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Individual determinants of extended working lives: a systematic review of the literature

By RODOLFO GUTIÉRREZ¹, FERMÍN LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ² &
AROA TEJERO¹

Abstract

The extension of working lives (EWL) appears as a long-term transformation driven by the increase in longevity and the expansion of institutional incentives to postpone retirement. However, the increase in average retirement ages is being less intense and more heterogeneous than promised by pension reforms. The mismatch between structural and individual changes reinforces the interest of a precise knowledge of the influence of individual determinants on EWL. Based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses methodology (Page et al. 2021), this article provides a systematic review of literature with the objective of conceptualizing variants of EWL and systematizing empirical evidence of the influence of individual determinants on EWL. This review can be of benefit both for detecting the areas on which future research should focus and for guiding the discussions on potential pension system reforms while considering the heterogeneity of individuals' profiles.

Keywords: bridge employment, pension, retirement, retirement planning.

¹Rodolfo Gutiérrez & Aroa Tejero, Department of Sociology, University of Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain

²Fermín López-Rodríguez, Department of State Law and Sociology, University of Málaga, Málaga, Spain

Introduction

Both scientific analyses and debates on the future of retirement focus on the causes and consequences of an extension of working life (EWL). The trend towards EWL seems to be long-term, driven by two major social transformations. On the one hand, the increase in longevity has caused life expectancy at retirement age to double in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the last five decades; indeed, available projections indicate that this trend has not yet come to an end (OECD 2019, 2021; Weber & Loichinger 2022). On the other hand, there is a fairly uniform evolution of pension systems with increasing requirements for full access to old-age benefits and incentives to extend working life and/or to make this transition more flexible by favouring the combination of pension and work (Hinrichs 2021; Lis et al. 2021; Myck 2015).

In any case, it is not clear that parallel changes in the microsocial sphere have been in line with these major transformations. Although with significant differences among European countries, surveys have revealed that the expected retirement age remains anchored at approximately 65 years, while perceptions of the starting point for old age have increased (Eurofound 2014; European Social Survey 2021). In recent decades, policies to prolong working lives in OECD countries have focused on incentives to increase labour participation beyond retirement age, and to reduce financial penalties for working longer. In addition, reforms also restrict the use of early retirement schemes and other passive benefits and allow for the combination of work and pension income.

However, on a factual level, there is a general increase in average retirement ages, but this trend has been of a lower intensity than promised by pension reforms, with additional evidence of the limited effects of financial incentives, at least on their own, to extend partial retirement schemes beyond a small group of highly skilled individuals (Eurofound 2016; OECD 2017, 2019).

This potential mismatch between structural and individual changes is of great interest and points to two very important facts to research. First, the sociodemographic characteristics (health, gender, family, education, occupation and work history) of individuals are associated with very relevant differences in their expectations and their actual conditions of

transition to retirement. In contrast, pension systems and labour market reform policies aimed at prolonging and making working life more flexible tend to ignore the heterogeneity of the objective and subjective traits of different groups of individuals, assuming that financial incentives translate into uniform changes in expectations and behaviours, with the consequent risks of increasing inequality risks in timing and conditions of retirement (Barslund 2019; Ní Léime et al. 2020). For a better design of policies affecting retirement, it is therefore crucial to have a precise knowledge of individual determinants of EWL.

Second, the heterogeneity of individuals, added to the very diversity of institutional environments, push towards a wider variety of transitions from employment to retirement (Fisher et al. 2016). For a growing, although still small, number of individuals, this transition loses the form of a dichotomy between regular employment and conventional retirement (OECD 2017). The EWL takes forms that are not limited to continuing employment after the legal retirement age, leading to greater complexity in later-life labour market dynamics. The way in which this complexity is conceptualized has a decisive influence on research findings (Leinonen et al. 2022). Further research on EWL needs to identify this variety of forms of transition towards retirement.

Whereas research on the effects of individual determinants of retirement timing and conditions has increased notably in recent years, systematic reviews of their contributions are limited, particularly those on their individual factors. Carlstedt et al. (2018) reviewed the research up to 2016 and focused specifically on macro, meso and microlevel incentives to prolong employment beyond retirement age. Ratten (2019) reviewed recent literature but focused on the specific mode of older entrepreneurship. Lassen and Vrankbaek (2021) extended the review to mid-2020, also with a focus open to all types of EWL incentives, macro, meso and micro, but without using systematic methodology to analyse the content.

This paper provides a systematic review of international research on the main individual factors determining EWL based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Page et al. 2021) methodology. This review offers three contributions that reinforce its novelty. First, it proposes a clear conceptualization of variants of EWL, which have been termed “employment after retirement” (EAR), “bridge

employment" (BE) and "unretirement" (UN). This conceptual dimension is a previous and necessary step for the second contribution: to review systematic evidence of a broad set of individual determinants of EWL, approaching a more explanatory discussion. Third, the review extends to research published between 2000 and 2023, which allows us to identify the most recent stage in which the overview of results has been uniquely enriched. Overall, this review can be helpful both for detecting the areas for research and for guiding the debates on potential pension system reforms while considering the heterogeneity of individuals' profiles.

The structure of the paper begins with a description of the methodology. The results are then presented in two sections: the first is based on the three main conceptual variants of the EWL, and the second on the observed influences of the four main types of individual determinants. The paper closes with a summary of the main contributions, which leads to a double discussion: on the one hand, regarding the gaps, both theoretical and empirical, that should be addressed in future research; and, on the other hand, on possible directions for institutional reforms that promote EWL.

Methods

Information Sources and Inclusion Criteria

The methodology employed for this systematic literature review was designed following the Page et al. 2021 guidelines. The PRISMA statement was published in 2009 and updated in 2020, and "was designed to help systematic reviewers transparently report why the review was done, what the authors did, and what they found (...) reflects advances in methods to identify, select, appraise, and synthesize studies" (Page et al. 2021: 1).

The databases selected were Web of Science (WoS) and SCOPUS,¹ which gather information and studies published in the most important

¹ Other databases, such as Google Scholar, were not included in the analysis because non-commercial publications whose editorial processes are not necessarily academic do not fall within the scope of this systematic review (Haddaway et al. 2015). Moreover, Google Scholar also fails to offer high levels of recall, precision, transparency, and reproducibility (Gusenbauer & Haddaway 2020).

publications in Social Sciences. They fulfil the necessary quality requirements by identifying all relevant records and ensuring a transparent and reproducible search (Gusenbauer & Haddaway 2020). All selected articles follow rigorous peer-reviewed processes, and book chapters have been subject to editorial criteria led by leading experts in their respective fields. The objectives of the research framed the identification of inclusion criteria. The studies incorporated were those from the field of Social Sciences which analyse specific concepts of EWL with a quantitative perspective of microlevel factors.

Search Strategy and Selection Process

Figure 1 presents the combinations of keywords entered into WoS and SCOPUS and the summary of the search strategy and selection process. The initial search without the application of exclusion criteria yielded a total of 2317 and 2964 documents in WoS and SCOPUS, respectively.² The automatic filters were then applied, excluding documents that were not articles, books or book chapters; were not published from 2000 onwards or were not published in English.

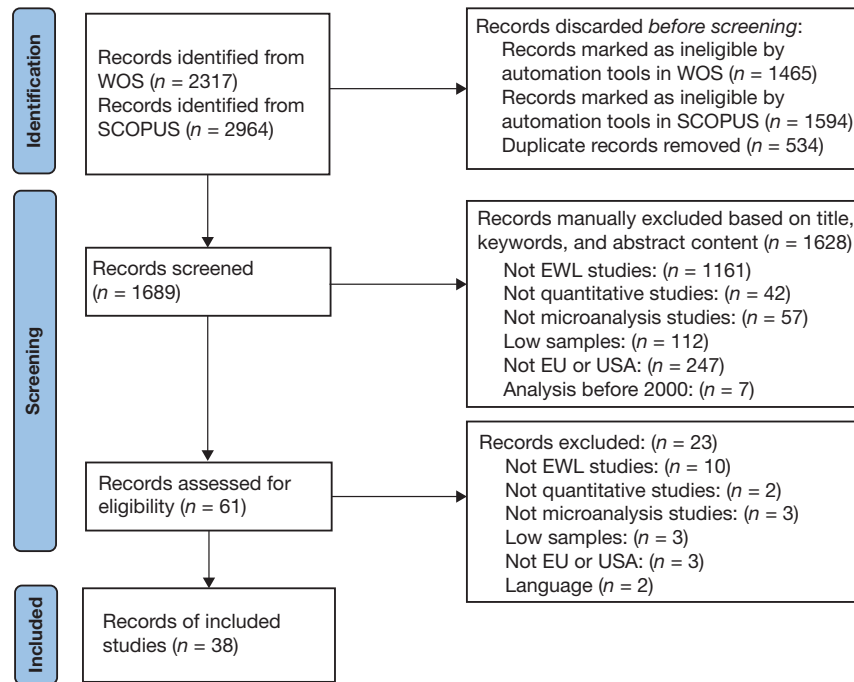
Only documents from the following Social Sciences areas were included. The subject areas selected in the WoS database were Business, Economics, Behavioural Sciences, Demography, Education Educational Research, Family Studies, Industrial Relations, Labour, Management, Political Science, Psychology, Psychology Applied, Public Administration, Social Issues, Social Sciences Interdisciplinary, Social Work, Sociology and Women's Studies. These filters reduced the number of WoS records to 1645. The subject areas selected in the SCOPUS database were Social Sciences, Business Management and Accounting, Psychology, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, Decision Sciences and Multidisciplinary. These filters reduced the number of SCOPUS records to 1495. Finally, 534 duplicated records were removed, resulting in a final sample of 1689 documents to be screened.

² The final search was conducted on 18th February 2023.

Figure 1. Identification of studies by databases and registers.

Source: Produced by the authors from Page et al. (2021).

Note: The keywords used in WoS and SCOPUS: ("bridge employment" OR "unretirement" OR "old* workers" OR "late* retirement" OR "old* employees" OR "old workforce" OR "extend* working life" OR "post-retirement" OR "postretirement" OR "working retirees" OR "working beyond retirement" OR "postponing retirement") AND ("preference*" OR "predictor*" OR "characteristic*" OR "motive*" or "determinant*" OR "factor*").



Screening

The title, abstract and keywords of 1689 articles and book chapters were examined with the objective of discarding those studies that did not fulfil the following inclusion criteria. First, in connection with the main objective

of the literature review, only research on EWL was considered. Based on our initial conceptual framework, any of the EWL concepts (EAR, BE and UN) should be addressed, preferably but not exclusively, as a dependent variable.

Second, only studies including microlevel factors of EWL from a quantitative perspective were selected. One of our objectives is to review what type of individual factors (sociodemographic, household characteristics, work-related and health) explain the decision of EWL. Therefore, research focused solely on countries or firms (not individuals) was disregarded. Moreover, the interest was in the quantitative analysis of representative samples at the country level. Only studies based on large representative samples were included.³

Third, the review was focused on European countries and the United States of America (USA) because they share two features that are relevant for the objectives of this analysis: on the one hand, they are countries with pension systems that are already “mature”; namely, culturally, and financially consolidated. On the other hand, although with divergent institutional trajectories among these regions, reforms are more likely to be implemented in the direction of encouraging EWL decisions (Aysan & Beaujot 2009).

All the above criteria resulted in a final sample of 61 records assessed for eligibility. The number of articles rejected in each stage of the exclusion process explained above is shown in Figure 1.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

The articles and book chapters in the final literature review were analysed using a data extraction template. The template was designed based on the research objectives. On the one hand, methodological information was summarized: data sources, sample size and country and years analysed (Table A1). On the other hand, the conceptual dimension was

³ We have included studies based on samples collected by institutions of recognized statistical prestige in each country (or based on registry data); and/or that incorporate individuals from various regions or occupations; and/or whose sample size allows extrapolating the conclusions with a high degree of reliability at the national level.

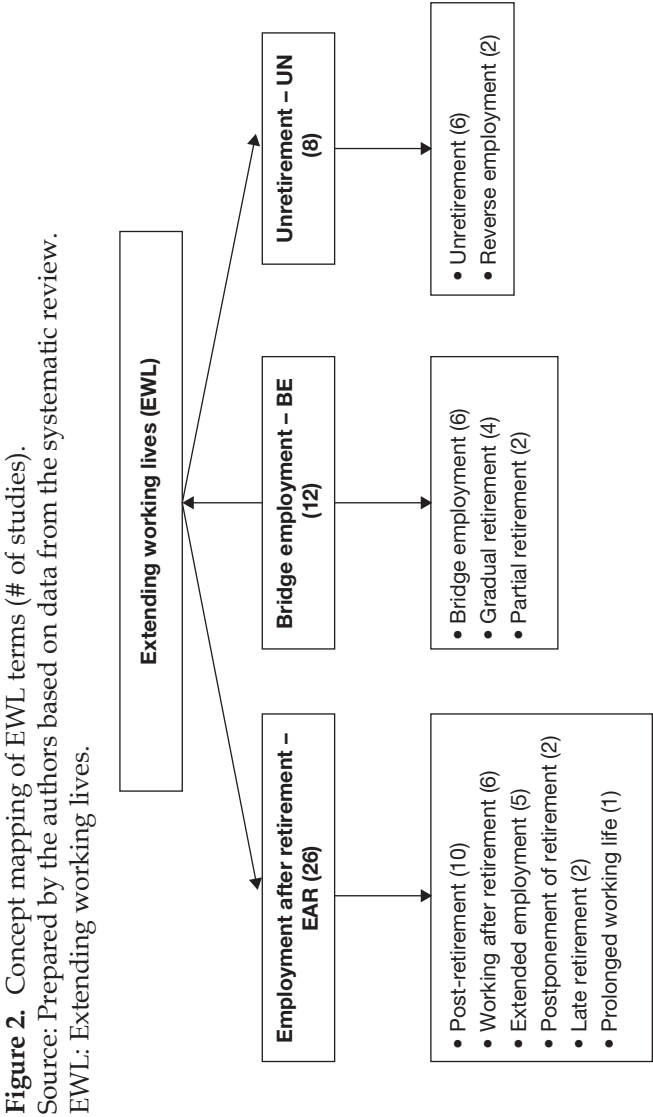
systematized, including the specific concept of the EWL employed and a description of the investigated microlevel factors (Table A2). Finally, general information was extracted: findings, main contributions, limitations and future lines of research. The templates used to compile the information are available on request from the authors.

Quality control was carried out by all the authors of this article to minimize the potential bias of the procedure of gathering information. The full process of designing the literature review and the search and selection of articles for analysis was reviewed systematically and exhaustively. Two of the authors adopted the reviewer role (authors RG and FLR), and the other acted as supervisor (AT) in a three-phase process. First, the initial sample of 1689 publications was screened by the authors RG and FLR: each of them screened half of the sample and filled the templates of the 61 records assessed for eligibility; then, an exchange of records took place in order to detect possible biases, omissions or errors. Second, author AT monitored the systematisation of the collection process and confirmed the 61 records assessed for eligibility. Finally, all authors conducted an in-depth analysis of the texts (with special attention to their findings, scope, methods, and conclusions). In this stage, a total of 23 publications were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The final sample of the systematic literature review comprised 38 articles and book chapters. The most common causes of exclusion were covering countries beyond the scope of this research or focusing on specific occupations with a low sample size.

Conceptual Dimension

The conceptual dimension deserves particular attention because available research has confirmed that EWL is not a univocal concept. This review has identified a range of 11 EWL concepts that have been used, with explicit definitions and with unequal frequency, in a total of 38 pieces of research (Figure 2).

When examining this range of terms, we conclude that the variety of concepts can be reduced to three variants, as shown in Figure 2: the concept of EAR, which would include all situations of paid employment after reaching the legal retirement age and which would cover 26 of the publications reviewed. The concept of BE encompasses all the situations



that, in the final stage of the working career preceding full retirement, modifies the usual employment with another employer, other functions or another duration. And the concept of UN applies to individuals who return to work after a period of full retirement.

These three concepts cover the most typical forms of extended working lives. However, there are additional characteristics in their specific operational definitions that reflect the growing flexibility of this transition and imply that each of these concepts does not always refer to clearly differentiated situations of employment and retirement.

The concept of EAR cannot ignore the fact that retirement age is increasingly variable for individuals with different work histories. Consequently, in the reviewed studies, there are three main options for operating the after-retirement variant. The most frequent, grouped under the term “postretirement employment,” takes all individuals who have reached the official retirement age, at whatever age it is established (Berglund et al. 2017; Finch 2014; Kauppi et al. 2021; McLaughlin & Neumark 2018; Virtanen et al. 2022). This includes those based on individuals’ own self-attribution of that status (Brown et al. 2014; Pleau 2010), and all individuals who are employed aged over 65 years (Gstrein 2023; Hofäcker & Naumann 2015). The term “working after retirement” is attributed to those who combine a retirement pension with gainful employment (Dingemans & Henkens 2020; Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Fasbender et al. 2016). A further variant of this concept is even possible, including a minimum period of occupation in the reference year: 6 months (Myllyntausta et al. 2022), or 1 month (Finch, 2014; Hellevik & Herlofson 2020).

The concept of BE usually refers to situations prior to retirement in which there is a reduction in working hours with part-time, seasonal or temporary employment (Boveda & Metz 2016; Cahill et al. 2008; Kalenkoski & McCarthy 2021; Kantarci & Van Soest 2008). However, other publications apply this term to situations before and after retirement age, either when the observed population includes all individuals above a certain age, which is qualified as gradual retirement (Albanese et al. 2020; Dingemans et al. 2017; Topa et al. 2014), or when the bridge dimension is associated with compatibility between part-time employment and the receipt of a retirement pension, designated as “partial retirement” (Congdon-Hohman 2018; Madero-Calib et al. 2023).

Regarding the concept of UN, the most common definition is that of individuals who return to work after having previously retired (Kanabar 2015; Pettersson 2014; Smeaton et al. 2018; Zhao & Burge 2021). Nevertheless, in some versions, this return to work after retirement is limited to part-time jobs (Platts et al. 2019).

Individual Determinants

The results of the literature review on the variables of influence in EWL are presented in Table 1, which summarizes the variables that appeared in at least two of the publications analysed in the final sample. The explanatory variables were grouped into four blocks, seeking a certain theoretical-conceptual consistency, and considering the relevance of terms according to their number of appearances.

First, individual sociodemographic characteristics were the most analysed, specifically gender, level of education, marital status and age. Second, household variables and, more specifically, income or wealth, domestic and care responsibilities and the employment status of spouses. Third, individual labour characteristics include occupation, individual income, employment status and age and type of retirement. Finally, the variables referring to health (the least frequent) are measured by only two types of indicators: objective health and self-perceived health.

The bibliometric description of the search results also makes it possible to identify the countries, data sources and most analysed years.⁴ On the one hand, the research carried out concentrates on countries with the most available data which are included in more than 10 publications. In addition to the European-wide comparative survey SHARE, Germany uses others such as German Social Security, German Socio-Economic Panel, German TOP Study or German Ageing Survey (DEAS); research for the USA has been mostly carried out with the American HRS (from the University of Michigan) and the American PSID; in United Kingdom (UK) research is mostly performed with the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) and the British Panel Household Survey (BPHS) and finally, the EWL concepts in Sweden have also been analysed with country-specific data sources (Swedish PSAE, Swedish Health Aging and

⁴ Specific results can be found in the Appendix (Table A3 and A4, and Figure A1).

Table 1. Conceptual dimension: factors of extending working lives

Factor	N
Sex	34
Level of education	31
Age and cohort	28
Marital status	27
Race/ethnicity/country of birth	9
Life/job satisfaction	6
Total – individual sociodemographic characteristics	135
Household and personal income/wealth	24
Working status of spouse	11
Care/domestic responsibilities	10
Children in household/number of (grand)children	10
Housing tenure	6
Household size	3
Household type	2
Total – household characteristics	66
Health status	18
Self-reported health status	17
Mental health	3
Total – health	38
Occupation	16
Type of retirement/type of pension	9
Working time	6
Pension income/wealth	5
Age at retirement/year of retirement	5
Working status	3
Labour market trajectories (years in employment and number of works)	3
Public/private sector	3
Years in retirement	3
Health insurance	2
Volunteer work	2
Social class	2
Total – labour market trajectories and occupation	59

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Retirement Transitions Study, Statistics Sweden, Swedish Interdisciplinary Panel). On the other hand, these studies cover a broad time period (1990–2021). There is a concentration of research just after the 1990s decade, when discussions and regulation of EWL transitions began to arise; particularly in the interval between 2000 and 2007, with a peak in the years before the Great Recession (22 publications included 2006 in their analysis).

Sociodemographic Characteristics

The influence of gender on EWL shows that being a female is negatively associated with late retirement and BE (Albanese et al. 2020; Axelrad 2018), so men are more likely to extend their employment (Myllyntausta et al. 2022); either beyond retirement age (Hellevik & Herlofson 2020; Hofäcker & Naumann 2015), by postretirement employment (Cho et al. 2016; Dingemans & Henkens 2020; Fasbender et al. 2016; Leinonen et al. 2020), or reverse retirement (Platts et al. 2019; Smeaton et al. 2018). However, some studies highlight gender similarities in terms of retirement (Radl 2013), re-entry into the labour force (Pleau 2010) and postretirement trajectories in the same environment as that previous to retirement (Burkert & Hochfellner 2017). There are also some differences across countries that show that females retire later than males in Sweden (Klaesson et al. 2018); similarly, in the UK and Belgium, women are more likely than men to extend their working lives beyond retirement age⁵ (Albanese et al. 2020; Finch 2014). However, in Germany, women have a higher probability of entering a postretirement job in an environment that is different from their jobs before retirement (Burkert & Hochfellner 2017).

Regarding the level of education, the general trend is that higher education is positively associated with EWL pathways (Madero-Cabib et al. 2023; Radl 2013). Working in retirement is more frequent among higher educated workers, regardless of the EWL concept (Boveda & Metz 2016; Cahill et al. 2008; Dingemans & Henkens 2020; Dingemans et al. 2017;

⁵ Finch (2014) research for UK analysed the period between 1991 and 2004 prior to the reform that equalized pension ages between women and men in 2018. Therefore, further research could determine whether EWL transitions in this country have changed since then.

Hofäcker & Naumann 2015; Kanabar 2015; Leinonen et al. 2020; Smeaton et al. 2018; Zhao & Burge 2021). Even medium-educated workers are more likely to remain in the labour market longer than lower-educated workers (De Preter et al. 2015). The interaction with gender shows that postretirement employment is also common among men with primary education (Leinonen et al. 2020). For women, a higher level of education reduces the probability of being employed aged over 67 (Hellevik & Herlofson 2020).

When the influence of marital status on EWL is analysed, most studies show that those without a partner are more likely to extend their working lives (Cho et al. 2016), either when they are single or have never married (Kanabar 2015; Platts et al. 2019), in widowhood (Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Dingemans et al. 2017), divorced (Dingemans et al. 2017; Leinonen et al. 2020) or with no spouse (Myllyntausta et al. 2022). However, there are exceptions in specific countries, such as Sweden, where retirees with a partner were more likely to prolong their participation in the labour market (Hansson et al. 2022); or the USA, where married individuals were more likely to choose BE (Boveda & Metz 2016; Cahill et al. 2008). In addition, marital status is one of the variables that significantly interacts with gender (Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Kauppi et al. 2021). In all institutional contexts, single never-married women are more likely to follow extended working life pathways (Madero-Cabib et al. 2023). This implies that being married lowers the odds of retired women's labour force re-entry (Pleau 2010), and that those who remarried after a divorce are likely to work after retirement (Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Finch 2014). Women divorcees or widows are more likely to work in bridge jobs than their male counterparts (Dingemans et al. 2017). Moreover, married men have a higher probability of UN (Congdon-Hohman 2018).

In the case of age, there are some differences among the concepts of EWL. On the one hand, both EAR and BE have a negative association with age: the younger, the greater the probability of being in this type of EWL (Axelrad 2018; Cahill et al. 2008; Cho et al. 2016; Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Dingemans et al. 2017; Topa et al. 2014). However, those who are still working after turning 67 are likely to remain employed for more years (Hellevik & Herlofson 2020). On the other hand, the likelihood of UN rises with age until the late 60s, when it starts to be negatively associated with UN (Congdon-Hohman 2018; Kanabar 2015; Smeaton et al. 2018; Zhao & Burge 2021). Age also shows a specific pattern of association

with gender: while it is negatively related to the likelihood of working in bridge jobs among men, this effect was found to be even more negative for women (Dingemans et al. 2017).

There are two individual variables that have been studied, although to a lesser extent. First, studies that analyse race, country of birth and ethnicity⁶ are more common in the USA and find that black workers are more likely to UN (Congdon-Hohman 2018; Zhao & Burge 2021), and to be partially retired (Kalenkoski & McCarty 2021). Specific studies for the European context were not found, but regarding the effective retirement age, in Sweden, Qi et al. (2019) reported that older immigrants' employment rates tended to be positively correlated with those of their non-migrant counterparts in their respective countries of origin. Second, workers with higher levels of job and life satisfaction are more likely to experience BE (Topa et al. 2014), and to prolong their working life (Berglund et al. 2017).

Household Characteristics

Beginning with household variables, the results obtained from the literature review for income and wealth have shown some inconsistencies depending on the concept of EWL used. On the one hand, both wealth and income are negatively associated with BE (Boveda & Metz 2016; Dingemans et al. 2017; Gstrein 2023), and with UN (Congdon-Hohman 2018; Leinonen et al. 2020; Zhao & Burge 2021). However, there are some nuances in this relationship: when the influence of wealth and income is jointly considered, the effect of the former remains negative, while the latter becomes positive, especially from age 71 onwards (Pettersson 2014). In terms of gender interaction, wealth appears to be a more important determinant for women (Cahill et al. 2008), who are less likely to experience re-entry when their household socioeconomic status is higher (Pleau 2010), and more likely to prolong their working lives when experiencing economic difficulties (Kauppi et al. 2021).

On the other hand, other studies have found that EAR (and postretirement employment, specifically) is more frequent for those who live

⁶ These variables were aggregated to account for the number of studies that included them, but Table A2 in the Appendix provides an accurate record of each specific concept.

in high- and low-income households, with some U-shaped polarization (Leinonen et al. 2020; Smeaton et al. 2018); on the contrary, individual income depicts an inverted U-type distribution (Burkert & Hochfellner 2017; Dingemans & Henkens 2020). The discrepancy with respect to the other two EWL concepts is probably due to the way income and wealth are defined: when it is measured as a continuous variable, the effect of household income and wealth on EWL is negative; whereas when it is operationalized as a categorical variable, the association turns positive for people living in households in higher socioeconomic positions.

Care and domestic responsibilities have shown a negative influence on EWL, regardless of the concept used (Brown et al. 2014; De Preter et al. 2015; Dingemans et al. 2017; Pleau 2010; Smeaton et al. 2018). This negative effect has proven to be stronger for women (Pleau 2010), although it can also vary over time: when care is prolonged over time (more than 5 years), that pattern becomes even more pronounced (Finch 2014).

The working status of partners has shown that having a spouse who is employed reduces the likelihood of EWL (Cahill et al. 2008; Hellevik & Herlofson 2020; Kanabar 2015; Pettersson 2014; Platts et al. 2019; Radl 2013; Smeaton et al. 2018). Further clarifying the effect of this variable on post-retirement employment, the higher the work intensity of the spouse (full time vs. part time), the higher the probability of this specific type of EWL (Hellevik & Herlofson 2020; Myllyntausta et al. 2022). In the case of UN, this association seems to be more evident for women, as men show higher odds of extending employment regardless of their partner's employment status (Kauppi et al. 2021; Pettersson 2014).

The presence and number of children are positively associated with postretirement employment or delayed retirement (De Preter et al. 2015; Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Fasbender et al. 2016; Gstrein 2023), BE (Dingemans et al. 2017) and UN (Cahill et al. 2008). However, when this effect is specifically analysed for UN and separated by children and grandchildren, this association becomes negative (Pleau 2010). Moreover, the timing or birth histories, rather than the number of children, seem to be more relevant: if the family is completed later (Finch 2014), or the offspring arrives later (Smeaton et al. 2018), the likelihood of EWL is higher. This relationship changes slightly for women, who may become less likely to extend their working careers if they live in households with children (Cahill et al. 2008; De Preter et al. 2015).

Housing tenure, household size and household type also show significant differences. While their influence on BE has hardly been analysed, it has been observed that renters are more likely to participate in EAR (Leinonen et al. 2020; Platts et al. 2019). However, in the case of UN, homeowners are more likely to remain in full-time jobs at older ages (Cahill et al. 2008). Regarding household size, it would be the variation in family composition, and not the number *per se*, that would influence EWL (Gstrein 2023): when the number of cohabiting members increases, retirement tends to be delayed (De Preter et al. 2015), but only in the case of households formed by couples and not in extended or single-parent families (Congdon-Hohman 2018).

Labour Market and Socioeconomic Variables

Regardless of the concept used to operationalize the dependent variable, the higher the level of occupation or social class, the higher the likelihood of EWL (Kauppi et al. 2021; Leinonen et al. 2020; Virtanen et al. 2022). This effect is obtained whether the jobs are compared in terms of manual versus intellectual (Myllyntausta et al. 2022), degree of physical demand (McLaughlin & Neumark 2018) or social category: higher probabilities are found in the upper service, white-collar and managerial classes than in the lower sales, routine or intermediate classes (Cahill et al. 2008). A nuance to this general finding is that when prolongation of employment is analysed in terms of timing, rather than as a dichotomic or categorical decision, older workers at the bottom of the social structure also postpone their exit from the labour market (Radl 2013).

Working status and working hours allow the identification of several groups of workers who show greater probabilities of EWL: self-employed, entrepreneurs and working long hours are the categories most reported in the literature (Cahill et al. 2008; Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Klaesson et al. 2018; Zhao & Burge 2021). This can be explained by the labour conditions of those types of jobs: those workers who have direct contact with clients, work evenings or weekends (Berglund et al. 2017), or in part-time positions (Brown et al. 2014; Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Finch 2014) are more inclined to work after retirement. The main gender difference is that part-time work seems to be a significant determinant of the prolongation of employment for men (Dingemans & Moehring 2019), while

other studies find that women are more likely to EWL if they work longer hours (Hellevik & Herlofson 2020).

The influence of retirement age and the type of pensions received (private, occupational or public) on EWL are closely linked. The results show that the older a worker is, the lower the probability of EWL (Fasbender et al. 2016; Hansson et al. 2022). However, if the association is measured at each point in the life cycle, this probability is positively associated with age up to 62 and then becomes negatively influenced (Congdon-Hohman 2018). Since retirement age is highly dependent on future earnings, workers with occupational or public pensions, who expect to receive a more stable income with less uncertainty, are less likely to EWL (Congdon-Hohman 2018; Hofäcker & Naumann 2015). Also, older workers with a defined pension plan or who have achieved full-time careers in lower occupational positions show a negative relationship (Cahill et al. 2008). The countries whose institutional pension scheme offers low provisions are an exception to this pattern, both in terms of coverage (amounts received) and social protection (Cho et al. 2016).

When analysing labour market trajectories, most evidence focuses on EAR. For the concepts of BE and UN, there seems to be a research gap, probably due to their own conceptual nature, which reflects time-varying changes that are difficult to measure in relation to retrospective information associated with labour market trajectories. More years in employment (Dingemans & Moehring 2019), and fewer years in unemployment, inactivity or sickness (Burkert & Hochfellner 2017; Fasbender et al. 2016; Finch 2014), are significantly associated with the probability of extending paid work beyond pensionable ages. Moreover, the number of job changes through working life increases the odds of postretirement employment, although this effect is more intense for men who achieve a high status in their previous jobs (Dingemans & Moehring 2019). When the working-time in previous labour positions is considered, women who spend more years in full-time jobs, with more employment stability, are found to be more likely to EWL (Finch 2014).

Health-Related Variables

Health-related variables are mainly measured from two perspectives: objective indicators related to health conditions (health variables), and

subjective indicators based on individuals' perceptions of their own health status (self-reported health). On the one hand, studies that include health variables demonstrate that those with good health, good working capacity, no pain and/or no sleep difficulties are more likely to undergo EWL (Dingemans & Moehring 2019; Dingemans et al. 2017; Myllyntausta et al. 2022; Platts et al. 2019; Smeaton et al. 2018; Topa et al. 2014; Zhao & Burge 2021). However, being in good health resulted in a lower probability of being partially retired (compared to other health conditions considered in the literature) (Kalenkoski & McCarty 2021).

On the other hand, self-reported health is also positively associated with EWL: considering one's health to be very good or excellent, or not having depression, increases the likelihood of continuing to work (Fasbender et al. 2016; Hellevik & Herlofson 2020; Kauppi et al. 2021), whereas the worse the self-reported health is, the lower the likelihood of UN (Kanabar 2015; Smeaton et al. 2018). Some studies emphasize this association specifically for women in two directions: women with good self-rated health are more likely to engage in EWL (Myllyntausta et al. 2022), but those who continue working beyond their pensionable age are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to have poor self-perceived health (Madero-Cabib et al. 2023).

Discussion and Conclusions

The volume and variety of available studies on EWL reinforces the conceptual convenience of the systematic review performed. The search was based on a total of 1645 screened publications, which was reduced to 61 articles or book chapters that were assessed, and then reduced to 38 that were finally included in the systematic review after the selection filters were applied.

The results obtained offer valuable contributions to the literature on EWL in several ways. First, current research accounts for a variety of EWL situations, reflecting that the transition between occupation and retirement takes multiple forms. This review has aggregated and categorized the three conceptual variants of EWL that are already fairly well-established in the available research. They have been termed "employment after retirement," "bridge employment" and "unretirement."

Recognizing and categorizing this variety is clearly a novel contribution and points to future lines of research.

Second, among the four groups of analysed individual factors, there are significantly influential variables on EWL, which confirms the relevance of systematically consolidating the patterns of association. In this sense, there are four explanatory variables whose influence has proven to be more consistent: educational level, occupation, health and domestic responsibilities. Educational level and occupation are those that most clearly favour EWL. This positive effect reaches the highest levels of education or occupation, but also the intermediate categories as compared to the lowest. The stronger influence and more consistent association for educational and occupational attainment reveals a pattern that may be associated with a job quality mechanism. Both pieces of evidence support the hypothesis that better working conditions act as powerful independent pull factors in various institutional contexts (De Preter et al. 2013). Good health also contributes to prolong working life and does so whether health status is measured by objective or subjective indicators. Care responsibilities at home is the explanatory variable that most clearly hinders EWL, an effect that is registered in any of its variants.

Third, there are some factors whose influence is less consistent, which makes it advisable to study them in greater detail in future research. On the one hand, regarding sociodemographic variables, the influence of gender is conditioned by the interaction with other factors: although women are less likely to have EWL, this influence is modified by educational level, marital status, health, income-related variables and household characteristics. The interaction with educational level shows how less educated men have a higher probability of postretirement employment, while for women, this positive influence is observed among the more educated. Regarding marital status, single women are more likely to follow EWL pathways. Health also interacts with gender insofar as women who continue working beyond their pensionable age are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to have poor self-related health. Other factors, such as socioeconomic vulnerability, financial or income difficulties, family care and childcare responsibilities or the difficulty of working full-time push women to extend their working lives.

On the other hand, regarding socioeconomic variables, the influence of income level also shares a limited consistency, most likely because

measuring it should be refined and any biases associated with other variables such as wealth should be avoided. Future research should properly distinguish between income and wealth, and specify whether such variables are defined as absolute measures or as relative levels at specific points in the distribution. Additionally, results point to the convenience of exploring the effects of these income-related factors differentiating the measurement at individual or aggregated-household level.

Fourth, it is also interesting to consider some evidence on specific EWL variants. While age is negatively associated with EAR and BE, this is not the case for UN. For this specific type of EWL, which usually involves returns to preretirement employment status, there is a positive influence of age that is maintained up to the ages closest to the statutory retirement age. Similarly, and given that BE also involves defining changes over time based on retrospective information, the evidence on labour trajectory variables has mostly concentrated on the EAR variant, indicating a potential gap and empirical challenge when analysing its influence on the rest of the EWL concepts. Moreover, some categories of explanatory variables have shown contradictory effects among the conceptual variants analysed. While married men are more likely to be UN; in the case of BE, it is divorced or widowed women. Furthermore, in the case of UN, it is the homeowners who are more predisposed to remain in their jobs; but in the EAR variant, it would be the renters.

This discussion on the main empirical results has already identified some of the most attractive lines for future research, such as systematically analysing EWL in these three different conceptual variants (EAR, BE and UN). Another line of improvement would be multilevel comparative analyses, still scarce in the literature (De Preter et al. 2013; Szinovacz 2012), connecting macro variables of the institutional (labour markets or pension systems) and cultural (expectations and values about life cycles and retirement) environment with patterns of individual determinants that already have a generalised influence. Most of the studies reviewed, especially for the European context, allow neither the joined in-depth analysis of country cases with a comparative perspective, nor the specification of different EWL trajectories. For this purpose, larger, longitudinal, comparative and more representative datasets will be required.

In these future analyses, research hypothesis could be to verify if the consistent determinants of EWL found in this systematic review

(educational level, occupation, health, and caregiving responsibilities) are maintained in all institutional and cultural settings; or, on the contrary, those contexts modulate the observed influence. In fact, one of the limitations of this literature review is the country coverage: the results obtained could be improved by including regions outside Europe and the United States with different cultural frameworks and, probably also, with more diverse pension systems. Future research could also be benefited from analysis of more recent years in which some reforms have been implemented, such as the equalization of pension ages between women and men in the UK.

These results may have interesting implications for debates both on the goals and effectiveness of policies aimed at extending of working lives. The obtained evidence supports critical approaches to policies that only seek to extend the legal retirement age and/or increase financial incentives to EWL (Ní Léime et al. 2020; Phillipson 2019; Turek et al. 2022). If those who have lower educational or occupational profiles, poor health or more care responsibilities are less likely to prolong their working lives (pushed by regulations or incentives to postpone retirement), the risk that either the incentives will be ineffective, or the retirement will be less equitable is higher. Flexible arrangements that respond to that heterogeneity of individual traits and preferences should avoid reproducing life-course advantages and disadvantages in the timing and conditions of accessing to retirement.

Regarding specific policies and considering the research on how different individual characteristics and trajectories determine EWL, there are two policies that have proven to frame more flexible and equitable effects. On the one hand, compared to Bismarckian pension systems with tightened contributions-benefit pension systems, Beveridge multipillar pensions systems (combining both public pension with minimum income and occupational or private earnings-related pension) have proved to be more effective in fighting poverty and inequality (Ebbinghaus 2021; Hinrichs 2021). On the other hand, a social investment orientation of welfare states has been confirmed to be effective in that direction (Kuitto & Helmdag 2021): investing in people skills and supporting care work over the life course could contribute to lengthen working lives. The positive effect of that approach on lifelong skills facilitates careers with greater mobility

in the central part of working life, which happens to a very favourable condition for EWL (OECD 2024).

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Corresponding Author

Aroa Tejero, Department of Sociology Spain, Facultad de Economía y Empresa, Edificio Departamental, 2ª planta, Avda. del Cristo, s/n, 33006, Oviedo, Spain. Email: tejeroaroa@uniovi.es

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Appendix

Table A1. Methodological characteristics of the articles examined

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Albanese et al. (2020)	243,655 individuals aged between 52 and 61.	Administrative data from the Belgian Population Register and Belgian Social Security.	Belgium.	1989, 1997, 2000–2004.
Axelrad (2018)	34,483 retired respondents.	Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE).	20 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.	2006–2007; 2010–2011, 2013.
Berglund et al. (2017)	764 workers aged 52 to 59.	Swedish Panel Survey of Ageing and the Elderly (PSAE).	Sweden.	2002–2003, 2010–2011.
Boveda and Metz (2016)	3737 men and women aged 50 and over.	University of Michigan Health and Retirement Study (HRS).	EE. UU.	1992–2014.
Brown et al. (2014)	3508 workers aged 18 and over.	National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW).	EE. UU.	2008
Burkert and Hochfellner (2017)	15,504 retirees who received regular old-age pension benefits.	German Pension Insurance linked to data of the German Federal Employment Agency (BASiD).	Germany.	2007

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued)

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Cahill et al. (2008)	12,600 respondents aged between 51 and 61.	Health and Retirement Study (HRS).	USA	1992–2004.
Cho et al. (2016)	50+ workers for different countries: 24,505 (Corea), 75,983 (Germany) and 18,780 (USA).	Korean Labour and Income Panel Study, German Socio-Economic Panel y Panel Study on Income Dynamics (USA).	USA, Germany and South-Korea.	1999–2007.
Congdon-Hohman (2018)	3421 respondents aged between 51 and 62.	University of Michigan's Health and Retirement Study (HRS).	USA	2006–2008.
De Preter et al. (2015)	930 people over 50 years old who are living with their partners.	SHARE.	11 EU countries: Austria, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Denmark, Switzerland, Greece and Belgium.	2004–2005; 2006–2007.
Dingemans and Henkens (2020)	2926 working retirees (aged 60–75)	SHARE.	11 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland.	2004–2007; 2010–2011.

(Continued)

Table A1. *(Continued)*

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Dingemans and Moehring (2019)	11,369 retirees aged 60–75 receiving pension income.	SHARE.	13 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Spain, and Sweden.	2004–2008; 2011–2013.
Dingemans et al. (2017)	22,485 pensioners aged between 60 and 75.	SHARE.	16 EU countries: Spain, France, Poland, Germany, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, Portugal, Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Hungary, Czech Republic.	2011
Fasbender et al. (2016)	2149 pensioners aged 60–70.	Transitions Old Age Potential Study (TOP) Study.	Germany.	2013
Finch (2014)	2680 individuals above retirement age (65 for men, 60 for women).	British Household Panel Survey (BHPS).	UK.	1991–2004.
Gstrein (2023)	9389 individuals aged 65 and over.	European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS, EUROFOUND).	28 EU.	2016

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued)

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Hansson et al. (2022)	3123 retired persons aged 60–66 years.	Swedish Health, Aging, and Retirement Transitions Study (HARTS).	Sweden.	2015–2021.
Hellevik and Herlofson (2020)	3123 retired persons aged 60–66 years. 3492 workers over 65, or over 40 if already retired but not prematurely retired (with full work history).	Swedish Health, Aging, and Retirement Transitions Study (HARTS).	Sweden.	2015–2021.
Hofäcker and Naumann (2015)	11,700 observations (one per person per year), heads of household over 50 and working full-time.	German Ageing Survey (DEAS, Deutscher Alterssurvey)	Germany.	1980–2008.
Kalenkoski and McCarty (2021)	941 workers who reported having retired at some point between the ages of 50 and 70 (unbalanced panel).	Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)	USA.	2005–2015.
Kanabar (2015)		English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)	UK.	2002–2013.

(Continued)

Table A1. (*Continued*)

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Kantarci and Van Soest (2008)	Meta-analysis including samples from other studies (of different sizes, all over 1000 individuals aged 50+), added to an own survey of 815 workers aged 25+ selected from the CentER panel (a Dutch representative survey).	Health and Retirement Study (HRS), Retirement History Study (RHS), National Longitudinal Survey (NLS), PSID, CPS, Current Population Survey (CPS), Retirement Confidence Survey (RCS), European Community Household Panel (ECHIP) and Enquete Beroepsbevolking (<i>Statistics Netherlands</i>).	Although it compares with other EU countries, it focuses mainly on the comparison between USA and Netherlands, with specific analysis for the latter.	1994–2006
Kauppi et al. (2021)	4014 public sector workers contacted 18 months before retirement.	Finnish Retirement and Aging Study (FIREA).	Finland.	2014–2019.
Klaesson et al. (2018)	4,190,298 individuals over 50.	Statistics Sweden (administrative records).	Sweden.	2001–2011.

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued)

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Leinonen et al. (2020)	10,879 workers who reached 63 years of age after 2003 (affected by a pension reform), and have reached 68 in 2015 after receiving employment income.	Finnish Centre for Pensions and Statistics Finland (cross-referencing administrative and demographic data).	Finland.	2005–2015.
Madero-Cabib et al. (2023)	2699 individuals over 60 who in the base year were below the average retirement age.	ELSA, HRS y SHARE.	11 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and USA.	2004–2016.
McLaughlin and Neumark (2018)	12,421 individuals aged 50–60, who are affected by an increase in retirement age.	Health and Retirement Study (HRS).	USA.	1992–2008.
Myllyntausta et al. (2022)	4263 public sector employees who have reached their individual pension date.	Finnish Retirement and Aging study (FIREA).	Finland.	2014–2019.

(Continued)

Table A1. *(Continued)*

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Pengcharoen and Shultz (2010)	2869 workers over 50 years who have been in their job for more than 10 years.	Health and Retirement Study (HRS).	USA.	1992–2002.
Pettersson (2014)	Two samples of 87,995 and 93,584 individuals aged between 56 and 107.	LINDA database (representative panel of 3% Swedish population, containing detailed information on income).	Sweden.	1994–2007.
Platts et al. (2019)	2046 individual aged 50–69 years who were born in 1920–1959	British Household Panel Survey.	UK.	1991–2015.
Pleau (2010)	3590 over the age of 50.	Health and Retirement Study (HRS).	USA.	1992–2006.
Qi et al. (2019)	12 million people over 18 years of age, born between 1930 and 1980, resident in Sweden at the time of the interview.	Swedish Interdisciplinary Panel (SIP, data from several administrative registers on income, taxes and employment).	Sweden.	1981–2011.

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued)

Reference	Sample	Data sources	Countries	Period
Radl (2013)	10,112 individuals aged between 55 and 75.	SHARE.	12 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Israel, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland.	2006–2007.
Smeaton et al. (2018)	Individuals over 50 for different countries: England (10,361), Italy (2852), USA (19,643).	SHARE, English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA), American Health and Retirement Survey (HRS).	England, Italy and USA.	2004–2012.
Topa et al. (2014)	5403 respondents aged 50 and over; 634 selected for longitudinal analysis.	SHARE.	11 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.	2004, 2006.
Virtanen et al. (2022)	1953 public sector employees whose statutory retirement date was between 2014 and 2019.	Finnish Retirement and Aging (FIREA) study.	Finland.	2019
Zhao and Burge (2021)	33,807 individuals aged between 51 and 69.	Health and Retirement Survey (HRS).	EEU.	1991–2010.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the systematic review.

Table A2. Main contributions of the articles examined: concepts and micro factors

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Albanese et al. (2020)	Gradual retirement: workers over 50 (mainly from the private sector) that reduce their working hours by 50%, 80%, or totally, and supplement their salary with a public pension.	Sex, age, occupation, type of household.
Axelrad (2018)	Late retirement: working after statutory retirement age.	Year of birth, health, age, education, marital status, household wealth.
Berglund et al. (2017)	Prolonged working life: probability of staying in their jobs after reaching the age of eligibility for old-age pension.	Type of employment (public or private sector), working hours, type of contract, self-reported health, individual income, household income, level of education, year of birth, age, level of education, marital status, household wealth.
Boveda and Metz (2016)	Bridge employment: transitional work that occurs between full-time employment in a career and complete labour force withdrawal.	Sex, age, education, marital status, health, total household wealth.
Brown et al. (2014)	Working in retirement: workers over the age of 50 that consider themselves to be working for pay in retirement.	Self-reported health, age, sex, marital status, presence of children under the age of 18, older care responsibilities, ethnicity, adjusted household income, working hours, job satisfaction, job characteristics (job demands, job control, social support), occupation.

(Continued)

Table A2. (Continued)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Burkert and Hochfellner (2017)	Post-retirement: taking a job after officially starting to claim old-age pension benefits; individuals who have worked for at least 30 days in the first 3 years of their retirement or who are jobseekers.	Seeking financial security (wage at the end of the career job), seeking continuity (days of unemployment relative to days in the labour force over the life course; last work status prior to retirement; gap in days between the last job prior to retirement and entry into retirement), seeking work ability (health and employers' characteristics); control variables (sex, level of education, nationality, birth cohort, duration of the career job, occupation, working time).
Cahill et al. (2008)	Bridge job, gradual retirement, and postponement of retirement: reduction of employment participation before complete retirement (combination of part-time employment and pension benefits). A middle step between full-retirement and unretirement: continuity after retirement (working and receiving a public pension at the same time) and 'hopping postretirement' (repeatedly shifting between employment and non-employment).	Cohort, age, sex, level of education, self-reported health, marital status, working status of spouse, presence of children in the household, type of pension, health insurance, wage, occupation, wealth, housing tenure.
Cho et al. (2016)		Sex, age, level of education, marital status, occupation, type of pension (public vs. private).
Congdon-Hohman (2018)	Unretirement: return to work (either part-time or full-time) after full retirement.	Demographic characteristics (age, sex, race, marital status, level of education), health (own and spouse's self-reported), dummy for receiving a pension, health insurance, household wealth, household size.

(Continued)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
De Preter et al. (2015)	Retirement timing: age at which individuals self-report being retired.	Sex, age, level of education, care responsibilities, health status (respondent and partner), working hours (full-time or part-time), volunteer work, household measures (age gap between partners, household size, household income).
Dingemans and Henkens (2020)	Post-retirement or working after retirement: working beyond the statutory pension age, receiving old-age pension benefits.	Sex, age, level of education, marital status, average annual pension income by quartile, severe deprivation rate.
Dingemans and Moehring (2019)	Working-retiree or working after retirement: working beyond the statutory pension age, receiving old-age pension benefits.	Age, level of education, marital status, self-reported health, presence of children in the household, pension income at household level, years in employment, years in full-time employment, years in part-time employment, years in self-employment, occupation, number of jobs
Dingemans et al. (2017)	Bridge employment: participation in paid work while receiving a pension income.	Sex, age, level of education, marital status, self-reported health, pension income, daily informal care tasks (having children or grandchildren).
Fasbender et al. (2016)	Post-retirement employment: working while receiving old-age pension benefits.	Age, sex, level of education, partner status, self-reported health, previous employment status, post-retirement civil engagement, post-retirement family care, social meaning of work
Finch (2014)	Working after retirement/working after pension age: working at least 1 month beyond statutory pension age.	Birth cohort, years since reaching pension age, socio-demographic characteristics (sex, marital status, and tenure), working status of spouse, health status, access to job opportunities (access to a car and level of education), individual non-labour income, type of pension (private, occupational, public), future financial expectations.

(Continued)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Gstrein (2023)	Extension of working life – postretirement: probability of being employed after 65.	Sex, health, age, level of education, household composition (marital status and presence of children), life satisfaction, household size, income quartile.
Hansson et al. (2022)	Postretirement work: working full-time, a few days a week, once a week or once/twice a month while being retired.	Sex, years in retirement, retirement age, partner status, partner's working status, pension income, involuntary retirement, occupation, caregiving, objective health, subjective/mental health, reasons for working.
Hellevik and Herlofson (2020)	Older workers o post-retirement work: working beyond statutory retirement age.	Sex, age, level of education, sector affiliation/type of employment (private/public/self-employed), working hours, job satisfaction, importance of work, work motivation, work ability, retirement/exit plans, financial situation, subjective health, health change, partner's working status.
Hofäcker and Naumann (2015)	Late retirement or post-retirement work: working beyond 65 years.	Level of education, sex, place of residence.
Kalenkoski and McCarty (2021)	Bridge employment: partial retirement, defined as household heads aged 50 or older who were working between 1 and 34 hours per week.	Age, sex, marital status, race, level of education, health, non-labour income.

(*Continued*)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Kanabar (2015)	Unretirement: returning to work after being retired.	Marital status, working status of spouse, self-reported health, level of education, opportunity to work beyond retirement age, subjective financial situation, financial planning horizon, self-reported social class, pension wealth, non-pension financial wealth quintile.
Kantarci and Van Soest (2008)	Gradual retirement: gradual withdrawal from the labour market by reducing work effort. Phased retirement: progressive retirement keeping the same employer. Partial retirement: change in employer before leaving the labour market.	Sex, age, presence of children, partner status, level of education, income level, reasons for not reducing working hours before retirement (financial/economic, social, individual, company benefits).
Kauppi et al. (2021)	Extended employment: working beyond pensionable date more than 3 months and less than a year (short extension), or 1 year or more (long extension).	Sex, age, occupational status, marital status, working status of spouse, financial difficulties, social relationships, social engagement frequency, social participation, informal care giving, self-reported health, mental health.
Klaesson et al. (2018)	Timing of retirement and late-retirement: working beyond the average retirement age of a given socio-demographic group.	Sex, family type, occupation, level of education, professional status, commuter.
Leinonen et al. (2020)	Post-retirement employment: working and receiving a pension at the same time.	Sex, marital status, level of education, occupational class, housing tenure, household income, household wealth, household debt, part-time pension.

(*Continued*)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Madero-Cabib et al. (2023)	Extended working life pathways: late retirement from a full-time job (working in a full-time job beyond the statutory retirement age), late retirement from a part-time job (work beyond the statutory retirement age in a part-time job), gradual retirement (combine some kind of retirement pension with paid job).	Sex, level of education, marital status, objective health, self-reported health.
McLaughlin and Neumark (2018)	Post-retirement employment: working after full retirement age.	Level of education, cohort, sex, self-reported health, marital status, ethnicity.
Myllyntausta et al. (2022)	Extended employment: continuing working for over 6 months beyond the individual pensionable date.	Sociodemographic variables (sex, marital status); work characteristics (occupation, working status of spouse, caregiving status, part-time retirement, shift work status, good working capacity, job strain, work time control); health status, self-reported health, and mental health. Demographic/control variables (age, sex, health status, annual household income, and level of education); work-related variables (work schedule flexibility, job satisfaction, job involvement, and job seeking self-efficacy); non-work-related variables (security or certainty of retirement plans, family and marital satisfaction, attitude towards employment).
Pengcharoen and Shultz (2010)	Bridge employment: part-time or full-time temporary jobs that are held after leaving one's career employment.	

(*Continued*)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Pettersson (2014)	Unretirement: fully retired individuals can choose to re-enter the labour market (unretire) in full or partially.	Sex, level of education, country of birth, age, age at the re-entry, social allowances, housing allowances, marital status, working status of spouse, pension, household wealth, years of retirement, years of unretirement.
Platts et al. (2019)	Unretirement: reporting being retired and subsequently return to paid employment or beginning full-time work after partial retirement.	Sex, year of unretirement, cohort, age at retirement, level of education, household income, subjective financial status, housing tenure, type of pension, self-reported health, working status of spouse, care responsibilities.
Pleau (2010)	Postretirement: any paid employment after an initial self-identification as fully or partially retired.	Demographic variables (sex, race, level of education, age at retirement), occupation, individual earnings, household wealth, housing tenure, type of pension, self-reported health, joint retirement; family/household composition variables (marital status, number of children and grandchildren, and caregiving).
Qi et al. (2019)	Extending working life: to postpone retirement despite having the option to exit the labour market earlier.	Sex, level of education, health status, country of birth.
Radl (2013)	Timing of retirement.	Social class, household income, working status of spouse, number of grandchildren, sex, years of education, job tenure.

(*Continued*)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Reference	EWL concept	Micro-level factors analysed
Smeaton et al. (2018)	Reverse retirement-unretirement: individuals who return to work after a period of self-defined full retirement.	Sex, age, income decile, marital status, level of education, self-reported health, work-limiting health problems, housing tenure, volunteer, carer, working status of spouse, number of children, child age, children living at home.
Topa et al. (2014)	Bridge employment: employment after retirement from a full-time job, but before leaving the labour market permanently. The worker must receive a salary and an old-age pension benefit at the same time.	Health, quality of life, life satisfaction, job satisfaction, bride employment quality (rewards dimension), age, sex, type of pension, type of employment (public/private sector), occupation.
Virtanen et al. (2022)	Extended employment: working beyond retirement age.	Work time control trajectories, cohort, sex, occupation, marital status, self-reported health.
Zhao and Burge (2021)	Unretirement – reversing retirement: reversal of a previously communicated retirement decision.	Working status, retirement expectations, wealth-related information (home assets, housing wealth, property taxes, financial assets, financial wealth); demographics (cohort, age, health, sex, number of children, marital status, race, level of education).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the systematic review.

EWL: extension of working lives.

Table A3. Methodological dimension: countries analysed

Country	<i>N</i>
Germany	13
EEUU	12
Sweden	12
Belgium	10
Italy	10
Denmark	9
France	9
Austria	8
Netherlands	8
Spain	8
UK	7
Finland	6
Greece	6
Switzerland	6
Czech Republic	4
Portugal	3
Poland	3
Cyprus	2
Estonia	2
Slovakia	2
Slovenia	2
Hungary	2
Ireland	2

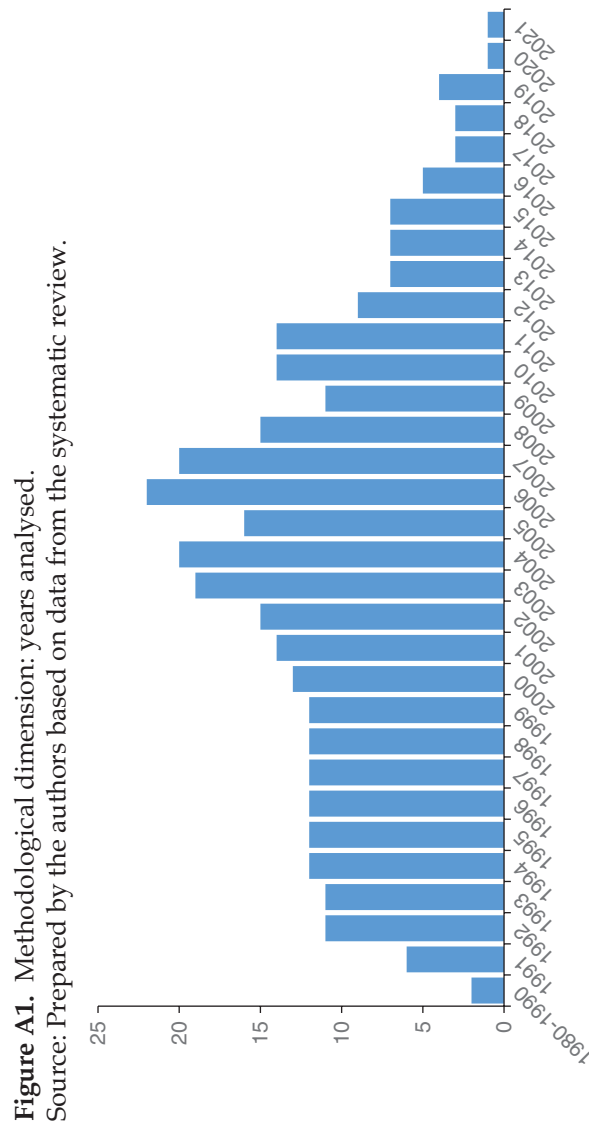
Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the systematic review.

Note: countries only analyzed in one study are not included in the table: Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Luxembourg and Israel.

Table A4. Methodological dimension: data sources

Database name	N
American HRS (U. Michigan)	10
SHARE	9
English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)	3
Finnish Retirement and Aging Study (FIREA)	3
American PSID	2
British Panel Household Survey	2
EQLS- Eurofound	1
Belgium Social Security	1
Swedish PSAE	1
American NSCW	1
German Social Security	1
German Socio-Economic Panel	1
German TOP Study	1
German Ageing Survey (DEAS)	1
American Current Population Survey (CPS)	1
Retirement History Study (RHS)- USA	1
Retirement Confidence Survey (RCS)- USA	1
U.S National Longitudinal Survey (NLS)	1
Swedish Health Aging and Retirement Transitions Study	1
Statistics Sweden	1
Finnish Centre for Pensions and Statistics	1
Swedish Interdisciplinary Panel (SIP)	1

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the systematic review.



Foucault, care of the self and the privileged status of old age

By CHRIS GILLEARD¹

Abstract

This paper draws attention to Foucault's 1981/1982 lecture series on *The Hermeneutics of the Self*. These contain one of the very few direct references Foucault ever made to the topic of old age. In them, he observes how, in the first and second centuries of the Common Era, Greco-Roman philosophers shifted their emphasis from "knowing thyself" to "becoming one's self." Whilst these writers saw the practice of the arts of living as desirable at every stage of life, they considered them effectively cultivated in later life, when the individual is least constrained by the weight of the world. Foucault argued that this classic focus upon the "arts of living" was later replaced by a "rules of living" approach, evident in the early Christian church teachings, and later embedded by the institutions of the state. Foucault's endorsement for pursuing an art of living in later life can be contrasted with other modern thinkers who have perpetuated a "rules of living" approach. Set against Foucault's support for an aesthetics of lifestyle, writers working largely within an ageing studies/gerontology framework have either advocated what might be called a public health agenda to age actively or successfully or have prescribed morally desirable pathways for older people to develop integrity, self-realisation and/or bodily transcendence. Foucault's advocacy of an art of living in later

¹Chris Gilleard, Division of Psychiatry, UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences, London, United Kingdom

life has been neglected by those using his work to emphasise the governance, rather than the freedoms of old age. Drawing attention to these overlooked lectures is intended to help re-balance this view.

Keywords: art of living, care of self, Foucault, rules of living, subjectivity.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his view of old age as expressed in his 1982 lectures on the hermeneutics of the self. In these lectures, he drew upon writings from antiquity that saw old age as a potentially privileged place, privileged because it was seen to offer an ideal opportunity to practice those technologies of the self that enable the self to exercise a degree of sovereignty over its self. These lectures constitute one of the few times that Foucault paid any attention to the place of old age. Most students of ageing have almost entirely ignored them and have instead focused upon Foucault's writings on governmentality, knowledge/power and surveillance and their application to the administrative institutions and practices of welfare for older people (Biggs & Powell 2001; Katz & Green 2002; Pickard 2009). Such themes are largely drawn from Foucault's earlier writings on the institutions governing ordering and organising individual subjects although none of these works refers directly to the topic of old age.

Nevertheless, it is these "genealogical" topics dominate the bulk of gerontological writing referencing Foucault. This is especially true in the case of "critical gerontology" and its focus on the role of the "relations of power and power relationships between professionals, institutions, and subjects of study" in controlling the organisation of "old age" (Powell 2011: 359). Within this tradition, Foucault's work is employed to frame "the history of gerontology as a system of knowledge/power that produces a discipline of the elderly body" (Dumas & Turner 2006: 145). Preoccupied with such welfarist perspectives, these "Foucauldian" gerontologists seek to demonstrate how "the discourse of community care acquires a coherence of power/knowledge" constructing older people's experiences and their identities as "a power/knowledge to be deployed against older people's voices rather than for their emancipation" (Powell 2012: 7). The point of this paper is to note that there is another, later

Foucault, which has been largely ignored in the gerontological literature; a Foucault that though less often referred to offers a very direct route to Foucault's thinking about old age and which provides a challenge to much current gerontological theorising.¹

Old Age and the Hermeneutics of the Self

Despite claims that "Foucault did not write about old age" (Pickard 2009: 69), in a series of lectures, given in 1981/1982 under the general heading of *The Hermeneutics Of The Self*, Foucault describes how, in classical Greco-Roman writing, the care of the self ceased being focused on the adolescent's entry into adult life and became, instead, "an obligation that should last for the whole of one's life" (Foucault 2005: 87). In his account of this classic writing on the care (or concern) for the self, he noted how they attributed to old age a "privileged status" in carrying out such practices (Foucault 2005: 107). He began his account by quoting the Greek philosopher Epicurus (BCE 341–270), who stated that one should practice philosophy both when we are young and when we are old, the former to acquire the steadfastness of an old man and the latter to grow young again (Foucault 2005: 88). Turning to a later text, Foucault sees a similar theme being repeated in Philo of Alexandria's "*De Vita Contemplativa*," advocating the kind of philosophical training that Foucault calls the "technology of self-care" as a practice to be performed through adulthood and on to old age.

In Philo's writing, Foucault sees a clear shift from practices of youth to practices best conducted in late middle age. This shift is advocated as a means of ensuring a satisfactory transition from active civic life to a less active old age, enabling old age to become "the centre of gravity, the sensitive point of the practice" for the care of the self (Foucault 2005: 92). Having established this historical record of making care of the self a life-long practice, Foucault pursues its realisation in old age as his main topic for the second hour of his lectures. There he seeks to establish the value given to old age during this classical period in Graeco-Roman literature,

¹ The division into an earlier and a "late" Foucault is no doubt problematic, but for practical purposes, I am distinguishing here between Foucault's writing in the 1960s and 1970s and that from the early 1980s till the end of his life in 1984 (see Elden 2017, for a more extended discussion on this "late" Foucault).

during the first two centuries of the common era. Antedating the work of George Minois and his account of the history of old age during the classical period (Minois 1989), Foucault observes a duality in how old age was regarded by the writers of this period. On the one hand, he argues that those in old age were judged as possessing wisdom, yet they were also marked by weakness; drawing upon much experience, they nonetheless possessed little energy to put that experience to use. Old age, Foucault concluded, contained – or expressed – an inherent ambiguity in the literature of this period, regarded “no doubt” as honourable but at the same time, “certainly” not desirable (Foucault 2005: 108).

Set against this ambiguity over the status of old age, Foucault suggests that the practices representing the care of the self, constitute, in old age, “the positive moment, the moment of fulfilment, the peak of this lengthy practice that the individual has pursued ... throughout his life” (Foucault 2005: 109). Quoting from Seneca, he advances the argument that old age arrives at the point when, without wanting or expecting to derive pleasure or joy from the world, the old man (*sic*) finally arrives at himself, can delight in himself and can at last achieve “a perfect and complete relationship” with his self.² In this account that Foucault derives from the classical Graeco-Roman literature, he evinces an implicit understanding that we must fulfil our life before the moment of death arrives and hence must organise our life as if we are already old. This is not just a matter of living long enough to reach chronological old age; it is about living in such a way that we should reach an ideal old age, “an old age we produce as it were which we practice” (Foucault 2005: 110).

Of course, it could be argued that Foucault is simply giving an historical account of the narratives concerning the care of the self, whereby writers in the classical period sought turn from governing others to fully governing themselves. His interest, it might be said, is more in organising the historical development of ideas about subjectivity and the self. Hence, his aim might seem merely to document the transition from the Hellenistic command to “know thyself” and its prioritisation in the search for the truth of the self to a later classical period, evinced by a “new” concern for styling one’s self. In short, that his goal is merely to mark this shift, from

² See Seneca’s *On Tranquillity of Mind* (Seneca 2008). In all his accounts of these “classical” texts, Foucault implicitly genders old age as a male stage of life.

a moralised path towards self-knowledge to a much more aesthetically informed notion of realising an autonomous life style in old age.

Arguably there exists another, more personal sub-text in this and other related themes in Foucault's later work, reflecting his growing concern with the question of self, subjectivity and the practices of freedom. According to Geoffrey de Lagasnerie, Foucault said at the time that his writing was a way of "transforming yourself, unbinding or freeing yourself from yourself," in short, a part of the technology of the self to which he was applying himself (De Lagasnerie 2015: 131). In an interview conducted shortly before his death, Foucault elaborated further on these practices, arguing that the virtue once assigned to the care of the self during this classical period was overturned as the Church and other "coercive" institutions took them over (Foucault 2020a). In doing so, he felt that their interpretation was shifted from the self-chosen practices of freedom and self-formation of the classic period to an avoidance or regulation of such practices, which were now deemed "suspect" and "denounced as a form of self-love, a form of selfishness or self-interest" (Foucault 2020a: 284).

Foucault pursued these concerns with the self when he went onto address a further transformation in the technologies of the self, as realised within early Christian teachings, notably in the form of the confessional and the prescription of the "regula vitae" (the rule of life). Rather than focusing upon the opportunity afforded by later life for strengthening the sovereignty of the self, these early Church teachings concentrated instead upon the subjection of the self, subjection to the disciplinary demands of Church doctrine to control the flesh. Youth, rather than old age, became the focus of disciplinary concern. With the subsequent decline in the authority of the Church, these would, in due course, be taken over by the state and its regulatory institutions, topics that had been the main focus for Foucault's earlier writings on disciplinarity and governance. The classical Graeco-Roman practices that had once privileged individual choice and the personal development of a style or form of life became, Foucault concluded, the rules of life under natural law, as evinced by the laws of the early Church (Foucault 2005: 424). The tone of Foucault's writing makes it clear that this transformation was not one to his taste, replacing "subjectivation" (making oneself a subject) with "subjectification" (being made subject to institutional pressures). As he would put it, in an interview conducted in early 1984, the year of his death, one should "be concerned

with yourself ... i.e. ground yourself in liberty, through the mastery of the self" (Foucault 1988: 20).

Foucault was in his late fifties when he died, and nearly 56 when he gave the lecture series on the hermeneutics of the self. Though far from conscious of his closeness to his death, the lectures he gave constitute one of the very few occasions when he touched upon the topic of old age.³ In the remaining years of his (writing) life, he focused upon technologies of the self, *tout court*, and did not follow through his 1982 lectures when he framed age, old age, as the focus and indeed centre of gravity for the practices of the care of the self, the "positive focal point towards which we should strive" (Foucault 2005: 110). Placed not as the peak of a career or as the peak of power in heading the household, old age was represented rather as the peak of self-realisation and self-sovereignty. Old age, Foucault argued, was framed less as an end point, a point of finitude but more a potential peak experience in realising the individualised journey of self-becoming; not a coming to terms with death and finitude but the ideal opportunity to practice and perfect the technologies of the self.

Of course we can never know whether Foucault would have practiced such an aesthetics himself, had he lived into later life or whether he might have developed these ideas further or abandoned them entirely. It seems evident that his mid-life awakening – which Foucault himself attributed to the triggering event of his trip to Death Valley, in California in 1975, where he was treated to the "mind-expanding" effects of taking the hallucinogenic drug, LSD – represented a shift in his thinking about subjectivity and self-hood (Wade 2019). This redirection in Foucault's thinking that followed his return from California to Paris has been described as "a tectonic shift" (Davidson 2005: xx). In place of the earlier concern over the "structures of subjectification" that had so preoccupied his thinking throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, from the late 1970s onwards, he continued to develop his own reading and thinking about the "practices of subjectivation" and the self-fashioning of the subject. Whilst

³ In a lecture delivered later that year at Toronto's Victoria University in June 1982, Foucault again notes that the idea of age as a privileged, *the* privileged moment of life to devote to "*askesis*" – "the diverse forms of cultivating oneself" (Foucault 2023: 69) – a point of view that he himself identifies with, stating that this is 'the point of view which is mine' (Foucault 2023: 75).

in two of the lectures he gave in 1982, he had pointed towards old age as an ideal time to fully engage with the art of living and the aesthetics of lifestyle his subsequent lectures (and writings) turned towards the more general topic of the government of self and others (Foucault 2011, 2012).

Technologies of the Self, Individualisation and Foucault's Neo-Liberalism

Though his general advocacy of the care of the self and the cultivation of a self-styled life-style (a sovereign concern with one's self) has been widely reported and debated, little has been said of his support for the idea that later life (old age) provides the best opportunity fully to engage with making oneself a sovereign subject. After a lifetime of being made a subject by the world (subjectification), the idea that later life (old age) affords the best opportunity for what he called "subjectivation" – making oneself the subject of one's self – (Foucault 2000: 351, 2005: 333) echoes some present day writing on the topic of "the third age." Thus, Peter Laslett considered later life – framed as the "third age" – to be a period in life when, freed from the responsibilities of work and family, older people could focus upon their "self-realisation." How far can such self-realisation be reconciled with Foucault's care (concern) for the self? Perhaps the critical point of departure is that pursuing a third age was for Laslett imbued with moral purpose, and not intended to be used to practice what might be deemed a purely selfish form of "self-love," or what he rather sternly called engaging in a life of "indolence" (Laslett 1991a: 140).

In contrast to the practices of freedom that Foucault advocated, Laslett saw the care of the self and the associated expectations of "self-realisation" to be defined by their social value and moral worth. For Laslett, there were rules for living a successful third age, manifested above all by "a duty to represent the future as a trust" (Laslett 1991b: 389). The rules governing the self-fulfilment of the third age, in short, were imbued with a "moralism/paternalism," which "paradoxically contradict the fundamental underlying principles of the self-realization discourse itself" (Laceulle 2018b: 269). For Laslett, the rules of living a third age were distinct for a particular phase of life – an opportunity, true – but one to be squeezed in between the business of a second age and the collapse into a fourth age.

His focus was on the opportunity to acquire a distinct status, albeit one defined not by work or childcare but by civic worth.

Other writers – such as Gilleard and Higgs – have argued that the third age is not a status – and certainly not a subjectivity – but constitutes a cultural space that is realised through the general “enriching” of later life and the opportunities this affords older people to participate as citizen consumers (Gilleard & Higgs 2011). Whilst employing the concept of “technologies of the self” to describe the consumption of the goods and services directed towards enhanced well-being in later life, such technologies of the self are embedded within the market and actively promoted in the media and by the modern welfare state with its emphasis upon individualisation and responsabilisation – a far cry, one might well argue, from the Stoic advocacy that Foucault was describing in his *Collège de France* lectures. Although a number of writers have accused Foucault of turning away from critique and an emphasis upon how the institutions of modernity render people subject to social control, towards a more individualistic position, exactly how far this constitutes a “defection” to a neo-liberal politics is debatable (Dean 2015; Dilts 2011; Tanke 2023).

Foucault’s engagement with neoliberalism has been seen as falling “squarely within his genealogical period” (Sherman 2019: 501), when he was concerned with the issue of “governmentality,” which he described as an ensemble of “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of ... power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instruments” (Foucault 2007: 208)⁴. Certainly, it is possible, as Dilts suggests, that “the neo-liberal account of human capital opens the grounds of subjectivity ... and allows him [Foucault] to think about the role that subjects play in their own formation” (Dilts 2011: 13). The bridge between a focus upon subjectification and subjectivation that his engagement with human capital theory enabled does not however mean that Foucault considered care for the self simply as a form of investment in one’s own human capital. It remains,

⁴ Some commentators and critics of Foucault’s work have periodised it into a three-fold division, distinguishing his early “archaeological” approach from his “genealogical” approach and finally his later “problematizations”; this latter phase being his turn to the hermeneutics of the self, the government of the self and the more general problem of “subjectivity” (Foucault 2020b).

as it was for the Stoics and other classic writers, a self-consciously performed enactment of one's sovereignty over one's self: a self-styling that creates a degree of freedom from the institutional subjectifications that otherwise characterise much of family and working life. The potential leverage that creates for the market, the media and the state to fashion that self-fashioning, of course, cannot be ignored.

Care of the Self, Self-Actualisation and Self-Realisation: Alternative Framings in Gerontology

If Foucault's advocacy of the practices of care of the self in later life can be linked both with ideals (idealisations?) of the third age and the marketisation of self-care, it is also possible to compare and contrast it with the more general advocacy of "self-actualisation" and "self-realisation" as practices of the self in later life. In this section, I shall explore how some key writers in the twentieth century have sought to characterise old age as a time for "self-actualisation" "self-integrity" and/or "self-realisation" and how far such views connect – and contrast with – those espoused by Foucault. Whilst the cultural trope of ordering the stages of life is centuries old, it is only really in the twentieth century that old age became a sufficiently democratic possibility, which could be framed within an implicitly secularised social order. Within this "institutionalised life course," old age was assigned a distinct place, a social position, through the introduction of retirement and the granting of a universal, pensioned citizenship (Kohli 2007; Kohli et al. 1983). This status was largely achieved without any obvious moral order or indeed expectations of those designated as aged or old. Old age was famously described by Burgess as a "roleless role" (Burgess 1960). One of the first writers to re-consider the signification of old age, its purpose or meaning, as opposed to its graphic or symbolic representation in the various "stages-of-life" iconographies of pre and early modernity, was Erik Erikson, in his book, *Childhood and Society* when he proposed the realisation of "integrity" as a distinct virtue of old age (Erikson 1950). In this section, then, I will consider how some of the key writers who have addressed the "matters of meaning and morality concerning later life" (Laceulle 2018b: 14) that have otherwise been neglected in ageing studies stand in comparison to the above "Foucauldian" position on care of the self.

As noted, Erikson was certainly one of the first such writers to address these issues. He outlined a schema describing the stages and tasks of psychosocial development from birth to the grave, a schema that he worked upon for a further 35 years, effectively to the end of his professional career (Erikson 1950, 1963, 1982; Friedman 2000). Erikson framed his stage theory of lifelong human development in terms of a systematic passage through a series of psychosocial crises, the resolution of which leads to the development of a series of “basic strengths” (Weiland 1993). These resolutions were aided by the use of socially embedded “ritualisations” whose nature is formed by and within society and social relations but which embody an underlying universality in so far as they are deployed as a means of successfully negotiating each stage of development and the crises they bring (Erikson 1982: 43–52). At the developmental stage characterising old age, Erikson sees the crisis being one of either achieving “integrity” – a sense of the wholeness of one’s life – or failing and falling into “despair” and a disdain for both one’s own life and more generally of the world. The ritualisation Erikson sees as supporting this transition is the philosophical (Erikson 1982: 33). By this, Erikson means the development of a philosophical outlook that enables the older person to contemplate the wholeness of his or her life, its integrality both with the world and with humanity collectively. In short, the art of making a success of later life is in shaping a coherent narrative about one’s life, and in shaping “a shared proclivity for understanding ... those who do understand the integrative ways of human life... [and] ... a comradeship with the ordering ways of distant times” (Erikson 1982: 65).

To some extent then both Foucault and Erikson share a view – an advocacy – of later life being a time for philosophical practice, but whilst Erikson emphasises the passive contemplation involved in realising such “integrality,” Foucault framed old age as a site of practice (he used the Greek term “askesis”) less concerned with contemplation than with aligning the self with the self, of refining a way of life that asserts authority, an authority of the self, the authoring of one’s life through shaping a lifestyle rather than developing a narrative. At the end of his book on *The Care of the Self*, he writes that this involves “the importance of developing all the practices and all the exercises by which one can maintain self-control and eventually arrive at a pure enjoyment of oneself ... the development of an art of existence that revolves around the question of the self” (Foucault

1990: 238). Whilst it can be argued that for Foucault, the art of living could not easily be separated from the act of writing, his focus was upon active subject-making, the pursuit of what the Cynics called “the royal life par excellence,” the life that is sovereign over itself (Foucault 2005: 307).

Whilst Erikson emphasised narrative coherence as a means of transcending the individual life and its singularity, Foucault wanted to celebrate that singularity and pursued the development of an autonomous “art of living” in later life. These practices, these “technologies of the self” (Foucault 2020c: 223–226), were forms of “active leisure” (Foucault 2020c: 252), designed to train the body and the mind, not so much with an end in sight but as practices of existence. In contemporary terms, one can see that such notions of active leisure are part of the cultures of later life. But their focus is different, emphasising above all a resistance to age, a forever maintaining of “youthfulness,” and the practices realised through counting steps, completing brain puzzles, undergoing exercise, good sleep habits, healthy eating and the regular use of “anti-ageing” cosmaceuticals and nutraceuticals. Foucault’s framing of the Greco-Roman technologies of the self, however, was mostly confined to those practices illustrated in the writings of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Philo of Alexandria, Plutarch and especially, Seneca (Foucault 2020c). These focused upon both the body and the soul, not to preserve or prolong life but to reach “a happy and autonomous life.” Ideally practiced most effectively in later life, these technologies of the self were not unlike Laslett’s idea of the third age, or Erikson’s goal of achieving integrity, but they represented a way of living beside death but on the bank of life (Foucault 2023: 76). Rather than resisting death or seeking to ensure a passage beyond death, in Foucault’s eyes, these “pagan” technologies of the self were concerned with the sovereignty of the self, a sovereignty of living beside death.

The notion of “transcending” the finitude of a life has been developed in the work of Lars Tornstam. Tornstam introduced the concept of *gero-transcendence* as “a meta-theoretical reformulation” of the disengagement theory developed by Elaine Cumming (Tornstam 1989). Whilst Cumming and her colleagues had framed their ideas about disengagement as a desired and desirable integration of the needs of older people to leave their social world with the needs of society to be freed from those without any further role, she conceived this as the mutual coordination of intra- and inter-subjective processes (Cumming & Henry 1961). What

Tornstam focused upon, however, was the intra-psychic process by which older people shifted their perspective “from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one” (Tornstam 1997: 143). Ironically for a sociologist, Tornstam was concerned less with a change in social relations and role performances than in a change or development in and of an essentialised self (Tornstam 2011: 168).

A central element of that changing self was a rising degree of “cosmic transcendence,” a term that is connected with Erikson’s formulation of old age as a time of integrity – or integrality – a sense of the wholeness of one’s life and its connection with all of humanity – mankind [sic] as “my kind” (Erikson 1982: 32). In contrast to this emphasis upon personal development and narrative integrity, Tornstam implies that gero-transcendence occurs as a result of “a natural progression toward maturation,” a kind of endogenous developmental process of the self, which transcends the limits of one’s body, one’s environment and, in a sense, one’s world (Tornstam 1997: 143). Rather than turning of the self more fully towards the art of fashioning one’s self, the position that Foucault tends to endorse, gero-transcendence involves a “natural” decline in self-centredness, a turn from egoism to altruism, and thereby helping realise previously hidden aspects of the self (Tornstam 2005).

In fleshing out these shifts in the self-arising in old age, Tornstam has eschewed both personal and cultural histories in favour of empirical surveys of older people, designed to demonstrate the multi-dimensionality of gero-transcendence, and the variability by which it is achieved. But with this focus upon demonstrating the phenomenon of gero-transcendence via interviews and self-reported questionnaires, he has neglected to explain how this progression takes place, treating it as neither practice nor discourse but instead as a process of naturally occurring “self-development.” Others however have taken it upon themselves to suggest a variety of “exercises” to help people discover “new possibilities for personal development” and thereby achieve higher levels of such transcendence (Tornstam 2011: 177). But whether treated as the outcome of such therapeutic tasks or as a reflection of the natural development of age, it is apparent that Tornstam considers gero-transcendence a reflection of a moral order, a moral imperative for becoming old. Whilst “essentialised” as part of the “natural progression” of human ageing, Tornstam also argues that gero-transcendence can also be fostered by various regulated practices

as well as by encouraging significant others to recognise encourage and accept such “signs of gerotranscendence as possibly natural signs of the ageing process” (Tornstam 2011: 177).

Like Erikson and Tornstam, Jan Baars and his colleague, Hanna Laceulle, share a similar concern with the moral ordering of old age (Baars 2012, 2017; Laceulle 2018a, 2018b). But rather than assuming any “natural” pattern to this moral ordering, as both Erikson and Tornstam seem to do, Baars and Laceulle’s focus is upon the desirability of active “self-realisation” in old age. Rather than any endogenous process of later life adult development, they perceive self-realisation as a socially necessary labour that is required, in part, to counteract the negative views held about – and dominating the discourses concerning – representations of old age in late modernity (Laceulle & Baars 2014). For Baars and Laceulle, “self-realisation” is a moral goal, set apart from the more indulgent forms of “self-realisation” that are associated with consumer society and its current “third age” advocates (Laceulle & Baars 2014: 39). That goal constitutes a search for autonomy, authenticity and virtue. In stressing the latter, they too mirror aspects of what Peter Laslett advocated in his version of the third age: the moral responsibility for those in later life who have the time and resources to undertake such morally responsible “self-realizations” to do so, virtuously, for others – in short to exercise civic virtue. They argue that such “moral philosophy ... offers a deeper and richer notion of self-realization ... [whose] roots reach back to the Socratic ideal of “knowing yourself”” (Laceulle & Baars 2014: 40).

Laceulle suggests that such a preferred form of self-realisation is necessary to counteract both the consumerist and the pessimistic narratives for living well in later life. She summarises her position as advocating “a process of moral self-development in which people strive to become who they are by realizing their deepest aspirations and highest capacities” (Laceulle 2018b: 30). Such development she argues is realised within three inter-related themes of autonomy, authenticity and virtue (Laceulle 2018a). Although framing ageing as “a socio-culturally constituted process of living in time” (Laceulle 2018b: 22), she unavoidably has to confront a key aspect such social constructionist definitions omit – namely the increasing probability of morbidity and mortality arising from a chronology expressed through and within structures that lie outside society and culture.

Whilst all these authors – Baars, Erikson, Laceulle and Tornstam – express a common theme – the desirability of moral development continuing into later life – they see its manifestation in different ways and through different mechanisms. In the case of Erikson and Tornstam, such development represents an endogenous process in the development of the self; or, in the case of Baars and Laceulle, as a culturally mandated direction of travel to overcome both the pervasiveness of negative representations of old age in “late” modern societies and the inevitable finitude that ageing universally incurs (Baars, Laceulle). Whilst Laceulle is aware of the various objections that can be made to her concept of self-realisation in later life – its implicit elitism, Eurocentrism, moralism, paternalism, self-centredness, etc., she insists that, faced with human finitude and the pervasive social devaluation of age, “becoming who I am” remains an important practice to pursue into later life (Laceulle 2018a: 265–270). Unlike Foucault, however, who is less inclined to advocate the idea of there being any authentic or essential self waiting to be realised or revealed, these latter authors seem to subscribe to such a belief. In doing so, they imply that such a self can – and should – be realised in old age – when an authentic, transcendent and fully realisable older “I” can be actualised. Foucault’s concern, on the other hand, remains with realising a style of living in later life, a practice of becoming to be engaged in each day, without end and without any final fashioning.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to delineate a strand of thinking about later life that takes its point of departure from a theme that Foucault had begun to develop in the course of his 1982 lectures on the hermeneutics of the self, namely, the care of the self. In framing old age as a position of privilege in practising these technologies of the self, Foucault contrasts the Greco-Roman emphasis upon developing an art of living (what might be termed a self-styled later lifestyle) with the subsequent shift towards a “rules of living” approach, that emphasised ways of realising a later life in keeping with the tenets of the church, the state or nowadays with the “rules” of any number of spiritual and non-spiritual coaches, trainers and public health officials. This turn from an aesthetics of later life style to an ethics of living a “good” old

age is arguably re-invented in the works of Jan Baars, Erik Erikson, Hannah Laceulle and Lars Tornstam with their focus upon gero-transcendence, personal integrity, self-actualisation and self-realisation. Although these models share a common focus upon the self in old age, they contrast sharply with Foucault's valorisation of the care of the self as a life-style practice exemplified in writings from the "classic period" in Greco-Roman history.

A significant element in contemporary gerontology embodies not so much an art of living as a rules of living approach, evidenced in both the work of writers such as Baars, Erikson, Laceulle and Tornstam and in the various public health initiatives concerned with promoting active, healthy or successful ageing. Whilst aspects of Foucault's "art of living" might seem to have echoes in Laslett's advocacy of the third age, the key difference, it is suggested, lies in the moral strictures that Laslett insists upon in living a morally significant third age. Whilst it might be argued that a more purely Foucauldian third age risks making people in later life simply another subject of the market, the practices the "later" Foucault sees making up the care of the self are constituted by the possibility of practising personal sovereignty – without assuming any fixed self-hood or subjectivity. Set against the lifelong forms of subjectification dogging both the early and the adult years of growing up, he raises the possibility of a self-styling, self-styled, "becoming" in later life. Not a goal or an end, he seems to be advocating rather a practice – an art of living – that can more fully be engaged with in later life, whatever the precise circumstances that later life is lived in and without any denial of the self's finitude.

Corresponding Author

Chris Gilleard, Division of Psychiatry, UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences, 6th Floor, Maple House, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1T 7NF, United Kingdom. Email: c.gilleard@ucl.ac.uk

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Past, present, and future in the context of queer ageing: a qualitative study with same-sex couples in Scotland

By DORA JANDRIĆ*

Abstract

This paper explores imagined futures of same-sex couples in Scotland through the intersection of their age and queer identities, focusing on the concepts of queer time and chrononormativity. The paper draws on qualitative interview data gathered through two joint semi-structured interviews with seven same-sex couples, and written accounts that the couples produced between the interviews. The paper demonstrates how these couples belong to the future and use their actions and knowledge to construct it. The paper contributes to ageing and future studies by exploring the queer ageing experience and the intersectionality of sexuality and age in the construction and imagination of the future. By exploring the social, cultural, and personal experiences of aging among queer adults, the findings of this paper contribute to the international discourse on aging and sexuality.

Keywords: ageing, chrononormativity, queer time, same-sex.

*Dora Jandrić, PhD in Sociology from the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland

Introduction

Our understanding of time is based on individual perception and the historical and cultural contexts we live in (Baars 2012; Butola 2011), which are, for the most part, informed by heteronormativity and chrononormativity. Heteronormativity “regulates those kept within its boundaries [heterosexual people] as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them [people who identify as non-heterosexual]” (Jackson 2006: 105). In a similar vein, chrononormativity regulates the way in which we measure time and prescribes the “correct” time and order in which to fulfil important life events such as marriage, having children, retirement, and death (Freeman 2010). The way in which we understand the future is likewise informed by our lived experiences and knowledge of relevant social, political, and personal events, making the future a real space and time that is informed and constructed by our actions and plans (Adam & Groves 2007). One of the most common narratives regarding the future is that “the children are the future,” an example of which can most prominently be seen in Greta Thunberg’s climate activism. The focus on the younger generations as key actors for the future is in line with chrononormative thinking, as it emphasizes the biological progression of time and age, implying that older people cannot occupy the future because of their proximity to the end of their lives. Queer time, as a response to these norms, creates an opportunity to imagine the future outside of the chrononormative “markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2005: 2). Therefore, queer time allows for the imagination for alternative, queer futures, ones that are occupied by older people as much as they are by the younger ones.

The intersection of age and sexuality places the ageing LGBTI population on the margins of society because of beliefs that older people are asexual (Gott & Hinchliff 2003), heterosexual, and cisgender (Simpson et al. 2018). These stereotypes portray older LGBTI people as “outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future” (Port 2012: 3). This group’s “nonfuturity” (Sandberg 2015: 20) is further emphasized by the legacy of the HIV/AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s, as the lifespan of people who contracted HIV was limited to such an extent that it erased any possibility of having a future and positioning them as figures of society’s “death drive” (Edelman 2004: 3).

This paper explores the prospect of studying the future through the intersection of age and LGBTI identities, arguing that older LGBTI people understand their role as “protagonists and agents of change” (Adam & Groves 2007: 164) and actively participate in the shaping and constructing of the future. By presenting the stories told by seven same-sex couples in Scotland, collected through semi-structured interviews and written diaries, as well as their recounting of past and present lived experiences, I will illustrate how the participants’ knowledge of historical and political events makes them key actors in the construction of the future. The paper also addresses the gap in knowledge on older people and their belonging to the future (Port 2012), specifically focusing on the intersection of sexuality and older age as perceived barriers to participation in imagining and creating the future (Edelman 2004; Sandberg 2015).

Literature Review

The unique ageing experiences of LGBTI individuals have been gaining increased attention in academic discourse (Almack 2018; Heaphy et al. 2004; Hoekstra-Pijpers 2022; Kneale et al. 2021). However, research on the futures of LGBTI individuals, and same-sex couples, has been confined to younger people, excluding queer older people from narratives about the future. This literature review provides an overview of queer ageing, queer time, and chrononormativity, and the non-linearity of the past, present, and future in constructing queer ageing experiences. Since this paper has couples as its main participants, it will frame the past experiences, present challenges, and future aspirations of those participants through the lens of interpersonal relationships they built and maintained throughout their lives, and it will address this in the findings section.

Queer Aging: A Unique Journey

Queer aging experiences are distinguished from heterosexual experiences by a combination of historical contexts and present-day realities (Kneale et al. 2021). Events such as the decriminalization of homosexuality, the enforcement and abolishment of Section 28 (which will be explored in more detail below), and the advancements of LGBTI rights such as equal marriage and adoption, all had an impact on the lives of LGBTI people. It is important

to understand that even though those events happened in the past, their echoes still remain embedded deep in the everyday routines of the couples in the present, while also helping them imagine their ageing futures that are “distinct from the many representations of hetero-happiness” (Changfoot et al. 2022: 1) that we see in media today. When talking about ageing, there seems to be a need to have a normative time when old age begins, as illustrated in a number of sources (see Stacey & Averett 2016; Westwood 2017). Moving away from the prescribed beginnings of old age, we can see that some groups, such as people living with HIV, sexual and gender minorities, and ethnic minority groups, might experience symptoms of ageing sooner than their peers (Rodés et al. 2022), which can queer the beginning of old age and the ageing experience in its entirety (Chazan & Whetung 2022).

Central to understanding queer aging in this paper are couple relationships, which serve as microcosms of shared experiences and perspectives (Valentine 1999). Through the joint narration of past and present events, couples reflect on personal experiences and contextualize them within broader socio-political contexts. The dynamics of mixed-age couples further enrich these narratives, highlighting the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and the co-creation of a joint future (Jackson 2010). The paper therefore understands age as subjective, and older age as unable to be prescribed by ticking off normative societal and biological expectations (Sandberg 2008). As this paper will illustrate, the ageing experience and the imagination of the future are portrayed as hopeful, despite the fears about health, accommodation, and death, that come almost naturally when thinking about later life. Queerness is what makes the future positive and non-normative (e.g. Jones 2011), as it allows imagination beyond the here and now, and into the then and there (Muñoz 2009). This paper continues the academic discussion of queer ageing and imaginations of the future, adding to the works like those of Simpson (2015) on ageing gay men, and Traies (2016) on the lived experiences of older lesbians, and exploring these concepts through a lens of coupledness.

Queer Time and Chrononormativity

Queer time is characterized by its deviation from chrononormative norms, encompassing diverse relationship dynamics, family structures, and lifestyle choices. Queer time is a response to both chrono- and

hetero-normativity, as the temporal trajectory that does not follow the prescribed norms of the dominant group, but rather creates norms of its own (Halberstam 2005). Queer time draws on life events which can be different to the ones predetermined by chrononormativity and defined by the milestones in an individual's life. The beginning of queer time for an individual is usually marked by an event that acts as a break from the established norms, such as coming out (Klein et al. 2015). However, queer time is not exclusively in opposition to chrononormativity. It exists within its framework of heteronormative coupling, marriage, and family formation (Freeman 2010). As Freeman (2010) further explains, calendars, diaries, and other ways in which people measure time are used to create rhythms that should be followed, and that are guided by chrononormativity, making it the mainstream understanding of time. Couples who transition from heterosexual relationships to same-sex ones navigate complex intersections of time, identity, and societal expectations, living across two temporal planes at the same time.

Events that happen during a person's life, as well as memories of those events, build parts of the identity of that person. When recalling key events, people position themselves within the temporal and social contexts of the times of those events, building a narrative about their own identity. Within those stories, people also position themselves in relation to others who occupy their memories and who serve as reference points for their own identity (Jenkins 2008). Mead (1934) explored the role of time in identity construction, and his ideas are the basis of the argument made in this paper that queer time and queer identities, both individual and couple ones, mutually construct each other. As the focus of this paper is on same-sex couples, Mead's (1934) theory needs to be applied to those events that were instrumental in the creation of the queer relational identity, in the past, present, and the future. Events such as coming out, beginning their current relationship, getting married, or moving in together, as well as their imagined futures, all create their couple identity. Therefore, queer time, across the life courses of the research participants, holds a central role in shaping their queer identities.

The above addresses several gaps in research. Firstly, I focus on the lack of attention on older people in general, and LGBTI older people in particular in research on futures, adding to existing discussions on queering ageing studies and the intersection of sex, gender, and older age, such

as those by Sandberg and Marshall (2017), Chazan (2020), Chazan and Baldwin (2021), and King (2022), to name a few. Secondly, there are no other studies about the futures of same-sex couples in Scotland or anywhere else. Available research on same-sex couples, both young and old, focuses on finances and health expenditures (Gavulic & Gonzales 2022), parenting (Tao 2023), and the impact of marriage on health (Umberson & Kroeger 2015), often comparing same-sex to opposite-sex couples. By exploring ageing within a same-sex couple, I also contribute to methodological discussions on the benefits and limitations of interviewing couples together. This paper makes a significant contribution to studies on queer time by exploring it through the ageing experiences of same-sex couples, making the argument that the role of queer time in constructing their identities in the past and present is what gives them the possibility of actively imagining and contributing to the future.

Historical Context

To study the present lived experiences, it is necessary to explore the historical context of the participants' youth and pinpoint key events in queer temporality. Going through defining developmental milestones when anything else than heterosexuality was considered either a disease (D'Augelli & Grossman 2001) or criminal behavior (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2017) had a profound impact on how the LGBTI population lived their lives. Most of the participants in this paper hid their sexuality from themselves, their family, and friends. 1967 brought about the beginning of change in England with the decriminalization of homosexuality (Criminal Justice Act 1967). Scotland followed in 1980 (Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980), but at the same time, the HIV/AIDS pandemic started to gain impetus, stigmatizing men who had sex with men and intravenous drug users as the main sources of the disease. As the decriminalization marked a potential of the co-existence of queer and heterosexual lives, the stigma and discrimination around HIV/AIDS threatened to dismantle that potential. The pandemic also increased the visibility of LGBTI people in the public sphere, raising awareness about marginalized communities. Hand in hand with the antagonism was the fact that homosexuality was still considered a psychiatric disorder in the United States (de Vries 2015), and a mental illness by the World Health Organisation (Stonewall 2016).

In one of the most notorious attempts to erase LGBTI identities from the public sphere in the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, a former prime minister of the UK, introduced Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 (Local Government Act 1988; Weeks 2007), which prohibited promoting homosexuality by the government and its employees (including teachers and social workers), and framed same-sex relationships as “pretend” family relationships (Reinhold 1994); this had a chilling effect on how professionals spoke to the people they were supporting, with LGBTI identities being wiped from those interactions. Political campaigns and efforts by the LGBTI community saw progress in the political and public sphere in the UK, and in Scotland in particular, in the last 25 years.

After the 1997 referendum and the devolution of the Scottish Parliament (Mitchell 2000), a series of positive changes for the LGBTI population marked the 2000s in Scotland. The devolution allowed Scotland its own legislative power over health and social care, education, local government and housing, justice, and policing, among other areas. In 2000, Section 28 was abolished in Scotland, and the ban on LGBTI people serving in the armed forces was lifted at the same time. In 2004, the Civil Partnership Act was passed, which allowed same-sex couples to form civil partnerships. In 2007, the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act, provided same-sex couples equal rights in adopting and fostering children, and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, which came into effect in 2014 in England, Scotland, and Wales, brought around marriage equality. The most recent developments in the UK included the 2017 posthumous pardon to all gay men who were prosecuted because of their sexuality, and the introduction of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland in 2020.

The above events, key for LGBTI equality in the UK, frame the lives of the present LGBTI population. These events can also be viewed as examples of queer time (Halberstam 2005) as they disrupted the familiarity of chrononormativity. Likewise, personal lived experiences of the LGBTI population, such as coming out, getting married, or forming a civil partnership, are all examples of the disruption of chrononormativity and the introduction of queer time. These experiences all exist alongside chrononormative expectations of heterosexuality, and inform the imagination of the future of the older LGBTI population.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were in a same-sex relationship, mutually defined by both partners as a significant couple-like relationship, regardless of duration and co-residence status. The decision to conduct couple interviews impacts the content and quality of the data, and depends on the goals of the research at hand (Gabb 2008). Focusing on the couple rather than on the individual better captures the partners' "joint commitment to their relationship" (Hydén & Nilsson 2015: 717), and provides insight into how their present and future are jointly constructed. Potential issues that might arise in joint interviewing are a power imbalance between the partners, differing opinions about the future, and an unwillingness to talk about uncomfortable issues in front of each other. The participants in this research definitely had points of contention when talking about the future but were quick to discuss them and hear each other out, creating a comfortable interview experience. Recruiting and interviewing couples allowed for a better understanding of relationships that were negotiated daily (Valentine 1999) and extended into their imaginations of the future. One of the partners needed to be over the age of 55, while the other partner could be of any age. Being younger than 55 was perceived to have different enough experiences to make them unsuitable for the study, unless they were in a relationship with someone above that age range, as was the case with several couples in the study. The age range of the participants, therefore, extends below 55 and was between 36 and 77. Participants were recruited by advertising the research in older LGBTI Facebook groups, and through word-of-mouth. All participants self-identified as middle class, left-wing, and as having no disabilities. The final number included was seven couples. There were three male couples, and four female couples. They were all white, the male participants identified as gay ($n = 6$), the female participants identified either as lesbian ($n = 6$) or did not want to label their sexual orientation ($n = 2$), but all were in same-sex relationships at the time of our interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted two joint semi-structured interviews with the couples over 12 months in 2016/2017. The first interview was designed to build rapport and get to know the couple. We mostly discussed their relationship, lifestyle, and stories about the past and present during this interview. All couples were given a notebook, and I asked them to create a personal representation of their future based on their conversations and reflections of joint, as well as individual experiences (Day & Thatcher 2009). The way in which they accomplished this representation was flexible and person-led, resulting in mostly written accounts with a few small drawings, and one rap poem. This method sought to give the couples the freedom to produce data in their own time and at their own pace, permitting “the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context” (Bolger et al. 2003: 580). In the second interview we talked about what they put in the notebook, and we discussed more general themes about the future.

Apart from addressing the invisibility of couples in academic research, the decision to conduct joint interviews came from a desire to study the couple interaction in creating narratives about the past, present, and future. Through our conversations, both partners often looked to each other for confirmation of the facts they described, and they often corrected each other when talking about events they experienced together. These methods were deliberately selected to reduce the power imbalance, which is a perennial challenge for interview-based research (Anyan 2013). Interviewing them together also helped level the power differential between the researcher and participants, as they had each other to rely on (Zarhin 2018). The notebook served a similar purpose because it gave them power over when to fill it out, and which information to include. Some of the statements they wrote down in the notebook had not been discussed between them before that point, so the research acted as a catalyst of their conversations about the future.

I recorded the interviews on my smartphone, after obtaining consent from the participants, and transcribed them myself. I used NVivo 11 for the organization of transcripts and easier management of codes and themes. The analysis consisted of two phases: a thematic analysis

followed by a narrative analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Guest et al. (2012), focuses on “identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas” (p. 13) that emerge from the data. During this thematic phase, I identified the themes that kept emerging in all interviews and written accounts, as well as those that arose only occasionally but were linked to the overarching question of the imagination of the future, such as death. The second iteration of analysis was a narrative analysis, which I used to explore the ways in which my participants made sense of their realities and how their stories were told, instead of what the stories were (Phoenix et al. 2010). In this round I looked more closely at how the couples told the stories of their lives, and how these stories fit into the social and historical context of the events they were discussing. These two methods of data analysis encouraged a deeper examination of the narratives shared by the couples and teased out nuances in their accounts. The entire process of data collection and analysis was iterative and reflective, as I went back to the transcripts and written accounts to revisit certain themes and explore them from different angles.

Ethical Clearance

The research was granted ethical clearance at the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. The data gathered was handled according to the guidelines of The Data Protection Act (1998), and the research was designed along the following ethical principles: consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. This level of ethical clearance reflected the concerns about interviewing potentially vulnerable people, in this case older people belonging to minority sexual identities.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are divided into three sections: past and present, short-term futures, and long-term futures, in the order they were talked about in our interviews. The information in brackets after each quote contains key information about the participants: pseudonym, age, and quote origin (first interview, second interview, or written account).

The Past, Present, and their Mutual Construction

The stories about the couples' pasts were saturated with heterosexism, homophobia, and discrimination. Growing up during the time when being a gay man was illegal, the male couples recalled how they tried to pass as "straight," with some entering heterosexual marriages, and others undergoing conversion therapy. These events also illustrate an attempt to conform to chrononormativity by fitting their histories into more traditional heteronormative temporal norms:

Yes, I was trying, I mean, I think that I was on a sort of denial trip all in all, and that I didn't sort of really, I always knew I was gay, but I managed to sort of hide from it and pretend it wasn't there. That's really why I got married I guess, but then when the marriage came to an end, that's when I really had to face it, you know. (Robert, 76, first interview)

I was also very unhappy with the way I was leading my life, as a gay man. Went to the doctor and he said "oh, you should have aversion therapy." And I thought "yes, all right, if that's going to make me *normal* [emphasis in the original interview], I'll do it." So I went and had aversion therapy in a hospital. And it really had no effect whatsoever on me. [laughing] (Jeff, 70, first interview)

Heterosexual marriage is still the norm, and society therefore ascribes a "privileged status" to these relationships (Brook 2018: 348). Using marriage to hide his sexual identity from others and from himself, Robert believed he was following the heteronormative path that would make him normal and ordinary (Richardson & Monro 2012) in the eyes of his immediate community. Jeff's motivations behind undergoing aversion therapy were the same – he was willing to do it if it meant he would become "normal." While these experiences belonged to the past, their impact had far-reaching consequences into the present. As Fred, Robert's husband, explained, they were still cautious of showing affection when out in public, even though they were openly out in the town they lived in:

One of the problems is that gay people of our age, as we were all brought up at a time when what we did was illegal, we could be sent to prison for, we could lose our jobs for, et cetera, so people of our age may be less likely to be open than younger people. You might see lots of younger gay couples holding hands in the street, it will be very, very rare that you'll see, well me and Robert don't, because we were brought up in an era where to do so would have, at best, led to talks, and at worst, at a certain time, would have led to prosecution. (Fred, 67, second interview)

The impact of the past on the present represents a linear consequence of one action on another. In the above examples, it also points to the impact of chrononormativity on what we know is the couples' queer time, indicating the continuing prevalence of heterosexual norms in mainstream society. In another example, the linear flow of time was disrupted, as the present was used to explain events in the past:

The first time I came to [city], came to this house, I'd spotted, in a frame, in a hallway downstairs, the document that was basically the founder's declaration of [a gay-rights organisation], William was one of the founders of that campaign. That's why I thanked him over lunch the next day, and, in particular on behalf of me and all my generation, my gay friends for that. And it got me to where I am today. (Peter, 36, first interview)

This example illustrates how the present shapes the past as we reflect on it with new knowledge and experiences. After noticing the document on William's wall, Peter reframed his past to fit the present, imagining how his coming out and living an openly gay life were influenced by William's actions in the past. Peter's identity as a gay man was a result of "unique temporal and existential concerns" (Fabbre 2014: 163) that mobilized William to take action in his youth and establish the organisation. The age difference between William (63) and Peter (36) illustrates how the same event can be experienced from two generational viewpoints.

Another example of stepping into queer time is presented by Sarah and Jane, now married to each other, who were both in heterosexual marriages when they came out. For them, coming out was an act of breaking away from the heteronormative life they lived up to that point, and reclaiming their own queer identities:

For me, it was complicated because I was married to a man at the time, and I was, I had two young children, so it just, as the dawning happened to me, I thought, I knew I was unhappy, and then started to think why that might be, and as I began to realise what was happening, I then thought "well I can't do anything about this because I've got two small children," and I had no role models, nobody else that I knew was in a position like I was, and I just thought I will have to just forget it, because I can't do this and make my children unhappy. (Jane, 56, first interview)

Jane's coming out symbolizes a disruption of chrononormativity and stepping into queer time. In her case, queer time is not a complete opposition to chrononormativity, as it includes her children, marriage to Sarah,

and the formation of a new family, elements that have similarities with a chrononormative understanding of a life trajectory. By coming out, Jane disrupts her chrononormative temporal progression, and positions herself and her relationship between the dominant, heterosexual norms, and the other, the queer. This is visible in Sarah and Jane using marriage, often considered “central to heterosexuality” (Brook 2018: 348), as a tool to encourage same-sex couples, specifically women, to come out and get married if that is what they want.

Breaking mainstream temporal norms was an iterative process for these participants. As Sarah and Rachel explain in the following extracts, coming out is a process often repeated daily:

So I don't think you come out once, I think, that's why I was hesitating. Every single day you have to come out. Jane gets into a taxi, they'll say “what does your husband do?” You know, and then you have to come out again, or can you be bothered? (Sarah, 61, first interview)

I'm still in process of coming out to various people, at different times, and places, and stuff like that. (Rachel, 58, first interview)

Coming out breaks the boundaries of chrononormativity (Freeman 2010) and opens a space and time for queer identity construction, creating a new temporal reality. The events that the participants recalled from their past, along with the events that happened after coming out, created a clear link between time and sexual identity. Their coming out journey might have started in the past, but it is happening in the present, and will most certainly continue in the future, ascribing its importance across every phase of the couples' lives and further establishing their belonging to queer time.

Short-Term Futures: Independence, Choice, and Control

When talking about their short-term futures, the futures that they will live to experience (Cook 2018), the couples focused on their health, accommodation, family, and death. The discussions around these futures also included the wish to have control over one's life and maintain independence for as long as possible.

One of the ways in which the couples wanted to maintain their independence was to age in place, in their own home, maintaining the freedom

to continue their relationship and lifestyle (Davey et al. 2004). One of the threats to ageing in place was the need to go into residential care, which is a common concern among the older LGBTI population (Simpson et al. 2018):

Fred: We're not in a financial situation to be able to afford private care, but in Scotland that shouldn't be a problem. Ideally, we could live in some sort of sheltered accommodation where we're still semi-independent. If we had to move into a sort of a care home, then we would want to move in together, in a double room. We wouldn't want to be separated.

Robert: Being separated in care I regard almost as a fate worse than death.

Fred: Yes.

Robert: It could happen.

Fred: These days, it's less likely to happen than in the past. But even so, it's certain we have to be wary. And then, of course, once you're in the hands of care workers, you rely on their attitudes, and their views. (Fred, 65, & Robert, 76, first interview)

The intersection of the past, present, and future in the above example further illustrates how the three temporalities inform and construct one another. In terms of future studies, understanding how plans and imaginations of the future are constructed is a step forward towards a more holistic approach to studying time. Fred made a clear link between the past and the present, projecting his expectations to the future as well. Both Fred and Robert were concerned about being separated, which could have happened in the past, when the attitudes of care workers in formal care institutions were more negative towards LGBTI people (Furlotte et al. 2016). Despite there being greater tolerance today towards same-sex couples and LGBTI individuals (Simpson et al. 2018), personal lived experiences still impacted the imagination of the future more than potential knowledge of what goes on in care settings. One thing that all imagined futures presented by the participants included was the necessity of maintaining their independence. While this was often described in terms of good mental and physical health, it was also reflected in other aspects of the participants' narratives:

Jane: Maybe they'll give Sarah a perm and put her in a crippling dress when she's too demented to know, to be able to tell them that's not what she would do.

Sarah: Can you imagine? The stockings around my ankles. (Jane, 56, and Sarah, 61, first interview)

Kathy, who wrote a rap poem in her and Rachel's notebook, expressed a similar idea about being unable to wear clothes that she chose for herself:

We want any intervention to recognise our status and preferences

We don't want apprehension of becoming stateless with severances

To suffer circumvention of our rights and heinous negligence's

Those without comprehension putting us in shapeless dresses. (Kathy, 57, written account)

These women viewed their attire as an outward symbol of their identity and a way to express their agency (Buse & Twigg 2015). Their sense of style was developed simultaneously to their coming out journey and is a physical manifestation of the life they lead in queer time. Losing their independence in later life would not only mean being physically dependent on someone because of health issues, but not being able to exercise their agency through something like clothing and style. While they were growing up and coming of age, the female participants abided by patriarchal norms of what was "proper" and how women should dress. The part of their lives they led before coming out and, one in line with chrononormative and heteronormative expectations, is a part they are now rebelling against by wearing what they want and living by their own rules.

Death was discussed in the framework of short-term futures as an end to the couples' imagined life-course. In a similar vein to maintaining independence in their life, having control over their death was a topic of conversation among most of the couples. One of the ways of controlling death was writing their wills, and planning for funerals and other practicalities surrounding the end of life. The other was hoping that assisted suicide would be legal by the time the participants needed it:

You know, suffering hurts me, seeing my mother starving herself to death hurts me. Can't do anything to change it, can't do anything about it. And I do think that if we make the choice in our right mind, we should be able to choose to terminate our lives. I've got nothing to fear as far as when I'm dead, I'm dead. (Jeff, 70, second interview)

Hoping for a choice in the future and imagining it will be available tames the uncertainty of the future (Groves 2014). Relating back to the desire of controlling the future, Westwood (2017) explains that taking one's own life can signify "the ultimate expression of autonomy" (p. 5) as it gives the individual control over their life and maps out their future more clearly. It also creates a future that is free of chrononormative boundaries as it allows the participants to end their lives before its prescribed, "natural," end. While heteronormativity framed their lives in the past, the participants are taking control over their presents and futures, even if most of it is in the form of hopes and imagination.

The couples imagined their short-term futures based on the experiences and knowledge of their past and present. From fears of discrimination in formal care settings that stemmed from the legal and medical terminology and attitudes surrounding LGBTI lives in the past, to concerns about losing their independence to the level that they were unable to dress themselves or live their lives as they were living them in the present, the imagination of the short-term futures was a reflection of events, experiences, and knowledge from the couples' past and present.

The Fear and Hope of Long-Term Futures

The couples' long-term futures, the ones that will happen after their death, included fears and hopes for future generations, and the imagination of Scotland as utopia, all of which can be understood as "an experience of time that may be socially shared" (Cook 2018: 3). Based on their past and present experiences, the socially shared ideas of the future almost always included children and younger generations of LGBTI people. As Gloria writes in her account, she considers Emily's children and grandchildren as her own, emphasizing the importance of her family of choice (Weeks et al. 2001):

The presence of children and young people in my life (mostly Emily's grandchildren) somehow makes the future seem a more real place and, for all I said earlier about not looking ahead, I can't help but hope for their complete happiness. I imagine them always being a part of my life. Now Emily's youngest daughter and her wife are about to adopt two children and they clearly figure in my imagined future. (Gloria, 58, written account)

Children do not only serve as physical vessels of Gloria's imagination, but as agents in framing the future as a *more real place*, colonizing it with their presence (Adam & Groves 2007). Even the children who were not yet there, as was the case with the adoption Gloria mentioned, *clearly figured* in her future, and, apart from being a loving addition to the family, the children also figured in Gloria's imagination as mediums for domesticating the uncertainty that the future might bring (Groves 2014). In this extract, we also get a glimpse of two families of choice, one of Gloria and Emily, and the other of Emily's daughter and her wife. Their presence strengthens the link between the queer present and future and carves out the space and time where such families can exist parallel to hetero- and chrononormative expectations.

When discussing how short-term futures were imagined, I outlined that they were based on lived experiences from the participants' past and present. The long-term futures were imagined in the same way, drawing on political campaigns and social movements the participants were involved in, as well as the socio-cultural contexts of their youth. As Rachel explains, the actions of the older LGBTI community in the past brought about legislation that allowed same-sex couples to get married and adopt children. These victories, however, did not mean that there was nothing left to fight for in the future:

I don't think as a community, LGBT community, we can sit back on our laurels and think we've won, I think we've won some battles but we haven't won the war yet, and if we sit back on our laurels and just think "well that's what we've achieved, we've got everything now, so we can just sit back and enjoy it," and we're doing a service to those who are coming behind us, cause we've got to fight for their rights, and for something for them to inherit, and that's definitely the way I see it. (Rachel, 58, second interview)

The idea of continuing the fight for the younger generations places the older same-sex couples very clearly in the future. The actions they took in the past resulted in the freedoms the LGBTI community has in the present. Consequently, they hope the actions they take in the present will realise a more equal and inclusive future. However, the imagination of a more equal future would not be possible without a socio-political context that allows for such thinking. The hope for Scotland and the trust in the

political leadership at the time (2016/2017) went hand in hand in some of the accounts:

But I also think is that, part of it in our psyche is that we know that the rule of law, society will not turn against us. Which is not necessarily the case, others, you know, I think Scotland is particular, you know that the fact is that the rule of law, we have in parliament leaders of the political parties whether it's just, society is not going to turn against minorities, cause we are, we have a, you know, we have two LGBT leaders, right, and two parties, so I think...as a gay couple we feel safe, so our future here in this country, we know it's nobody be turning against, and that's not necessarily the case elsewhere, right? (Alan, 63, second interview)

The knowledge and experience of customs, traditions, laws, and moral codes make the future more predictable (Adam & Groves 2007), as they are familiar to the people who imagine it. Even though the participants' past experiences with institutions and heteronormative moral codes have not always been positive, the changes they witnessed and experienced during their lifetime offered them hope that the positive movement would continue into the future. Like Alan, Emily was hopeful of the future political situation in Scotland because of the government and the trust she put into the first minister at the time, who she described as "our little, fearless leader" (Emily, first interview).

Hope was also the key building block of utopistic thinking about Scotland. The knowledge of the past and present allows us to imagine the future. For Scotland to be imagined as utopia, positive changes had to have taken place during the participants' lives, as utopias reflect the socio-political and historical contexts that were experienced in a specific place and time (Bloch 1995). Based on this, Rachel reflected on what makes Scotland different in comparison to the rest of the UK, and the rest of the world:

You see, that's where I think that's where Scotland and independence is different, because Scotland is outward-looking, the government is outward looking, it's internationalist, it wants to welcome migrants, whereas this small Britain idea, isolationist like Trump and all that, "we're British, we want to be British." (Rachel, 58, second interview)

While another Scottish independence referendum is uncertain at the time of writing this paper, most of the couples in this research hoped for it to happen at some point in the future. They were determined to support Scottish

independence because they believed it would bring Scotland more freedom to create better legislation and support for its LGBTI population. In the current political situation, however, it is unclear whether the referendum will take place during their lifetime, or whether it will just remain a part of their queer utopistic imagination of the future. This uncertainty has been further amplified by the recent resignation of the Scottish First Minister, Humza Yousaf in 2024, and the public's opinion of Scottish independence (McDonald 2024).

Conclusion

This paper fills a significant gap in knowledge about the ageing experience and the perception of the future by older same-sex couples. While research on future exists in the areas of economy, climate change, and others, an “in-depth consideration of how the future of society is perceived by individuals is largely absent from the literature” (Cook 2018: 2). I addressed this absence by presenting narratives about the future of society as told by older same-sex couples in Scotland and argued that they are constructed from their experiences in the past and present. In response to a lack of research on LGBTI older people's futures, I argue that their lived experiences, unique life trajectories, and queer identities are key elements in considering how queer time, and queer futures, are imagined and realized. Ideas such as that gay men in the 1980s had a limited lifespan due to HIV/AIDS (Sandberg 2015), and that older people are closer to death (Baars 2017) and therefore have no place in the future, show how the intersection of sexuality and age places the older LGBTI population on the margins of studies about the future. The paper demonstrated how that same intersectionality is the very reason why they should be included in studies about the future, and considered its active participants.

Furthermore, the paper offers a critique of Edelman's (2004) argument that thinking about and imagining the future requires a reproductive drive that would populate the future with children. While reproduction is reserved for heterosexual couples in the biopolitical agendas of nations (Foucault 2008), the paper illustrates how it is no longer an exclusively heteronormative privilege but extends to queer individuals and relationships as well. The queering of reproduction and family formation was visible in the narratives shared by the participants who had children and who imagined their future through them. For the participants who did

not have children of their own, the future was occupied by younger generations. The fears of discrimination that permeate the short-term futures are more real and more prone to impact those younger generations and are based on the things the couples themselves experienced. The long-term futures, still open and free to be constructed, hold a promise of hope and equality for children and grandchildren.

One of the limitations of this paper is the small sample of participants which means that the findings cannot be generalized to the wider LGBTI population of Scotland. However, the findings from their narratives can be used to study LGBTI ageing in similar cultural contexts. Additionally, the participants were mostly recruited via online forums and groups, meaning they had technological literacy and were members of different social groups. This also means that people with different lived experiences, those who might be isolated and technologically illiterate, are not represented in this sample. As mentioned above, the participants self-identified as being middle-class and left-wing, which represents a particular set of ideas and beliefs presented in this paper.

While chrononormativity shapes the key events an individual must accomplish in life, using “time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 2010: 3), that is towards reproduction and continuation of the population through children, queer time offers an alternative mode of existence. Starting off as its opposition, queer time disrupts the chrononormative expectations of heterosexual coupling, marriage, and having children. Instead, it offers a parallel path where individuals have the freedom to choose their families, and, if they so wish, live outside the prescribed temporal norms. The stories presented in this paper illustrate lives lived in queer time and the imagination and construction of queer futures. They also reflect the couples’ struggle to fit into chrononormativity and queer time simultaneously and provide us with the possibility to explore how their agency could better inform the understanding of the two. By studying the life course and subjective ageing experiences in the context of queer time and future studies, we can better understand the elements that go into the creation of multiple possible futures, and what it actually means to grow old as a same-sex couple in a country such as Scotland.

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Corresponding Author

Dora Jandrić, PhD in Sociology from the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland. Email: jandricdora@gmail.com

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The older woman at the centre of dystopia: dramatizing the perils of ageism in Emma Adams' *Animals*

By INESA SHEVCHENKO-HOTSULIAK¹ & NÚRIA CASADO-GUAL¹

Abstract

This article presents an age-centered analysis of *Animals* (2015), a dystopian play by the British playwright Emma Adams in which men and women over 60 are deemed redundant and useless by a dystopian society that either ordains their murder or marginalizes them completely. Framed within the field of ageing and theatre studies and its intersection with gender theories, our analysis aims to examine the position of the play's older female protagonists in a dystopian world infested with ageism and sexism, which deprives older people (and particularly older women) of their humanity and divests them of their generational meaning. On the whole, the article intends to explore the political and symbolic significance of (female) older characters in new (and demodystopic) dramaturgies of old age, especially with the ultimate objective to search for alternative cultural narratives and conceptualizations of later life that help reconstruct the value of ageing and of intergenerational relationships.

Keywords: ageism, contemporary drama, demodystopia, intergenerational relationships, older women.

¹Inesa Shevchenko-Hotsuliak & Núria Casado-Gual, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Lleida, Lleida, Catalonia, Spain

Introduction

The fear of old age has been identified as one of the major sources of social concern of the contemporary world (Brunton & Quartly-Scott 2015; Butler 2008: 43–44; Neuberger 2008). As any other global anxiety, this fear has also permeated multiple manifestations of high and popular culture, including the theatre. Within the growing theatrical renderings of old age, the focus on the complexities of ageing has become particularly salient, and as such it has been examined by theatre and age scholars such as Anne Davis Basting (1998), Michael Mangan (2013), Elinor Fuchs (2016), and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (2016), to name but a few. However, neither on the stage nor in our youth-oriented societies in general are older people typically perceived from such a rich perspective. Rather, they are frequently viewed, represented, or interpreted through stereotypes, and often diminished in comparison to younger individuals or age groups, rendering their “age,” in the words of the pioneering age critic Margarette Morganroth Gullette, “a different difference” (2004: 111) that marginalizes them rather than makes them singular in their myriad experiences of ageing. Despite the recent increase of attention on the diversity of these experiences and on the alternative, or, in Linn Sandberg’s words, “affirmative” models of old age (2013), ageing is often simplistically categorized as either “positive” or “negative” (Baars 2010: 106–108), giving way to two predominant narratives of ageing, that is, “progress” and “decline” (Gullette 2004). In this respect, while the former may be coupled with the model of “successful ageing,” originally promoted by John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn (1997) and, later on, criticized due to its promotion of neo-liberal or elitist values, such as productivity and independence, the latter, as Gullette asserts, “falls like a bludgeon on what excludes old people from the human majority” (2017: 13).

The restrictive and predominantly negative interpretation of age in our youth-centered world affects older women in a particular way. In a society that continues to demand youth and beauty from women much more than men, (old) age is also claimed to marginalize women earlier and more frequently in their life course (Friedan 1993; Gullette 2004: 23; Holstein 2017; Sontag 1972; Twigg 2004: 62). Hence, age and gender become a doubly dangerous source of social categorization, more specifically for women past their fifties or even younger. At the same time, the fear of old

age is often expressed through the female body, which becomes its symbolic cultural embodiment (Bouson 2016; Byrski 2014; Friedan 1993; Gullette 2004; Henneberg 2010; King 2013: 76; Woodward 1991). This cultural stigmatization can also be observed in the media, albeit ambiguously: while more nuanced representations of ageing and older women are becoming more pronounced in serialized drama (Casado-Gual & Oró-Piqueras 2017; Oró-Piqueras 2023), reflecting in this way major changes in both demographics and social perceptions of later life, the Hollywood industry continues to denigrate older women who do not agree with the conventions of youthful appearance and lifestyle, effectively “erasing” the realities of ageing (Whelehan 2013: 80). In theatre, this cultural tendency is clearly illustrated through either the scarcity of roles available for actresses past their forties, or the stereotypical images of female ageing that are often provided in dramatic representations of later life (Harpin 2012; O’Neill & Schrage-Früh 2018), or both. In contrast with these social and cultural trends, contemporary plays that offer a critical view of the fear of old age while at the same time generating constructive or alternative conceptualizations of (female) ageing offer an enlightening resource whereby the generational divide that is generated by age-based typification or, even worse, that is fueled by ageism and gerontophobia, can be unveiled, counteracted, and, ultimately, redressed. After all, through its long tradition of examining sociocultural taboos, theatre as “a provocateur for social dialogue,” is an art with the potential to address a multi-generational audience and bring the issue of ageism into public discourse through both its dramatic contexts and performances (Black & Lipscomb 2017: 36), thereby generating a much urgently needed cultural change.

This article presents an age-centered analysis of *Animals* (2015), a dystopian play by the British playwright Emma Adams produced in 2015 by the London company Theatre 503. Despite receiving somewhat mixed reviews, *Animals* has been lauded for providing regular theatregoers with the opportunity to rest from “the seasoned polish of restaged classics” typically seen in central London theatres (*Animals* 2015), and to enjoy a new story by the emerging playwright with powerful messages that are well-suited for a dramatic exploration (Forsyth 2015). Moreover, theatre critics have particularly praised the play for offering “meaty roles” for older actresses (*Animals* 2015; Love 2015) – namely, Marlene Sidaway

(Norma), Sadie Shimmin (Joy), and Cara Chase (Helen) – whose appearance on the stage is celebrated, especially at a time when roles for older actors are rare (*Animals* 2015).

The play could be classified as a dramatic “demodystopia,” that is, a narrative that explicitly addresses demographic shifts and presents them as a critical societal issue (Domingo 2008: 275). Despite the recent spotlight on dystopian themes in theatre (De Simoni 2021; Reid 2019; Tönnies & Voigts 2022; Vieira 2013), the issue of age remains overlooked in their plots.¹ Adams’ “demodystopic” theatrical piece contributes to filling in this gap: in her play, men and women over 60 are deemed redundant and useless by their gerontophobic society, which either ordains the killing of its older citizens or marginalizes them completely, rendering them entirely invisible and generating, in this way, an apparently irreparable schism among generations. As a direct reflection of patriarchal societies, the play emphasizes the impact that the radical form of (state-promoted) ageism has on the female citizens of this totalitarian world. Framed within the field of ageing and theatre studies and its intersection with gender theories, our analysis aims to examine the position of the play’s older female protagonists in a dystopian world infested with ageism and sexism. Specifically, it intends to observe the mechanisms whereby the sustained marginalization against older people (and particularly older women) deprives them both of their humanity and also, in Rica Edmondson’s words, of their “generational meaning” (2015: 201), that is, their contribution to future generations. As will be shown, the intergenerational rupture depicted in Adams’ dystopian universe and directly derived from ageism not only results in the deformation of old-age identity, but also in the general moral degeneration of an entire society. Through our close reading of the play, we intend to explore the political and symbolic value of contemporary (and demodystopic) dramaturgies of old age, with the ultimate objective of searching for new cultural narratives and conceptualizations of later life that underscore their value in intergenerational

¹ Some exceptions to this pattern are Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children*, two British dystopian plays published and produced in 2016. Both have received critical attention from the perspective of theatre and ageing studies (see, for example, Casado-Gual 2020), thereby contributing to the emerging cultural trend in which (old) age, dystopia, and theatre intersect.

relationships and recognize, at the same time, the diversity and complexity of ageing femininities.

Ageism as a Dystopic Dramatic Conflict

Animals complies with all the features of a (demo)dystopic text in its recreation of a futuristic society that has adjusted to severe environmental and socioeconomic transformations: the action is set in 2046, 16 years after a natural catastrophe that brought with it major environmental changes within the British region of North Yorkshire. After being hit by a tsunami (Adams 2015:20),² the imaginary “once respectable market town” in which the action is set has become completely eroded and suddenly transformed into a “seaside resort” (16) in which the local residents have become gentrified. Through its satirical tone, one could say the play delves into the catastrophic combination of climate change and the prevalence of neoliberal economies. Yet, at a more particular level, Adams’ piece also focuses on another kind of “catastrophe,” namely, the overpopulation of older people.

The global increase of ageing demographics has commonly been perceived as a “disaster” in the Western world (Charise 2012: 3; Cruikshank 2013: 27; Jewusiak 2023); in fact, in the ageist language used by the media, it has often been equated with a “tsunami” due to its magnitude and its impact, generally thought of as devastating (Calasanti 2020: 195; Cruikshank 2013: 26; Delafuente 2009; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014: 1). Moreover, the symbolic association of older people with environmental catastrophes, for which they are blamed by younger generations, has fostered a cultural narrative that condemns them as the cause of several uncontrollable social and economic issues, viewing them as a cataclysmic force that endangers the planet’s overall well-being (Jewusiak 2023: 3). In line with this cultural reading of old age and its associated anxieties, the uncanny universe of Adams’ play, which includes the clearly dystopian plot of age-related killing that is noticeable in science fiction literature (Falcus 2020; Pogońska-Baranowska 2023), uneasily projects a near-future in which the hazardous combination of ageism, sexism, ableism, and classism leads to a massive

² For the sake of style and readability, subsequent in-text citations will only include the page number of the play.

and legalized form of murdering of older people. Also, much more literally than symbolically, in the dramatic world of *Animals*, ageing becomes the form of “exile” into which everyone over 60 is driven, thus making older people the prisoners of their own homes – which they cannot leave for years, no matter how desperate the situation is (79).

In fact, the “problem” of old age in the piece leads to extreme measures that eventually cause a profound generational rupture in the totalitarian society dramatized. Thus, as the play unfolds, the reader/viewer is introduced into a chaotic world in which intergenerational contact between older and younger people has become severed, Utility Inspectors judge the citizens’ “contribution to” (or toll on) society, and only those in their middle years are apparently “safe”: while children are overprotected and, yet, forced to “merit” as “well-adjusted” once they turn 18 through therapy-controlled programs not everyone can afford (20), everyone who is 60 and cannot prove their “usefulness” through a green or amber permit that legitimates their existence becomes redundant and disposable – and, as such, is “cleared,” that is, executed by a “Utility Inspector” who is also supposed to confiscate their property for the state (21).

Significantly, Adams renders those segregated and displaced by the play’s ageist regime the protagonists of her play, and gives older women in particular the lead roles, hence conflating their gender- and age-based marginality in a dystopia that perpetuates patriarchy through male domination, while becoming a daring anti-ageist critique. The play’s storyline spans the period of about 24 hours in the lives of three older women, namely, Norma, aged 77, a retired nurse with poor mobility and, yet, the owner of “a forged amber permit” that allows her to live on (22); Norma’s carer, Joy, aged 59 and, therefore, with only “one legal year left” before her “usefulness to society” is submitted to a test (18), and Norma’s neighbour, Helen, aged 70, who is presented as one of the well-off “incomers” that moved to the area after the tsunami, and who also owns an amber permit. The apparently unobtrusive lives of these women, which nevertheless cross the border of “legality” all too often – Norma’s forged permits are obtained through Joy’s blackmailing a Postmaster, Helen keeps stimulating drugs in her cupboards, and Norma and Joy lead a very suspicious and completely illegal “Sandwich Circle” – are threatened by the imminent arrival of Noah, a new Utility Inspector. The potential conflict marked by Norma’s forged permit, which is soon announced in the first

scene of the play, becomes further complicated by Noah's daughter, Maya, described by the playwright as an "innocent" and "a sweet but spoilt and wilful" girl who, on the eve of her 18th anniversary, and despite having received all the therapy needed for her to merit as "well-adjusted," (15) does not manage to have a single "happy memory" that allows her to pass a validation test as an adult (24, 94).

Despite the marginality represented by Maya within the middle-aged-dominated regime of the play, Adams' piece explicitly makes ageing and old age its primary issues. In this sense, the fear of old age is the major force whereby ageing individuals are constructed as fixed and undesirable in the play's dramatic universe. Within the context of demodystopian literature, fear has been classified into three types, namely, "fear of population decline," "fear of population excess," and "fear of population professionals," that is, fear of those who believe they have the solution (Shriver 2004). Against that background, Adams' dramatic demodystopia complies with all types of fear, which are "treated" or confronted in various ways, and all of which create a "generational" form of disorder, both within the life courses depicted in the piece and also within its dramatized society. Hence, readers/audience are immersed into a world in which younger people are literally bubble-wrapped in special coats (23), treated like children until they turn 18, and kept in the dark about any potentially "disturbing" fact (ranging from weather conditions to scientific knowledge up to the reality of death) and, in this way, kept aside from all the possible "dangers" of the world (including old age). On the other hand, in compliance with the anti-ageing politics of this imagined universe (or simply in order to survive in the world impregnated with ageism), older people falsify their permits (22), deny, or lie about their real age (55, 59–60), or hide it under the "mask of ageing," to borrow Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth's term (1991), that is, the form of appearance attained by those who can afford the embellishment of plastic surgery to display rejuvenated faces and bodies. By means of cosmetic interventions, wealthy and affluent citizens like the professionally face-lifted Grandma mentioned at the beginning of the play (20) conceal (or rather repulse) old age, thereby figuring it, as Kathleen Woodward notes, "as a dirty secret that had best remain undetected, latent, not manifest" (1991: 151). In fact, in the totalitarian system imagined by Adams, where words such as "flooding" (24), "forgive" (42), "library" (66), or "dead" (44)

are banned or simply do not appear in censored dictionaries (27), “ageing” or “older” have lost their daily usage and have been replaced by “diminishing” (66), a term that avoids referring to old age while at the same time identifying it with decline. Whether they are issued “an amber permit” as “diminishing citizens” or receive “a red permit” right before having their “officially useless” lives “cleared,” older people are homogeneously presented as a dependent, largely unsustainable social group.

As the legal wardens of this middle-aged-oriented, totalitarian state, Utility Inspectors are meant to control the threat that older citizens pose to a society oriented towards productivity, efficiency, and “happiness.” In this way, they promote the image of older people as “a burden on good people,” as Maya proudly puts it, referring to Noah, her newly promoted Daddy (52). Mirroring the dissociation that Western, youth-infatuated materialistic cultures generate between working-class people over 60 and the rest of young and/or rich individuals (Friedan 1993: 191–226), the older citizens in the society imagined by Adams are not only gentrified by the arrival of Incomers, but “othered” and equated with “nothingness” (93), and considered “non-existent” (37) by their own society. As Noah tells Maya in their encounter with older women: “Don’t look at them. They’re fucking nothing. They’re not you and me. Just ignore them.” (93) In a deeply sarcastic way, this piece portrays a gerontophobic and (implicitly) a misogynist society in which older people are tested at utility value, despite “utility” being “the wrong measure for old women’s lives” (Cruikshank 2013: 196). They are likewise “gerontified” by the status quo, generating a deadly division between “young/useful” and “old/useless” that renders older people “officially worthless” (92) at the mercy of a utilitarian and highly materialistic elite. In Adams’ dramatic demodystopia, the “excess” of the ageing population is translated into general gerontophobia that fuels ageism and becomes lethal. The “clearance” of the useless aged in their own premises (30, 61) has become a usual everyday procedure for those who question the system or simply do not comply with its laws and requirements, that is, are not young, healthy, and/or rich.

In the ageist, ableist, socially-divided world of the play, fear mainly operates against older people who feel abandoned by the government and discarded by society itself: the only resources of the state in which they are taken into account are used to ensure their control or disempowerment; and all their legal rights are reduced to a minimum that threatens

both their integrity and subsistence, as they are not allowed to work, they cannot use whatever economic resources they are left with (32), and they are excluded of medical services (30), thus experiencing a form of extreme precarity that makes hunger a common daily experience (17, 21, 96–97) and group solidarity – such as the “Sandwich Circle” Norma caters for with Joy’s help (22) – an essential survival mechanism. As a reflection of the intersectional aspects of age in our own world, within Adams’ universe, the combination of old age, class, and gender strongly predicts the experience of poverty in later life as a common one for many older women (Barusch 1994; Cruikshank 2013: 115–118). Portrayed as a burden on the social, health, financial, and economic systems, the older female characters in the play have definitely been converted into a “handy new group to target,” as Gullette puts it referring to older people in the ageist Western world (2017: xxi). The excess of fear towards old age that dominates Adams’ piece and the absence of “real” images of the elderly at the center of its imagined world disguise the reality of ageing. At the same time, “a miasma of dread” around later stages of life, as Betty Friedan put it (1993: 41), is generated and “[helps] *create* the ‘problem’ of age” (1993: 42, emphasis in original), the carriers of which (i.e. older people themselves) must be kept at distance, or, as the feminist scholar argued, “must be quarantined lest they contaminate, in mind or body, the rest of society” (1993: 50). In this sense, Adams’ imaginative demodystopia isolates “the problem,” which is also gender-ridden, thus preventing “the contamination of age” (Friedan 1993: 65) from spreading.

Ambivalent Portrayals of Gendered Ageing

Animals not only demonstrates that cultural renderings of ageing and old age that lead to ageism against the old continue to be entrapped within the “narrative of decline” (Gullette 2004), but also that this is particularly notable in the case of older women. In Adam’s piece, the portrayal of female old age is strongly anchored within images of impairment and notions of physical difference – a depiction that is doubly problematic in that, while mirroring the predominant narrative of age, it conflates ableist and ageist assumptions (Aubrecht et al. 2020). Hence, even though the play’s protagonists occupy diverse positions within the spectrum of later life, they similarly signify the female experience of ageing through signs

of physical decay and infirmity (29, 96); the deformity of their wrinkled faces, which younger characters like Maya find distressing (35, 37); their constant dependence, either on medicine (96) or the help of others (35, 46, 57); loss (18, 70) and loneliness (31); and even poverty (32), all of which paradoxically make the three female figures victims of the so-called “disorders of longevity” (Butler 2008: 75) in a society for which living into old age has become a serious problem instead of the medical or social victory it was meant to be. At the same time, the narrative arcs of the three characters similarly show that the intersection of gender, class, and (old) age is especially dangerous for any individual in the ageist and sexist universe they inhabit.

Nonetheless, the individual portrayals of the three older women also exude other aspects of female ageing that offer important nuances to what could also be deemed an essentially ageist and ableist depiction of female old age, especially because they reinforce the sociocultural elements that condition their predominantly negative experiences of growing older. Norma, the oldest of the three women, is also the frailest one: she suffers from severe arthritis that keeps her awake at nights (29), uses a cane to support herself (17), is no longer apt to successfully test in one of the “readings” that the Utility Inspector may demand of her (60), and regards her scarce visitors as “Trojan horses” potentially carrying infections (30). Norma has a permit that indicates that she is, in fact, 37 years old. To the shock of Helen (55) and Joy (59–60), Norma claims she was “feeling optimistic” when she last forged this document: “I thought, I feel 37, so I’ll put down 37. Why not?” (60) Beyond its intended comical effect, the woman’s denial of her chronological age enables a more complex interpretation of female ageing in at least two ways. At one level, the disparity between Norma’s actual age and her “feeling” much younger reflects the complexities of age as a construct, and enhances the power of “personal age” (Woodward 1991: 149) within this construction. The subjective experience of age that Norma exemplifies is at odds with its social projection: in its “social” version, a far more negative image of the older person becomes “distorted” and returned in this way to them through their reflection in the mirror – a commonly experienced feeling which Woodward, extending Lacan’s theories, has seminally called “the mirror stage of old age” (1991: 67). Closely connected with this, and in a more direct association with the dramatic world of the play, Norma’s belief

that she could “pass for” a woman in her late thirties with just a touch of make-up (67) can also be understood as a desperate gesture; that is to say, “a defense mechanism,” to borrow from Friedan (1993: 66), whereby older women can protect themselves from the extremely dangerous aura of “uselessness” that permeates and obscures their lives in the play’s dystopian society. When Joy assures Norma that to forge her age as 59 would have been more reasonable, Norma remorsefully remarks: “But 59 is too close to 60. It’s all down hill from there” (60), thus, accepting the idea that ageing equals decline and foreseeing, at the same time, the “dangers” of this realization.

Joy, Norma’s live-in help, is precisely completing the stage where she will be considered “still prime” (84) and, therefore, is regarded as a lawful citizen only for a fairly limited time before she turns 60. Characterized as a very active woman throughout the play, Joy is notably much less (if at all) affected by the effects of biological ageing than her employer. However, in a conversation she has with Maya about becoming an adult, she wistfully affirms that “[e]verything changes for ever” from the day you officially reach adulthood (34), hence confirming the declinist view of ageing that her older friends embody, while at the same time extending her negative interpretation of ageing to earlier stages within the life course and transmitting this message to younger generations. The fact that she saves some medicine for the potential encounters with the Utility Inspectors (60), and that she is delighted about the “haul” provided by Helen with the arthritis pills that the women have been unable to acquire for years (82), tacitly implies that she may need medicine to alleviate age-related pain and/or illnesses soon enough. Her lower social status as an in-home carer, especially in comparison with that of Norma (as a retired nurse) and, even more, with Helen’s (as a former Incomer), makes the prospect of her old age look even grimmer. Joy’s presentation as a character reflects the social hiatus between masters and servants in the style of old classical comedies: shown by herself in Norma’s living-room while watching out for her employer’s imminent appearance, Joy enters the scene “dragging polythene bags full of bread crusts and broken biscuits,” and sits on Norma’s cherished old recliner chair while chewing some biscuits “guiltily” (17). Very early in the play, this comical presentation, which quite effectively establishes the power dynamics between the two characters, can also be re-read as dramatically signaling not only the precarity that defines Joy’s

present life, but also the deeper disempowerment she is bound to have in the near future. In fact, Norma is aware of this, and uses their social-class difference as a source of blackmail to her own advantage, threatening Joy to dismiss her (and, therefore, leave her without both a job and a home) if she does not obey her (often extreme) orders (18–19, 50), including her doing sexual favours to the Postmaster that forges Norma's permit, and to as many other men that can help them survive in their precarious, illegal situation (19–20). Despite the fact that Joy is depicted as healthy, active, and sexually attractive, her liminal position as a "young-older person," in intersection with her gender and class, perilously announces an inescapable destiny of both destitution and the ensuing "state-induced" death.

Helen's characterization ambivalently contrasts Norma's and Joy's depiction in terms of class and gender. Defined as "healthy and excellent at crosswords" (15), a skill on which Norma and Joy depend to obtain some food that comes from crossword contests (31, 101), Helen's apparently differentiated character conception is also ambiguously situated within the narrative of decline that underlies Adams' demodystopia. On the one hand, as an Incomer that arrived in town 1 year after the tsunami with her daughter and granddaughter, Helen's portrayal is tinged with loneliness due to the loss of "the sentimental attachment" with her family (31), a bond that is now measured in extremely high fees, and which her daughter ceased to pay following "an awful mix up" involving her granddaughter (91) and for which Norma and Joy were responsible. Helen's nostalgia for the past confirms her assimilated declinist views: in her encounter with Maya, the woman heartily recommends enjoying her young years, since "[l]ife will never feel this beautiful again. Never." (43) In spite of her apparent physical and cognitive capacities, Helen's biological old age is emphasized and implicitly associated with disability when she sprains her ankle while trying to catch a balloon that Maya has been given by her father, and which the girl needs to generate happy memories to pass her test (46). Helen's groans of pain, her incapacity to stand up, and her desperately asking Maya to look for help (46) and get some amphetamines to prove her healthy appearance in front of the imminent arrival of the Utility Inspector (57), transform Helen's physical characterization. Despite her agile resourcefulness, the fragility of her ageing (female) body is emphasized in this way, which may implicitly underscore its dysfunction (Leder 1990: 85, 149).

On the other hand, and in parallel to the declinist elements of her appearance, Helen can also be interpreted as generating a counter-narrative of female old age in the play. As shown by the episode with her sprained ankle, Helen often uses her quick wit to find a way out of predicaments, and later on in the play even dares to defy the Utility Inspector by rhetorically asking: “Does it really seem so bloody impossible, that an old person might be an intelligent human being?” (65) Her usually cheerful disposition (highly contrasted with Norma’s grumpiness) is in part due to Mr. Brown, the man with whom she has intimate relationship, and who is a supporter of many of the women’s illegal actions for survival. Seen from Norma’s jealous point of view, a relationship with a man at her age makes the woman “always look[...] so bloody perky and smug” (60). However, now that Helen has lost her granddaughter and the ties with her daughter are broken, she realizes she has found “something to live for” (75, 76), and, therefore, does not want, nor is ready, to die (76). In Helen’s characterization, love found in her later years becomes a source of resistance to the ageist system that oppresses women like her. Through this aspect of her character creation, the play contests the stereotyped image of the sexless, frigid, or simply ridiculous older woman in love, through which ageing women are often perceived in real life (Barusch 2008) or have been represented on the stage (Mangan 2013).

The Grotesque Intersections of Ageism and Sexism

In recent years, a significant shift has been observed in cultural representations of older women whereby stereotypical portrayals of female ageing have been challenged, contested, or undermined (Dolan & Tincknell 2012; Henderson 2018; Richardson 2019; Spry 2021; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014). Nonetheless, Adams’ play generally capitalizes on the characterization of older women as grotesque, scary, and even monstrous in order to represent a generationally divided, extremely ageist society, thereby complying with the long-established cultural tradition that has represented older women in such a limiting way (Byrski 2014; Friedan 1993: 54). Lynne Segal contends that the dreadful characters in cultural renderings of old age are not accidentally female, but rather “quintessentially female, seen as monstrous because of the combination of age and gender” (2014: 13). In *Animals*, this problematic representation reflects both the perception

that the younger characters (including young women) have of their older "others," as well as the "anomaly" (in both social and moral terms) within which older women themselves are depicted. This is attained through a series of uncanny interactions between the female characters, which practically transform the piece into a gothic fairy tale, echoing the deep-rooted cultural trope of the monstrous mature/older woman in literature. It can likewise be understood as a dark social fantasy of the near-future, in which the Boomer generation is attacked and perceived, in Gullette's terms, as "the enemy [...] that sucked up too much of the oxygen" that younger generations needed (2004: 45).

The first accidental encounter between the young and older women of the play becomes fraught when Maya meets Joy and "discovers" her ageing face, and focuses on physical qualities that turn signs of ageing into a peculiar mask: "It's so funny! When you talk, little creases ping and pop." (35) Joy tries to excuse herself for this "inappropriate" appearance by remarking that she cannot afford a face-lift, which confuses Maya even more, since she does not know what it means (35). The girl's shock intensifies when she sees Norma and Helen, the appearance of whom starts generating a grotesque fantasy to her age-illiterate eyes, to adapt Thomas Cole's term (1994: 7), and for which she lacks the appropriate terms: "Your creases are even bigger than Joy's! Are you witches? My teacher said all the modern witches had been cooked in an oven. How did you escape the oven?" (37) For a girl like Maya who has never encountered the realities of ageing, the women's skin that is "so falling off of [their faces] and hands" (38) creates the specter of incorrectness and flaw. "You look all wrong," (38) she claims; thus, dissociating her young self from the apparent image of her future old self, simply because "old" (with its visible signs of time passing) is a non-existent identity in her society.

Norma tries to lessen Maya's shock by asserting they are, indeed, "witches who have wrinkled skin because [they] are a hundred years old," and allays her fear by clarifying they are "good witches" she should not be scared of (38). Even though Maya decides to stay with the three women to have "totally brilliant fun" with their "magic potion" (39) as she waits for her father to turn up any time, the "monstrosity" of female old age is, nevertheless, suggested through their first encounter. More than Maya, it is the older women who are enhanced as the victims of their monstrous status, imposed as it is by the ageist and misogynist world of the play. In

it, older women are seen through the long-established tradition that has represented them as “hags, nags, witches or worse” (Friedan 1993: 54), ranging from traditional fairy tales (Henneberg 2010) to the golden age of Hollywood cinema and beyond (Chivers 2011: 38–57). Echoing such cultural views of female ageing, the image of the three older women has become, in Woodward’s terms, “the figure of horror and catastrophe” (1991: 8) through which Maya, rather than being scared, becomes a young “Snow White” that awakes from a long, ignorant sleep as an overprotected child.

Within the same scene, and perpetuating the play’s satirical portrayal of female ageing in its oppressive dramatic universe, Norma suggests putting on their so-called “face supports” while Maya is with them, which, as stage directions indicate, are “very large rubber bands” that “Norma pulls [...] around her jaw and forehead, affecting a kind of instant, if horrific face-lift” and provoking her some pain (38). Through this grotesque effect, which evokes the convergence of anxieties of female ageing in the portrayal of classic-Hollywood “hag figures” such as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1952) or Baby Jane and Blanche Hudson in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), Norma’s old age is submitted to the imperatives of “ageist standards of appearance,” as Ann Gerike has put it (1990: 41). With her “face supports” on, Norma “speaks” to Maya through an incongruous mask which, by intending to hide Norma’s identity as an older human being, actually enhances her age in a ridiculous way, rendering her a theatrical version of the iconic crones of the big screen (Chivers 2011; Creed 1993, 2022; Richardson 2019). This and many other comic elements of the play that underline the “inappropriateness” of the women’s age create, borrowing from Friedan, “a satire or a humorous attack on the [social and cultural] denial of age” (1993: 57).

The denial of age, however, is not only the result of the old age aversion but has its origins in the constructed gender roles (and gender rules) which are cemented from the younger stages of the life course in the dystopian universe of the play. Following the popularized sexist “colour rules,” Maya, for whom “a prince” is destined even in her afterlife (95), is supposed to like pink clothes (23) and can only be given a “legal,” that is, “pretty, totally awesome and pink” balloon (24), even though she (like her Mother, whom Daddy completely resents) would not mind having it in another color (65). Her 18th birthday test, which determines the level

of her “suitability” for society, implies the recollection of only fun memories, in which there is no place for intelligence, curiosity, or even real fun itself (24, 26). If she does not “merit,” her only destiny is to become a “Comfort Girl [...] for other people’s daddies” (94) – the role Maya had the chance to witness through her encounters with Ling May, “Daddy’s best Comfort Girl ever,” (43) of whom Maya talks in an affective and longing way (26, 43, 46), and who clearly defied the system through her “transgressive” tendency to think for herself. Maya’s own “transgressive” behaviour (expressed in her wish to use forbidden weather words or her willingness to have “real fun”) makes her, in Ling May’s words, “totally Comfort Girl material,” (43) an idea her Daddy confirms, to his horror, at the end of the play (94). As Adams’ piece reveals, questioning the (patriarchal) system turns into a real threat that can determine your destiny, no matter your age. By presenting women of different ages entrapped in a sexist system that diminishes them as human beings and becomes more harmful to their dignity as they advance in the life course, *Animals* renders ageism a part and parcel of patriarchal oppression.

It is, however, through the revelation of what the women’s “Sandwich Circle” implies that Adams’ dark satire is transformed into a demodystopic horror story. In a gradual way, a terrible mix-up around that peculiar “club” that completely ruined Helen’s granddaughter is clarified to reveal that Norma, Joy, and their network of older friends are eating human meat in their sandwiches, which they obtain from “windfalls” (35, 40, 91). Through this euphemism, they actually refer to “abandoned” children whom they murder, and whose dead bodies they curate and slice up in a “larder” (91) – the same place where they had temporarily locked Helen’s granddaughter without realizing their family tie. When the group’s appalling cannibalistic behaviour is disclosed in the last scenes of the play, in a sequence of scenes where Maya awakens again to the realities of her world as a Gretel-figure that accidentally ends up in the larder (91, 97–98), Helen must also acknowledge the truth she had been looking away from every time she visited Norma to have something to eat. Horrified and, yet, trapped in their desperate, extremely precarious situation, Helen ends up eating sandwiches again in one of the last scenes (96–97). Likewise, Norma’s words when trying to justify their having released her granddaughter – “We wouldn’t ever eat a neighbour’s grandchild! We are not / animals!” (91), and Joy’s repeating “Animals!” in an overlapping

line – similarly underline the conundrum provoked by the dehumanizing effects of a dystopian universe where ageism and sexism coalesce, which imprisons older women within the most sinister of *clichés*: that of the child-consuming witch. Through the re-presentation of such a monstrous figure of ageing femininity in a demodystopic light, Adams' play signifies the violent disintegration that patriarchal and youth-oriented societies can undergo, sometimes inflicted by its most marginal members.

Representing Intergenerational Chaos

In addition to its brutal portrayal of the impact of ageism and sexism on older women, the demodystopic universe of Adams' play also illustrates the consequences of intergenerational estrangement: in the play, the rare interactions between members of different generations are not only imbued with the ideological denigration of ageing, through which the old are deprived of their personhood, but also affect the idea of generational continuity itself. This generational disorder or "generational anachronism," as Sarah Falcus terms it, drawing from Marry Russo's influential study, is a commonplace in (demo)dystopian narratives that refers to "a mistake in the 'normative systematization' – or generational organization – of time" (2020: 68). In Adams' play, generational continuity is broken by a form of "extreme polarization" between the younger and older members: the young, personified by Maya, are deprived of a phase of growth and maturity by being treated like children who must be protected from such essential aspects of life, such as ageing or death; and the older figures are "othered" into the far end of the spectrum, their lives becoming forced to exist in suspension or, to borrow from Segal's memoir, to persist "out of time" (2014). In a world deceptively depicted as "safe," therapists "help" children create "a little box in [their] mind where [they] lock away all [their] sad, horrid, non fun thoughts [and words]" (26) or, on occasion, "adjust," (20) "mend" (45), or "fix" (94) the youngsters, that is, avert critical thinking and questioning the world around them, hence distancing them even further not only from their own maturity, but also, and especially, from their future older selves. In addition, the extremely high "Sentimental Attachment fees" (45, 87, 94) that allow the families to continue keeping their kinship ties divide the members of different age groups even more, as seen through Helen's character who has lost all the

relationships with her daughter and granddaughter in exchange for the therapy sessions for the latter (45). In this way, Adams' play demonstrates, as generally discussed within age studies, that the biased attitudes of the young towards those who are on the opposite side of the life continuum are not so much self-initiated, but rather externally imposed on them by society and culture (Gullette 2004: 52).

The play's problematic depiction of intergenerational relationships is complicated further by the system of parenting that is recreated in it, which fully relies on socioeconomic strategies and imposes a form of "happiness" on both parents and children that can only be attained through artificial or material means. In fact, Noah, who is convinced that Maya will be taking care of him in his "diminished" years (66), fails to become a successful father despite, as he believes, doing everything for his daughter (64), or rather, as the play insinuates, because of the system itself (23, 64). Paradoxically enough, the solution to this apparently unbridgeable intergenerational gap comes from the older women characters, a detail that emphasizes the play's anti-ageist critique. Unable to find affection and protection in her Daddy, and having lost her Mother and Ling May as the only ones who knew how to make her happy in a genuine way, Maya finds a new constructive relationship in Helen, who can understand what fun is for the young girl, and who shares the realities of life with her, which the girl is eager to know. Even though, to Helen, this transmission of knowledge is initially a desperate selfish act, through which Maya is manipulated into helping her before Noah turns up for his inspection, it eventually becomes a sign of "generativity," the term used by Erik Erikson to refer to "the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (1950: 267). In fact, Helen's "generative action" quickly evolves into mutual esteem, friendship, and fondness, and in later scenes, she is actually shown to "care" for Maya (35, 44–45, 100). Several moments of the play, in which the conversations between Maya and Helen are accompanied by patience, love, support, and fun, resemble the close relationship of a grandmother with her grandchild. Hence, they foreground the idea that knowledge is transmitted not solely through words, but also through the sense of intimacy and embodied affection that is transmitted with care; and, at the same time, they suggest that intergenerational relationships founded on mentorship build richer and deeper knowledge of ageing, as demonstrated by

other narratives in which such interactions are depicted (Casado-Gual et al. 2019: 16).

Helen's new "generational" role, not only as Maya's "adopted grandmother," but also as her main carer, is emphasized when Noah tries to kill his own daughter, realizing that after the horrible "truths" she has discovered in Norma's house, Maya will be forever traumatized – and, therefore, the therapy sessions she will require will be utterly unaffordable (94). In a heroic gesture, Helen stabs Noah in the back both saving Maya's life and, at the same time, providing the "Sandwich Circle" a new order whereby future killings are to only be perpetrated against threatening Utility Inspectors. In the last lines of the play, Maya's giving the answer to the last crossword puzzle Norma and Joy are trying to solve with the symbolic answer of "El Niño" – corresponding to the definition "Little child brings great sea change" (101) – conveys the inferred sign of change and further development within the relationships between Maya and the older women who, as the play insinuates, will not just "fix" the girl (94), but will also restore generational meaning for all of them, or, in Edmondson's terms, "their place in the flow of generations" (2015: 19).

With its open ending, Adams' play does not give a compelling answer to what will happen to Maya and the three older women, nor does it put an end to the atrocities of the ageist and sexist society of their dramatic world. However, its denouement implies a sense of relief in the intergenerational tensions depicted, and it suggests a sense of redemption for the main characters, generated out of their mutual forgiveness and deeper bonding. The positive reciprocity of their relationships (and, hence, generational continuity) becomes profound and meaningful as well as beneficial for young and older people: as the end of the piece insinuates, Maya is finally liberated from the lies that burdened her harming experiences with grown-ups, especially with her Daddy (94), and receives parental care and love from older women; and, while Norma and Joy make peace with Helen after the terrible incident with Helen's granddaughter (97), Helen herself recuperates her lost family through her new bond with Maya. Despite its extremely bleak prospects, towards the end of Adams' demodystopian piece, old age exhibits the characteristics of "intergeneration" and "regeneration" that Robert E. Yahnke observed in the cinematic renderings of ageing (2000, 2010): thus, the intergenerational reconciliation

implied in the last scene may be read as contributing to re-generating wholeness and unity within a self-destructive society.

Conclusions

This article has presented an age-focused analysis of a contemporary play that highlights the close interconnection between negative interpretations of ageing and gender, ageism, intergenerational rupture, and social fragmentation. The increase of narratives of different genres with an important emphasis on old age unmistakably signals the heightened anxiety and uncertainty about the future caused by the ageing demographics. In this sense, and quite exceptionally through a theatrical demodystopia, *Animals* contributes to raising awareness about the perils of generalized gerontophobia, and especially of its consequences for older women in particular, in the following ways.

In the first place, as has been demonstrated, the play shows how the culturally-ingrained fear of ageing deforms old age identity by presenting it as a non-human entity. It also separates different age groups, leading to social degeneration and atrocity, and projecting negative “age-effects,” as Bridie Moore terms it (2014), on all the generations involved. As Adams’ demodystopia illustrates, the dread of later life strips older people of their identity and even humanity, while simultaneously leaving the young without real images or references of their future older selves. Secondly, the adverse “age-effects” of Adams’ demodystopian world are explicitly signified as gender-ridden. While the prevalence of older female characters in the piece mirrors the growing visibility of older women on the stage, it also signals the pervading power of the narrative of decline in its renderings of ageing femininity, through which female ageing is associated with loss, dependency, and poverty and, in a frequently ableist way, with impairment and physical difference. In a similar vein, the play also underlines the extent to which the older woman is regarded as “grotesque” and even as “monstrous” by societies that reject or turn a blind eye to the process of growing older. Thirdly, and counteracting what could be deemed a victimized or problematic image of the older woman, the play transforms its ageing protagonists into figures of resistance who (especially in the case of Helen) have the capacity not only to survive the double form of oppression they are subjugated to, but also to foster new bonds with the young whereby their society might be regenerated.

All in all, through its apparently realistic aesthetics and characterizations, the efficiency of its satirical tone, and the recognizable scope of its seemingly futuristic temporal frame, Emma Adams' play poignantly warns us of the dangers of organizing our world into "polar opposites," as Woodward has put it, instead of regarding "age" as "a subtle continuum" (1991: 6), whereby all ages (especially if gender-marked) can be recognized as equally leading to fulfilling relationships and forms of life. As a theatrical piece, *Animals* generates a "safe" narrative through which the dangers (and even "horrors") of ageism and sexism can be contemplated, identified, and, ultimately, confronted; and, as a cultural artefact, it enables a better understanding of the complex intersections at work in the construction of the ageing self, including the rich role older women have played and continue to have as powerful agents of social cohesion.

Corresponding author

Inesa Shevchenko-Hotsuliak, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Lleida, Pl. Víctor Siurana 1, Lleida, 25003, Catalonia, Spain. Email: inesa.shevchenko@udl.cat

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