginn 1991). The importance of naming the oppressions cannot be underestimated particularly when both ageism and sexism are undergoing similar changes, in terms of becoming subtler and increasingly contradictory, by containing progressive and oppressive aspects, or being denied (Calasanti 2016; Richardson and Robinson 2015; Rahman and Jackson 2010). Although solely emphasising the oppressive aspects of the intersection age and gender can be justifiably criticised (see also Krekula 2016; Hearn and Wray 2015; Krekula 2007), the empirical evidence (see Section 3.2.3.1) of older women's experiences of the 'double' impact of ageism and sexism cannot be ignored.

The main criticisms of the double jeopardy hypotheses focused on the fact that, as noted in Section 2.2.5, it is regarded as an additive approach when it comes to considering more than one social division, which tends to encourage a hierarchy of

oppressions (Krekula 2007). This in turn ignores any advantages or assets that may arise out of a situation where there are intersecting oppressions (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). These criticisms, amongst others, encouraged critical feminist gerontologists to consider analysing age and gender as intersecting social divisions. Calasanti (2010, 2009, 2004, 2003) is regarded as the main proponent who introduced intersectionality, a well-established feminist concept since the late 1980s (see Section 2.2.5 for a detailed discussion), to the gerontological analysis of ageing and gender. However theorists who use an intersectional approach also encourage the inclusion of other social divisions with age such as, disability (see McGrath et al 2016), ethnicity (see also Maynard et al 2008; Wray 2007, 2004, 2003) and sexual orientation (see also Calasanti 2009). The advantage of using an intersectional approach is that it recognises the existence of the power relations that are integral to the social divisions being examined. The approach also highlights the diversities in later life to the extent that “there is not just *one* ‘old age’ nor is there simply *one* ageism” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001, p27). Whilst the importance of perceiving the intersection of age and gender as mutually constructed has been previously discussed (see Section 3.2.2), there has been a tendency to use a gender lens when considering the age/gender intersection, which emphasises gender relations between men and women (see also Calasanti 2010, 2004). The advantage of this approach is that it is inclusive of older men’s experiences and appeases the criticism levelled at the feminist political economy approach of prioritising older women’s experiences to the exclusion of older men (Venn et al 2011). Nevertheless it is crucial that an intersectional approach does not ignore age by encouraging its analysis to be led by other social divisions. As people age it can be argued that ageism becomes more prevalent within the intersection and this has to be recognised within the analysis (Walker 2009).

3.2.4 Towards an Affirmative Approach of Ageing

There are new ways emerging of conceiving and understanding ageing that are challenging the basis of established approaches such as their tendency to divide and exclude people, and presenting older age as something that should be avoided or ‘put off’ (Wilinska 2016). Among these is the concept of affirmative ageing, briefly referred to in Chapter 2, which aims to account for the experiences of ageing in terms of difference as opposed to either being situated within, and assessed by, the binary ‘measurements’ of decline or success (Sandberg 2013b, 2011). The other aspects of the affirmative model of ageing include the recognition of the materiality of the ageing body, as well as the role that exercising agency has in shaping experiences, and the ‘acceptance’ of all ‘forms’ of old age (Sandberg 2013b). The central and challenging message from this approach is the removal of the ‘either/or’ position that older people are placed into, when consideration is

given to their experiences, feelings and meanings about particular issues vis-à-vis ageing. In other words the concept of affirmative ageing accepts that older people can have simultaneously held contradictory experiences and feelings, for example, loss and gain, opportunities and constraints, and vulnerability and strength (Sandberg 2013b, 2011). Although the initial debates around affirmative ageing have taken place specifically within the context of the ageing body and sexuality of older men (see also Sandberg 2013a, 2011), the ideas are generic and therefore, it is argued here, are transferable to other areas of ageing and applicable to older women.

The affirmative ageing approach, with its critique of the double jeopardy and successful ageing concepts for their partisan, divisive and homogenous impact on the presentation of older people's experiences, advocates the use of an intersectional approach. Coming from this standpoint has enabled researchers to identify different positive outcomes that older women have experienced, rather than viewing their situation as having 'additional' oppressions (Calasanti and Slevin 2001), a point that was discussed earlier in Section 3.2.2. A good example of this approach is Krekula's (2007) study focusing on ageing and the body, where the older women participants were able to find individual strategies to cope positively with ageing within a structurally oppressive context. (See Section 4.2.5.3 for a detailed consideration of this piece of research). Research within this genre revealed that the intersection of structural systems such as age and gender can "either strengthen *or* weaken each other... supplement *or* compete...[construct] new forms of marginalization, *or* a mutual neutralization of each other" (Krekula 2007, p167). This approach assumes a certain level of agency and empowerment in terms of resisting oppressive norms, and supporting the notion of ageing differently. There are situations where countervailing narratives between individuals can effectively undermine some elements of dominant discourses and where some aspects are too powerfully embedded to be challenged (Foucault 1990 [1977]). Therefore older women can experience simultaneously being empowered and disempowered, (Maynard et al 2008), a contradictory situation, which can be accommodated within the affirmative approach to ageing. It is important that the concepts of agency and empowerment are not regarded as fixed entities, rigidly associated with autonomy and independence, as in their usage within the successful ageing paradigm. These concepts are fluid, influenced by a personal, cultural and social context, and vary from each individual (Wray 2004). There needs to be a critical interrogation of the terms in relation to the inherent values and more consideration needs to be given to concepts such as reciprocity, interdependence, and self worth/esteem, which contain elements of agency, empowerment and resistance, in order to promote inclusivity (Maynard et al 2008; Wray 2004).

It could be argued that the criticisms of the established concepts and approaches to ageing, together with new ways of considering older women's experiences, has started to change the content and direction of later life research. Research studies over the past decade or so have, using an affirmative ageing and/or an intersectional approach, have been able to find unexpected aspects of ageing and/or examples of resistance to the negativism of ageing. Examples of the former include: intersection of ethnicity, age and gender in relation to agency and (dis)empowerment (Wray 2007, 2004, 2003); ethnicity, age and gender in relation to quality of life (Cook et al 2004); gendered meanings of home, leisure and social relationships (Russell 2007); and, care-giving and health (Calasanti 2010). Examples of the latter include: older women's collective resistance to ageing through membership of a society (Barrett and Naimen-Sessions 2016; Barrett et al 2012); older women's resistance to the label of 'frailty' (Grenier and Hanley 2007); and, older women's strategies to cope with ageing bodies (Krekula 2016, 2007).

3.2.5 Ageing Body and Sexuality: Frameworks for Researching Older Women's Experiences

Older women's experiences of their ageing body and sexuality have been of growing interest for feminist researchers. Empirical research within these areas is comprehensively reviewed in Section 4.2. Therefore the focus of this discussion is limited to a consideration of how the previously discussed approaches to ageing have influenced and directed studies in this field. For example, the notion of double jeopardy, also referred to as the 'double standard of ageing' (see Section 3.2.2), raised important concerns regarding older women's experiences of ageing bodies and sexuality, and the impact of ageism and sexism. It is now recognised that older women have to fight against the process of invisibility in these areas. With regards to their bodies, the process is paradoxical in that the more visibly women age, the more invisible as a person they become (Woodward 1999). Women's value within society is linked to appearance, beauty, slimness and youth and so this process of invisibility represents also a loss of power (Twigg 2004). It is argued that women's sexuality is enmeshed with appearance and 'doing gender' and therefore the invisibility also encourages perceptions of asexuality (Isopakhala Bourett 2016). Sexuality in relation to older women is further obscured by the emphasis on older male sexuality through the Viagra discourse (Gott and Hinchliff 2003a). This oppressive context makes it all the more important that future research enables older women to voice their experiences in a way that the nuances and contradictions are captured appropriately.

Up until recently the ageing body has been ignored by feminists, and social gerontologists have preferred to focus on the social and political areas of ageing,

reflecting their strong opposition to being associated with the physiology of ageing (Twigg 2004). This resulted in many years of a biomedical perspective on bodies in later life, with its intrinsic model of decline and decay. The rise of cultural gerontology prompted an interest and focus in relation to the ageing body (see also Higgs and Gilleard 2015; Gilleard and Higgs 2013, 2000). Feminist gerontologists have also developed new approaches to researching women's experiences of the ageing body, regarding it as a place where the intersection of ageism and sexism could be usefully explored (Wilinska 2016). Within this oppressive context research has demonstrated that older women have been able to exercise agency and think of their bodies in a 'resistive' way (see also Krekula 2016; Lietchy and Yarnal 2010; Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008; Krekula 2007; Hurd Clarke 2001; Hurd 2000). One particular research project used a range of innovative visual methods to enable groups of older women to explore different representations of themselves in challenging and empowering ways (Hogan and Warren 2013). With regards to ageing and sexuality, its development in terms of a research focus is discussed in Section 4.2.1. However, its path towards generating gerontological research interest ran along similar lines to the ageing body in that it was, and still is to a certain extent, influenced by a biomedical context and discourse.

With regards to the cultural turn and the separate, yet parallel, discourses around successful ageing, the impact has been double edged. On the one hand creating opportunities for researching ageing bodies and sexuality, enabling researchers to move beyond the "misery perspective stressing women's ageing as a problem" (Krekula 2007, p160). On the other hand successful ageing has placed older women under immense pressure not to 'fail' in undertaking their journey to remain 'forever' youthful. Arguably, research has moved sideways into the study of 'agelessness', and towards creating theories with the potential to eliminate or further marginalise old age as a 'stage' in the lifecourse (Higgs and Gilleard 2015; Calasanti and Slevin 2001). Both genders are affected by the discourses around successful and active ageing, men through 'youthful' sexual performance and women through 'youthful' appearance (Marshall 2006; Katz and Marshall 2003; Marshall and Katz 2002; Calasanti and Slevin 2001). This focus on appearance for older women has resulted in a much higher volume of feminist research in relation to the ageing body (see also Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2011) than that focusing on sexuality.

During the initial phase of the cultural turn, research on ageing and the body tended to concentrate on appearance and its significant interrelationship with self-esteem, social and sexual relationships, and identity (Krekula 2016). This focus also gave feminist researchers and theorists the opportunity to locate their investigations structurally through linking concerns regarding appearance with

ageism (see also Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008; Calasanti and Slevin 2001). Despite this there was, and continues to be, calls to highlight the contradictions presented by the anti-ageing 'resistance' and to develop a position of challenging "the devaluation of being old while not attempting to deny age" (Twigg 2004, p63). The stance of being pro-ageing and "ageing naturally" is a complex and problematic issue for older women whilst an ageist and sexist context exists (Twigg 2004, p63). The cultural turn also determined the content of the majority of the ageing body research, with very few considering the role of the female ageing body within a caregiving/care receiving context (see also Twigg 1997).

When considering the newer approaches to ageing and the body it can be difficult for researchers to distinguish between resistance and accommodation, particularly within the context of anti-ageing strategies (Twigg 2004). It is disadvantageous to regard resistance and accommodation as an 'either/or' situation as they can be strategies that older women use simultaneously to cope with the negativism of the ageism/sexism intersection (see also Barrett and Naimen-Sessions 2016; Krekula 2016; Barrett et al 2012; Grenier and Hanley 2007; Krekula 2007). In relation to sexuality research, an exploration of the term 'cougar',¹⁹ Montemurro and Seifken (2014, p37) found that older women were perceived as "denying ageing" as opposed to "resisting ageing" by not following the 'rules' around sexual behaviour in order to create a youthful appearance. Within the body of research around ageing and sexuality there are very few studies, which focus on the intersection of age and gender per se, although implications for the intersection can be drawn from the findings. For example, the findings of a study exploring the importance of sex in later life identified differences based on gender (Gott and Hinchliff 2003b). Although an intersectional approach was not undertaken it did yield unexpected results in relation to older women including: becoming more assertive in challenging the expectation on them to 'perform' their 'marital [sexual] duty'; identifying older age as a time to focus on their sexual pleasure; and finding other non-sexual ways to assert their femininity. Theoretical and empirical contributions specifically focusing on the intersections tend to fall into two groups in relation to sexuality, with one group focusing specifically on sexual orientation (see also Westwood 2016; Calasanti 2009; Heaphy 2007; Heaphy, Yip, and Thompson 2004), and the other focusing on sexuality more generally in relation to older

¹⁹ The term 'cougar' used particularly in the American media is "a label describing 'older' women who assertively pursue younger sexual partners" (Montemurro and Seifken 2014, p37). It is a predominantly derogatory term, meaning "predators" and "flesh eating" and signifying "inappropriate pairing" (Montemurro and Siefken 2014, p40).

women (see also Jen 2016; Calasanti 2009) and older men (see also Sandberg 2013a, 2011).

A couple of issues became clear whilst undertaking this part of the review that have some implications for the practice of research within this area. First, the majority of research regarding ageing bodies and sexuality predominantly involved women in midlife and/or third age with 'older' women receiving scant or no attention (Freixas et al 2012; Twigg 2004; Calasanti and Slevin 2001), a point that is picked up again in Section 4.2. Interestingly a study on ageing and the body (Oberg and Tornstam 1999) found that older women's satisfaction with their bodies increased with age and once over the age of 75 their body esteem matched that of older men. This research, as well as suggesting that transitional phases of the life course may be the most problematic, also points to the danger of homogenising the experiences of a chronologically large cohort or generalising findings from a 'younger' cohort. The second issue related to the difficulty of isolating gender from other influences on experiences of sexuality, as identified by Jen (2016). The application of intersectional analysis to research data is considered further in Sections 2.2.5 and 5.6.2.

3.2.6 Messages from the review on ageing and gender: a way forward

The following key points have been identified from this review focusing on the concepts of ageing and gender in relation to older women. First, a social constructionist approach to ageing was recognised as an important challenge to essentialism. It also provided an influential contribution to the way that older age was defined, discussed and conceptualised. Second, an analysis of different theoretical approaches to age and gender highlighted the limitations of the double jeopardy hypothesis. Subsequently the intersectional approach combined with an affirmative model of ageing was considered as an alternative analytical approach, which had the potential to reflect nuanced experiences of older women's lives more precisely. Third, and related to the previous point, was the importance of identifying the influences of both structure and agency vis-à-vis age and gender. For example, older women could experience oppression in relation to ageism/sexism on a structural level, whilst also, in certain situations, exercising agency to minimise the effects or produce assets. Fourth, it was demonstrated in this review how theoretical approaches can influence, not only the way aspects of age and gender are researched, but also the research agenda.

3.3 SEXUALITY – APPROACHES, INTERPRETATIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS

3.3.1 Significance of Sexuality

The centrality of sexuality to the development and sustenance of self and identity is well established across a range of disciplinary fields, including sociology, psychology and medicine/health. Sexuality is viewed as a core dimension of life, the prime site in which identity is inscribed, and to take away its importance or to silence it undermines the very notion of being human (Foucault 1990 [1977]). However the majority of developmental models of human growth, whilst recognising the importance of sexuality in terms of self-development in childhood and young adulthood, are silent about sexuality in older age. Many theorists within this field “consider adulthood as the point of maturity, and in doing so overlook late life” (Grenier 2012, p48).²⁰ Despite this legacy research studies have embraced the significance of sexuality for older people (see also Lee et al 2016; Lindau et al 2007; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b) linking it to quality of life and wellbeing (see also Menard et al 2015; Yun et al 2014; Hinchliff and Gott 2004; Nay 1992). However maintaining that sexuality is significant to everyone throughout their life course presents a picture of a fixed and constant presence, which denies fluidities, transitions and diversities, which take place both on an inter and intra personal level (Dunk West and Brook 2015). There may be times in people’s lives when their sexuality features less strongly than at other times depending on their circumstances. Whilst recognising this possibility sexuality has also become more significant in recent times as it increasingly represents an expression of lifestyle and character, as opposed to solely sexual desire (Rahman and Jackson 2010; Evans 1993). This process enhances the position of sexuality as it becomes a significant part of a person’s social identity and in turn has become more central to the self as consumer. As noted in relation to ageing and the cultural approach in Section 3.2.3.2, the “self becomes a reflexive project” (Giddens 1991, p33) where social identity is constructed through lifestyle consumption. An example of this is the anti-ageing industry where issues such as the management of the ageing body situate older women’s sexuality in pivotal position in relation to their identity. This ‘choice’ to refashion and (re)create ourselves (Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002;

²⁰ There are three models, which are widely known and used within the field of human growth and development: Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) focused on psychosexual development; Jean Piaget (1896–1980) focused on cognitive development; and Erik Erikson (1902-1994) focused on psychosocial development. Only Erikson’s model included later life and focused on the tension between integrity and despair with wisdom being the goal to achieve (Grenier 2012).

Giddens 1991) and, by implication, our sexuality will be an issue that is returned to later in this section.

The view that sexuality has grown into a significant and central feature in modern societies is a view supported by Richardson (2000), who locates its importance in terms of the 'public' and 'private' domains of our societies and lives respectively. For example, sexuality is viewed as a central feature of social, political and economic issues and systems, as well as being pivotal in relation to personal identity and relationships which are linked to intimate feelings of love and pleasure (Richardson 2000). With this level of significance it is not surprising that sexuality is viewed as something 'special' and "rarely treated simply as a routine aspect of everyday life" (Scott and Jackson 2013, p190). The construction of sexuality as 'special' has contributed to influencing a particular emphasis on older people's sexuality as problematic, a point that was highlighted in Chapter 1. A recent review of research literature claimed that the substantial knowledge base built up over the years in relation to older age and sexuality is contextualised in a biomedical framework, which has focused on important, but nonetheless 'unusual', issues. The consequence has been the existence of a pool of knowledge that is, at best specialised, and at worse ignores the healthy ('ordinary') older person (DeLamater 2012).

It could be argued that excessive significance has been given to sexuality, which has created a "fallacy of misplaced scale" (Rubin 2007 [1984], p278-279). From this, sexuality is regarded as imposing and influential, creating anything from paths to personal fulfilment and social revolution to more recent claims of having the potential to destabilise the status quo (see also Butler 2006 [1990]; O'Keefe 1999). In relation to older people the expression of sexuality through sexual activity is suggestive of a reliable marker for 'successful' ageing or ageing 'well' (Woloski-Wruble et al 2010; Katz and Marshall 2003).

3.3.2 Definitions of Sexuality

As the concept of sexuality defies precise and conclusive definition (Gott 2005) it could be suggested that researchers have a tendency to focus on 'tangible' specificities relating to the 'sexual' such as desires, expressions, satisfaction, activities/behaviour and (dys)functions (see also Galinsky 2012; Mazo and Cardoso 2011; Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 2009; Delamater and Moorman 2007; Delamater and Sill 2005; Hayes and Dennerstein 2005). As noted in Chapter 1, using a narrow definition, particularly of sexual activity and behaviour, has been criticised as encouraging older people's sexuality to be explored through a medicalised, phallogocentric and heterosexist lens focusing on achieving coitus (Gott

2005; Cronin 2004; Deacon et al 1995). Not only does this “coital imperative” (Kirkman 2005, p112) serve to provide constraints on what is deemed to be ‘proper’ expressions of sexuality for older heterosexual people, it also excludes the experiences of older ‘non-heterosexual’ people (Cronin 2004). It has been argued that any consideration of sexuality needs to go beyond sexual acts and practices to include orientations, identities, relationships, beliefs, feelings, behaviours and desires (Scott and Jackson 2013; WHO 2006; Weeks 2003; Bremner and Hillin 1994).

In considering the adoption of wider definitions of sexuality, it is worth noting the findings of a range of early studies within gerontology focusing on sexuality in later life. The findings included: that sexuality held different meanings for different people (Allen 1987); that sexuality should not be reduced to penile-vaginal intercourse (Haddad and Benbow 1993); and, for older women, that sexuality went beyond physical gratification (Nay 1992). In all three of these studies, as well as identifying penile-vaginal penetration, a wide range of ‘other’ expressions of sexuality were highlighted such as close companionship, body image, feelings of warmth, masturbation, intimacy of sharing and caring, and a sense of identity. In a further study it was found that the definition and expression of sexuality was broader and more diverse for older people than for younger people, which the researchers concluded was as a result of older people facing more changes in relation to their sexuality (Starr and Weiner 1981). From these aforementioned findings it can be seen that the concept of a ‘wider’ definition of sexuality has been present for over three decades.²¹ It is interesting to note that these studies took place in a ‘pre-Viagra’ period, before 1998, and consideration needs to be given to the impact of the “viagrafication” of older people’s sexuality (Kirkman 2005, p112). This process not only defined and shifted sexual ‘dysfunctions’ from the paradigms of psychology to those of medicine but also, refocused and narrowed the definition of sexuality, and in particular sexual expression, vis-à-vis older people. This discussion is returned to in Section 4.2.2.

The concept of sexuality needs to be seen in broad terms in relation to empirical and theoretical research for two reasons. Firstly, it is important that the concept offers inclusivity, which in turn gives tangible form and evidence to its fluidity and

²¹ Shuttleworth et al (2010) cite both empirical and theoretical sources that have in the past recognised the wide range of sexual expression used by older people within a residential care setting including “loving and caring”, ‘cuddling’, ‘intimate touching’, and ‘aggressive eroticism’ (2010,p188). What is particularly interesting is that this broad approach towards the definition of sexuality was acknowledged as long ago as the early 1980s (see also Weg 1983).

diversity. For example, in an American survey studying older people's sexuality, focus was on sex and sexual activity, defined as "any mutually voluntary activity with another person that involves sexual contact, whether or not intercourse or orgasm occurs," (Lindau et al 2007, p763). The move away from a coital focus is encouraging but may not be sufficiently inclusive for someone who has difficulty in sexually expressing themselves physically or emotionally due to an impairment or ill health. An assumption of asexuality or that sexuality is unimportant can be the outcome of an exclusively narrow definition which then produces knowledge that serves to support dominant and misleading stereotypes (Shildrick 2004). Secondly, and relatedly, adopting a wide definition of sexuality ensures the continued development of relevant, appropriate and accurate knowledge within the field of ageing and sexuality. For example, Woloski-Wruble et al (2010) stated that it was established knowledge within the field of gerontology that with age, older women were significantly less sexually active. The knowledge was predicated on a definition of sexual activity as penile-vaginal intercourse. When subsequent studies broadened the definition to include any sexually arousing activity, partnered or non-partnered, it was found that despite some decrease older women do remain sexually active. The impact on sexual activity tends to be psycho-social factors such as lack of sexual partner or ill health of sexual partner and self (Woloski-Wruble et al 2010).

Contrasting definitions of sexuality are aligned with divergent theoretical approaches. Essentialism favours a definition focusing on sexual technique, having 'sex' or "concerned with the reproduction of the species" (Jackson 1999, p5). Social constructionism goes beyond sexual acts and practices to encompass the complexities and fluidities of human behaviour and being within influential societal contexts (Weeks 2003). As sexuality is multifaceted and attracts many meanings and understandings (Weeks 2003), the focus of the remainder of the review will move away from trying to secure a 'fixed' universal definition towards exploring some of the main themes of sexuality. In order to do this consideration will be given to influential theoretical contributions, which will in turn unpick some of the issues that have been introduced within this section.

3.3.3 Theoretical Approaches

3.3.3.1 Overview

The two main contrasting approaches that have been implicitly suggested in the previous section's discussion between a narrow and wide definition of sexuality can broadly be referred to as 'essentialist' and 'social constructionist' respectively.

The essentialist approach dominated the theories of sexuality and underpinned the sexological paradigm up until the 1960s (Parker 2009; Richardson 2007) with its view that sexuality was natural, universal and biologically determined with insignificant influences from societal structures (Bywater and Jones, R. 2007). The challenge to the notion of sexuality being a pre-given entity at the start of life came from a range of approaches, focussing on how different levels of society contributed to its constructions and meanings (Weeks 2003). The two approaches will now be discussed particularly in the context of their impact and influence, not only on how sexuality itself is perceived, but also how gender and sexual orientation are viewed.

3.3.3.2 Essentialism

The essentialist or naturalist approach has moved away from drawing predominantly on religious doctrine towards basing its claims more on biomedical 'knowledge' (Scott and Jackson 2013). Although criticisms from other approaches, namely social constructionism, have been influential in developing more nuanced and empowering understandings of different people's experiences of sexualities (Richardson 2000), essentialism maintains its authority and appeal in many ways. An example is in relation to issues of ageing and sexuality where much of the research is underpinned by a biomedical approach (DeLamater 2012; Cronin 2004). The initial starting point for essentialism is to use the anatomical differences at birth to develop a biologically driven and oppositional model of (hetero)sexuality in that, sex (male/female) influences gender (men/women) and its related traits (masculinity/femininity) (Richardson 2015; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Carabine 2004). The binary categories for people are viewed as different but complementary, in that male and female sexuality are perceived as naturally active/dominant and passive/submissive respectively. Sexual relations between men and women are perceived as a 'natural' consequence of this biological development with dominant sexual activity being penile-vaginal intercourse, which in turn is linked to reproduction.

The power of this model of sexuality is in its 'taken for granted' aura and consequential claims of normality, which in turn naturalise gender relations within the framework of heterosexuality (Carabine 2004). This has led to the 'othering' of non-normative sexualities and genders, which have traditionally been the main focus of investigation and research. With its beginnings in second wave feminism, theorising heterosexuality is a recent development (see also Richardson 2000; Jackson 1999), directing the focus of sexuality studies towards "the demystification of its apparent naturalness" (Scott and Jackson 2013, p185). The other impact of

essentialism is the way that sexuality is viewed primarily within the context of the heterosexual male sex drive (Carabine 2004). This has led to challenges from feminists in relation particularly to 'uncontrollable male sexual urges' justifying male violence (Richardson 1997). Similar narratives have been explored in relation to older women's experiences of their male partners' (non-consensual) use of Viagra (Loe 2004; Potts et al 2003). Carabine (2004) argues that naturalist approaches to sexuality have created a hegemonic perspective that it is biologically and naturally heterosexual and therefore by implication gendered.

3.3.3.3 Social Constructionism

As maintained in Section 3.2 social constructionism challenges the essentialist claim of a biological 'essence' predetermining age over and above social/cultural influences. This challenge equally applies to sexuality, with the main contributions coming from the fields of psychoanalysis, interactionism and post modernism/post structuralism (Scott and Jackson 2013; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Richardson 1997). For each there is a different emphasis on identifying the most influential process in the construction of sexuality and how these processes are manifested and constituted. The shared perception however is that the various influences on the construction of sexuality are both productive and repressive (Scott and Jackson 2013). Differences aside, the basic principles commonly upheld by these approaches in relation to sexuality include: the rejection of the universality and naturalness of sexuality; the positioning of sexuality as socially, culturally and historically influenced in its constructions; and, the recognition of sexuality as fluid, changeable and diverse (Richardson 2015; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Carabine 2004; Weeks 2003; Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2001). Social constructionists are also concerned with sexual identity and social meanings in relation to sexuality, espousing a shift away from the essentialist emphasis on sexual activity (Weeks 2003).

Two broad criticisms of the social constructionist standpoint in relation to sexuality are, first, the argument that shifting completely to the position that sexuality is the product of social, cultural and historic forces will deny/ignore the role of the body in shaping sexuality (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2001; Bordo 1998, 1993). Many critics recognise the importance of incorporating the body within social construction theories of sexuality but the challenge is to be able to do so without returning to essentialism (Jackson and Scott 2007; Vance 1989). The second criticism concerns the agency people have to resist repressive influences governing their sexuality and, as referred to earlier in Section 3.2.3.2, the degree of 'choice' individuals may exercise in (re)constructing themselves (Vance 1989).

Both issues are very pertinent to older women within the context of the biomedical anti-ageing industry and the repressive stereotypes of sexuality in later life.

The generic response to the essentialist epistemological framing of sexuality from social constructionists has been the analysis and problematising of the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality and their interrelationships (Richardson 2015). These concepts will now be considered using contributions predominantly from feminist approaches taking into account influences from both post modernism and post structuralism, namely the work of Foucault (1991 [1977], 1990 [1977]) and Butler (2011 [1993], 2006 [1990]).

3.3.4 Sex/Gender and Sexuality

3.3.4.1 Introduction

As a response to essentialist understandings, social constructionists have analysed the concepts of sex/gender and sexuality on three main levels: (inter)personal, cultural and structural. Feminism has been central to these debates (Dunk West and Brook 2015). Prior to the 'cultural turn' and the influence of post-modernism and queer theory, feminist theorists challenged the naturalist approach by predominantly linking the construction of sex/gender and sexuality to encompassing structures such as patriarchy and capitalism (Rahman and Jackson 2010). This resulted in meta-narratives.²² The latter has been challenged by post-modernist claims that society is fragmented, fluid and diverse, and this has shifted the focus of analysis and understanding towards historical and cultural practices, in particular the role of language and discourse, in their construction. Many feminists have criticised this shift as it gives too much weight to cultural norms over that of material and structural inequality, which they maintain provide foundation to the discursive analysis of gender and sexuality (McLaughlin et al 2006; Jackson 2001; Hennessy 2000). The significant contributions made by feminist theorists to the field have been to problematise heterosexuality, challenge traditional gender assumptions, and consider sexuality as more than a 'private' issue by locating it in both the public and political realm (Richardson 1997).

²² Contemporary work using the approach where gender constitutes sexuality has moved away from attempting to produce meta-narratives and focuses on the complexities of the relationship between gender and sexuality. This involves considering both, the different levels of society in relation to social construction (Jackson 2005, 1999) and the types of sexualities that are involved (Richardson 2007).

3.3.4.2 Sex/Gender divide

Positioning sex and gender respectively as representing the biological/anatomical differences between male and female, and the cultural, psychological and social differences between male and female (see also Oakley 1972) was an immense conceptual breakthrough for feminism (Scott and Jackson 2013). Although keeping some links with essentialism it enabled feminist theorists to argue that the gendered social roles with their inherently related inequality (Oakley 1972) were not 'naturally' fixed. De Beauvoir had acknowledged the process of 'becoming gendered' many years previously in her seminal book exploring the oppression of women where she stated, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1997 [1949], p259). How a person 'becomes' a gender is a site of theoretical debate, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.3.4.3. The biological/social division of sex/gender has been successfully challenged through authentic argument that bodily sex differences can only be named and discussed through an understanding of the gender (Butler 2011 [1993]; Butler 2006 [1990]; Delphy 1984). Therefore sex differences are socially constructed, in other words, gender constructs sex (Richardson 2015). This is now the generally accepted position within social constructionism and the sex/gender binary is perceived as unhelpfully maintaining a link with essentialism (Rahman and Jackson 2010).

3.3.4.3 Gender and sexuality

Owing to the interrelationship of gender and sexuality it is difficult to consider the social construction of one without invoking some connection, however small, with the other. Situating both concepts within one section will allow flexibility to continue the discussion, if connections demand it. Having previously considered the significance and definitions of sexuality, the review now turns to a discussion of gender and its inter-relationship with sexuality.

Feminist gender theory challenges essentialist views by not only identifying ways that gender is socially and culturally defined but also how these 'attributes' of 'becoming and being' a man or woman are linked to power and inequality respectively. From this viewpoint gender is regarded as a social division (Abbott 2013; Rahman and Jackson 2010). This view differs from queer theorists who perceive gender as a cultural distinction (McLaughlin 2006). Criticism of feminism's gender role theory, where the practices and values of a particular gender are learnt through socialisation, has been forthcoming due to the view that it is over-deterministic and gives no recognition to people who resist or challenge gender norms and expectations. The theory also fails to take account of both the

diversities within the gender binary and the development of 'genders' outside of the binary (Rahman and Jackson 2010). An important contribution to the debates around gender has been the work of Butler (2011 [1993], 2006 [1990]) and her concept of 'performativity'. For Butler, performativity captures the continuous process of 'doing gender' and differs from merely expressing gender 'norms' to producing or constructing what it is to be a 'woman' or a 'man'. Gender is regarded as an unstable concept, needing to be repeatedly performed, which in turn restates its 'naturalness'. However the 'repeat' enactments do not necessarily produce the ideal woman or man, and the gaps and incongruences, together with its inherent instability, enable people to exercise resistance and perform subversions of the gender binary (Butler 2006 [1990]).

One of the main criticisms of Butler's position is its overemphasis on the cultural and discursive aspects of gender and sexuality resulting in a neglect of the material and structural inequalities and subsequent constraints on the exercise of agency (Hennessey 2000; Jackson 1999; Walby 1997).²³ The challenge presented by Butler 2006 [1990] and queer theory to the politics of identity and the use of 'essentialised' categories such as 'woman' leads critics to maintain that lived experiences of difference and gendered inequalities are denied (Jackson 1999), and that the analysis of structural identities are thwarted (Gunnarsson 2011). It is important that any continued consideration of gender incorporates issues of diversity, resistance, agency, and embodiment whilst also analysing gender's intersection with other social divisions (Richardson 2015).

There are three main theoretical positions with regards to the relationship between gender and sexuality. First, sexuality is regarded as establishing gender (see also Ingraham 1996; MacKinnon 1982). Second, gender is seen as determining sexuality (see also Jackson 2005, 1999). Third, gender and sexuality are regarded as analytically two separate, yet related, domains (see also Sedgwick 2008 [1990]; Rubin 2007 [1984]; Butler 2006 [1990]). The first two positions are located within differing feminist approaches where gender and sexuality are analysed together. The third position represents the challenge from queer theorists who advocate analysing sexuality and gender separately, and disputes the stability of the relationship between the two concepts (Richardson 2015). Queer theorists claim that maintaining the relationship between gender and sexuality constrains and

²³ Butler (1997, p265) did address this criticism by acknowledging that sexuality could not be viewed as "merely" cultural", but is criticised further for reducing the structural aspects to capitalism and class relations and ignoring gendered non-capitalist processes such as women's domestic labour and childrearing (Rahman and Jackson 2010).

over-simplifies understandings within the field in a way that fails to recognise diversities and sexualities that are not associated with 'normally respective' genders. Within this research project the position that gender constitutes sexuality is taken for a number of reasons. First, older women's experiences of sexuality are predominantly gendered due particularly to the influence of Viagra and the medicalisation of sexuality, which has a heterosexist and male defined focus (Loe 2004). Second, gender is central to developing understandings of the impact of heteronormativity on all people regardless of sexual orientation (Carabine 2004). For example older people are often denied the right or ability to be sexual but at the same time are assumed to have a heterosexual identity (Carabine 2004). The standpoint of gender constituting sexuality therefore contributes to the coherency of the research study, which uses sexuality as a lens through which to explore the intersection between age and gender.

3.3.4.4 Gender, sexuality and power

Power is a central concept for feminist theorists in their analysis of gender and sexuality, particularly for those theorists who regard gender as a social division in which differences equate with inequalities. Considering age as a social division (Vincent and Phillips 2013) constitutes an even further complexity in relation to power. The link between power and older people's sexuality is evidenced in the way it is influenced by both biomedical 'knowledges' and the cultural equating of sexuality to the youthful domains of beauty, desire and attraction (Gott 2005).

Feminist theorists have regarded power and domination as central to the construction of male and female sexuality and have argued that the operation of power, namely male power, is through a patriarchal system (Richardson 1997). There have been opposing approaches within feminist thought regarding the location of male power, as being based either within social institutions or with men themselves. The concept of patriarchy has been criticised for its implied universality and subsequent inflexibility to respond to the complexities and fluidities of gender (Abbott 2013) and its relationship to sexuality. Additionally an overemphasis on patriarchy led to a neglect of the influences of other social divisions, in particular class and race/ethnicity, which gave rise to further power inequalities, not only between men and women but also between different women or groups of women (Richardson 2015).

Further criticism of a model of universal 'top-down' power, as proposed by the advocates of patriarchy, comes from post-modernism and in particular the work of Foucault (1990 [1977]). Foucault locates power, not in social institutions and

particular groups (i.e. patriarchy and men), but in everyone everywhere, effectively embedding power into everyday practices and relationships and at all levels (historical, social, cultural and personal) of society. Power is diffused and embodied in discourse as opposed to being located either in a person or a structure.²⁴ In relation to sexuality Foucault claims that the discourse around heterosexuality creates not only boundaries in terms of normality/abnormality, but also generates positions for people in terms of identity and how people make sense of themselves. Within the normalisation boundaries, discourses have in effect produced rather than repressed sexuality.²⁵ The extent of disruption that a dominant discourse experiences from 'counter' discourses depends on the amount of power attached to the latter.

An example is the difference in power between medical/biological discourses in relation to older women's sexuality and the discourses espoused by older women. Interestingly in relation to ageing and sexuality there are two prevailing discourses, that of asexuality or having a 'youthfully defined' sexuality. It is the latter which is the countervailing discourse and the debate is how much it has successfully disrupted the dominant discourse, or is the experience of having different and contradictory discourses as a context for older people's sexuality equally oppressive, a point noted in Section 1.2. In relation to older people, and in particular older women, Foucault also recognises the use of silence within the construction of a discourse. Silence, being an active element of constructing discourse, is particularly relevant to the asexual discourse and the predominant invisibility of older women and older women's sexuality. Although the dominant discourses in relation to sexuality transmit and produce power, they can also be undermined, exposed and challenged. Foucault maintains that the construct of sexuality is fragile and that power through alternative discourse can be transformative offering "a point of resistance and a starting point for opposing strategy" (Foucault 1990, p101).

²⁴ It is important to note the Foucauldian meaning of 'discourse' as confusion can arise in the common usage of the word to mean a spoken exchange between people (Burr 1995). For Foucault 'discourse' relates to groups of systematic and coherent 'statements' that can be made up of texts, speech or images. These groups of statements provide language for discussion and represent knowledge about a particular topic. Discourses are dominant ways of framing knowledge and constructing a topic that come to represent the 'truth' and rendering anything discussed outside of that discourse as meaningless.

²⁵ Foucault viewed the Victorian period as one where there was a 'discursive explosion' around sexuality where many of the modern ideas of Western sexuality were born (Weeks 2003).

Criticisms of Foucault's model of power and discursive construction of sexuality include the view that discourse can present itself as a 'micro' narrative and for change to happen the question is how many of these 'reverse discourses' are needed (Abbot 2013). Related to this is the risk of neglecting the material, economic and structural influences in the operation of power (Hall 2001) as well as a risk of presenting people as passive victims of discourse (Carabine 2004).

3.3.5 Heterosexuality

Any consideration of sexuality within Western society would not be complete without some discussion of heterosexuality. Although heterosexuality has been referred to in the previous discussions it is pertinent to discuss in more detail its presentation, impact and challenges that have advanced understandings of this monolithic entity.

3.3.5.1 Presentation and impact

Heterosexuality is constructed as a naturally coherent and fixed sexual identity, which embodies universal normal sexual development (Scott and Jackson 2013; Richardson 2000). It is premised on gender divisions (Scott and Jackson 2013; Rahman and Jackson 2010, Richardson 2000) and promotes not only the assumption that men and women's sexualities are naturally heterosexual, but also the gendered expectations that comes with each (Dunk West and Brook 2015). Although it is not consciously adopted as an identity, many gendered social/sexual roles emanate from it such as, husband and wife, which then place emphasis on being 'properly' feminine or masculine (Rahman and Jackson 2010). Although it presents itself as immovable, heterosexuality does allow for a diversity of meanings and social arrangements, with evidence that some heterosexual people are pursuing alternative lifestyles (Rahman and Jackson 2010; Richardson 2000). For example, older heterosexual people pursuing 'living-apart-together' [LAT] lifestyles with their sexual partners.²⁶ It has in the past been suggested that although there is a broad spectrum of 'doing heterosexuality' there exists a heterosexual normativity primarily valuing married heterosexual people, who engage privately in penile-vaginal sexual intercourse (Rubin 2007 [1984]). Some

²⁶ 'Living-apart-together' (LAT) relationships refer to lasting sexual relationships where the partners live separately. Research in Sweden found that this was a popular type of relationship with older people, in particular older women, where a significant amount of autonomy can be retained (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003).

would argue that this perception still exists with lone mothers in particular being vilified and valued less (Carabine 2004). Paradoxically, without obviously being visible, heterosexuality influences and structures people's lives. Its importance is overlooked (Scott and Jackson 2013) due mostly to its 'taken for granted' status and its treatment "as an unquestioned paradigm" (Richardson 2000, p19).

Making heterosexuality visible is about examining its impact and the forms that impact takes place. An important starting point is examining the concept of heteronormativity, that is, the way heterosexuality is institutionalised in practice, relationships, family structure and identity (Carabine 2004; Cronin 2004; Richardson 2000). Western societies are structurally organised on the basis of a "belief that heterosexuality is biologically, psychologically and sociologically superior to other forms of sexuality" (Cronin 2004, p110). This suggests that heterosexuality is relational to 'non-heterosexual' sexualities and has the power to construct, through its ideal of married monogamous heterosexual relationships, what is acceptable sexuality. As the hegemonic form of sexuality, heterosexuality, through its institutionalisation, structurally marginalises 'non-heterosexual' sexualities, as well as placing constraints on heterosexual people (Rahman and Jackson 2010, 2004). From this it can therefore be surmised that the social ordering of sexuality is based on two forms of social divisions and their related oppressions, that of heterosexuality/'non-heterosexuality' and normal/marginalised, and men/women and dominance/subordination (Scott and Jackson 2013). This results in two distinct forms of inequality, which intersect with other social divisions such as age and disability.

As well as impacting on people's gender, sexual identity, and sexual desires/attractions, heterosexuality also influences what is regarded as 'normal' and acceptable sexual practices and behaviour (Scott and Jackson 2013; Richardson 2000). Heterosexuality dominates the definition of 'having sex' through its construction of normative sexual practice as penile-vaginal intercourse. Not only is this a male defined view of sexual practices in that it excludes for women the role of the clitoris but also it serves to regulate and shutdown diversity in relation to sexual expression.²⁷ This latter point impacts significantly on older people who may

²⁷ A UK based qualitative research project with young men and women entitled 'Women, Risk and Aids; Men, Risk and Aids' (Holland et al 1998, 1991, 1990) found that 'sex' was equated with penile-vaginal penetration and that young women found it difficult to assert the different ways that gave them sexual pleasure. The young women in the project experienced double standards and male defined views of sexuality, which made it difficult for them to express their desires.

want to reject using Viagra to maintain 'having sex', and are redefining sexual practices and expressions in a broader way that suits their situations.

3.3.5.2 Challenges to heterosexuality

The main challenge to the institution of heterosexuality has focused on the predominantly essentialist claim that heterosexual partnerships are natural. This has then acted as a basis for exposing the power dynamics within heterosexuality vis-a-vis regulation of sexuality and the maintenance of gender inequality. Although heterosexuality has been a site of theoretical disagreement amongst feminists, there has been a general consensus that it is socially constructed (Scott and Jackson 2013; Richardson 2000). Early feminists viewed heterosexuality as compulsory, neither natural nor chosen, but "imposed, managed, organised, propagandised and maintained by force" (Rich 1980, p648). There is more acceptability currently for 'non-heterosexual' identities subsequently challenging the compulsory aspect of heterosexuality, nevertheless it can still be argued that it is more than a sexual 'preference' in that it is an institution that pervades many aspects of people's lives (Seidman 2009). The important contribution from early feminist theorists was the suggested fragility of heterosexuality, and its need for structural and cultural 'support' from societies (Dunk West and Brook 2015). Raising the issue of the fragility or instability of heterosexuality as a socially constructed and supported institution laid the groundwork for the analysis by queer theorists (see also Butler 2006 [1990]) of the instability of the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Scott and Jackson 2013).

Both Butler (2006 [1990]) and Foucault (1990 [1977]) challenged the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality and claimed that its normativity depended on 'different' sexual orientations being labelled as 'other' or 'outsiders'. Although both theorists recognised the power of hegemonic heterosexual discourses, for Butler (2006 [1990]) the instability of heterosexuality lay in challenging heteronormativity, which she claimed as a gendered and homophobic system based on the hierarchical opposites of male/female, man/woman, and heterosexual/homosexual. Butler's notion of performativity in relation to gender (discussed in Section 3.3.4.3) is also relevant in relation to heterosexuality in that it needs to be repeatedly performed in order to maintain its 'naturalness'. It is the resistance to performing the 'normal' gender roles that challenges the 'naturalness', and subsequently has the potential to destabilise entities such as heterosexuality. In contrast to Butler, Foucault regards sexuality, and in particular homosexuality, as male and does not regard sexuality as gendered (Richardson 1997). Foucault's (1990 [1977], 1991 [1977]) analysis of sexuality concentrates on its construction and establishment, together with how it is regulated. Discourse, as noted in Section 3.3.4.4, is the central

mechanism of social construction, and by which heterosexuality is defined, constructed and established. Crucially for Foucault, through the process of normalisation, disciplinary power is implemented and sexualities are controlled. This regulation takes place both explicitly through laws/policies, and implicitly through what is and is not acceptable and 'normal' sexual behaviour. The complexity of discourses can be seen by the way that heterosexuality is mediated and intersects with other, predominantly essentialist, discourses around such issues as race, age and disability. For example: black people can be viewed as hyper-sexed and lacking in sexual control; older people viewed as asexual; and disabled people viewed as incapable of sex, sexually vulnerable and/or needing control (Bywater and Jones, R. 2007; Carabine 2004). Foucault (1990 [1977]) raises an important issue in that although heterosexuality is the norm, what constitutes as heterosexuality is constantly evolving. Heterosexuality is influenced by its historical and cultural context implying that it can be contested and challenged and has therefore a degree of instability. For Foucault (1991 [1977]) sexuality is a site of power, which could be liberated as well as regulated, a source of knowledge, and a powerful means of resistance.

Feminist theorists have taken many of the above ideas but have also maintained a concern for the intersection of sexuality and gender and the way that heterosexual relations bolster male dominance (Scott and Jackson 2013; Jackson and Scott 2010; Jackson 2006). The broader social inequalities between genders, particularly within the institution of heterosexuality, are recognised as impacting negatively on women's choices relating to their sexual relationships and sexual expression (Scott and Jackson 2013). Although feminists have and continue to disagree on how heterosexuality should be analysed the position taken in this research is one of "analytical distinction between gender, as the hierarchical relationship between men and women, and heterosexuality, as a specific institutionalised form of that relationship" (Rahman and Jackson 2010, p88). Another important aspect is the need to bring into an analysis other social divisions and how they intersect with gender and heterosexuality.

3.3.6 Messages from the review on sexuality: a way forward

In this review focusing on the analysis of the concept of sexuality, the following key points can be highlighted. First, when considering the definitions of sexuality, a feminist/social constructionist approach was used to criticise the essentialist view and to advocate for a broad and inclusive definition. This was found to be invaluable later in the study, when the older women participants discussed a wide and diverse range of sexual practices. Second, the relationship between sex/gender and sexuality was explored, where the position of gender constituting

sexuality was espoused in relation to this research. Third, using a predominantly feminist approach, heterosexuality was analysed in terms of its dominance, impact and ordering of sexuality. The processes of heteronormativity were explored and, in particular, how the parameters of 'normal' sexual behaviour, practices, relationships, desires and identity are defined. This is of particular relevance to all older women, who, as can be seen in the studies reviewed in Section 4.2 together with the findings in Chapters 7 and 8, were trying to redefine sexuality for themselves, which frequently challenged 'normality'. Finally, the review argues strongly throughout that sexuality is socially constructed and made up of two social divisions, that of orientation and gender. These divisions are based on distinct forms of inequality and therefore any analysis of sexuality has to take account of power. It is argued within this review that, to a significant extent, the location and use of power resides within discourses. This is particularly pertinent in relation to older women's sexuality, which is constructed through, and constrained by, the discursive binary of asexual/'sexy oldie'.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter was a conceptual/theoretical literature review, which focused on ageing, gender and sexuality. Throughout the review a feminist/social constructionist approach was used to critically appraise the concepts. In Section 3.2 after an introductory discussion on older age, ageing and gender were critically evaluated as an intersection, using relevant theoretical literature. In Section 3.3 the definitions and theoretical approaches in relation to sexuality were discussed, together with the interrelationship between sex/gender and sexuality. The aim of this literature review was to clarify the terminological and theoretical positions taken within this research. The messages from the reviews concluding Sections 3.2 and 3.3 have been summarised as follows, demonstrating how they have influenced the direction of the study:

- A feminist/social constructionist approach to ageing and sexuality has been used throughout this thesis. This has enabled the use of an intersectional lens specifically to investigate the age/gender intersection.
- This approach to sexuality supports a wide definition of the concept as well as offering a critical analysis of heterosexuality. This has been useful for this study in terms of investigating the way that older women's sexuality is constrained by the dominant discourses of asexual/'sexy oldie'.
- The use of the affirmative model of ageing has enabled nuanced and contradictory experiences to be identified. In turn, this has challenged the 'either/or' binary models of ageing and sexuality in relation to older women.
- The analysis and discussion of the data have sought out and identified both

structural influences on older women through the age/gender intersection as well as the individual influences where older women have been able to exercise agency.

CHAPTER 4: EMPIRICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL LITERATURE REVIEW: OLDER WOMEN AND SEXUALITY, AND RESEARCHING AGEING AND SEXUALITY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The critical summaries presented in the empirical/methodological review cover two areas. These are the extant knowledge with regards to older women and sexuality, and the issues and challenges of researching ageing and sexuality. Although presented in two separate sections, the areas are interlinked in that both have an empirical and qualitative focus, whilst informing different aspects of the research study, that of content and method. In each section the developing and increasing interest in ageing and sexuality is identified along with the beginnings of a qualitative 'turn' within research in this field. Subsequently the dominance of quantitative methods and its propensity to narrowly define sexuality is challenged. The structural context of ageing and sexuality, particular in relation to the dominant discourses of asexual and 'sexy oldie', are recognised in terms of their influence on the content and direction of empirical research.

Section 4.2 focuses on older women's sexuality and presents the contribution that an identified body of qualitative research has made to four aspects of sexuality, namely: sexual desires and practices; sexual relationships; ageing sexual body; and sexual orientation. In Section 4.3 methodological issues in relation to qualitatively researching ageing and sexuality are summarised from a body of relevant literature. Reviewing what was known about the practice of researching sexuality with older people was a necessary and important step in informing the methodology of this research study. The key issues are critically discussed under three themes: first, the type and focus of research that has been undertaken in the past and the subsequent agenda for future research; second, the contextual issues involved in the research; and third, issues of method. Conclusions are drawn from the themes relating to the nature, direction and focus of the research study in question.

4.2 OLDER WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

4.2.1 Ageing and sexuality: developing interest

The move away from regarding older people as asexual was discussed in Chapter 1, and has been paralleled by an increase in the information available for older people with regards to sexual issues through a range of different accessible channels such as general media and, increasingly, websites. Other sources of

information have been books using the voices of older people narrating their own experiences of sexuality (see also Fishel and Hotzberg 2009; Barusch 2008). Academically there has been an increasing interest in ageing and sexuality, with journals devoting special editions to the area (see also Bouman and Kleinplatz 2015; Hillman 2011; de Vries 2009; Phanjoo 2002). In an editorial of *The Journal of Sex Research*, van Lankveld (2012) claimed that interest in sexuality in later life was continuing and was now becoming part of the future sex research agenda. This general shift supported the view that sexuality was becoming integral to the lives of older people.

In spite of this increased recognition, a review of gerontological journals from 1988 to 2007 found that out of 21,000 articles only 66 focused on sexuality with 31 of these focused on sexual orientation with no specific mention of sexuality (Scherrer 2009). The key issues identified from the content of the literature sample for the review included: the continuing need for articles to assert the importance and relevance of sexuality in later life; the “privileging of the role of sexual identity for understanding the sexual experiences of older adults” to the cost of other aspects of sexuality (Scherrer 2009, p8); and that sexuality in later life is culturally, medically and socially regulated (Scherrer 2009). This review concluded that there was a paucity of research being published in gerontology journals and that the key issues tended to make older people’s sexuality ‘special’, overly concentrated on lesbian and gay (non-sexual) experiences, and within the context of issues such as Viagra and residential care.

In contrast to the increased interest in ageing and sexuality there continues to be significant omissions in official policy documents, evidencing an on-going structural support for silence around older people and sexuality (DeLamater 2012; Gott 2005). Although omissions in earlier British strategies for services for older people of sexual issues and vice versa were identified (Gott 2005), more recent examples of the exclusion of older people can be found in relation to World Health Organisation reports regarding sexual health programmes (WHO 2010a, 2010b), and the exclusion of sexuality issues from older age strategies in America (DeLamater 2012).

4.2.2 Ageing and sexuality: before Viagra

To assess the influence of the medicalisation of sex, and in particular Viagra, on the discourses around ageing and sexuality, it is worth considering messages from research in the pre-Viagra era, that is, before 1998. Large-scale seminal studies by Kinsey et al (1953, 1948) and Masters and Johnson (1970, 1966) recognised the importance of sexuality throughout the life-course, although findings point to a gradual decline in sexual activity and interest. It was further identified that sexuality

was one of the last aspects of life to 'decline' in relation to the ageing process (Kaplan 1990, 1974). Reviewing earlier studies, Trudel et al (2000) summarised that older people remained sexually active, despite changes in type of sexual activity, its frequency, and people's sexual interests and fantasies. Earlier studies also challenged the essentialist view of biologically driven transitions relating to sexuality by demonstrating that older people's sexual behaviour was influenced by a range of physical, psychological and social factors, and linked to the influence of sexual attitudes and early life sexual behaviour (Trudel et al 2000). Ageist attitudes and culturally driven ideas about ageing and sexuality also acted as barriers for older people wanting to develop a sexual self in later life (Hillman and Stricker 1994; Parke 1991). Support was also growing amongst some researchers to challenge the heterosexist and reductionist focus on penile-vaginal penetration. Subsequently research aims became more inclusive by broadening the definition of 'sex' and considering a range of orientations (Deacon et al 1995), a point discussed earlier in Section 3.3.2. Arguably, taken together, this literature presented a strong body of empirical research that challenged the asexuality of older people. Also within this body there were challenging and radical ideas in terms of anti-essentialist perceptions of sexuality together with a push towards a redefinition of 'sex' in order to develop an inclusive research agenda. This agenda was at best delayed, at worst regarded as irrelevant, with the advent of Viagra.

4.2.3 Ageing and sexuality: overview of empirical quantitative research

The developing recognition of a sexually active older age and the subsequent establishment of the 'sexy oldie' discourse has been predominantly influenced by a combination of, the availability and popularity of Viagra, and the 'successful' ageing 'project' (Marshall 2006; Katz and Marshall 2004). As acknowledged in Chapter 1, this socio-cultural change was reflected in the increase of empirical research within the field of sexuality in later life.

Over the last decade or so there have been many large quantitative studies regarding ageing and sexuality, whose focus have included: sexual well being across 29 countries (Laumann et al 2006); sexuality and health (Lindau et al 2007); sexual dysfunction (Laumann et al 2008); sexual partnerships, practices, attitudes and problems (Waite et al 2009); sexual behaviour (Herbenick et al 2010); and, sex, romance and relationships (American Association of Retired Persons 2010). Alongside America, other countries have been engaged in similar research, such as Germany (Beutel et al 2007), Finland (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 2009) and Spain (Palacios-Cena et al 2012). The key findings to come out of this body of studies is that older people still have sexual desires and interests, and engage in sexual activity, which provides substantial evidence of the existence of a sexual

self in later life. Longitudinal studies have also taken place in Australia (Hyde et al 2010; Ferris et al 2008), and in Sweden (Beckman et al 2008). In the latter study between 1971 and 2001, four different birth cohorts of older people in their 70s were asked about sexual activity, attitudes, problems and marital satisfaction. The findings suggested that older people from the later cohorts expressed generally more satisfaction and fewer problems in relation to their sexual selves and more positive attitudes towards sexuality in later life, than earlier cohorts (Beckman et al 2008). Within Britain a recent piece of quantitative research was undertaken with over six thousand people between the ages of fifty and ninety (Lee et al 2016). Using questionnaires the participants were asked about their attitudes, concerns, and relationships, as well as frequency of sexual activity and behaviour. The key findings showed that: poorer health was associated with lower levels of sexual activity and higher levels of sexual problems; high levels of sexual desire and activity gave rise to a sense of well being; and, although levels of sexual activity declined with age “a sizeable minority of men and women remain sexually active until the eighth and ninth decades of life” (Lee et al 2016, p133). Despite evidence demonstrating a ‘developing’ sexuality in older age, these studies do have limitations, chiefly relating to the emphasis on heterosexuality and frequency of sexual activity together with issues around the language and definitions of sexuality (Hinchcliff and Gott 2016). As noted in Chapter 1 many quantitative studies, particularly within a biomedical/health context, have focused on ageing and sexuality within a ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘problematic’ paradigm. This body of literature runs counter to the ‘sexy oldie’ discourse by contributing “to the stereotype that later life is a time of diminished or no sexual activity” (Delamater 2012, p134).

4.2.4 Ageing and sexuality: an introduction to qualitative research

Whilst quantitative research does to a large extent raise the profile of older people’s sexuality, the generalised knowledge produced is limited. A more diverse and nuanced understanding of ageing and sexuality needed to be developed challenging the binary of asexual/‘sexy oldie’ (Sandberg 2013b), and qualitative research was best placed to achieve this aim. Just over a decade ago a small number of qualitative studies challenged the dominance of the binary by presenting the views and experiences of older people as well as defining sexuality in a wider sense (see also Loe 2004; Gott and Hinchcliff 2003b; Ley et al 2002; Jones, R.L. 2002; Van der Geest 2001). The main common ground relating to this body of knowledge was that researchers had more contact with older participants through the data collection methods and the studies moved away from the narrow and biomedical definitions of sexuality. For example van der Geest (2001) viewed sexuality in a holistic sense taking into account the influences of social, cultural and biological factors. These influences were reflected in the diversity of views on

sexuality expressed by research participants. Jones, R.L. (2002) used a narrative approach to explore how women's stories of sex and sexuality were influenced by the way society constructs dominant myths around ageing and sexuality. Gott and Hinchliff (2003a) explored the value that older people placed on sex in later life and their findings supported a sexuality that is diverse, changeable, adaptable and fluid. This research also challenged the assumption that "if older people are not sexually active sex is not important to them" (Gott and Hinchliff 2003a, p1626). As noted in Chapter 1, this is a growing body of literature, which has become established in challenging some of the disadvantages of quantitative research, as well as the essentialist heteronormative context within which sexuality in later life is often framed.

4.2.5 Older women's sexuality: what is known qualitatively?

The remainder of this literature review considers qualitative research in more depth with a particular focus on older women's sexuality. The reason for this is because, as acknowledged in previously (see Chapters 1 and 3), older women's sexuality is positioned in a particularly invisible way. This is due mainly to the 'sexy oldie' discourse's interrelationship with the masculine ideal in relation to heterosexuality (Loe 2004). This section is a consideration of the research studies, which are tabled in Appendices 20 and 21. Four main aspects of sexuality can be identified as the research areas of focus for the selected range of studies: sexual desires and practices; sexual relationships; ageing sexual body; and sexual orientation. Although these aspects of sexuality are presented separately in the discussion to follow, it is important to recognise that they are inter-related and the separation is to aid the structure of presentation rather than deny the connections. Other research studies (see Appendix 21 for details) were also reviewed but fell outside of the inclusion criteria. However some of this research is pertinent and is referred to as and when it is deemed relevant.

It is also worth noting a couple of methodological features of the studies, which raise questions about generalisability (see Appendix 20 for a more detailed breakdown of the research methods employed). The age range of the participants in most of the studies spans three to four decades, with many samples including women in their 50s (see also Fileborn et al 2015a, 2015b; Thorpe et al 2015; Lagana and Maciel 2010; Vares 2009; Hinchliff and Gott 2008; Heaphy 2007; Hurd

Clarke 2006; Heaphy et al 2004).²⁸ Over a period of 30 to 40 years there is considerable variation in socio-historic context (Gott and Hinchcliff 2003b) as well as general 'life-course' issues affecting women's experiences of their sexuality.²⁹ Although generalisability was not an aim for these studies, there is a danger that the women at the 'older' end of the samples are marginalised, particularly if quotations that are used to represent the voice of the participants are predominantly from women at the 'younger' end of the age range (see also Fileborn et al 2015a, 2015b; Moore 2010a; Hinchliff and Gott 2008; Heaphy et al 2004). This is compounded further if the sample is also particularly small (see Appendix 20). The majority of the researchers themselves identified the lack of socio-demographic diversity of their samples although a wide range of countries are represented within the body of research on which this section of the literature review is based.

4.2.5.1 Sexual desires and practices

Although the common focus of older women's sexual desires and practices connects this group of studies, each initiative approached this aspect of sexuality in a different way. In research involving older predominantly heterosexual women in Australia, two sets of findings (Fileborn et al 2015a, 2015b) were published, one for partnered, and the other for 'single' older women respectively. The research was led by the participants' subjective meanings and understandings of sex and sexual desires. The participants' experiences were explored within the context of their sexual relationships and there was a commitment from the researchers to challenge norms, whilst encouraging diversity. This was achieved by recognising that the findings might not fit into the binary of asexual/sexual expression of sexuality in later life, which the researchers claimed limited and silenced certain sexual experiences. In a study with Mexican-American older heterosexual women, the majority of whom were not partnered, Lagana and Maciel (2010) focused specifically on sexual desires, as this was viewed as a precursor to sexual

²⁸ Research within the discipline of 'health' defines 'older' chronologically as 50 years and over. Hinchcliff and Gott (2008, p70) recognise this by stating, "the term 'older people' has taken on this age categorization within sexual health research".

²⁹ Gott and Hinchliff (2003b) recognised the limitations of a wide age range where the attitudes and behaviours of participants in their 50s differ from those of participants in their 80s. It is difficult to ascertain whether 'age' or 'cohort' affects this.

activity.³⁰ Notably, this study explored with the participants the socio-cultural context that shaped and influenced their sexual desires and experiences. The two remaining studies (Hinchliff and Gott 2008; Jones, R.L. 2002) considered the discourses and narratives emanating from the asexual/sexual binary and explored the ways that older women discussed and negotiated their sexual desires and activities within this context. In Hinchliff and Gott's (2008) study the participants identified as heterosexual and over half of the sample was partnered, whereas in the research by Jones, R.L. (2002, p122) the participants were a "reasonably diverse group in terms of age, social class, sexual orientation and past and present sexual experience".

Within the findings of these studies key issues in relation to older women's sexual desires and practices were identified. The first key issue was that older women successfully used, manipulated and resisted the repressive stereotypes of the dominant cultural storyline in order to discuss their sexual desires and experiences in an open and candid manner (Jones, R.L. 2002). They also asserted the importance and need for sexual activities for their own pleasure and that of their partner(s) (Hinchliff and Gott 2008). When older women discussed their experiences of sexual practices, masturbation, and orgasms they conveyed to the researcher their awareness of challenging the asexual older woman storyline by stating, "am I shocking you" (Jones, R.L. 2002, p132) or "that's very rude I shouldn't be telling you that" (Jones, R.L. 2002, p130). Through interview conversations the participants demonstrated the complex relationships they had with the dominant and counter cultural storylines and used these effectively to emphasise their sexual agency and willingness to engage in talk about their sexual experiences (Jones, R.L. 2002). This complex relationship with the asexual/sexual binary was also identified by Hinchliff and Gott (2008) who found that the participants rejected the asexual stereotype for themselves but that some of the 'younger' participants tended to believe that sex was unimportant and of no interest to women who were older than them. Positioning themselves as women who desired sex and had sexual needs was a way that the participants challenged negative constructions of older women's sexuality.

Another key issue was the recognition that older woman's sexual desires and experiences were diverse, fluid, complex and paradoxical (Fileborn et al 2015a,

³⁰ Lagana and Maciel (2010) refer to the linear human sexual response cycle where sexual desire (which is comprised of fantasies about, and desires to engage in, sexual activity) is the first phase followed by arousal, orgasm and resolution. This is based on work by Masters and Johnson (1966) and Kaplan (1977).

2015b; Hinchcliff and Gott 2008). Older partnered women discussed sexual activity as something that ranged from regularly being part of their lives to not being engaged in at all. This however was not a static situation and sexual desire was described as something that was fluid, influenced primarily by contextual factors (Fileborn et al 2015a). For some of the participants the lack of sexual desire was met with feelings of both relief and loss. Other participants, who wanted sexual contact and whose male partners were finding penile-vaginal penetration difficult, felt both frustrated by the lack of heterosexual sexual intercourse and liberated by the removal of its expectation (Fileborn et al 2015a). Further contradictory feelings were highlighted in that older heterosexual women viewed sexual activity as both 'risky' and 'safe' (Hinchcliff and Gott 2008). For example, on the one hand sexual activity may only consist of penile-vaginal penetration with no prospect of a relationship, and on the other hand, it was regarded as an essential ingredient within a committed relationship. This tension between 'risk' and 'safety' was also found with 'single' older women who were being criticised for dating 'younger' men, and yet felt invisible sexually if they did not get involved in a sexual partnership (Fileborn et al 2015b). This is referred to in Section 3.2.5.

The final key issue concerns the claim that older women were more strongly dissuaded from acting on their sexual desires and needs by socio-cultural and religious traditions rather than by biological/hormonal changes and concerns (Lagana and Maciel 2010). Older women discussed having sexual desires and fantasies but their sexual needs remained unmet as a result of restricted social networks, religious views, and cultural opposition to women expressing their sexuality outside of marriage. These barriers together with poor physical health, lack of suitable partner, and a cultural stigma related to sexuality in later life, "emerged as critical issues associated with limited or no sexual fantasies and desire in our sample" (Lagana and Maciel 2010, p705). This latter study plays an important role in challenging the essentialist view that older women's sexuality is biologically determined in its 'decline'.

4.2.5.2 Sexual relationships

Older women's experiences of sexual relationships were approached in different ways and covered a diverse range of relationship statuses including: long-term relationships (Menard et al 2015; Moore 2010a; Hinchcliff and Gott 2004); widowhood/remarriage (Yun et al 2014; Watson et al 2010; Nyanzi 2011; Hurd Clark 2006); and dating (Fileborn et al 2015b; Malta and Farquharson 2014; Watson and Stelle 2011; Malta 2008). In contrast with the majority of the above-mentioned research, the findings of three studies (Menard et al 2015; Malta 2008;

Hinchliff and Gott 2004), which have been included in this discussion were presented in a gender neutral way.

Research involving long-term relationships focused on: the transformation and changes of sexuality with age, emphasising sexual expression, feelings and gender roles (Moore 2010a); the importance and meaning of being sexually active with a long-term partner and whether this context enables any changes in sexuality that may come with ageing (Hinchliff and Gott 2004); and an exploration of the ingredients for “great sex” (Menard et al 2015, p81). The research based in Japan (Moore 2010a) explored older heterosexual women’s sexual feelings within the context of traditional gender roles, where women are encouraged to express their sexuality in a restrained way.³¹ The participants maintained that the culturally sanctioned sexual relationships that their husbands had engaged in outside of marriage had hastened their disinterest in acting on their own sexual desires.³² Many claimed that their marital relationship had become more like a sibling relationship where they viewed their husbands in a desexualised way. Some of the older women had regained a degree of non-sexual intimacy with their husbands together with growing confidence in asserting what they wanted from the marital relationship. More importance was placed on women friends and pursuing sensuous leisure activities than the relationship with their husband. Older women in the study spoke of the presence of sexual desire, but they tended to be either divorced or single (Moore 2010a). Conversely Hinchliff and Gott’s (2004) UK-based research with heterosexual couples who had been married for a minimum of twenty years, revealed that sexual activity between partners was regarded as important and beneficial for themselves and their relationship. The couples discussed changes, which prevented them from continuing to engage in penile-vaginal penetration, such as health issues or erectile dysfunction, but also how they were able to respond positively by expressing their sexual feelings in other ways. This enabled ‘sex’ to be viewed in a wider sense and demonstrated that their long-term relationships were both dynamic and enduring.

Continuing the theme of a sexually active long-term relationship, Menard et al

³¹ The researcher claimed that the women’s restrained sexuality made undertaking the research difficult as some of the women felt it to be inappropriate to talk about sex, sexual expression and sexuality referring to the latter as “it” (sore), “those things” (sō iu koto), “those kinds of relations” (sō iu kankei), or “relations between men and women” (danjo kankei)” (Moore 2010a, p157)

³² Japanese society culturally sanctioned men of the current older generation to express their sexuality publicly through engaging in sexual services and extra-marital affairs.

(2015) undertook a study with a sample of older people who had been in their relationships for over twenty-five years and claimed to be having “great sex”. The participants represented a range of different sexual orientations as well as a significant minority living with a disability/chronic illness. This study tends to buck the trend by focusing on optimal sexual experiences, as opposed to sexual dysfunction. The findings indicated that a combination of maturity, personal growth and depth of relationship enabled the participants to dispense with oppressive sexual scripts and redefine their “sexuality per se beyond genital functionality and the imperative of penetration” (Menard et al 2015, p. 91). The major contribution of this study is that it demonstrated that “great sex was something that had developed over a lifetime” (Menard et al 2015, p83), in other words, sexuality in later life was viewed within a developmental model.

Research in relation to older women’s experiences of sexuality within the context of widowhood was undertaken with women in Uganda (Nyanzi 2011) and South Korea (Yun et al 2014). The studies contrast substantially due to the different socio-cultural context, with sexuality among widows in Uganda being “highly contested and often socially condemned” (Nyanzi 2011, p380), whereas in South Korea attitudes tended to be less oppressive encouraging older women to hold more liberal attitudes and thoughts towards their sexuality (Yun et al 2014). The Ugandan research study found that widowhood was a gendered experience. The sexuality of older widows was controlled on both a personal and cultural level because sexual activity was viewed through the lens of procreation, and any remarriage of older widows challenged this framing by linking sexual activity with pleasure (Nyanzi 2011). Many older widows remained celibate, as opportunities for a sexual relationship were limited to either remarriage or a levirate relationship.³³ The former had to be sanctioned by a widow’s children, who would only agree if there were obvious financial or support benefits, while the latter was being strongly resisted by many older widows. The participants claimed that other opportunities for sexual expression such as casual sexual relationships and masturbation were available only for widowers. The researcher also interviewed one older widow who was HIV positive who discussed the educational role that she and other older women played in relation to giving sexual health advice to younger people. This study demonstrated the constraints placed on older widows by the socio-cultural

³³ Bereaved women in Uganda are assigned a levirate (male) guardian and a female assistant who support her in raising her children. It is also the custom for the guardian to take over the widow and ensure she produces more children. Levirate marriages are forced marriages of a widow to her dead husband’s brother (Nyanzi 2011).

context and particularly the complexities vis-à-vis the different 'sexual' roles older widows were 'allowed' to occupy in order to exercise any sexual agency.

The aim of the South Korean study was to explore the meaning of sexuality in later life with a group of older heterosexual women. The women had lived alone for an average of fourteen years since the deaths of their husbands and had been 'dating' and sexually active for the last twelve months (Yun et al 2014). The participants gave accounts of a "process of recovering their femininity, self-achievement, and self-esteem" (Yun et al 2014, p474), which in turn enabled them to live their lives more independently. As well as describing positive aspects of being involved sexually with a person, such as enabling them to find another part of themselves, enjoying sexual feelings and expression, exhibiting their femininity, and feeling invigorated by life, the participants also discussed having the confidence to tackle the conflicts and tensions that arose. This included, concern about what other people thought, negotiating some of the cultural and physical barriers of sexual intimacy, and dealing with some of the losses and different expectations that arose with the relationship. The participants claimed "a happy sexuality in their later years was the reward for enduring a lonely and tedious single life for a long time, and managed to handle challenges by properly controlling their reason and emotions" (Yun et al 2014, p479).

Set against a very different cultural backcloth, Watson et al (2010) undertook research in America exploring issues of sexuality with older heterosexual women who had remarried. The important features of the participants' new relationships were romance, sexuality, and companionship. They described experiencing new feelings, "an unanticipated reawakening of sexuality" (Watson et al 2010, p306), and relational qualities that they had not had in their previous marriages. All the participants were surprised at how important and enjoyable the sexual component of their marriage had become, as they had tended to hold the view of an asexual, but companionable, later life relationship. An important issue for the participants was maintaining their independence, which involved negotiating between compromising for the relationship and preserving their sense of self. This resulted in a situation where "independence was not relinquished, but was redefined as interdependence, a balancing of connecting and separating" (Watson et al 2010, p309). Similar findings with regards to strong feelings of passion, sexual satisfaction and a discovery of "later-life sexual chemistry" were reported in another study with older women who had remarried (Hurd Clark 2006, p132). Many of the participants discussed the shift of importance away from penile-vaginal penetration, owing mainly to health issues, towards other ways of expressing love and affection. The research demonstrated the capacity of the participants to redefine their sexual needs and desires to complement the changes, resulting in

greater value being placed on hugging, kissing, cuddling and companionship.³⁴ This challenges the coital imperative dominating sexuality generally in that the older women viewed alternative ways of expression as a “welcome discovery in their later-life relationships and one that provided new opportunities and avenues for the expression of love and sexuality” (Hurd Clark 2006, p138).

Continuing the theme of new sexual relationships in later life, studies focusing on dating have examined the meanings for older heterosexual women (Watson and Stelle 2011), and the initiation and progression of heterosexual relationships within the context of dating (Malta and Farquharson 2014; Malta 2008). In a study exploring the experiences of older people of different ways of starting new sexual relationships, comparisons were made between on-line and face-to-face initiation and the impact for older men and women on the type of relationships that developed (Malta 2008). The findings indicated that relationships that started on line developed more quickly than those that began face to face, but that the latter were of a longer duration and more likely to become ongoing. Regardless of the type of initiation, all the relationships had become sexual within a short space of time. Findings regarding online dating from a broader study focusing on sexuality and single older women (Fileborn et al 2015b) suggested that some of the older women participants felt it offered them more convenience and control to find relationships on their own terms. However the majority felt that online dating highlighted gender differences and inequalities in older age, such as older men wanting younger partners. In another study on dating (Malta and Farquharson 2014), the participants indicated that for any new relationship to develop long-term it needed to acquire qualities of commitment, companionship, and sexual and emotional equality. As with earlier research (see also Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003, p48) the participants, in particular the heterosexual older women, were more likely to favour “Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships”, as a result of valuing their separateness, independence and freedom from caring for, and looking after, a male partner and not having to take up or return to traditional marriage roles (Malta and Farquharson 2014). There was recognition from the participants that relationships seemed easy to initiate and to terminate but, even within this context, for the participants whose new sexual relationships had ended there appeared to be no suggestion that the relationships had been unimportant.

Remaining with the topic of dating, a study by Watson and Stelle (2011) explored

³⁴ Butler and Lewis (1983, p180) contended that “athletics and ‘production’” are often replaced or complemented, in later-life relationships, by the “second language of sex”, which they maintained included strong feelings of tenderness, sensitivity, warmth, and thoughtfulness.

the meaning of dating as an end in itself, as opposed to viewing it as a step along the process towards a long-term relationship. Older heterosexual women who had experienced divorce, remarriage and bereavement, stated that dating, as well as being a route to remarriage/long term relationships, could provide companionship, fun, and opportunity for physical and sexual intimacy without any level of commitment (Watson and Stelle 2011). Sexual intimacy was viewed on a continuum from holding hands to penile-vaginal penetration, and many of the participants held an open mind from one dating situation to another about whether and how to act on their sexual desires. The older women recognised that dating had a different meaning for them in older age as the goal was fun rather than finding a life partner. They felt that through their life experiences and better self-knowledge they had become fussier regarding male partners. The research highlighted the importance of being satisfied with life which provided “a background that allows these women to enjoy dating, desire dating if the right man comes along, but to be content and satisfied with themselves and with their lives if they do not date in the future” (Watson and Stelle 2011, p272).

4.2.5.3 Ageing Sexual Body

The research on women’s bodies/body image and ageing has tended to involve women participants who are either in midlife or younger (see also Carter 2016; Sandberg 2013b; Montemurro and Gillen 2013; Lietchy 2012; Lietchy and Yarnal 2010; Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2007; Winterich 2007; Hurd Clark and Griffin 2008; Thompson et al 1999). These studies have however contributed to the understanding of women’s perspectives as they age and raised important points regarding ageing, gender and sexuality. Although reference will be made to this body of research the main focus of this section are studies that have undertaken research with older women in relation to body image, embodiment and ageing. This research includes: perceptions and feelings about ageing bodies (Krekula 2016; Krekula 2007; Slevin 2006; Hurd Clark 2001; Hurd 2000,); experiences and management of aesthetic body changes (Macia et al 2015); embodied experiences within the context of intimate relationships (Thorpe et al 2015); and the impact of media representation of ageing and sexuality (Vares 2009). Within some of the studies the connection between embodied ageing and sexuality was implicit with only one study referring specifically to ‘sexual body image’ defined “as the way women perceive their physical selves as sexually desirable and how they relate to their bodies during sexual activity” (Montemurro and Gillen 2013, p4). As desirability, attraction, and physical appearance are very much inter-related it could be argued that reference to women’s body image will always have a sexual component to a greater or lesser extent.

The Western cultural context in relation to ageing and the body gives rise to a range of tensions that older women have to continually negotiate. The main tension rests with the Western binary ideal that beauty is equated with being young, fit and slim, whilst ugliness is associated with being old, in decline and overweight. Research exploring older women's perceptions and feelings about their ageing bodies identified two key issues. First, older women coped with their sense of loss of physical attractiveness by emphasising their commitment to a healthy body (Hurd 2000). The shift towards valuing a healthy body, which in turn was viewed as attractive by some of the participants, suggested an attempt to redefine beauty in later life. It also enabled the older women to live with negative feelings towards their ageing bodies, whilst maintaining a sense of self-worth. As a consequence however the participants found that giving greater priority to maintaining a healthy body had made it more difficult to cope with any decline in their physical ability and much more difficult to deal with than the perceived loss of their beauty (Hurd 2000). Second, the research highlighted a range of strategies that older women employed in order to cope with the apparent disconnect between their 'ageing' body and 'youthful' self, that is, the outside/inside, body/mind split (Hurd Clarke 2001). The notion of ageing on the 'outside' (the body) but not the 'inside' (the mind) has been around in gerontology for some years (see also Featherstone and Hepworth 1991; Kaufman 2000 [1986]) and the research identified that the older women occupied two positions on the issue. These included one position of congruence with body and mind, and one position of incongruence, which was much more nuanced.³⁵

An example of avoiding personal discrimination was identified in a study of the different ways older French women managed aesthetic changes in relation to their bodies (Macia et al 2015). The study found that, on the one hand, the women accepted the changes whilst on the other they covered up the ageing process by using beauty products and cosmetic surgery. The use of anti-ageing products was complex as it depended on sufficient financial resources and whether the participant still thought of herself as attractive, that is, worth investing in. The older women were aware of the stigma of the ageing body and that looking old had moral undertones and suggestive of 'letting oneself go'. The participants stated that they partook of beauty work for the sake of other people in their lives so as not to appear selfish and to present the practice as a moral obligation.

³⁵ The position of incongruence varied from "youthful older adults...[who] feel like teenagers on the inside despite declining levels of health and functional abilities" (Hurd Clarke 2001, p458) to "the fighters...[who] struggle against the implications of having to appear young in order to avoid... discriminatory behaviour" (Hurd Clarke 2001, p459).

Research by Thorpe et al (2015) was more explicit in linking body image with sexuality and involved older women discussing their perceptions and feelings about their ageing bodies within the context of long-term and newer relationships. Familiarity, love and affection were viewed as a 'protection' against the ageing process within long-term relationships, as ageing bodies were reported as continuing to be perceived as desirable and attractive. The older women stated that, although there were aspects of their bodies that gave rise to feelings of dissatisfaction, these feelings dissipated within the context of the relationship where older bodies were seen as both flawed and desirable. For participants within newer relationships the findings suggested it was the perception of incompatibility between ageing female bodies and sexual desirability that needed to be challenged by the older women themselves. Once this 'barrier' was overcome, the accounts given by participants suggested that older bodies were viewed "as continuous with sensuality and pleasure, in contrast to the often taken for granted meaning of ageing as leading to loss of identity and attractiveness" (Thorpe et al 2015). This perception of older bodies is supported by other research undertaken with women in midlife, where "female ageing bodies are described as being capable of producing 'excitement', desire and potential pleasure" (Sandberg 2013b, p31). These accounts suggested that older female bodies were perceived in a way that challenged the ageist and sexist stereotypes (Thorpe et al 2015).

In a distinct piece of research, older heterosexual men and women watched the film, 'The Mother' (Michelle 2003), in their own time, and were then asked, in single gender focus groups, for their responses to the film as well as their views on media portrayal of ageing and sexuality and the changes in attitudes towards the topic (Vares 2009). The context for the research was a recent growth of images within popular culture representing older people as sexual, but no research had explored the impact of this increasing representation with older people. Subsequent discussion focused on the ageing feminine body revealed contradictory views held by older women participants. On the one hand, they supported the idea that older women could express their sexuality with whoever they chose and condemned the invisibility of older women's sexuality within the media. On the other hand, they reacted with disgust at seeing the nudity of the older woman in the film when she was being sexual with the younger man. Conversely the impact on the older male participants was influential in encouraging them to think that older women were sexually attractive. Vares (2009) suggested that the older women participants' aversion to the female ageing body was more closely associated with self-disgust, as many of them had stated that they did not like mirror images of themselves and would not contemplate a new sexual relationship because it would involve showing their bodies. The findings of this research suggested that the growing visibility of

older women's sexuality and subsequent nakedness does not make it any easier for older women to accept their own ageing bodies positively.

Not all studies have replicated the homogeneity of the participants involved in the above-mentioned research studies. One study undertaken with a more diverse group of younger women in terms of sexual orientation and ethnicity, found that the participants identified that the areas of concern regarding ageing were weight gain, grey hair and facial hair (Winterich 2007). Each of these had been recognised by the participants as having the ability, in terms of the ageing process, to undermine their sense of being female. Although commonly identified areas, the lesbian participants were more concerned with facial hair, the Black heterosexual women's concerns were with weight gain and facial hair, and the white heterosexual women were concerned about all three areas. Despite similarities, the diversity of the findings highlights the importance of procuring as diverse a sample group as possible, and failing this the need to identify the homogeneous nature of the participants when presenting any findings. Further research regarding body image with older lesbians resulted in contrasting findings with participants of one study expressing dissatisfaction with their weight (Slevin 2006), whilst another earlier study found that the participants dismissed society's perception of beauty and instead supported broader definitions that mitigated against external appearances of ageing (Thompson et al 1999)

Overall these findings for body image, embodiment and ageing showcase a range of experiences, perceptions, feelings and practices which challenge the notion that an ageing body can be viewed in an oppositional way as either positively or negatively, declining or succeeding (Sandberg 2013a, 2013b). Research (Leitchy 2012; Liechty and Yarnal 2010) with women in their 60s found that concerns with body image continue as women age but that these concerns are not fixed within the context of ageing but have a degree of fluidity. This fluctuation that older women experienced depended on inter-personal relationships, cultural environment and key life events. However the main influence was found to be older women's ability to change their attitudes towards an ageing female body, which enabled them to think differently and manage an ageist and sexist context, to a greater or lesser extent (Liechty and Yarnal 2010).

Two studies (Krekula 2016, 2007) buck the trend of the majority of the qualitative studies by, firstly including older women over 75 years of age, and secondly, using the older women's experiences and feelings of their ageing bodies and appearances to develop theoretical knowledge within this area. The aims of both studies were to challenge the double standard of ageing assumptions as

oversimplified and inadequate in explaining the fluctuations and apparent contradictions within women's narrated experiences.³⁶ Krekula (2007) noted that participants in her study felt both pride and dissatisfaction with their body image and appearance, valuing their health, competence and independence, as well as using negative words to describe their ageing bodies. The findings suggested that the older women were expressing different, as opposed to contradictory, sentiments about distinctive bodily aspects, that of "the physical body and the body as an embodied identity claim... understanding the body both as something we *have* and something we *are*" (Krekula 2007, p166). Building on these findings a further study focusing on appearance (Krekula 2016) identified strategies that older women used that suggested ways in which differently held views could co-exist. These included: a time dimension, where the older women used their knowledge of the appearances of their 'younger' selves as a comparison in which their current body (dis)satisfaction was created; using more than one reference group to assess their appearances, such as other older women, and not only comparing themselves to youthful notions of beauty; and using a range of 'markers', other than physical ones, to assess their appearance, such as emotions and dress.

4.2.5.4 Sexual orientation

A small amount of emerging research has focused specifically on heterosexuality in order to explore the extent and limits of older women's sexual agency (see also Meah et al 2011; Hinchliff and Gott 2008). However within the studies reviewed so far focusing on sexuality per se, older heterosexual women have dominated the participant groups. Therefore a review of extant qualitative research focusing on older 'non-heterosexual' women has been undertaken in this discrete section. Within the previous sections only one study focusing on sexual desires and practices included older lesbians (Jones, R.L. 2002), whereas 'non-heterosexual' representation in the studies focusing on ageing bodies was, to a greater or lesser extent, an improvement. Some of the studies included older lesbians within the participant sample (see also Carter 2016; Liechty 2012; Liechty and Yarnal 2010; Winterich 2007) whilst other studies focused specifically on the experiences of older lesbians (see also Slevin 2006; Thompson et al 1999). Older bisexual women are not represented within the previously reviewed studies and there is a dearth of extant empirical research focusing on their experiences of ageing and sexuality

³⁶ Sontag's (1972) double standard of ageing maintained that men are judged on the basis of performance, while women are primarily evaluated according to outward appearances.

(Jones R.L. 2016). Research with 'older lesbians, gays and bisexuals' (OLGBT) tends to focus on lesbian and gay ageing (Jones R.L. 2016, Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010), with research studies predominantly recruiting very low numbers of older bisexual people (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010). Although there has been recently a greater inclusion and recognition of bisexuality vis-à-vis ageing (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010), in terms of this review, the few existing qualitative studies (see also Rowntree 2014; Jones R.L. 2011; Weinberg et al 2001) have included people in 'midlife' as opposed to older age and have predominantly focused on the broader issues of sexual identity. Subsequently this review of empirical work focuses on the experiences of older lesbians in relation to ageing and sexuality.

The majority of research specifically exploring lesbian sexuality, was undertaken in the 1980s and early 1990s, and is neither current nor concerns the experiences of older lesbians, making past research in this area limited (Averett and Jenkins 2012). Studies with older lesbians have predominantly included gay men as participants, and have focused on broader, non-sexual issues concerning sexual orientation. It has been recognised for some time that studies with older lesbians need to be undertaken separately so gender issues that impact on 'non-heterosexual' ageing experiences do not become subsumed or invisible (Averett et al 2014; Averett and Jenkins, 2012; Gabbay and Wahler 2002). The non-sexual issues explored within the context of lesbianism and ageing include: physical and mental health; care and support services; kinships, networks and support; identity issues (e.g. coming out, lifestyle); and discrimination (Harding and Peel 2016; Averett and Jenkins 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010; Gabbay and Wahler 2002). Within the ageing and sexuality research field the studies with older heterosexual women and men, and the studies with older lesbians, gays and bisexuals contrast remarkably, in that the focus with the former has been on 'sex' (e.g. desires, functioning, satisfaction, performance and health), whilst the focus with the latter has been on the wider non-sexual issues (Harding and Peel 2016). It can therefore be concluded that very little is known about older women's sexuality who identify as lesbian or bisexual, other than issues regarding their sexual orientation (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010). As older lesbians and older bisexual women are predominantly invisible within society owing primarily to the assumption of heterosexuality and the prevalence of the 'asexual older woman' myth, the current situation vis-à-vis research only serves to compound their unseen status (Averett and Jenkins 2012).

Briefly summarising earlier qualitative research (Raphael and Robinson 1980; Tully

1989; Classen 2005³⁷) with older lesbians focusing on issues concerning their sexuality, three key findings were consistently identified. Firstly, older lesbians experienced sexual fluidity across the course of their lives as many had had sexual relationships with men.³⁸ These relationships varied, and included marriage, long and short-term relationships, and dating, with some older lesbians discussing the fact that they still felt some attraction to men. Secondly, the older lesbians indicated that being sexual was still important to them but that opportunities to engage in sexual activity had lessened mainly due to the lack of a sexual relationship. Lastly, the studies found that partnered older lesbians tended to be involved in long-term, monogamous relationships. Older lesbians who were 'single' still desired to be partnered and would actively look for suitable women with whom they could initially have an emotional connection with before starting a sexual relationship. Older lesbians generally favoured serial monogamy as opposed to engaging in non-monogamous relationships.

Two recent research studies have been undertaken, with one using quantitative methods focusing on older lesbian sexuality, identity, and romantic relationships (Averett et al 2012), and the other using mixed methods focusing on a range of issues involving the lives of older lesbians (Traies 2016, 2014). Regarding issues of sexuality, both studies confirmed and expanded on the aforementioned findings of earlier research noting: a greater diversity of types of long-term relationships, including living-apart-together (LAT) and civil partnership relationships (Traies 2016, 2014); and a positive link for participants between satisfaction with their sexual lives, and an affirmative attitude toward ageing (Averett et al 2012). Both studies recognised difficulties regarding the meaning of 'sex' and 'having sex' within the context of a lesbian sexual relationship, which mirrored debates regarding older heterosexual couples who no longer participated in penile-vaginal penetration.³⁹ Notable were a small number of participants who identified as lesbians who had never had a sexual relationship with a woman. This raised the issue that for some lesbians their 'sexual' identity involved relationships with

³⁷ This is a piece of non-peer reviewed research but is included here due to the dearth of research in this area.

³⁸ Although the participants of these studies had over their life-course been attracted to more than one gender, and in some cases continued to be so, they did not identify themselves as bisexual.

³⁹ Recent research with bisexual women and men across the ages of 18 to 70 yrs has also shown that "there was no universal agreement about which behaviours do and do not constitute having 'had sex', [with] some behaviours more likely to be labelled as 'sex' than others" (Hill et al 2016).

women based solely on their social and emotional connections (Traies 2014).

It is worth briefly acknowledging a joint study which involved the participation of both older lesbians and gay men where the focus of the research was to understand how sexual orientation and gender interact, and how this interaction might influence ageing and later life (Heaphy 2007). As previously noted the experiences of older women are predominantly from a heterosexual orientation. However the influence of 'non-heterosexual' orientation on ageing cannot be regarded in isolation and needs to be considered with the intersection of other social divisions. In a study with older lesbians and gay men, Heaphy (2007) concluded that older lesbians experience ageing differently, in some instances, from older gay men and older heterosexual women. The findings focused on access to material, social and cultural resources as opposed to discussing directly issues relating to sexuality. The main contribution from this study was that a lesbian identity does not protect older women from heteronormative ideas about gender in later life. Although older lesbians live 'outside' of heterosexuality, which can lessen pressures to adhere to gender norms (Heaphy 2007), as was seen in the studies focusing on the ageing body (see also Kelly 2007; Winterich 2007; Thompson et al 1999), the findings were as variable as those with older heterosexual women.

4.2.6 Messages from the review on older women's sexuality: a way forward

An examination of literature concentrating on older women's sexuality has led, within this review, to an identification of gaps and areas where further contribution is needed within the field of ageing and sexuality. First, regarding the samples on which the studies were based, it was noted that representation from women in the older age bracket (75+ years old) could be increased, as could the diversity of older women in respect of orientation and ethnicity. Second, as noted in Section 3.2.5, the findings of the research studies were not used to explicitly investigate the age/gender intersection. The aims of many of the studies were specifically centred on aspects of sexuality as opposed to using sexuality to explore the intersection. Third, the literature within this review demonstrated that there had been a shift towards concentrating on an understanding of ageing and sexuality, which was more fluid, diverse and nuanced. There is a continuing development regarding this understanding, which would benefit from further contribution.

4.3 RESEARCHING AGEING AND SEXUALITY

4.3.1 Overview of relevant literature

This section presents an examination, through critical engagement with relevant literature, of methodological issues in relation to qualitatively researching ageing and sexuality. The literature within this review is focused on both researching sexuality, and researching sexuality within the context of ageing. The former predominantly included authors who based their discussion on their own research practice (see also Sparrman 2014; Irvine 2014; Frith 2000; Holland et al 1998) whilst a few others discussed sexuality research from a purely theoretical standpoint (see also Parker 2009; Poole et al 2004). The decision to include the aforementioned literatures was based on applicability to researching sexuality with older people. The literatures that focused on the latter were greater in quantity with the majority of the authors predicating their critique and analysis on research practice with older people (see also Tarzia et al 2013; Gledhill et al 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005; Gott and Hinchcliff 2003b; Heaphy et al 1998). There were only a few authors who discussed these issues solely in a theoretical way (see also Bouman and Kleinplatz 2015; Deacon et al 1995). It is worth noting that, although Leontowitsch (2012) discussed methodological issues that were not specifically related to sexuality research, she does offer critique regarding research with older people that is pertinent to researching ageing and sexuality. There was only one issue, that of the impact on the researcher of engaging in sexuality research, where contributions were only found from authors within the field of sexuality research, but not within the context of older age. The key points identified within the literature are presented under three themes. First, the type and focus of research that has been undertaken in the past, and the subsequent agenda for future research. Second, the contextual issues involved in the research and third, issues of method.

4.3.2 Past and future research design and focus

As previously highlighted (see Section 1.3), the dominant research design used in the area of researching sexuality within the context of ageing has been quantitative (Leontowitsch 2012; Gledhill et al 2008; Minichiello et al 2004; Deacon et al 1995). It is interesting to note that this predominance extended to researching sexuality with people of all ages where large-scale surveys examining sexual behaviour and attitudes have been carried out (Frith 2000). Until recently, influenced by the prevalence of quantitative research, the knowledge about ageing and sexuality has been particularly limited to quantifying and categorising sexual activity and performance (Gott and Hinchcliff 2003b; Deacon et al 1995). However some recent

quantitative research has expanded its remit to include other aspects of sexuality such as attitudes and relationships (see also Lee 2016 and discussion in Section 4.2.3). In spite of this development, a more holistic knowledge base and exploratory in-depth research needs to be encouraged (Gledhill et al 2008), implying a greater use of qualitative research methods in future studies. The need for qualitative research that specifically enables an exploration of people's experiences of sexuality taking into account their structural, social and cultural contexts had been identified some time ago by The Sexuality Research in the United States Report (Di Mauro 1995). As sexuality in later life is a continually developing research area, qualitative methodology is well placed to find out about the aspects of sexuality that are pertinent and meaningful to older people themselves (Leontowitsch 2012; Minichiello et al 2004).

Past research within the area of ageing and sexuality has often neglected to highlight the heterogeneity of older people regarding them as a "single older cohort" (Bouman and Kleinplatz 2015, p1). This view has posed problems for sampling in terms of a lack of diversity in the areas of sexual orientation, class and ethnicity (Gledhill et al 2008; Deacon et al 1995). Subsequently there has been a danger that sexuality was, and continues to be, perceived as separate from societal structures and a "special" entity within our lives, that is, "beyond the social" (Jackson 2008, p35). This point has a particular relevance for older people (Scherrer 2009), noted previously in Sections 3.3.1. Researchers need to locate issues and experiences of sexuality within the broader structures of societies and explore the influential aspect of these intersections (Parker 2009). The issue of homogeneity has been further compounded by the proliferation of research that focuses solely on vaginal-penile penetration (Bouman and Kleinplatz 2015; Gott 2005; Deacon et al 1995), perpetuating the belief that it is the only way of evidencing continuation of one's sexuality. Consequently, other aspects of sexuality such as, beliefs, desires, expectations, relationships and identities, have often been overlooked by researchers (Bouman and Kleinplatz 2015). This is a particularly worrying trend of the research agenda in relation to ageing and sexuality as many older people are using a much wider definition of sexuality (Hinchliff and Gott 2004) and are moving away from focusing on vaginal-penile penetration as the main way of expressing their sexuality (Sandberg 2013a, 2011). It is critical that future research enables older people to discuss their experiences in relation to their sexuality in a wider and more positive way. This type of approach would help to challenge the overemphasis on older people's sexuality as problematic or "failing", a standpoint which is fuelled by an ageist culture (Deacon et al 1995, p507) and a biomedical view of ageing "as a biological and inevitable downward trajectory of physical decline" (Leontowitsch 2012, p1).

4.3.3 Contextual issues

Three key contextual issues were identified in relation to researching sexuality and researching sexuality within the context of ageing. These were, the sensitivity of the topic, ageism, and the impact on the researcher of undertaking research within this field.

A significant amount of the literatures identified that this particular research area posed methodological challenges, many of which were linked to the 'sensitivity' of the topic (Hurd Clarke 2012; Gledhill et al 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b; Gott 2001; Pointon 1997; Deacon et al 1995). Before proceeding to discuss the challenges facing researchers, it is necessary to consider briefly the concept of sensitivity. It has been suggested that the labelling of a topic as sensitive has more to do with the relationship between the topic and its social context than the topic per se (Lee 1993). As the perception of sensitivity varies between people, situations and topic, it could be argued that the idea of a particular research topic being perceived as sensitive is socially constructed. An example of this process has been highlighted in a qualitative research project examining children's (9 – 12 years of age) ideas of sexuality (Sparrman 2014). The researcher asserted that in society children and sexuality are discussed in a "sex-negativity" way (Sparrman 2014, p293), which helps to create and sustain the topic as one of sensitivity.⁴⁰ This in turn creates barriers for the researcher in terms of securing ethical approval, negotiating with the various gatekeepers, and gaining access to the participants. Ultimately this may result in impeding "research into children's "normal" everyday understanding of sexuality" (Sparrman 2014, p293) and has the potential to deny young children the opportunity to find appropriate language, have a voice, and to develop positive approaches towards sexuality. Applying this analysis to researching sexuality in later life, older people, as discussed in Section 1.2, have in the past been perceived and positioned as asexual. Although post Viagra has seen a challenge to this stereotype with increasing recognition that older people can be, and are, sexually active, the notion of asexuality has been, and continues to be, pervasively dominant (see also Jones, R.L. 2002). It could therefore be suggested that framing older people as asexual helps to construct the topic as sensitive, which brings with it all the aforementioned methodological barriers.

⁴⁰ The phrase 'sex-negativity' is used by Sparrman (2014) to refer to a discourse around children that encompasses deviance and risk in relation to sexuality. The discourse creates a need for child protection, and the anxiety around sexual threats towards children prevents any research taking place towards developing an understanding of child sexuality.

In two studies with older people, one exploring sexual desire (Gledhill et al 2008) and the other exploring sex and sexual relationships (Jones, R.L. 2005; Jones, R.L. 2002), sensitivity is given further consideration. The researchers discussed recruitment and the use of gatekeepers to distribute their research material within older people's organisations, clubs and groups. In both studies this strategy of recruitment had elicited a poor response, compared with their other strategies.⁴¹ In the first study, within a day of receiving the research material, the gatekeeper stated that "members would not be interested" (Gledhill et al 2008, p90), and in the second study the researcher was persuaded by one gatekeeper to take the word 'sex' out of her advertising material and use the phrase "relationships, intimacy and health" (Jones, R.L. 2005, p49). Both researchers felt that these methodological difficulties were associated with other people's perceptions of older people's views of sexuality, that is, disinterest, feeling offended by sex and sexual expression and, in effect, suggesting implicitly that the topic was too sensitive to research in an in-depth way. It has been claimed that there are fewer qualitative research studies owing to "the perception that older people are reluctant to discuss intimate details of their lives" (Gledhill et al 2008, p84). This is directly linked to the asexual discourse referred to earlier, in that older people are presumed to have nothing to contribute due to the assumed irrelevancy of sexuality in their lives (Jones, R.L. 2005). Even with growing recognition that older people are sexually active, researchers are still connected to the asexual discourse in the way that positions their studies as "taboo-breaking and revelatory...[treating] older people talking about sex as exceptional and noteworthy" (Jones, R.L. 2005, p46). This precludes older people's sexuality being perceived as ordinary as well as older people's conversations about sexuality being viewed as 'normal'. Studies have found that older people do want to talk about their experiences of sexuality and have enjoyed the opportunity within research to do so (Gledhill et al 2008; Gott 2005; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b; Gott 2001).

Despite the aforementioned barriers that the concept of sensitivity creates for researchers, Jones, R.L. (2005) identified in her study some beneficial aspects of treating research on ageing and sexuality as a sensitive topic. Recognition by both the interviewees and the researcher of the sensitivity of the topic whilst openly discussing issues of sexuality enhanced certain qualities in the study. The researcher appeared trustworthy, the interviewees appeared knowledgeable,

⁴¹ Both Jones R.L. (2002) and Gledhill et al (2008) had employed a range of other recruitment strategies that 'spoke' directly to older women, for example, use of newsletters and direct contact, which were more successful than the use of gatekeepers.

honest and open, and the research study itself appeared important, original and as if it was “seeing beyond the conventional” (Jones, R.L. 2005, p52). It is also important for researchers to recognise when research practice becomes too invasive or too close to participants’ vulnerabilities. For example, research carried out with older women focusing on body image and the ageing body (Hurd Clarke 2012; Hurd Clarke 2003; Furman 1997), required data collection methods that provided the participants with an element of ‘distance’ from the topic. In one study the use of photographs were considered less threatening than direct questioning about how older women had physically aged (Furman 1997).

Turning to the second contextual issue, the discourses around asexuality referred to above are based upon the ageist and dominant notion that sexual activity, desire and expression are associated with youth and the inherent adjuncts of physical attractiveness and beauty (Bywater and Jones, R. 2007). Consequently older people are presented with narrow and restrictive strategies “to remain sexual [which] reflect and reinforce youth-centred definitions of sexuality” (Gott 2005, p41). If older people fail to live up to a ‘youthful’ sexuality then they are relegated to the position of being asexual, a point discussed in Section 1.2. It is important for researchers to recognise that ageism is part of the research context in relation to ageing and sexuality. In an early study exploring sexual activity and risk-taking with older people, Gott (2001) identified three barriers to undertaking the research that had links to ageism. These included: the perception that older people do not take part in sexual behaviours that caused a sexual health risk;⁴² such research caused too much offence to be undertaken; and subsequently, only young people were at that time included in research on sexual health. The ageist attitude of the researcher was identified in Hurd Clarke’s (2012) account of researching women’s body image and ageing. The researcher was challenged by one of the participants, an 82-year-old woman who stated,

“I really was surprised that you didn’t ask me about sex. Sex is an important part of how you feel about your body. So I want to know in the second interview are we going to talk about sex? Because I’ve got something to say!” (Hurd Clarke 2012, pp30-31).

⁴² New diagnosis of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) have been increasing over the past decade in older age groups: in England men (65+) = 1235 (2011) rising to 1588 (2015) and women (65+) = 240 (2011) rising to 372 (2015) (Public Health England 2016). Heterosexual women are more likely to get STIs and showed the highest increase in comparison with ‘non-heterosexual’ women (Hinchliff and Gott 2016). The trend in STIs is emulated in increasing HIV rates in older people (von Simson and Kulasegaram 2012).

Hurd Clarke (2012) concluded that an important part of research practice within the area of ageing and sexuality was the need for researchers to develop a reflexive and informed stance together with an awareness that research takes place in an influentially ageist context. Researchers need to challenge themselves and their own attitudes in order to be able to develop an open, non-judgemental and enabling approach (Bowman and Kleinplatz 2015).

The final contextual issue raised by the literatures involved the impact, both professionally and personally, on the researchers within the field of sexuality. Although no literature was found that referred directly to researching ageing and sexuality the issues raised in the general field of sexuality research are equally applicable. In a review of the literature, Poole et al (2004) came to the conclusion that researchers habitually experienced undesirable consequences, mainly in the form of stigmatisation and discrimination. These include: assumptions made about the researcher in sexual terms and the related stigma (Haywood and Mac An Ghail 2006; Israel 2002; Okami 2002);⁴³ negative impact on academic career through being marginalised and ostracised (Haywood and Mac An Ghail 2006; Israel 2002; Okami 2002; James and Platzter 1999); and, the emotional impact of the subject matter (Stoler 2002; Zurbruggen 2002; James and Platzter 1999).

In a recent American study using a range of data sources⁴⁴ Irvine (2014) found that academics within the discipline of sociology that were involved in researching sexuality were still struggling for professional recognition and acceptance. The focus of the study was to explore the means by which researching sexuality was constructed by the structures and processes of academia, namely universities, as a “form of ‘dirty work’, [i.e.] an occupation that is simultaneously socially necessary and stigmatized” (Irvine 2014, p632). The academic researcher participants described a range of processes, which confirmed them as “dirty workers” (Irvine 2014, p638) including: barriers to, funding for scholarly pursuits, publication of work and progression and promotion; lack of support for research in terms of training; restrictive practices by ethical review boards when considering sexuality research projects; and the trivialisation of, and hostility for, the subject matter which in turn

⁴³ Examples included: marginalisation due to assumed non-heterosexual orientation (Haywood and Mac An Ghail 2006); assumption of paedophilia because of focus on child sexual abuse (Okami 2002); and being a target of jokes by colleagues, family and friends for researching female strippers (Israel 2002).

⁴⁴ Range of data sources included survey data of contemporary sociologists, historical archives of 20th century sexologists, sociological journals, biographies, autobiographies, letters, and personal documents.

questioned the legitimacy of the research. Other issues were also raised that collaborated with the earlier aforementioned studies. This study raised the important issue that the stigma researchers experienced was in the form of structural inequality, that is, “systematic barriers and practices by those with institutional status” (Irvine 2014, p639). As well as directly affecting the academics involved it also served to direct and influence the continued development of knowledge within the area of sexuality.

4.3.4 Issues of method

The final theme identified in the literatures in relation to researching ageing and sexuality related to the different aspects of the research process. These included, recruitment, data collection, and researcher role and profile. Although issues of method have been touched on in the previous sections, when discussing research design and focus, and contextual issues, it is worth considering them in more detail.

Whilst recruitment was discussed within the context of sensitivity, it is worth re-stating that recruitment of older people to participate in sexuality research was generally regarded as a challenge amongst researchers, demanding the employment of a range of diverse strategies (Tarzia et al 2013; Gledhill et al 2008; Lee 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005). Samples of participants tended to lack diversity in relation to sexual orientation and ethnicity (Tarzia et al 2013; Gledhill et al 2008; Pugh and Jones, J. 2007; Heaphy et al 2004) with recognition that accessing older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual participants (OLGBT) was particularly challenging (Tarzia et al 2013; Pugh and Jones, J. 2007). In a qualitative study focusing on how ‘non-heterosexual’ people experienced ageing and later life, Heaphy et al (2004) struggled to achieve diversity within their sample of OLGBT participants, which was predominantly made up of white and well-educated people.

The data collection method most favoured by qualitative researchers when engaging with older people in sexuality research has been in-depth semi-structured interviews (Tarzia et al 2013; Gledhill et al 2008; Lee 2008; Heaphy et al 1998). In contrast focus groups have been favoured for researching sexuality with young women (Overlien et al 2005; Frith 2000).⁴⁵ Interestingly Jones, R.L. (2005) stated that whilst researching sexuality with older women she initially used focus groups

⁴⁵ Advantages of focus groups include: sharing and hearing other experiences; reciprocity; richer data; balance of power between participants and researcher (Frith 2000).

and found that they inhibited explicit personal discussions. The researcher went on to use one-to-one individual interview method, which “generated large amounts of data where older women talked about many aspects of sex in later life,” (Jones, R.L. 2005, p51). An important aspect of many data collection methods is the use of language, which was raised as a complex issue in relation to sexuality (Tarzia et al 2013; Robinson et al 2006; Jones, R.L. 2002; Heaphy et al 1998; Holland et al 1998). Participants asked to discuss their sexual experiences have been faced with a stark choice between a language that is medical/technical and one that is slang/offensive (Holland et al 1998). This lack of a nuanced language fails to enable people to reflect on their experiences adequately and comfortably (Robinson et al 2006). The meanings of different words to describe sexual experiences as well as the concept of sexuality itself can be problematic and demand the need for negotiation between researcher and participant (Heaphy et al 1998). This negotiation around meaning is not possible in relation to written recruitment material and, as discussed earlier, there can be a perception of sensitivity if certain terms such as ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality’ are used. The use of other ambiguous terms such as ‘health issues’ or ‘intimate relationships’ without the subsequent clarification of meaning can raise ethical issues about whether the participants clearly understand the nature and focus of the study (Tarzia 2013).

Turning to the researcher role and profile it was recognised throughout the literatures on sexuality research that it was important for researchers to create a comfortable and enabling environment so that participants would feel able to discuss issues relating to their sexuality in an as open and detailed way as possible (Frith 2000). It has been recognised in the past that perceived commonalities between researcher and participant play a significant role in developing a trustworthy and enabling environment (Dunne 1997; Finch 1984; Oakley 1981). There is on-going debate about how influential a shared identity between ‘interviewer’ and ‘interviewee’ is, with some researchers cautioning that the positives must not be overemphasised (Robinson et al 2006; Heaphy et al 1998). Other researchers however have been unable to arrive at a firm conclusion either way (Tarzia et al 2013), whilst others have been able to state categorically that “sharing elements of participants’ sexual and gender identities is highly influential to generating trust and rich data” (Lee 2008, p10). This is discussed further in Section 5.5.4. Whilst there are divergent views over the issue it is imperative for researchers to realise that rapport building can be achieved in other ways. Whilst exploring sexual desire, Gledhill et al (2008) maintained that rapport and engagement could also be achieved through relevance of the research to the participants and that within their study, “all participants agreed that raising awareness of the older person as a sexual being was important and was their main reason for participation in the study” (Gledhill 2008 et al, p92).

4.3.5 Messages from the review: a way forward

A review of the literature identified a range of methodological issues in relation to qualitatively researching ageing and sexuality, which could usefully inform future research. The main messages included: the need for qualitative research to use an inclusive definition of sexuality; the importance of researchers being aware of the impact of the ageist context of sexuality research on themselves and their research; and the recognition that recruitment/sampling and data collection posed challenges in terms of diversity and use of language respectively. There were mixed messages from the review with regards to the concept of sensitivity and whether sexuality research could be done unambiguously within a respectful and enabling environment.

Recent commentary on researching ageing and sexuality suggested that future studies needed to: focus more on issues and aspects of sexuality that were relevant to older people (Leontowitsch 2012; Deacon et al 1995); and, give older people more agency and influence (Bouman and Kleinplatz 2015). This in turn would challenge the “top-down...approaches that assume to know what constitutes later life” (Leontowitsch 2012, p2). In spite of these observations the review highlighted the lack of literature exploring older people’s/women’s perspectives on the processes, and future agenda, of researching ageing and sexuality. This influenced the decision to undertake participative research for this thesis where older women had the opportunity to contribute to the methods and focus of the research.⁴⁶ Inspiration and encouragement for this decision also came from a participative action research project into the needs and aspirations of older lesbians and gay men (Gay and Grey 2006). The project enabled older people to add their voices to the research processes and to establish a ground up approach to undertaking the research. This empowered the older people to discuss their experiences of marginalisation, which in turn informed local support agencies about their needs (Fenge 2010; Fenge et al 2009; Gay and Grey 2006).

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter was an empirical/methodological literature review and covered the following two areas in relation to ageing and sexuality: first, in Section 4.2, after an initial critical discussion of the structural context and development of research in

⁴⁶ The decision to include researchers in the field of ageing and sexuality is discussed in Section 2.3.3.2

relation to sexuality in later life, a body of existing empirical research focusing on older women's sexuality was appraised; second, in Section 4.3, through reviewing relevant literature the methodological issues of researching ageing and sexuality were highlighted. The 'gaps'⁴⁷ revealed in both the area of study and research methods were used to guide the research. Based on the messages from the reviews that concluded Sections 4.2 and 4.3 the way forward for the research study is summarised as follows:

- The main aspects of sexuality covered by the literature within this review supported the use of a broad definition of the concept, which re-emphasised the point highlighted in the conclusion in Chapter 3. This thesis included a range of aspects vis-à-vis sexuality which were discussed within this literature review, as well as adopting a definition that was welcoming to all older women regardless of relationship status.
- This study ensured that 'older' women were represented within the sample in order to address the issue acknowledged by the review, of older women being marginalised by 'younger' older women.
- It was demonstrated that there was a dearth of research studies explicitly exploring the age/gender intersection through researching sexuality. This study aimed to address this gap.
- This literature review added further support to the decision (see Section 2.3) that the methodology of the study was to be based on participative and qualitative principles in two ways: first, there was a significant gap with regards to older people having an opportunity to influence the methodology and focus of research within this field; and second, qualitative research concentrating on ageing and sexuality is continuing to develop and would benefit from further contribution.

⁴⁷ When I am referring to 'gaps' in relation to research I am using the terms broadly to include also research areas and methods that may be in their infancy

CHAPTER 5: METHODS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The research methods used to carry out this study are presented in this chapter. The three main components of the research design, those of it being qualitative, inductive and participative, have been discussed in Chapter 2 and only returned to if relevant to the ensuing discussions within this chapter of the numerous research processes. Reference to the fact that the research was divided into two parts, namely Phase 1 and 2, has been made in Chapters 1 and 2. Owing to the complexity of the structure of this research it is useful to recap the research aims of each of the phases. Phase 1 aimed to identify the methodological issues in researching ageing and sexuality and, in doing so, contributed significantly to informing and shaping the research methods used in the second phase. Phase 2 is the main part of this study aimed at exploring older women's experiences of their sexuality within the context of ageing with an emphasis on identifying changes, and any impact these changes had on participants' sense of self.

The structure of the chapter is as follows:

- Section 5.2 sets out the ethical processes for both phases of the research, moving on to a detailed discussion of ethical issues relating to Phase 2 of the research;
- Section 5.3 presents a brief summary of the methodology used in Phase 1 of the research, together with recommendations from the findings informing the research focus and methodology for Phase 2;
- Sections 5.4–5.7 examine participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, and the quality framework in relation to Phase 2 of the research.

Within the chapter as a whole, I consider the aspects of the research process in terms of my practice and role as researcher. Whilst engaging reflexively with the processes that I have conducted throughout this study, I have also incorporated quotations from the participants' interviews.

5.2 ETHICS – PROCEDURES AND PRACTICE

5.2.1 Introduction

In this section I provide a brief outline of the institutional procedures I engaged with in relation to ethics approval for this research study as a whole. This is followed by

a discussion of how the ethical issues were applied in practice in relation to the main part of the research, that of Phase 2.

5.2.2 Phase 1 and 2 of Research Study - Institutional ethics procedure

I submitted three ethics application forms to the University Research Ethics Committee for approval. The first two applications were for Phase 1 of the research study (detailed in Section 5.3) in 2006 and 2008, prior to the recruitment of older women participants and researcher participants respectively. The third application was for Phase 2 of the research study in 2009, prior to the recruitment of older women participants. All applications included participant information sheets, informed consent forms and, where appropriate, recruitment advertisements (see Appendices 1,2,7,8,9 and 10). All applications received approval on first submission to the Committee with minor amendments. The ethical issues covered were predicated on a principle-based approach of non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy and justice (Gilligan 1993 [1982]) and the applications were a statement of my intentions in relation to these issues in both my research design and research practice.

5.2.3 Phase 2 of Research Study - Practice of ethics

Ethical conduct is not a fixed entity, which is planned for and finalised at the approval stage of the research process (Goodwin et al 2003). Ethical issues permeate the whole of the research process from study design to publication of findings and it was important to me as the researcher to be continually alert to any events that may happen during this process. As well as being guided by the findings in Phase 1 of the research, I also piloted the interview guide prior to undertaking any recruitment or data collection. Two of my work colleagues, women in their mid-fifties, agreed to take part in a pilot interview and were asked to assess the data collection method, involving the interview process and the guide, for acceptability, effectiveness and whether there was anything that could be seen as potentially unacceptable or damaging. The feedback was positive and although no changes were identified during this piloting process, I felt that it helped to strengthen the ethical basis of the research (Peace 2008).

5.2.3.1 Recruitment of Participants

I decided to use informal networks, as opposed to using health and social care services, as a way of advertising the research, contacting and recruiting older women participants. This strategy was informed by the view that older people who are in receipt of a service may feel obliged to take part through fear of reprisals or

reduction in care from their care providers (Birkland and Kaarst-Brown 2010; Reich 1978), or might feel subtly pressured and/or motivated through boredom (Gilhooley 2002) or social isolation (Gledhill et al 2008). Important ethical goals in relation to recruitment were that participants should be voluntary, self-selecting, competent to give full informed consent, and able to understand the written and verbal information about the research study. These components are, according to Gilhooley (2002), essential for consent to be considered valid. To meet these requirements I initially sent potential participants an information sheet (see Appendix 9), which detailed the research aims, objectives and expectations of participants. If an individual woman was interested in becoming a participant, I arranged a discussion with her by telephone to ensure that the nature of the research plus her involvement had been fully understood. Informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were also discussed in order to develop a common understanding within the context of the research. During this discussion I was also clear about the boundaries of confidentiality and potential situations in which I would have an obligation to breach confidentiality in order to minimise suffering and injury to self and others.

I was informed also by the findings from Phase 1 of the research study highlighting the pivotal role of the researcher in developing the participants' trust in the research process, the key elements of which were identified as confidentiality, anonymity and acceptance. The use of research advertisements (see Appendix 10) and information (see Appendix 9) to reinforce the issues of confidentiality and anonymity, together with consent forms (see Appendix 8) and, in particular, reassurance from the researcher were important.

They [older women participants] would need a lot of reassurance that there would be anonymity, you'd have to build up a relationship of trust before they would tell you anything... you've stressed that confidentiality and anonymity are assured. Yes women need a lot of reassurance. (OW3P1)

Developing a common understanding of confidentiality and anonymity between participants and researchers is particularly challenging within the context of qualitative research where the presentation of rich, detailed and personal accounts can lead to participants being inadvertently identified (Bryman 2016; Kaiser 2009). Within this research there was the added complexity that I had used informal networks where some older women had developed close friendships and might recognise each other in the findings. Faced with this possibility, I felt that my only option was to be open about this risk before recruiting and to outline the strategies I would be using in relation to anonymising participants' contributions.

With regards to informed consent I used a written form (see Appendix 8), which was sent to all participants prior to their interview, to be signed and returned back to me. As discussed in Section 2.3.3.3, in Phase 1 of the research I had given the interview question areas in advance to both groups of participants and this had been commented on as being helpful and enabling. I therefore repeated this practice for Phase 2 at this stage of the recruitment process, by giving the prospective participants a copy of the questions based on the interview schedule (see Appendix 15). I was aware from the findings of Phase 1 that, as well as being a complex topic, sexuality can be perceived by some people as a sensitive subject to research. I felt that having sight of the interview schedule beforehand gave prospective participants a good insight into what would be expected/asked of them and subsequently provided additional material towards their 'informed' decision of whether or not to take part in the research.

5.2.3.2 Data Collection

At the beginning of each interview I checked whether the participants had any questions and reiterated their right to withdraw at any time during the interview. All the participants again agreed that their interviews could be taped. The issue of data storage was raised in Phase 1 of the research study, which was linked to reassurance from, and trust in, the researcher.

I think people are going to be very frightened of the tape so we have to trust you and you've got to give them (the potential participants) confidence that the tapes... and all your papers will be carefully kept out of the way so that people can't see it. Give confidence to people I think that's what you've got to do. (OW2P1)

Care regarding data protection was taken at all stages of the research and the principles of good practice as outlined in the Data Protection Act 1998 with regard to stored data was adhered to throughout the research process. I explained to the participants that their names, contact details, tapes and transcripts were kept separately and securely. The tapes and transcripts would only be identifiable by number and would not have names/contact details attached to them.

Rapport is cited by Hewitt (2007) as one of the components of an ethical research relationship. It is important that the researcher balances the level of formality with that of informality and that the rapport built does not lead to participants feeling uncomfortable about how much they may have disclosed. The findings in Phase 1 identified the importance of professionalism by the researcher, which was characterised by aspects such as bona fide identification and credentials, good time keeping, clear aims and objectives, and a constructive attitude. The

participants in Phase 1 felt that professionalism increased the trustworthiness of the researcher, bolstering participants' trust in the research, which in turn increased participants' sense of being in control. Although I had already approached the task of the research study in Phase 1 in a professional manner and drawn on my skills and experience from my professional careers in social work and academia, I had not taken account of the positive impact that being professional would have on the participants' sense of control.

During the data collection I had not felt that any of the participants became unduly distressed, although they all contributed in a personal, intimate and intense way. As promised in my ethics submission I had put in place contingencies in case any participant became upset. I endeavoured to be guided by the participants in terms of how much they wanted to explore a particular issue and subsequently how much they wanted to disclose, and this enabled me to avoid any sense of exploitation (Hewitt 2007). I felt that my background in social work and counselling provided me with the skills to respond to the women in an empathic and supportive way.

5.2.3.3 Other ethical issues

The other approach towards ethical issues within research is an ethics of care (Gilligan 1993 [1982]) and is an approach that is supported by feminist researchers (Burns and Chantler 2011). As well as encompassing the issues that I have discussed in the above sections, the ethics of care approach additionally considers issues of reflexivity, power and quality/rigour (Bell 2014; Burns and Chantler 2011; Hewitt 2007), whilst also emphasising the research context, responsibilities and relationships (Bell 2014).

With regards to reflexivity, Hewitt (2007) suggests that the researcher should be open about their position vis-a-vis the research methodology as well as the research topic. I agree with this view and feel that I started this process in Chapter 2 and continued to reflect on my involvement throughout the research. The issue of power in relation to the researcher/participant relationship is a complex one and I have endeavoured to challenge the hierarchical nature of the association. I feel that the main challenge was encompassed in the participative nature of the research, which I have discussed in Section 2.3. It is however an inherently non-egalitarian relationship and the researcher can only take a limited amount of necessary steps towards addressing some of this inequality. I have discussed this issue further in Section 5.5.4. The ethical procedures that I have followed ensured that the participants have felt included (Bell 2014). I feel that my feminist perspective that permeated this research study had a firm commitment to producing a piece of research that was non-exploitative and respectful, conveying

the views of a group of older women about their experiences of sexuality which in the past had been marginalised, silenced and unheard. The quality of the research study is another component of ethical research, extending to the concept of rigour (Bryman 2016; Hewitt 2007). It is important for the researcher to incorporate various qualitative processes that enhance trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln 2005). I discuss the processes and strategies that I have put in place in Section 5.7 and agree with the correlation between quality, integrity and ethical research practice (Bryman 2016; ESRC 2015; DH 2005). Caring for the participants who have made this research possible had been an overriding priority within my research practice. However, by applying the principles of the ethics of care, I would argue that I had moved beyond the customary ethical principle of 'doing no harm' towards aspiring to undertake research that had benefited the participants in a constructive way (Piper and Simons 2011).

5.3 PHASE 1 OF RESEARCH STUDY: METHODOLOGY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

5.3.1 Introduction

As stated previously I undertook the research in two phases, with Phase 1 being the start of the participatory aspect of the research study. Issues relating to the concept and practice of participatory research have been discussed in Section 2.3. In this section, I therefore provide a summary of the methodology used in Phase 1 of the research together with the recommendations that came out of the findings and how these were then applied and integrated into the methodology of Phase 2. A fuller description of the findings and subsequent discussion is detailed in Chapter 6. Appendices 1 to 6 refer in detail to the ethics, participants, data collection and data analysis used in Phase 1.

5.3.2 Research aim

The aim of this phase of the research was to undertake a qualitative study to identify any methodological issues in researching ageing and sexuality, and in particular, researching older women's experiences of sexuality. This focus was identified through the literature review (see Section 4.3), which highlighted a small amount of theoretical and empirical literature exploring methodological issues with regards to researching sexuality in later life. The empirical literature was based on the experiences of researching in the field and at the time of the study, no literature

was found exploring the views of older women/men on the methodological issues of researching ageing and sexuality.⁴⁸

5.3.3 Methodology

5.3.3.1 Ethics approval

Ethical approval has been discussed in section 5.2.

5.3.3.2 Data collection

A purposive sample was recruited comprising of six older women, aged 70 years and over, and eight researchers, with an interest and/or experience in researching sexuality. Recruitment was achieved through contacting different types of older people's and academic networks, using newsletters and emails (see Appendix 3). I collected the data using individual semi-structured interviews which took place either face-to-face or by telephone. The interview schedule was structured around seven key aspects of the research process: importance; gaps; sexuality, ageing and society; language; recruitment; data collection; and researcher influence (see Appendix 4).

5.3.3.3 Data analysis

These key aspects, in turn made up the coding framework under which themes were developed using a six-staged thematic analysis outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Appendix 5). A total of seventeen themes were identified across the following aspects of the research process in relation to researching older people's sexuality; level of importance, gaps in knowledge, influence of society's views of ageing and sexuality, language of sexuality, recruitment of participants, data collection methods, and the researcher's influence on the research process (see Appendix 6). From this analysis I undertook a process of developing seven summary statements, one from each aspect, of recommendations for Phase 2 of this research project. This process was facilitated by the fact that I had planned to use the findings of Phase 1 as a basis to recruit older women for the second phase of the research (see Appendix 11 as an example). It required me to clarify and summarise the key findings/themes, and assess realistically what could be put into practice in terms of recommendations.

⁴⁸ See Note 4, Section 1.4.

5.3.4 Recommendations and actions for Phase 2 of research study

The main recommendations from the findings of Phase 1 are outlined below (1)-(7). After each recommendation I have identified the subsequent action(s) that I implemented in relation to the methodology and my research practice within the second phase of this research study.

(1)

It is not only important that ageing and sexuality research takes place, but also the research needs to be critical and challenging requiring a compatible philosophical base from which to achieve this aim.

Action:

- I used an informed eclectic combination of feminism and social constructionism placed within a critical gerontological framework to undertake the research.

(2)

There is a predominance of quantitative research within the field of ageing and sexuality, which is not conducive to giving older women a platform on which to share their experiences of sexuality. A recommended focus for this type of research involves the experiences of older women in relation to changes in their sexuality within the context of growth, development, transformation and redefinition.

Action:

- The questions within the interview schedule focused on experiences, changes and impact within a qualitative research framework.

(3)

When planning the research, account needs to be taken of both the impact of societal views/discourses on sexuality and the perceived sensitive nature of the research topic

Action:

- Although the context for this research was dominated by contrasting but equally constraining stereotypes, older women/people wanted an opportunity to talk

about their diverse experiences of sexuality. The 'sensitivity' of the subject was also recognised.

- There needs to be awareness that gatekeepers may not be helpful re: recruitment because of their own assumptions of research being 'too sensitive'.

(4)

It is preferable to use the word 'sexuality' in recruitment material and information, as it is a comprehensive term that is broad and encourages inclusiveness. There is a risk that the use of other words to imply sexuality will lead to confusion and raise ethical issues involving lack of clarity and dishonesty. However, there needs to be a commitment on the part of the researcher to take the lead in developing a common understanding of 'sexuality' between researcher and participant. This is crucial to the success of any research study in this field and will need to take place with every new researcher-participant contact.

Action:

- The research material (written and verbal) used the word 'sexuality'.
- Space was created within interviews to negotiate the understanding of the word 'sexuality'.
- Interview questions were accessible, interesting and relevant to older women.
- Although I piloted the interview schedule, I also went into the interviews prepared to reframe some questions if the need arose.

(5)

In response to the issues raised in recommendations **(3)** and **(4)**, there is a crucial role for the recruitment strategy in encouraging confidence and establishing trust in the research process. The language used in all recruitment material needs to be clear in terms of the aims and objectives of the research study as well as defining any terms that may lead to confusion. It is necessary to convey the importance and seriousness of the topic of ageing and sexuality to potential participants. These issues also apply to data collection.

Action:

- I ensured that the recruitment material nurtured trust and confidence and conveyed the seriousness of the research topic.
- Recruitment points that were accessed included Age Concern, Older Lesbian Network, Older Feminist Network, Growing Old Disgracefully, Women's

Institutes, University of 3rd Age, conferences, community centres, libraries, magazines, and newsletters.

- The findings of Phase 1 were disseminated to older women's groups and networks as part of the recruitment strategy.

(6)

Data collection methods that involve verbal interaction allow for more flexibility to respond to recommendation **(4)**. No clear recommendation can be given about whether individual or group interviews best suit the research topic. The older women participants favoured individual interviews as they felt less exposed and more assured about confidentiality. Owing to the complexity of sexuality the research process needs to be able to adequately prepare participants prior to an interview so they feel they have the ability and confidence to contribute.

Action:

- Individual interviews took place.
- I gave the interview questions to the participants in advance of the interview and also spent time prior to the interview making sure that each participant was clear about the aims and objectives of the research study.
- Within the interviews, I used a range of ways of engaging with the participants including: a discussion about the definition of sexuality; asking participants who they have had conversations with in the past about sexuality; and asking participants to talk about their sexuality when they were younger.

(7)

Researchers have a pivotal role in challenging any negative impact from the recommendation **(3)** above on the recruitment and data collection processes by using their skills, experience and value base to develop best practice. It is important for researchers to be aware of the contextual issues of sexuality for both the research process and the research participants. Building a professional working relationship with participants is essential to establishing participants' trust in the research process itself and ensuring the success of any ageing and sexuality research project.

Action:

- I was aware that my role as the researcher was key and therefore I spent time preparing for my role and taking on board the above issues.

5.3.5 Conclusion

I felt that this part of my research study had been important on two levels. Firstly it addressed the gap in literature regarding how to research sexuality in later life, that is, it explored the methodological challenges from both the perspectives of, older women who were representative of the participant group for Phase 2 of this research, and researchers who had a wealth of (non-documented) experience in this field. This also enabled me to clarify the aims of Phase 2 in relation to older women's experiences of their sexuality, which concentrated on the changes and transitions, the processes used to cope with these, and the impact on their sense of self. Secondly, this phase of the research enabled older women, in particular, to have a voice in an area where they are ignored, that of influencing and setting the research practice and agenda in the area of exploring sexuality.

5.4 PHASE 2 OF RESEARCH STUDY: RECRUITMENT

5.4.1 Introduction

This section considers, in relation to Phase 2 of the research study, how the participants were recruited, the sampling strategy used and the profile of the participants. It must be noted that ethical issues in relation to recruitment have been covered in Section 5.2 and will not be returned to in this discussion.

5.4.2 Recruiting the participants

5.4.2.1 Recruitment materials and sources

I used two types of recruitment material; an advertisement (see Appendix 10) and an article (see Appendix 11), both focusing on the details of the research, to a greater or lesser extent. Many of the suggestions that came with the findings of Phase 1 in relation to recruitment material have been implemented. For example, the wording of the advertisement is one of inclusion encouraging all women to take part in the research,

“Including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. No matter how you see, describe or define your sexuality your views are important and are needed to contribute to this research.”
(Appendix 10)

There was much discussion within the Phase 1 interviews about language and the word 'sexuality', and as noted in Section 5.3.4, its use was favoured on ethical grounds. However, although sexuality is a comprehensive term, I was anxious

about people's different definitions and interpretations of the concept and in particular the common misunderstanding that it solely refers to sexual orientation. This may have had some impact on the recruitment, in that it was perceived as research solely with older gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals (OLGBT), but this did not bear out in the profile of participants where the majority defined themselves as heterosexual (see Appendix 13). In the advert I also stated my age and gender in an attempt to make the advert more personable. The advert also mentioned confidentiality and anonymity in a bid to address the potential sensitivity that may be perceived by some older women and, to try to lessen anxieties about personal exposure, which was an issue identified in the findings of Phase 1. The other type of recruitment material that I used was an article, which was a combination of the content of the advertisement and a summary of the findings of Phase 1. This strategy not only gave potential participants more background to the research study, but also enabled me to disseminate the findings through the different networks/organisations so that other older women could see themselves as a group, influencing the research agenda.

Different routes were taken to advertise the research. These included, contacting by email (see Appendix 12) older people's networks and formal organisations, attending older people's conferences and network meetings, submitting articles for older people's newsletters, and by word-of-mouth through using my own professional contacts. The advertisement was sent via email to named people within each of the various networks and organisations asking for it to be publicised. The informal networks, such as Growing Old Disgracefully, were very proactive in publicising the material widely through their groups, newsletters and conferences. I received a mixed reaction in relation to formal organisations such as University of 3rd Age (U3A) and Age UK/Help the Aged, with the former fully supporting the research, and the latter often directing me away from their mainstream groups towards 'special interest' groups focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). This may have arisen because of the misunderstanding of the definition of sexuality, to which I referred to earlier. Although I did want to make contact with as diverse a group of older women as possible, my research was aimed at all women regardless of sexual orientation. I was apprehensive about my reliance on named contacts and gatekeepers as it was identified in the findings in Phase 1 that any reticence from gatekeepers could hamper recruitment. An email I received from a co-ordinator of a local AgeUK group in response to one of my recruitment emails did not alleviate my anxiety as it stated,

"I will circulate amongst the groups I work with, but I don't know what the up take will be – can be a bit of a touchy subject! as you most probably are aware of." (Bailey 2010)

I preferred contacting older women personally through attending meetings and conferences as a way of recruiting participants because I felt more in control of the information giving process and was able to discuss any misunderstandings and misapprehensions. I achieved the same degree of control in relation to networks/organisations publishing the article about my research.

5.4.2.2 Participant inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for potential participants was age and gender, and it was made explicit in all the recruitment material that any woman over the age of 70 years of age would be welcome to participate in the research. Both of those criteria were self-defining, as was other demographic information about the participants (see Appendix 13). In relation to the age limit, it was important for this research study to include only participants who would be seen in western societies as 'in older age'. This decision was based on a range of inter-related factors within the structural context of age. As acknowledged previously (see Chapters 1 and 3), there has been an extension of 'midlife' into later phases of ageing over the past couple of decades (Biggs 1997), with 'midlife' now being accepted as chronologically falling between 35 – 70 years of age. This change of perception in terms of the 'midlife'/older age 'divide' has been driven by the concept of 'midlifestyle' and its central tenet of "choosing not to be old" (Biggs 1997, p553). It is also linked into the concepts of 'successful ageing', 'third age' and the 'reflexive project' of later life, all of which have been discussed in Chapter 3.

The consequences of this 'shift' is that, first, it has further marginalised older women and men who are either in their 70s, 80s and beyond, or are in 'midlife' but are perceived as 'failing' to age well, a point that is recognised throughout this thesis. Second, there is a danger that women and men in 'midlife' are seen by researchers to represent 'older' people. It was highlighted in the literature reviews in Chapters 3 and 4, that the 'midlife' representation of older women was taking place within sexuality research and within studies on the ageing body. Sandberg (2013b) argues that there is the danger that 'midlife' women contribute to the process of 'othering' older women, particularly within the context of successful/unsuccessful ageing. Within this context I was interested in attracting older women who no longer perceived themselves as in mid-life and who would possibly be predominantly positioned by society as 'others' or 'outsiders' within the sexuality discourse. It was a difficult decision to use chronological age as a definer of being 'in old age' particularly as I believe that old age is both a subjective concept as well as being structurally and culturally constructed. However in the limited space of the recruitment material, it became a pragmatic decision to use

numerical means of definition. Interestingly after I had made this decision, many of the participants in both phases of the research stated that they were drawn to the research because of the age limit, and stated that they would not have volunteered to take part in research if the age limit had been lower, although they would have been eligible. There was a sense from the participants that they viewed themselves as ‘different’ to women who were younger than 70 years of age.

5.4.2.3 Recruitment strategy outcomes

The recruitment process took place over an eleven-month period, between November 2009 and October 2010, which resulted in sixteen older women coming forward to take part in the research. It was a painfully slow process, but I was aware at the time of data collection that other researchers had also experienced difficulty in terms of recruiting older women/people in relation to researching sexuality. The progress of recruitment is particularly impeded if sources such as health and social care services are not included. (Ethical reasons for this decision have been discussed in Section 5.2). The type of research and data collection method can also impact negatively on recruitment given that researching sexuality is predominantly regarded as sensitive research (Farquhar 1999; Pointon 1997) and that interviewing, as opposed to questionnaires or surveys, can be perceived as more intrusive. The other issue specifically with this research was the inclusion criteria that I have discussed in the previous section in relation to age. I did receive many enquiries from women in the 55 – 69 age range who were interested in taking part, but felt, as discussed earlier, that it would end up marginalising women who were older.

Table 1 gives a breakdown of how the 16 participants were recruited and demonstrates that it is important to have a range of different methods. This approach was used successfully in a study exploring sexual desire with men and women over the age of 65 years (Gledhill et al 2008).

Table 1: Outcomes of Recruitment Strategy

| Number of Participants | Source | Method/Type of Material |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 3 | Professional contacts | Word of mouth |
| 3 | University of 3 rd Age | Newsletter / Advert |
| 3 | Participants from Phase 1 | Personal contact |
| 3 | Conferences | Seminars / Information from advert and article disseminated both verbally and written form |
| 4 | Various older women’s | Email, newsletters and attending |

| | | |
|--|----------|---|
| | networks | meetings / Advert and article – these used as basis for information when meetings were attended |
|--|----------|---|

The range of sources involved in the recruitment strategy in Table 1, in particular the conferences, networks and University of the 3rd Age, would position themselves as organisations that challenged stereotypical views of ageing. Therefore it could be argued that the participants recruited from these sources would approach ageing and sexuality from a ‘bias’ position of viewing ageing and sexuality in a positive and challenging way.

5.4.3 Sampling strategy

A type of non-random sampling strategy, that of purposeful sampling, was used, where participants were recruited with a purpose that they would be able to contribute to the key aspects of the topic under investigation (Bryman 2016; Creswell 2007; Ritchie et al 2003; Patton 2002). Located within this broader strategy were the inclusion criteria, discussed in Section 5.4.2.2, which enabled finer decisions to be taken in relation to the question of who should be part of the sample. Although the group of participants incorporated certain shared features, such as age range and gender, it was also important for me to ensure that there was as much diversity as possible within the final sample in order to capture different perspectives in terms of the topic, sexuality (Bryman 2016; Ritchie et al 2003). The issue of diversity will be returned to later, when the participants’ profile is discussed.

In relation to sample size there is a continuous debate within qualitative research about how large a sample needs to be for the findings to be considered trustworthy. Some researchers have suggested sample size policies, recommending 25 – 30 participants as a minimum (Dworkin 2012); others have suggested 15 participants as the smallest acceptable sample size for all types of qualitative research (Guest et al 2006); whilst others have varied their recommendations depending on the type of qualitative design (Creswell 2007). In relation to thematic analysis together with the use of interviews as a data collection method, a recommendation of between 15-20 participants has been suggested (Clarke et al 2015). Patton (2002) advises that sample size should not depend on rules governing numbers, but more on qualitative issues such as research aims, design, context and resources. Although I had no pre-determined sample size in mind at the beginning of the study, I had hoped for at least 20 participants. However, as discussed earlier in Section 5.4.2.3, I was having difficulties recruiting and due to resource limitations a pragmatic decision was taken in supervision to

progress the analysis with a view to assessing whether I could achieve the aims of the research using 16 interview scripts. Qualitative research aims to explain, describe and interpret information about a research topic at a level of sufficient depth (Maxwell 2013). The concept of saturation is often cited as a measure of an adequate sample size but it can be argued that new data will always add something new to an existing data set. Therefore an assessment of adequacy involves judgement and experience in evaluating the quality of information and analysis (Sandelowski 1995). From discussions with my supervisor and after an assessment of the analysis it was decided I had sufficient data in terms of richness and depth.

5.4.4 Research participants

A demographic profile of the participants is detailed in Appendix 13 and summarised below in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Participants’ Demographic Profiles

| | Number n=16 | Percentage |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Ethnicity | 15 White British 1 Other | 94% White British 6% Other |
| Disability | 16 non-disabled | 100% non-disabled |
| Class | 7 Middle Class 4 Working Class 4 Working/middle class 1 Not identified | 44% Middle Class 25% Working Class 25% Working/middle class 6% Not identified |
| Sexual Orientation | 14 Heterosexual 2 Lesbian | 87% Heterosexual 13% Lesbian |
| Age | 11 in 70 -79 years age range 4 in 80 – 89 years age range | 69% in 70 -79 years age range 31% in 80 – 89 years age range |

From this summary of the participants’ demographic profile it can be seen that diversity was not well represented in terms of ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. There has been research in the past that has identified the difficulty of recruiting older lesbians (see also Pugh and Jones, J. 2007; Gott 2005). In relation to the participants’ ‘age’ profile it could be argued that there was a significant degree of homogeneity in that all the participants exercised “the social and cultural capital of later life which allows for the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure” (Higgs and Gilleard 2015, p14). It is these latter aspects, as opposed to chronological ageing, that located the participants in the third age of later life (Laslett 1996 [1989]). The gaps in terms of which women are being left out

of the sample through lack of diversity in some areas is a concern and a limitation which needs to be kept in mind when evaluating the findings of this research.

Despite some of the demographic limitations, the sample demonstrated strength in relation to the diversity of the older women's experiences vis-à-vis sexuality. Referring to Appendix 14, the following is a summary of the participants' sexual history, within the context of sexual relationships, at the time of data collection:

- Sexual relationships before marriage – 7 participants
- Married at least once – 16 participants
- Married or involved in more than one long-term relationship – 6 participants
- Short-term sexual relationships ('flings') – 6 participants

The following is a summary of the participants' current sexual relationship status at the time of data collection:

- Not involved in a sexual relationship – 10 participants
- Involved in a sexual relationship – 3 participants
- Involved in a 'post-sexual' relationship (i.e. where a long term sexual relationship is no longer sexual) – 3 participants

As can be seen from the preceding summary, over four-fifths of the participants at the time of the fieldwork/data collection were either, not involved in a sexual relationship, or in a relationship that was no longer sexual. However the majority of the older women concerned were still expressing themselves sexually in a range of different ways and/or continued to regard themselves as a sexual person and 'having a sexuality' (see Chapters 7 and 8).

5.5 PHASE 2 OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: DATA COLLECTION

5.5.1 Introduction

Some of the practicalities with regards to data collection have been discussed in previous sections (5.2.3.2 and 5.3.4). Therefore in this section I have focused on a range of issues related to the data collection method used in this study, that of the in-depth semi-structured interview. The issues include: face-to-face and telephone interviewing with a particular focus on the latter; the researcher-participant relationship, focusing on issues of power and difference; and specific matters that relate to interviewing around the topic of ageing and sexuality.

5.5.2 In-depth semi-structured interviews

“Feminists are particularly concerned with getting at experiences that are often hidden. In-depth interviewing allows the feminist researcher to access the voices of those who are marginalised in society.” (Hesse-Biber 2014b, p190)

In relation to older women’s sexuality, it is the diversities and nuances of those experiences that remain hidden and unarticulated. Therefore an in-depth interview method can be a good exploratory tool to gain as much insight as possible, enabling participants to talk about their subjective understanding of the issues and by doing so, develop an understanding of women’s lived experiences (Hesse-Biber 2014b). The other issue that influenced my choice of in-depth interviews was the potential of the method to provide rich and detailed data, in this case, in an area that was comparatively under-researched. The interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix 15), enabling me to use my guide flexibly, as a frame of reference, as well as being able to explore and follow up with the participants any additional information raised that may not have been included in my interview schedule (Bryman 2016; Alston and Bowles 2003). The guide offered me some structure without restricting spontaneity or precluding me from ‘going with the flow’ if a participant was taking the interview in an unanticipated but interesting direction. This gave the participants some degree of control over the course of the discussion whilst also giving me some parameters to ensure that the aims of the research were being addressed.

5.5.3 Face to face interviews – v – telephone interviews

Of the 16 interviews that took place, 5 were conducted face-to-face (two of which took place in the participants’ homes and the other three in my office), and the remaining 11 interviews were undertaken with participants using the telephone in their own homes. I left the choice of mode and place of interview to the older women, with the majority opting for an interview by telephone due mainly to convenience. As many of the participants lived some distance away telephone interviewing was not only cost and time effective (Stephens 2007) but also enabled me to directly access participants from geographically dispersed locations (Holt 2010). This flexibility was particularly important in light of the difficulty that I was experiencing in recruiting participants. It is worth considering some of the issues raised by this research study on the use of the telephone for conducting semi-structured interviews, particularly as it is a mode of interviewing that is more often encouraged for short, structured interviews only (Fontana and Frey 1994). Recent empirical work (Irvine et al 2013; Trier-Bieniek 2012; Holt 2010; Stephens 2007; Sturges and Hanrahan 2004) comparing the two different modes of interviewing,

telephone and face-to-face, within qualitative research has identified mixed views in relation to the pros and cons of each.

One of the main issues that has been raised as a concern with telephone interviewing is the lack of visible non-verbal communication clues and subsequently, building a rapport with participants has been seen as more difficult than with face-to-face interviewing. As mentioned previously, I involved myself in considerable 'preparatory' contact either by telephone, email or letter to ensure that the participants fully understood the paperwork, ethics processes, and the aims and objectives of the research study. This was particularly useful in establishing a relationship and getting away from the negative concept of 'cold calling', which is often associated with telephone contact (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). I found that I needed to express myself in a clearer manner and had to verbally articulate aspects of communication that would otherwise have been conveyed non-verbally in a face-to-face situation (Irvine et al 2013; Holt 2010; Stephens 2007). I also found that some time into an interview the issue of whether to probe further was difficult to assess, and had to be undertaken, again, verbally (Irvine et al 2013; Holt 2010; Stephens 2007).

An advantage in relation to telephone interviewing that has been identified in the research was that the researcher feels more in control of his/her environment (Irvine et al 2013; Holt 2010; Stephens 2007). I experienced less distraction from my environment and more able to take more notes without worrying about non-verbal communication such as eye contact. In comparison with face-to-face interviewing, I felt that I was imposing less on the research participants in terms of time, and intruding less by not being physically present in the participants' homes (Holt 2010). Also a couple of the participants mentioned that they were moving rooms during the phone interview as someone had come in, enabling them "to control the privacy of the conversation" and "their own social space" (Holt 2010, p117). Interestingly Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) state that there tends to be an increased perception of anonymity with telephone interviewing which may help with topics that are sensitive and embarrassing, although not conducive to topics that are sensitive and emotionally painful. I did not seek feedback from the research participants about their views on telephone interviewing but two older women participants volunteered that they felt freer and less inhibited using the telephone as opposed to a face-to-face situation because of the nature of the topic we were discussing.

I did not feel the data gained from using the telephone was any less detailed than the data obtained from the five face-to-face interviews. Holt (2010, p116) argues

that the data from telephone interviews can in effect be richer because “*everything* had to be articulated by both the participants and [the researcher]”. Another research study suggests that the ‘extra’ anonymity offered by telephone interviewing can result in more honest discussions particularly within a society where we are becoming more use to ‘virtual’ communication (Trier-Bieniek 2012). In relation to this study the telephone, as a communication aid, has played a key role in the lives of the participants’ generation and through this familiarity has enabled me to use it successfully as data collection tool.

5.5.4 Researcher – participant relationship

As documented in Chapter 2, an imbalance of power is a thorny, yet intrinsic, characteristic of researcher-participant relationships (Allen 2011; Law 2006; Van den Hoonaard 2005). Related to this issue is the continuing debate of whether minimising socio-economic differences between researchers and participants by arranging “matched” interviews (Grenier 2007, p716) increases rapport as well as creating a more egalitarian relationship (Hesse Biber 2014b; Tazia et al 2013). As discussed previously in Section 4.3.4, feminist researchers in the 1980s espoused women interviewing women assuming that the ‘shared’ position in society enabled the lived experiences to be fully captured by the research process (see also Oakley 1981), a claim that has since been challenged (Hesse Biber 2014b; Robinson et al 2007). Within this study the social locations that I shared with all the participants was one of gender and being non-disabled, whereas class, ethnicity and sexual orientation were shared with some and not others. This illustrated the fluidity of the insider/outsider positions where within some of the interviews I was occupying both positions. Tinker and Armstrong (2008, p54) reflect this variability by stating that,

“Researchers are always both insiders and outsiders in every research setting, and are likely to oscillate between these positions as they move in and out of similarity and difference, both within and between interviews”.

Age was the only social location that I did not share with any of the participants, as being in my mid-fifties at the time of data collection I would have been regarded as being in midlife or at the ‘younger’ end of older age. As mentioned previously, my age, together with my gender were included in the information I gave out about the study and for the majority of the participants who took part in a telephone interview there were no visual ‘clues’ regarding other differences/similarities. Only two participants referred to my age in relation to their own ages of 70 and 75 years of age, by stating “you’re years younger than me” (OW7P2) and “you’ve got a way to go yet” (OW2P2). These comments indicated that both of the participants felt that the age gap was significant. Most of the participants questioned my motives and wanted to know why I was interested in older women’s sexuality, which again gave

me the impression that they perceived me as much 'younger' than themselves in assuming that the topic was of little 'personal' relevance to me.

Although older women occupy a range of social locations, which affect the amount of power they have within a given situation, I found it particularly useful to reflect on how older age may impact on the research process in order to become aware of the power imbalance between the participants and myself. Literature exists about how to conduct research with older people (see also Robertson and Hale 2011; Jamieson and Victor (eds) 2002; Wenger 2001; Gubrium and Sankar (eds) 1994), but there is little research that has explored the way age differences impact on the research process (Lundgren 2013; Riach 2009; Grenier 2007). This under theorising is particularly stark in comparison to the knowledge that exists in relation to differences and their impact with regards to gender, class and ethnicity (Lundgren 2013; Grenier 2007). A study by Van den Hoonaard (2005, p394) found that the power imbalance within interview situations was compounded for older women who "are not used to having their ideas or opinions considered important, significant or interesting" due to their marginalised position within society. Therefore the impact of the research process resulted in women feeling uncomfortable and unknowledgeable, unsure of what to expect, and worried that the answers they gave were not correct (Van den Hoonaard 2005). These instances made me look out for similar situations that may occur in the interviews for this study and there were a range of comments, which reflected the need for reassurance, such as; "I'm really sorry if I haven't been a great help" (OW4P2); "I've kept you, I've talked a long time." (OW16P2); "It's been useful has it?" (OW8P2). I found that an important factor in my role within the interview was to convey encouragement and support which enabled the older women to perceive "themselves as competent interview participants" (Van den Hoonaard (2005, p398). There were however a couple of participants who 'appeared' to be engaging well with the interview who expressed some concerns about their 'performance' as the interview was drawing to a close. For one participant the self-direction that I had encouraged within the parameters of the interview guide had not met up with her expectations of 'research', which prompted her to comment that I hadn't "really asked questions have you? You're not asking anything direct" (OW4P2). This lack of 'proper questioning' can be a particular problem within qualitative research especially with participants who perceive that 'real' research should be researcher-led (Van den Hoonaard 2005). The other participant expressed concerns about how she had presented herself and stated,

I do feel I have been building myself up. I feel ashamed of the way that I have been speaking about myself that I have been making myself out to be this and that and wonderful but everything I have told you has been said.

It's the truth. I've not made anything up. (OW5P2)

This participant was in a difficult long term marriage where validation of her personal experiences and contributions were not forthcoming, and her comments reflected this as well as the way that older women's opinions and experiences are rarely enquired about let alone taken seriously (Van den Hoonaard 2005). Both participants needed copious amounts of reassurance and interestingly on reading their interview scripts sometime after their interviews I was struck at the significant contributions each had made to the study.

However using reflexivity to be aware of status differences within the researcher/participant relationship, although necessary, has its limitations in redressing the power imbalance (Hesse Biber 2014b) and needs to be used along with other strategies. As well as being aware of particular issues that could crop up in research interviews for older women I also conducted the interviews using skills and strategies that may have helped to redress some of the power imbalance. These included using open questions, choosing to listen, using prompts for clarification and probes for encouraging more detail or depth (Hesse Biber 2014b). Overall the aim was to make the interview situation as much participant led as is possible. As discussed previously I also gave the interview schedule to participants ahead of their interview to enable them to have unpressured time to reflect on, and to develop confidence in, their contribution. This research strategy is useful if topics are perceived as intangible and/or complex and can result in obtaining thicker and richer data (Burke and Miller 2001). The participants welcomed this approach, with one stating that "it's good to have the questions in advance because it gives you time to think a bit" (OW10P2). Issues in relation to the interview schedule are returned to in the next section.

5.5.5 Interview focus: ageing and sexuality

The recommendations from Phase 1 of the research identified certain specific issues that needed consideration in relation to undertaking an interview focusing on ageing and sexuality. Two main concerns are discussed within this section, that of the meaning of sexuality, and the perceived sensitivity or 'difficulty' of researching the topic. I was aware from both the research I had carried out in Phase 1 and the existing literature (see also Bellamy et al 2011; Heaphy et al 1998) of the difficulties in developing a common understanding of the concept of sexuality within the research setting. I was aware that although sexuality defies a singular fixed definition many people assume it means sexual orientation and/or engagement in 'sex', predominantly penile vaginal penetration (Bellamy et al 2011). In the information about the interview questions that were given to participants I outlined my use of a wide definition for the purposes of the research

(see Appendix 15) and then followed this up by creating a space early on in the interview to 'negotiate' our understandings of the concept (Heaphy et al 1998). This strategy was particularly poignant in regards to telephone interviewing where meanings and comprehension can be negatively affected and where complex issues need to be articulated more clearly (Irvine et al 2013; Stephens 2007). I did explain that a wider definition was more inclusive when it came to perceiving our sexual selves and all the participants agreed to base the interview on a broader meaning of the concept. The participants came to the interviews with a range of definitions including sexual activities, sexual orientation, sexual relationships and a broader view encompassing desires and fantasies, which was reflected in research about meanings of sexuality undertaken with a group of mixed aged women (Bellamy et al 2011). My intention in adopting an all-encompassing definition was to challenge the exclusive nature of a precise meaning and to encourage multiple understandings, as opposed to taking an authoritarian stance and 'making' the women adopt 'my' definition. It is worth noting that the use of a wide definition of sexuality within the data collection process of this research study positively enabled the participants to identify and discuss the different ways that they engage in to express their sexuality (see Section 7.3.2).

Once the discussions around the definition of sexuality had finished the interviews flowed very well and there did not appear to be any issues regarding the 'difficulty' of discussing experiences. Although the perceived sensitivity of the topic did not come up directly for the participants, some older women did seek reassurances about anonymity, confidentiality and the storage of the tapes. A good way of engaging the participants was to start the interview off with a discussion about their sexuality when they were younger. This then enabled the older women to focus on the changes they felt they had experienced within the context of ageing. Many of the participants were interested and ready to share their experiences and stated that they were motivated to participate due to the age limit starting at 70 years of age and the way that un-partnered women were encouraged to take part. Any difficulties were related to other things rather than the topic, such as partner loyalty with one participant stating that, "I'm quite happy talking about it [sexuality]. The only thing that probably holds me back is that I'm never quite sure what my husband feels" (OW2P2).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The issue of partner loyalty was also discussed by the participants in Phase 1 (see also Section 6.8.2).

5.6 PHASE 2 OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: DATA ANALYSIS

5.6.1 Introduction

Over the past decade thematic analysis has developed into a widely used data analysis method (Bryman 2016), which provides an "accessible, systematic and rigorous approach to coding and theme development" (Clarke et al 2015, p223). The type of thematic analysis that I used in this research study is particularly developed for research that takes place in a qualitative paradigm (see also Clarke et al 2015; Braun and Clarke 2013, 2006; Clarke and Braun 2013). Qualitative researchers have in the past been criticised for their lack of transparency, particularly in relation to the process between the collected data and presentation of findings (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Silverman 1993). This has led to the view that qualitative research needs to be undertaken in a methodical and detailed way in order to uphold good research practice, which in turn produces rigorous and useful results (Creswell 2012). Research accounts need to offer "greater disclosure in [their] qualitative analysis" (Attride-Stirling 2001, p386), in other words sharing the 'how' of their analysis. This has particular relevance to thematic analysis where there is a continuing opaqueness amongst researchers of how and why themes are identified (Bazeley 2013, 2009). Therefore within this section I intend to outline how the analysis was carried out using the six stages of thematic analysis initially specified by Braun and Clarke (2006), and explicitly highlighting the choices made in my role as the researcher with regards to methodological issues.

5.6.2 Decisions prior to undertaking thematic analysis

My decision to use thematic analysis was influenced initially by the fact that it is a method providing "a set of theoretically independent tools for analysing qualitative data" (Clarke et al 2015). It therefore offers the flexibility of being 'partnered' with a range of different theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006), which complemented my eclectic standpoint. Thematic analysis also affords the researcher further adaptability in terms of different types and levels of analysis, which subsequently demands transparent decision-making (Braun and Clarke 2013). It is worth noting also that the adaptability of thematic analysis had enabled me to use it as an analytical tool, although in different ways, for both phases of this research, giving the study an internal coherency. My decisions in relation to the form of thematic analysis that I undertook for Phase 2 of the research were guided by my standpoint (detailed in Chapter 2), my commitment to undertake a predominantly inductive piece of qualitative research (see Section 2.3.2) and by the key aim of the research, which was to explore and represent older women's

voices in a way that legitimised their subjective experiences. These decisions will now be discussed in more detail.

I decided that the type of analysis I wanted to undertake involved providing a thematic description of the entire data set from the transcriptions of the sixteen interviews, gaining a rich overall description of older women's perceptions of their sexuality as opposed to concentrating on one particular aspect. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that, although the findings in this type of analysis risk losing a degree of depth, it is useful in situations where the phenomenon is under-researched. I would argue, based on the literature review that I undertook, that researching sexuality in its widest sense, within the context of ageing, needs further development both empirically and theoretically. As I have indicated in previous discussions I decided that the identification of themes would be inductively driven, in that I have grounded the analysis primarily within the data. While any inductive approach is compromised by the influences from the researcher's biography, knowledge and standpoint this approach did allow me to "stay as close as possible to the meanings in the data" (Clarke et al 2015, p225).

Following on from this I also chose to adopt a semantic level of analysis in relation to theme development where I focused on the meanings of participants' contribution at an explicit or surface level (Hayfield et al 2013; Braun and Clarke 2006). I was aware that this decision might keep my thematic analysis at a descriptive level. With this in mind I decided to present my findings on two levels; firstly, themes that summarise older women's experiences of sexuality on a descriptive level (see Chapters 7 and 8); secondly, a theoretical interpretation of those themes, drawing out their significances, implications and interrelationships (see Chapter 9). Smith et al (2009) refers to the concepts of hermeneutics of empathy and hermeneutics of suspicion when discussing levels of analysis and interpretation. The former is where the researcher attempts "to reconstruct the original experience in its own terms; the latter uses theoretical perspectives from outside... to shed light on the phenomenon" (Smith et al 2009, p36). It is important for both levels of analysis to be presented separately so that anyone reading the research is clear about the type of analysis that is being undertaken (Smith et al 2009). As initially noted in Chapter 2, the theoretical analysis and interpretation that I engaged in was informed by the work of Krekula (2016, 2009, 2007) in terms of the intersection between age and gender and Sandberg (2013a, 2013b, 2011) in terms of the concept of affirmative ageing. Both bodies of work interconnect in their principles for, and perceptions of, the experiences of older age and therefore can be synthesised to provide a coherent analytical framework. Based on the discussion in Section 3.2.4 the main aspects of the framework can be summarised

as including: taking a developmental approach to ageing thereby challenging the domination of the success/decline binary view of older age; accepting the materiality of the ageing body and its impact on older people's lives within the influential structural/cultural context; recognising that the age/gender intersection can give rise to advantages and assets where an older person has been able to exercise agency; and accepting that older people can experience feelings that are different but simultaneously held, with the possibility of leading to something new or unforeseen. It was also important within this framework to acknowledge the power relations and oppressions linked to the social divisions of age and gender, the outcome of which could be dissimilarly experienced on different levels of society. Applying this framework (see Chapter 9) to the individual experiences thematically presented in Chapters 7 and 8 has enabled me to locate older women's experiences within a wider structural context (Braun and Clarke 2006), which is an important process for participants whose perspectives are marginalised (Huxley et al 2011).

An issue for me as researcher was one of ascertaining the extent of my interpretation of the data during the initial process of analysis involving coding and theme development. As referred to in Chapter 2, all data analysis involves some level of interpretation and I was aware that undertaking thematic analysis was an active process, involving myself in making decisions on selection, editing and reporting of data so that the themes could be actively sought (Taylor and Ussher 2001). I would argue however that there are different levels of interpretation and the 'descriptive level' thematic analysis presented in Chapters 7 and 8 could be regarded as 'first level' analysis, with minimal interpretation and closely grounded to the interview script itself. My aim at this level was to prioritise the views and perspectives of the participants by "not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p84). Subsequently I was taking the older women's accounts "at face value... as depicting the truth and reality [how they perceive it] of [their] experiences" (Opperman et al 2014, p506).

5.6.3 Going through the stages of thematic analysis

At this point, I will detail the process applied to each stage of the thematic analysis in relation to this research study. As well as the data, the research aims, interview questions and the definition of sexuality, guided my analysis. I shall use the term 'data guides' to refer to these pieces of information in further discussion. After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the exclusion of non-verbal expressions, I spent some of the initial stage of "familiarising yourself with your data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p87) checking the accuracy of the transcriptions against the original

tape recordings. On re-reading I used my research aims to identify all the data that made up the data set and set aside data that did not relate to the main research question. Some of the latter included information about the participants' demography, personal history, and their views and questions about the research process. This information, although not relevant for the data analysis, has been included in the appropriate sections of this chapter. During this process I also ensured that the data set was anonymised. At this stage I made a note of any key ideas, which further aided my familiarisation with each interview transcription.

In the second stage of “generating initial codes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p88), I systematically went through all the data set assigning codes to various data extracts using the data guides. This process of complete coding (Braun and Clarke 2013) resulted in 144 initial codes, with each code being assigned a computer file in which all the related data extracts were transferred. I subsequently reviewed the initial codes by deciding whether each code had sufficient relevant data support and was adequately unique. During this process I deleted some codes whilst re-assigning their data extracts to other relevant codes, combined similar codes, and identified a small number of codes as ‘miscellaneous’. I kept some codes that were inadequately supported by the data, because at this stage of analysis I could not confidently assess their importance. This issue of whether the recurrence of codes is a signifier of their importance (Buetow 2010) will be returned to later in this section. I made a decision to keep any ‘shared’ data extracts which were situated in more than one code because I felt they possibly signified crucial connections between the different codes and potential themes. Also I found that owing to the complexity of the nature of sexuality multiple coding of data extracts was quite frequent at this stage of the analysis. I left this issue to the last stage of my analysis and found that through writing up my findings I was able to decide with more knowledge and confidence which code and theme a data extract was best placed. I ‘named’ the majority of the codes using a short phrase as opposed to one word in order to retain the meaning without needing to refer constantly back to the data during the remaining stages of analysis (Clarke et al 2015). In the final analysis (see Appendix 17) there was only one code, named ‘unrepresented’, where a phrase was not used but the related sub-theme, ‘managing representations and attitudes’ served to contextualise this code.

I started stage three of the data analysis with 84 codes and began “searching for themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p89) by grouping different but comparable and related codes together. There was a further reduction in the number of codes during this process for the reasons cited in the previous stage of analysis. Each group of codes was held together by a central focus pertinent to my research aims.

I had used 69 codes to make up 11 groups, which I decided were my initial themes. I used the key point of each theme as the theme’s working title, for example, ‘penetrating issues’, ‘handling body image’ and ‘talking about sexuality’. My next main task was refining the initial themes that I had identified with the aim of creating “a plausible and coherent thematic mapping of [the] data” (Clarke et al 2015, p236). During this process, as well as streamlining the codes further, I also amalgamated the theme ‘medical interventions’ with ‘penetrating issues’ as the data extracts within the codes of the former theme focused on particular responses to the changes experienced by the older women participants with penile-vaginal intercourse. This strategy of theme development enhanced the strength of the remaining theme whilst also enabling me to incorporate an important contribution from the participants, which would have been excluded due to lack of data support. Another important aspect of this part of my analysis was the involvement of my critical reference group, which I discussed in Section 2.3.3.4. The outcome of this collaboration was a decision to create five main themes under which the ten themes were appropriately distributed and subsumed (see Appendix 17). Table 3 gives an example of the structure of one main theme, which shows the way that codes, themes and the main theme are connected within this research study. The whole structure is underpinned by the data from the participants’ interviews and is a hierarchy that is built up from the bottom, ensuring that the findings are data driven.

Table 3: Structure of Main Theme ‘Ebb and Flow of Sexuality’

| MAIN THEME | EBB AND FLOW OF SEXUALITY | |
|-------------------|---|---|
| THEMES | ENDINGS/CHANGES | MOVING ON |
| CODES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ending of sexual relationship • Ending of sexual feelings and desires • Issues that (negatively) impact on sexual feelings • Missing being sexual with someone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future sexual relationships • Ways of moving on • Experience of dating • Enjoying a sexual relationship • Continuation of a (long term) sexual relationship |
| DATA | Data Extracts | Data Extracts |

During the fourth stage of the analysis, “reviewing themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p91), I checked the relevance and fit of both, the data extracts associated with each code, and the latter in relation to each theme. It was important that each theme was distinctive with the related codes making up the descriptive components of the theme’s essence. Although it was crucial to identify a “central

organising concept” (Braun and Clarke 2013, p224) or “key analytic point” (Clarke et al 2015, p236) of each theme, it was equally important for me to recognise that each theme holds together multiple different facets or ideas. In turn the themes also needed to relate to each other in providing an overall analysis of the issues being researched. I felt that this inter-relationship was enhanced by the fact that each of the five main themes provided an organising structure by encapsulating the main idea of a number of themes (Braun and Clarke 2013). Although I made no changes after having reviewed the themes I had to make difficult decisions in relation to three codes that contained non-recurring issues. These codes contained one data extract or reference to a relevant issue, which had been contributed by one participant. The dilemma I faced was that undertaking thematic analysis is predicated on identifying issues that reoccur. However Braun and Clarke (2006) in their seminal article about how to undertake thematic analysis tend to identify the problem of non-recurrent data at the level of a theme as opposed to a code. They go on to discuss the issue of prevalence within the data by stating that, “more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p82). Buetow (2010, p123) concurs with this view by stating that the “recurrence of codes is not necessarily a sufficient criterion of their importance” and argues that thematic analysis needs to find a way of being able to assess saliency in a non-numerical way. Buetow’s (2010, p124) espouses the broad criteria that “findings are highly important when they are new and advance understanding” which I applied to my data set in terms of my decision making around the saliency of codes. Subsequently I decided to keep each of the ‘one-off’ codes as I felt that they were an important contribution qualitatively to the related themes in that they brought an aspect to the theme that was new and thereby enhanced the diversity of the theme’s key analytic point. In making this decision it was imperative to guard against anecdotalism which has been highlighted as a danger within qualitative research where one person, setting or event can be presented as typical and as a consequence wrongly influence the interpretation of data (Bryman 2016; Silverman 2014). This influenced my decision to be open about the atypical nature of any of the findings by stating clearly in my write up if only one participant held a particular view. At the end of this stage I felt confident that the codes, themes and main themes that I created summarised the key experiences, meanings and feelings described by each participant adequately enough for me to be able to address my research aims in an authentic manner (Clarke et al 2015).

For the penultimate stage of “defining and naming themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p92) I produced a form based on a three-step formula involving the tasks of describing, comparing and relating (Bazeley 2009) each theme (see Appendix 16).

This enabled me to carry out a comprehensive, consistent and rigorous analysis by identifying the character and make up of each theme. I began by analysing the related coded data extracts for issues that were significant and relevant to the research aims. From this basis I was able to ascertain the distinct attributes of each theme, as well as determining their boundaries, variations and exceptions within the themes themselves, and any potential connections between themes. I felt that it was important that I was able to establish an account of each theme in its “breadth and diversity” (Braun and Clarke 2013, p232), as well as how each theme, potentially at this stage, fitted into a broader account of women’s experiences of sexuality. The names for the main themes and themes needed to be concise and be able to convey their central concept. I also felt that it was important the names conveyed movement, dynamism and fluidity which reflected the older women’s narratives of their sexuality. At the end of this stage I had gained a clear idea of the detail of each theme, their interrelationships with each other and the overall account that they gave about the data and in particular the main research question.

In the final stage “producing the report” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p93) I decided to write up the thematic analysis using the main themes’ titles as the headings and the theme names as sub-headings. I felt that it was important that the findings were written up in a way that would reflect the method of data analysis whilst also addressing the central research question. I used general descriptors of frequency when discussing participants’ contributions to an aspect of a theme, such as ‘majority’, ‘most’, ‘minority’, ‘significant minority’, or ‘some’, and only used the numerical term ‘one’ when a single participant discussed an issue. I felt that it was important to be able to convey nuanced and diverse perspectives and findings that struggled to fit neatly into the thematic map. As discussed previously I used a wide range of data extracts to support my themes and ensured that women’s voices were the main contribution and that my interpretation was minimal at this stage of the analysis. To support the task of writing up my findings I used the files that I had created for each theme, which included the list of codes and their data extracts together with the analytical form referred to in the previous paragraph (see Appendix 16).

5.7 PHASE 2 OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: QUALITY FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

5.7.1 Introduction

There is considerable debate within qualitative research regarding the issue of quality and the criteria used for its assessment (Bryman 2016; Seale 2004; Seale 1999). The wide range of views on the matter is a reflection of the fact that the

debate is part of a larger discussion on the type of knowledge that is produced by qualitative research studies (Mays and Pope 2006). The debate also raises the issues of first, whether a common criteria can be relevant to all types of qualitative research given its diversity (Dixon-Woods et al 2004), and second, whether the qualities of qualitative research, inherent in its nature, such as those of creativity, insight and interpretation, can ever be assessed using a criteria (Flick 2014; Dixon-Woods et al 2004).

An alternative criterion has been developed based on the concept of 'trustworthiness' (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Lincoln and Guba 1985), used for assessing and judging the quality of qualitative research by researchers who are proponents of socially constructed knowledge and who give recognition to diverse and multiple perspectives (Seale 2004). The concept of 'trustworthiness' is made up of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985), which replaces respectively the concepts within the traditional positivist paradigm of, internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Bryman 2016; Miles and Huberman 1994). To address the limitations of relativism the notion of authenticity was later added to the criteria which proposed that research knowledge should, represent a range of different realities, develop understanding and appreciation among others, and empower people to act in a positive way (Guba and Lincoln 1994). There have been other more recent developments to construct different criteria (see also Spencer et al 2003; Yardley 2000,), as well as some resistance to the concept of a criterion. Some researchers have suggested standards (see also Hammersley 1992) and strategies (see also Flick 2014) instead of criteria, and others (see also Rolfe 2006) have suggested that its time to say "farewell to criteriology" (Schwandt 1996, p59), so that each piece of research is appraised on its own merits.

Within the context of the aforementioned debates I would concur with Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) who argue that qualitative research, with its integral interpretive quality, needs to provide evidence throughout the research process that demonstrates rigour. The latter is an essential ingredient in good quality research and with this in mind I decided to use the concept of 'trustworthiness' to inform my research practice throughout the study. This decision was taken because I wanted a criterion that understood the nature of qualitative research and one, which I knew, would support my epistemological stance. I am aware of the pitfalls of adhering to a checklist of technical procedures and agree that they can "strengthen the rigour of qualitative research only if they are embedded in a broad understanding of qualitative research design and data analysis" (Barbour 2001, p.1117).

5.7.2 The practice of establishing trustworthiness

In this section I address each of the criteria of 'trustworthiness' and outline the strategies I used for each in order to maximise the quality of this research study. The work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) has informed the strategies used to address each criterion.

5.7.2.1 Credibility

In order to increase the credibility of the research study I have used the method of triangulation. Although triangulation usually refers to more than one method or data source, Denzin (2006) considered the concept more broadly and identified two other forms, that of, analyst and theory/perspective triangulation. I have used analyst triangulation by using both supervision and a critical reference group (see Section 2.3.3.4), to consider and review my findings in relation to the thematic composition and structures. I have also used a theory/perspective triangulation through my eclectic theoretical lens (detailed in Chapter 2), and in the fact that the findings of this research have been presented from two perspectives, that of the older women's perspective in Chapters 7 and 8, and from my further analysis in Chapter 9. Within Chapters 7 and 8 I have extensively used quotations from the older women's interviews, that is, raw data, which will enable readers to judge whether my interpretations, in terms of constructing themes and my analysis within Chapter 9, is credible (Mays and Pope 2006; Patton 2002).

5.7.2.2 Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that in order to achieve the concept of transferability then any research study needs to contain detailed accounts of the phenomenon under research and these accounts need to be contextualised both structurally and culturally. This gives readers enough information to be able to judge how transferable the findings are to other situations (Seale 2002). I have achieved thick description by presenting detailed and nuanced accounts of the participants' experiences of sexuality, not only by using quotations but also presenting differing experiences (see Chapters 7 and 8). Using a predominantly feminist approach I have also located the older women's experiences within a structural framework (see Chapter 9).

5.7.2.3 Dependability

Dependability involves assessing whether the research process itself provides confidence to the findings and can be achieved mainly through audit trails (Lincoln and Guba 1985). I have created an audit trail, which documents my research process and gives a clear description of the path that I have taken. This audit trail includes ethics papers, interview schedules, participant demographics, sampling and recruitment information, raw data (tapes of interviews), interview scripts, and data analysis documents. Many of these documents are located in the appendices of this thesis. Addressing dependability generally, I would suggest that I have been open and transparent in relation to my theoretical stance and the methodological processes that I have used.

5.7.2.4 Confirmability

Using triangulation and audit trails enables a researcher to achieve confirmability, which involves assessing how well the findings are supported by the data. Both processes have been discussed in above Sections 5.7.2.1 and 5.7.2.3 respectively. The other process, which can increase confirmability, is the researcher's engagement with the concept of reflexivity. I have engaged reflexively with the research process and have detailed my position openly in Chapter 2, whilst also noting my decisions and choices throughout my discussions in relation to the methodology. Throughout my research study I have used research literature to inform my use of particular types of sampling, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, which I feel, has encouraged reflexivity and self-scrutiny (Pyett 2003).

5.7.2.5 Authenticity

Authenticity as a concept refers to the research study's impact on the participants themselves as well as a wider political impact (Bryman 2016). It encompasses the notions of change, understanding and empowerment. I do not feel at this stage in the research that I can comment on impact but it is worth noting the following comments from a couple of older women participants regarding their engagement with the study.

“Interesting to speak y'day. It gave me much to ponder over.” (OW7email day after interview)

“It's made me look at things that normally you don't look at.” (OW8 at end of interview)

Empowerment and change are central to feminist research and as with the Phase 1 findings, I am committed to disseminating the findings of the participants' experiences, not only through academic channels, but also through older women's networks.

5.8 CONCLUSION

The research methods used in this study have been discussed within this chapter, and the processes involved in the recruitment, data collection and data analysis have been considered in detail. The dovetailing of Phase 1 and 2 of the research process has been demonstrated and particular emphasis has been given to the way that the recommendations of Phase 1 have informed and shaped the methodology and focus of Phase 2 of the study. The findings of both phases of the research are presented in the next three chapters, with Chapter 6 showcasing the findings of Phase 1, and Chapters 7 and 8 displaying the findings of Phase 2.

Foreword for Chapters 6, 7 and 8

These chapters present the findings of this research study from Phase 1: Chapter 6, and Phase 2: Chapters 7 and 8. To recap, the aim of Phase 1 was to identify any methodological issues when researching older women's experiences of sexuality, which then informed the recommendations for the methodology of Phase 2. These recommendations have been summarised in Section 5.3. The aim of Phase 2 was to undertake an exploration of older women's experiences of their sexuality within the context of ageing, with particular focus on any changes, and how these changes had impacted on how they felt about themselves.

The findings take a journey through three distinct, yet inter-related, areas; researching sexuality; expressing sexuality; and revisiting sexuality. In each of the areas the findings are displayed under theme headings, to reflect the data analysis method of thematic analysis (Clarke et al 2015, Braun and Clarke 2013, Clarke and Braun 2013, Braun and Clarke 2006). In chapter 6, focusing on the area of researching sexuality, the findings are confirmed by the data, using quotations from participants, and supported by existing literature. In chapters 7 and 8, focusing on the areas of expressing and revisiting sexuality, the findings are solely confirmed by the data. As discussed in the previous chapters 2 and 5, the older women's voices within Phase 2 of the research study are prioritised through the extensive use of interview quotations, which enables their lived experiences to dominate, as well as reflecting the inductive nature of this research study. This "theory minimisation" (Grbich 2013, p292) approach to data display is frequently linked to postmodernist research, "where minimal interpretation but maximal display of data occurs so the reader can get close to the participant's experiences" (Grbich 2013, p292). I have discussed at some length (see Section 5.6) that theme identification and presentation has inevitably involved me in a degree of interpretation in my role as the researcher. Notwithstanding I have tried to keep this to a minimum within these chapters to enable the narratives of the participants to dominate. I support a partnership approach towards the presentation of the findings, made up of, first, the subjective experiences of the participants and, second, a theoretical analysis from the researcher. I would argue that this combination gives the research findings more authority (Hughes 2002) and contributes significantly to the trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of the research study. I have created a separate space for myself as the researcher in Chapter 9, where I present a theoretical analysis of the findings from Phase 2 of the research study.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCHING AGEING AND SEXUALITY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the findings of Phase 1 of the research study are fully presented. Reference has been made to some of the findings within the methodology chapter (see Section 5.3) relating to the recommendations for Phase 2. Although there will inevitably be some repetition of their content in this chapter, I felt that it was important to keep the findings as a whole as they represent an important part of the participative aspect of the research study.

6.2 OVERVIEW

I developed a coding template or framework based on my interview schedule to direct and organise my coding and theme development and included seven aspects of the research process. These aspects are interrelated, with the 'macro' aspects of importance, gaps, sexuality, ageing and society, and language, providing an influential context to the 'micro' aspects of recruitment, data collection, and researcher influence. Each aspect is presented separately to aid the structure of this chapter, and their connectedness is illustrated through the identification of any common codes and themes. The themes are explained in terms of their components, which are based on the codes, and any sub-themes that were identified in the analysis (see Appendix 6). This chapter identifies the methodological issues of researching sexuality with older women/people.

6.3 IMPORTANCE

All the participants felt that researching sexuality should be an important part of the ageing and later life research agenda and an analysis of the participants' reasons identified two key themes of 'establishing a presence' and 'making a difference'.

6.3.1 Establishing a presence

There was recognition from most of the participants that older people's sexuality struggled to establish a presence, in both social and research worlds. The older women participants spoke of a lack of discussion and a silence around sexuality within their own social networks.

I was in the WI [women's institute] and we used to have lots of speakers but no-body touched on that [sexuality], they seemed to avoid it, they talked about social workers, prisons, everything, but nobody talked about that. (OW1P1)

The researcher participants identified older people's sexuality as a neglected and under-researched area.

Literature on later life, whether it's sort of the medical perspective or on the more social aspects of gerontology, have still been quite neglectful of sexuality generally and in recognising the continued sexuality and sexual needs of older people. (R6P1)

The majority of the participants considered that research focusing on ageing and sexuality had an important role in challenging this lack of presence through 'breaking the silence' and 'bringing discussion out into the open' in relation to sexuality. Research enables older people, and in particular older women, to be taken seriously in terms of voicing and expressing their sexuality.

6.3.2 Making a difference

A number of the participants identified that the use of stereotypes and myths created a misrepresentation of older women's sexuality within society. Therefore it is important for research to not only establish a presence in terms of sexuality, but to establish a certain type of presence which challenges images and information that do not adequately reflect the experiences of older women. Subsequently, a key role of research in ageing and sexuality is 'making a difference', which includes 'challenging perceptions' in order to 'change attitudes' and to 'create a better understanding' across generations towards older women's experiences of sexuality.

I think it [researching ageing and sexuality] would be good because it would expose some of the myths and might enable more discussion, more acknowledgement that it [being sexual] is perfectly normal. I certainly feel I've been made to feel abnormal because I'm not like what the media puts across to us. (OW5P1)

6.4 GAPS

Most of the participants identified gaps in knowledge relating to ageing and sexuality and analysis of their contribution revealed two key themes of 'transitions in sexuality' and 'type of research'. The older women participants contributed only to the former theme, whereas the researcher participants contributed to both themes with their main contribution being to the 'type of research'.

6.4.1 Transitions in sexuality

The older women participants in particular had very specific but wide ranging questions about sexuality that they wanted future research to explore, including, how older women cope with a loss of a sexual partner, how older women feel about their bodies, the types of sexual practices older women engage in, and how personal histories and societal pressures affect older women's sexuality. These questions can be grouped into 'changes in sexuality', 'influences on sexuality' and 'experiences of sexuality'. A common focus of interest across these areas of enquiry involved the concept of change where there was an assumption by participants that changes in sexuality did take place during the ageing process.

How the definition [of sexuality], whatever definition they [future research participants] give, is different from what they said about themselves 30 years ago. (OW3P1)

It [the research] was going to be quite a big project [focusing on] how relationships and sexuality change in terms of... ageing. (R7P1)

However a small number of participants recognised the influence of other factors such as history, family and society on changes relating to sexuality and that the complex interrelationship with ageing needed to be explored in researching ageing and sexuality.

They [older women] grew up in an era where being asexual was normal for being older... now they're living in an era where to be asexual is also a form of deviance... questions now have to be what kind of pressure do [older women] feel about having to be sexual and the cultural penalties there are for being asexual. (R8P1)

Whilst considering 'experiences of sexuality', there was a sense from the participants that they felt it was important for research to explore not only what the changes may be, but also ensuing impacts.

What they [older women] mean by sexuality and what does it mean for them in this stage of their life and do they think it's still important? To get them to talk about what sexuality and sensuality means to them. (OW3P1)

The key theme 'transitions in sexuality' pulls the areas of enquiry together as well as reflecting a sense that the changes involve movement that may lead to growth, development, and possible transformation of sexuality within the context of ageing, in terms of its form, shape and appearance.

6.4.2 Type of research

The majority of the researcher participants felt that the knowledge gap in relation to researching ageing and sexuality was in the 'type of research'. They felt that qualitative research studies, employing methods that encourage older people, and in particular older women, to talk about their experiences of their sexuality, were still relatively small in number.

There definitely are gaps. There are a lot more questionnaire based work than interview based ones and a lot more to do with measuring and counting frequencies and how often older people have sex, rather than what it means to them... there has been more qualitative studies coming out than there was certainly before... so it is getting better but it is still quite limited – you know it is still basically quite quantitative. (R2P1)

The voice of the medic, health professional and sexologist also dominated, making it difficult to access not only the experiences of older people but also to explore the diversity of meanings that sexuality held for older people.

6.5 AGEING, SEXUALITY AND SOCIETY

All but one of the participants recognised that researching sexuality takes place within a context, made up of dominant ideas and images of ageing and sexuality, which impact on the research process. An analysis of the participants' views on the form this impact may take identified three key themes of 'competing images', 'lack of support for research' and 'sensitive research'. This last key theme is shared and also discussed in the aspect of recruitment of participants in Section 6.7.

6.5.1 Competing images

This key theme is made up of 'negative attitudes' and 'positive experiences'. Older women participants contributed significantly to identifying 'negative attitudes' with examples such as, sexuality being associated only with younger people, older women being portrayed as asexual, and the lack of information about sexual matters for older people. There was the view that negative attitudes may act as a barrier to older people expressing their sexuality.

I am interested in how older people respond to the external limits that may be put on their sexuality by public attitudes. There's a lot of this 'ooh wrinklies, ooh they can't' by younger people, and I'm sure that must impact on older people to some extent if they're thinking of having a relationship, 'what are my children going to think', that sort of thing. (OW4P1)

'Positive experiences' represent solely the views of the researcher participants who from their own research experiences had found older people to be very willing to talk openly about sexuality and enjoyed sharing their sexual experiences.

Older people had a lot to say about sex and sexuality in later life and it was important to listen and older people weren't as reluctant to talk about it as people assumed. (R2P1)

These 'competing images' of asexuality and sexuality in later life impact on research by giving mixed messages about whether researching sexuality is a relevant and important topic for older people. The two competing images are unequal in terms of influence and the participants, when considering the importance of research in presenting experiences of later life sexuality that challenge distorted images, referred to the predominance of an asexual image.

6.5.2 Lack of support for research

A number of researcher participants expressed frustration and discouragement by the lack of support for researching sexuality in later life. One example cited was the difficulty of acquiring mainstream funding. Decisions turning down funding applications are difficult to challenge, as the issue of sexuality in later life is frequently absent from major government policy documents involving older people and/or sexual health.

I think it [researching ageing and sexuality] is certainly important. I mean that was what was so shocking [being denied funding] because there have been so many things coming out here in New Zealand in terms of policy documents... sexuality actually got left off a lot of those... its missing in all those kinds of documents. (R7P1)

The lack of support was felt particularly acutely in relation to qualitative research, with one researcher participant experiencing negative attitudes from academic colleagues and peers questioning the value of researching ageing and sexuality in terms of interest, importance and usefulness.

6.5.3 Sensitive research

A number of participants made significant references to the fact that they felt that ageing and sexuality is often perceived as sensitive by, and on behalf of, older people. The older women participants identified a range of feelings that may be experienced by other older women if they were approached to take part in such research, including feeling upset, frightened, and uncomfortable. These feelings

could be linked to the 'risk of exposure', which is explored in Section 6.7, and there was a view that sexuality was a delicate topic needing to be treated carefully.

You've got to be careful who you send it [research information] to so that you don't upset people because some people over 70 would go, 'oh how dare they even suggest that I might be interested in that'. You could upset people, because 'how dare they', it's almost indecent, what you're doing. (OW2P1)

All the participants felt that sexuality could often be perceived by older people as being too personal to be researched and a disrespectful invasion of privacy. A difficult question to answer from the findings is whether people's perception of sexuality as a sensitive topic is solely influenced by their age. One researcher participant stated that,

The issue of sexuality is so charged emotionally... particularly in the US with the Puritan ethic, that it [talking about sexuality] is quite uncomfortable for some [older people] and then others are at a point in their lives where they are more eager to talk about this than ever. (R5P1)

This suggests that aspects of life, other than their age, might influence receptiveness to sexuality research. Arguably the more receptive older people are the less likely they are to allow any perception of sensitivity to put them off being involved in researching sexuality. The findings do however highlight one further point involving the perception that 'other' people hold on behalf of older people, that researching ageing and sexuality is too sensitive. Within the findings 'other' people included gatekeepers of health and social care services and people interested professionally in gerontological issues who were,

Quite adamant that to try and discuss sexuality with older people, older women, was very difficult and would certainly be almost offensive to ask older women whether they were lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual... I think it's patronising to say that older people will be offended if you try and talk about sexuality to them or won't want to, or won't understand... I think that's the excuse that some service providers have given when people have tried to access [older] people. I think that's one of the challenges for researchers to... overcome those barriers to access. (R6P1)

One researcher participant highlighted a situation where the gatekeepers of a specific social networking resource were unwilling to display advertising material for recruiting research participants which used the word 'sexuality', for fear of offending the older people who used the resource. These feelings of sensitivity by proxy can be linked to negative attitudes and in turn support the image of

asexuality by silencing the voice of the older person in talking about their experiences of sexuality.

6.6 LANGUAGE

All the participants identified that the main issue relating to the aspect of language within the research process centred on the concept of sexuality, its meanings and the ways it is discussed. The analysis of their contributions identified one key theme of 'understanding sexuality'.

6.6.1 Understanding sexuality

This theme is made up of 'different meanings', 'common understanding' and 'understanding within the research process'.

6.6.1.1 Different meanings

The older women participants contributed significantly by sharing their meanings of 'sexuality', including sexual activity, intimacy, emotions, attractiveness, passion, identity and sexual orientation. Although the majority of the older women welcomed a definition that included more than just sexual activity some felt it was unrealistic because of the way society's norms are imposed on the meanings of sexuality.

I mean the majority of people will see sexuality as... mainly heterosexual for a start... I think for a lot of people sexuality will mean heterosexual penetration and I think the term should mean different. (OW6P1)

A couple of the older women participants felt that the imposition of a narrow definition of sexuality created pressure on them to engage in sexual activity. In contrast to this the wider definition of sexuality including sexual orientation caused religious and moral conflict for another older woman who preferred to use other terms to describe the sexual relationship she had experienced with her husband.

I would have used intimacy rather than sexuality.... because sexuality covers such a lot, it covers homosexuals, lesbians, everything doesn't it, I would have used the word intimacy, I think that's a far better word. (OW1P1)

Generally all the participants felt that the range of meanings sexuality held for them and other people could generate both positive and negative connotations, which in turn could influence the decision of whether to participate in research. There was recognition however that in order to undertake a broad and inclusive research study involving older women no other term was as comprehensive as sexuality.

It means different things at different times. I mean sexuality, what other word could you put for it? I can't think of any other way you can put it. (OW2P1)

6.6.1.2 Common understanding

Most of the older women and researcher participants implicitly recognised the problems raised by the different meanings of the word sexuality with some researchers voicing concern about the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication, which in turn could compromise the aims of a study. These participants put forward a range of strategies to develop a common understanding within the research process such as, using other terms for sexuality, reframing research questions which mirrored the terms and language being used by participants, and negotiating a shared meaning at the beginning of any researcher/participant encounter.

I think I usually start off by saying 'and what does the term sexuality mean to you?' So I get them [participants] to define it and we probably usually do that at the beginning of the interview and that leads to discussion...so that can be a way of managing it [the different meanings] but of course it is a bit late by then because some people may have chosen not to respond. (R2P1)

The participants viewed developing a common understanding around the issue of sexuality as a particularly important aim of research within this area. As highlighted above, strategies have their limitations, which can particularly affect key research processes such as the recruitment and data collection.

6.6.1.3 Understanding sexuality within the research process

The recruitment of participants and the collection of data are two aspects of research connected to 'understanding sexuality within the research process' through the use of language in recruitment advertisements and interviews. The key issue in relation to recruitment advertisements was about the use of 'sexuality', where the participants returned to the previous issues in relation to 'understanding sexuality' but in a more focused manner. Although the majority of the participants favoured using 'sexuality' in the advertising and information material, many felt it was also important within the written material to be able to convey inclusiveness by stating the range of different meanings for, and experiences of, sexuality. This approach was felt to aid understanding of the aims of a research study whereas the use of other words to mean sexuality could lead to confusion and raise certain ethical issues.

I've had good conversations with [name of researcher] about whether we should frame these conversations as ageing and sexuality focus groups for example, or should they be something that seems benign like ageing and health. Then again the question is whether that's manipulative, when you really want to discuss sexuality. (R5P1)

The key issue in relation to interviews centred on the language of sexuality, in particular how people communicated and talked about sexuality. The researcher participants in particular identified a broad range of language used by older people to discuss issues relating to sexuality, which challenges the researcher in terms of understanding.

I think I was really surprised and pleased at the range of language that got used in the end in the interviews. Some people stated things properly you know and used clinical terms and some people stated things very euphemistically, and yet it was usually pretty clear what they were talking about you know... and then other people used quite rude slang and that each of those vocabularies sort of changes what it is possible to talk about, changes the tone, and the rude slang is usually accompanied by quite a lot of joking and laughter whereas the euphemistic talk is bit more telling you about feelings and things like that. (R2P1)

Despite the diversity of language there was also recognition that sexuality is controlled or dominated by medical terminology, which hampers the development of 'general' language to discuss experiences of sexuality and in turn understanding. One researcher participant also felt that the researching sexuality agenda was being driven, not only by the medicalisation of sexuality, but also by issues and concerns of sexuality that were youth-orientated. This led to irrelevant and inappropriate questions and in turn to a misunderstanding of sexuality in later life.

6.7 RECRUITMENT

When considering the aspect of recruitment participants concentrated on the practical task of 'contacting participants' and considered what would act as 'motivators for involvement' in research. There was an acknowledgement that these issues are influenced by the perception that researching sexuality is sensitive, which in turn could impact negatively on recruiting participants. Due to this the shared theme of 'sensitive research' is returned to with some additional brief commentary.

6.7.1 Sensitive research

A number of the participants felt that the perceived sensitivity of the research topic could lead potential participants to worry about their 'risk of exposure', discussed earlier in Section 6.5.3, if they agreed to take part in the research. This 'risk of exposure' was connected to the notion that too much personal information about sexuality may have to be disclosed leading to feelings of vulnerability and anxieties about safety particularly in situations involving gay and lesbian sexual orientation.

Some people like to keep it [talk about sexuality] very close, ...they're talking about themselves, exposing themselves... you might have difficulties... finding people... I think people are going to be very frightened of the tape. I think people can often be seen afterwards as "I've said too much and talked too much" if it's on tape. (OW2P1)

Especially the older gay men, it was more 'what's all this for then', it was twenty questions before you even got to the questions, and there was quite a concern about their own safety and security, and how much of a threat was this [research] to them. (R4P1)

Due to the possible links between 'risk of exposure' and 'difficulty of recruiting' participants, some of the older women participants felt that there was a crucial role for the preliminary research information. The recruitment advertisements and participants' information sheets needed to encourage and nurture confidence, and trust in the research process, a dominant theme, which is considered further in Sections 6.8 and 6.9.

Sexuality is a delicate topic, certainly amongst older women [and] you need to put that ... that might sound reassuring about 'women hearing women's stories'. I'm just trying to think of ways to make it more palatable, more acceptable, less frightening. (OW3P1)

6.7.2 Contacting participants

Different ways of 'contacting participants' to take part in researching sexuality were suggested by all the participants. Many of the older women felt that 'making contact with groups' either for older people such as Age UK, or for women such as Women's Institute would be a starting point to 'making contact with older women'. Numerous groups identified by the older women participants were non-traditional such as Older Feminist Network, Growing Old Disgracefully Network and Older Lesbian Network, and would tend to challenge assumptions and stereotypes in relation to gender, ageing and/or sexuality.

I mean [name of network] is a good place to start because a lot of those women have been doing a lot of self awareness stuff so they're becoming aware of themselves and they're freeing up themselves so I think if you can get them... you maybe need to talk to some more of them. (OW5P1)

Over half of the sample of older women participants for this research was recruited from non-traditional groups and informal networks. There was a sense however from the older women that non-traditional groups are more likely to have older women members who would be more receptive to volunteering to take part in sexuality research and not be deterred by the sensitivity or 'inappropriateness' of the topic.

[Name of network] was really a good source of respondents for me and I am sure that's because you know the aim of [name of network] is something that you can sort of see similar to continuing to be sexually active as an older person, as that is another thing you are not suppose to do... to continue to have sex. So you know if you can find a group that somehow aligns with this aim then that's really helpful. (R2P1)

Arguably older women who volunteered to take part in sexuality research were in a sense taking up a challenge. This aspect of recruitment was also encountered by one researcher participant who failed to attract participants for a sexuality research project after extensive advertising and had talked to a national newspaper about her difficulty in recruiting.

[The national newspaper] actually reported on 'New Zealanders shy to talk about sex' or 'New Zealanders don't want to talk about sex' and then all of a sudden the phone never stopped ringing. So it was that one newspaper article that never cost anything which was the clincher. (R7P1)

The couple of older women participants who were involved in the more traditional older people's/women's groups felt that 'talking to groups' about the aims and ideas of the sexuality research in question initially may help to stimulate interest and encourage older women members to volunteer to take part.

There are quite a few of these groups around... retired professionals... the WI. If you are willing to go out and give them a talk about it, your research, and what you are doing... then you might have some success. (OW2P1)

As well as groups, participants identified contact points for older women where recruitment advertisements could be displayed such as community centres, libraries, luncheon clubs, and older people's/women's magazines and newsletters. Some of the researcher participants identified 'informal networks' as a way of

contacting participants such as web-based chat rooms, and in particular had found success employing the sampling technique of snowballing.

A snowball sample and people recommend friends of theirs and there is a level of trust, so if you can tap a community. That seems to be the best way to recruit folks because they know each other, they trust each other, they can recommend individuals. (R5P1)

During the process of contacting older women, many of the participants stressed the importance of a diverse sample of participants in terms of, not only socio-demographic background, but also sexual experiences. One researcher participant felt that it was important for researchers to be prepared for sexual diversity and for the impact that it has on the type of sample. It was suggested that the extent of the diversity could be due to participants volunteering only if they have had non-traditional, memorable or extremely significant sexual experiences.

I think you are more likely to get people who have had a slightly unusual experience because they feel they have something to say, they have something they want to express, whereas some people who feel 'I have nothing to say', 'nothing interesting has ever happened to me' in respect to sex then they are less likely to respond to you. That is certainly my experience... I think it made the sample more diverse than the general population of older people. (R2P1)

'Having something to say' is returned to in the next theme as being identified as one of the motivators for people becoming involved in research. The researcher participants had encountered 'difficulty in recruiting' older participants and highlighted the challenge posed to the research findings when working with a small sample. As suggested earlier, many of the participants linked the difficulty in recruiting to the sensitivity of the topic under research, but the findings could not adequately ascertain the level of impact age may have on the issue.

6.7.3 Motivators for involvement

The participants identified a wide range of factors that could motivate older women to get involved in researching sexuality. These broadly fell into two groups associated either with the participants or with the research process itself. The personal attributes of the participants that were identified include possessing a degree of familiarity with academia/research setting, having something to say, and courage.

I guess you have to be quite confident individual to come forward and take part in this sort of thing to start with don't you ... you will have something to say won't you. (R3P1)

They have to be prepared and to really think about it and to have the courage, if that's what's involved, to speak out. (OW3P1)

Many of the older women also identified features within the research process itself that were important motivators such as using the research information to convey to potential participants that their contributions would be listened to and taken seriously as well as being considered important and useful.

Older women do feel that their ideas and thoughts are not being considered any more so I would think that a lot of women might jump at the idea of being able to talk about things to somebody who is going to listen to them... they must feel that their comments and views and so forth will be taken seriously and may even somehow change things that they're unhappy about. (OW4P1)

One older woman participant in her mid-seventies commented that she had been motivated to take part in this study on how to research sexuality because the information sheet and advertisements had specified that participants needed to be over seventy years of age. There was a sense that she was more attracted to a specification of age as opposed to the umbrella term 'older' where she may not have felt as welcomed.

You specifically saying for women over 70, well I thought well yes, I feel quite strongly about it, that women over 70 should not be dismissed, and so that was why I decided to do this one, I was more willing to do this one than I was to do the first one [research where 'over 50' was specified]... because I'm of the age that you're researching. (OW2P1)

As discussed in Section 6.6, the use of language in recruitment advertisements to enable a broad understanding of the concept of sexuality is crucial in conveying the nature, aims and objectives of a study, which in turn is a key factor in people's decision whether to volunteer as participants.

6.8 DATA COLLECTION

Participants contributed to the aspect of data collection with discussions addressing three key themes of 'methods of collecting data', 'talking about sexuality' and 'trust in research'. This latter theme is shared with the aspect of researcher influence.

6.8.1 Methods of collecting data

Interviews, focus groups, surveys and questionnaires were the main methods of collecting data identified by the participants. There was a general feeling that methods involving verbal, as opposed to written, discussions offered more spontaneity, flexibility and in turn the opportunity to develop common understanding, which was identified in Section 6.6 as fundamental to sexuality research. The pros and cons of individual versus group interviews were discussed, with some participants favouring the 'privacy' of individual interviews because of the perceived sensitivity and personal aspect of conversations about sexuality. Group interviews were seen as taking place in a public space and therefore too self-exposing.

I wouldn't have discussed this, no way would I have discussed my personal thoughts and feelings in a group, no too many people know them... I think young people might be willing to trust, they probably go 'oh well'... certainly not women of our age, no way, I wouldn't discuss in a group, there's too many people have got that knowledge in their head and they go out with it, and we can never wipe it out. (OW2P1)

I run a film group at [name of place] U3A and we viewed and discussed the film 'The Mother'... whereas the women were very open on all sorts of personal issues on previous film discussions, we have been meeting for over 3 years, the group did not at any moment divulge anything personal about their own personal sexuality. Would I talk in a group of people I do not know... I do not think so. (OW6P1)

I went with the thought that I might use groups as my method rather than interview but I got rather discouraged because I felt that all the talk about sex was being suppressed in the big group but going on in the pairs and threes... but that talk about sex did not seem permissible within the [larger] group whereas it was ok in ones, twos and threes. (R2P1)

Some participants however favoured the method of discussing issues of sexuality within a group situation, which was seen to provide richer discussions due to the interactive nature of groups and the ability to bounce ideas off each other. There were mixed views about whether group discussions worked better within formalised focus groups where there was a limited amount of meetings between groups of people who did not have pre-established relationships with each other, as opposed to using an established friendship and/or activity group. The anonymity provided by formal focus groups was considered to encourage openness within the group discussions. Interestingly a couple of the older women participants preferred

being interviewed on an individual basis over the telephone because of the degree of anonymity offered by the lack of face-to-face contact.

Telephone interviews I think are good because you don't have a face to face and you can say things that, you know, that you can throw out... If you're going to talk about sex or sexual activity or they are such deep-seated feelings about it, often feelings of inadequacy, feelings of shame, feelings of all sorts of things, and especially in our generation where sex was not something one could talk about that easily. I think that it's better to be as anonymous as possible. A voice on the phone permits you. (OW6P1)

One researcher participant had found through feedback from his research participants that the intensity of face-to-face individual interviews had been exacerbated by the topic of sexuality. Another researcher argued that one of the advantages of focus groups was that members were in a stronger position to negotiate their interaction with each other in terms of the level of disclosure they were prepared to undertake.

6.8.2 Talking about sexuality

The majority of the participants recognised that many older women who volunteered to take part in sexuality research would need some support to feel empowered to talk about their experiences of ageing and sexuality. For example the importance of participants 'being prepared' adequately so that they felt able to engage with the research process. Talking through the aims and expectations of the research or giving out a copy of the interview questions were identified as strategies that could happen before the data collection took place. Within the context of sexuality research where there are issues of sensitivity, participants' anxieties regarding personal disclosure, and the complexity of sexuality, it was felt by participants that knowledge of the questions/areas of enquiry would be helpful and empowering.

We give a brief introduction as to what areas we will cover but not set out... like an A4 sheet that these are the areas we are going to cover. We haven't done it in that way. I imagine it would be useful as triggers, if someone hasn't been sexually active for a bit, but would like to talk about the part of their lives when they were sexually active it might work as a trigger. (R1P1)

I thought it was important to have telephone contact with my participants to let them hear my voice and to tell them what I was doing, send them information sheets and draw parameters around the study – you know this is what I hope to get out of it and went through things with them on the phone ... desensitising I guess was a major reason for doing that... some

[participants] said I wish I had time to think about the issues we talked about... I asked them what they thought sexuality meant to them and some people didn't have a clue...it means so many different things anyway, it is difficult to pin point... I usually gave them a flavour of what I wanted to talk about. (R3P1)

For this research study all the participants were given a copy of the interview questions in advance. The older women participants in particular, whilst feeling that such a practice would stifle spontaneity, welcomed the move and had felt that it had enabled them to usefully contribute.

I actually went through them [the questions], otherwise I might have forgotten lots of things. I've actually got my answers here in front of me and obviously I've added to them as we've talked. (OW5P1)

It was certainly helpful to get the questions ahead of time with you, so I would say I think that's a good thing. (R5P1)

Both the content and the process of the interview were identified by the majority of participants as being important in 'engaging women in sexuality talk'. Apart from using direct questions about issues of sexuality, both older women and researcher participants suggested topics that could lead into a discussion about sexuality. These triggers included the menopause, Viagra, beauty, and media images of older people's sexuality. Interestingly an older woman and researcher participant suggested framing the discussions around the activity of talking, suggesting that researchers could explore why talking about sexuality may be difficult, and/or if conversations about sexuality were happening, asking older women who they were talking to, how they were talking, and what they were talking about. It was identified by a couple of older women that 'women talk freely about sexuality' and attributed this to both age and being an 'atypical' older woman.

I think the fact that you've chosen 70 and above, I think a lot of women by the time they get to 70 are much more laid back... I think we're aware of our, what shall I say, aware of our deaths and we're much more into doing things that perhaps when we were younger we would think twice about. I think we're much more daring. A lot of the women I meet are much more free. (OW5P1)

Certainly among the women that I mix with who are largely members of [name of network], so we're probably not very ... I can't think of the right word, typical of older women as a whole, we're certainly very free in talking about sexuality, not that we do a lot, but if it does come up we tend to be very forthcoming about it, but I would have thought that older women in

general wouldn't be. I don't really have any close friends who aren't feminists so I don't really know how that would be. (OW4P1)

Building a good working relationship was the issue that dominated the process of the interview situation and participants identified a range of ways including the use of basic counselling skills, creating an atmosphere of acceptance, trust, empathy and comfort, and having the ability to manage the beginning, middle and end of the interview process. An older woman participant felt that the use of reminiscence as a way of engaging older women would be appropriate. This idea was given further support by a researcher participant who used reminiscence as a way of enabling older participants to usefully contribute to her research when they were no longer sexually active. Many of these features of a good working relationship are linked to the theme 'trust in the research process' which is considered in the next section.

Various participants identified possible barriers that may prevent older women talking about sexuality, despite the researcher offering support and encouragement. One such barrier involved older heterosexual women being reluctant to talk about the negative side of their sexual relationships and marriages through either a sense of loyalty to their partners or finding it difficult to put across their side of the story particularly when their views conflicted with general perceptions. A researcher participant gave an example of the use of Viagra, where for some older women it has impacted negatively on their long-standing sexual relationships. This 'protection of self and partners' gives rise to the possibility that participants put on their 'best face' for the interview situation or any involvement in research may have to be on a covert level.

The interesting thing in terms of the women, for a lot of them that had you know not very good experiences since Viagra came on the scene in terms of their own relationships for a variety of reasons, some of them actually didn't want their male partner to know that they were participating and so for some of them we had to go to quite great lengths to meet them in motels and what have you because they certainly didn't want anyone to know they were actually participating, but that's because I think they were being so critical and they thought they were being also critical of their partners. (R7P1)

Several researcher participants felt that being involved in sexuality research could be described as 'talking to strangers about sexuality' and that the interview situation could be perceived as odd and in turn become a barrier to conversation. It was felt important to have a structure to the interview and for the researcher to be aware that he/she may be the first person that the participant has spoken to about his/her sexuality. It is worth reiterating here that the 'range of language used

in interviews', which has been referred to within the aspect of language (see Section 6.6) can cause barriers to conversing meaningfully about sexuality.

6.8.3 Trust in research process

The theme 'trust in the research process' which also features within the aspect of researcher influence in section 6.9 was a particularly important issue for a number of the older women participants. They felt that the ability to engage in sexuality research was based on building participants' trust in the researcher and the process. Confidentiality, anonymity and acceptance were identified as the key elements of trust and that it was the researcher's role to ensure that these elements existed for participants.

I think it's very important that they [potential participants] know that nothing they say is going to be told to anybody that would identify them in any way. Confidentiality, and also 'whatever you say is ok, you can say anything you like'. (OW4P1)

The use of research advertisements and information to reinforce the issues of confidentiality and anonymity, together with consent forms and reassurance from the researcher were felt to be important in building up a relationship of trust with older women participants. There was a sense that the combination of talking about sexuality with a researcher and the taping of the conversation could lead some older women to feel that they had over-exposed themselves. These feelings could only be addressed and balanced through feelings of 'trust in the research process'.

6.9 RESEARCHER INFLUENCE

The researcher's role is an integral part of all the preceding aspects of the research process, making it a difficult task to identify and focus on specific influences. Therefore for this aspect the analysis of the data concentrated on the influences of the researcher that are specifically relevant to researching sexuality. All participants who contributed to this aspect felt that the researcher influenced how the research was carried out which in turn influenced the participants' experiences. The researcher participants made a significant contribution to this aspect focusing on issues that positively influenced best practice in research. The older women participants contributed less in terms of the range of issues but felt strongly about the few issues that would affect older women's involvement in sexuality research. Researcher influence was identified as being exercised through the researcher's 'skills and experience', 'knowledge' and 'values and self'.

6.9.1 Skills and experience

All the researcher participants recognised the need to be able to skilfully manage the tasks of the research process. The sensitivity of the research topic heightened the need for specific tasks to be undertaken in a competent way. The researcher's skills in making the research process accessible and welcoming to potential participants was regarded as a key task and one older woman participant emphasised that terms such as confidentiality and anonymity needed to be fully explained.

You'll probably have to explain what you mean by... confidentiality and anonymity... you know there are different interpretations of confidentiality. (OW6P1)

The researcher has a lot of influence in building up trust in the research process and enabling potential participants to make an informed decision about whether to become involved in the research study. The researcher's skills and experience of managing the interviewing process are crucial and a lack of experience of interviewing older people about sexuality can become a barrier.

I think the most significant thing that was a barrier I feel was just the first interview because I had never interviewed anyone about sex before. I've interviewed on sensitive topics and sex might have come up in one or two previous interviews but it wasn't... I wasn't going to be asking a man who was old enough to be my dad about his erections. I had never done that before so I thought that was the most challenging thing... that was my personal barrier. (R1P1)

Another researcher participant thought that it was important for researchers to undertake some preparatory work if they felt unable to engage comfortably in conversations about sexuality.

As far as sexuality and personal reflection... I don't know that I've done focused preparation in this area but for someone who is not comfortable having conversations around sexuality... there would be some preparation needed. I'm somewhat comfortable with any of these issues. (R5P1)

'Ending the research' in a positive and general way was also felt to be important as it recognised the intimate and emotive nature of talking about sexuality.

I always try to make sure that I'm not ending it on a high note, if that makes sense, as all the aspects about sex can be intimate or emotive. I just keep those for the middle of the interview... I build up to them and I build down from them and especially if someone has been talking about an issue that

has got them a little bit upset... I never finish on that note I always finish or try and bring it round to something a little bit more positive. (R1P1)

A couple of the researcher participants felt that it was important to ensure that participants were given the choice to be kept informed of how the research findings were progressing and being used. Participants may feel more strongly about the issue of continued involvement with the research because of the personal nature of the research topic. The themes of 'establishing a presence' and 'making a difference' that were identified in the aspect of importance may also contribute to participants' wish to know if the research was fulfilling these aims.

6.9.2 Knowledge

The participants identified the level of researcher's knowledge about the issues of ageing and sexuality as another influence on the research process. An awareness of the personal, cultural and structural influences on older people's sexuality was regarded as valuable in terms of data collection.

I think there should be some background questions to establish their [older women participants] general feelings about it throughout their life, not just in old age, but how they felt about sex all through their life. I think a lot of older women, me certainly, have been inhibited by the way we were brought up. I, personally if I were doing the research, I would want to know what experience older women had had of that kind... I just think that background questions are important so that you know where they're coming from really and whatever they say about their later life how they might have been influenced by their very earliest influences with sex. (OW4P1)

I made a point of trying to understand the social situations that people had been through over the years, so finding out what it was like during the war, reading some of the gay history, finding out about some of the big court cases, Lord Montagu and Peter Wildeblood in the early 60s, Wolfenden and the significance of that... I think that gave me some kind of head start so that when somebody started talking about something in an interview I didn't have to stop them to ask who it was they were talking about and what they were talking about... I think if I hadn't made that effort to gain an insight into previous decades that people had lived through then it would have either slowed things down or given slightly less rich data. (R6P1)

Researchers needed to use the knowledge of the various influences and attitudes on sexuality in a considered manner as the social construction of an older person's sexuality was complex and could not be reduced to one aspect such as age. One researcher participant felt that the researcher's knowledge of the participants' context and community aided their understanding of the data and empathy of the

older participants' needs. One older woman participant had experienced a researcher's lack of knowledge and had lost confidence in the research project that she had been involved in previously highlighting the important link between knowledge and trust.

6.9.3 Values and self

The researcher's 'values and self' were regarded by the participants as powerful influences on the research process. A number of older women participants felt that in order to successfully recruit and engage older women into sexuality research, researchers needed to use an empowering value base made up of professionalism and trustworthiness. The 'professionalism of the researcher' included aspects such as bona fide identification and credentials, good time keeping, clear aims and objectives, and a constructive attitude.

I felt it was something I was willing to take part in as long as I thought it was done right and you've got it set out, who you were, what you were, and what you were doing... you've got to feel well these people are doing this research, interviewing you and taking seriously what you say. I think that's important for the person that's interviewing, their attitude as well... you've got to let people see that you're very serious about your work, and that sexuality to you is a serious thing and not a sniggering thing as well, and sexuality is a big thing, it's you as a person, it's not just in the bed that's important. (OW2P1)

High levels of professionalism increase the trustworthiness of the researcher which in turn bolsters participants' 'trust in the research process', which was referred to previously in Section 6.8 on data collection. As well as increasing participants' trust in the essential concepts of confidentiality and anonymity, one older woman participant felt that professionalism and trustworthiness increased her sense of being in control of the research process.

I think all these things [aspects of professionalism] are important, and you've asked permission for each thing that you've done so that they think they are in control... and they can actually stop when they want to stop... we are in control that we can say as much as we want and as little as we want. (OW2P1)

Reference to a value base for many of the researcher participants involved their own attitudes towards ageing and sexuality which were predominantly influenced by theories that challenged and critiqued society's constructions and images of older people's sexuality. Interestingly however, only one researcher participant felt

that her positive attitude towards older people's sexuality might influence her research in a negative way.

I think it is really helpful to be able to go back and look at the interview transcript or whatever and see look there I am, I didn't necessarily mean to, but there I am saying this thing or going along with this or... so I think that's probably why positioning is inevitable... you know even with my analytic mind I am desperately interested in most stories but my instinct is to want to hear the stories about deviance and what you are not supposed to do and that sort of thing. (R2P1)

Other researcher participants felt that they were able to position themselves in an open and unbiased way in order to be able to hear alternative standpoints to their own. In relation to the 'self', the researcher participants focused on the differences between themselves and their research participants in terms of gender, sexual orientation and age, and the influence these differences may have on the research process. Gender differences were regarded as significant when researching sexuality with researcher participants highlighting mainly positive influences.

Having done the feedback, a lot of the women [participants] were saying that it was better doing research with a man [researcher] because there wasn't those shared assumptions and they explained things a little bit more. (R3P1)

We found it really interesting because there's that whole debate should women interview men, in particularly older men about their sexuality, and that was interesting because we did have a male interviewer available but most of them [male participants] opted for, wanted female interviewers... and also just for me, I enjoyed talking to the men as opposed to the women. I found it a lot easier to talk to the men. (R7P1)

One female researcher participant however had felt vulnerable when interviewing male participants about issues of sexuality as some male participants had crossed boundaries making the interview situation uncomfortable and in some situations threatening. Differences in relation to sexual orientation tended to encourage negative influences and examples were given by one researcher participant about his experience of older gay men preferring to be interviewed by researchers of the same sexual orientation and gender. One gay male researcher participant had found difficulty in recruiting older lesbians and felt that it was his gender that had created the barrier. Age differences between researchers and participants tended mainly to reap advantages. A number of the researcher participants identified the fact that older people were pleased that younger people were taking a positive interest in relation to ageing and sexuality and felt that they had something to

'teach' younger researchers. This encouraged a large degree of openness and detailed answers to exploratory questions. It is important for researchers to be aware of how negative attitudes towards older people's sexuality can, at times, lead to assumptions about age differences that, in themselves, become barriers to research taking place.

I presented some findings from it [research study] at a gerontology conference and someone in the audience... backed up by colleagues, said that they were quite astounded that someone in their seventies would talk to me... in my twenties. They were like, how can they talk to you about sex, you're young enough to be their granddaughter and they were quite astounded about that, and that it shouldn't be done. But these are the obstacles that prevent people doing this research with older people about sex, one, they assume they [older people] are not going to talk to you because it's too private and two, they assume that you might be too young. (R1P1)

6.10 DISCUSSION

Beginning the research with the question of how participants viewed the level of importance of researching ageing and sexuality was crucial, as the issue of sexuality is often perceived by others as a luxury or immaterial for older people, in comparison to, for example, deprivation and ill health (Gannon 1999). The research participants felt that this area of research was both important and necessary due to the neglect and silence that exists around the issue of older people's sexuality. Older people are often excluded from research and policy that focuses on sexuality and sexual health, as noted in Section 4.2.1, and arguably this marginalisation is linked to a particular perception and construction of older people's sexuality that is driven by ageism (DeLamater 2012; Bywater and Jones, R. 2007; Gott 2005; Levy 1999). Jones, J. and Pugh (2005, p257) identify further exclusion relating to older lesbians and older gay men in that "research on gay sexuality in general ignores older people, and research on older people largely ignores [gay] sexuality". The findings showed that not only should research into ageing and sexuality confront this neglect, silence and exclusion by establishing a presence, but also make a difference by challenging the stereotypical and ageist views of sexuality in later life. Therefore it could be suggested that researching ageing and sexuality addresses the concept of "catalytic validity" (Lather 1991, p68), with its potential to empower older participants as well as stimulate and promote change. As noted in Sections 1.3 and 4.3.2, ageing and sexuality research has been predominantly quantitative in type (Leontowitsch 2012; Gledhill et al 2008; Minichiello et al 2004), focusing in the main on heterosexual sexual intercourse, and/or situated within a 'dysfunctional/problematic' paradigm

(DeLamater 2012; Malta 2008; Gott 2005; Deacon et al 1995). Within a quantitative framework the voice of the older person together with the complexities and diversities of sexuality is absent.

The findings identified barriers, which may prevent researchers from accessing older people's perspectives on sexuality, such as inappropriate methodologies, focusing solely on sexual activity and 'dysfunctions', and the medicalisation of older people's sexuality (DeLamater and Sill 2005). Interestingly Frith (2000) identified comparable issues and barriers vis-à-vis researching sexuality generally, regardless of the age of the research participants, and argued for greater use of qualitative methods particularly if the topic is under-explored, as experiential and subjective aspects of sexuality are missing. As well as identifying the need for more qualitative research the participants felt that investigation into the changes that older women experienced in their sexuality would be an important and positive focus for future research. Deacon et al (1995, p507) have supported this particular focus and its implied notion of growth and development by stating that such research "may provide knowledge that challenges the tendency to conceptualize sexuality and aging as continual combatants". Subsequently it is important to view sexuality as being constructed over a lifetime (DeLamater and Carpenter 2012).

Researching ageing and sexuality does not take place in a vacuum and consequently society's attitudes towards sexuality generally, and older people's sexuality specifically, impact on the research process. One of the main themes highlighted in relation to this impact was the way that sexuality was perceived by some people as a sensitive topic to research, a view, which has considerable support in the extant literature (Hurd Clarke 2012; Gledhill et al 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b; Gott 2001; Pointon 1997; Deacon et al 1995). Farquhar (1999) suggests that sexuality is nearly always regarded as a sensitive issue and Ringheim (1995) regards it as one of the most difficult areas in social science to research. As discussed in Section 4.3.3, there have been examples of the 'sensitivity' of sexuality being beneficial in terms of enabling older women to engage with the research process (see also Jones, R.L. 2005). In this research it was unclear about the extent to which age influences an older person's perception of the sensitivity of sexuality as a research topic. However it was identified that age influences other people's perceptions of sensitivity on behalf of older people, a point that has been noted in other research studies (see also Gledhill et al 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005) and discussed in Section 4.3.3. The findings point to an increased perception of sensitivity, offensiveness, indelicacy, and indecency when sexuality is discussed within the context of older people. These issues are often "manifestations of younger people's concerns regarding talking about sex with older people" (Gott 2005, p63), which can become barriers to undertaking sexuality

research with older people. The findings did however raise a genuine concern that the perceived sensitivity of the topic was often linked to older people's anxieties about discussing extremely personal issues which could lead to feelings of exposure and vulnerability. Any research, which has the potential to pose a threat or incur psychological, social and financial costs to those involved, can be rightly defined as sensitive research. However "it may well be that a study seen as threatening by one group will be thought innocuous by another" (Lee and Renzetti 1993, p5). This variation in the perception of threat or sensitivity can also be influenced by the context within which the conversation or discussion about sexuality takes place.

The cost experienced by the researcher participants within the study through their involvement with qualitative sexuality research was a lack of financial and professional support, demonstrating the processes of being involved in "dirty work" (Irvine 2014, p632), which was discussed in Section 4.3.3. Sexuality researchers in other disciplines have often experienced working within a hostile academic environment where they have had difficulties in, gaining funding, having their work accepted by the 'better' journals, securing promotion (Haywood and Mac An Ghail 2006; Okami 2002; James and Platzer 1999), and therefore risked jeopardising any future career opportunities (Israel 2002). Israel (2002) argues that researchers need to employ strategies to survive the stigma of sexuality research such as forming a support network with other sexuality researchers. Although this was not explicitly stated in the research findings the researcher participants were already part of the same informal network.

In relation to the impact of society's attitudes on the research process the findings also identified the theme of competing images of sexuality in later life. On the one hand the older women participants felt that older people were viewed as asexual and assumed to therefore be disinterested in taking part in research, and on the other hand there was evidence from the researcher participants that older people wanted to get involved in research to talk about their experiences of sexuality. Arguably these two competing images mirror the dominant and countervailing discourses relating to ageing and sexuality, that of, asexuality and 'sexy oldie' respectively. The main support for the countervailing discourse or counter storyline comes from academics and practitioners (Jones, R.L. 2002), which corresponds with the findings of this study. However, Gott and Hinchliff (2003b, p1626) focusing on the importance of sex in later life found that older participants "welcomed the opportunity to talk about sex and discuss issues they had never talked about before." On the one hand, views of this type from older participants involved in sexuality research could be regarded as biased, but on the other hand it could be

argued that these views highlight that, for some older people, research studies may provide the only positive space to talk openly about issues of sexuality.

Sexuality is a difficult term to define having different meanings for different individuals (Deacon et al 1995), and where different theoretical perspectives influence meaning. Therefore the findings in relation to the aspect of language within the research process plausibly focused on the concept of sexuality, its different meanings, and ways of developing a common understanding. Different types of language used when talking about issues of sexuality were identified, and in particular, the predominance of medical terminology. Jones, R.L. (2002, p123) outlines how in her research she used the phrase “intimate relationships” as opposed to ‘sex’ in the recruitment material and the introductory part of her interviews with older women. Although the phrase ‘intimate relationships’ was used to imply a broad approach to sex and in respect of the sensitivity of the topic, she felt that it might have excluded certain conversations about sexuality such as masturbation or sex outside of relationships. The findings of this study however clearly support the use of the word ‘sexuality’ throughout the research process despite recognising the different and often confused meanings that are associated with the term. Within this context the findings identify some strategies that can be used by the researcher in the recruitment and data collection phases of the research to develop a common or negotiated understanding. Heaphy et al (1998) maintain the importance of negotiation and that the researcher needs to be prepared to “define and be specific with regards to the terms used” in the research process (Heaphy et al 1998: 461). The findings support this view although suggest some flexibility on behalf of the researcher in the negotiation process such as starting with the participants’ understanding of terms and, if needs be, reframing research questions, which mirror the terms and language used by the participants. The findings and literature identify the pivotal role of the researcher in using themselves and the research process to further common understanding around the issues of sexuality.

Moving on from the contextual issues of importance, gaps in knowledge, the impact of society and the language of sexuality, the discussion now turns to the micro aspects of the research process, including recruitment, data collection and the influence of the researcher. The findings identified a range of ways of directly contacting older women to take part in researching sexuality, many of which are identified in a report on engaging older people in research generally (North West Forum on Ageing 2004). The report is committed to exploring ways of directly recruiting as diverse a sample of older people as possible and cites shopping in supermarkets as the top activity of older people (North West Forum on Ageing

2004). Useful though this information may be, the methods of contacting or recruiting older people within these places are not explored. The importance of recruiting a diverse sample of older women in terms of class, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and sexual experiences was highlighted in the study. As noted in Section 4.3.4, diversity within samples in relation to ethnicity and sexual orientation are particularly difficult to achieve with past research on ageing and sexuality being predominantly undertaken with white, affluent and well-educated older people (Tarzia et al 2013; Pugh and Jones, J. 2007; Heaphy et al 2004; Deacon et al 1995). The findings raised the point that the sensitivity of the topic may impact negatively on recruitment and highlighted the need to motivate older women to volunteer. The features of the research process itself were identified as important motivators for involvement including the centrality of the recruitment material to convey the importance and usefulness of the research. When researching 'non-heterosexual' relationships, Heaphy et al (1998) identify the relevance of research to people's lives, and the wish to make an issue visible, as two of the motivators that encourage participation in research and help to build rapport between researcher and participant. Increasing the visibility of older women's experiences of sexuality was an issue raised throughout this research in terms of its importance and the reason why some of the older women participants had volunteered.

Turning to the aspect of data collection, the findings produced mixed views in relation to the best type of method for collecting data around the issue of sexuality. All participants favoured a method involving conversation or discussion, with the debate focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of individual and group interviews. Within the literature the use of focus groups is preferred when discussing sensitive topics because of the mutual support and safety available from members of the group, especially when the experiences discussed may not be acceptable in other situations (Frith 2000; Farquhar 1999; Kitzinger 1994). Frith (2000) sets out a robust case for focus groups being enabling environments specifically for sexuality research, encouraging people to share their experiences and thereby enhancing disclosure. The collective discussions, debates and disagreements can produce in-depth exploration of the nuances of a complex topic and provide greater clarification in an area which is prone to misunderstandings due to the range of language and meanings (Frith 2000). In contrast, the older women participants in this study favoured the individual interview, perceiving the group situation to be unsafe and too public. Jones, R.L. (2005, p50) within her research experienced a greater level of disclosure within a one-to-one situation because "research interviews are a confidential, private space where personal talk is appropriate". One of ways identified in this study of enabling older women to talk

about their experiences of sexuality was having sight of the interview questions in advance. It could be argued that instead of hampering spontaneity, a view that is commonly held, this strategy within an individual interview situation could encourage and produce the depth of exploration that is experienced within a group interview.

An important theme to come out of the findings was the task of establishing trust in the research process, which was predicated on the skills, experience, knowledge, and values of the researcher. Trust in the research process involved the concepts of confidentiality and anonymity, the foundations of which were laid down in the recruitment process and were built upon by the researcher during the process of data collection. Creating an atmosphere of trust by promising these two ethical requirements will be met is a particularly important part of sensitive research (Lee 2008) and helps to create a comfortable and enabling environment where two strangers can engage in discussions on sexuality (Frith 2000). Graham et al's (2007) study focusing on people's experiences of participating in research found that ethically sound research involved more than the issues of confidentiality and anonymity. People also needed to feel valued, respected and, most importantly, feel that the researcher managed the research process in an accessible, egalitarian and competent way. The findings in this study identified the importance of the researcher's professionalism together with an empowering value base as crucial to developing trust in the concepts of confidentiality and anonymity as well as in the research process itself. The issue of researcher and research participant's shared identity in terms of gender, age and sexual orientation and its influence on the establishment of rapport and trust, was identified in a diverse set of views that did not lead to any firm conclusions. This position is reflected in the literature (Tarzia et al 2013; Lee 2008; Robinson et al 2006; Heaphy et al 1998), which has been discussed in some detail in Section 4.3.4. It is important that researchers are aware of the range of identities that exist between themselves and the participants and take sufficient time to reflect on how the different power dynamics influence certain aspects of the research process, a point which has been discussed further in Section 5.5.4.

The importance of the researcher's knowledge in relation to ageing and sexuality was identified as positively influencing the experiences of the participants' involvement in the research study. Levy (1999) states that researchers need an awareness of the historical, cultural and social contexts of sexuality whereas Deacon et al (1995) stress the personal level of sexuality by raising the importance of knowing the role that sexuality and sexual behaviour has had throughout a participant's life course. Both of these points were identified in the findings of this

study. The knowledge of the different theories and perspectives on sexuality were raised as a possible barrier to being unbiased when listening to older people's experiences of their sexuality. The majority of the researcher participants however felt they were open to listening to perspectives that were oppositional to the ones they held for themselves. It is however important for researchers to reflect on how their views and assumptions may influence the research process (Jones, R.L. 2002) particularly in the area of ageing and sexuality where there are such contrasting and potentially oppressive perspectives.

6.11 CONCLUSION

The main conclusions that can be drawn from the research in Phase 1 are that researching ageing and sexuality is necessary and critical, and there is a need for more qualitative research studies focusing on older women's experiences of transition in relation to their sexuality. The impact of society's views on ageing and sexuality cannot be underestimated and need to be taken into account when planning the research process. The different meanings of 'sexuality' need a commitment from the researcher to develop a common understanding with participants. This is crucial to the success of any research within the area of ageing and sexuality. Finally the researcher has a pivotal role in countering any negative impact on the recruitment and data collection processes that may result from stereotypical views of ageing and sexuality.

The findings were taken forward as recommendations and informed the undertaking of Phase 2 of the research study. The recommendations and subsequent actions are presented and discussed in Section 5.3.4.

CHAPTER 7: EXPRESSING SEXUALITY

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this, and the following chapter, the findings of Phase 2 of the research study are presented. This chapter focuses on the expression of sexuality covering a wide range of issues that the older women discussed in their interviews. These issues are presented within two main themes of, communicating about sexuality, and practising⁵⁰ sexuality (see Appendices 17 and 18). In the former theme the older women participants discussed how communication about ageing and sexuality is manifested and identified some of the barriers to discussing issues involving sexuality. In the latter theme the older women shared the different ways they practised and expressed their sexuality. The participants also discussed in depth their processes of re-evaluation of the current role of sexuality in their lives.

7.2 COMMUNICATING SEXUALITY

It is poignant that within a research project set up to enable older women to discuss experiences of their sexuality within the context of ageing, over half of the participants spent time during their interview discussing the activity of talking about sexuality. Within this theme the older women participants raised three key issues, that of, not talking or talking about sexuality, the importance of shared and sharing experiences, and using research to talk about sexuality. Prior to discussing these issues in depth it is worth noting that when the older women participants referred to issues in relation to communicating about sexuality it was within the context of changes, which included, physiological changes and the impact these changes had on their current sexual relationship, coping with the death of a partner, and embarking on a new sexual relationship.

7.2.1 Talking about sexuality

With regards to the first issue within this theme, the majority of women felt that sexuality was, on the whole, not talked about amongst older women. One participant stated that,

As a whole none of my friends, and I've got a lot of women friends, are open to talking about sexuality... time and time again the discussion [within a

⁵⁰ The word 'practising' is used to mean all sexual expressions, partnered/un-partnered and reflects the use of the broad definition of sexuality used throughout the thesis.

discussion group setting] sort of flirted with sexuality but none of the women were prepared to talk personally about it. (OW1P2)

This perceived lack of communication was analysed further by the participants who identified some of the barriers that may hamper any open conversation about experiences in relation to sexuality. One barrier identified was the view that sexuality is a private issue and not appropriate to talk about in public.

It's not a thing [sexuality] of the past in my mind completely but I would never go round talking about it in public. (OW5P2)

I think there are many people around from all sorts of groups who don't think it's nice to talk about older people and sexuality, particularly older women. It's just not nice, which is such a Victorian attitude. (OW12P2)

Building on this comment a couple of other participants felt that it was the reaction of others who could act as a constraining factor in preventing them from openly discussing sexual issues. For example one of the participants implicitly referred to this constraint and stated,

I feel comfortable talking about it [sexuality] but conscious of the fact that other people are easily embarrassed so I think I'm quite sensitive about sexuality whilst although I'm quite comfortable with talking about it and comfortable with my sexuality, I'm aware that other people don't feel the same. (OW9P2)

Another participant detailed the way she dealt with the external constraining factors in a challenging way,

I have one friend who is widowed and has this particular gentleman friend who she just refers to as 'my friend' and one day as we were having lunch I stopped the conversation by saying could you tell me exactly what is your relationship with this man? And there was absolute deathly silence and she said well he stays at my house occasionally, we go on holiday together and we may get married one day but that was as far as it went and afterwards the others were coming to me saying I couldn't believe you asked her that [laughing] but it was a real conversation... I was sick of them pussyfooting around it, talking about 'my friend'. She was quite happy to answer me but the others were absolutely horrified... In fact it would be quite nice if I did have friends who could talk about it and whether it is they feel the same and wish they had people they could talk to but I don't know, but it's never happened. (OW6P2)

It is interesting to note that a few participants referred to talking about sexuality, and, in particular, engaging in sexual activity, as 'boasting', which again could be seen as a constraint to any open dialogue. Another barrier to chatting openly about their sexuality that some of the participants identified was in relation to having consideration for their partner. There was a sense of loyalty that stopped older women discussing problematic issues, particularly in relation to physiological changes.

I'd have difficulty talking about it because the last thing I want anybody to think is anything against my husband – 'poor chap' sort of thing. We've decided that [to have a non-sexual relationship] and it all seems very private. (OW2P2)

If older women decided to discuss issues then they may have had to cope with a sense of betrayal. One participant went as far as to say that older women who,

Are still married and some of them are perhaps recently bereaved or divorced, they're very much less inclined to talk about sexuality than women who had been on their own for quite a long time... I think they're very loathed to admit if their sex life is unsatisfactory. (OW9P2)

There was an exception however as one participant did not allow the fact that she was married to act as a constraint and took part in the research by making sure her partner did not find out, and also discussed issues that she did not speak to her partner about. Her comments reflected this as she stated during her interview,

I met somebody about 7 years ago and [she lowers her voice] we went to bed after about six months. I'm just being careful [referring to her quiet voice] I hope he's [husband] not back from the shops and I'm just going to go downstairs to check... [resumes conversation] I did have some relationships with men in that gap [between ex-husband and current relationship] but can't say I'm particularly proud about those because they were married. Then the current one came along but I don't talk about the other relationships with him. (OW7P2)

The final barrier that was identified is the discourse of the 'sexy oldie' where older people are assumed to be sexually active. This discourse made it difficult for the older women to share changes that they have experienced in relation to their sexuality that have resulted in their sexual relationships becoming physically non-sexual. One participant stated,

I get really, really angry about all the programmes about sex for women after the menopause... but you don't read anything about the number of women,

couples, who don't have sex in later life because nobody wants to hear about it and I think that is really sad because I think many, many couples must in their later years be celibate. (OW2P2)

As well as highlighting barriers the older women participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of discussion about sexuality in later life. Comparison with the past was made, such as,

I was in my prime during the sexual revolution... sex was all over the place and then I get to 60s and 70s and nobody talks about it any more. (OW1P2)

It was [when younger] okay to think about it [sexuality] and talk about it with a few women and to write about it but not since. (12OW5)

There was a view from many of the participants that the lack of discussion needed to be challenged due mainly to the desire to learn and understand more about sexuality within the context of ageing. This was reflected in a comment made by one participant, who stated,

There is a need to talk more about sexuality in older women and to know more about it and to be able to exchange feelings as you get older. (OW10P2)

This need to increase their knowledge was demonstrated in the fact that a significant minority of the older women expressed either their lack of knowledge about a specific issue, or based their knowledge on assumptions. For example,

My sister's a widow for 6 years and when I was first dry I asked her, I tried to ask her if this had happened to her and she said oh [husband's name] and I gave that up years ago and that's all she'd say so I haven't talked to other women... I haven't talked to other women about how they've coped or haven't they. I don't know. (OW16P2)

I just assumed... it's interesting I've no idea when I think of it, I just assumed that women who still are married and have got husbands presumably they still have sexual relationships, I don't know. (OW3P2)

A couple of the participants were anxious that the lack of discussion amongst older women about sexuality could be interpreted as evidence to back up the dominant discourse around the concept of an asexual older age. One participant highlighted this connection by stating,

It's interesting to realise that in the [name of network]... we haven't raised the subject at all. Nobody has said let's do a workshop about sexuality or sensuality. It's as if it's gone from our lives and we don't mention it. (OW12P2)

The perceived assumption that older women generally did not talk about sexuality was questioned by a significant minority of participants who felt that older women were becoming more open to discussing their experiences of sexuality. One participant commented that,

I think as far as the particular generation is concerned I think now people of my generation are far more open about it than they were when they were younger... I don't know but to me there seems to be much more freedom of speech and freedom of attitude than there used to be. (OW6P2)

Another participant linked her confidence to talk about sexuality with increasing age and stated,

I think by the time you get to my age, and certainly in my case, there isn't anything you could ask me I wouldn't answer... And I'm here if you want to speak to me again as I've quite enjoyed it because it's made me, knowing you were going to talk to me, it's made me as I say look at Clare Raynor's book and I've spoken to one or two people who I know well enough to speak to about it and it's been quite an interesting situation, and of course my daughter laughed a bit because she's only 47 and I'm old, so it's all been quite nice, I've enjoyed it. (OW8P2)

There was a sense from the older women participants that they were 'ready' to take on the challenge of confronting assumptions and engaging in meaningful dialogue if given the opportunity and appropriate conditions. A couple of participants had been engaged in putting on specific workshops to encourage older women to take part in open discussion about their experiences of sexuality in later life. One participant stated that,

It was an extremely good workshop and several of us found ourselves saying things... I found myself talking with the person sitting next to me about masturbation. (OW10P2)

It can be seen from the majority of the interviews within this research study that older women who conversed about issues of sexuality tended to talk with other older women. There was one exception however where the issue of inter-generational communication about sexuality was raised by a participant who talked about discussing sexual issues with her children and grandchildren. She felt she

was passing on both her sexual knowledge and values whilst also recognising that the latter had changed over time. She captured this view by stating,

To my children and grandchildren I make it ever so clear that sex is a wonderful, joyous thing, in a committed relationship which now might be partners because they don't seem to want to marry, but it has to be a fairly long committed relationship for it to be as wonderful as it can be. (OW8P2)

The participant gave a sense that she placed any dialogue she had within the context of "just a very ordinary conversation" (OW8P2). This was an interesting and challenging contextualisation given the struggle for commonplace conversation that some of the participants have been recounting.

The second key issue was the importance of shared and sharing experiences in relation to sexuality, which was referred to throughout this theme, by a significant minority of participants. These participants identified whom they currently shared their experiences with, which were predominantly friends, followed by partners and then lastly professionals, such as therapists and health workers. In order for sharing to take place the relationship had to be seen as trustworthy and the participants felt that it was important that they were not going to be judged. One participant commented,

I do have one friend who I would talk to about anything... we can talk in that way where I know she won't judge me and I don't judge her and we can talk about anything and we can talk about our husbands knowing that it stays with us. You need a really close friend to whom you can talk about your relationship with. I wouldn't discuss it with any old person. I would only discuss it with this one person I just trust completely. (OW2P2)

The importance of sharing and shared experiences in relation to sexuality was defined by the participants as, not feeling or being alone, together with receiving support and encouragement. Within the context of the changes some of the older women experienced, and the significant impact the changes had on their long-standing sexual relationships, the importance of sharing cannot be underestimated. One participant reflected this sentiment well by stating,

Seeing my friend, that was very, very, very important to see that my friend has had similar experience... yes very, very important because we were both very sexually active and we were a bit different from friends who were more conventional and so to see that we both had the same experience is so important for me. (OW10P2).

The third issue within this theme continued the discussion around the notion of sharing and related to the older women participants using research to discuss their issues of sexuality. For a small minority of participants they discussed issues within the research interview that they had not discussed with anyone in the past. Comments that were made included,

Now I've talked to you more than I've probably talked to anybody else I've talked to. (OW2P2)

Well it's not something I talk to anybody about I have to say. (OW3P2)

I haven't talked like I'm talking to you. (OW16P2)

For one participant it was the fact that the study would be anonymised that encouraged her to take part together with the fact that she felt that the privatisation of older women's experiences needed to be challenged and taking part in the research was her way of contributing to that challenge. She reiterated this by stating,

One of things of course is that it's a very private thing and this is why I think research is so important like what you're doing. I mean I couldn't do it on the TV... I would never do that but I've been quite happy to take part in this research that is anonymised just to bring it out in the open but I know it's a very sensitive thing. (OW2P2)

Interestingly for a couple of the participants talking to myself as the researcher was put on a par with talking to their therapist or close friend. Many of these discussions confirm the generalised silence or the lack of dialogue ethos that exists for older women in relation to sexuality. The research process appears to have given the green light to open discussion, which for some of the participants had been constructed as either off-limits and/or too difficult to discuss.

7.3 PRACTISING SEXUALITY

Practising sexuality is made up of the three themes namely, penetrating issues, expressing sexuality diversely and asserting sexuality now, and tell the story of older women's sexuality in a nuanced and holistic way. Starting with their experiences of penile-vaginal penetration, which tended to be biologically/medically driven, heterosexually orientated and specifically focused on deficits in older age, the older women's accounts moved onto a more wide-ranging, diverse and inclusive view of sexuality. The women, regardless of their relationship status, discussed their sexual practices and expressions, both personally and generally,

within the context of ageing. The account of their experiences continued with a consideration of the current presence and influence of sexuality in their lives, that is, asserting sexuality now. The participants explored how they felt their sexuality existed for them in relation to other aspects of themselves, and within the context of identified changes. The fluidity and evolving nature of sexuality is demonstrated through their discussions.

7.3.1 Penetrating issues

When discussing their experiences of their sexuality within the context of ageing, over half of the participants identified a range of issues relating to penetrative sexual activity. It should be noted that the findings within this theme have a heterosexual focus, that is, focusing specifically on penile-vaginal penetration. The two lesbian participants did not contribute to this theme, as they did not refer to any issues relating to penetrative sexual activity, when discussing their experiences of their sexuality. The scope of issues within this theme that were discussed by the participants included changes in penetrative sexual intercourse, the feelings associated with the loss of penetration, and the pressure to continue to have penetrative sexual intercourse.

The majority of the older women participants who were currently involved in a sexual relationship identified that the main change for them in relation to penetrative sexual intercourse was due to physiological factors. The main ones identified were experiences of vaginal dryness, which made penetration difficult and painful, and difficulties their male partners experienced in relation to penile erection. Participants stated,

Gone off the boil. His age, I would think that has had an effect on that. The Viagra hasn't had the effect that I think he hoped it would, so that's surprising, but is it at 72? (OW7P2)

A few years ago I got a very dry vagina... it had suddenly become painful to have intercourse and [husband's name] was really worried about that... I think my libido's not like it was... when we first couldn't because it was so painful [husband's name] didn't sleep with me for a little while and he didn't talk much about it really. (OW16P2)

Whilst for the above participant this experience had impacted negatively on her sexual desire and relationship, others expressed a contrasting view, such as,

I'm sexually active, I find men attractive, physically attractive. I have a big desire for sexual contact, physical sexual contact, but the problem is almost

physiological really. I don't think that it should be considered as a problem, I think it should be considered as a variation... well it is a huge change because penetration was very important, that was the idea, absolutely yes, that is a change, but the rest of sexuality, what I call other physical contact, and specially clitoral stimulation is the same. (OW1P2)

For a couple of other participants, the changes in penetrative sexual intercourse were due to other factors such as, illness of partner and boredom with lack of novelty in relation to sexual activity within a long term relationship. In the former situation, the older woman stated that her sexual feelings never changed even when penetrative sexual intercourse was not possible. In contrast the participant who struggled with the growing predictability of the sexual expression within her relationship and subsequent lack of excitement, found that she had lost her sexual desire. She recalled,

So we started going out and after about eighteen months I would think, we made love as it was known in those days... then we were married and it was great, absolutely great and we had adventurous sex in the woods and it was great... and when we did have sex it was very adventurous... but now... just occasionally I've thought shall I instigate it and then I couldn't be bothered. Oh the other thing of course I'm not even sure that [husband's name] would be able to perform after all this time and it would be a terrible stress on both of us. (OW14P2)

Some of the participants discussed their feelings of loss when penetrative sexual intercourse was no longer part of their sexual expression. For some the initial loss was enormous but the feelings had lessened over time, whereas one older woman still had feelings of sadness, and stated,

I'm still sad that we don't have penetrative sex. I think I get extra from penetrative sex now... I really liked that feeling of him inside me and having an orgasm. (OW16P2)

Although it was recognised that the loss of penetration was a loss of part of their sexuality in relation to sexual practices, the older women did not feel that it affected their sense of self as much as for their male partners. This implication was based on some of the participants' particular view of male sexuality, for example, that men's sex drive does not diminish with age, men cannot live without sex, and that penetration represents masculinity. One participant stated that,

My feeling, and I could be wrong, is that most men, older men, would have to be... taught or educated in enjoying contact without necessarily having

intercourse. I mean for men particularly it's the be all and end all, having an erection and having intercourse. (OW9P2)

Another participant re-affirmed this view and stated,

I think it's very difficult for men to actually, well, appreciate women's sexuality. I mean I can go ... well I can go very personal here, but in a way my husband is not very highly sexed if you know what I mean. We fitted fine when we were younger but when penetration became difficult that was his only way of ... he's not very physical, I don't mean sexually but he's not very physical, he's not a cuddly person, he's physical, so once penetration was out of the window it really was a matter of teaching him that that's not all there is in sex. (OW1P2)

For a number of the older women they felt that there was pressure from a range of sources, such as the medical profession, the media and the dominance of the male view of sexuality, for older women to be seen to be sexual, and that 'being sexual' was defined very specifically as continuing to engage in penetrative sexual intercourse. This pressure to continue to have penetrative sexual intercourse influenced and impacted on the different strategies that the older women engaged with in order to cope with any changes related to this sexual activity and expression.

The first strategy that the participants discussed involved trying to maintain the status quo by continuing to engage with penetrative sexual intercourse. This predominantly involved a bio-medical approach, which promoted the use of HRT and/or lubricants. Some participants felt distrustful of any medical intervention and others who had decided to try HRT experienced severe side effects. One participant stated,

There is undue pressure on older women to be seen as being sexually active, it is the other side of the coin, and not only sexually, but in terms of penetration, a man's view of sexuality... I mean there was a pressure to go on HRT, so I went on HRT and sexual activity became a bit less painful but HRT gave me terrible, terrible, side effects, extremely, extremely severe migraines at times that lasted for 3 days and I was nearly unconscious and nobody realised that it was HRT until 3 years later and I had to come off it and when I came off it penetration became impossible because of the pain and I mean real, real pain. (OW1P2)

It is worth noting however that for one participant, taking HRT, had increased her sexual desire and had given her a degree of reassurance that her loss of desire

was more to do with the biological rather than the psychological aspects of her sexuality.

The second strategy that women had adopted in response to being unable to continue with penetrative sexual intercourse involved sexual expression and pleasure by engaging with non-penetrative sexual activity. This included mutual masturbation, kissing, cuddling, hugging, stroking, fondling, holding hands and massage. The older women participants enjoyed the range of non-penetrative sexual activity and valued them for their part in maintaining intimacy, closeness and physical contact within a sexual relationship where penetrative sexual intercourse had become problematic. Although on one hand non-penetrative sexual activity was viewed positively, it was also perceived by a significant minority of the older women as 'second best' or a 'substitute' for penetrative sexual intercourse. One older woman stated,

We're always hugging and kissing and embracing and teasing and fooling around really, but it's all... well I think it's is a substitute [for penetrative sexual activity] and a very necessary substitute to keep things on the boil. (OW7P2)

Some of the participants implied that they did not feel that they were being properly sexual unless they were engaging in penetrative sex. This domination of penetration as a sexual expression within older heterosexual women's sexual relationships was experienced by a significant number of participants who felt that once penetrative sex had become problematic then their male partner struggled to know what to do in order to support the continuation of their sexual relationship. This was referred to earlier where some of the participants felt that they had to teach their partners about non-penetrative sexual activity becoming an end in itself as opposed to it being positioned, at best as 'foreplay', and at worst 'second best', to penetrative sex. One participant felt that the medical approach contributed to this perception and commented,

It was a medical solution to the problem [vaginal dryness], whereas I feel now that it should have been a completely different approach. It should have been, 'yes that's happened, but sex is not only penetration, you should teach your husband to pleasure you in other ways'. But that has never been said to me and I feel that should change really. (OW1P2)

The older women implied that they were much more ready and able to express themselves sexually in different ways and that for some the cessation of penetrative sexual intercourse presented an opportunity to explore the diversity of

sexual expression whereas other participants felt constrained by the male view of sexuality.

Well the last experience I had was so good because it was such fun. It was like grown ups playing. We enjoyed all sorts of touching, I mean I bought myself lots of new underwear and enjoyed touching in different ways, in lots of different ways, and yes it was fun and it was very pleasurable. When we first got together he couldn't keep an erection but that didn't bother me so it didn't bother him and that's an important thing for men. And when it was clear that that didn't matter, there were many other ways, things that we could enjoy. (OW9P2)

I think it's because people become inhibited when things [penetrative sexual intercourse] don't work as they should... it's not actually seen as an opportunity but the opportunity is there. (OW7P2)

The third strategy that some of the older women had chosen with their partner to undertake was to continue with their relationship, but for the latter to become non-sexual. There was an acceptance that the sexual side of the partnership had ended and reassurance was sought in the fact that the situation must reflect normality and be experienced by other older people. One participant stated that,

Anyway I talked it over with my husband because obviously it was something that mattered, we had to discuss and he said well the thing is I'm sure this happens to loads of couples and there's absolutely no way I want to have sex with you if you don't want it, if you've got a low libido... we don't have to have it, it's not necessary. (OW2P2)

It could be argued that for some participants non-penetrative sexual activity has always been and still is an important part of their sexual relationship so the loss of penetration is adapted to in a positive way in that their sexual relationship continues. For other participants non-penetrative sexual activity was only important as the precursor to penetrative sexual intercourse so the loss of the latter is more difficult to adapt to and is more likely to result in their sexual relationship ending.

7.3.2 Expressing sexuality diversely

Within this theme the participants identified and discussed the different ways that they expressed their sexuality. The findings of this research study clearly demonstrated that even with a small number of older women there was an incredibly diverse range of sexual expressions talked about including celibacy, masturbation, sexual fantasies and dreams, sexual expression through writing, flirting, touching and the enjoyment of beauty. It is worth noting that these sexual

expressions existed in their own right as opposed to those mentioned in Section 7.3.1, which are positioned as 'foreplay to' or 'substitute for' penetrative sexual intercourse. The participants' willingness to share and accept this diversity was supported by their commonly held belief that sexuality is an ever-changing aspect of their selves. Often in their interviews they discussed changes that they had experienced in their own sexuality during different phases of their lives. This view of the fluidity of sexuality was extended to others and challenged the perceived homogeneity of older women's sexual experiences. The range of sexual expressions discussed by the participants involved different levels of engagement with self and others in terms of physical, emotional and/or cerebral contact. It is however worth noting that a significant proportion of the sexual expressions identified by the older women did not require the sexual involvement or the physical presence of someone else, for example, celibacy, masturbation, sexual fantasies and dreams, and sexual expression through writing. These sexual expressions were discussed by nearly all the participants regardless of relationship status.

Masturbation was the most dominant aspect of this theme with over half of the older women identifying with the activity as a means of expressing themselves sexually. The participants described this form of sexual expression as involving physical touching that they engaged with on their own. A significant minority of the older women viewed masturbation as an activity that had been, and still was, a constant aspect of their sexuality. One participant remarked,

Think the other thing, which a lot of people don't ever admit to, I can't remember a time when I didn't masturbate. I can't ever remember a time however minor... it was when I was perhaps 10, 11, 12 or something like that... and of course during marriage if I was away from my husband from any length of time and certainly since I've been left a widow I occasionally, once a week or something like that. (OW8P2)

A number of participants discussed masturbation in an unassuming way, taking care not to overstate its importance whilst at the same time acknowledging it as part of their sexuality.

I am comfortable with my body and you know talked about things like masturbation and so on, and so I've been able to enjoy my sexuality in that respect. I'm still kind of aroused by sexual images and reading and so on and I feel that that's ok that I enjoy that, it shows the feeling of aliveness, it increases the feeling of aliveness... I wouldn't say it's important, it's there. Probably I can go for days or weeks without thinking about it but I feel it's a feeling of aliveness that's there, still there. (OW9P2)

I would say it's been there but no more recently than ever, but it is there still, becoming older has not affected that in any way. (OW7P2)

It hasn't become more important it's just there you know. But when my husband is away or when he's not very communicative or doesn't quite see that I need him... we sleep together and I get satisfaction in this way, and I do masturbate as well. (OW1P2)

It could be argued that these statements implicitly suggested that the older women concerned viewed masturbation in a functional way, that is, it was a sexual activity that was there to be engaged with if the need arose. For one participant, masturbating had been a sexual expression she had recently engaged in, as she explained,

I discovered that I could masturbate when I became really frustrated, not until I was 60 years old, and then because of certain things in life, it's so quick and easy and it's over with, and I've never even thought of that until as I say I was about 60 because, well I know this is not going any further, my husband being a diabetic became impotent very early on in our marriage so I had a lot of sexual frustrations. I didn't seek anyone else and then suddenly one day I discovered I could just get rid of this tension, but he never knew. (OW4P2)

Although in a couple of the above narratives, the older women identified in a direct way the situations when they would engage in masturbation, other participants regarded it as a much more complex sexual expression. One participant felt she wanted to masturbate but found that it was difficult to achieve pleasure due to changes in her vaginal muscle tones. Other participants used masturbation to cope with emotional frustration, loss and comfort with differing degrees of success. For example, an older woman, who had been bereaved a couple of years before being interviewed for this research study, had tried to masturbate to comfort herself as a response to the loss of her long term partner. She said,

I've tried masturbation twice and it left me uncomfortable, tired, thinking what was all that about... there is no stimulation in it, there's just a security feeling, and masturbation just really was a waste of time I suppose in a way. (OW15P2)

Another participant had used masturbation as a way to express herself sexually through a lengthy and difficult relationship where it also helped her to cope with her emotions of frustration and loss. She explained further,

I think in so much of my life I've felt frustrated sexually... after I'd separated from my husband, that [masturbating] was a great comfort... I'd go in for more masturbating in later life when I wasn't having a sexual relationship. My masturbation fantasies would get wilder and wilder but I can't imagine that I would ever have actually put them into practice. I occasionally feel moved these days when something or some programme or book seems to set off a sexual reaction, it [masturbating] makes me feel so peculiar these days, I get headachy and I feel exhausted, and nothing very much happens anyway. (OW10P2)

Therefore for the participants masturbation was a sexual expression that they were familiar with and, for the majority, had been a constant aspect of their sexuality through their life-course. It is worth noting however that although masturbation was a common sexual expression, there was fluidity and variation in the context in which it was expressed and in the emotions surrounding its expression.

A significant minority of the participants involved themselves in sexual fantasies and dreams as a way of expressing themselves sexually. This sexual expression ranged from sexual dreams about people, to fantasies about meeting someone and being "swept off my feet" (6OWP2), through to fantasies and dreams "about having a partner and making love" (12OWP2). The significance of these fantasies and dreams varied as some participants perceived them as a form of escapism, whilst other participants wished that their dreams and fantasies could be experienced in real life. One participant revealed,

I don't tend to be looking at a woman and thinking I like you and I'd like to go to bed with you. I don't feel that at all, but I do have a lot of sexual dreams. That's interesting isn't it and it's always with women. Although I think to myself why can't I translate this into something good in my life? (OW13P2)

For one participant the significance of her erotic dreams, which were about her long term partner with whom she was no longer (physically) sexual, was more complex. On one level she felt pleased that her dreams involved her partner and that she was able to assert an aspect of her sexuality but, on another level, she felt wistful about the fact that her erotic feelings did not encourage her to want to engage in a physical sexual relationship.

A number of participants expressed their sexuality through flirting and touching, which led to positive feelings of pleasure, enjoyment, warmth and happiness. It is worth noting however that although these forms of expression tended to be discussed within the context of sensuality and sexual feelings during the research interview, some of the older women felt that it was important to 'de-sexualise' the

activity. For example one participant enjoyed flirting but ensured that she did it in an open way and commented,

I am an outrageous flirt so that any of the men I meet at bridge I flirt with, and I only flirt with married men, and I only flirt with them in front of their wives because I don't want to get into anything like that so I have quite a lot of fun and the wives know me and accept it and we giggle. (OW8P2)

When the participants discussed the issue of touch, there was recognition that touch could be perceived as both sexual and non-sexual depending on the context. One older woman captured this well by stating,

There are occasions, perhaps having a massage or at a hairdresser, when parts of the body, the touch it just starts something, oh that's lovely and relaxing and you realise that if it went on for a long time it might develop into more, if the other person was the appropriate one. (OW10P2)

Hugging was identified as an example of touching that needed contextualising, as for some of the participants being hugged was viewed sexually if within the context of sexual relationship. Others perceived hugging as a sign of support, which promoted the feeling of being connected to others. One participant commented,

Touch is important now certainly and this is something that we all talk about in [name of network]. It really is, the need for hugs. I mean hugging is not necessarily sexual and touching is very important. (OW10P2)

The perception and 'enjoyment of beauty' was identified by some of the participants as a way that they expressed their sexuality. This form of expression involved no physical contact with other people and for a couple of the participants it extended beyond the appreciation of beautiful people to include the enjoyment of beautiful things such as fabrics, colours, perfumes and flowers. One participant stated,

I like beautiful things, I like fabrics and colours and that's all part of sensuality. I like you know perfumes and flowers, I'm a keen gardener as well, I like getting my hands in the soil. It also makes me more aware of beauty in everything, in literature and in music and the environment and in people. I mean I could look at a handsome young man and think wow and you know and rejoice in it really. (OW9P2)

Associated with this enjoyment of beauty is the appreciation of 'glamour' and one older woman stated that she liked,

To wear long dresses and I do like to wear glamorous clothes and spend a lot of money on clothes and enjoy doing that and looking nice. (OW6P2)

Another type of sexual expression that involves no physical contact with other people was writing about one's sexuality through the construction of a public blog. Although this way of expressing sexuality was identified by one participant only, the older woman concerned discussed the significance and meaning of her public blog in such depth that from a qualitative researcher's perspective it demanded some consideration in relation to older women's experiences of their sexuality. The older woman concerned felt that her sexuality had been stifled during her lifetime and had not nearly reached its full potential in terms of expression, which had left her with many frustrations and unused energies. These feelings were also combined with the shared perception amongst the participants that there was a tendency for older women's sexual expressions, to be publicly portrayed, either, as no different to younger women or, not at all. The participant concerned felt that her writing had helped her to,

Express my sexuality in humorous entries in my blog these days and I've been quite interested to see myself as a person who has emerged through my blog.... sexuality is certainly a strand there... I decided that I would have a category called 'missing it' to show that an 80 year old woman is not dead flesh as it were. (OW10P2)

Celibacy was identified as a form of sexual expression commented on by a couple of participants, but perceived in different ways. One participant viewed it as a choice, albeit a difficult one, stating that,

To admit it [celibacy] somehow involved not quite shame, but something close to it, a personal failure or absence or something. (OW12P2).

Another participant acknowledged that celibacy for her was a force of circumstance and linked to problematic issues with penetrative sexual intercourse that have been discussed earlier in Section 7.3.1. This participant made sense of her 'forced' celibacy within the interview by stating that,

I think many, many couples must in their later years be celibate because they discover something else about their relationship which is more valuable than sex. (OW2P2)

What is interesting here is the way that celibacy has to be defended through the discovery of "something that's much stronger than sex" (OW2P2) as if the

perceptions of celibacy as “personal failure” (OW12P2) run deep, as opposed to an acceptance of celibacy as a valid form of sexual expression.

7.3.3 Asserting sexuality now

Within this theme participants focused on their sexuality holistically by considering its current presence and influence on their lives. The issues that were discussed within this theme included the participants’ views on changes they had experienced with their sexuality, with some discussion on how their sexuality had been replaced by other things, and how, if at all, their sexuality influenced the perception they had of themselves. Running through this theme was a commonly held assertion amongst the majority of the participants that their sexuality remained an evolving aspect of their lives.

Most of the participants discussed sexuality, both generally and personally, within the context of change whilst also recognising its variability from person to person which they felt was often driven by age, gender and relationship status. Although the majority of the participants acknowledged changes within their sexuality, only half viewed the changes as a direct consequence of becoming older. Interestingly amongst these participants there is a general view that changes within sexuality should be viewed as “a transition... natural progression” (OW12P2) and that “needs may change as you get older” (OW14P2). It is important to emphasise that it was the concept of change per se, as opposed to the types of changes that the participants associate with age. This important point allowed the participants to assert that changes happened in relation to older women’s sexuality, but that the changes experienced can be dissimilar.

Building on this assertion the findings highlighted a diverse range of changes, which were experienced by the older women in relation to their sexuality. One participant had experienced a major change in her ability to engage in penile-vaginal penetration but felt that despite this,

I’ve always been very, very, how do you say, positive, about my own sexuality and I was very sexually driven if you like and I don’t feel any diminishing of it with older age. (OW1P2)

Another participant felt she had rediscovered her sexuality and stated,

I suppose I’d given up on sex with a partner as it were at my age so yes it was surprising to me to find that the feelings and the emotions and the responses were still there. (OW9P2)

In contrast one participant stated,

I guess I was sorry that this friend I had a sexual relationship with, I'm sorry that it faded, she definitely still feels that she would like me, but I just don't have any feeling for her... and some of me wishes it was. I guess the closeness as well, not only the sex, the closeness and yet I know there's part of me that withdraws from that. It withdraws from the intimacy... perhaps I'm getting too old to be bothered. (OW13P2)

One participant felt that her sexual feelings toward her husband had changed and were now not intense enough to be acted on, but felt that she could experience the intensity of sexual feelings again if she were to start a new sexual relationship. She commented,

I'm aware that because I've been in this relationship for 53 years if it broke down well probably if [husband's name] died I think my sexuality in the normal sense of the word might come to the fore again. (OW14P2)

This was an interesting comment as it suggested that, for this participant, the changes in her sexuality were not fixed but had the potential to change in the future.

This again supports the concept of fluidity and movement in relation to sexuality and in particular the variability of its influence on an individual's life. For a few participants there was however a finality about the changes that they had experienced which tended to focus on a disinterest in, and a diminishing of, their sexuality. It is worth noting however that these participants were not, at the time of data collection, involved in a sexual relationship and were discussing their sexuality and changes only within the context of pursuing any future sexual relationships.

Changes were identified by some participants who felt that their sexuality had been 'replaced' by something else. This process of 'replacement' was discussed in positive terms by the older women and within the context of a refocusing of the energy and passion that they had usually associated with their sexuality. For example one participant described herself as being passionate about new things and had moved house, made new friends and joined a local sustainability group. Another participant had rechanneled her energy into giving talks, which had boosted both her confidence and self-esteem. One of the older women detailed her experiences of rechanneling by stating,

I see myself as a highly sexed, passionate but unfulfilled person you know, and I feel I've never really realised my potential and I felt very frustrated and lonely even in marriage, and all this sort of frustration. So I think it's left me with difficulty in expressing my own emotions and affections easily. Now I have re-channelled the energies that I would like to express through sexual and loving relationships into more intellectual activities... instead of committing to people, I commit to roles or tasks and challenges... I mean the changes in my sexual identity... have been changes in someone trying to express herself in a relationship and failing to do so and turning into somebody else, an efficient doer of things. (OW10P2)

For a couple of other participants however, whose long term relationships with their husbands were now no longer sexual, there was a sense that this aspect of their sexuality had been replaced by something 'better'. For example one participant felt that the sexual side of her relationship had been replaced by love and for the other participant the 'replacement' was with "a sort of reliance on each other, it's like we can't do without each other" (OW2P2). This participant commented further,

I'm not saying I've got the answers, I only know what I've got here is something precious and I'd love to be able to tell you, this is why I wanted to do this [take part in research study]. I'd love to be able to tell people all about it, there's more to life than just sex. (OW2P2)

For the majority of the participants who contributed to this discussion around the replacement of their sexuality, or aspects of their sexuality, there was a sense that there had been a conscious decision to either instigate and/or take an active part in promoting these changes.

Other participants raised the issue of how older women were perceived sexually and the tension they felt between what was expected of them and what they were experiencing. For example one participant who felt that her sexuality was taking a diminishing role in her life was also acutely aware that she could be used as an example to support the asexual stereotype. In her interview she stated that,

I'm not expecting to set the world on fire any more... but it's not good that we're [older women] perceived as being old and past it. (OW4P2)

Another participant was experiencing pressure to continue to engage with penetrative sexual intercourse regardless of any changes she was experiencing and stated that,

There shouldn't be this pressure [to continue with penetrative sexual intercourse].... it should be accepted as normal [not continuing] when getting old and that's how it is. (OW1P2)

In fact for many of the participants it was the expression of their sexuality, and in particular their sexual feelings, that had undergone significant changes, which in turn influenced the participants' perception of their sexual self. Due to the dominance within society of a narrow definition of sexuality, the tasks of identifying, and in particular validating, a diverse range of sexual expressions is imperative in enabling the older women participants to assert that 'sexuality is still part of me'.

Although the majority of the older women participants maintained that they regarded themselves currently as a sexual person, the views of their sexuality varied in terms of expression and prominence. A common thread throughout the participants' discussions appeared to be that sexuality is part of, or an aspect of, their self as opposed to having a central role in the participants' perception of themselves. One older woman participant succinctly identified this, and stated,

The most important factor I consider over a lifetime is the changes in what I would call the sexual component of one's being. (OW1P2)

This statement was supported by many of the participants who tended to view their sexuality as 'still' existing but occupying a less prominent space within themselves. Throughout their interviews the older women contributed comments such as,

I thought ooh that's [sexual feelings] still there then a bit. (OW3P2)

It's not a thing of the past in my mind completely... I've just put them [sexual feelings] on the back burner. (OW5P2)

I'm not in a relationship at the moment but still feel very much a sexual being and sensual. (OW9P2)

The candle hasn't been entirely blow out... and the flow of sexuality is still running. (OW10P2)

I think my sexuality is still intact. (OW11P2)

Although these comments imply that sexuality was taking less space in the participants' perception of themselves than it might have done in the past, there was a sense from many of the participants of a sexuality 'at rest' whilst maintaining an openness to be 'stirred'. Some of the participants acknowledged in their discussions that the intensity of their sexual feelings could be rekindled given the right circumstances. One participant, who was in a long-term non-sexual

relationship, commented that her sexual feelings would be reawakened by “the novelty value of a new sexual relationship” (OW14P2). In contrast to this some other participants experienced their sexual feelings as powerfully as they had done in the past. One participant described a recent sexual relationship where her sexual feelings “were definitely as intense as when I was younger” (OW6P2). Another older woman stated that the intensity of her sexual feelings had not lessened, despite her sexuality playing a less central role in her sense of self.

It is worth considering at this point that many of the older women participants perceived themselves as ‘more than a sexual being’. As well as sexuality assuming a less central or prominent role in their sense of themselves, a significant number of participants discussed the fact that although they had experienced changes, and in particular losses, in relation to their sexuality this did not seem to negatively affect the way they saw themselves. For example, one participant stated that,

While I was losing this part [being able to continue with penetrative sexual intercourse] of my sexuality it didn’t affect my own identity if you know what I mean... penetrative sex was not pleasurable for me any more but that did not affect my identity. (OW1P2)

For this participant the changes in her sexuality, although significant, acted as a confirmation that she did not define herself only in sexual terms. It could be suggested that in spite of changes that highlighted significant losses in relation to their sexuality, such as loss of a sexual relationship with a current long term partner, some of the participants had ‘grown’ by viewing themselves in broader terms through developing other qualities and in particular their confidence. For example,

I realise I’m a lot more, there’s a lot to me than that [being sexual] and alright if people see that in me as well fine but I’m happier that somebody says that she’s a fantastic public speaker, I’d rather somebody say that about me now. (OW6P2)

I really don’t think my identity is based on my sexuality and you know again some people have to feel like a sexual object because they’re women, my identity isn’t tied up with sexuality how I define it, as I’ve become more confident in the person I am. (OW14P2)

A significant minority of the participants gave the sense that they had transcended gender expectations by seeing themselves as more than a sexual being and valuing other aspects of their selves.

7.4 CONCLUSION

Within this chapter the older women participants discussed their experiences of communicating and practising sexuality. The older women took the opportunity to share their views and experiences regarding the issue of talking about sexuality and identified a range of barriers that may impede any open discussions. These participants believed that the silence around sexuality contributed to, a lack of knowledge, perpetuation of myths and a sense of invisibility. It is important to recognise however that some participants felt that older women were very willing to discuss issues of sexuality and it was the experiences of ageing that gave them the confidence to engage in discussions. The importance of sharing experiences of sexuality was identified by many of the participants and for a few of the older women, taking part in the research had enabled them to discuss issues that they had not discussed in the past. There was a deep sense of commitment and support from the participants for the research study and to share their own experiences. With regard to the older women's experiences of practising sexuality, a lot of the focus was on the changes they had encountered. The findings in this chapter gave a nuanced account of their experiences, with some challenging homogenous stereotypes, in their diversity and fluidity. Many of the participants' experiences challenged the heterosexist notion that any valid expression of women's sexuality needs to be located within the framework of penile-vaginal penetration. The older women identified a range of different sexual expressions, many of which did not involve a partner. Although the participants' accounts demonstrated varied experiences, there were commonalities, namely, that for the majority of the older women sexuality still played a part in their sense of self.

CHAPTER 8: REVISITING SEXUALITY

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the older women's experiences of revisiting issues that are related to their sexuality in a broader sense. These issues are presented within three main themes of, embracing new positions, the ebb and flow of sexuality, and living with ageism and sexism (see Appendices 17 and 19). In the first theme the older women participants discussed the way changes in sexual relationships created new positions in relation to themselves and others. The second theme discusses issues of endings, transitions and moving on in relation to sexuality and the impact these issues have on the older women's sexual feelings, desires and relationships. The third theme focused on the participants' experiences of ageism and sexism in relation to sexuality on different levels of society. Overall this makes up the concept of 'revisiting sexuality' where older women relooked, re-evaluated and reconsidered the role of sexuality in their lives and the way wider issues impacted on it.

8.2 EMBRACING NEW POSITIONS

Within this main theme of embracing new positions, the two themes namely, experiencing aloneness, and re-evaluating friendship, cut across both identity and relationship aspects of sexuality. Within both of these themes the women explored the changing position of their sexual identity in relation to the changes they have experienced in their close and intimate relationships. For example, experiencing aloneness has been a difficult position for women to occupy in relation to their sexual identity as female sexuality has not existed in its own right and often gone unrecognised if the women concerned are not (hetero)sexually involved with a man. Bearing this context in mind it could have been assumed that experiencing aloneness for the older women participants would be an unwanted or negative event in relation to their sexual identity. The data however yielded a surprising narrative in that for the majority of the research participants, experiencing aloneness was positive and had a significant impact on their sense of themselves. The theme of re-evaluating friendship could have been regarded as an outlier in terms of analysis but it does offer another aspect in terms of embracing new positions through friendship.

8.2.1 Experiencing 'aloneness'

The participants' experiences of aloneness were made up of two distinct issues, that of, separateness within the context of a current and long-term relationship, and

living and being on one's own. These issues reflected the diversity of the participants' experiences and also the nature of being alone. For example, the older women who experienced aloneness through a degree of separateness from their partners had chosen this as an aspect that they wanted to create within their relationships. Their experiences of aloneness was time-limited and undertaken within the greater context of being in a relationship. As one participant stated,

I think we're meant to be in couples, I don't think we're meant to live on our own. I like being on my own and I can spend quite a considerable time on my own and I do go off on my own but I wouldn't like to be without my husband at all. (OW2P2)

In direct contrast to this the participants who were not involved in a sexual relationship at the time of the research study, experienced aloneness through living and being on their own, which was a situation that came about through a series of stressful events, such as death of a partner, and an ending of a sexual relationship leading to a break up of the relationship. It was also a continuing situation for the foreseeable future for those specific participants.

Different ways of creating and achieving separateness within the context of a current long-term relationship were discussed by some of the participants. One participant explained that her long-term relationship had,

Reached a point where we are very happy together, we do a lot of things separately. It was a big step for me when I started going off on my own... at first he didn't like that at all but then realised that I wasn't going off searching for a man and he said 'oh perhaps it's not too bad because it gives me a bit of time on my own'. So he discovered it was quite good to have time on his own... when he was due to retire and I said what are you going to do when you retire and he said... we'll do things together and I said no I've got a life of my own and you've got a life of your own... I know it sounds a bit cool and calculating but I was terrified that I was going to have a whole day taken over by him...but anyway we worked it out. (OW2P2)

For this participant there was a process of negotiation with her partner in order for a degree of acceptable separateness to exist between them. This process of negotiation was also pertinent for another participant whose separateness from her partner tended to be along practical lines in that they slept in different rooms in order to "get a better night's sleep" (OW7P2). Although a negotiated separateness this participant felt that it had had a negative effect on their sexual relationship and intimacy in terms of a lost opportunity to be physically close. Interestingly one participant who had been on her own for a while before getting involved in her

current long-term relationship thought that she felt easier about separateness than her partner and attributed it to having had a lengthy period on her own. The process of negotiation in her situation involved her,

Curtailing really what I might go and do off on my own. But when you've been on your own it's easy to go off and do things on your own and don't think anything of it. (OW16P2)

In contrast another participant discussed the way that she had solely created her separateness from her partner as a way of promoting her self worth and helping her to cope with the lack of (recent) sexual relationship within her marriage. She summarised by explaining,

I've not been a devoted mother who has devoted every moment of her time to the family. I've always had very strenuous outside interests. It has helped me to cope with the [recent] sexual changes in my relationship with my husband. It was also for my survival because at home my husband always made clear that he thought very little of my ability, you know, to do things. I didn't command much respect at home so I went out for it and I got it, which helped me to build up respect for myself within the house. (OW5P2)

These different experiences also highlighted the diverse nature of the focus of the separateness, from separateness in relation to certain activities, to separate sleeping arrangements through to creating a separate identity.

For the older women who were not involved in a long-term relationship at the time of the research study, their experiences of being on their own, had given them a sense of what separateness from someone is like. Although their circumstances of separation had been difficult at times, they had also come to appreciate and value the positives, so much so that the possibility of future sexual relationships were only considered if a degree of separateness could be visualised and achieved. In other words the experience of separation through being on their own had become a barrier to thinking about future relationships in that the latter was dismissed if the independence they have found could not be protected. This protection was defined mostly in terms of living separately from a (future) partner. For example,

I couldn't possibly envisage a sexual relationship. I'm not sure that I would want to live with anybody anyway. (OW3P2)

I don't think I actually want a man living in the house with me again... I prefer living alone, but it would be nice to have a man in one's life, somebody to talk to and preferably someone who shows you special

affection and affinity with you but it might be very satisfying just on that level. (OW10P2)

I'm not sure if I want to live with anybody again...and I know quite a lot of women who have long distance relationships as it were. (OW13P2)

Their views were not related to any separateness that they had experienced within their last long-term relationship but more to their experiences of being on their own and finding independence. One participant reiterated this by saying

Ever since my divorce, I've said if ever I had another partner I wouldn't want to live with them or if I did live with them I would want to be absolutely clear that we had our own space. (OW9P2)

It is worth noting however that despite the diverse experiences in relation to separateness within a long-term relationship all the participants who contributed to this aspect of experiencing aloneness very much valued the concept both within their current relationships and as a necessary aspect of any future sexual relationship.

Reflecting on the biography of the sample where two-thirds of the older women were not involved in a sexual relationship at the time of the research study, the majority of participants contributed to the issue of living and being alone. When discussing being alone there was a sense from the participants that, on the whole, it was a change in their lives that they came to positively embrace. The changes included moving on from the past where life was busy, where the needs of others had to be given priority and where sexual relationships, for some, were inhibiting. One participant stated,

I discovered... just how much I was responsible for his [2nd husband] mental well-being. I had to make all the decisions and I felt like I was drowning somehow because he was sucking the life out of me, so needy and I had to be there all the time and he had to do everything with me so I really enjoy not being like that and since I've been on my own... I do all sorts. (OW3P2)

The participants had common experiences of self-development and self-determination where they described feelings of freedom and being in control of the direction and destiny of their lives. One participant summarised these aspects very well by stating,

I have to be truthful, I can't say I'm terribly unhappy about it [being on her own]. I mean I do miss the sex and I do miss the intimacy but then at my age there is an incredible freedom that I've never had in my life because I

always had parents or parents in law or kids or my husband and now there's just me, so if I want to lie in bed until dinner time or go to bed at 2am in the morning or have a sandwich for each meal. The freedom of being alone at my age is incredible. So it compensates a bit. (OW8P2)

Another participant reiterated similar positive feelings about being alone by saying,

I mean as I've got older ... my sexuality if I was active would certainly be drawn to a woman and that's it, but as I've said before I have thoroughly enjoyed this 8 years of celibacy, it's been lovely, it's something that I would hesitate to give up, it's too important to be able to do what you want, as and when you want, without having to ask anybody. It's a very privileged lifestyle really. (OW11P2)

Although the older women's experiences pointed to a time of development in relation to personal attributes such as confidence, self-esteem and being in control of one's life, their narratives also highlighted the hard work and effort that was involved in achieving satisfaction and enjoyment in experiencing aloneness through living and being on one's own. Participants discussed having to plan and organise their time carefully and identified the importance of creating social networks. One participant discussed how the silence of living on her own needed 'organising' by stating,

My husband was a reasonably quiet man but he breathed, and nobody breathes in this house only me and you don't realise that until you're alone and he would perhaps get up and go to the toilet or perhaps go a make a cup of tea or go upstairs for something and none of that happens when you're on your own and that silence takes a bit of organising but you can. (OW8P2)

There was also a sense that experiencing aloneness positively was a process that is learnt, as one participant stated,

I think I've learned to live without it [sexual relationship], just as I've learned to live on my own and actually to like it. (OW12P2)

Within this positive context the participants also identified the difficulties of being on their own which tended to be premised on attitudes towards 'single' women and the pressure within society to be part of a (heterosexual) couple. A couple of the participants gave examples of specific situations, such as going out for a meal and how to spend Sundays, with which they had experienced difficulties in terms of being alone. One participant described this situation by saying,

Now I'm alright about Sundays, they were always a problem, to find something to do or someone to do it with on a Sunday because people in relationships very often spend the Sunday together and they close other people out, not intentionally, but it just works out like that. So now I can enjoy Sundays without feeling a lack of something. (OW12P2)

This participant, who had been celibate for over 30 years, identified how it had been a difficult journey for her to eventually feel positive about her choice of being on her own. She stated,

It's taken several decades but yes it has happened [feeling positive]... but I guess I've absorbed some of the shame or sense of failure that's around that everybody needs to be in a relationship, we're made to think through the media, in papers, magazines and of course on television, everybody has to have a partner although I'm sure many people don't, women and men as we get older, our friends move away or die. (OW12P2)

Only one older woman spoke about her feelings of loneliness through being on her own and discussed the complex nature of loneliness by observing,

I am very lonely being on my own even though I don't think I would want to start living with a fella again. It was strange because I was quite happy living alone for all the years when my husband was still alive and living in the next town but when he died I suddenly began to feel a great deal more lonely and it's all part of this realisation that I came to that I was still loyal to him and loyalty I put down as possible sexual emotion I think. (OW10P2)

Another participant within her interview clarified that for her there was a difference between being alone and being lonely. This participant identified her social networks and interests as a crucial support in experiencing aloneness positively and preventing her from experiencing loneliness.

It is worth at this point returning to some of the points raised earlier with regards to the impact of experiencing aloneness on the older women participants' sense of self. The participants located the positive influences within a developmental framework, which included an increase in self-confidence, self-determination and self-awareness. A participant spoke of her involvement in a national society,

I've just gone from strength to strength... and the people who have said to me we're so delighted you're becoming [position in an association] and I've realised how many friends I've made and it's all been really because of me, it's been what I do, who I am, the impression that I've made on people and I think that's something that I've never had in my life before. (OW6P2)

One participant explained that through creating periods of separateness from her partner and through counselling she had developed the ability to love and accept herself rather than rely on her relationship to bolster her self-esteem. She stated,

We had some pretty good sex but it was never... about emotions. This was the area that I think my husband didn't get to, was the feeling bit... [I] began to look then at loving myself, and once I'd realised that... that's the person you are here to love is yourself, I mean that was a big turn round for me... I was brought up to believe that you love other people, you don't love yourself... it wasn't that I stopped looking after my family but I didn't go the extra lengths. What I did do was go the extra lengths for me. I started looking after me and what I needed. (OW2P2)

As referred to earlier, some of the participants went on to discuss their positive feelings of being in control of their own lives, which they saw as a direct consequence of experiencing aloneness. For the majority of the participants who discussed this issue, being in control was linked to being on their own and not being sexually involved with anyone. Interestingly one participant who was involved in a long-term relationship had developed her sense of control over her life through participating in her own activities outside of her relationship and gave talks to groups of people. She commented,

I walk up to the lectern and I speak quietly and calmly... and I give a sense of authority. I am very tiny... it was said of me... that I had presence and since then various people have said the same thing. Because I feel I'm in control, when I go up there I am at the stage now where I feel that I can say what I feel with confidence... I can go into a room with any strangers now and I know at some stage I will be noticed. (OW5P2)

The feelings of being in control of their own lives are valued by the participants who recognised that their hard earned self-determination could be threatened or difficult to maintain within the context of illness, increased frailty and, as highlighted in a previous discussion, starting a new sexual relationship. One participant summed up this perspective succinctly by saying,

I'm not frightened of death and I would quite happily go... if I go to sleep tonight and don't wake up, great, but what I am frightened of is many years of illness when you're reliant on somebody else. (OW8P2)

This view was supported by other participants when discussing being on their own and it could be suggested from the findings that an essential aspect of being on

one's own successfully was having the ability to choose to be independent from others.

A small minority of participants shared their feelings that life was better for them without a sexual partner. Participants used superlative descriptors to capture strong emotions and transitions and a good example was from one older woman, who stated,

I feel quite sorry for people now who have only ever had one relationship because you know when I thought it was the end of the world when my marriage was coming to an end, but it's been like an opening, a blossoming really. (OW9P2)

For one participant however it had been difficult to admit to herself that her life on her own was more satisfactory now that her husband had died. She was involved in a difficult long-term relationship and described a conversation she had with a friend of hers whose husband had also died. She said,

It was only about 6 months after he'd [friend's husband] died and she [friend] said at one point you know I know this sounds dreadful but if somebody said to me you can have [husband] back tomorrow I think I'd have to think about it. And you know it made me feel less guilty about the way I feel because they [friend and her husband] were so much closer, ... but I realised that a lot of women when they're on their own they suddenly feel oh yes it's quite good this. (OW6P2)

This disclosure from her friend enabled this participant to admit that she had grown in confidence, self-esteem and ultimately had started to direct her own life after living for many years in an inhibiting relationship.

8.2.2 Re-evaluating friendship

Within this theme the participants discussed what they had experienced within the context of friendships, which included the range of different qualities of friendship, and their friendships with men and women.

The qualities of friendships that were identified by the participants were talked about within the context of their women friends. All the qualities were positive and included emotions such as feelings of gladness and expressions of love. As one participant commented,

I always felt that it [friendships with women] was an expression of love for me and we do express ourselves physically. Yes we do go in... for a lot of sort of hugging each other because we get very close when we have our get-togethers... it is a great opportunity to be close, warm and loving and a great deal of laughter as well. (OW10P2)

Other qualities focused on issues to do with support and acceptance. One participant described a social group that she belonged to and remarked that,

They're really, really nice. It's a very easy social mix there, people can just sit and talk to who they like or read a book... it's nice... I think it's thrown me a little lifeline. (OW11P2)

Long-term friendships were viewed as aspects of the participants' lives that had been constant, although at times contact with friends was infrequent. These friendships acted also as an important connection with the participants' past and one participant went further and said,

I've known [name of friend] years and it's nice that we have connections with the past, dealing with people in the present and the future is still to look forward to. (OW11P2)

For the participants, friendships with women were diverse with one participant feeling that she had not got on well in the past with other women whereas another participant felt she had always had a good friendship with one particular woman which had lasted years. There was a common thread for two of the participants who felt that friendships with women as they grew older had developed and become more important regardless of their experiences of women friends in the past. One of the participants observed,

I always did enjoy the company of men and I always thought I got on better with men than women. Now I don't feel like that, I feel more that I can relate much more to women than I use to be able to. (OW6P2)

In contrast a couple of the participants identified that from their experiences, friendships with men were less straightforward as one participant stated,

I like men's company but there has to be some quality about it, there has to be something rather special about them. (OW15P2)

Another participant, who identified as heterosexual, felt that any potential friendship with a man raised the issue of the possibility of a sexual relationship. From her

discussion within the interview it felt that she was struggling to assert a new way of being with men, as she commented,

I would like a relationship [with a man] and I've had quite a few relationships but somehow I don't really want the sexual side of it. I do but I don't.
(OW6P2)

Another participant went further and identified friendships with men, for her, had undergone a transition that had taken place within the context of her ageing. The participant claimed that if she were younger, relationships with men would have tended to be sexual as opposed to platonic. She felt that a man,

In my age group might equally feel that he might not be looking for a sexy looking woman or an attractive younger women but might, as I feel I would be now, be looking for a good companion and interesting to talk to.
(OW10P2)

Another participant supported this view of a transition in terms of relationships with men, and stated,

Well one [male friend] is physically very, very frail indeed but he's got a nice hand to touch... so I like men's company but I've gone back into being the kid I was with them sort of thing, I'm friendly rather than anything, else at all.
(OW15P2)

8.3 EBB AND FLOW OF SEXUALITY

Two themes, endings/changes, and moving on, contribute to the main theme of older women's experiences of their sexualities ebbing and flowing within their lives. The themes are closely inter-related with the central focus revolving around the endings of sexual feelings, desires, expressions and relationships. The difference lies in the emphasis, with the older women participants focusing on their experiences of endings in relation to their sexuality in the first theme, whilst within the theme of moving on the older women discuss the way their sexuality continues within the context of these endings.

8.3.1 Endings/changes

Within this theme issues that have influenced the endings of sexual feelings, desires, expressions and relationships, as well as feelings of loss, were discussed by many of the participants. It could be suggested that although the endings for some of the participants did not take place recently, they have become part of the

narrative of their sexuality in older age. The main issues that will be explored in this theme are the ending of sexual feelings and desires together with issues that may have impacted negatively on these feelings and desires, and the ending of the sexual relationships themselves, which highlighted the experiences of loss.

Participants' experiences of how their sexual feelings and desires ended varied from some participants having experienced an abrupt ending, to others having experienced a gradual diminishing of feelings and desires. There was similarity in the older women's descriptions of having experienced an abrupt cessation of sexual feelings, for example, "it was just like somebody had switched a switch, my libido was gone" (OW2P2), and "it was just like a tap being turned off" (OW3P2). For a couple of these participants the ending of their sexual feelings and desires were linked to physiological changes, in particular their menopause, and in some respects this naturalistic explanation counters any notion of the fluidity of sexuality and gave a decisiveness to the endings, that is, a point of no return. As one of the participants stated, "I don't feel the need you see to express my sexuality...I don't feel sexual, I don't want to be sexual any more" (OW2P2), and went on to say in her interview that she no longer regarded herself as having a sexuality. Interestingly the participant linked her statement to the way she defined sexuality and noted,

If I think of sexuality as meaning being sexual and having sex [penetrative heterosexual sexual intercourse] then no I don't have any. We still cuddle and kiss a bit but apart from that no I don't have one. We are very loving, very caring, we consider each other. (OW2P2)

This narrow definition of sexuality struggles to make sense of other sexual experiences and expressions experienced by this participant who identified a contradiction within her own narrative and commented,

I still have erotic dreams and they're usually with my husband which is nice, but no its [sexuality] just not there. (OW2P2)

It could be suggested that these were changes not endings but, in order for them to be perceived as such, it requires a more inclusive definition of sexuality to be embraced. Another of the participants experienced an abrupt ending to her sexual feelings and desires when her sexual relationship with her long-term partner ended. She commented,

It's almost as if a switch was turned off somewhere and it remains switched off but that's ok...I would have to meet an individual that would re-spark something and I haven't done that. (OW11P2)

Whilst re-iterating what has already been expressed regarding abrupt endings, she conveyed a different perspective by suggesting that the 'ending' could be a temporary situation and that there was a possibility of her sexual feelings and desires being rekindled. Other participants have referred to a sexuality lying dormant as opposed to having permanently ended when considering the current presence and influence of sexuality on their lives.

Some participants experienced the endings of their sexual feelings and desires more as a gradual diminishment. One participant described her longing for an opportunity to express her sexuality after having separated from her long-term partner and how her feelings had lessened over time. She remarked,

I no longer think about how lovely it would be if there was another body next to mine...it has taken years but it's a relief not to have that yearning. (OW12P2)

Another participant whose partner had died a few years ago felt that the recent loss of her sexual feelings was a relief because she had found the frustration very difficult to manage. Interestingly she did not equate this to an end to her sexuality and explained,

Quite recently, until a few months ago I really felt quite sexual, quite prepared to have some kind of sensual experience. It's just a gradual lessening... I'm still very feminine but I don't have sexual desires... although I can have very erotic dreams but I think my body has gone into slow motion. To have the admiration of the opposite sex is still very nice and you can get quite a ... not a thrill, but I can't think what the word is, to be told how nice you look or things like that but physically I'm not really interested in having any more relationships, physically. (OW4P2).

Her narrative tended to support the suggestion that for many of the participants their sexuality, and in particular sexual expression and appreciation were changing as opposed to ending.

Although already referred to previously, it is worth returning to the issues that the participants identified as negatively influencing their sexual feelings and desires as well as how these factors impacted on their sense of self. The issues that were highlighted ranged from physiological to external circumstances and for many of the participants it was a combination of, as opposed to, a single factor. These factors included menopause, illness, death of partner, friends and family members, problematic relationships, no partner/lack of opportunity, and being unprepared to

take up a 'partner' role in order to engage in a sexual relationship. One participant commented about her situation, and stated,

My friend and I are widows... we live near each other, we have our own home and money and our own car. We do not have to wash mucky underpants and mucky socks, we do not have to produce Sunday lunch in a way of a roast and apple pie and custard and we felt at our age that if we got one perk, sexual perk a month, we would be very lucky so we feel the price is too high. (OW8P2)

Only one participant felt that her sexual feelings and desires had ceased due to a change of feelings towards her partner and stated,

Well it was definitely me who didn't want sex any more... I mean my feelings changed for herI don't feel anything now. (OW13P2)

From these factors it can be seen that, unless the issue of menopause was regarded as part of the ageing process, ageing itself was not identified as having a negative impact on sexual feelings and desires. The issues of ageing were explicitly challenged by some of the participants, who stated,

I don't think my age has impacted at all. (OW7P2)

I am 8 out of 10 [i.e. very interested in sex] when I was young and even now. It hasn't changed just because I'm old I just haven't got anybody to practice it with. (OW8P2)

In keeping with the ethos of qualitative research it is worth highlighting an exception in relation to one participant's experience of how she felt her sexuality had ended. This participant highlighted two factors, firstly her partner's inability to express himself sexually and secondly, the way she was no longer regarded by society as a sexual person, which she attributed to her age. She indicated,

I think my sexuality has gone from me possibly... I am not viewed now as an object for sex but I am viewed with admiration and respect, a little bit like the queen. (OW5P2)

This participant is the only one to have explicitly identified an influence outside of herself and her relationship that had impacted detrimentally on her sense of her sexuality.

The participants identified a range of feelings in relation to their experiences of the cessation of their sexual feelings, desires and expressions ranging from sadness

through to relief. Interestingly even the participants who felt sadness and regret, went on to describe how these were only initial feelings and that more positive feelings emerged in response to the endings. One participant felt initially that she was missing out on different aspects of her long-term relationship but after a while came to the conclusion that their relationship had qualitatively improved and she felt a lot closer to her partner. It is worth pointing out that this participant together with her partner had undertaken couple counselling to discuss the ending of their sexual relationship. The lack of sexual intimacy had therefore been a trigger for both of them to re-assess their relationship, which in turn helped them to cope with the loss of the sexual side of their relationship. The participant summarised the situation by stating,

There are other things in our relationship that I value much more [than being sexual together] and so that's how it's gone on really... but it has reached a point where we are very happy together, we do lots of things separately anyway, we worked it out and as I say we have a very good relationship now and I can't imagine life without him... We're much closer I think than we ever were in lots of ways and we've both changed an awful lot so it's good. (OW2P2)

Whilst discussing the impact on the participants of the ending of their sexual feelings, desires and expressions it is worth noting that for a significant minority of the participants the feelings of loss, or missing being sexual with someone, was talked about. Participants who were not in a sexual relationship at the time of this research study particularly related to this issue, through their discussions about the meaning of being in a sexual relationship with someone. The participants missed a range of aspects such as, closeness, expressing themselves sexually in a range of ways, feeling their inner spirit, and having a connection with someone.

Only one participant explicitly identified the gains of not being in a sexual relationship, and said,

Yes I regretted the loss of a sex life when it first happened, I think I've just got used to it I suppose. I feel in charge of my life, which you can never be, with somebody else because you've always got to be accommodating to somebody else... sexual activity, there's something, it energises you doesn't it when you have sex. I don't have that but I do have a lot of energy now. (OW3P2)

The other issues discussed by the participants in this theme were their experiences of the ending of a sexual relationship. Although the experiences were diverse there was a commonality in that the relationships referred to were all long-term

relationships, that is, relationships which had been built on substantial commitment either through marriage, living together and/or longevity. Three different situations emerged from the older women's narratives of their experiences of ending sexual relationships. Firstly, the sexual relationship ended but the relationship continued. Secondly, the sexual relationship ended, which eventually led to the ending of the relationship itself. Thirdly, the sexual relationship ended but the relationship itself continued and eventually ended through the death of their partner. Each of these different situations will now be discussed in some depth.

Reflecting the biography of the research sample only a small number of participants discussed endings of the sexual side of a long-term relationship that they were currently involved in. Only one of the participants felt she had to make sense of the situation in order to be able to move forward with her partner, and as mentioned previously, became involved in couple counselling. Although the other participants tended to accept the situation without independent support, none of the participants used the research interview to explore the ending of the sexual side of their long-term relationships. Their narratives covered the issues of physiological changes and sexual predictability in a matter of fact way, which probably masked the importance of the change within their relationships. This tone is highlighted in the following descriptive examples of how the cessation of the sexual relationship came about.

I thought well I had pretty good sex before the menopause and that was fine, but what can you do, it just disappeared.... my libido is no longer there but where it goes goodness only knows. (OW2P2)

It [sexual relationship with her husband] was fairly active until about 10-15 years ago when he began to become impotent. Mind you he's 90 now, it became less and less quite a while ago and now it is completely finished. It has been for a number of years. (OW5P2)

It just seemed to be that it was not boring exactly because he was the only man I'd ever made love with, but every time you turn to each other and it was a cuddle and you know where it was going. I suppose I was tired and so we talked about it and he went along with it, he just said he wouldn't like it not to be ever again and I suppose just occasionally it happened again but not with the same enjoyment and vigour, for me. (OW14P2)

The participant who owns the last quotation went on to say elsewhere in her interview that she thought many long-term relationships became non-sexual and remarked,

A friend of mine who has been married the same length of time as me... [her husband] died 3 years ago, and I'm quite sure, well I'm not sure because we've never spoken about it, but I'm fairly sure, that their relationship will have gone down the same path as mine [become non-sexual] I think a lot of our generation's will, but we never talk about it. (OW14P2)

Falling short of making links to ageing per se, the participants' comments above implicitly suggest that the cessation of a sexual relationship within long-term relationships was a common occurrence within the older generation.

Other participants reflected on the endings of sexual relationships from the past, which led to the ending, via separation, of the relationship itself. For most of the participants the separation was a long, and at times unhappy, process. For some of the participants it involved waiting until their children had grown up, and for others it needed to be done in stages due to the investment of both partners in the relationship. As one participant stated, "we didn't split up completely then, we just had separate rooms" (13OWP2). For another participant years of feeling rejected by her partner took its toll in that, as she says,

When I finally felt in my heart that I was giving up on the marriage...it was 10 years later before I asked if we could separate. (OW10P2)

Not all participants experienced this gradual process of endings. Another participant whose long-term sexual relationship ended abruptly described her situation saying,

I did get into a long-term relationship that lasted for 13 years... we did a lot together and it was lovely, we lived together... and unfortunately she found somebody else. These things happen. We'd been together from... yes it was in my 60's because I remember my retirement party, she'd be around then, so I'd be in my 60's. I think it was about 1984/5 when we started living together and she left me in 1995. (OW13P2)

Only two participants experienced the death of their partners whilst still involved in a relationship with them. For both participants the sexual side of the relationship had ended sometime before the death of their partner, but it is here that the similarity ends. For one of the participants the relationship had been fraught with problems, particularly around the ending of the sexual side of their relationship, and her view was, that

In my marriage it [penetrative heterosexual sexual intercourse] had become too big a part. It became too important, so that as my husband got older and

he wasn't as capable if you like, it became too much of an issue and I began to realise that there was very little actually in our marriage once that had gone. It would have been nice if there had been more. There was a long time, a good 20 years when it was still the most important thing but not happening. (OW6P2)

This had led to an unhappy period of tensions and wondering what was left of her marriage. In contrast the other participant was happily involved in her relationship and although penetrative heterosexual intercourse had ceased due to her partner's illness, during this time they had both expressed themselves sexually in other ways. So for this participant the ending of her sexual relationship happened on her partner's death and the 'ending' of particular forms of sexual expression could be described as changes or transitions forced by circumstance. This participant summarised her situation poignantly,

When he was 77 he became ill, so for 3 and a half years before he died, he'd had a stroke, so sex then involved holding hands. We liked to sit next to each other watching TV, we shared a double bed and he liked to cuddle and so on, but the penetration bit of sex finished because of his illness. But there are other, as you gather, other bits and pieces of sex, kissing or cuddling or holding hands, all are part and parcel. (OW8P2)

Again it is interesting to note the inclusive impact a wider definition of sexual expression had on this participant's narrative of her valued long-term relationship.

8.3.2 Moving on

The theme of moving on focused on how the participants perceived aspects of their sexuality to be continuing within the context of ageing. The notion of moving on in this theme is discussed within a relational context and the participants discussed the way their sexuality continued, in terms of ebbing and flowing, evolving, retreating and remaining stationary. The older women participants highlighted four main issues when discussing how their sexuality continued to be tangible. These included, ways of moving on as a response to change, future sexual relationships and the experience of dating, enjoyment of a sexual relationship, and the continuation of a long-term sexual relationship. It is worth noting that all but one of the participants contributed to this theme as a whole with the majority of the older women having something to say about the issues of moving on and future sexual relationships.

Taking the first issue, the participants discussed ways of moving on which they had experienced as a response to a change in, either their sexual relationship status or,

sexual expression within their sexual relationships. It can be seen from the data that ways of moving on differed significantly between the participants, and included, choosing to remain in a relationship within a long-term marriage that was no longer sexual, having a passionate short-term sexual relationship, maintaining a familiar connection with a person with whom you no longer have a long-term relationship, and developing tactile friendships. Additionally one participant felt that there needed to be a way for people, who were caring for their sexual partners but no longer have a sexual relationship, to engage in “something that’s acceptable and respectable whereby they can have a non-threatening sexual relationship” (9OW17/33). Interestingly the participant was more concerned that this ‘service’ should be made available to male as opposed to female carers. It is worth at this point exploring in more depth the different responses that the older women participants identified.

For one of the participants, moving on involved staying with her long-term partner when the sexual side of their relationship had ended. Although she referred to being in a “sexless relationship” (2OW), she also felt that this change in their relationship had brought with it qualities such as closeness, consideration, trust and warmth which had in turn increased the feelings of love and care. She summarised the impact of the changes by saying that,

We have a relationship that is undreamt of, I wouldn’t have dreamt of it years ago to have this kind of relationship with someone where I trust him with everything and I think he trusts me... I can’t imagine not being with this man, ever. I would be devastated yes, if anything happens to him that’s how deep I feel about this relationship and yet it’s sexless. (OW2P2)

Even with this level of contentment however, the participant experienced uncertainty and some tensions, which were located in how the relationship should be defined. The fact that her relationship was societally recognised and sanctioned through marriage contributed to her dilemma, possibly because a common assumption is that a sexual union is integral to a state of marriage. The participant expressed this dilemma,

Yes I mean it was very upsetting at first [having a non-sexual relationship] it brought up all sorts of things and I did feel, I felt that I was an oddity and I still feel as though I’m an oddity and will do until somebody comes up with some research about the kind of happy marriages there are that are sexless. (OW2P2)

Within the research interview this participant struggled to name her relationship feeling that it was more than a friendship and different from a sibling relationship. She commented,

I suppose what we have, what they call, is a brother/sister relationship, although I've never had a relationship with my brother like this. (OW2P2)

It could be suggested that part of the struggle that the participant was experiencing was to do with the historical aspect of having had a sexual relationship and where this fitted into, or how this continued as part of, the changed relationship. The participant's struggle was further illuminated in that although she viewed her current relationship as "sexless" (OW2P2) due to lack of penetrative heterosexual sexual intercourse, there still existed sexual expression in the form of cuddling and kissing between her and her partner. The impact of the change on her perception of her sexuality was within the context of an ending, as discussed in the previous Section 8.3.1. For another participant in a similar situation, moving on within her long term relationship had involved her in re-emphasising the love that her relationship was based on, and seeing her sexuality more in terms of "loving care" (OW14P2). Interestingly both participants had undergone relationship counselling in order to reach the mutual decision with their partners to carry on within their respective and 'sexually' changed relationships. It could be argued that the space offered by counselling was necessary to enable two older people to challenge, firstly, the lack of communication around sex and sexuality as discussed in Section 7.2 and secondly, the barriers that made it difficult to engage in different types of relationships as a response to changes that are in some way inter-related with longevity. It could be suggested that both of these participants found a way to positively embrace change and to find some type of continuity in relation to their sexuality within a 'post-sexual' relationship.

The remainder of the participants that contributed to the issue of moving on discussed contrasting ways in which they maintained a sense of continuity in terms of expressing their sexuality after an ending of a long-term relationship. Following the death of her husband with whom she had had a difficult relationship and a "long, long time of no sex" (OW6P2) one participant had responded by embarking "on a very, sort of, passionate relationship I suppose which went on for probably a year and a half" (OW6P2). Another participant responded to the death of her husband with whom she had had a positive relationship, by developing tactile male friendships, and explained that,

There's three men at church, all married, all very happily married, and I sit next to them and if I feel sad I can just put my hand out and they will be there, and there is a maleness about them. (OW15P2)

For a couple of other participants moving on from a long-term relationship that had ended due to separation as opposed to death, maintaining a familiar connection with a person was important. One older woman felt connected in an emotional way, although she did not have much contact with her long-term partner when they had separated, and stated,

I still felt myself married to him but he was after all in my life for 60 years and that's a heck of a time and you realise that you don't brush that aside easily. (OW10P2)

Another participant maintained close contact with her ex partner and explained,

I know he loves me, I don't love him, I like him, he's company. It's very easy when you've got somebody who loves, who enjoys being with you, just going with them. It's a bit of an odd situation I know it's not a common sort of situation but... yes I do feel a bit guilty sometimes but I don't have any urge to look for another bloke. (OW3P2)

It cannot be suggested that there was an explicit expression of sexuality within the latter two quotations cited above, but there was a feeling of continuity in a 'post-sexual' sense that differed from the 'post-sexual' relationships referred to earlier in this section, in the fact that the relationships had not been qualitatively enhanced.

The majority of the participants discussed future sexual relationships with regards to how they viewed their sexuality continuing within the context of ageing. There were contrasting views on starting a new sexual relationship with the majority of participants not being interested to a significant minority expressing an interest. A range of reasons was identified as influencing participants' disinterest, none of which referred to a lack of sexual interest, feeling or expression of sexuality. Being married was an issue identified by one participant who stated,

Well I am very sad that there is no sex now between my husband and myself. I would have liked it to have continued and there is nothing I can do about that and I don't intend to. I have never slept outside marriage. (OW5P2)

Some of the other participants rejected the idea of a future sexual relationship because of being disinterested in becoming someone's partner again, either

through living together or marriage. In particular the disinterest appeared to be around not wanting to sacrifice newly found independence, which relates to earlier discussions around experiencing aloneness. One participant stated,

I cannot and have not been able to think in terms of another man and there are a lot of single men who are looking for a housekeeper but I can't just... I'm not a one night stand, I couldn't go from one to the other, I have to build a relationship up, so I'm totally single. (OW8P2)

This attitude was reflected in other interview data where there tended to be a generalisation that older heterosexual men were seeking traditional partners when considering future sexual relationships. One participant commented,

I'm still very much a sexual woman, if the right person came along. There's not much opportunity as you get older, the older you get, the men who are free seem to quickly get attached to another wife, and the men I've found in general, the men in their 70s are much less open minded and liberal than women are. (OW9P2)

A significant number of participants were of the opinion that it would be difficult to find a suitable future partner, as experience had shown that potential partners were,

Quite boring... and accustomed to dominate... and have been very disappointing. (OW12P2).

As a researcher it was difficult not to make the judgement that some participants' standards in relation to future sexual partnership were very high, possibly unattainable. It can however be seen from the interview data that for some participants their high standards were based either on past relationships, for example, one participant stated, "I look round and I think there isn't a bloke who is a patch on my [late] husband" (OW15P2), or having to give up an aspect of their lives that they either cherished or have invested emotional energy developing. One participant illustrated this by stating,

It was the first time in my life [after separating from her partner] that I was actually doing what I'd always wanted to do when I was young and that was live on my own. I was able to do it and I grew to like it so much, as I say I have made no attempt to remove myself from it and it would have to be quite an exceptional individual that would make me want to do that. (OW11P2)

One participant stated that she would not be interested in future sexual relationships if her current long term relationship ended because of the concept of having “to start again” (OW2P2) and continued by saying,

I definitely wouldn't take up with anybody else it would just mean that you'd have to work through such a lot I suppose. (OW2P2)

From the older women who stated that they would be interested in starting a new sexual relationship, one participant's interest was motivated by the 'other' aspects of relationships, as she explained,

It would be nice to meet somebody now that I could relate to, that I could go on holidays with and go for meals with. It's going for meals that bothers me more than anything, I'm not happy at going for meals by myself. (OW6P2)

For the rest of the older women in this group, although their interest appeared from the data to be sexually motivated, it was combined with a certain degree of reservation. Comments such as,

I mean I think if my interest and imagination were aroused you know I might... I think it might not be a very physical relationship and I certainly don't think it would establish itself on the physical basis, I think I would probably be quite surprised and perhaps a bit nervous of an approach if it started like that at my age when I think about it. (OW10P2)

It would be nice but... I don't feel turned on basically, I haven't found anybody that turns me on. I can't see me ever having another sexual relationships. Still having said that I mean the woman I have had, well maybe two years ago now, it's not that long ago is it after all is said and done. (OW13P2)

Only one of the participants explicitly associated her reservation about embarking on a new sexual relationship with her age and commented a couple of times in her interview on her lack of energy to pursue such a relationship if the opportunity arose. She summarised her position by stating that her sexual emotions,

Occasionally arise... I wouldn't rule out the possibility of being attracted or someone else being attracted to me... I mean I've reached a stage of life where actually I have very low energy, it's quite an effort to get myself to get up and get out and do things, I'm much happier sitting at home in front of the computer and doing things. I've always said I've had an active brain dragging a reluctant body behind me. (OW10P2)

Within the context of future sexual relationships only one participant discussed her recent experiences of dating and talked about the difficulties of finding someone appropriate. She supported many of the points made earlier in this section by saying that,

A lot of them [the men she had dated] seem to fall into certain categories, one is they want a substitute for their dead wife, others just want companionship but they're hoping for a bit of sex and there are some who are just boring to be honest. (OW6P2)

From the data it can be seen that it was a minority of the participants that felt that their sexuality, in terms of sexual feelings, no longer existed. The majority of the participants felt as if they did not want to repeat their relationship history (i.e. get married or live with someone) but would like a sexual relationship if the right person came along. For most of the participants their lack of sexual interest was less to do with the ageing process and more to do with force of circumstance and, the assertion that a new sexual situation might ignite their sexual feelings was often cited. One participant reflected this by saying,

You can never see into the future, to be celibate for part of your life is one thing but to say that you're always going to be so... from my past experience you can't say that about life, you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, never mind what's going to happen next month or next year. (OW11P2)

It could be argued, from these findings that for the majority of the participants their sexuality continued but was not necessarily expressed through a relationship, either by choice, or by circumstance. As discussed previously, sexual expression took many forms and, to an extent for many of the older women, the different forms of expression supported and encouraged a broader, anti-essentialist view of sexuality, which this study has tried to keep as its central tenet.

Some of the participants discussed their experiences of significant, but not lasting (short-term), sexual relationships, which they had embarked on in the past after a long-term relationship, had ended either through separation or death. Although these experiences are not current within the lives of the participants concerned it is worth including their narrative on this aspect of the continuity of their sexual expression, chiefly because of the lasting impact these relationships had on their sense of self. This 'continuation' after an ending of a long-term relationship was experienced in terms of freedom, liberation and an enjoyment of the sexual side of a relationship. Participants stated that,

It was exciting and I enjoyed it and was having a fantastic time. (OW6P2)

The sexuality was totally different, no inhibitions from my point of view, freer, a release I suppose from whatever was holding me back in the first married.... yes happier. (OW7P2)

It was the most pleasurable sex that I'd had in my life and that was in my mid-70s. (OW9P2)

An entirely physical relationship, probably the best sex I'd ever had.... he only had to lay his hand on mine on the table or something and we were practically off. (OW10P2)

A couple of other participants recounted narratives of friends who had started new relationships where the sexual side of the relationship was very enjoyable. As one participant stated,

I have a friend who's never had a satisfactory sexual life ever and never had any in-between lovers until 2 or 3 years ago and she's 83 now so she was 80 and had a lover and it was alright and she wasn't dry and sore so she's got a lover now, she's 83. (OW16P2)

This was an important counter narrative for this particular participant who felt that continuing to engage in penetrative sexual intercourse could be problematic, specifically in relation to physiological changes which she was experiencing herself. It could also be suggested that it also challenged any discourse that supported homogeneity by highlighting the diversity of older women's sexual experiences.

In contrast to the experiences of the older women who had been involved in relatively short-term sexual relationships, a small number of participants discussed the enjoyment of the sexual side of their long-term relationships. A couple of the participants, whose long term partners had died within the last eight years, discussed how expressing themselves sexually with their partners continued up to a few years before their deaths. A couple of the older women stated that,

My husband was older than me, he was 12 years older and died when he was 81 but he was still active sexually, including penetration, until he was 77 so it was good, we didn't have a problem. (OW8P2)

On we went [actively sexual] for 47 years... lot of touching, hugging. I think just the hands, holding hands. (OW15P2)

One participant described the on-going (although changing) sexual relationship she currently had with her long-term partner and stated,

He's glad that we can just do what we're doing [being sexual without penetrative sex], well he says he is, and that's all right, and we can be noisy at it as well. (OW16P2)

These narratives are not only a testament to the diversity and continuity of sexual expression, but also they show how the use of a wider definition of sexuality offered an inclusive engagement with its different aspects for all older women to talk about their experiences.

8.4 LIVING WITH AGEISM AND SEXISM

The influence of ageism and sexism runs through the other themes and is analysed in more depth in Chapter 9. It was however important to include the issue as a separate theme, led by the participants, in that it focuses on their explicit discussions in relation to their experiences of sexuality within the context of ageism and sexism. The two themes, which contribute to this main theme are, managing representations and attitudes, and handling body image. They cover the older women's experiences of ageism and sexism in relation to their sexuality through three different societal levels. The examples that the participants identified were the media, social networks and body image, which corresponds to the structural, cultural and personal levels respectively.

8.4.1 Managing representations and attitudes

Within this theme the older women participants demonstrated their awareness of the influence of ageism and sexism in their lives. It could be assumed that the participants experienced the impact of sexism in relation to their sexuality throughout their life course, but that now as older women the social division of age, was intersecting with their gender to impact differently on their experiences of their sexuality. The participants identify two influential means, by which attitudes towards their sexuality as older women were conveyed. The first means was through media representation and, the second means was through their social networks.

The media representation of older women's sexuality was discussed by a couple of participants in relation to popular visual representation i.e. film, newspapers and television. These participants maintained that older women's sexuality was more often than not portrayed through a 'youthful' lens, which tended to lead to

'misrepresentation' that supported a homogenous ideal, which, in turn, denied difference and failed to reflect experiences. One participant succinctly stated,

There is a continuing change in sexuality and I think this is important, whereas we [older women] are presented as sexual in the same way as the younger women. (OW1P2)

There was a sense also from this participant that older women who were in public life were trying to 'distance' themselves from older age by taking on a more 'youthful' look. This participant cited the example of an article about Joan Bakewell, (who had championed older women's issues in the past), and stated that,

I saw her [a picture accompanying the article]... and she was wearing four inch high heels and a skirt over her knees and proffering in the article 'oh yes I do dress like that because I don't want to feel like I'm coming out of a pensioner's meeting'. (OW1P2)

It could be argued that older women are pressured to disassociate themselves with ageing and need to appear as if they are 'ageing well' by appearing younger than their age in order to secure any positive media interest and representation. Women between fifty and seventy years of age are, more often than not, perceived as the sole representatives and public face of older women which has a consequence of marginalising women over the age of seventy. This marginalisation was experienced in a range of ways by the participants concerned and highlighted some tensions within the media representation of older women's sexuality.

It was felt by a couple of participants that sexuality in relation to older women over the age of seventy was, as stated earlier in the discussion, misrepresented by,

The insistence that 70 years plus women should have a perfect young person's sexuality, and I don't believe that it's so. (OW1P2)

Another participant commented on a television makeover programme for women over sixty years of age,

I watched it [the programme] because it was about women over 60 and I was appalled because of this idea that we've got to be sexual in our appearance, to look sexy... it's crazy it seems to me because what he [the presenter] was trying to do was to make these women look in a certain way.... make you look young and I don't want to be young. (OW2P2)

Accompanying these comments of how their sexuality was misrepresented were strong feelings of upset, anger and disgust together with a sense of invisibility and non-representation. The participants perceived this lack of representation not only in visual terms but also as a missed opportunity to explore publicly the issues and changes experienced in relation to sexuality in later life. Both participants had experienced changes, which had impacted on their ability to continue to engage in penetrative sexual intercourse and felt that the representation of older women's sexuality as being not only 'youthful' but also static, forced them to be silent about their own experiences. The participants felt that this encouraged them to privatise their issues and hampered any discussion amongst themselves and their friends. One participant stated,

I'm sure that some women do not have these physiological problems, but I'm sure that lots of us do and we're not acknowledged and that is something that makes me upset that I'm not heard or I'm not represented or I'm not understood although as I say there are very few people who want to talk about it. (OW1P2)

The dilemma for these participants was that they did want to support the representation of older women's sexuality but wanted the representation to be more accurate by its recognition and exploration of diversity. They did not want to be silenced by the tyranny of the countervailing stereotype of the 'sexy oldie'. One participant summarised this dilemma well by stating,

The emphasis is all the time being placed on sex as being the key, oh fancy not thinking that 70 year olds can have sex, of course they can have sex, but it's that emphasis on that... it's almost as if they've forgotten that at 70 years old there's other things as well. This sex business is like that's the one that's being pushed as being you know the surprise to people that 70 and 80 year old people could still be having sex and whilst I think that's fine, that's pertinent, it's like it's left behind, all those like myself that aren't [having sex]. (OW2P2)

The second means by which attitudes towards older women's sexuality were conveyed was through their social networks. This was discussed by many of the participants in relation to how people such as friends, family, and other people that the older participants came in contact with in their day-to-day lives viewed their sexuality. Although this channel for conveying attitudes was on a different level than the previously discussed media representation, for one participant they became inter-connected in terms of her experience, where she felt her grandchildren had picked up from watching television stereotypical aspects of

ageing which they then proceeded to relate to her. She went on to highlight the connection between the different levels by stating,

If there was a picture in a children's book of a granny, she would be old, white haired, dodderly with a stick and they [her grandchildren] don't sort of think well my Nana's not like that.... anybody over a certain age is a dodderly old person and the idea of having a boyfriend or a sexual relationship would just be a joke. (OW6P2)

The participants experienced a diverse array of views from other people within their lives ranging from older women's sexuality being perceived as 'safe', that is, non-existent, to something to be taken as a joke, that is, some recognition of existence, to positive recognition and support of their sexuality. One participant, however, discussed the way she felt that older women's sexuality was invisible to older men, particularly if they were trying to find a new partner. She stated,

Most of the ads in Saga for instance they're [older men] looking for a woman... they're usually looking for a woman at least 10 years younger than themselves, so they very much assume that if you're over a certain age you're past it. (OW9P2)

Other participants discussed the reaction of others, particularly family members, to sexual relationships they had been engaged in, which varied from a respectful acceptance to a protective objection. There was an implicit sense that the responses would be judgemental and for one participant it was the threat of other people's disapproval that acted as a control in terms of her sexual behaviour. She stated,

I think it's sad in a way that we [older women] can't be more promiscuous without it being risky or frowned on. Does that sound shocking? (OW9P2)

Another participant added to this aspect of 'moral' reputation by saying that it did initially concern her 'what the neighbours' thought about her having male friends to stay but that after a while her feelings changed, and she remarked,

I'm quite happy about it [male friends staying the night] now, it doesn't worry me in the slightest, sometimes their wives have been as well and sometimes they've been on their own. They always know that if they're having a meeting in this part of the country they have a bed here and it won't have me in it. (OW6P2)

It could be argued here that this participant had internalised the oppressive notion that older women's sexuality was non-existent and that having male friends to stay

could no longer be viewed as having a sexual motive. Later on in her interview however she discussed that the reactions of others felt less important to her as her confidence grew with age. This was tied in for her about having moved beyond the sexist notion that women are only to be defined in terms of their sexuality. She stated,

I think I can see that I have other qualities now. I think when I was younger I felt that was the only thing [being sexual] that mattered to anybody about me, well to men anyway. (OW6P2)

The context of disapproval and approval was not only experienced in terms of sexual relationships. One participant felt that the reaction of others to her physical appearance, and in particular their approval that she 'looked good for her age' was very important and impacted on how she felt about herself. For this particular participant it had been important all her life that she dressed immaculately and presented herself in the 'best possible light'. When she was younger it centred solely on her femininity but now she appeared more concerned about the impact of ageing. She commented,

She actually asked how old I was which I didn't really like but because she was an ex nurse who I had known for some time I told her and she was just stunned. She said I believe you look absolutely fantastic, I cannot believe it. I mustn't look my age must I if a nurse would say that? (OW5P2)

However this positive response was short-lived as the participant went on to explain,

I said to [the nurse]... I am thinking of [having my teeth capped]... she said 'ooh I wouldn't bother at your age', and that really was the most cutting remark, at my age you give up, after saying I looked fantastic and suddenly, just suddenly because she knew my age she had a different view point. (OW5P2)

An aspect of positive support and recognition for older women's sexuality which was experienced in a negative way by one participant, which involved the notion of 'keeping up appearances', where she had not talked to her friends about the way her long term sexual relationship with her husband had developed into a "sexless but happy marriage" (OW2P2). There appeared to be an assumption from friends of the same age that sexual activity was continuing, and as there was a silence around any changes that disrupted this continuity then there was pressure on older women to 'keep up appearances'. The participant concerned stated,

I always led them [friends of the same age] to believe it was as hot as hell kind of thing, it's nothing to do with anybody else really. (OW14P2)

This reaction tended to collude with the misrepresentation of older women's sexuality and the privatisation of changes and issues that failed to fit into dominant representations.

The older women participants experienced a range of difficult emotions when they identified the way that ageism had impacted on their sexuality. Their reactions included, being upset, rationalising feeling hurt with a sense of unfairness, outrage and resilience. The participants coped with ageism in a range of different ways, which were influenced in the main by their reactions. These included, separating their own current experiences from public representation, acceptance that sexuality is for the 'young', successfully hiding their age, having an inner strength that people dare not cross, finding an anti-ageist environment to frequent, and showing films that offer a different representation of older women's sexuality.

8.4.2 Handling body image

This theme is a good example of how ageism and sexism impacted on the older women on a personal level and covered a range of issues that the older women participants experienced regarding their body image in relation to ageing, and how these changes were handled. The concept of body image was viewed as an important part of their sexuality and was discussed in terms of appearance and attractiveness. Both these aspects were interrelated in that 'successful' handling of body image resulted in an appearance or feeling of 'attractiveness'. Appearance, attractiveness and handling of body image will be considered in more detail together with the tensions that the participants experienced in relation to the embodiment of their own ageing.

Although for a majority of the participants their bodily appearance was linked to their sexuality through the concept of 'attractiveness', it is worth noting that an assessment of this attractiveness came from themselves as much as from others. This was captured by one participant who stated in relation to dressing up that,

I had a great deal of difficulty deciding what to wear to this dinner and eventually chose an outfit which I particularly like, and when I went in, the men were saying 'oh you look really nice, oh that looks lovely'. (OW6P2)

Other participants gave the impression that judgements about their appearance were a matter only for themselves and commented,

I never dress to please men, I dress to feel good... I just dress to please myself. (OW3P2)

I care about the way I look.... for my own satisfaction and enjoyment. (OW9P2)

This self-confidence was reflected throughout the theme by participants who discussed issues such as, an awareness of own attractiveness, dressing to please myself, and feeling comfortable with my body. These aspects also reflected the range of feelings that the older women had in relation to their physical appearance such as, satisfaction through to acceptance, to being comfortable with how they appear.

It is too simplistic however to conclude from this aspect of the findings that the participants were solely guided by critical self-assessment with regards to their appearance. Owing to the societal context in which women age there is a complex inter-relationship between assumptions, expectations and appropriateness in relation to bodily appearance which impacts significantly on older women's lives. This issue will be returned to when considering the tensions and dilemmas that the older women participants experienced when handling their own ageing body image.

When the participants were discussing sexuality within the context of attractiveness, the former was referred to using a range of meanings from attracting another person in relation to starting a sexual relationship through to being attractive to other people in terms of rapport and being 'good to be with'. Again the use of a wide definition of sexuality within this research study had enabled the participants to consider the notion of attractiveness and its link to sexuality in a new and challenging way. One participant demonstrated this by discussing her relationships with younger people whom she informally mentored, and stated,

I think they [younger people] find me a very attractive elderly woman who's full of life. I don't think they look on me as a sexual object for one split second but I think they are attracted to someone who is clearly mature but still full of life and full of fun and dresses well. (OW5P2)

This sense of attractiveness cannot be underestimated and a significant minority of the participants discussed their awareness of their own attractiveness. One participant also suggested that her attractiveness was within her own control and stated,

I still feel I'm a woman and I know that if I set out I could attract somebody if I wanted to... I know that I am still an attractive woman if I set out to be. (OW3P2)

Other participants felt that any compliments they received about their appearance were generally viewed as a positive payoff for the effort they had put into making themselves attractive and was validation that their efforts had worked. The specific reactions to the compliments were however varied starting from disbelief, surprise, pleased with a tinge of cynicism and humour, and feeling nice without the feelings of sexual desire.

It needs to be highlighted at this point that a couple of the participants did not and never had, associated their sexuality with physical appearance. Whilst they recognised that their physical appearance had changed they had not felt 'less attractive' in sexual terms. What is interesting in terms of their discussion was not the fact that sexuality was perceived as separate from physical appearance but that the separation enabled them to view the ageing body as one in decline whilst their sexuality remained 'intact'. These participants captured this by stating,

I've always been alright with my body...I mean how awful to feel that your sexuality is all to do with your lovely body and that once it's started to deteriorate you couldn't be who you thought you were. (OW14P2)

I don't feel any less sexually attractive than when I was younger. Sex and appearance do not go together for me so I haven't suffered from being less attractive because I'm getting older or because I'm being fatter... that is sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror I find oh gosh I am fat, I'm probably not as attractive as I used to be, but it's only passing, it's not the core of my consciousness really. (OW1P2)

Ageing was prominent throughout the discussions within this theme and were reflected by participants discussing such issues as, dressing myself as an older woman, looking younger than my age, looking my age and awareness of ageing. For the majority of participants their awareness of ageing in relation to their body image was discussed within the context of decline. Any physical changes were seen in problematic terms and there was a sense from the participants that the ageing body was considered as unattractive. One participant described the physical changes in relation to the ageing body by stating,

I mean everything goes south, drooping boobs, everything is going south when you're our age... it's not what could be described as beauty. (OW2P2)

A significant number of the older women felt that within the context of physical ageing an 'attractive' appearance could no longer be taken for granted and therefore felt the need to engage in a range of strategies that enabled them to manage, control and handle their own body image.

The range of strategies employed by the older women participants focused on the aspect of taking care of their appearance and involved the importance of dressing up their body as well as specific body care such as, skin and hair care, weight management, and cleanliness. There was recognition that, as attractiveness cannot be taken for granted within the context of physical ageing, taking care of their appearance demanded making an effort. One participant stated,

I know when I put my face on and I dress up and I really, really try and I know I look good and people look at me... you see I think my attractiveness and my sexuality that people may think is because I've kept myself very slim and I dress very very carefully, indeed I do... I know I dress well. (OW5P2)

In contrast another participant stated,

I care that I look good and still do come to that but I take less trouble these days but I don't actually make great effort... I mean I look at myself in the mirror and I think oh god because I'm not the sort of person that has always made up and continued to make up. I'm very much for being comfortable and doing things the easy way. In fact I deliberately abandoned daily making up when I got to a certain age, I forget what age that was. I thought now's the time to be comfortable. (OW10P2)

For some participants taking care or making an effort with their appearance did signify a fight against the ageing process, which they felt all older women should take part in, so as not to "let the side down" (OW5P2). This attitude was further reinforced by a couple of participants, who stated that,

The body is ageing and I see it in other women and I feel very critical of other women of how they've let themselves go... they've put on weight and they don't appear to think about their appearance very much. (OW12P2)

Well it's pretty awful that one does degenerate but it's terribly important to try and keep the weight down and keep the hair nice, which I do, and wear decent clothes. I like buying clothes but then I think well who really notices, do anybody notice because you know the face is obviously ageing which you can't do anything about unless I was going to go for botox which I wouldn't, but I do think it's very important, particularly with a new husband, more than ever, to try and not let things slide. (OW7P2)

The participants also discussed at some length the importance of dressing up in relation to handling their body image and it was striking how powerful this strategy was in influencing the women's perception of themselves and in particular their own ageing. Some of the older women reported how their feelings about themselves changed in that they felt good, nice, glamorous, and visible, all of which combined to give a sense that dressing up had temporarily suspended their perceptions of their decline in relation to the ageing process. One participant touched on all these issues as she described going out locally shopping where she stated,

When I go down to [name of town] shopping... I develop into another human being... I feel dowdy. I walk to the bus stop and so I stand with other dowdy old women at the bus stop and I've suddenly joined them and I've become with them... I'm just one of them, not very dressed, not smart, flat shoes and I just become... I just lose sort of self-respect. If I dress up and dress smartly I become a different person, I am a different person altogether when I go out and dress up and leave the [local] environs. When I don't dress up and go into [name of town] I disappear. (OW5P2)

Dressing up however had started to introduce tensions into the women's lives in terms of handling their body image, in that the majority of the participants wanted clothing that was smart, attractive and comfortable and did not want to be dressed as a 'younger' woman in order to be perceived as making an effort to take care of their appearance. This issue in relation to clothing and dressing up will be returned to as the tensions and dilemmas faced by the older women are explored further.

When the participants discussed the different issues and strategies that they were involved with in relation to the changes they experienced in terms of their physical ageing there emerged two main dilemmas. First, wanting to have or achieve an attractive appearance without having to look 'young' or 'younger'. This posed the question that if ageing is perceived as unattractive how is attractiveness achieved without having to look younger? Second, wanting to embrace their own ageing and age in the way they wanted to as opposed to what was society's expectation of how they should age. The message coming from the older women was that they were experiencing difficulties in finding different ways to age and 'looking old' led to a sense of invisibility. Many of the participants felt that the only way forward was to look younger than their chronological age but this was not a strategy that the participants in this research study necessarily wanted to pursue. One participant who was in her 80's argued, from her own experience, that looking younger than your age was only acceptable for 'younger' older women and that 'older' older women can be regarded as inappropriately unusual. It appeared from her

experience that it was only acceptable to challenge the perception of old age up to a certain age. Recounting her experiences she stated,

I know I don't look 83 and I know people will be shocked and I know people will think 'oh she's a freak' and I don't want... I just want to look good in old age. (OW5P2)

Returning to the issue of clothing, women who dressed 'younger than their years' are particularly criticised and the participants were only too aware of this need to dress attractively and 'age-appropriately'. Interestingly a couple of the participants stated explicitly that they wanted to dress themselves as older women and that this demanded 'different' clothing not 'younger' clothing. One participant summed this up by stating,

I am 72 and I want to be 72. I want to dress and be my age but you can't convince people of this. They think I want to be told that I look younger than I am and I don't want that. I want to be my age. (OW2P2)

In contrast other participants wanted to be able to dress appropriately or inappropriately, in whatever they desired, demonstrating that they wanted to define how they should age. One participant described her thoughts by stating,

She [younger women ex work colleague] was with me the other day and she had a lovely knitted dress, short knitted dress and leggings, and I thought I'd really like that but I can imagine my daughter saying mother you can't wear that at your age and I've always said those words 'at my age' will never pass my lips and I've been thinking a lot about these leggings and this dress because you're sort of conditioned to thinking oh perhaps... my daughter once said mother promise me you will never wear either a denim jacket or a mini skirt and I think perhaps I would like a denim jacket and mini skirt but we're very conditioned to knowing that 'you're not supposed to wear one at your age'. (OW6P2)

The findings within this theme raised the question about whether the older women's strategies for handling their ageing body image was more about coping with the perceived decline of the ageing process as opposed to preserving their sexuality. This theme does however demonstrate the inter-relatedness of sexuality and body image and therefore it could be argued that as the ageing body is the antithesis of 'sexy' then the older women participants' handling of the ageing process also includes 'holding onto' their sexuality.

8.5 CONCLUSION

Employing a wide definition of sexuality within this research study, to include a person's, beliefs, behaviours, relationships and identities (Weeks 2003, Bremner and Hillin 1994) has enabled the participants to consider their relationship with their sexuality in a wider and more comprehensive way. Within this chapter the older women participants discussed their experiences of sexuality with regards to occupying new relationship positions, coping with endings and transitions, and dealing with ageist and sexist attitudes towards sexuality in later life. For many of the participants a new relationship status had been forced onto them by a death of a partner, an ending of a sexual relationship and/or a break up of a relationship. The older women discussed how they had coped with the challenges precipitated by these relationship changes and subsequently had taken a journey of self-development. Although having positively survived crisis in their sexual relationships and the consequential impact on their own identities, throughout their interviews the older women did not underplay the extent of feelings of loss and pain. Older women experienced the intersection of ageism and sexism with regards to their sexuality, a view that has been identified nearly half a century ago by Susan Sontag (1972). This intersection was explored within this chapter through the voices of the older women participants who identified the way they experienced ageism and sexism on a personal, cultural and structural level with regards to their lives. Throughout this chapter there was a sense that the older women participants were handling immense existentialist issues, which were displayed through their commitment to a self-defined continuity.

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion in this chapter is based on the findings that have been presented in Chapters 7 and 8, which focused on older women's experiences of their sexuality within the context of ageing and older age. Through the narrated experiences of the older women, the main emphasis of the research has been to identify changes in relation to sexuality, together with the participants' responses to, and impact of, these changes. The principles of the intersectional approach to age and gender based on the work of Krekula (2016, 2009, 2007), and the affirmative ageing model based on the work of Sandberg (2013a, 2013b, 2011), have been combined to guide the interpretation informing this discussion. The principles have been discussed and detailed in Sections 3.2.4 and 5.6.2.

The discussion starts with a consideration of the key points raised by the two overarching themes of the findings: 'expressing' and 'revisiting' sexuality. 'Expressing' sexuality focused on the specific issues of communicating and practising sexuality. In contrast, 'revisiting' sexuality covered the wider issues of sexuality including self, relationships, and societal attitudes. Although the older women's experiences were far-ranging and nuanced, they were at the same time connected by the commonality of the fluidity and heterogeneity of the participants' sexuality. Their stories illustrated both the complexities of the ageing experience, together with its developmental features.

Assessing the age/gender intersection in relation to older women's sexuality, the findings suggest that the influence of age on gender, and vice versa, is fluid and its variability is dependent on the context and how effectively individual agency can be exercised. The key themes of expressing and revisiting sexuality, together with the intersectional analysis, act as a basis for the final part of the discussion, which is focused on the main issues that are identified within the findings as significant aspects that influence and construct the story of older women's sexuality. These include the binary discourses of ageing and sexuality, and the characteristics of older women's sexuality. Based on the findings of this study, the interrelationship of the two areas are examined in terms of the extent to which each is constrained, challenged and influenced by the other.

9.2 EXPRESSING SEXUALITY

The analysis presented within the overarching theme of expressing sexuality, focused on the participants' views and experiences of communicating about, and practising, their sexuality.

9.2.1 Communicating sexuality

With regards to communication, issues explored included the extent to which experiences of sexuality in later life were talked about, and an identification of what encouraged/discouraged discussion. Many of the participants demonstrated their awareness of a general reluctance to discuss any changes they were experiencing with their sexuality, which in turn exacerbated their isolation and limited their understanding. Indeed, Fileborn et al (2015a) have highlighted the need for more open discussion to aid the development of knowledge within the area of ageing and sexuality, as well as giving older women more control and choice over their sexuality. However, this may be difficult to achieve given the impact of the ageist assumption that older people are asexual, which was found by extant research to contribute to the lack of dialogue between health care professionals and older people (Hinchliff and Gott 2011; Gott, Hinchliff and Galena 2003; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b). The comments from the older women participants within the current study conveyed their concern that the silence around their experiences would contribute to the stereotype of an asexual older age. Because of this they were prepared to discuss issues within an appropriate context, which, in this case, was that of research.

In spite of the well documented difficulties in recruiting older people to take part in sexuality research, studies have found that, once recruited, older people value the space to discuss sexual issues which they would not necessarily discuss with other people (Gledhill et al 2008; Gott 2005; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b; Jones, R.L. 2002, Gott 2001). In an investigation of older women's perspectives of Viagra, Loe (2004, p304) found that the participants talked openly about their sexual lives without any direct questions about sexuality, and that Viagra had provided the researcher with a "non-threatening entrée into women's sexual lives and stories". The willingness of older women/people to discuss issues relating to sexuality was also borne out in the current research, where some of the older women participants felt that their confidence to discuss sexual issues came from being of an older age. Research provided a framework of anonymity and confidentiality, which in turn reinforced a sense of seriousness, an important finding in Phase 1 of this study, and echoed in other studies. Treating sexuality in later life seriously has enabled frank discussions about sex with older women (Jones, R.L. 2002). When not treated

seriously, it can act as a barrier to conversation, even when individuals are eager to discuss sexual issues and concerns, as highlighted by a recent study which asked older people about encounters with health professionals (Tetley et al 2016).

9.2.2 Practising sexuality

Participants in the study did not necessarily connect the importance of treating sexuality in later life seriously with sexual problems. Findings focused on sexual activity and expression revealed certain issues, but it was in the wider context of the presence and influence of sexuality currently in the older women's lives. The heterosexual participants discussed penile vaginal penetration in terms of the difficulties experienced in carrying on with the sexual practice. As in the findings of Fileborn et al (2015a), the impact on their sexual relationships was varied, and depended on whether non-penetrative sexual activity was acceptable to themselves and their partners. For some participants non-penetrative sex was regarded as a substitute and not 'real' sex, although it was recognised as an important part of their relationship. Studies have found that older heterosexual adults placed a greater emphasis on sexual expressions such as cuddling, hugging and touching, once penile-vaginal penetration was no longer possible or desirable (Hinchliff and Gott 2004; Gott and Hinchliff 2003b). In a further study with older heterosexual women focusing on the importance of sexual activity, Hinchliff and Gott (2008) found that the majority of the participants considered non-penetrative sex as either more or equally as important as penile-vaginal penetration.

A diverse range of sexual expressions was discussed by participants in this study, from masturbation, to sexual fantasies, through to writing a sexual blog. These ways of expressing themselves sexually differed from the aforementioned discussion of non-penetrative sexual activity, in that they were perceived as an end in themselves as opposed to being positioned as a complement to, or substitution for, penile-vaginal penetration. The expressions represented different levels of engagement with self and others in terms of physical, emotional and cerebral contact. The 'restricted' opportunities for older women to express themselves sexually, for example, due to illness, bereavement, or being un-partnered (DeLamater 2012; DeLamater and Sill 2005), makes this finding an important contribution to the understanding of older women's sexuality. It can only be tentatively suggested from the findings that the prominence of non-penetrative sexual activity has grown within the lives of some of the participants as a force of biopsychosocial circumstances. Although studies have shown that older women and men are challenging heteronormative notions of sex by using a broad definition of sexuality (Fileborn et al 2015a, 2015b; Sandberg 2013a; Hurd Clark

2006), the findings within this small qualitative study tentatively suggest that the repertoire of sexual expression could be wider than is currently documented.

The analysis also illustrated how older women considered their sexuality in terms of its presence and influence in their current lives, by moving away from sexual activity and viewing sexuality in a more holistic way. A key finding was the way that sexuality remained an evolving aspect of their lives, regardless of the participants' relationship status. The part that sexuality played within and between the lives of the participants was fluid and heterogeneous, which reflected the on-going life changes that the older women experienced. This challenge to a fixed sexual identity or, in the context of ageing, a steady decline towards a 'final' ending of sexual activity, expression and desire, has also been supported by the findings of other studies (Fileborn 2015a, 2015b; Hinchliff and Gott 2008). Although just over two-thirds of the participants in the current study were un-partnered, a significant minority of those had experienced a resurgence of their sexual desires and feelings during recent short-term sexual relationships. Other studies with older women focusing on dating and re-marriage have also reported findings where participants have experienced a 're-discovery' of their sexuality (see also Yun et al 2014; Watson and Stelle 2011; Watson et al 2010), demonstrating further support for regarding sexuality as a fluid aspect of a person's sense of self.

Building on this shifting nature of sexuality another key finding that the analysis conveyed was that for the majority of the older women, whilst sexuality had become a lesser aspect of their lives, they had become 'more than' a sexual being. This implied some movement towards transcending gender expectations, and is a significant finding in relation to age, gender and sexuality that is discussed further in Section 9.4. However, it is worth reiterating that for the majority of the older women their sexuality still (fluidly) existed, but was no longer taking up their sense of self completely. The analysis also illustrated how many of the women had refocused their (sexual) energies into other things, which had helped to build their confidence and self-esteem.

Other non-Western studies have similarly documented older women coping with the changes within their sexuality through redirecting their energies into family, spiritual and religious activities (Ravanipour et al 2013; Ford and Chamrathirong 2012; Shea 2011). It is interesting that these studies with Iranian, Thai and Chinese older women respectively, have tended to include findings and comments about sexuality as a whole whilst also focusing on sexual activities, desires, expressions and relationships. Many older Chinese women challenged the presumption, effectively underpinning Western sexology, that a sexual (marital) relationship was a priority for a good quality of life in older age (Shea 2011).

Support for this priority was identified in a UK study where older women viewed sexual activity as important and a “normal’ and expected part of [later] life” (Hinchcliff and Gott 2008, p78). As previously discussed in Section 3.3.1, the Western cultural context not only links health and success to an active ‘sex’ life, but the significance and ‘specialness’ of sexuality has become elevated culturally so that it is now assumed to be a central point in both public and private spheres of people’s lives (Scott and Jackson 2013; Richardson 2000). It could therefore be argued that it is difficult for older women, such as the participants in the current study, to maintain that their sexuality has a lesser role in terms of their current lifestyle.

The findings within this overarching theme of expressing sexuality found the participants focusing on the changes to their sexuality that they had experienced, and were continuing to experience within the context of ageing. Accounts of sexuality were nuanced, some challenging homogenous stereotypes, in their diversity and fluidity. These changes opened up opportunities to redefine sexual expression and to move away from the constraints of the ‘usual’. For many, it had been a difficult process involving losses, resignations and readjustments. Running through their accounts however was a sense of re-evaluating their relationship with their sexuality, recognising that it was still part of them, to a greater or lesser extent.

9.3 REVISITING SEXUALITY

Within the overarching theme of revisiting sexuality, the findings showcased three key areas that were of importance to the older women participants. First, experiencing aloneness and transitions within friendships as a result of sexual relationship changes. Second, endings, changes and moving on in relation to sexuality and the impact these issues had on the older women’s sexual feelings, desires and relationships. Third, living with different levels of ageist and sexist attitudes towards ageing and sexuality. As can be seen the key areas focused on issues that were related to experiences of women’s sexuality in a wider sense and many encompassed a sense of continuation and development. This notion of a developmental model in terms of sexuality in later life has been captured in a unique study by Menard et al (2015) on the factors that contribute to the ‘best sex’, which is detailed more fully in Section 4.2.5.2.

9.3.1 Embracing new positions

From the findings, older women’s experiences of aloneness and friendship in relation to changes in terms of their sexuality can be perceived within a positive

and developmental context. By doing so it is also important to recognise the feelings of loss and vulnerability (Sandberg 2013b) which may have been a response to some of the changes, particularly in relation to older women being on their own due to a crisis such as death of a partner, an ending of a sexual relationship and/or a break up of a relationship. The findings identified varying levels and degrees of being on their own, with some participants having negotiated periods of aloneness within their long-term relationships in order to promote self-worth, and develop independence together with their own sense of self. In a study with recently partnered older women, Watson et al (2010) found that the issue of negotiating independence within the sexual relationship itself was a prominent theme, pivotal to the success of the relationship. The un-partnered women in the current study found that being on their own had increased their confidence, self-esteem, and control over their own lives together with a sense of freedom. These findings are supported by studies with widows (Carr 2004; Davidson 2002, 2001; Chambers 2000), which have additionally shown that “after an initial period of bereavement their lives had continued to develop and they had individually continued to grow” (Chambers 2000, p146). Extant research (Carr 2004; Davidson 2002, 2001; Chambers 2000; Talbott 1998) also concurs with the pattern in the current study for many of the older women to want to protect their newly found independence and to refuse to consider future sexual relationships, if their autonomy was not guaranteed. Participants were aware of the fragility of their self-development given the potential for issues beyond their control such as illness or disability to threaten it.

The findings in relation to friendship were quite thin and are therefore difficult to interpret in any great depth. They did however point to a transition or change in gender relationships particularly for some of the heterosexual participants who viewed their relationships with older men to be more companionable than sexual. The importance of friendships was identified, particularly with other older women, a pattern reflected in a study with Japanese women exploring issues of ageing and sexuality (Moore 2010a). The latter revealed married older women to have developed a preference for social gatherings with other women which afforded them with a “greater fulfilment” than was provided within their existing long-term heterosexual relationships (Moore 2010a, p159).

9.3.2 Ebb and flow of sexuality

Participants’ experiences of endings/changes in relation to their sexual feelings, desires and relationships were interconnected with their stories of how they saw themselves moving on in relation to their sexuality. The link between the processes was solidified in a way that the endings for the older women signified the beginning

of changes in terms of how they perceived their sexuality. The context, influential factors and consequences of the endings/changes varied across individual accounts but were linked by the common threads of fluidity and heterogeneity of their sexual experiences. The older women's responses to endings/changes in relation to their sexuality included a mixture of sadness, loss, relief and feeling positive. This is a significant finding in that it shows how differently held or contradictory views co-exist which is important in terms of how research on ageing is dominated by binary models of explanation that tend to airbrush nuanced experiences (Sandberg 2013b; Krekula 2007). Although the participants' indications about whether the endings of their sexual feelings, desires and relationships had a finality about them varied significantly, all the older women gave a sense of moving on with their sexuality in differing relational contexts. There was a tension for some of the un-partnered participants, whom on the one hand stated that they would consider future sexual relationships, but on the other hand did not want to if it meant that they would have to occupy a traditional female partner role. Although research that reflects this position has been discussed in the preceding paragraph, it is also worth re-emphasising the point noted in Section 4.2.5.2, that 'living-apart-together' relationships, where intimacy, companionship, autonomy and freedom are achieved, have been found to be particularly popular with older women (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003; Ghazanfareon Karlsson and Borell 2002). An unexpected finding was that for a couple of the participants, close contact with ex-partners/husbands was an important emotional, and on some occasions, intimate connection. A commonality running through the findings in relation to older women's accounts of, and responses to, endings/changes in relation to their sexuality was the sense of continuity. Drawing from a range of circumstances older women illustrated through their discussions the evolving nature of their sexual feelings, desires and relationships and the way that their sexuality ebbed and flowed.

9.3.3 Living with ageism and sexism

An important issue that emerged from their accounts was the older women's perceptions of how ageism and sexism impacted on their experiences of sexuality. Participants felt their influence on all levels of society with (mis)representation, management and control emerging as key issues. They maintained that the media representation of older women added to the pressure to age 'youthfully', and that this depiction encouraged a silence around the pertinent issues of ageing and sexuality. Some support in expressing sexuality was received on a cultural level and, in particular, through social networks, yet participants also experienced many implicit constraints, which controlled and defined what was 'acceptable' sexual behaviour for older women. In a study carried out by Montemurro and Gillen (2013)

with women in their 50s and 60s, the findings highlighted the influence of the media and significant others, together with physical appearance, on the participants' sexuality and feelings of sexual desirability.

Issues of management and control were particularly prevalent within the findings relating to body image. For the majority of the participants their body image was seen as an important aspect of their sexuality, and linked particularly with the notion of attractiveness. Montemurro and Gillen (2013) and Calasanti and Slevin (2001) have also noted a significant interrelationship between the body, ageing, sense of self and sexual desirability that is experienced across lifespan. The participants in the current study viewed the age-related changes to their bodies in negative terms, a finding that is reflected elsewhere in the research literature (see also Thorpe et al 2015; Vares 2009) and identified their strategies of taking care of, and controlling, their appearance in order to influence their attractiveness. The main strategy involved the use of clothes, which as Twigg (2009) argues, provides a vehicle through which the body is publicly presented to the social world. It can therefore be a way for older women to take back control and feel that their bodies are less influenced by ageist/sexist stereotypes (Twigg 2009, 2007). However, 'dressing up' gave rise to a major dilemma of how to appear attractive without necessarily trying to look younger. The older women were acutely aware that if they did 'look their age' they were frequently ignored or rendered invisible, and that visibility came at a cost that involved ageing in a socially appropriate way, that is, youthfully. The participants conveyed their dissatisfaction with having to misrepresent older women by 'hiding their age' but also recognised the difficulty of finding a way to present themselves sexually through ageing differently.

The findings within this overarching theme of revisiting sexuality focused on the broader issues that older women experienced in relation to their sexuality within the context of ageing. Employing a wide definition of sexuality within this research study opened up the opportunity for the participants to discuss a range of issues focusing on changes including occupying new relationship positions, coping with endings and transitions, and dealing with ageist and sexist attitudes towards sexuality in later life. The women's stories of progress and self-development ran side by side with their feelings of loss and pain and illustrated a commitment to a self-defined continuity. The participants' experiences of ageism and sexism tended to be the most challenging for any 'developmental spin' or interpretation, possibly reflecting the enormity of the task. These latter issues are returned to in the following section.

9.4 AGE/GENDER INTERSECTION: CONTRIBUTION OF FINDINGS

What can the aforementioned experiences and changes together with their impact on participants' sexuality, tell us about the age/gender intersection? Understandings of the intersection of age/ageism and gender/sexism have typically been framed by the notion of double jeopardy yet the accounts of women in the study also provided evidence of ways in which the interplay between age and gender had resulted in positive outcomes for older women (Krekula 2007). How and in what situations were the older women able to exercise agency in terms of their sexuality? In this discussion the intersection of age and gender is considered as mutually constructed (see further discussion in Section 3.2.2) with the participants 'doing' age and gender simultaneously (McMullin 1995) in relation to their sexuality. Within this perspective it is also important to note that the balance, type and form of influence between age and gender is changeable (Krekula 2007).

9.4.1 Ageism/sexism context

The older women's accounts of living with ageism and sexism, framed their general experiences vis-a-vis sexuality firmly in terms of double jeopardy. The participants expressed strong feelings towards what they perceived as invisibility and misrepresentation of older women's sexuality at both a structural and cultural level. They felt that their experiences of sexual practices, expressions, desires and relationships in older age did not fit into the 'sexy oldie' stereotype, and were not subsequently represented elsewhere. The invisibility of older women's sexuality not only supported the asexual stereotype but also exacerbated the privatisation of sexual issues and stifled any communication about the changing nature of sexuality in later life. The participants felt that the portrayal of older women's sexuality was controlled by the 'either/or' of the binary, that is asexual/'sexy oldie', as opposed to being informed by the sharing of nuanced and lived experiences. Further discussions of these issues are in Section 9.5. The impact of the negative effects of the age/gender intersection was acutely felt on a personal level in relation to the participants' body image. The issue of ageing was most prominent for the older women when discussing their sexual body image and the majority of the participants viewed the ageing body as one in physical decline. The structural and cultural messages, which championed an intrinsic connection between youth, beauty and sexuality made it impossible for older women to find any positivity around their sexual body image unless different interpretations and reference points were used (Krekula 2016).

The use of strategies to hide signs of ageing presented the participants with the dilemma of having to appear 'younger' in order to become more visible, which in turn lent its support to a new form of ageism. "Post-ageist ageism" is linked to the successful ageing paradigm in that anti-ageist attitudes are embraced, whilst older age is perceived as something to be resisted (Calasanti 2016; Marshall and Katz 2012, p230). As identified in the discussion in Section 8.4.2, the older women struggled to find a way to 'outwardly' age that was empowering, personal and different. There were however examples in the findings where individual participants demonstrated an alternative strategy. One participant claimed that she perceived her sexuality and body image separately and in doing so kept her sexuality untouched by the changes to her physical body. Another defined her appeal in a non-sexual way, emphasising instead her power to give pleasure to others through her fun-loving personality. These strategies are examples of older women creating different frames of reference to cope with the impact of their physical ageing on their 'attractiveness', frames which are more age-appropriate, whilst also being aware of the youthful beauty norms (Krekula 2016). Participants also used clothing as a strategy to manage the physical changes to their bodies due to ageing. Notwithstanding the 'youthful' dilemmas referred to earlier, the findings illustrated that the older women were aware of what they could achieve through 'dressing up' and therefore this strategy gave them a sense of choice and control. It allowed them to talk about their bodies in positive as well as negative ways, that is, simultaneously holding contrasting views (Krekula 2007), though this way of exercising agency in order to cope with the negative effects of the age/gender intersection was recognised as possibly being limited to 'younger' older women in terms of managing one's ageing 'appearance'.

9.4.2 Sexual practices and expressions

As in the findings of other research studies (see also Fileborn et al 2015a; Hinchcliff and Gott 2008) the participants' experiences of sexual practices and expressions were dominated by heteronormative views of sexuality, in particular the synonymy of penile-vaginal penetration with 'having' sex and 'real' sex (Diorio 2016; Holland et al 1998). This social construction of 'normal' sexual practice acted as an oppressive context for many of the heterosexual participants in their current and past struggles to continue to engage in the practice. Some of the older women felt under pressure to carry on with the sexual practice, as not doing so resulted in difficulty for them in perceiving themselves as sexual or having a 'sexuality' due to the dominance of a narrow and essentialist definition of 'sex'. This stranglehold on the form of female sexuality was reflected in the perception held by many of the participants that a biomedical intervention such as Viagra or hormone replacement

therapy was the foremost strategy to ensure continuing sexual activity and expression in later life. This strategy is not only based on the deficit model of ageing but also supports the asexual/'sexy oldie' binary discourses of ageing and sexuality. Therefore declining to take up this strategy positions older women within the category of 'failing' to make good their 'deficits' and renders them to an asexual status. In effect the consequences for some older women is that they are no longer in a position to define their (hetero)sexuality through their male partner and experience a further impact on their sexuality in terms of invisibility. Within this situation the power relations within and between age and gender intersect in an oppressive way that serves to "strengthen... each other" (Krekula 2007, p167).

The focus of the above discussion on a double jeopardy approach to ageism and sexism using the study's findings on sexual practices does not tell the whole story and taken on its own is an oversimplification of the experiences of older women. Further analysis of the findings at a micro level of experiences, actions and strategies revealed situations where individuals had coped positively and where the intersection of age and gender had resulted in assets (Krekula 2007). Although some older women felt constrained by the heterosexist view of women's sexuality, they also recognised how male sexuality, and specifically masculinity, was narrowly defined on penile functioning and remained "anchored in the erect penis across the lifecourse" (Marshall and Katz 2002, p63). The partnered heterosexual participants felt better placed in terms of coping with the loss of penetrative sex as a sexual practice than their male partners due to the perception that female sexuality was broader and could be conceived of being outside of the 'penetrative box'. This was illustrated by participants who claimed that their sexual feelings and desires were not affected if penile-vaginal penetrative sexual activity proved impossible to achieve. They reported simultaneously held feelings of loss on the one hand for a sexual practice that they had enjoyed, and gain on the other in terms of an opportunity to broaden, redefine 'sex' and express their sexuality in other ways. For some participants, therefore, there was a counter strategy to the biomedical intervention for addressing difficulties in penile-vaginal penetration, which involved engaging in non-penetrative sexual activity. This was the most empowering strategy for older women in that it supported their sexual agency, challenged heteronormative definitions of sex, and was an accessible and inclusive way of continuing to express sexuality in later life. It could be argued that becoming older had given them an opportunity to 'break out' of traditionally gender defined practices and roles vis-a-vis their sexuality. These findings are in line with a growing body of research illustrating how older women have started to challenge the sexual hierarchy of expression by encouraging broader and more inclusive understandings of sexual activities and expression (Fileborn et al 2015a, Menard et al 2015, Watson and Stelle 2011, Hurd Clarke 2006, Hinchcliff and Gott 2004).

Yet the participants in the current study however demonstrated variable sexual agency within their relationships. For some of the older women even when penile-vaginal penetration became impossible, negotiating other ways of being sexual did not result in a satisfactory outcome and the sexual relationship ended. Similar findings have been reported by Fileborn et al (2015a). What this study was able to show was that exercising sexual agency to negotiate any change in terms of sexual practice was dependent on the history of the sexual relationship and also specifically attitudes towards non-penetrative sexual practices. For some of the participants, alternative practices were regarded as second best or positioned as 'foreplay' as opposed to an end in themselves. In other words, the heteronormative hierarchy of sexual expression may be so dominant that difficulties with achieving penile-vaginal penetration inevitably result in the relationship becoming non-sexual. In this situation the structural context constrained any attempt to exercise sexual agency resulting in the negative effects of the age/gender intersection being strengthened (Krekula 2007).

Moving away from the context of penile-vaginal penetration the findings showed that many of the older women continued to express their sexuality in very diverse ways. This was an inspiring finding as over two-thirds of the participants were unpartnered at the time of the study suggesting that the invisibility older, and in particular 'single', women experienced (Fileborn 2015b) was being used advantageously by creating and defining sexuality for themselves. If, according to Foucault (1991[1977]), strategies used for the social control and regulation of women's sexuality are focused on the processes of reproduction, it could plausibly be argued that older women are left unregulated/invisible and free to do what they want sexually. As well as countering the heteronormative expectations in relation to female sexuality discussed earlier, the participants' accounts of the different ways they expressed their sexuality went further by asserting also a continuing sexuality for older women in a non-relational context. The paradox here is that many of the non-partnered and non-penetrative sexual activities and expressions cannot be 'accounted' for using the 'sexy oldie' model of sexuality in later life. This is a good example of how on a structural level the older women in this study would be seen as asexual, whilst on a personal level they are defining their own sexuality.

9.4.3 Changing relationships and gender expectations

In considering the broader issues in relation to sexuality the findings illustrated that life-course events, such as death, divorce, and separation had had overall a positive influence on many of the participants' lives in relation to their sexual identity. Women have had to struggle to get their sexuality recognised in its own right particularly if they are not involved in a heterosexual partnership. This has

been highlighted in the past through the invisibility of lesbians and it has not been unusual in everyday conversations for questions to be asked of lesbian relationships such as what they 'do' in bed and who the 'man' is within their relationship (Yep 2002). Bearing this structural context in mind it could have been assumed that experiencing aloneness for the older women participants would have been an unwanted or negative event in relation to their sexual identity resulting in a situation of double jeopardy in terms of the effects of ageism and sexism. When applying an affirmative approach of older age (Sandberg 2013b) to this situation the findings yielded an unforeseen narrative in that for the majority of the research participants, being on their own had been a "process of development and gaining experiences" (Krekula 2007, p166). Within the context of losing partnered sex, intimacy and companionship, the older women achieved determination, confidence and awareness through planning, organisation, and effort. This is a good example of a situation where the age and gender intersection has resulted in assets where there has been "a mutual neutralization" of the discriminatory effects of each structural system (Krekula 2007, p167) through the exercise of agency. The impact on the older women's sexual identity of learning to experience aloneness positively was a general reluctance to consider future sexual relationships, which were regarded as a threat to the benefits of self-development. The ambivalence expressed towards starting new sexual relationships came mainly from the reluctance to take up (again) the traditional 'wife' role. Gaining a more visible sexual identity came at a price that many of the older women were unwilling to pay. With older age came the confidence for the participants to perform gender differently to how they would have when they were younger. In other words age at the intersection with gender was weakening the constraint that femininity should be performed in a certain way (Krekula 2007). Further examples from the findings of age weakening gender discussed in Section 9.3 included, re-evaluating friendships based on changing gender relations, and negotiating a degree of separateness within long-term relationships to build self-esteem and distinct identity. The older women's recounted experiences gave a sense that the narrative of their lives was moving in a progressive direction. There was a sense from some of the participants that doing things for themselves had encouraged an emergence of aspects of their identity that may have either been lost, or discouraged in the past.

9.5 STRUCTURE/AGENCY: BINARY DISCOURSES/CHARACTERISTICS OF OLDER WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

Building on the aforementioned analysis in the previous sections, particularly with regards to the age/gender intersection, the discussion continues to situate the key themes of the participants' stories within the wider aspects of the structural and

cultural levels of society. The inter-relationship between structure and agency is explored further in an effort to ascertain the extent of constraint, challenge and influence each exerted on the other.

9.5.1 Structure: binary discourses

The structural and cultural context that impacts on older women's sexuality in Western society is made up of two intersecting binary discourses, which have been referred to throughout this thesis. To recap, the first binary is located within the successful ageing paradigm (Rowe and Kahn 1998), and the second, specifically constructed for older people's sexuality, is based on the concepts of asexuality/sexually active (Sandberg 2011; Gott 2005; Jones, R.L. 2002). It is useful at this stage to succinctly restate the main features of both binaries in terms of their connection with each other, and impact on older women. Of the two, the successful ageing paradigm is the most dominant as it has subsumed the asexual/sexually active binary as evidence of positive and successful ageing. The combination of anti-ageing culture, sexually enhancing medication and the "Third Age leisure lifestyle" (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011, p1) has seen sexual functioning and performance become a vital indicator of ageing well (Marshall 2011; Gott 2005; Katz and Marshall 2003; Katz 2001). Sexual 'decline' and related perceptions of asexuality are markers of unsuccessful ageing (Katz and Marshall 2003). This connection highlights the basis of both binaries as ageist because successful ageing is premised on the aim of 'avoiding being/becoming old' (Calasanti and King 2005; Calasanti 2003), and old age continues to be regarded as incompatible with sexuality (Sandberg 2011; Gott 2005). As discussed previously in Section 9.4.1, this creates, rather than challenges, a new type of ageism (Calasanti 2016; Marshall and Katz 2012). Both sets of discourses are gendered impacting differently, and with increased negativity, on older women in comparison with older men. Successful ageing for older women is based on maintaining a youthful 'attractive' appearance and controlling bodily 'decline'. For women in Western society youth and beauty are intrinsically linked with sexuality (Menard and Cabrera 2011), therefore older women are more likely to be perceived as asexual. This sexual 'status' is compounded by the 'sexy oldie' discourse and its basis of the (youthful) heteronormative standards of sexuality (Loe 2004), which ignore older women's sexual desires and needs (Sandberg 2011). In summary the structural and cultural context in relation to older women's sexuality constructs a pervasive sense of invisibility.

9.5.2 Agency: characteristics of older women's sexuality

The participants' stories within this study demonstrated that the aforementioned discourses in relation to ageing and sexuality presented the socially and culturally constructed and sanctioned ways that older women could be sexual. The 'either/or' discourses of asexual/'sexy oldie' did not however reflect the range of ways that older women were sexual but at times influenced and limited the ways that the participants identified themselves sexually and/or perceived their sexuality. Three main characteristics emerged from the themes which encapsulated older women's experiences of sexuality, that of, fluidity, heterogeneity and diversity. These characteristics challenged the essentialist and fixed nature of sexuality represented by the 'sexy oldie' and symbolised a story of continuity in response to the overall invisibility propagated by the sexuality binary. The feature of continuity will be returned to later in this discussion. All the participants identified changes in respect of their sexuality recognising them as common life-course experiences, but maintained that the essence of the transitions were heterogenic. This highlighted the oppressive nature of the dominant discourses which imposed the notion of homogenous changes and in turn had the power to silence any narrative about nuanced experiences of sexuality within the context of ageing, a point that has been raised in other studies (see also Fileborn et al 2015a, 2015b). The dynamic between constraint and challenge runs through the participants' accounts of their experiences and is now given further consideration.

9.5.3 Invisibility and regulation of older women's sexuality

The participants demonstrated awareness of the dominant discourse of asexuality and, as referred to in Section 9.2.1, expressed concern that the lack of general dialogue amongst older women about sexuality exacerbated their invisibility. The older women's marginalisation was mostly keenly felt in terms of how they were represented by 'sexy' 'younger'/midlife women in the general media, lending support to the 'sexy oldie' countervailing discourse. The process of positioning older women into non-essential or 'other' beings by mid-life women is an important point that is seeing continuing debate (see also Hinchliff and Gott 2016; Sandberg 2013b; Krekula 2007), and has been discussed throughout this thesis in relation to sexuality. This accentuated the participants' sense of invisibility and apprehension about being 'perceived' as asexual. The older women felt that they were more likely to be located in the asexual position because many did not have a male partner, or they identified as lesbian, or they were not engaging in penile-vaginal penetration, all contra-indications for taking up the 'sexy' oldie position. Some studies have shown how older women have used the asexual/sexual binary to their advantage to challenge the construction of ageing and to talk openly about

sexuality (see also Hinchcliff and Gott 2008; Jones, R.L. 2002). In this study some of the older women felt anger and frustration at the misrepresentation, while others tackled the silence through blogging, putting on workshops and getting involved in research. The participant who created the blog did so as a direct challenge to the lack of realistic public depiction of older women's sexuality. Breaking any silence is an important part of challenging or undermining discourse as,

“Silence itself – the things one declines to say or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse... than an element that functions alongside the things said...[silences] are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault 1990, p61-62).

As discussed in Section 9.4.2, women's sexuality, particularly in relation to reproduction and procreative behaviour, has been heavily regulated and scrutinised as well as being constructed as central to women's identity (Foucault 1991 [1977]). Implications of this perspective for 'post-reproductive' older women are arguable, but what is undeniable is that the binary of asexual/sexual is clearly a method of discursive regulation. The aim of any form of regulation of sexuality is to contain the normalising structure of sexuality, particularly as sexuality is an important focus of power and resistance (Heaphy 2007; Foucault 1991 [1977]). As highlighted throughout this thesis, it is the specific heterosexual act of penile-vaginal penetration that is sanctioned as the sexual practice that 'allows' an older person to be defined as a 'sexy oldie' (Gott 2005; Loe 2004). This discourse supports heterosexuality as the norm, whilst excluding other sexual practices and older 'non-heterosexual' people (Cronin 2004). It also supports gender divisions and influences gender expectations, roles and identities (Dunk West and Brook 2015; Scott and Jackson 2013; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Richardson 2000).

Using the essentialist definition that the binary is based on, the majority of the participants within this study would be deemed asexual. The prerequisite for enabling the participants to share their stories of nuanced experiences was the use of a broad definition of sexuality. The theme, expressing sexuality diversely, was a rich contribution of a range of different sexual expressions, which was particularly poignant as over two-thirds of the sample at the time of data collection did not have a sexual partner, and half of those who had a (hetero)sexual partner were not engaged in physical sexual activity. However there were a couple of heterosexual participants who struggled to view themselves sexually and felt that their sexuality had ended. This was directly linked to either having no male sexual partner or not engaging in penile-vaginal penetration. As acknowledged previously within this chapter, and chapters 7 and 8, some participants found it too difficult to challenge

the heteronormative aspect of the binary and the narrow essentialist definition of sexuality. The regulation of older women's sexuality can be regarded as playing a small part in shoring up the boundaries of 'normal' sexuality for wider society. Other perspectives link the social control to wider issues such as the devaluation of women who are no longer capable of reproducing or attracting the 'male gaze' and have,

“become a reminder of death to come... the fears of ageing and death have to be controlled especially in a society... which is obsessed with youth images, narcissistic gratification and the prolongation of life at all costs” (Silver 2003, p386).

The regulation of older women's sexuality can therefore be arguably linked to the third age/successful ageing paradigm, in that older women who no longer look youthful need to be defined as asexual so that the “ideals of sexual *productivity*... [i.e. anti-ageing industry]... that shape the larger relations of compulsory heterosexuality” (Calasanti 2009, p481) can be maintained.

9.5.4 Doing gender roles differently

Having considered how the participants experienced and dealt with two oppressive processes of the structural and cultural context, invisibility and regulation of sexuality, the discussion now turns to how the participants resisted or challenged particular aspects of their gender role. The fluidity, diversity and heterogeneity of their experiences of sexuality enabled the participants to challenge not only the essentialist nature of sexuality but also of gender. There were four examples, where a significant number of participants were 'doing gender' differently and as these have been detailed previously in this chapter, and chapters 7 and 8, they are only briefly summarised here. These included: first, that sexuality had shifted away from a central position in relation to their gendered identity; second, through embracing new social and personal positions, namely aloneness, many of the participants had undergone a significant process of self development; third, certain aspects of their self-development, specifically self-confidence, self esteem and control, were valued to the extent that any future sexual relationships would only be entered into if these aspects could be protected; and fourth, some participants had embraced non-penetrative sexual activity and redefined 'sex' for themselves and their male partners. The interrelationship between gender and sexuality is complex, and it is difficult to surmise from the findings as to the weight of influence of each, although the position taken within this thesis has been that gender constitutes sexuality (see Section 3.3.4.3). The claim that there is a fragility about the construction of gender and heterosexuality, that requires both to be

continuously performed (Butler 2006 [1990]), allows the possibility for older women to exercise resistance and do gender differently. As gender performances are sexualised ones (Butler 2006 [1990]), it could be argued that the changes the participants had experienced in relation to their sexuality acted as a catalyst to undertake gender differently. Isopahkala-Bouret (2016, p10) has argued that, “ageing can unbalance the tight framing that defines gender relations in accordance with heterosexual desire” enabling gender to be performed differently.

9.5.5 Sexuality, continuity and self

As noted earlier the sense of continuity of sexuality permeated the participants’ stories. It is therefore worth discussing further how the older women perceived their sexuality given the aforementioned oppressive context. The importance of the prerequisite of moving away from the essentialist definition of sexuality and employing a broader and more inclusive definition (see Section 3.3.2), cannot be overstated. It empowered most of the participants to challenge the ‘either/or’ principle of the asexual/sexual binary, by their ability to identify ‘other’ ways that their sexuality continued. For many of the older women their sexual expressions were un-partnered, unrecognised and unseen. The process of ‘uncovering’ or finding their sexuality relied on regarding sexuality in the broadest sense. The different and nuanced sexual expressions identified within this study supports a redefinition, as opposed to a disappearance, of older women’s sexuality. Could the older women’s experiences of their sexuality within this study be regarded as a form of resistance against the structural and cultural context? In a study with older women about their resistance to being defined as ‘frail’, Grenier and Hanley (2007) found that the participants were living with a tension of being perceived as fragile and powerless on a social level whilst having opposite feelings in terms of their own sense of identity. The study identified three different types of resistance.⁵¹ In relation to this study, the participants’ accounts could be viewed as examples of individual resistance to the label of asexual, the acceptance of which may have meant abandoning their sense of self. The importance of this type of resistance is self-evident, but its ability to disrupt the asexual/sexual binary is limited. Although dispersed power gives individuals the possibility for resistance (Foucault 1990 [1977]), some types of structural and cultural discourses are so dominant they can only be challenged as opposed to overturned (Tulle-Winton 1991).

⁵¹ Grenier (2007) identified three types of resistance: individual, collective and subversive, with the latter involving taking on the label in order to gain something such as a service.

Considering older women's sexuality holistically the changes the participants experienced in regards to their sexual practices and expressions had influenced a shift, in that sexuality no longer held a central role in their self-perception. What is difficult to ascertain from the findings is whether sexuality had become a smaller component in terms of these women's lives or whether other aspects of their selves had become more important. Suggesting the latter, Silver (2003, p387) states that in relation to older age "sexuality is now part of a larger configuration of the self". It is clear however from the older women's accounts that they had developed a stronger sense of self through their abilities to redirect their energies, as a response to the losses they had experienced in relation to their sexuality. Sexuality becoming less important to the lives of older women to an extent parallels the asexual discourse that is propagated on a structural level. Yet the participants' accounts within the findings of this study show that an oppressive discourse on a structural level has been turned into an opportunity for growth on an individual level (Krekula 2007). It is clear from the findings that the majority of the participants regarded themselves as having a sexual identity, asserting that 'sexuality is still part of me', but had many reservations about expressing themselves sexually in a relational way. This challenges the traditional notion that female sexuality cannot exist in its own right, without the 'essential' ingredients of a male partner and subsequent engagement in heterosexual penetrative sexual intercourse. In doing so it also highlights the importance of identifying and validating a diverse range of sexual expressions thereby enabling the older women participants to assert the existence of their sexuality. The position held by the participants of their sexuality being present but less influential in their lives raises a direct challenge to the either/or binary of asexual/'sexy oldie' that dominates perceptions of sexuality in later life. The older women participants had to reconcile this structurally imposed discourse in order to feel comfortable with their lives. New ways of sexual expression had been explored within the context of change, which for many had resulted in sexuality no longer playing, for the moment, a key part in their identity.

9.6 CONCLUSION

The discussion within this chapter focused on an analysis of the themes that had been presented in the previous two chapters based on the participants' stories of their sexuality. Three aspects of their accounts were concentrated on including: first, the key points of the overarching themes, 'expressing' and 'revisiting' sexuality were identified and discussed within the context of extant research studies within the area of ageing and sexuality; second, the participants' experiences in relation to their sexuality were analysed within an intersectional/affirmative ageing

framework in order to explore the age/ageism and gender/sexism intersection; and third, using the main points of the participants' stories the constraints and challenges of the structure/agency inter-relationship were determined. Drawing from the discussion the following summary statements can be made about older women's sexuality in terms of experiences, changes and the impact those changes have on individuals' sense of self:

- Although the experiences of the participants were varied and nuanced the three common characteristics of older women's sexuality can be identified from the data as fluidity, heterogeneity and diversity.
- The study demonstrated that some of the older women were 'doing' gender and sexuality differently. It cannot be concluded from the findings that older age influenced the differences. However it can be stated that the research focus was on the changes the older women experienced within the context of their own ageing.
- With regards to the inter-relationship between the context (structural and cultural) and individual older women's experiences constraints towards, and challenges from, each could be identified for both. As is to be expected the dominance of structure outweighed the challenges received by older women's experiences. However this discussion also demonstrated that "even though the interplay between power relations shows a double jeopardy on a structural level, when it comes to the micro level, individuals are actors, who interpret and define their reality" (Krekula 2007, p167).

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

10.1 INTRODUCTION

I have based this thesis on an exploration of older women's experiences of sexuality within the context of their own ageing. In this broad aim my research has focused on participants' experiences of changes in relation to sexuality, and the questions posed included: what were/are the changes; how have the changes been dealt with; and what impact have these changes had on older women's sense of self. Integral to this qualitative research study was my adoption of a participative approach and my commitment to inductive research, which ensured that the findings were data led. Thematic analysis (Clarke et al 2015; Braun and Clarke 2013, 2006; Clarke and Braun 2013) was used to identify themes from the older women's stories, culminating in two overarching themes of 'expressing' and 'revisiting' sexuality, detailed in Chapters 7 and 8. In Chapter 9 these themes were used as a basis to explore the intersections of age/ageism and gender/sexism, and structure (unsuccessful/asexual-successful/'sexy oldie' binaries) and agency (characteristics of older women's sexuality).

10.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Within the overarching themes of 'expressing' and 'revisiting' sexuality, the participants discussed a range of changes in relation to different aspects of their sexuality including practices, relationships, ageist/sexist attitudes and sense of self. The changes that the older women had experienced were predominantly due to life events including, death of a partner, relational issues such as separation/divorce, and the challenges of continuing within long-term sexual relationships. These situations were influenced by the socio-cultural context in which ageing, gender and sexuality is located, creating difficulties for older women to confidently re-evaluate the significance of their sexuality within their lives. For example, some of the heterosexual participants identified difficulties in continuing with the sexual practice of penile-vaginal penetration due to physiological changes. The response to, and impact of, this change in the women's lives varied significantly, from a cessation of sexual relations/ending of sexuality, to creating and taking up the opportunity to express and redefine sexuality differently. Although the response/impact was heterogeneous, the example demonstrated a commonality of living within the constraints of a heteronormative socio-cultural context, which permeates sexual practices, relationship structures and sexual identities. It also showed the capacity of some of the older women to exercise sexual agency in spite of the oppressive structures.

Running through the older women's accounts within the theme of 'expressing sexuality' was a strong message that, as a consequence of different changes, the part that sexuality played in their lives ebbed and flowed. This assertion challenges the essentialist view of a fixed sexual identity and the 'either/or' binary of the asexual/'sexy oldie' discourse, both of which are dominant features within the socio-cultural context for sexuality in later life. Interwoven with the fluid presence of sexuality in their lives, many of the participants claimed that sexuality took up a lesser part of their sense of self. They had developed into 'more than a sexual being'. This concept was expanded on within the theme of 'revisiting sexuality' where the participants discussed sexuality within a wider context of relational issues and ageist/sexist attitudes. What was striking about the older women's accounts was that, in the face of adversity, brought on by the loss of partnered sex, intimacy and companionship, there was a sense of continuity and self-development. For example, adjusting to a new relational status of being on their own, had led many of the participants to achieve confidence, independence, self-esteem and control over their own lives. To consider taking up a new sexual partnership would have to ensure the protection of these achievements. This example demonstrated the way that changes within their sexuality were enabling/forcing older women to revisit and challenge traditional gender roles.

The women's narrations of their experiences of their sexuality provided a lens through which to consider the age/ageism and gender/sexism intersection. Using an intersectional/affirmative ageing framework revealed both disadvantages and advantages resulting from the age/gender intersection, which were usually experienced on a structural and individual level respectively. For example, ageism/sexism intersection was particularly prevalent in relation to the invisibility and misrepresentation of older women's sexuality on a socio-cultural level. This led the participants to feel that they were being positioned as asexual. This invisibility was accentuated in relation to their ageing body where the older women struggled to find a way to age without having to create a 'youthful' appearance. Where the participants perceived the invisibility as an advantage on a personal level was in regards to female sexuality where they felt that it was easier to express themselves in a non-penetrative way. This was in comparison to older men, whose criteria for ageing successfully is sexual performance, and the ability to accomplish penile-vaginal penetration. The participants challenged gender roles in a variety of ways and a particularly significant finding was un-partnered older women expressing their sexuality in diverse ways and regarding themselves as having a sexual identity in their own right. The stories from the older women of their experiences of sexuality demonstrated that the social divisions of age and gender have a dynamic

relationship where the emphasis of influence changes depending on the level of operation and the strength of individual agency.

The discourses within the successful ageing and asexual/'sexy oldie' binaries that make up the context for ageing and sexuality were not reflected in the older women's accounts of themselves. When the participants were discussing exercising sexual agency, three principal characteristics could be identified, those of, fluidity, diversity and heterogeneity. Although at odds with each other, the dynamic relationship of constraint and challenge between these examples of structure and agency runs through the findings. The two main structural processes of constraint identified within the findings were invisibility and regulation. As noted earlier, the older women were frequently positioned as asexual/invisible through not being able to fulfil the criteria for being regarded as a 'sexy oldie'/visible. This in turn acted as a form of discursive regulation in constructing which older women were regarded as 'worthy' of having a sexual self. The processes of challenge from the older women were twofold: first, the participants demonstrated the dynamic connection between gender and sexuality, and that changes in sexuality resulted in the possibility of performing gender differently; and second, through their 'resistance' to the asexual status, the participants were able to assert a nuanced continuation of sexuality within their lives.

The findings from this research study challenge dominant discourses of both asexual and 'sexy oldie' by highlighting that although changes in relation to sexuality are experienced by older women, they are both fluid and diverse. There was recognition that the oppressive nature of the dominant discourses can impose the notion of homogenous changes which in turn can stifle any narrative about nuanced experiences of sexuality within the context of ageing. Fluidity, diversity and heterogeneity are features of older women's sexuality that not only make a generalised statement within the context of ageing impossible, but also undesirable.

10.3 CONTRIBUTION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this thesis contribute broadly to the development of knowledge in the following three areas: (1) understanding of sexuality in later life; (2) feminist perspectives on women's sexuality in later life, with particular emphasis on an intersectional approach; and (3) methodology around researching ageing and sexuality.

In developing knowledge towards the understanding of sexuality in later life the findings add to the body of extant literature in providing narratives of older women's

experiences of their sexuality as being fluid, nuanced and diverse (Fileborn et al 2015a, 2015b; Hinchcliff and Gott 2008; Hurd Clark 2006). The diverse ways that older women expressed their sexuality was also recognised within these literatures, but the findings within this current study suggested that the repertoire of sexual expression was wider than currently documented. The ebb and flow of sexuality that the findings identified was reiterated implicitly within extant literature, which focused on dating or new relationships (see also Yun et al 2014; Watson et al 2010; Hurd Clark 2006). These studies identified older women experiencing a re-awakening or rediscovery of their sexuality. There was however a lack of detail about the nature of the 'movement' in relation to sexuality. This thesis contributes significantly here, as the findings tentatively begin to analyse the process of sexuality playing a lesser part in the lives of the older women. This then created a shift in how gender was performed in that the participants felt 'more than a sexual being' and the findings demonstrated many examples where traditional gender roles were challenged. Current research in this area is conflicting, with some research stating that gender roles become blurred with age (see also Biggs 2004; Silver 2003) whilst other research maintains that gender roles are strengthened with the ageing process (Wilinska 2010; Russell 2007; Wray 2003; Arber and Ginn 1991).

The dominance of the asexual/'sexy oldie' discourses was identified within this thesis as with other research (Fileborn et al 2015a; Sandberg 2013a, 2011; Hinchcliff and Gott 2008; Jones, R.L. 2002). However this thesis contributes further to the debate by using the findings to specifically identify examples where the structure had constrained the older women and where the latter had challenged the structure. This was demonstrated through the processes of invisibility and regulation of older women's sexuality and the older women's resistance to the asexual label. Resistance is an important concept to analyse as it aids understanding about the processes of exercising agency. This has been identified in other literature involving resistance to, ageing (Barrett and Naimen-Sessions 2016; Barrett et al 2012), labelling of 'frailty' (Grenier and Hanley 2007), and ageing bodies (Krekula 2016, 2007). This thesis contributes to this body of literature by focusing on how the older women participants challenge the asexual positioning.

Within the context of the historic neglect of feminism with regards to issues of ageing (see Chapter 2), this thesis contributes to the development of feminist perspectives on women's sexuality in later life by constructing an eclectic approach incorporating the work of two gerontologists, namely Krekula (2016, 2009, 2007) and Sandberg (2013a, 2013b, 2011). The establishment of an analytical tool made

up of an intersectional perspective on age and gender, together with an affirmative approach to ageing enabled the identification of the following: (1) situations where older women had been able to exercise sexual agency thereby demonstrating that the age/gender intersection had given rise to advantages/assets; (2) situations where the structural oppression in relation to older women's sexuality had been too dominant to challenge resulting in experiences of double jeopardy; and (3) situations where older women experienced feelings that are different but simultaneously held, with the possibility of leading to something new or unforeseen. Using this analytical framework adds to the body of knowledge that considers ageing in terms of its intersection with other social divisions such as ethnicity, age and gender in relation to (dis)empowerment (Wray 2007, 2004, 2003) and to quality of life (Cook et al 2004); gendered meanings of home, leisure and social relationships (Russell 2007); and care giving and health (Calasanti 2010). This thesis contributes by using sexuality to explore the ageing and gender intersection.

In considering the contribution made to the methodological issues around ageing and sexuality, the findings of both Phase 1 and 2 are drawn on. The body of literature that this thesis contributes to is comprised of authors who have reflected on their own research practice in the field of ageing and sexuality (see also Tarzia et al 2013; Gledhill et al 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005; Gott and Hinchcliff 2003b; Heaphy et al 1998). This thesis concurs with, and supports, this extant body of literature. However few have considered the research process as a whole tending to focus on specific issues in terms of methodology, such as interviewing (Tarzia et al 2013), recruitment/sampling (Gledhill et al 2008; Jones, R.L. 2005), or as part of the dissemination of the findings (Gott and Hinchcliff 2003b; Heaphy et al 1998). This current study has contributed positively to the question about whether research in the area of ageing and sexuality should or needs to take place. From both phases of the research the findings demonstrated a strong commitment, willingness and need from the older women to talk about their experiences. This issue of feasibility has been reiterated by a recent study with older people, relatives and staff within the context of a care home (Simpson et al 2017). However the contribution of this thesis goes further than the issue of feasibility by considering also the macro and micro aspects of the complete research process. The findings are consistent with previous research in terms of identifying the complexity of definition and language of sexuality (Bellamy 2011; Heaphy et al 1998). Additionally however the evidence from this research strongly suggests that the definition used by a research study of the concept of sexuality is pivotal in enabling or disabling nuanced accounts of older women's sexuality. Based on the participant profile of Phase 1, which included researchers in the field of ageing and

sexuality and older women, the findings overall provide a rich source of information for future researchers.

10.4 IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH STUDY

These findings are of benefit to policy makers and professionals working within the fields of sexual health and older age. They challenge the assumption that sexuality is non-existent/not important to older women regardless of relational status. The findings also highlight the dangers of 'information' based on dominant discourses and present a case for an inclusive yet individualised approach to the construction and dissemination of knowledge in relation to older women's sexuality. The findings suggest that getting a balance between recognising the heterogeneity of older women's experiences and identifying commonalities on which to base information and services will be a challenging task.

These findings will also be of interest to older women as they contain rich and nuanced examples from the participants of their experiences of ageing and sexuality (changes, coping strategies and impact). The participants who took part in the research were fully aware of their shared experiences of changes, but that the changes themselves were diverse. One participant summarised this view by stating,

At different stages of women's lives from puberty to death is a continuing change in sexuality and I think this is an important thing to convey that sexuality is very, variable... as well as growing older, feeling these changes [in sexuality] alerts me to the variability of sexual experiences and expectations. (OW1P2)

This discernibility would enable the participants to take information from this research that was relevant for them. Also as noted in Chapter 1, many older women have identified a lack of information and knowledge around sexuality, and although the findings within this research are not generalisable, many of the differing experiences that have been recounted will be useful.

10.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

As most of the limitations of the research have been identified in Chapter 5, the following discussion presents a summary of the main points. Both phases of the research were based on small-scale qualitative research and therefore diversity within the samples was important. However in both sets of participant samples this diversity was not adequately achieved in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability. Although the challenge of recruiting diverse samples in relation to sexual

orientation and ethnicity is well documented (see also Tarzia et al 2013; Gledhill et al 2008; Pugh and Jones, J. 2007; Heaphy et al 2004), it must be recognised within this research that the use of informal networks, conferences and the University of the 3rd Age to recruit older women for Phase 2 resulted in a predominantly homogenous sample vis-à-vis ethnicity and sexual orientation. As identified through the literature review in Chapter 4, the research from non-Western countries (for example Yun et al 2014, Nyanzi 2011, Moore 2010a), and research that included diverse samples (for example Lagana and Maciel 2010, Winterich 2007) also resulted in findings that gave diverse perspectives on the range of aspects of sexuality. Therefore the homogeneity of some of the social dimensions of the sample within this research will have affected the findings to a greater or lesser extent. Although it was disappointing not to have achieved better representation from older women who identified as lesbian, gay, queer and bisexual, the research study does tell a 'hidden' story, even though most of the participants represented the dominant sexual orientation. The older women participants, who were in their 70s and 80s, could be regarded as homogenous in terms of their positioning within the Third Age of later life due to their high degree of independence and autonomy (Higgs and Gilleard 2015; Laslett 1996 [1989]). However, considering the issue of diversity more widely, within Phase 1 the participants represented different experiences and perspectives in relation to researching sexuality, that is, older women and researchers in the field. These different interest groups guarded against researcher bias and provided a type of triangulation vis-à-vis source of data (Bryman 2016). In Phase 2, the strength of the sample was in relation to the diversity of older women's sexual history with regard to sexual relationships. Data collection within Phase 2 was a challenge as recruitment was slow and I found that it was difficult to sustain a sense of momentum. In order to counter this I found that I had to spend more time preparing for each interview in order to refresh my position as researcher.

Within the context of establishing trustworthiness in Phase 2, the main limitation is within the area of credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose member checks as a crucial part of ensuring credibility, but criticisms about the practice of showing interview transcripts and data analysis to participants are well documented (Bryman 2016; Angen 2000; Sandelowski 1995; Morse 1994). The main reason, however, that I did not undertake respondent validation was due to time restrictions and being unable to give the process the attention and effort that it would have needed in order for it to be carried out in a responsible way. Another issue in relation to credibility is the recommendation that the researcher should undertake prolonged engagement with participants. As I stated previously my engagement with the older women involved a one-off, albeit in-depth, semi-

structured interview. In spite of this, I felt that the research that I undertook was of high quality in that my methodology was informed, and I have provided a clear audit trail from data collection to data analysis that outlines my process from interview scripts to themes (Miles and Huberman 1994) in both phases.

10.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

In relation to methodology, any future research into the area of ageing and sexuality with older women needs to ensure that samples are diverse in terms of ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. Due to the complexity of sexuality, data collection over a prolonged period, and/or a series of interviews, would be beneficial. Subsequently, other ways of accessing stories of sexuality in later life using visual methods, such as photography, art, dance and theatre could be usefully explored. Theory development within the area of ageing and sexuality is in its infancy so therefore it would be productive to use a methodology that would support this endeavour such as grounded theory approach. With regards to the focus of future research the following areas, which have only begun to be explored in this thesis, could be built on:

- Older women's sense of their sexual selves and in particular what influences the shifting character of sexuality within the context of ageing.
- The processes of resistance to oppressive structural discourses and the psychosocial conditions needed to enable the exercising of sexual agency within the area of ageing and gender.
- The notion of revisiting sexuality across the life-course, at different ages and different stages of relationships, to see what might be similar, unique and/or different to the processes in later life.

10.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Undertaking this research study has been an invaluable learning experience in terms of managing a research project, developing my research practice and increasing my knowledge base in relation to ageing and sexuality. The process has re-affirmed my commitment to qualitative research as well as increased my interest in a participatory approach. My steepest learning curve was in regards to dealing with the complexity of the issues of sexuality in terms of language and meaning. It was an invaluable and important step at the beginning of this journey in undertaking Phase 1 of the research. To me it felt like a type of 'partnership' where I learnt from older women and researchers in the field. The complexity of the task would have been extremely difficult to cope with without this input. Working with others in the initial stages was a supportive process for me as researcher and

reflecting back I wish I had had the capacity in terms of time to increase the participatory element of the study. This experience has encouraged me to engage any future research within a participatory framework.

APPENDIX 1: PHASE 1 ETHICS DOCUMENTATION

The following documentation refers to older women participants in Phase 1 and includes: (a) Participant Consent Form, (b) Participant Information Sheet, (c) Recruitment Advert, and d) Ethics Approval letter. Ethics approval application submitted on 30/1/06 and approved on 9/3/06.

(a) PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Sexuality, Yourself and Ageing
Phase 1: How should this topic be researched?

Name of Researcher: Rhiannon Jones
Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated: _____ for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

4. I agree to take part in the above project.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Name of Person taking consent Date Signature
(if different from researcher)

Researcher Date Signature

Copies: One copy for the participant and one copy for the Principal Investigator / Supervisor.

(b) PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**The main title of the research study:
Sexuality, Yourself and Ageing**

Phase 1 – How should this topic be researched?

You are invited to take part in Phase 1 of the above research study. Before you decide whether you want to be involved it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to discuss it with others if you wish and if you need further information or any questions answered please contact me on any of the contact details below.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore the changes women experience in their sexuality as they grow older and how any changes affect how women feel about themselves.

So, what is sexuality? I am adopting a wide definition of sexuality which includes I am interested in the views of all women who are 70 years of age and over, including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. However you see, describe or define your sexuality your views are important and are needed to help to inform how this research should take place.

This study is being divided into two parts - Phase 1 and Phase 2. You are being invited to get involved in **Phase 1**. Phase 1 will involve you sharing your views and ideas about how the research in Phase 2 – “women’s experiences of their sexuality as they grow older” - should be conducted. I would like to know what questions should be asked? What are the important issues in relation to this topic? Is it an important topic as you grow older? Your views, ideas and suggestions will help to inform how this research should take place.

After your involvement in the first part of the study you may be interested in taking part in Phase 2. I will ask you if you are interested and contact you when the second part of the study is being undertaken.

Who is involved?

Phase 1 of the study will involve about 10 participants who are all women who are 70 years of age and over. The women will have heard about the study from reading adverts, word of mouth or will have contact with someone who knows about the study.

I am the researcher and my name is Rhiannon Jones. I am 50 years of age, female and am doing the study for my PhD with the Sheffield Institute for Studies on Ageing which is based at the University of Sheffield.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You will also be given a copy of the consent form to keep. On the consent form it says that you can leave the study at any time. You do not have to give a reason. It will be your right to leave if you want to.

What will be involved if I decide to take part?

If you decide to take part I will arrange to interview you at a time which is convenient to you. The interview should not last more than an hour. You will be asked to share your views and ideas regarding how the research should be conducted. This would include your views on the types of questions you would ask, the language you would use, and other issues you think would be important in this type of study. At the end of the interview you will be asked if you would like to take part in Phase 2 of the study. There is however no obligation to take part in Phase 2 if you do not want to.

What happens to the content of my interview?

With your permission I would like to tape record the interview, as it is important that I do not miss anything you may say. The tape of your interview will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and only I and my supervisors (Merryn Gott and Lorna Warren who work at the University of Sheffield) will have access to them. At the end of the study, the tapes will be erased. Your ideas and views together with the other participants' and my ideas and views will go forward to influence and direct Phase 2 of this research study. It is important to note that all the information you give me will be kept strictly confidential. If any of your ideas are used in Phase 2, you will not be able to be identified

Are there any disadvantages or risks for me of taking part in the research?

I cannot foresee any disadvantages or risks for the participants of this research study. However it is important to remember that you can leave the research study at any time and if any question makes you feel uncomfortable or distressed then you do not have to answer it. You do not need to give a reason why you do not want to answer it.

Are there any advantages for me of taking part in the research?

The main benefit of taking part in this research study is that you have an opportunity to influence how a research study is conducted in this very important but neglected area in relation to older people.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research study is part of a PhD thesis supervised by Merryn Gott and Lorna Warren of the Sheffield Institute for Studies on Ageing. The research study has been ethically reviewed by the Sociological Studies Department's Ethics Review Committee which adheres to the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or comments please contact me – by e.mail on r.jones@mmu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0161 247 2110 or by writing to Rhiannon Jones, Division of Professional Registration (Social Work), Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS INFORMATON SHEET

(c) RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT

**Are you a woman?
Are you 70 years of age or over?**

Here's an opportunity to get your voice heard - an opportunity to influence.....

There is some exciting new research taking place exploring the changes women experience in their sexuality as they grow older and how any changes affect how women feel about themselves. But how should such research be conducted? What questions should be asked? What are the important issues in relation to this topic? Is it an important topic as you grow older?

If you are female and 70 years of age or over you are invited to share your ideas and views about how such research should be done. I am interested in the views of all women, including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. However you see, describe or define your sexuality your views are important and are needed to help to inform how this research should take place. If you are interested you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by a female researcher from the University of Sheffield. Confidentiality and anonymity are ensured.

If you would like some more information please contact - Rhiannon Jones - by e.mail on r.jones@mmu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0161 247 2110 or by writing to Rhiannon Jones, Division of Professional Registration (Social Work), Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.

(d) ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

Secretary to Head of Department
Janine Birch

The University of Sheffield
Department of Sociological Studies
Elmfield, Northumberland Road
Sheffield, S10 2TU
Telephone: +44 (0) 114 222 6422
Fax: +44 (0) 114 276 8125
Email: j.l.birch@sheffield.ac.uk

10 March 2006

Dear Ms Jones

PROJECT TITLE: SEXUALITY AND SELF IN OLD AGE

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on *9 March 2006* the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following document that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form (*dated 30.1.06*)
- Participant information sheet (*dated 30.1.06*)
- Participant consent form (*dated 30.1.06*)

This application is approved subject to:

The Information Sheet being re-drafted to include:

1. A short paragraph spelling out what the researcher means by 'sexuality', incorporating the description in the advertisement which explains it very clearly.
2. A mailing address for contact
3. More information about the nature and structure of the project so that participants have a clearer sense of what the differences between the phases are and how they might be involved in more than one phase.

If during the course of the project you need to deviate from the above-approved document please inform me. Written approval will be required for significant deviations from or significant changes to the above-approved document. Please also inform me should you decide to terminate the project prematurely.

Yours sincerely

Janine Birch

Janine Birch
Ethics Administrator

(b) Information Sheet for Participants

The main title of the research study is - Sexuality and Ageing

Phase 1 – Researching Sexuality and Ageing

You are invited to take part in Phase 1 of the above research study. If you need further information or any questions answered please contact me on any of the contact details below.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore the changes women experience in their sexuality as they grow older and how any changes affect how women feel about themselves. A wide definition of sexuality will be used to include sex and sexual practice, sexual orientation, sensuality, emotions, relationships and identity.

How will the study be organised and who is involved?

This study is being divided into two parts - Phase 1 and Phase 2. The aims and purpose of Phase 2 are stated in the preceding paragraph.

Phase 1 will involve two groups of participants – women over 70 years of age and people who have researched in the area of sexuality and ageing. You are being invited to get involved in **Phase 1** as someone who has experience and an expertise in researching issues of sexuality with older people. Phase 1 will involve you sharing your views and ideas about your own research experience.

What will be involved if I decide to take part?

If you decide to take part I will arrange to interview you. The interview should not last more than an hour and as stated earlier it will focus on your own experiences of researching issues of sexuality and ageing. You will be given a consent form to sign and a copy of the form to keep. With your permission I would like to tape record the interview. The tape of your interview will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and only I and my supervisors will have access to them. At the end of the study, the tapes will be erased. Your ideas and views together with the other participants' and my ideas and views will go forward to influence and direct Phase 2 of this research study. It is important to note that all the information you give me will be kept strictly confidential. If any of your ideas are used in Phase 2, you will not be able to be identified.

Are there any disadvantages or risks for me of taking part in the research?

I cannot foresee any disadvantages or risks for participants of this research study.

Are there any advantages for me of taking part in the research?

The main benefit of taking part in this research study is that you have an opportunity to influence how a research study is conducted in this very important but neglected area in relation to older people.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research study is part of a PhD thesis supervised by Merryn Gott and Lorna Warren of the Sheffield Institute for Studies on Ageing. The research study has been ethically reviewed by the Sociological Studies Department's Ethics Review Committee which adheres to the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or comments please contact me – by e.mail on r.jones@mmu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0161 247 2110 or by writing to Rhiannon Jones, Division of Professional Registration (Social Work), Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS INFORMATON
SHEET



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Department
Of Sociological
Studies.

Rhiannon Jones
Department of Sociological Studies

Department Ethics Co-ordinator
Dr Jo Britton

The University of Sheffield
Department of Sociological Studies
Elmfield, Northumberland Road
Sheffield, S10 2TU

Telephone: +44 (0) 114 222 6431

Fax: +44 (0) 114 276 8125

Email: n.j.britton@sheffield.ac.uk

14 July 2008

Dear Rhiannon

PROJECT TITLE: 'Sexuality and Self in Old Age'

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 10 July 2008 the revisions to the above-named project were **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following document that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form (*dated 29 May 2008*)

and those documents submitted for your original review:

- Participant information sheet (*dated 30 January 2006*)
- Participant consent form (*dated 30 January 2006*)

However, the ethics reviewers have suggested that you consider the following amendment, which you can choose to follow or to ignore:

- (i) Personal safety issues should be explored or a statement as to why there are no personal safety issues provided, particularly if some interviews are in participants' homes.

If during the course of the project you need to deviate from the above-approved document please inform me. Written approval will be required for significant deviations from or significant changes to the above-approved document. Please also inform me should you decide to terminate the project prematurely.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jo Britton
Department Ethics Co-ordinator

(c) ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

APPENDIX 3: PHASE 1 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H |
|----------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|----------|---------------------------------|----------|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| OW 1 | Participant in RAS | Other research | F | White British | 84 | Heterosexual | Industry |
| OW 2 | Participant in RAS | Other research | F | White British | 75 | Heterosexual | Health care |
| OW 3 | No experience of research | Older women's networks | F | American Jewish | 78 | Heterosexual | Education Social Care |
| OW 4 | No experience of research | Older women's networks | F | White British | 79 | Heterosexual | Armed forces Industry |
| OW 5 | Participant/ researcher in research | Older women's networks | F | White | 72 | Heterosexual | Education Self-employed - leisure |
| OW 6 | Participant in research | Older women's networks | F | Oriental Jewish | 71 | Heterosexual | Health care services |
| R 1 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | F | White British | 35 | Heterosexual | Industry Academia |
| R 2 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | F | White British | 35 | Bisexual | Social care Academia |
| R 3 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | M | White | 35 | Gay | Health care Academia |
| R 4 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | M | White British | 25 | Bisexual | Leisure Academia |
| R 5 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | F | White | 33 | Queer | Academia |
| R 6 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | M | English | 26 | Gay | Academia |
| R 7 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | F | NZ Pakeha European | 48 | Asexual* | Academia |
| R 8 | Research in RAS | Academic networks | M | White Jewish Canadian Caucasian | 54 | Heterosexual | Academia |

* Asexual – used here as a self-defined identification of a sexual orientation

A= Participant Group (OW –Older Women, R-researcher); **B=** Past experience in research (RAS-researching in ageing and sexuality); **C=** Method of recruitment; **D=**Gender; **E=**Ethnicity; **F=**Age; **G=**Sexual Orientation; **H=** Past/current employment context.

APPENDIX 4: PHASE 1 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR INTERVIEWER

Method of data collection is semi-structured interview, face-to-face or telephone, and taped. Framework of interview is as follows:

Introduction for all participants

- Make sure that the participant is clear about the purpose of the interview and reiterate the aims of Phase 1 if necessary.
- Information Sheet – anything need clarifying/expanding on?
- Participant Consent Sheet – for face-to-face interviews go through sheet, sign, and give copy to participant.
- Participant Consent Sheet – for telephone interviews acknowledge receipt of signed copy, and check that participant has received their copy.
- Check participant's agreement to have interview taped and clarify that tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed at the end of the research project.
- Re-emphasise confidentiality and anonymity.
- Remind participant that they have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions put to them.

Settling in/rapport building questions for all participants

- **Demographic information:** Age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and current/past employment.
- **Research interests and experience:**
 - Older women participants:**
What particularly appealed to you about becoming involved in this research?
What research have you been involved with in the past?
 - Researcher participants are asked:**
How did you get involved with researching issues in relation to older people?
What research have you been involved in with older people?

Older women participants

- **Main question areas are importance, gaps, language, recruitment, and data collection issues in relation to researching ageing and sexuality.**
- What do you think of use of the word 'sexuality'? What is its meaning to you and others?
- How important is sexuality to people as they grow older?
- How important is research with older people about issues of sexuality?
- What ideas and views do you have about how researching sexuality with older people should be conducted?

- What are the important issues that I should be aware of when I am researching sexuality with older people?
- Prompts around following issues:
 - Language and meaning of sexuality (if this has not been covered adequately in first question).
 - How to recruit older people?
 - How to enable older people to talk about sexuality?
 - What do you think of this way (interview/tape) of researching?
 - There are other ways of researching such as groups/questionnaires – what do you think of these ways in relation to sexuality?
 - What are the important questions I should be asking? What would you like to find out about ageing and sexuality?
 - Any views on what the researcher should be like?

Researcher participants

- **Main question areas are importance, gaps, language, recruitment, and data collection issues in relation to researching ageing and sexuality.**
- How important do you feel researching sexuality is as an aspect of ageing and older people's lives?
- What areas of research are missing in relation to ageing and sexuality?
- From your own experience of researching what ideas and views do you have about how researching sexuality with older people should be conducted?
- What are the important issues that researchers should be aware of when they are researching sexuality with older people?
- Prompts around issues:
 - Language and meaning of sexuality
 - How to recruit older people?
 - How to enable older people to talk about sexuality?
 - Method of researching?
 - Any issues of 'difference' between the researcher and the participants that affect the research? (e.g. generational, gender etc.)

Ending for all participants

Is there anything else that you feel is important that should be considered when undertaking this type of research that I haven't asked you about? If so what? If there is anything else that you may think of after this interview that you feel is important and you wish to tell me please feel free to contact me.

Additional ending question for older women participants only

Would you be interested in taking part in Phase 2 of the research? (Explain Phase 2 of research and if participant interested arrange to contact at a later date).

Additional ending question for researcher participants only

What are your future plans for research in this area?

APPENDIX 5: PHASE 1 ASPECTS OF THE CODING FRAMEWORK

Initial coding framework/template

- Research experience of participants
- Importance of researching ageing and sexuality
- Gaps in researching ageing and sexuality
- Language of sexuality
- Recruitment of participants
- Data collection
- Ageing, sexuality and society – influence on the process of researching ageing and sexuality
- Researcher influence on process of researching ageing and sexuality
- Any other important issues to consider in the researching ageing and sexuality
- Debrief issues –issues that come up in the ‘ending’ of the interview or ‘off tape’ that have relevant to the researching ageing and sexuality process

Final coding framework/template

Research experience of participants – demographic information

Importance of researching ageing and sexuality

Gaps in researching ageing and sexuality

These aspects seek out justification for researching ageing and sexuality, i.e. should it be done/why should it be done? And if it should be done what should be its focus?

Ageing, sexuality and society and its influence on researching ageing and sexuality

This aspect acts as the context for researching ageing and sexuality

Language of sexuality

This aspect tends to operate on two levels: first, the macro level which makes up the context for researching ageing and sexuality; and second, the micro level of influencing the research process itself in terms of recruitment and data collection

Recruitment of participants

Data collection

Researcher influence on researching ageing and sexuality

These categories are the micro aspects of the research process itself

APPENDIX 6: PHASE 1 ASPECTS, THEMES, SUB-THEMES, AND CODES/COMPONENTS

Notes for reader

- Every effort has been made to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the findings by presenting the themes, sub-themes and codes within this chart in the order in which they appear in Chapter 6 of the thesis.
- The shared themes and codes appear in italics.

| ASPECT | IMPORTANCE | |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| THEMES | ESTABLISHING A PRESENCE | MAKING A DIFFERENCE |
| SUB-THEMES | | |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | Neglected topic Breaking silence/silence Bringing out into the open Taking older women seriously Being given a voice | Challenging perceptions Changing attitudes Creating a better understanding |

| ASPECT | GAPS | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| THEMES | TRANSITIONS IN SEXUALITY | | | TYPE OF RESEARCH |
| SUB-THEMES | CHANGES IN SEXUALITY | INFLUENCES ON SEXUALITY | EXPERIENCES OF SEXUALITY | |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | Changes in sexuality Self-image | Personal histories Impact and negotiation of oppositional influences Sexual pressures | Range of different aspects of sexuality Sexual relationships The meaning of sexuality in this stage of their life | Type of research Older women's perspectives Methodology of researching ageing and sexuality Diversity of background of research participants |

| ASPECT | AGEING, SEXUALITY AND SOCIETY | | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| THEMES | COMPETING IMAGES | | LACK OF SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH | <i>SENSITIVE RESEARCH</i> |
| SUB-THEMES | NEGATIVE ATTITUDES | POSITIVE EXPERIENCES | | |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | Sexuality associated with younger people Impact of society's attitudes on sexuality of older people | Older people want to talk about sexuality Conversations about sexuality | No support for researching ageing and sexuality | <i>Sensitive [indecent] research topic Participants' risk of exposure</i> |

| ASPECT | LANGUAGE | | |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| THEMES | UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY | | |
| SUB-THEMES | DIFFERENT MEANINGS | COMMON UNDERSTANDING | UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | Sexuality means sex Sexuality means more than sex Sexuality means (hetero)sex Sexuality means sexual orientation Sexuality as visibility Sexuality [is fluid] is sexuality Sexuality is the whole thing Sexuality is just a word Sexuality as pressure to be sexual Preference for 'intimacy' as 'sexuality' means other sexualities Turning away from 'sexuality' Intimacy, love and religion Intimacy means sex Romance – 'something lovely' | Sexuality's problem of definition Developing a common understanding of meaning of sexuality | <i>Language of recruitment adverts</i> <i>Range of language in interviews</i> Language control |

| ASPECT | RECRUITMENT | | |
|----------------------|---|--|---|
| THEMES | <i>SENSITIVE RESEARCH</i> | CONTACTING PARTICIPANTS | MOTIVATORS FOR INVOLVEMENT |
| SUB-THEMES | | | |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | <i>Sensitive [indecent] research topic</i> <i>Participants' risk of exposure</i> | Making contact with groups Making contact with older women Talking to groups Informal networks Recruiting diverse participants Difficulty of recruiting | Familiarity with academia Having something to say Courage of participants Conveying being listened to Conveying importance Usefulness of research Making a contribution Attracted by age specified by research <i>Language of recruitment adverts</i> |

| ASPECT | DATA COLLECTION | | |
|--------------------------|--|---|---|
| THEMES | METHODS OF COLLECTING DATA | TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY | TRUST IN RESEARCH PROCESS |
| SUB-THEMES | | | |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | Other methods of data collection Individual interviews Group interviews Telephone interviews | Being prepared Engaging women in sexuality talk Women talk freely about sexuality Flowing interviews Protection of partners – ‘best face’ Talking to strangers about sexuality <i>Range of language in interviews</i> | <i>Trust in research process</i> |
| ASPECT | RESEARCHER INFLUENCE | | |
| THEMES | SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE | KNOWLEDGE | VALUES AND SELF |
| SUBTHEMES | | | |
| CODES/ COMPONENTS | Practical issues of research involvement Research process explained Managing the interview process Researcher’s lack of experience Ending the research Keeping involved in the research process | Researcher awareness of historical influences on sexuality Researcher understanding Researcher’s lack of knowledge | Professionalism of researcher <i>Trust in research process</i> Participant control of research process Positioning of researcher Researcher/participant difference Vulnerability of researcher Age of researcher as barrier |

APPENDIX 7: PHASE 2 ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

Ethics approval application submitted on 27/5/09 and approved on 17/8/09.



**Department
Of Sociological
Studies.**

Rhiannon Jones
Department of Sociological Studies

Department Ethics Co-ordinator
Dr Jo Britton

The University of Sheffield
Department of Sociological Studies
Elmfield, Northumberland Road
Sheffield, S10 2TU
Telephone: +44 (0) 114 222 6431
Fax: +44 (0) 114 276 8125
Email: n.j.britton@sheffield.ac.uk

20 August 2009

Dear Rhiannon

PROJECT TITLE: 'Sexuality and Self in Old Age'

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 17 August 2009 the revisions to the above-named project were **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following document that you submitted for ethics review:

- 1) A completed research ethics application form (dated 27 May 2009)
- 2) Appendix 1 - Consent form (dated 27 May 2009)
- 3) Appendix 2 - Participants information sheet (dated 27 May 2009)
- 4) Appendix 3 - Advert (dated 27 May 2009)

If during the course of the project you need to deviate from the above-approved document please inform me. Written approval will be required for significant deviations from or significant changes to the above-approved document. Please also inform me should you decide to terminate the project prematurely.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'S. Midgley'.

pp. **Dr Jo Britton**
Department Ethics Co-ordinator

APPENDIX 8: PHASE 2 PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: **Sexuality and self in older age**

Name of Researcher: **Rhiannon Jones**

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____ Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated **[insert date]** explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research
5. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant _____ Date _____ Signature _____
(or legal representative)

Name of person taking consent _____ Date _____ Signature _____
(if different from lead researcher)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Lead Researcher _____ Date _____ Signature _____
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

APPENDIX 9: PHASE 2 PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

University of Sheffield
Information Sheet for Participants

Sexuality and self in older age

You are invited to take part in the above research study. Before you decide whether you want to be involved it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to discuss it with others if you wish and if you need further information or any questions answered please contact me on any of the contact details below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore older women's experiences of their sexuality, in particular any changes, and the impact these experiences may have on themselves.

So, what is sexuality? I am adopting a wide definition of sexuality, which not only includes sex and sexual practice but also sexual orientation, sensuality, emotions, relationships and identity. I am interested in the views of all women who are 70 years of age and over including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. No matter how you see, describe or define your sexuality your views are important and are needed to help to inform this research.

Taking part in this research will involve you talking about your experiences and views in a one-to-one interview with me.

Who is involved?

This study will involve about 30 female participants who are 70 years of age and over. The women will have heard about the study from reading adverts, word of mouth or will have contact with someone who knows about the study. I am the researcher and my name is Rhiannon Jones. I am 54 years of age female and am doing the study for my PhD with the Sheffield

Institute for Studies on Ageing which is based at the University of Sheffield. Prior to my current job of teaching social work students, I worked for many years as a social worker and counsellor providing a service for older people.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You will also be given a copy of the consent form to keep. On

the consent form it says that you can leave the study at any time. You do not have to give a reason. It will be your right to leave if you want to.

What will be involved if I decide to take part?

If you decide to take part I will arrange to interview you at a time, which is convenient to you. The interview should not last more than an hour. You will be given a choice about whether you would prefer either a face-to-face interview or an interview over the telephone. You will be given a copy of the interview questions beforehand so that you can feel ready for the interview. You will be asked to share your experiences and views about how growing older may have changed or affected your sexuality and in turn how any of the changes have made you feel about yourself.

What happens to the content of my interview?

With your permission I would like to tape record the interview, as it is important that I do not miss anything you may say. The tape of your interview will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and only I and my supervisors (Merryn Gott and Lorna Warren who work at the University of Sheffield) will have access to them. At the end of the study, the tapes will be erased. It is important to note that all the information you give me will be kept strictly confidential. If any of your experiences and views are used in the report of the research you will not be able to be identified as the information will be anonymised.

Are there any disadvantages or risks for me of taking part in the research?

I cannot foresee any disadvantages or risks for the participants of this research study. However it is important to remember that you can leave the research study at any time and if any question makes you feel uncomfortable or distressed then you do not have to answer it. You do not need to give a reason why you do not want to answer it.

Are there any advantages for me of taking part in the research?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those women participating in the research project, it is an opportunity to contribute your experiences and views to a much-neglected area in relation to older people. It is hoped that this work will be published in a range of different places and you will be able to have a copy of anything that is published.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research study is part of a PhD thesis supervised by Merryn Gott and Lorna Warren of the University of Sheffield. The research study has been ethically reviewed by the Sociological Studies Department's Ethics Review Committee, which adheres to the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure.

What is something goes wrong?

I will be undertaking the research study in a professional manner and cannot foresee any problems at this stage. It is important for you to know however that if you decide to take part in this project and you are unhappy about some aspect of the research then there is a complaints procedure, which involves, in the first instance, contacting my supervisors, Merryn Gott and Lorna Warren of the University of Sheffield.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or comments please contact me – by e.mail on r.jones@mmu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0161 247 2357 or by writing to Rhiannon Jones, Professional Registration Department (Social Work), Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS
INFORMATON SHEET

APPENDIX 10: PHASE 2 RECRUITMENT ADVERT

Are you a woman?
Are you 70 years of age or over?

Here's an opportunity to get your voice heard and to put your views
across.....

There is some exciting new research taking place exploring the changes women experience in their sexuality as they grow older and how any changes affect how women feel about themselves.

If you are female and 70 years of age or over you are invited to talk about your experiences. I am interested in hearing the experiences of all women, including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. No matter how you see, describe or define your sexuality your views are important and are needed to contribute to this research. If you are interested you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by a female researcher from the University of Sheffield. Confidentiality and anonymity are ensured.

If you would like some more information please contact - Rhiannon Jones - by e.mail on r.jones@mmu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0161 247 2110 or by writing to Rhiannon Jones, Division of Professional Registration (Social Work), Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.

APPENDIX 11: PHASE 2: RECRUITMENT ARTICLE

OLDER WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

Are you a woman? And are you 70 years of age or over? If yes then you may be interested in getting involved in some exciting new research that I am doing for my PhD. It involves finding out from women who are 70 years or over about the changes they experience in their sexuality as they grow older and how any changes affect how this makes them feel about themselves.

The first part of the research has already taken place, which involved a group of six women over 70 years of age, and eight researchers sharing their ideas and views about how such research could be conducted. Here are some of the main points raised by the older women participants.

- What does the word 'sexuality' mean? All the women agreed that sexuality meant many different things to different people, which could be confusing. Therefore they felt it was best for the research to use a wide definition to include sex, sexual practice, sexual orientation, sensuality, emotions, intimacy, relationships and identity.
- Was such research important? All the women felt that sexuality was usually associated by society with younger people. Therefore this type of research was extremely important in making sure that sexuality in later life was discussed and any misinformation could be challenged.
- Who needs to get involved? There was a strong feeling that the views of all older women (over 70 years of age) were important however they see, describe or define their sexuality, and whether or not they are currently sexually active.
- What questions need to be asked? There were many aspects of sexuality that the women wanted to find out about mostly involving changes and how older women experience and cope with those changes in their sexuality.
- Is the research too sensitive? The women felt that for some the research would be too sensitive and put them off getting involved. They felt however that the researcher could help to encourage involvement by fully explaining what was involved, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and being professional at all times. This would help all women who were interested in getting involved to have trust in the research process.

If you would like some more information or would like to get involved please contact: If you would like some more information please contact - Rhiannon Jones - by e.mail on r.jones@mmu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0161 247 2110 or by writing to Rhiannon Jones, Division of Professional Registration (Social Work), Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.

APPENDIX 12: PHASE 2: EXAMPLES OF RECRUITMENT EMAIL

EXAMPLE FOR OLDER PERSON'S NETWORK

From: Rhiannon Jones [R.Jones@mmu.ac.uk]

Sent: 05 November 2009 16:14

To: info@growingolddisgracefully.org.uk

Subject: PhD Research Project - Sexuality and Ageing

Dear Members of Growing Old Disgracefully Network,

Three years ago you kindly agreed to put an advert in your newsletter concerning my research that I am undertaking with the University of Sheffield for my PhD about the issue of sexuality and ageing. My research is in two stages:-

- 1) The first stage involved interviewing a small group of women over the age of 70 and a small group of researchers and asking their opinions about how researching the topic of sexuality should be conducted. The advert that I sent you for your newsletter was in relation to recruiting volunteers to take part in this first stage of the research. The recommendations from this first stage are to be used to inform the next stage of my research. I attach these recommendations for your information.

- 2) The second stage will involve a larger sample of women over the age of 70 and asking them to talk about their experiences of their sexuality as they have grown older.

I am currently looking for older women (over the age of 70) who would be interested in taking part in the second stage of this research and I was wondering whether there would be any women involved in the Growing Old Disgracefully network who would be interested. I attach the advert that I am using for this stage of the research together with a participant information sheet which gives much more detail about what is involved for anyone who wishes to take part. Would it be possible for you to either put something in your newsletter and/or pass the information around your network for me? If there is anyone who may want to take part they could either contact me direct (my details are on the advert and information sheet) or they could pass on their contact details and I will contact them.

A few points about the research that may be worth stressing are, firstly, I am adopting a wide definition of sexuality which not only includes sex and sexual practice but also sexual orientation, sensuality, emotions, relationships and identity. I am interested in the views of all women who are 70 years of age and over, including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. However women see, describe or define their sexuality, their views and experiences are important and I would be interested in hearing them. Secondly, the interviews are individual one-to-one interviews with myself and can take place over the telephone if a face to face meeting is not

wanted or feasible in terms of geographical distance. Thirdly, participants will be given the questions in advance so that they can feel prepared or may, after taking a look at the questions, decide not to proceed with the interview. Fourthly, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research at any time are assured. The research has been approved by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee.

Anyway apologies for the lengthy email but I did want to make the purpose and aims of the research clear. If there is anything that needs further clarification please do not hesitate to contact me. Many thanks for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes

EXAMPLE FOR FORMAL ORGANISATION

From: Rhiannon Jones [mailto:R.Jones@mmu.ac.uk]
Sent: 29 April 2010 13:08
To: Jane Bailey
Subject: Research: Sexuality and Ageing

Dear Jane

I got your email contact address from the Age Concern and Help the Aged website link entitled Regional Opening Doors Initiatives. I am undertaking a research project for my PhD with the University of Sheffield in the area of sexuality and ageing. My research aims to explore older women's experiences of their sexuality as they have grown older. I am currently looking for older women (over the age of 70) who would be interested in taking part in this research and I was wondering whether you would be able to help me through the work you are involved in. I attach the advert that I am using for this research together with a participant information sheet which gives much more detail about what is involved for anyone who wishes to take part. If there is anyone who may want to take part they could either contact me direct (my details are on the advert and information sheet) or they could pass on their contact details and I will contact them.

A few points about the research that may be worth highlighting are;

- I am the sole researcher and am 55 years of age. Although I am undertaking the research study with the University of Sheffield, my current job is teaching social work students at Manchester Metropolitan University. I worked for many years as a social worker and counsellor providing a service for older people. I have always been committed to raising issues that concern older people and in particular issues, such as sexuality, that older people may feel excluded from in a variety of ways.
- The way that the research is being undertaken has been informed by a group of older women and researchers who were involved in the first part

of the research which was spent considering some of the issues of researching this topic.

- I am adopting a wide definition of sexuality which not only includes sex and sexual practice but also sexual orientation, sensuality, emotions, relationships and identity. I am interested in the views of all women who are 70 years of age and over, including women who are not currently sexually active, as well as those who are. However women see, describe or define their sexuality, their views and experiences are important and I would be interested in hearing them.
- The interviews are individual one-to-one interviews with myself and can take place over the telephone if a face to face meeting is not wanted or feasible in terms of geographical distance.
- Participants will be given the questions in advance so that they can feel prepared or may, after taking a look at the questions, decide not to proceed with the interview.
- Confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research at any time are assured. The research has been approved by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee.

If there is anything that needs further clarification please do not hesitate to contact me. Could I also take this opportunity to apologise for any cross posting as Antony Smith, National Development Officer/Equalities and Human Rights has put out an advert on the Age Concern and Help the Aged network for me earlier this year which you may have already seen.

Thanks for any support you can offer this project.

Best wishes

APPENDIX 13: PHASE 2 – PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

| Partici- pant | Age | Gen- der | Ethnicity | Dis- ability | Class | Sexual Orientation | Recruitment Method | Data Collection Method | Past Employment |
|--------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1OW | 75 | F | Sephardi Jewish | None | Middle | Heterosexual | Phase 1 of research study | Telephone | Neurophysiological Research assistant |
| 2OW | 75 | F | White British | None | Working/ Middle | Heterosexual | Phase 1of research study | Telephone | Teacher/Therapist |
| 3OW | 70 | F | White British | None | Middle | Heterosexual | U3A* | Face to face | Teacher/Social worker |
| 4OW | 74 | F | White British/ Scottish | None | Working | Heterosexual | U3A* | Telephone | Nurse |
| 5OW | 83 | F | White British | None | Working/ Middle | Heterosexual | Through work colleague | Telephone | Teacher |
| 6OW | 72 | F | White British | None | Any | Heterosexual | Through work colleague | Face to face | Teacher |
| 7OW | 70 | F | British | None | Middle | Heterosexual | Through work colleague | Telephone | Teacher |
| 8OW | 76 | F | English | None | Middle | Heterosexual | U3A* | Telephone | Head Teacher |

| Participant | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Disability | Class | SO | Recruitment Method | Data Collection Method | Past Employ |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 9OW | 79 | F | White British | None | Working/Middle | Heterosexual | Older women's networks | Telephone | Teacher & Community Pharmacist |
| 10OW | 82 | F | White Caucasian | None | Middle | Heterosexual | Older women's networks | Telephone | Secretary P.A. |
| 11OW | 72 | F | Human race | None | Working | Lesbian | Older women's networks | Face to face | Nurse Midwife |
| 12OW | 82 | F | White British | None | Middle | Heterosexual | Phase 1 of research study | Telephone | Armed Forces Industry |
| 13OW | 80 | F | White British | None | Working | Lesbian | Older women's networks | Telephone | Nurse |
| 14OW | 73 | F | British/ Yorkshire | None | Middle | Heterosexual | Older women's networks | Face to face | Teacher |
| 15OW | 75 | F | British | None | Working | Heterosexual | Older women's networks | Telephone | Teacher |
| 16OW | 81 | F | 'Boringly' British | None | Working/Middle | Heterosexual | Older women's networks | Face to face | Secretary/Youth Work/Teacher/ Counsellor |

APPENDIX 14: PHASE 2 PARTICIPANTS' SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP PROFILE

| Name | Sexual Relationship{s} History | Current sexual relationship{s} status |
|-------------|--|--|
| 1OW | Sexual relationship before marriage Married once Still married Some 'flings' during marriage | Long term sexual relationship |
| 2OW | Marriage 1 – short Marriage 2 - current | Long term sexual relationship that is no longer sexual |
| 3OW | Sexual relationship before marriage + with person she married Marriage 1 – lasted 16 years Marriage 2 – split up 2 years ago | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 4OW | Sexual Relationship before married Married once for 48 years Husband died in May 2009 | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 5OW | Sexual relationship before marriage Married once Still married | Long term sexual relationship that is no longer sexual |
| 6OW | Boyfriends/engaged Married once for 45 years Husband died 5 years ago | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 7OW | No sexual relationships before marriage Marriage 1 – lasted 32 years Marriage 2 – current (2 years ago) | Long term sexual relationship |
| 8OW | Sexual relationship before marriage Married once for 44 years Husband died 8 years ago | Currently not in sexual relationship |

| Name | Relationship History | Current relationship & sexual expression |
|------|---|--|
| 9OW | No sexual relationship before marriage Marriage 1 - lasted 24 years Has had other sexual relationships since divorce | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 10OW | Many sexual relationships before marriage Marriage 1 – lasted 29 years Separated and did renew marriage vows but never got back together with husband Had a short sexual relationship after marriage ended | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 11OW | Marriage 1 – lasted 20 yrs Separated Sexual relationships with women – 2 long term and 2 short term | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 12OW | Marriage 1- separated 1974 – had ‘fling’ with husband for a few months some years later | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 13OW | Marriage 1 – separated after 20 years as both decided they were gay/lesbian Long-term relationship with woman Some short term relationships with women | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 14OW | Sexual relationship before marriage with husband Married at 21years old and still married | Long term sexual relationship that is no longer sexual |
| 15OW | No sexual relationship before marriage Married once for 47 years Husband died 4 years ago | Currently not in sexual relationship |
| 16OW | No sexual relationship before marriage Marriage 1 – lasted 20 years Married 2 - at 54 years of age and currently married Had sexual relationships between marriages | Long term sexual relationship |

APPENDIX 15: PHASE 2 – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

- Make sure that the participant is clear about the purpose of the interview and reiterate the aims if necessary.
- Information Sheet – anything need clarifying/expanding on?
- Participant Consent Sheet – for face-to-face interviews go through sheet, sign, and give copy to participant.
- Participant Consent Sheet – for telephone interviews acknowledge receipt of signed copy, and check that participant has received their copy.
- Check participant's agreement to have interview taped and clarify that tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed at the end of the research project.
- Re-emphasise confidentiality and anonymity.
- Remind participant that they have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions put to them.

Settling in/rapport building questions

- **Demographic information:** Age, ethnicity, disability, class, sexual relationship history, sexual orientation and current/past employment.
- **Definition of sexuality:** For the purposes of this research I am using a wide definition of 'sexuality' not only includes sex and sexual practices but also sexual orientation, sensuality, sexual emotions, sexual relationships, beliefs, identity, sexual desires. What do you feel about this definition – does it differ to your own?
- Have you ever been involved in research about sexuality before this?
- Who, if anybody, do you talk to about how you are feeling about your sexuality?
- If you do talk to someone, how often do you chat to them about your sexuality and what do you talk to them about?
- How would you describe your sexuality when you were younger?

Main question areas

The interview itself involves four main questions about your sexuality and any changes you have experienced with your sexuality, as you have grown older. I would like to move onto how sexuality features in your life now

1. How would you describe your sexuality now?/How important sexuality to your life now?

2. What changes, if any, have you experienced with your sexuality, as you have grown older?
3. How have you coped with these changes?
4. How do these changes make you feel about yourself?

Ending interview

Is there anything else you would like to add about how you feel about your sexuality, which has not been covered by the questions?

Do you want to be kept informed about progress of research?

If something needs clarifying can I get back to you?

Do you know of any older women who may want to take part in this research?

Many thanks for your participation.

APPENDIX 16: PHASE 2 – EXAMPLE OF A THEME FILE

This is an example of a theme file, which was constructed for each of the ten themes in order to manage the process of data analysis and provide an audit trail. Each theme file include:

- a) All the codes that make up the theme and the data-bits that contributes to each code.
- b) The construction of each theme in a tabular format.
- c) Notes on a comprehensive initial analysis based on codes and data-bits using a format, which includes describing the theme, and comparing the differences and variations within each theme from the different participants. This enables connections and relationships with other themes to be developed (Bazeley 2009).
- d) The write-up of each theme, which was the basis for the presentation of the final analysis of the findings

The referencing used was to aid finding the data-bits in the original transcripts if needed, for example (1OW4), the first number before OW refers to the participant and the number after the OW refers to the page number in the interview transcript. Any numbers following this reference in a different set of brackets, for example (1OW4) (06,07) refers to other codes, in this example codes 06 and 07, which the data-bit supports.

The example that follows is based on the theme, 'asserting sexuality now' which is part of the main theme, 'practising sexuality', which is located under overarching theme, 'expressing sexuality'.

(a) ASSERTING SEXUALITY NOW: CODES AND DATA-BITS

CODE 06: Sexual changes are part of becoming older

We are still the same person but we older person, but it's not redefining at all. I personally, and I don't know how she feels but I didn't define myself only on sexual terms, so it is one and the same. It's like having lines on the face or developing diabetes, that's another thing, it's not a definition as such.
(1OW4)(06,07)

No it has affected me in the period around menopause and once I've come to terms with it is not abnormal to feel that way. That has been a big ... it took a lot of ... how do you say? I mean there was a pressure to go on HRT so I went on HRT and sexual activity became a bit less painful but HRT gave me terrible, terrible, side effects and I had to come off it and when I came off it and penetration became impossible because of the pain and I mean really, really pain, and so I think it's then that I decided this pressure to be sexually open to men... there shouldn't be this pressure, it should be accepted as a normal getting old and that's how it is. (1OW4)

It is difficult because you see I don't want to say that older women shouldn't be represented as being sexual. What I'm saying is that sexuality does change, it

changes in the life cycle and as you get older it changes. When you're a teenager it's something, when you mature it's something, if you get a partner it's something, if you're ageing it's something it's not something that they can define generally without looking at the special circumstances or the context. (1OW9)

The most important factor I consider over a lifetime is the changes in what I would call the sexual component of one's being (1OW –email after interview)

Well I think how I feel ... I've always been very, very how do you say positive about my own sexuality and I was very sexually driven if you like and erm ... I don't feel any diminishing of it with older age. (1OW6) (06,08)

Yes right. But surely as our bodies get older we're not really that interested any more, we've had our lives. Well I have, I don't know how people manage who never had a relationship, never had children or I don't know ... they've obviously come to terms with that earlier on but I feel I've had my share, I've done my thing, I'm not expecting to set the world on fire any more, not that I ever did, but it's not good that we're perceived as being old or past it, whatever. (4OW9) (06,11)

P: You see my sexual, my sexuality, I think my sexuality has gone from me possibly

I: mm what do you mean by that

P: I am not viewed now as an object for sex

I: right, right

P: But I am viewed with admiration and respect, a little bit like the queen (laughs). (5OW9) (06,07,29,57)

I: Right and did you find, it sounds in your voice you found that quite surprising [having the most pleasurable sex] in a way.

P: Yes it was. I suppose I'd given up on sex with a partner as it were at my age so yes ... It was surprising to me to find that the feelings and the emotions and the responses were still there. (9OW4) (06,56,68)

Yes I think... It's a transition I guess, it's a natural progression. (12OW7)

P: I guess I was sorry that this friend I had a sexual relationship, I'm sorry that it faded, she definitely still feels that she would like me but I just don't have any feeling for her, I don't know it's ... and some of me wishes it was. I guess the closeness as well isn't it, not only the sex, the closeness.

I: The sort of intimacy.

P: Yes and yet I know there's part of me that withdraws from that. It withdraws from the intimacy. I don't know what that's all about. Perhaps I'm getting too old to be bothered. (13OW9) (06,24,44,110)

P: Well I just think there's changing needs especially for women. I think it could go from hetero to homosexuality. I don't know, you won't have read the growing old disgracefully book that came out right at the beginning that started the network?

I: I don't think I have.

P: Well it was written again 25 years ago and it was when women found it extremely difficult to get out of their normal roles and so quite a few of those women were either divorced or separated or had come to the idea that they were lesbians and so it was all their feelings which was very, very good really. I think needs may change as you get older. (14OW4)

CODE 07: Seeing myself as more than a sexual being

We are still the same person but we are older person, but it's not redefining at all. I personally, and I don't know how she (friend) feels but I didn't define myself only on sexual terms, so it is one and the same (1OW4)

(I:you were describing your sexuality when you were younger as being very sexual and very pleasurable).

P: Very, yes. Well yes it was something that was quite important and I was very open about it and that has changed but it hasn't changed me in terms of looking at myself. (1OW4)

I don't feel any less sexually attractive (laughing) than when I was younger. Sex and appearance do not go together for me so I haven't suffered from being less attractive because I'm getting older or because I'm being fatter ... that is sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror I find oh gosh I am fat, I'm probably not as attractive as I used to be, but it's only passing, it's not the core of my consciousness really. (1OW6) (07,12)

You see as a feminist my consciousness about myself was as a sexual being very strongly but it has never been only a sexual being – you see what I mean? So growing older, losing those years where sexuality has changed between the ages 65 and 68, 69 where I was struggling with penetration ... no it was more than that, it was 55 to 65, something like that, while I was losing this part of my sexuality it didn't affect my own identity if you know what I mean (1OW9) (07,09)

I realised that I didn't have to do anything about it, I just accept that it is what it is; penetrative sex was not pleasurable for me any more and it did not affect my identity. My identity is more like a whole woman who is completely ignored on the intellectual, on the physical level, on all levels. So you know that sort of thing. (1OW9) (02,07,11)

P: Yes well I think ... we think that sexuality is the key to a relationship and what I'm saying is that I think it's the key to a relationship for some people at a certain time in your life and for some people it continues and for some it doesn't. (2OW11) (07,17,23)

I'm not saying I've got the answers, I only know what I've got here is something precious and I'd love to be able to tell you, this is why I wanted to do this, I'd love to be able to tell people all about it, there's more to life than just sex. (2OW12) (07,28,57)

I: You'll have to see how you feel after your holiday.

P: Yes see if I can pick up a fella (laughing).

I: ..it's definitely link to how you feel about yourself as well isn't it really.

P: Yes, yes. But it's [sexuality] not the only part of life. (4OW10)

P: You see my sexual, my sexuality, I think my sexuality has gone from me possibly

I: mm what do you mean by that

P: I am not viewed now as an object for sex

I: right, right

P: But I am viewed with admiration and respect, a little bit like the queen (laughs) (5OW9 06,07,29,57)

I: So how do you feel about your sexuality now and about yourself?

P: I feel .. I gained a lot of confidence I think perhaps when I was younger. I think what people thought about me, what people think about me still does matter a lot but I think ... I think I can see that I have other the qualities now. I think when I was younger I felt that was the only thing [being sexual] that mattered to anybody about me, well to men anyway, (6OW10) (07,62)

I: And do you feel a lot of your identity was possibly based on your sexuality?

P: I think so. Well that's what I felt. And now I'm almost ... no I realise I'm a lot more, there's a lot to me than that and alright if people see that in me as well fine but I'm happier that somebody says that she's a fantastic public speaker, I'd rather somebody say that about me now. (6OW10)

I really don't think my identity is based on my sexuality and you know again some people have to feel like a sexual object because they're women (14OW1) My identity wasn't tied up with sexuality how I defined it as I became more confident in the person I was. (14OW8)

CODE 56: Sexuality still part of me

Well I think how I feel ... I've always been very, very how do you say positive about my own sexuality and I was very sexually driven if you like and erm ... I don't feel any diminishing of it with older age. (1OW6) (06,56)

and I think it is a man's problem whereas some women say oh he wants sex and I really don't feel like it – I don't have this problem but on the other hand I don't get the physical intimacy that I would like unless I ask for it if you know what I mean. I don't know if it is a general problem but since you're doing research I should tell you. (1OW9)

I do, yes I do feel very positive. I do feel myself as a sexual person. (1OW6)

Well it is a huge change because penetration was very important, that was the idea, absolutely yes, that is a change but the rest of sexuality, what I call other physical contact, and specially clitoral stimulation is the same. (1OW5) (02, 56)

I: Very early on [in the interview] when we started chatting you said something about it's [sexual feelings] completely gone now or 'just about' and I wondered what was the 'just about' about?

P: Well just about was about the fact that I do sometimes want to masturbate and the other night, in the middle of the night, I managed to achieve a certain amount of physical ... what I can't seem to do is to get the muscles to do what they ought to do, you know what I mean, but I just managed to do just that but I haven't been able to do that for ages and why the hell I could manage it that night I don't know why and not others, but I thought ooh, that's still there then a bit. It wasn't terribly ... well no it was quite pleasurable but most times it doesn't work. (3OW7) (23,56)

P: Oh I think we go into two categories. I've seen it on the television women boasting about their sexual activity you know.....we still have sex and this and this and this, keeps you young and

I: How old do you think these women are? What age are you talking about?

P: 75 like and I've seen programmes on the television and they're boasting that it keeps them younger or they are the other way completely they never ever talk about it and to them it is just a thing of the past. It's not a thing of the past in my mind completely but I would never go round talking about it in public. (5OW10) (03)

P: So I have always been a very outgoing person and I think that was probably part of my sexuality you know I was outgoing and friendly.

I: Yes that is a theme that seems to have run through your life really from the very first bit you were talking to me about it being an ethos, a central part of you, that outgoingness. It feels as if you have still got that really....

P: I think I still have some of it because I find I am very helpful with young people but... you know... young men seem to want me to help them and I do help them you know with their speeches and such like and I get all the men in the group, I'm very comfortable and they are comfortable with me. We have a great sort of rapport. (5OW7/8) (12,20,56)

I: You were obviously sad about that side of the relationship and I just wondered what had then happened to your sexual feelings, you know, were they still there

P: I just put them on the back burner....

I: Right and just sort of ... they never sort of rear their heads do they or....

P: No not really, no (silence)

I: It's just that some women that I talk to say that their sexual feelings change quite a lot when they go through the menopause but obviously yours didn't.....

P: Oh no, no, (silence)

I: Right, right, so they are on the back burner then

P: Yes I think so yes (5OW9/10)

I: So the men that you have been going out with then you haven't actually felt any sexual feeling towards them?

P: No except for one. Except for one and yes that was very good, I enjoyed him and we had a really nice time together but that didn't come to anything.

I: And going back to how you were feeling about this other person and your sexual feelings, do you think that they changed at all, do you feel that they were as intense as when you were younger?

P: You mean with this person that I'm saying I did have ...

I: Yes

P: Yes it was definitely as intense. (6OW8)

I'm quite surprised when I talk to women ... I don't know whether ... I think sexuality in its broadest terms I think it matters to all women. I think they've all got some sort of identity even if it's only that I am a woman and I will behave like a woman, even if it's as broad as that but I do think ... I don't think it matters how old people are. (6OW15)

I: Because that's interesting as well really in terms of ... I was just thinking you were talking about ageing and you used the word degeneration. It is the word you used isn't it?

P: Yes

I: I was just quite interested to hear you .. there are certain things that may not degenerate ...?

P: Yes. In that respect that [masturbation] hasn't (7OW12) (56,77)

I am 8 out of 10 [very interested in sex], when I was young and even now. It hasn't changed just because I'm old I just haven't got anybody to practice it with (laugh) (8OW4) (43,56)

P: I think the other thing, which a lot of people don't ever admit to, I can't remember a time when I didn't masturbate.

I: Right I was going to ask you that.

P: I can't ever remember a time however minor it was when I was perhaps 10, 11, 12 or something like that, I don't really think I was doing anything very interesting, but I can remember that and of course during marriage not unless I was away from husband from any length of time and certainly since I've been left a widow I occasionally, once a week or something like that.

I: So you obviously still feel very sexual?

P: Oh yes, definitely. (8OW6) (23,56)

I'm not in a relationship at the moment I still feel very much a sexual being and sensuality, yes and very appreciative of how ... (9OW2)

I'm still kind of aroused by sexual images and reading and so on and I feel that that's ok, that I enjoy that and even if it doesn't go anywhere it shows the feeling of aliveness, it increases the feeling of aliveness. (9OW3)

I: And in fact it feels also that they are still there as well even though you're not expressing them within a partnership.

P: That's right. I feel if the right person came along I mean it made me realise that I'm still very much a sexual woman. If the right person came along. (9OW4) (32,56)

I: Right and did you find, it sounds in your voice you found that quite surprising [having the most pleasurable sex] in a way.

P: Yes it was. I suppose I'd given up on sex with a partner as it were at my age so yes ... It was surprising to me to find that the feelings and the emotions and the responses were still there. (9OW4) (06,56,68)

I mean I believed, I see myself as being a highly sexed physically and emotionally passionate woman who unfortunately perhaps through making the wrong decisions ... for a time I suppose I expressed that, physical passion anyway when I went wild in [country], then I married this rather staid person who found it difficult to express his own feelings and things and that was what eventually drove me to the separation because I felt I never was able to build a sort of relationship with him that I'd looked for in marriage so I felt very deeply frustrated and that affected my whole life since I think. (10OW8) (56,104)

What you ... and I don't feel that I've missed something in my life which I should have had, I haven't much to complain about compared with a maiden aunt I had for instance but still and all that's the world today so yes I definitely miss it and I still feel ... I can see a fit bloke and say to myself I wouldn't mind a bit of that. (10OW10) (44,56,92)

I: I just wondered if it was something that you missed now?

P: Yes I do, in fact when you get onto the heading of the topic that I direct you to is called 'missing it'. I find actually, I find it extremely irritating and sometimes quite stressful that there is so much explicit sex on tv, in books and things, and a lot of it at a level that I never experienced which makes me feel that I've missed out or something and anyway I sit there saying oh for god's sake that's alright but I'm not getting any and I turn it off (laughing) because it ... yes I suppose ... I doubt very much whether I would be able to perform very much at my age but it doesn't stop you in your head does it? (10OW10) (44,56,104)

Yes it is oh yes it is and perhaps in some respects it might be less so if I felt I'd had my fair share. I mean I put that in inverted commas because it's not the way one should look at it, it's a question of fulfilling your potential I think. If you feel something that you could or should have done to express yourself in your life and you haven't been able to I think that's really what it comes down to. It isn't what other people are having it's what so much it's what you wanted yourself. (10OW10) (56,104)

P: I suppose it was all in my head and this is what I'm saying really. It was because I was having his attention I suppose and we got on well together but I suppose it means that the spark is still there.

I: Yes and again you're describing an energising of yourself really.

P: Yes yes that's where we started from wasn't it

I: It was

P: It was. And again it was mostly mental energy but it was certainly there so yes I think I would reckon that the candle hasn't been entirely blown out. (10OW15)

I: But also able to talk about your sexuality in your blog, which is interesting.

P: Yes that does seem to show doesn't it, that the flow of sexuality is still running. (10OW23)

I: Am I right in thinking that for you then becoming older hasn't had a huge impact on your sexuality in any way?

P: No I don't think it's had any impact on my sexuality, I think my sexuality is still intact but to a woman, it's as simple as that. (11OW13)

I: But it feels though what I think is quite interesting is it feels as if you still feel sexual.

P: Yes

I: Because of the dreams and your very strong identity. Is that right?

P: Yes

I: It's a very different step isn't it then to find somebody you feel sexual about, two different things going on isn't there really (13OW8) (17,56,73)

I: So you would see it {the lack of sexual activity in a long term relationship} more from what you've said, you'd see it more connected to the length of a relationship as opposed to anything to do with age?

P: Yes

I: Because you were saying you could imagine you know if you weren't with [husband] you could imagine ...

P: Yes I think I could.

I: ... the sexuality being rekindled in you.

P: It would be the novelty value.

I: That urgency if you started a new relationship.

P: Yes I think so (14OW10)

I: Do you feel your needs have changed?

P: Oh very much so, yes. My needs are all fulfilled at the moment by [husband] in every way. Now I also I'm aware that because I've been in this relationship for 53 years if it broke down well probably if [husband] died I think my sexuality in the normal sense of the word might come to the fore again.

I: Do you mean in a sense that quite raw sexual feelings you mean?

P: Yes, yes. Yes. I think so (14OW4)

I think I get extra from penetrative sex now. I think I like ... I really liked that feeling of him inside me and having an orgasm and I know ... yes it's ... I mean I can become aroused still, I can still become aroused and we use lots of oil, we do use lots of oils and cream and I'm still wondering if I shouldn't do something so that we can go and have penetrative sex again. I don't know, that's the one question whether I should in fact but I hate the medical side of it because I was having to get these things, I had to get them on prescription and stuff and it felt it was being interfered with somehow and lost it's personal nature whereas now ... I suppose sometimes it made me laugh which we can laugh a lot. (16OW17) (9,39,56)

CODE 57: Sexuality replaced

P: but no it's (sexual activity) just not there. But something else is. Something that's much stronger than the sex.

I: Right and can you put it into words at all what that other thing is?

P: Yes it's erm, it's a sort of reliance on each other, it's like we can't do without each other and we talk about it quite a bit. I can't imagine life without him
(2OW7) (28, 57)

I'm not saying I've got the answers, I only know what I've got here is something precious and I'd love to be able to tell you, this is why I wanted to do this, I'd love to be able to tell people all about it, there's more to life than just sex.
(2OW12) (07,28,57)

P: You see my sexual, my sexuality, I think my sexuality has gone from me possibly

I: mm what do you mean by that

P: I am not viewed now as an object for sex

I: right, right

P: But I am viewed with admiration and respect, a little bit like the queen
(laughs) (5OW9) (06,07,29,57)

P: Yes but I don't know if/where sexuality comes into it

I: I think it depends how you see sexuality really... I think if you take a wider definition and seeing it in terms of attractiveness and different things like that then it probably is still there although you mentioned that it was on the back boiler, you know it might be coming through in other ways

P: Yes

I: I don't know what you think about that

P: It may be I don't know (silence)... (5OW13)

I: And do you feel this [passion] for new things in your life as well or is it things that have always been in your life and you've had a renewed passion for them?

P: Well I mean I moved house about one a half years ago, I'm very happy with the move, and I've got a small terraced house and I have a very good relationship with my neighbours and my friends. I got involved with, it's a large village where I live with things happening, and really happy that we've just started a transitions group with is a sustainability group and I'm very happy about the fact that because I have this inner confidence I can relate to people, male/female, young/old, in a very sort of direct way. Does that make sense?
(9OW6/7)

After sort of saying I see myself as a highly sexed, passionate but unfulfilled person you know, and I feel I've never really realised my potential and I felt very frustrated and lonely even in marriage and all this sort of frustration so I think it's left me with difficulty in expressing my own emotions and affections easily now and have re-channelled the energies that I would like to express through sexual and loving relationships into more intellectual activities and things and interests and instead of committing to people I commit to roles or tasks and challenges.
(10OW8) (104,57)

I think most of what I've got here under the heading we've touched on already. I started off as I've always seen myself as a highly emotional, physically and passionate woman but I felt that I've never been able to realise that potential

and that eventually I've sort of re-channelled the sexual energy into other activities and roles and so on. And er ... I've put a note here but I think I've said it to you that I express my sexuality in humorous entries my blog these days. (10OW21) (17,57,104)

P: It's incredibly complex. Yes I mean the changes in my sexual identity I suppose the changes have been changes in someone trying to express herself in a relationship and failing to do so and turning into somebody else, an efficient doer of things. (10OW23)

P: it felt so funny to go out without [husband] all dressed up but I had a great time but I left just before 12 to drive myself home, I thought I'm not going to get into any difficult situations so I was aware that I didn't want anything else at all because of all these other things that were so important to me.

I: And you would see those other things as being part of the sexuality that you had together maybe?

P: Yes if it you define it as sexuality. As I say I think it's love, I think it's ... you know I don't like the expression having sex. I could never, ever, well who knows what I could never, ever do, you don't know you know. (14OW9) (25, 57)

(b) ASSERTING SEXUALITY NOW: ITS CONSTRUCTION

| Name of theme | Total number of databits | Total participant support |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Asserting Sexuality Now | 61 | 15 out of 16 participants supported this theme |

| Codes | Links to other codes | Number of databits | Participant support |
|---|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 06 Sexual changes are part of becoming older | 06,07,08,11,24,29,44,56,57,68,110 | 11 | 1,4,5,9,12,13,14, |
| 07 Seeing myself as more than a sexual being | 02,06,09,11,12,17,23,28,29,57,62 | 13 | 1,2,4,5,6,14 |
| 56 Sexuality still part of me | 02,03,06/2,9,12,17,20,23/2,32,39,43,44/2,68,73,77,92,104/3 | 28 | 1,3,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,13,14,16 |
| 57 Sexuality replaced | 06,07,17,25,28,29,104/2 | 9 | 2,5,9,10,14 |

(c) ASSERTING SEXUALITY NOW: INITIAL ANALYSIS NOTES

DESCRIPTION

Key ideas, characteristics and boundaries

This theme focuses on older women talking about their sexuality in the present i.e. as they experience it now.

There is a general assertion that sexuality is still present in their lives in one form or another.

The issues discussed within this theme are: changes experienced with sexuality, which have been linked to ageing; how much sexuality is part of one's identity; and how sexuality is replaced by other things.

There is an acknowledgement of the changes experienced with sexuality – these changes are associated, on the one hand, with age ('06 Sexual changes are part of becoming older') but in an 'over time things change sense' as opposed to ageing per se, but on the other hand the changes are diverse, making a generalised conclusive statement about sexuality within the context of ageing impossible. The changes range from 'rediscovery of sexuality' (9OW4) to 'getting too old to bother with it' (13OW9).

Within this theme the majority of the participants view sexuality as part of their identity – 'sexuality still part of me' or 'seeing myself as more than a sexual being'.

The link between changes and sexuality being part of identity is succinctly stated 'the most important factor I consider over a lifetime is the changes in what I would call the sexual component of one's being' (1OW). There is a sense from the participants that they have 'grown' in spite of experiencing losses around their sexuality (e.g. 1OW – psi; 2OW, 4OW, 5OW – sexual relationship with husband) i.e. 'seeing myself as more than a sexual being'.

Majority of the participants stated that their sexuality was still part of their selves. Many maintained that their awareness of being a sexual person had not diminished with age and that in fact what had changed was the way they expressed their sexuality i.e. how they coped and acted on any sexual feelings, which could range from issues on a personal level (e.g. difficulty in penile vaginal penetration (pvp) 1OW) to more social issues (e.g. lack of partner 8OW).

Some participants feel that their sexuality had been 'replaced' either consciously by themselves (9OW, 10OW, 14OW) or other people (5OW) and these replacements can signify changes (5OW, 9OW, 10OW, 14OW).

How are things talked about? What is the context?

Many of the participants discuss sexuality within the context of experiencing change and/or recognising its variability from person to person (i.e. that it is context bound influenced by age, gender and relationship status) – this fluidity of sexuality is acknowledged in Theme 'Expressing Sexuality Diversely'.

Discussing their sexuality as 'part' of their identity challenges Foucault's assertion that sexuality is 'central' to identity.

Sexuality is talked about in terms of changes and fluidity in the amount of space it occupies within an older woman's identity – 'the most important factor I consider over a lifetime is the changes in what I would call the sexual component of one's being' (1OW) or is it that other aspects of being for older women start to occupy more space 'I don't feel any diminishing of it (sexuality) with older age' (1OW6)

Some participants (1OW, 4OW,) stated their personal experiences of changes as a criticism of what they thought was a 'general perception' e.g. 'there shouldn't be this pressure (to continue with pvp) it should be accepted as normal getting old and that's how it is' (1OW4); 'I'm not expecting to set the world on fire any more, not that I ever did, but it's not good that we're perceived as being old and past it' (4OW9).

Contradiction between 'changes in the sexual component of one's being' (1OW) and 'I don't feel any diminishing of it with older age' (1OW6) – does this suppose that this participant splits physical act of sexuality and sexual feelings? (Note to self: explore this further with other participants' transcripts).

Although the majority of the participants discussed the fact that 'sexuality is still part of me', sexuality was discussed in terms of different levels of intensity of sexual feelings and the different ways sexual feelings were aroused and expressed.

Sexuality being replaced by something else was not talked about in a negative way but in a way that energies and passions had been redirected (9OW, 10OW) or that the replacement was of a higher status/better – e.g. 'queen' (5OW9) or 'love' (14OW9).

A significant number of participants (1OW, 2OW, 4OW, 5OW, 6OW, 14OW) discussed the fact that although they had experienced changes and losses in relation to their sexuality this did not seem to negatively effect the way they saw themselves, (e.g. 'while I was losing this part of my sexuality it didn't affect my own identity if you know what I mean' 1OW9). With some participants viewing themselves in broader terms or confirming to themselves that they were not just defined by their sexuality. It could be tentatively suggested that for the participants whose identity had been predominantly based on sexuality they had transcended their gender expectations and managed to start to base their identity on other aspects of their selves.

What is not talked about

What are the exceptions or something that does not fit in?

Rediscovery of sexual feelings as a surprise change for one older woman (9OW4).

Changes in sexuality had been how other people viewed her - (whereas for other participants contributing to this aspect of the theme had consciously taken part in the replacing of their sexuality – a good example of this is 10OW) - by replacing viewing her as an 'object for sex' (5OW9) to viewing her 'with admiration and respect, a little like the queen' (5OW9).

One participant discussed explicitly that her sexuality may be rekindled if she started another relationship and the fact that any sexual feelings she did have towards her husband were not intense enough to be acted on (14OW4)

Importance – number of supporters and saliency

06 Sexual changes are part of becoming older

07 Seeing myself as more than a sexual being

56 Sexuality still part of me

57 Sexuality replaced

Although not many codes within this theme (in comparison to other themes) the overall support and number of data bits (61) demonstrates the importance of this theme.

15 out of 16 participants contributed to this theme – only participant OW15 did not contribute (profile 47 years married/husband died 4 years ago/no current sexual relationship).

Majority of support (over half of the contributors) for Code 56.

Just under half of the participants supported Codes 06 and 07.

Conclusion – all codes are significant in terms of support from participants and data-bits.

Links to other themes

Fluidity of sexuality acknowledged and demonstrated within this theme in terms of older women's present experiences of their sexuality is linked to Theme 'Expressing Sexuality Diversely' where this fluidity is also recognised when women engage in diverse ways of expressing themselves sexually.

COMPARISON OF DIFFERENCES/VARIATIONS WITHIN THEME

Variations between individual women's talk on this particular theme

- **Ask Who? Why? What? When?**
- **Differently expressed?**
- **Under what conditions?**

Changes in sexuality varied from – no diminishing of feelings (1OW); shift in sexual component of one's being (1OW); disinterest and can't be bothered (4OW, 13OW); sexuality not there (12OW7); rediscovery of sexual feelings (9OW); not viewed as a sex object by others (5OW) refocusing of energies (9OW, 10OW). The link between these diverse changes (as stated below) is that it is a 'natural progression' (12OW7).

Replacement of sexuality – transition from sex object to queen (5OW9); energy into community projects which involved people (9OW6/7); energy into writing blogs, activities and roles – removing from emotional relationships with people (10OW8/21/23); transition from having sex to love (14OW9).

More than a sexual being – assertion that 'there's more to life than just sex' (2OW12 + 4OW10); transcending gender expectations from sex object to queen (5OW9); developing other qualities and confidence (6OW10, 14OW1 + 8); confirmation that always knew that she was more than sexual being (1OW).

Sexuality still part of me – difference in intensity of sexual feelings as for some participants sexual feelings had not diminished (1OW, 6OW, 7OW, 8OW) and for others (3OW, 5OW, 14OW) their sexual feelings were still there but were on

a 'back burner' (5OW9) {5OW and 14OW were in long term relationships which were not sexual}. For many of the participants it was the expression of their sexual feelings that had changed as opposed to their intensity – this change in expression was due to issues with psi (1OW, 5OW, 14OW, 16OW), lack of partner (8OW, 9OW, 10OW, 13OW) – but the diversity of sexual expression was present e.g. non-psi (1OW, 16OW), masturbation (3OW, 8OW), rechanneling energy into other things that tapped into self esteem (5OW public speaking), stimulation from sexual images and reading (9OW), expression 'in my head' (10OW), dreams (13OW), sexuality present and not acted on (5OW, 14OW).

Variations and links

Common link in discussions about changes is assertion that these changes should be accepted as normal/obvious (1OW4, 4OW9, 12OW7, 14OW4).

Common link is way that the assertion that sexuality exists but occupies at the moment less space in the self – 'but I though ooh that's still there then a bit' (3OW7); 'it's not a thing of the past in my mind completely'(5OW12); 'i just put them on the back burner' (5OW9); 'the candle hasn't been entirely blow out' (10OW15); 'the flow of sexuality is still running' (10OW23); 'I think my sexuality is still intact' (11 OW13); 'I think my sexuality in the normal sense of the word might come to the fore again' (14OW4);

(d) ASSERTING SEXUALITY NOW: WRITE-UP

Themes 1 and 2, issues of penetration and diversity of sexual expression respectively, focused on sex, sexual practices and different ways of sexual expression that the older women participants engaged in and experienced. This theme 'asserting sexuality now' continues to tell the story of older women's sexuality, but differs from the aforementioned themes, with the participants focusing on sexuality in a more holistic way and considering its current presence and influence in their lives. The participants explore how they feel their sexuality exists for them in relation to other aspects of themselves and in particular within the context of their own ageing. The issues that are discussed within this theme include the participants' views on changes they may have experienced with their sexuality, with some of the older women discussing how their sexuality has been replaced by other things, and how, if at all, their sexuality influences the perception they have of themselves. Running through this theme is a commonly held assertion amongst the majority of the participants that their sexuality, whilst 'ebbing and flowing', remains an aspect of their lives.

Most of the participants discuss sexuality, both generally and personally, within the context of change whilst also recognising its variability from person to person which they feel is often driven by age, gender and relationship status. This fluidity associated with sexuality was demonstrated by the participants in Theme 2 when discussing the diverse ways of expressing themselves sexually. Although changes within sexuality are acknowledged by the majority of the participants, only half view the changes as a direct consequence of becoming older. Interestingly amongst these participants (1OW4, 4OW9, 12OW7,

14OW4) there is a general view that changes within sexuality 'should be accepted as a normal part of getting old' (1OW4) and 'a transition.... a natural progression' (12OW7). What needs to be emphasised is that it is the concept of change per se as opposed to the types of change that the participants associate with age. This important point allows the participants to assert that changes happen in relation to older women's sexuality, but that the changes experienced can be dissimilar.

Building on this assertion the findings do highlight a diverse range of changes which are experienced by the older women in relation to their sexuality, from the rediscovery of 'the feelings and the emotions and the responses of it [sexuality]' (9OW4), through to not feeling 'any diminishing of it [sexuality]' (1OW6) to 'getting too old to be bothered with it [sexuality]' (13OW9). One participant (14OW) felt that her sexual feelings toward her husband had changed and were now not intense enough to be acted on, but felt that she could experience the intensity of sexual feelings again if she were to start a new sexual relationship. This is an interesting comment as it suggests that, for this participant, the changes in her sexuality are not fixed but have the potential to change in the future. This again supports the concept of fluidity and movement in relation to sexuality and in particular the variability of its influence on an individual's life. For a few participants (4OW, 12OW, 13OW) there was however a finality about the changes that they had experienced which tended to focus on a disinterest in, and a diminishing of, their sexuality. It is worth noting however that these participants were not, at the time of data collection, involved in a sexual relationship and were discussing their sexuality and changes only within the context of pursuing any future sexual relationships.

Changes were identified by some participants who felt that their sexuality had been 'replaced' by something else (2OW, 5OW, 9OW, 10OW, 14OW). This process of 'replacement' was discussed in positive terms by the older women and within the context of a refocusing of the energy and passion that they had usually associated with their sexuality. For example one participant described herself as being passionate about new things and had moved house, made new friends and joined a local sustainability group (9OW6/7). Another participant had removed herself from emotional relationships with people and was putting energy into expressing herself through constructing and writing her blog (10OW8/21/23). Another participant (5OW) had rechanneled her energy into public speaking, which had boosted both her confidence and self-esteem. For a couple of other participants (2OW, 14OW) however, whose long term relationships with their husbands were now no longer sexual, there was a sense that this aspect of their sexuality had been replaced by something 'better'. For example one participant felt that the sexual side of her relationship had been replaced by love (14OW9) and for the other participant the 'replacement' was with 'something that's much stronger than the sex.... it's a sort of reliance on each other, it's like we can't do without each other' (2OW7). For the majority of the participants who contributed to this discussion around the replacement of their sexuality, or aspects of their sexuality, there was a sense that there had been a conscious decision to either instigate and/or take an active part in promoting these changes.

There was an exception however, where one participant had felt that changes in her sexuality had been based on how other people viewed her and she had had very little control over the process of change. The older woman participant summarises the 'replacement' by stating that 'I am not viewed now as an object for sex... but am viewed with admiration and respect, a little like the queen' (5OW9). This transition from sex object to queen had been imposed on her by other people who, she felt, had reacted stereotypically to her appearance as an 'older' woman, that is, regarding older women in a non sexual or asexual way. This was particularly significant to this participant who had, all her life, taken extreme care of her public appearance and had 'exuded sexuality when I was younger' (5OW2). In her interview she stated that 'I am still very slim and I am not afraid to have Botox, I've had it once or twice and I have taken care of my skin' (5OW5). Other participants (1OW, 4OW) also raised the issue of how older women were perceived sexually and the tension they felt between what was expected of them and what they were experiencing. For example one participant (4OW9) who felt that her sexuality was taking a diminishing role in her life was also acutely aware that she could be used as an example to support the 'asexual' stereotype. In her interview she states that 'I'm not expecting to set the world on fire any more.... but it's not good that we're [older women] perceived as being old and past it' (4OW9). Another participant was experiencing pressure to continue to engage with penetrative sexual intercourse regardless of any changes she was experiencing and stated that 'there shouldn't be this pressure [to continue with penetrative sexual intercourse]... it should be accepted as normal [not continuing] when getting old and that's how it is' (1OW4).

These experiences demonstrate the pressure felt by some participants from two contrasting but dominant sexual stereotypes for older women, that of, asexuality and the 'sexy oldie' (Gott 2005). These stereotypes suggest two opposing 'developments' that older women can expect in relation to specific aspects of their sexuality within the context of ageing. Firstly, changes can be expected in older age and these changes are focused solely on the diminishing importance of sexuality both in how it is expressed by older women, and how older women's sexuality is perceived by others. Opposing this is the view that any changes in sexuality can be and should be resisted, with much research {Note to self: e.g. cite studies} emphasising the role that sexual activity plays in maintaining and developing 'healthy' ageing. There is a particular emphasis within this view on sexual practices and, in particular heterosexual penetrative sexual intercourse, which is seen as the activity that should be pursued with the same [perceived] vigour and commitment of youth. The findings from this research study challenge both these stereotypes by highlighting that although changes in relation to sexuality are experienced by older women, these changes are both fluid and diverse. This fluidity and diversity of experiences that the older women participants identify not only make a generalised statement about sexuality within the context of ageing impossible but also undesirable. Their experiences also highlight the oppressive nature of the dominant stereotypes which impose the notion of homogenous changes and in turn can stifle any narrative about nuanced experiences of sexuality within the context of ageing.

Although the majority of the older women participants maintained that they regarded themselves currently as a sexual person, the views of their sexuality varied in terms of its prominence and expression. In fact for many of the participants it has been the expression of their sexuality, and in particular their sexual feelings, that has undergone significant changes. Although some participants, as discussed earlier, felt that 'sexual changes are part of becoming old', two other influences on sexual changes were also identified. Firstly for some heterosexual participants (1OW, 5OW, 14OW, 16OW) who are currently in long term relationships, there have been 'difficulties' around the continuation of penetrative sexual intercourse, as a sexual expression. These issues were discussed fully in Theme 1 'Issues of penetration'. Secondly for some of the other participants (8OW, 9OW, 10OW, 13OW) the lack of sexual partner has been influential in relation to changes in their sexual expression. Theme 'Diversity of sexual expression' details a range of different ways that the older women participants expressed their sexual feelings, some of which were re-emphasised by the older women participants in relation to this theme. These included non-penetrative sexual activity (1OW, 16OW), being sexual with themselves (3OW, 8OW), feeling stimulated by sexual images and written word (9OW), expressing sexuality cognitively or 'in my head' (10OW10), experiencing sexual dreams (13OW), and some participants stated that their sexuality exists but is not acted on (5OW, 14OW). It cannot be assumed that this range of expressions have emerged as a direct response from the older women to the two influences on sexual changes discussed earlier in this section, as they may be expressions that the participants have used all their sexual lives. For example it was discussed in Theme 2 'Diversity of sexual expression' that for a significant minority of the older women being sexual with themselves had been a consistent aspect of their sexuality through their life course. It could be argued however that it is the prominence and relevance of this diverse range of sexual expression that has grown within the lives of some of the participants as a direct response to difficulties in continuing to engage in heterosexual penetrative sexual intercourse and/or not being involved sexually with another person. The traditional notion that female sexuality cannot exist in its own right, without the 'essential' ingredients of a male partner and subsequent engagement in heterosexual penetrative sexual intercourse, is challenged by the sexual experiences of the older women participants. Due to the on-going influence of such long-established beliefs in many aspects of society the tasks of identifying, and in particular validating, a diverse range of sexual expressions is imperative in the process of enabling the older women participants to assert that 'sexuality is still part of me'. This assertion together with 'seeing myself as more than a sexual being' are the contributions made by the participants in their discussions about how their sexuality currently influences their view of themselves. It is worth noting that the changes detailed earlier in this theme not only contextualise but also influence the participants' perception of their sexual self.

A common thread throughout the participants' discussions appear to be that sexuality is part of, or an aspect of, their self as opposed to having a central role in the participants' perception of themselves. This is succinctly identified by one older woman participant who states 'the most important factor I consider over a lifetime are the changes in what I would call the sexual component of one's

being' (1OW letter correspondence). This statement is supported by many of the participants who tend to view their sexuality as 'still' existing but occupying a less prominent space within themselves. Comments such as 'I thought ooh that's [sexual feelings] still there then a bit' (3OW7); 'it's not a thing of the past in my mind completely' (5OW12); 'I just put them [sexual feelings] on the back burner' (5OW9); 'the candle hasn't been entirely blow out' (10OW15); 'the flow of sexuality is still running' (10OW23); 'I think my sexuality is still intact' (11OW13); 'I think my sexuality in the normal sense of the word might come to the fore again' (14OW4). Although these comments imply that sexuality is taking less space in the participants' perception of themselves than it might have done in the past, there is a sense from many of the participants of a sexuality 'at rest' whilst maintaining an openness to be 'stirred'. Some of the participants (3OW, 5OW, 14OW) acknowledged in their discussions that the intensity of their sexual feelings could be rekindled given the right circumstances. In contrast to this some other participants (1OW, 6OW, 7OW, 8OW) experienced their sexual feelings as powerfully as they had done in the past. One of these participants (1OW) stated that the intensity of her sexual feelings had not diminished, despite her sexuality playing a less central role in her sense of self.

It is worth considering at this point that many of the older women participants perceived themselves as 'more than a sexual being'. As well as sexuality assuming a less central or prominent role in their sense of themselves, a significant number of participants (1OW, 2OW, 4OW, 5OW, 6OW, 14OW) discussed the fact that although they had experienced changes, and in particular losses, in relation to their sexuality this did not seem to negatively affect the way they saw themselves. For example, one participant states that 'while I was losing this part [being able to continue with penetrative sexual intercourse] of my sexuality it didn't affect my own identity if you know what I mean' (1OW9). It could be suggested that that in spite of changes that highlighted significant losses in relation to their sexuality, such as loss of a sexual relationship with a current long term partner (2OW, 4OW, 5OW), some of the participants had 'grown' by viewing themselves in broader terms (6OW10, 14OW1/8) through developing other qualities and in particular their confidence. For one participant (1OW9) the changes in her sexuality, although significant, acted as a confirmation that she did not define herself only in sexual terms. A significant minority of the participants (2OW12, 4OW10, 5OW9, 6OW10) gave the sense that they had transcended gender expectations by 'seeing myself as more than a sexual being' and valuing other aspects of their selves. A couple of the participants stated that 'there's more to life than sex' (2OW12, 4OW10), which within the context of the findings of this research suggests a moment of personal revelation and development, as opposed to any concessionary cliché. One participant states 'I think when I was younger I felt that [being sexual] was the only thing that mattered to anybody about me, well to men anyway.... now I realise I'm a lot more, there's a lot more to me than that' (6OW10).

APPENDIX 17: PHASE 2 - FINAL ANALYSIS

OVERARCHING THEME: EXPRESSING SEXUALITY

MAIN THEME: COMMUNICATING SEXUALITY

THEME: TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

The participants raised three main issues: (1) talking/not talking about sexuality; (2) importance of sharing/shared experiences; and (3) use of research to talk about sexuality. Barriers to communication were identified, as were the positive aspects of sharing experiences.

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|--|
| <p>Sexuality not talked about amongst older women Importance of shared and sharing experience Using research to talk about sexuality (Some) older women are open about sexual issues</p> |
|--|

MAIN THEME: PRACTISING SEXUALITY

THEME: PENETRATING ISSUES

The older women discussed penetrative sexual intercourse in terms of changes, feelings of loss and pressure to continue to engage in the sexual activity. Different strategies that older women engaged with in order to cope with any changes were: (1) continuing to engage in the activity; (2) engaging in non-penetrative sexual activity; and (3) continuing the relationship but the latter becomes non-sexual.

| | |
|--|---|
| Sex is not only penetration Changes in penile-vaginal penetration Pressure to (continue to) have penile-vaginal penetration Non-penetrative sexual activity | Loss of penetration Male pressure on heterosexual women Improving your sex life Resisting medical intervention |
|--|---|

THEME: EXPRESSING SEXUALITY DIVERSELY

The older women participants discussed a diverse range of sexual expressions that they engaged in including, celibacy, masturbation, sexual fantasies and dreams, and sexual expression through writing, flirting, touching and appreciation of beauty. As the range of sexual expressions suggests the participants were involved with different levels of engagement with self and others in terms of physical, emotional and/or cerebral contact.

| | |
|--|---|
| Diversity of sexual expression Being sexual with myself More valuable and stronger than sex Sexual fantasies and dreams | Enjoying flirting Enjoyment and importance of touching Enjoyment of beauty Absent but not missed |
|--|---|

THEME: ASSERTING SEXUALITY NOW

The older women focused on their sexuality holistically by considering its current presence and influence on their lives. The issues that were discussed included the participants' views on changes they had experienced with their sexuality, with some of the older women discussing how their sexuality had been replaced by other things, and how, if at all, their sexuality influenced the perception they had of themselves. The majority of the participants asserted that sexuality remained an evolving aspect of their lives.

| |
|--|
| Sexual changes are part of becoming older Seeing myself as more than a sexual being Sexuality still part of me Sexuality replaced |
|--|

OVERARCHING THEME: REVISITING SEXUALITY

MAIN THEME: EMBRACING NEW POSITIONS

THEME: EXPERIENCING 'ALONENESS'

The older women participants experienced 'aleness' in different ways, from separateness within a long-term relationship, through to living and being on one's own. This theme cuts across both the identity and relationship aspects of sexuality. For many of the participants experiencing 'aleness' was a response forced onto them by a death of a partner, an ending of a sexual relationship and/or a break up of a relationship. Although on the surface these could be assumed to be unwanted or negative events the participants' experiences of 'aleness' yielded surprising and positive results that impacted significantly on their sense of themselves.

| |
|---|
| <p>Valuing separateness Being on my own Finding myself Being in charge and in control Better life without partner</p> |
|---|

THEME: RE-EVALUATING FRIENDSHIP

The older women focused on relationships that they viewed as separate from their sexuality i.e. social relationships. There was a sense that the participants were re-assessing the issue of friendship and identified qualities of social relationships as well as the aspects and differences of friendships with men and with women.

| |
|--|
| <p>Enjoying the company of women Being a good companion Friendship commitments Enjoying the company of men</p> |
|--|

MAIN THEME: EBB AND FLOW OF SEXUALITY

THEME: ENDINGS /CHANGES

The older women discussed endings in relation to sexual feelings, sexual desires and sexual relationships. These endings highlighted transitions/changes together with the feelings of loss that the participants had experienced. Issues that had prompted the loss of feelings, desires and relationships in relation to the participants' sexuality were also discussed.

| |
|---|
| <p>Ending of sexual relationship Ending of sexual feelings and desires Issues that {negatively} impact on sexual feelings Missing being sexual with someone</p> |
|---|

THEME: MOVING ON

The participants shared their experiences of how they perceived their sexuality (and in particular sexual expression) continuing within the context of ageing. This theme focused on continuity within the context of relationships ending (through separation or death). The older women discussed how their sexuality evolves, advances or just 'is' in response to these endings.

| |
|---|
| <p>Future sexual relationships Ways of moving on Experience of dating Enjoying a sexual relationship Continuation of a (long term) sexual relationship</p> |
|---|

MAIN THEME: LIVING WITH AGEISM AND SEXISM

THEME: MANAGING REPRESENTATIONS AND ATTITUDES

The participants talked about the influence of ageism and sexism on their experiences and perceptions of their sexuality. The older women identified two ways that they experienced these oppressions on different levels of society, that of (1) media representation and (2) social networks.

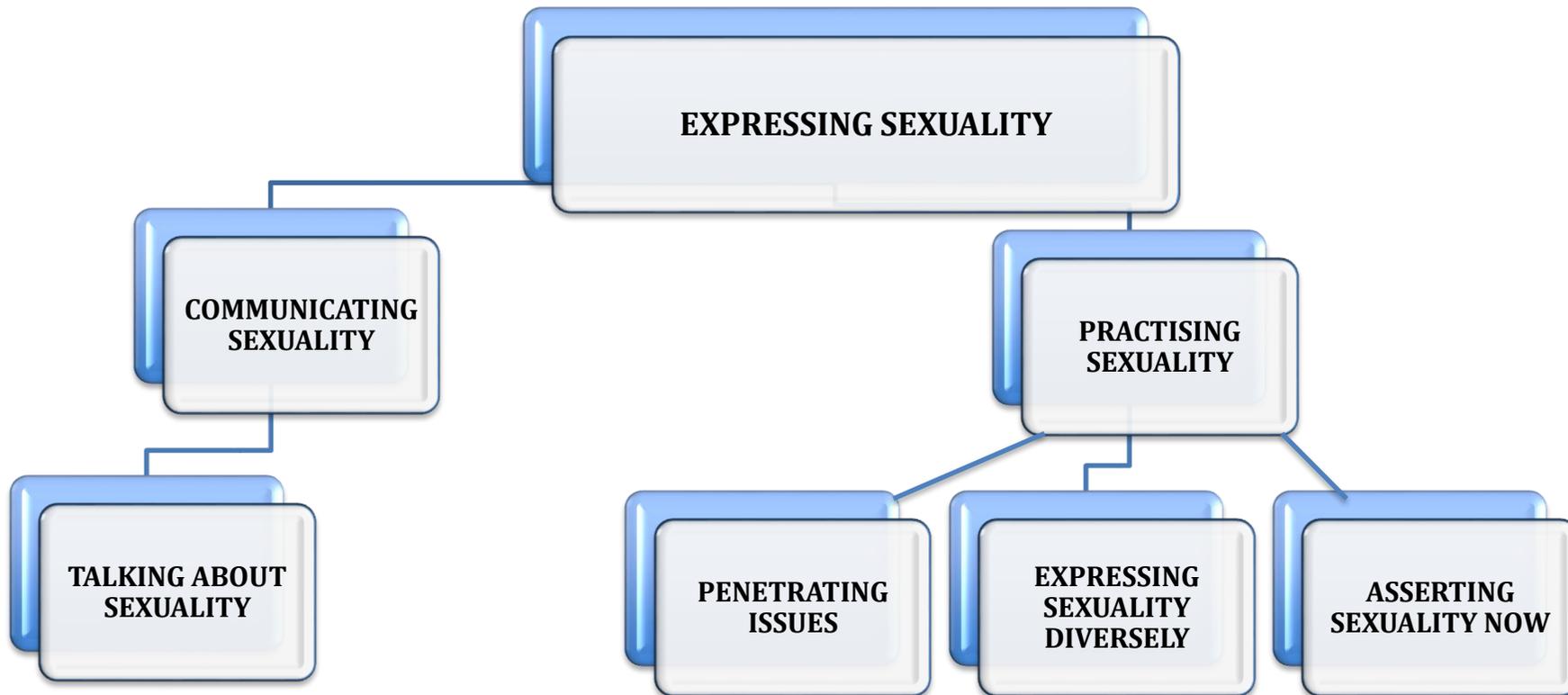
| | |
|--|--|
| Coping with ageism (Mis) represented 'youthfully' Older women's sexuality is a joke Unrepresented | Importance of reaction of others Older women are 'safe' Older men's attitude to women |
|--|--|

THEME: HANDLING BODY IMAGE

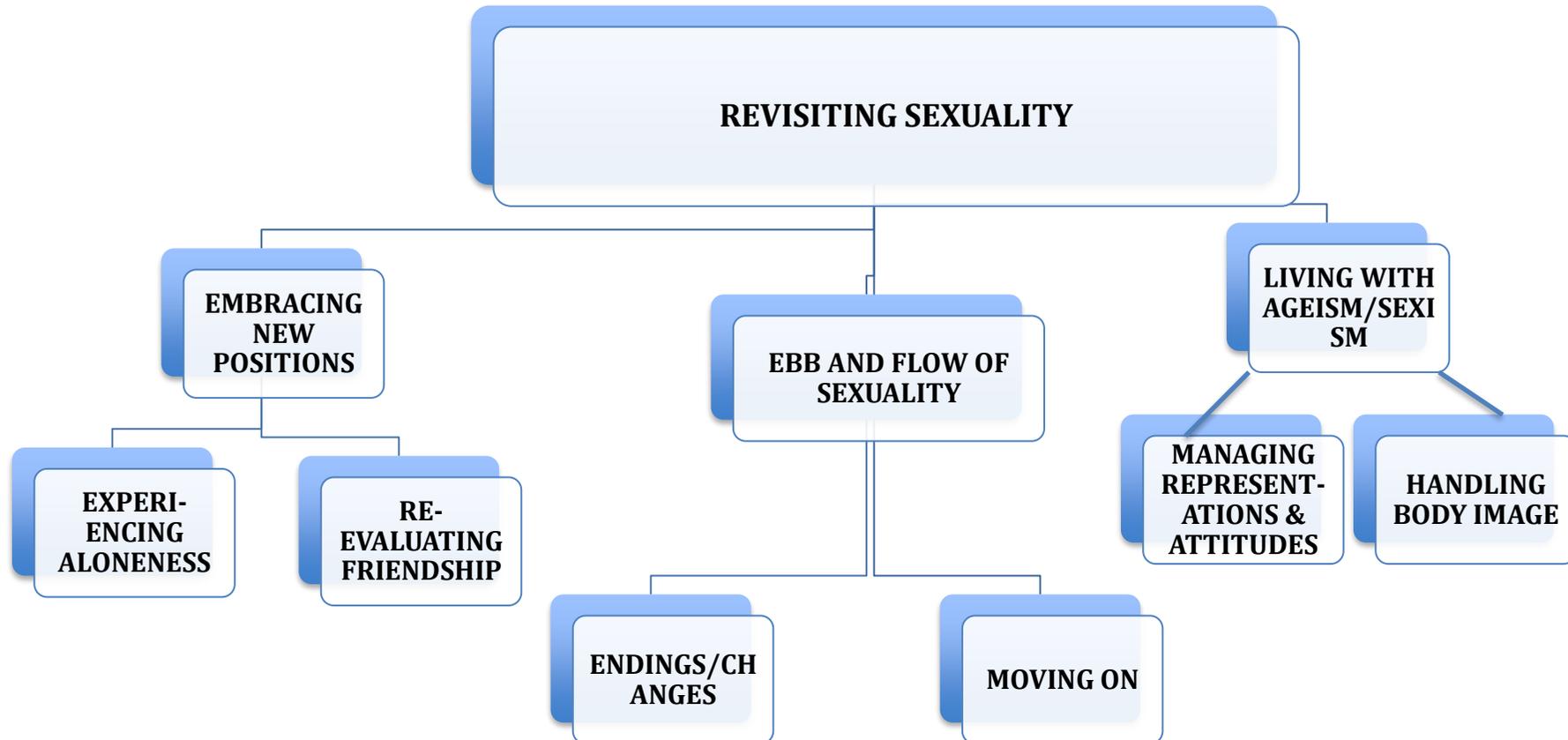
The main foci are the changes that the older women participants experienced in relation to ageing and how these changes are handled. The concept of body image was viewed as an important part of their sexuality and was discussed in terms of appearances, attractiveness and how they handled their body image and the tensions this created.

| | |
|---|--|
| Awareness of own attractiveness Dressing myself as an older woman Looking younger than my age Sexuality as separate from physical appearance Dressing to please myself Receiving compliments about my appearance | Looking my age Importance of 'dressing up' Taking care of my appearance Admiration for young women Awareness of ageing Feeling comfortable with my body |
|---|--|

APPENDIX 18: PHASE 2 – EXPRESSING SEXUALITY



APPENDIX 19: PHASE 2 – REVISITING SEXUALITY



APPENDIX 20 – A LIST OF THE MAIN BODY OF LITERATURE USED IN THE REVIEW DISCUSSED IN SECTION 4.2.5

| | ARTICLES | COUN- TRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION TO REVIEW |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Fileborn et al (2015a) | AUSTRA- LIA | N= 43 partnered women In-depth interviews Coding/themes | 55-81 | Heterosexual (42) + bisexual (1), middle/upper class, Caucasian | Sexual desires and practices |
| 2 | Fileborn et al (2015b) | AUSTRA- LIA | N= 15 'single' women In-depth interviews Coding/themes | 55-81 | Heterosexual, middle/upper class, Caucasian | Sexual desires and practices; Sexual relationships |
| 3 | Heaphy (2007) | UK | N = focus groups = 14 women + 16 men N=postal survey = 102 women + 164 men | 50-80 | Lesbian/gay, White, educated to degree level, approx. 50% defined as financially 'secure' | Sexual orientation to age/gender |
| 4 | Hinchliff and Gott (2008) | UK | N =19 women (partnered/'single') In-depth interviews Foucauldian discourse analysis | 50-83 | White British (18) + 'Scottish' (1), heterosexual, | Sexual desires and practices |
| 5 | Hurd (2000) | CANADA | N = 22 women In-depth interviews (twice) Analysis based on grounded theory | 61-92 | Heterosexual, White, all social classes represented, mixed in terms of health and disability issues | Ageing sexual body |
| 6 | Hurd Clarke (2001) | CANADA | N = 22 women (twice) Analysis based on grounded theory | 61-92 | Heterosexual, White, all social classes represented, mixed in terms of health and disability issues | Ageing sexual body |
| 7 | Hurd Clarke (2006) | CANADA | N = 24 women with varied marital experiences; in-depth interviews; grounded theory analysis | 52-90 | Heterosexual, White | Sexual relationships |

| | ARTICLES | COUN- TRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION TO REVIEW |
|----|----------------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 8 | Jones R.L. (2002) | UK | N = 23 women In-depth interviews Narrative analysis | 61-80 | Diverse across age, social class, and sexual orientation | Sexual desires and practices |
| 9 | Koren (2011) | ISRAEL | N = 20 heterosexual couples In-depth individual interviews Theme identification | 66-82 W 70-92 M | Heterosexual, middle/upper class, Jewish, majority secular | Sexual relationships |
| 10 | Krekula (2007) | SWEDEN | N= 16 women Focus groups | 75-96 | Represented various socio-economic groups, widows, lived alone and had a range of disability experiences | Ageing sexual body |
| 11 | Krekula (2016) | SWEDEN | N= 12 women Interviews (some use of images/photos) | 75-90 | Heterosexual, middle class, European, mixed in terms of disability issues, mixture in terms of relationship status | Ageing sexual body |
| 12 | Lagana & Maciel (2010) | USA | N=25 women Semi-structured interviews Grounded theory analysis | 59-89 | Heterosexual, Mexican descent, diverse across educational attainment and relationships status, predominantly low to middle income | Sexual desires and practices |
| 13 | Macia et al (2015) | FRANCE | N=29 women In-depth interviews Thematic/conceptual analysis | 65-75 | Over half partnered, diverse across educational attainment, predominantly no health or disability issues | Ageing sexual body |
| 14 | Malta & Farquharson (2014) | AUSTRALIA | N= 24 women + 21 men In-depth interviews (email, face to face, telephone, instant messaging) Thematic analysis | 60-81M 60-92 W | Heterosexual | Sexual relationships |

| | ARTICLES | COUNTRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION TO REVIEW |
|----|---------------------|----------------|--|------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 15 | Moore (2010) | JAPAN | N= 20 women + 20 men Life history interview | 62-88M 52-78W | Heterosexual, majority married, majority had high education achievement, mixture of employed and retirees | Sexual relationships |
| 16 | Nyanzi (2011) | UGANDA | N=35 women +9 men Focus groups, interviews and participant observation Grounded theory analysis | n/s | Heterosexual, widows/widowers | Sexual relationships |
| 17 | Thorpe et al (2015) | AUS | N=20 women Semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis | 55-72 | Heterosexual (20), lesbian (1), over half were partnered | Ageing sexual body |
| 18 | Traies (2016, 2014) | UK | N= Semi-structured interviews = 34 lesbians N= autobiographies = 11 lesbians N = survey questionnaires = 372 lesbians | 60-90 | Lesbians, working and middle class representation, majority had high education achievement, predominantly White, majority in good health | Sexual orientation/sexuality |
| 19 | Vares (2009) | NZ | N= 17 women + 13 men Focus groups (gender specific) – semi-structured discussion based on film and advertisements Discourse analysis | 49-82 | Heterosexual, middle class and non-Maori New Zealanders of European descent | Ageing sexual body |
| 20 | Watson et al (2010) | USA | N= 8 women; semi-structured interview; Interpretative phenomenological analysis | 64-77 | Heterosexual, White, middle class, represented a range of relationship status but all had remarried | Sexual relationships |

| | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|-------|---|-------|--|----------------------|
| 21 | Watson & Stelle (2011) | USA | N = 14 women Semi-structured interview Interpretative phenomenological analysis | 64-77 | Heterosexual, White, middle class, represented a range of relationship status but all had experience of dating | Sexual relationships |
| 22 | Yun et al (2014) | KOREA | N = 10 women In-depth interviews Thematic analysis | 65-75 | Heterosexual, all involved in a recently formed sexual relationship, Korean | Sexual relationships |

Notes

- The inclusion criteria for the above literature is:
 - Published works in peer reviewed journals; Empirical and qualitative research; Post 1998; Electronically accessible; English language; Research focusing on older women’s perspectives; Women aged 70+ (research sample can start below 70 but needs to have an age range that is 70+); Researcher(s) has used a wide definition of sexuality and/or challenges biological determinism in that cultural/social factors are also taken into consideration; and, ‘Healthy’ and ‘mundane/everyday’ context
- Heaphy (2007) and Traies (2016, 2014) were based on mixed methods approach but were included in this sample due to the qualitative contribution they made to age/gender and sexuality respectively in relation to sexual orientation.
- Heaphy (2007), Koren (2011), Malta & Farquharson (2014), Moore (2010), Nyanzi (2011) and Vares (2009) used both older women and men within their samples but were included in this sample as they presented their findings in a gender specific way and therefore the findings relating to the older women participants are the findings that have been used in this review.

APPENDIX 21 – LIST OF THE LITERATURE THAT WAS USED TO SUPPORT THE MAIN BODY LITERATURE IN SECTION 4.2.5

| | ARTICLES | MISSED MAIN BODY BY | COUNTRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION REVIEW |
|---|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|--|------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1 | Carter (2016) | Age too young | CANADA | N= 14 women Interviews Narrative analysis | 30-45 | Diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities | Ageing sexual body |
| 2 | Gott and Hinchliff (2003b) | Gender Not specified | UK | N= 23 women + 21 men Semi-structured interviews Framework analysis | 50-92 | Heterosexual, diverse relationship status | Sexual desires and practices |
| 3 | Hinchliff and Gott (2004) | Gender Not specified | UK | N=10 women + 18 men who had been married for 20 years + In-depth interviews Framework analysis | 50-86 | Heterosexual, mixture of health issues but only a minority expressing ill health that impacted on their lives | Sexual relationships |
| 4 | Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2007) | Age too young | CANADA | N=44 women In-depth interviews Grounded theory coding | 50-60 | Caucasian, well educated, middle- and upper-class socio-economic status, diversity in terms of educational attainment, income, marital status, employment history and status | Ageing sexual body |
| 5 | Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) | Age too young | CANADA | As 4 above | 50-60 | As 4 above | Ageing sexual body |

| | ARTICLES | MISSED MAIN BODY BY | COUNTRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION REVIEW |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|---|------------------|---|---|
| 6 | Liechty (2012) | Age too young | USA | N=13 women Individual interviews + focus groups Coding/categories | 60-69 | Diverse in terms of education, economic status, heterosexual (12), lesbian (1) | Ageing sexual body |
| 7 | Liechty and Yarnal (2010) | Age too young | USA | As 6 above | 60-69 | As 6 above | Ageing sexual body |
| 8 | Malta (2008) | Gender Not specified | AUSTRA- LIA | N=45 women and men Interviews (by instant messaging, email, by phone and face to face) | 60-92 | No information | Sexual relationships |
| 9 | Meah et al (2011) | Age query | UK | Focus groups | 19-90 | Heterosexual | Use as reference only in relation to review as does offer comment on (hetero)sexual desires and practices and how women challenge its nature |

| | ARTICLES | MISSED MAIN BODY BY | COUNTRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION REVIEW |
|----|-------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|--|------------------|---|--|
| | Menard et al (2015) | Gender Not specified | CANADA | N= 30 women and men who had been in the same relationship for over 25 years Semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis | 60-82 | Diverse in terms of sexual orientation and disability | Sexual relationships |
| 10 | Montemurro and Siefken (2014) | Age too young | USA | N=84 women In depth interviews Grounded theory approach + thematic analysis | 20-68 | Heterosexual, diverse in terms of social class, ethnicity and above average in relation to education attainment | Used as reference only in relation to review as it does offer comment on the nature of the sexually active midlife woman |
| 11 | Montemurro et al (2013) | Age too young | USA | N=95 women In depth interviews Grounded theory approach + thematic analysis | 20-68 | Heterosexual, diverse in terms of social class, ethnicity and above average in relation to education attainment | Ageing sexual body |
| 12 | Ravanipour (2013) | Age too young | IRAN | N=15 women, living with husband Interviews Coding/themes | 60+ | Heterosexual, Iranian | Sexual desires and practices |
| 13 | Rowntree (2014) | Gender Not specified | AUSTRALIA | N= 10 Interviews = 6 women + 4 men N=57 surveys = 30 women+ 24 men Thematic/narrative analysis | 50-70 | Predominantly white, heterosexual and middle class although some diversity in relation to countries of origin, sexual orientation and relationship status | Used as reference only in relation to review as does consider sexuality as a whole in relation to ageing from a younger person's perspective |

| | ARTICLES | MISSED MAIN BODY BY | COUNTRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION REVIEW |
|----|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------|--|------------------|---|---|
| 13 | Rowntree (2014) | Gender Not specified | AUSTRALIA | N= 10 Interviews = 6 women + 4 men N=57 surveys = 30 women+ 24 men Thematic/narrative analysis | 50-70 | Predominantly white, heterosexual and middle class although some diversity in relation to countries of origin, sexual orientation and relationship status | Used as reference only in relation to review as does consider sexuality as a whole in relation to ageing from a younger person's perspective |
| 14 | Rowntree (2015) | Gender Not specified | AUSTRALIA | N= 10 Interviews = 6 women + 4 men N=57 surveys = 30 women+ 24 men Thematic/narrative analysis | 50-70 | Predominantly white, heterosexual and middle class - diversity in countries of origin, sexual orientation & relationship status | Used as reference only in relation to review as does consider the fluidity of sexual identity in relation to ageing from a younger person's perspective |
| 15 | Sandberg (2013a) | Age + pilot research | SWEDEN | N=5 women Interview | 50+ | No information | Ageing sexual body |
| 16 | Sandberg (2013b) | Men only | SWEDEN | N= 22 men Interview (16)+ diaries (6) Thematic analysis | 67-87 | Heterosexual, White, Swedish, diverse in terms of social class and partnership status | Ageing sexual body |
| 17 | Shea (2011) | Age query | CHINA | N=12 women Interview + survey | 40-80 | Heterosexual, Chinese | Sexual desires and practices |
| 18 | Thompson et al (1999) | Age too young | USA | N=3 women Interview | 57-69 | Lesbian, educated to a high level | Ageing sexual body |
| 19 | Winterich (2007) | Mainly too young | USA | N=30 women Interview Thematic analysis | 46 -71 | Diverse in terms of sexual orientation, ethnicity, social class | Ageing sexual body |
| 20 | Wood et al (2007) | Age too young | USA | N=22 women; Interview; GT analysis | 58-65 | Heterosexual, White, middle class | Sexual desires and practices |

| | ARTICLES | MISSED MAIN BODY BY | COUNTRY | METHODS | AGE RANGE | PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS | CONTRIBUTION REVIEW |
|----|----------------------|---------------------|---------|---|-----------|--|------------------------------|
| 21 | Averett et al (2012) | Quantitative | UK | N=394 women Questionnaire Analytic software | 51-86 | Lesbian, Caucasian, predominantly middle class and high levels of education and income | Sexual orientation/sexuality |

Notes

- This body of literature fell outside of the inclusion criteria for the main body of research (see Appendix 21) because of one or more of the following: (1) the age range of the participants failed to include older women who were 70+ years of age; (2) the participants were older men only; (3) the participants were older men and women but the findings were not gender specific or separated by gender and referred to the generic term 'older people'.
- Shea (2011) stated that the age range "spanned middle and old age, with some in their fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth decades of life" (Shea 2011, p365). A decision was taken that this was not specific enough and therefore was not included in the list of the main body of literature.
- Winterich's (2007) research did include one participant over the age of 71 but it was decided that this was not sufficient to be included in the list of the main body of literature.
- Meah et al (2011) did not give much detail in terms of participants and therefore a decision was made to use this in a reference only capacity
- There were two pieces of research referred to in Section 4.2.5 in relation to ageing sexual body (Slevin 2006) and sexual desires and practices (Classen 2005). Both studies involved older lesbians but were not included in the main list other than for reference due to the fact that the research had not been published in peer-reviewed journals but in the form of book chapters and a book.
- Averett et al (2012) was not included in the list of the main body of literature due to the study being quantitative research. It is the only study that is purely quantitative that has been included in the review but it was felt important to include, as it is a large piece of up to date research within the UK and did help to add weight to previous research in an area where there is minimal research.

APPENDIX 22: PERMISSIONS EMAIL

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10/14/16



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