

AGE IN CHANGE

Voices and Views of Older Women



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By: Anna Hedlund
For Professor: Johanna Esseveld
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“We develop through experience. Therefore hardships and misfortune challenge us. It is in overcoming mistakes that we touch the song of life.”

(Beatrice Woods)¹

ABSTRACT. The youth orientation of Swedish society makes older women invisible. Current norms of youth and beauty exclude and misrepresent the elderly and ageing, and pose a challenge for older women to maintain a positive self-image. This research explores how older women experience and cope with the processes of ageing within a youth centred cultural context. The paper presents and analyzes findings from six semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women between the ages of 65 and 85 regarding their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of ageing in relation to their bodies, to significant others, and to media representations of ageing and old women. The results of the research reveal that these women have, through lived experiences, developed strategies in dealing with ageing in relation to their bodies, to significant others, and to the youth oriented media outlet. Such strategies are diverse and overlap into different contexts, yet themes of approaches utilised by all six respondents emerge in the form of shifting values, humour, communication, and resistance. The results further suggest that identity formation continues in old age, as an embodied process of continuity and change that is influenced by structural factors, relationships, as well as individual agency.

KEYWORDS. Older women, ageing, lived experience, ageism, sexism, coping, agency, qualitative methodology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Swedish society is permeated with youth centered cultural and commercial values, which devalue old age and make elderly persons invisible. Current norms of youth as beauty generate a distorted image of ageing and old age. These youth oriented values are reflected in the public and private spheres of life, and reproduced within the same. One visually powerful sphere where these values are both reflected and reproduced is the popular media, in which these norms are mediated in many forms, such as anti-ageing advertisements and women's beauty magazines. There are few positive images of old age and even fewer older women role models in mass media representations, an absence that shines through most public spheres. This absence and silence of old women's lived experiences is not only an issue reflected in and reproduced by the popular media, but also found in other contexts, such as academia. Although a growing body of feminist research is giving voice to elderly women's experiences, it is still largely unexplored. This paper² is dedicated to the project of listening and giving voice to older women's perspectives and perceptions of their process(es) of ageing, and, thereby, to emphasise their lived experiences as valuable contributions, not only to academic research, but in society at large.

Through a feminist qualitative research approach, firmly grounded in the women's stories, themes were generated that centre on the following areas of inquiry: Elderly women's embodied experience of, and ways of coping with, the processes of ageing in their bodies, in their social sphere of relationships; and in their reactions to media representations on ageing and older women. Based on feminist methodology I conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews with six Swedish women, whose ages span between 65 and 85 years at the time of interviewing.

The background section contains the cultural context within which my own inquiry originated, and holds some of the research I have used as resources for deepening my understanding of older women's experiences of ageing on a macro and micro level of the social world. The intent in this section is to expand upon the meaning of ageing as a social construction; display the intersection of ageist/sexist discourses in our Swedish culture; exhibit the silencing of older women's lived experiences; explore identity formation in old age as an embodied process of continuity and change that is influenced by structural factors, relationships, as well as individual agency; and, finally, to problematize the influence of ageist/sexist discourses in mass media on women's sense of selves.

In the analysis and discussion section, the findings are analysed and interwoven with previous research on the areas of women's embodied ageing, ageing within relationships, and media representations of older women and ageing. Agency as an element of identity formation in old age is also discussed. The results of the interviews and following analysis reveal that these women have developed strategies through experiences in how they deal with the processes of ageing as this relates to their bodies, interpersonal relationships and the media representation of ageing and older women. Even though the informants' responses to various aspects of ageing are individually different, themes of strategies emerge, such as a shift in values from appearances towards wellbeing; ways of communicating within relationships that involve continued learning, and forms of resistance to ageist/sexist occurrences in mass media, as every day life approaches. Their strategies are not confined to one particular area of their lives, but rather overlap. Furthermore, rather than simply coping, in the psychological sense of the term, they are actively and consciously involved with their own ageing as embodied processes, in their social relationships, and in their reactions to media portrayals of ageing and elderly women. Their strategies unveil agency in individual approaches to everyday life situations, set within larger structural and contextual influences. In their individual processes of defining and redefining themselves in relation to experiences, relationships and cultural/historical contexts, they reveal both continuity and change in an ongoing interactive creation of selfhood and personal growth.

2. WHY FEMINIST METHODOLOGY?

“Feminist research still has the dual goal of developing a ‘critical’ science and contributing to the further understanding of women’s situation in society.”
(Esseveld, 1988:24)

There is not just one feminist methodology, but many forms of feminist qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, based on various standpoints, feminist theories and activism. (See for example De Vault, 1996, 1999; Esseveld, 1988; hooks, 1984; Smith, 1990) The common ground between different feminist research methods and theories is the project of emancipation – of working towards the elimination of sexist inequalities. (Compare Gemzöe, 2002; hooks, 1984)

My starting point in this research process is based on one form of feminist qualitative research, which I consider to be “contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, and socially relative” (Wolf in Reid, 2000:184), and incorporates in-depth interviews and analysis grounded in the women's stories as they were told to me. I listened to their life histories, as a way to obtain perspective over

changes and themes in their approaches to, and experiences, of their lives. The interviews also incorporated questions that generated discussions, which brought forth their views and voices of related topics on ageing. Thus, the themes and analysis are grounded in life history interviews and interview discussions with the women. This approach was chosen because it allows the interviews to evolve according to what the respondents feel is important to talk about, thereby shaping the research result in terms of emerging themes, definitions and, to some degree, also analyses. This way, the informants are not fitted into already set categories or analysed according to one presumed theory, and the door is left open to new ways of thinking. My choice of method is an open-ended way of exploring the subject under scrutiny and allowed my questions to evolve in relation to academic texts, and to personal conversations with the informants.

The whole research process is situated in a standpoint of women's lived experiences. I hope for this research process to reflect my ethical "standpoint" (Smith, 1990:164) of wanting to give voice to a marginalized group of women, and create a sense of authenticity of the voices that I have listened to. This means, that I have chosen to include authentic quotes as much as possible, and to convey their meanings as the participants have explained them to me. I believe this to be a method that has a potentially empowering effect in that the informants see that what they have to share of their experiences, thoughts and reflections is valuable information and of vital importance to this research. One of the many challenges in this form of qualitative research lies in the process of moving from individual stories to analysis, i.e. interpreting. It is I, the researcher, who give meaning to what I perceive as the informant's message, which not only puts me in a position of power, but also makes me liable to scrutiny and questioning by anyone reading the material, including the women who participated.

The feminist methodology I have chosen, acknowledges the ethical responsibility on part of the researcher and a dialectic process between interviewer and persons interviewed. My role during the interviews was to ask questions around certain themes, encourage further depth of those responses that were important for them to discuss, and to listen. By listening to their stories, I 'borrowed their eyes' for a while; an intellectual and empathic process, which I believe increased my understanding of their experiences in life. It was my intention to raise my own awareness by listening to these women, and to rid myself of internalised misconceptions – a humbling process for which I gratefully thank the participants.

The idea of feminist emancipatory research aims to empower the participant and view her as a collaborative co-creator of the process. (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) The idea of empowerment is, in my view, an ethical aspect of qualitative feminist research that aims for positive social change on a micro/macro level, starting in a research process where a researcher shares the power of defining and naming with the participants. In this respect I have, for example, used the women's own vocabulary and experiences in processes of defining instead of simply trying to fit the women and their experiences into already established categories. During the interviews, I also adopted an attitude of encouragement and positive affirmation to their responses, to confirm the value of their experiences and views. The interviews led to later discussions over the phone with most of the participants, and several of them asked for a copy of the transcription of their own interview, which some of the women stated, led to further personal reflections and positive evaluations of their lives. Several of the women expressed an appreciation for the experience of being interviewed, and one even considered the process to be therapeutic.³

Feminist research praxis also involves a critical view of power relations in the research process. The approach of acknowledging the position of power that I am in as a researcher, while trying to re-locate and share the power of defining with the participants, are part of the feminist project, especially feminist action research (FAR), which inspired my choice of method. (Reed, 2004) Although this study is far from a pure collaborative effort, such as a focus group with a social justice agenda, participatory action research (PAR) and FAR are approaches with ethical principles that have influenced this study. (Kondrat & Juliá, 1997)

The women in this study were selected via a snow-ball sampling method (Berg, 1998:132), a form of 'chain reaction' of referrals that led to the six informants participation. That is, I talked about my research with one woman who then referred me to a person who turned out to be interested in participating, who, in turn, recommended another person, and so on. The respondents are Swedish 'caucasian' women between the ages of 65 and 85⁴, and are, at the time of the interviews in 2005, all relatively able-bodied and living at home. They come from various class backgrounds (working-, middle-, upper-), and are situated in various cities or smaller towns of Sweden, from north to south. They have various levels of education, from 7 years of schooling to university degrees, and all six have been working for pay on and off throughout their lives. They also have educated themselves in different ways, or taken educational courses based on personal interests, later in life. All six have been married at least once, and all have at least one living child,

five of them have grandchildren, and one of these persons has several great grand children. Two of the women are living with their husbands, whereas the other four are living on their own, either widowed or divorced. Of these four two currently have heterosexual love relationships. Two of the six women express a belief in the Christian faith but none is actively involved within a religious community.

Six in-depth interviews, that spanned over 3-5 hours in time, were conducted with each individual. In most cases the dialogue continued over the phone during the weeks after when I needed clarification or further depth to their responses. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions, and performed where the participants felt most comfortable (i.e. all six preferred to do it in their own homes, which meant some travelling on my part). The interview material was, with informed and written consent, recorded on tapes, which were all transcribed in Swedish.

The interviews started with questions about the informants' personal backgrounds. This form of life history research method is useful due to its capacity to reveal micro-sociological processes internal to the individual. (Berg, 1998) That is, this method reveals the individual's own story and views of life; how she perceives her experiences, defines and ascribes meaning to them. (Trossholmen, 2000; Davies, 1997) This method has the potential of capturing individual differences and the individual's location within a larger historical and cultural context. (Trossholmen, 2000) The use of open-ended questions was intended to allow the participants to feel control and power over the situation, since they could also choose direction of the topic. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify previous ones, and more structured questions were asked when the participant said she felt finished with one question. This approach allowed for the topic to expand and narrow in the direction, which the respondent felt was important to her.

Primary sources used in the research process are interview transcriptions and previous academic research. Of the academic works consulted, Ninni Trossholmen's ethnographic study of twelve older women, "Tid till eftertanke" (2000), as well as Clary Krekula's (2004, 2005) feminist research on older women have been particularly influential. Barbara Macdonald's (1991) writings about her own experiences of ageism have greatly influenced the process, as has Evelyln Rosenthal's (1990) edited work on Women, Ageing and Ageism. Lars Tornstam's (2005) educational work on the "The social psychology of ageing" is another resource widely consulted, as is "Beyond Silence" by Johanna Esseveld (1988). Esseveld's work has given birth to many

reflections and pathways in this research process, especially the idea of voicing older women's views, also reflected in the title of this paper. Furthermore, it has been my intention to refer to research in a Swedish context since I believe this reflects a specific cultural and historical location and is more relevant to Swedish women's experiences. However, most research in this field is conducted in other countries such as the UK and the USA, and I have included applicable research from international sources as well. Secondary sources have been part of my personal process of inquiry and of the development of the thesis. Examples are media resources such as the internet, national/international television, newspapers and magazines (e.g. "Tara"), but also many personal discussions with women of all ages in order to raise awareness (my own in particular) of some of the current fears and misconceptions about ageing that I encountered throughout this process.

3. BACKGROUND: WHY OLDER WOMEN!

The background section of this paper reflects my initial starting point in the research process; the cultural and academic context within which my own inquiry originated, which attempts to answer the question: 'Why research with older women?' This section presents an empirical framework of research references that are compiled to both contextualise the informants' experiences within the social world, as well as to point out why this research is important. In this section I intend to: Expand upon the meaning of ageing as a social construction; display the intersection of ageist/sexist discourses in our culture; exhibit the silencing of older women's lived experiences; explore identity formation in old age as an embodied process of continuity and change that is influenced by structural factors, relationships, as well as individual agency; and, finally, to problematize the influence of ageist and sexist discourses in mass media on women's sense of selves.

3.1 Ageing – defining change

“Old age can only be understood as a whole: it is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact.” (de Beauvoir, 1978:20)

Ageing is both a biological/ physical process of change that starts with birth, as well as a social construction. From the moment we are born, our bodies begin to age. Although ageing as such is universal in the sense of biological inevitability, or, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir: “Die early or grow old: there is no other alternative” (1978:315), it is also a contextual, socially relative, and individually embodied process. (Compare Trossholmen, 2000; Krekula, 2005) That is, the way

that a particular society, culture or subculture, in time, place and history values ageing will affect how the ageing individual relates to others and perceives herself. Or, as de Beauvoir articulates it: “Although old age, considered as a biological fate, is a reality that goes beyond history, it is nevertheless true that this is experienced in a way that varies according to the social context” (1978:16).

How ageing is experienced and perceived is thus affected by context, i.e. cultural/geographical/historical location, in that it is contingent upon social status factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, skin colour, sexual orientation, (dis-)ability, to mention a few influences. Our location in the social strata will affect how we experience our selves, others and our lives within the world, also in our old age.⁵ There are also social norms and rules interconnected with different phases of life, thus the social ageing is culturally defined by “age-based social positions” (Krekula, 2005:7). That is, we experience different expectations on, for example, how to dress and behave according to our social locations and age groups.⁶ (Krekula, 2005)

In western societies, the social construct ‘old age’ is generally defined in a legal sense in that a person is considered ‘old’ when s/he retires from work, i.e. the public sphere of life. (Giddens, 1994) However, the concept ‘old’ contains more meanings than this, which, in a youth oriented culture, signifies something negative. (Giddens, 1994, Trossholmen, 2000) The value of youth, especially as a normative assignment of feminine beauty, tends to generate views of old age as ‘bad’, manifested in discriminatory and stereotyping discourses pertaining to older adults. Some of these misconceptions are exhibited in the views and expectations of elderly women as being asexual, passive, weak, helpless, incompetent or aggressive and demonized. (Gerike, 1990; Itzin, 1986; Rosenthal, 1990; Trossholmen, 2000) This cultural tendency to homogenise and stereotype older women is also reflected in and reproduced by the mass media. (Itzin, 1986) Tornstam (2005) indicates that the media have an important role in spreading and reinforcing these negative images in society.

The aspect of individual agency⁷ as a factor involved in shaping the experience of ageing in old age is a generally neglected perspective in research.⁸ Though material inequality based on factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, (dis-)ability, income levels, etc. certainly affect the process of ageing, and how one perceives and copes with this process, there are still differences between individuals within these social strata. A person’s complex and multidimensional background, their accumulation of life experiences in relation to societal and historical changes, affect the process of

ageing. (Trossholmen, 2000) But the individual still has, to some degree depending on situational/contextual factors, the power to make choices in thought and action, e.g. to resist or conform to social norms and expectations.

I maintain that the ways in which a person handles the process of ageing depend not only on external (social/cultural/historical) structural relations, but also on inter-relational factors and on internal factors. Thus, ageing according to my understanding of this as a dialectic process, reflects a multidimensional, internal and external, movement of self within interactive social contexts, cultural and historical locations – “a process [that] resembles a mosaic rather than a continuum” (Hess in Rosenthal, 1990:xii).

3.2 The intersection of ageism/sexism

“Stereotypes are constructed by the production and explanation of the world in dichotomies.”
(Mulinari, 1997:141)

In order to grasp the existence of oppressive features in a society, I believe it is important to deconstruct the “framework of oppositional binarisms⁹ [that] has historically provided the governing logic of identity formation in the West” (Gutterman, 1994:220). Ageism, the negative discrimination of elderly, has its roots in the same dichotomous thought system¹⁰ that divides human beings into male and female, ‘white’ and ‘black’, masculine versus feminine, heterosexual versus homosexual, etc., and devalues one as the lesser worth Other. Ageism as a binary social construction separates ‘old’ from ‘young’ or ‘younger’, and defines the ‘old’ as of lesser worth and lesser beauty. It is a normative association of ‘old’ as something negative and something to be avoided.

“Discrimination due to age (“ageism”) is an ideology in the same way as sexism and racism. There are just as many false stereotypical perceptions of older people as there are prejudices against other groups.” (Giddens, 1994: 259)¹¹

Ageism, the term coined at the end of the 1960’s by Robert Butler (1975), is, like sexism, racism and other forms of oppressive social phenomena, a prevailing Western¹², even global, issue. (Macdonald, 2001; INSTRAW, 1999) Although it could be applied to any age group, ageism is here defined as the marginalization, stereotyping and negative discrimination of the elderly. (Compare R. Butler, 1975; and O’Beirne, 1999) Ageist discourse justifies discrimination against the elderly. One example is the current debate about how to deal with the so-called ‘problem’ of a growing population of elderly – of which most are women. (Jönsson, 2002) Defining a growing

population of elderly as an economic ‘burden’¹³ for the rest of society does not, I believe, generate a positive view of older people in general, but rather diminishes their contributions as individuals and collectively.

The implications of discriminatory treatment of elderly take many forms. Giddens, for example, holds that elderly people tend to become invisible in a society “where youthful vitality and attractiveness is highly valued” (1994:259). However, even though ageism affects all genders and sexes, there is a gendered difference in the degree to which older persons are affected by ageist marginalization. Ageism as a negative discriminatory treatment affects older women to a greater degree than older men. (O’Beirne, 1999) Hurd holds that “traditionally lacking access to the power associated with the public sphere, women’s bodies and hence their physical and sexual attractiveness have been important sources of social valuation for women.” (2000:81) Thus older women become even more invisible, since women, according to the cultural beauty standard for femininity in females, lose their social “currency”¹⁴ of sexual attractiveness as they age. (Hurd, 2000)

Cultural representations of femininity are at the heart of the otherization of older women, images in which the stereotypical ‘beautiful’ woman is also youthful or young and therefore, the old woman is ‘not’. (Itzin, 1986) Ageist “othering” (Krekula, 2003:184) of women means, in effect, that they are facing an added dimension of discrimination in addition to sexism, as maintained in the social world by gendered power relations. The intersection of sexism and ageism causes, in Susan Sontag’s (1972) words, a “double standard”¹⁵ of ageing. That is, whereas a man supposedly gains dignity and power with age, the older woman is, in contrast, devalued by her ageing, and no longer considered valuable or attractive. (Itzin, 1986; O’Beirne, 1999)

The “varieties of ageism affecting women grow out of sex role stereotypes and discrimination combined with ideas about the nature of the middle-aged and old” (Rosenthal, 1990:1). Thus the old woman is sometimes pictured as “dull or demented”, “aggressive and interfering”, “asexual” or “rigid”, and sometimes as an “idealized grandmother” (Itzin, 1986:123) in her approach to life. There are also some portrayals of older women as dangerous - mostly in folklore stories of witches (Trossholmen, 2000), or as dominatrix’s within relationships (soap operas) where their lives center on controlling, manipulating and creating a chaos of relational intrigues in their social settings.¹⁶ Another sexist/ageist stereotype is the nice old lady – the pious and angelic grandmother whose life is devoted to providing care for grandchildren, or the old crone whose wisdom is revered.

Rosenthal asserts that “[p]owerful myths and stereotypes of aging limit the lives of middle-aged and old people. For women as they age, the intersection of ageism with sexism can be devastating in circumscribing their activities and controlling their self-image” (1990:1). Thus, the effects of a ‘positive’ stereotype may be just as detrimental, and limiting as negative ones, creating social expectations on older women.

“Varieties of ageism directed toward women today contribute to a picture of women as unproductive, dependent, rigid, weak, defenseless, morally old-fashioned, timid, ugly, senile and lonely. The list of negative stereotypes can be extended, making it no surprise that younger women look past us and through us as if by denying our existence they will magically avoid growing old. Positive stereotypes harm us less directly but in the end are no less limiting, casting us as perfect mothers forbidden our own neediness, or wisdom-filled crones denied challenge or growth.” (Rosenthal, 1990:6)

Stereotypes, whether ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ not only limit the lives of older women, but also tend to simplify and therefore silence the complexity and diversity of women’s lived experiences.

3.3 Silence and absence – in general

“With a few devotional practices and some animals to care for, the old unmarried woman’s life is full.” (Durkheim, 1952:215)¹⁷

The area of elderly women’s experiences of ageing has been, and still is, a neglected one within sociology, but also in other academic disciplines¹⁸, whether it be gerontology, psychology, or anthropology – or even feminist research¹⁹. Although a growing body of, in particular North American feminist research²⁰ is giving voice to elderly women’s issues and experiences, this field of study is still largely unexplored, nationally and internationally.

Research on ageing has, so far, relied heavily on different medical aspects, especially in gerontology where the focus on the elderly as “care receivers” (Trossholmen, 2000:12) has contributed to a “misery perspective”²¹ (Tornstam 2005:231; Trossholmen, 2000:16). This easily translates into images of dependency and illness. Furthermore, research on medical aspects is still using the male body as the norm, which makes the medical needs of women less visible and attended to. The fact is, though, that the majority of elderly are women who are well and healthy enough to live at home rather independently. This is also the category and group of elderly that is “the most invisible” (Trossholmen, 2000:14).

Academia is not the only realm where elderly women are invisible and silenced by absence or misrepresentation. In fact, “there are few cultural institutions and practices that do not promote and

reinforce the stereotyping of women” (Kesselman et al.1995:37), whether old or young. One powerful example where older women are generally absent is the popular media. According to Itzin (1986), the mass media has a crucial role in the construction of ageism and sexism by generally presenting images of women as submissive, as sexual objects, and *not* as powerful individuals. Media and advertising images of beauty promote youthfulness as an attractive trait in women. Women are supposed to stay fit, keep the flesh from sagging, and the facial skin from wrinkling through gym workouts, anti-wrinkle creams, and other de-vices. Itzin further points to the values of capitalist ideology in consumer society²², that has vested interests in maintaining profitable stereotypes of women, so that women will keep buying products in order to look younger. ‘Stay younger-looking longer and you will be happier’ appear to be one of the commercialized media messages to women (and men).

3.4 Identity – in change

“[P]ersonal identities are constructed and changed in every day life through an individual’s own actions, [...] the reactions by others, as well as economic and ideological factors constrain and support such actions.” (Esseveld 1988:181)

In sociology and psychology, theories concerning the formation of identity are mainly applied to childhood and youth. (Tornstam, 2005) Although processes of cognitive growth and socialization in early life are important aspects of understanding individual ‘personality’, I believe the theories of identity formation²³ applied to early age are insufficient in understanding the complexity of selfhood in later life. Very little research has so far been dedicated to exploring women’s identities in old age. (Krekula, 2003, 2004) Identity is generally considered to be the self-image that a person has of herself, and the image others have of her, and what position the person has in society. (Krekula, 2004) Individuals are influenced by their demographic location in culture and history, by larger structural frameworks such as political, educational and media institutions, as well as age, class and gender etc. Yet, identity is more complex than this.

Identity, within social theories, is defined as the identification with a collective category, (such as ‘Swede’), or, following social psychological theories, as the multiple social roles (e.g. ‘grandmother’ and ‘volunteer’) a person has in society. Both theories, however, leave little room for “changes in identity” (Krekula, 2004:31). (See also Esseveld, 1988) The identification with a certain category or social role might change with old age, for example, from ‘worker’ to ‘senior’,

or from 'wife' to 'widow'. Moreover, Krekula renders identity to be "both stable and changing and involving embodied dimensions" (2004:29).

Krekula explores changes in identity in her study of older women, and presents those as the way that the informants describe certain aspects of their personalities as stable, versus other aspects as changing. Examples she gives of continuity in this respect are the women's self-definitions as being "strong", "shy" or "adventurous" (2004:33) throughout their lives. That is, certain personal traits are experienced as stable, as continuous through time and various situations. One example of change in identity that the informants in Krekula's study emphasise is (the increase in) self-confidence. Thus Krekula concludes the concurrent co-existence of stability and change in identity (2004:33). She also brings in the realm of embodiment to the identity discussion, and pinpoints the informants' multifaceted views of their bodies. There are accounts of the body as a source of both "physical pleasure" and "discontent", of "pride" (e.g. being "strong") and "grief" (e.g. dislike of the look of one's naked body) (2004:35). This reveals complexity in women's experiences of their embodied selves.

Hurd maintains that "given the developmental nature of body image, we cannot assume that older women will perceive their bodies in the same ways that younger or middle-aged women do, or that their evaluations of their bodies remain unchanged over the life course" (2000:79). An older woman's body keeps changing with the process of ageing, but how she feels about, and deals with, those changes depend on numerous interconnected factors, such as social status (class, level of education, financial state, ability etc.), values of beauty, view of femininity, and so on. These factors can affect a person's sense of value within her social world, but may also change depending on context. The question is to what degree are we affected by our surroundings, by other people's judgments, and how much do we compare ourselves to standards of human value within our social worlds? Hurd, for example, found in her study on older women's body images, that the respondents define their wellbeing to be more valuable than their looks, yet she concludes that the women also exhibited "the internalization of ageist beauty norms even as they assert that health is more important to them than physical attractiveness" (2000:77).

Relationships and personal interaction is another influential aspect of identity formation in later life. In her study of middle-aged women in the US, Esseveld (1988) emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships in the formation of women's identities. She demonstrates through her own research that the interaction between her and the respondents of the study, through in-depth

interviews and the relationships that evolved throughout the research process with the women, generated awareness and positive change for some of them as they reflected upon and reconstructed their lives and roles as housewives and women. Esseveld states that for these women, “arriving at a different perspective was the result of a long, on-going and complicated process of thinking through personal tension and ambivalence” (1988:182). In my understanding of Esseveld, interpersonal relationships in combination with intrapersonal self-reflexivity have the potential to generate change in the private sphere of individuals and the everyday lived experiences of larger structures, such as gender relations.

In Giddens’ (1991) analysis of modern society, identity formation is considered to be a dialectic process between structure and agent. Giddens points out that individual self-reflexivity not only aids in our ability to explain social phenomena, but also gives us the potential option of changing our future actions. Although agency is inextricably linked with stratified social locations (gender, age, class, etc.) and contextual locations, it allows for reactions and actions that generate change. Both structural and interpersonal relations socialise and form identity, yet I emphasise individual agency as an internal force of self-reflexivity that potentially transcends other influences and thereby, to some degree, breaks the structural and inter-relational patterns laid out for women in their/our everyday lives. Thus, I define agency as the self-reflexive power to resist, question, and make choices that may or may not follow expectations and norms that are experienced within everyday relationships.

Conclusively, in reference to the above authors, Krekula, Esseveld and Giddens, identity formation in old age is explicated as an embodied process of continuity and change, which is influenced by structural relations, interpersonal relationships, as well as individual agency.

3.5 The question of media influences

“The stories of our culture are the story of ourselves as a culture; of our perceptions of our selves.” (Lindell, 2004:222)

In her dissertation on gender (mis-)representation in films, Lindell (2004) stresses the influence of institutional forces, such as film and mass media, on women’s identities. “The media does not only mirror reality, but is part of its construction.” (Lindell, 2004:221) The documentation of sexism in media is extensive. (Itzin, 1986; Lindell, 2004; Macdonald, 1995) Yet, little attention in research is paid to the interconnection with ageism and how the intersection of ageism and sexism affect older women. (Itzin, 1986) “When older women are portrayed – on the few occasions when they are not

invisible by complete omission – they are extorted to stay young and beautiful, to do things to their bodies to achieve this, and to wear make-up, hair products and clothes to conceal their age” (Itzin, 1986:125). Itzin argues that older women are even less visible than older men and that this could distort perceptions of reality. Rarely, she states, “are older women portrayed as capable and independent”, and “never as sexually attractive” (1986:126).

Although I hold that there is no media conspiracy against women, much of the mass media outlet misrepresents women, and much of the media industry is male dominated, e.g. most producers are men, as are media critics. (Compare Lindell, 2004; and Macdonald, 1995) Thus male dominated ownership and production generates a media outlet where women’s perspectives are neglected. (Lindell, 2004) Macdonald indicates that “media discourses are not detached from ways of talking and thinking that exist elsewhere in society, but selectively promote some while neglecting others” (1995:47). She suggests a self-reflexive approach to the media influence on women’s identities, and that “we need to recognize the part we all play in keeping mythologies and ideologies alive” (Macdonald, 1995:11).

Dorothy Smith problematizes the impact of media images on women’s lives by explicating how “the discourse of femininity is a medium through which the fashion industry manages the market and its productive relations” (Smith, 1990:202). That is, the discourse of femininity within media prescribes “the tyranny of ideality vis-à-vis the body forever imperfect” (Smith, 1990:203). The fashion industry thus manufactures a desire among women in general to try to live up to the discursive feminine ideal.

“Discourse”, Smith states, “is organized extra-locally; its texts are uniform and ubiquitous; its powers govern the norms and its interpretations of appearances are effective in multiple local sites” (Smith, 1990:203). Smith points out that advertisements and magazines educate, train and inform their readers in “the doctrines of femininity” (1990:200). However, the consumer woman is not simply a “puppet of the media” (1990:204), because, although the fashion industry has the power to manage the market via the discourse of femininity, it does not control the discourse itself. Agency plays a significant role also within these relations of ruling:

“It is easy to misconstrue the discourse as having an overriding power to determine the values and interpretation of women’s appearances in local settings, and see this power as essentially at disposal of the fashion industry and media. But the relation between discourse and local practices is not causal. Rather women are active, skilled, make choices, consider, are not fooled or foolish. Within discourse there is play and interplay.” (Smith, 1990:203)

In my understanding, Smith refers to women's ability to actively and consciously choose, reflect and question. Hence agency on the part of individuals must be viewed as a factor in discursive contexts, in how we participate in and give meaning to our experiences. Although influenced by larger structures, such as sexist media discourses, we still have choices in how we interact with the world we live in.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

“Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you.”
(Jean-Paul Sartre)

In this section the findings are analysed and discussed; interwoven with other studies on women's embodied ageing; ageing within relationships; and representation of older women and ageing in the media. Here I explore how the informants' responses and experiences relate to other research, thus contextualising and analysing lived experiences within larger societal and cultural structures, such as gender relations and mass media influences. In the final part of this section, the dynamic interaction between larger structures, interpersonal relations, and individual agency are also discussed as aspects of identity formation in old age.

4.1 Ageing – a defining process

The women in this study accept ageing as a natural process of change, as a biological inevitability of life, and connect physical aspects to the natural cycles of life on earth. Yet, the participants bring in other aspects of ageing as well. Yvonne, for example, defines ageing as an individual process that varies according to background and values, thus referring to social and cognitive influences on her perception of ageing. Madeleine, as another example, includes a definition that incorporates an accumulation of experiences, 'tools' with which to deal with life's challenges, and presents her view of ageing as continuous personal growth. Madeleine also unveils an expanded understanding of old age as consisting of an accumulation of 'earlier' ages. That is, a person embodies many different previous 'ages' – memories and experiences of previous times, such as childhood, young adulthood and older adulthood. These earlier ages within one person are presented as assets of experience in dealing with life in old age.

Thus, the women's views of ageing as a process of change embody both external and internal factors. This is important because ageing, as a process, is more than a biological/physical change; it is also a process of change within the individual, a process that is interconnected with her

interaction with relationships and social structures. It is also important to note ageing as involving internal changes because this defies any stereotyped notion of older women's stagnation, of ageing as a time of stalled growth. Change is part of life, the informants reveal, and it continues also in older age. These six respondents are all examples of how personal growth, of learning through experience, is likely to continue throughout life, no matter what physical age a woman may embody.

4.2 Embodied ageing

“The body is in the social world but the social world is in the body.”
(Bourdieu, 2000:152)

The body is the instrument through which we perceive and learn from the social world of cultures and various forms of (interpersonal, structural) relationships. The body is shaped by the social and environmental contexts in which it exists, both on a micro and macro level of life. In short, the thoughts and actions that produce the world we live in, would not exist had it not been for the bodies through which these phenomena are carried out. My interpretation of Bourdieu's statement above is that the body cannot be separated from the social world in which it operates, because it both reflects and, to some degree, is part of the recreation of the same. Cultural values are inscribed²⁴ in the body, in the way we feel about it, and made visible in the way we act and interact through it. The experience of the social world is embodied; perceived and dealt with through the body.

Historically, women's social value has been interlinked with their bodies. (Macdonald, 1995; Hurd, 2000) Women's social roles have been identified with and expressed through bearing children, in satisfying men's sexual needs, as well as in the labour of caring for men's and children's emotional and physical needs. (Brown & Jasper in Hurd, 2000:81) These social roles designated for women have defined their bodies as useful in roles of servitude, and therefore women's gender roles, and identities, have been defined by public and private expectations on their embodied capacities to provide and care for children and the family. Thus, women's embodied identities have historically been interlinked with their/our gendered assignments into roles related to the private sphere of the home (Hurd, 2000). Women may, for example, experience a social pressure to embody the role of caregivers, and give up on their own needs, thus using their bodies in serving significant other's needs. In older age this is seen in the informants' accounts of taking care of parents and partners.

Although individual women may subscribe to societal and social expectations, there is also resistance to perceived or verbalized expectations seen in the informant's personal stories. All six women talk about their increased ability to set limits and say 'no' to other people's demands, and to embrace their own wants and desires to a greater extent.

4.2.1 Well-being in the body

The women in this study display a multitude of ways of relating to their bodies. They reveal perceptions of the body as a source of enjoyment, liking, pleasure and pride, and simultaneously as a source of pain, discontent and irritation. They connect the more negative experiences with the body with illnesses. Yet the informants' views of physical aspects of ageing as a negative drawback can also be detected in societal constructions of ageing as mediated via the media.

Commercialized media present many images focusing on anti-ageing actions that supposedly prevent the body from 'losing' shape - firmness in skin and flesh, giving the message that physical ageing should be prevented, and that the process of ageing is purely negative for the individual. The "fear of ageing is stimulated by the glossy women's magazines and driven by advertisers of the multitude of products claiming age-delaying or even age-reversing properties" (Macdonald, 1995:195). Processes of ageing are denied and kept at bay by presenting a youthful look of the body, especially for women, and promising a future of, for example, less wrinkles if using a particular product. This way, the cultural pattern of rewarding women for 'looking younger' than their actual age, is reproduced and reinforced. (Compare Hurd, 2000, and O'Beirne, 1999)

The tendency among the respondents to view illness as a natural part of ageing is strengthened by images of old age as a state of dependency on medical institutions. (Tornstam, 2005) Although it is well-documented in research that women are statistically more inclined to experience chronic illnesses in later life (Hurd 2000:81), old age cannot in itself be equated with illness or other disabilities – even if it is common to have more ailments in old age than in younger ages. (Giddens, 1994). There is a tendency in society, and the media, to focus on the growing population of elderly as a 'problem', thus focusing on medical (and economic) aspects of ageing among those persons who are institutionalised due to illness. (Jönsson, 2002) This aspect is further reinforced by and reflected in media portrayals of older women as victims of health care deficiencies. (Trossholmen, 2000) Yet, the parallel between the women's accounts and societal tendencies cannot elicit a simple conclusion.

The women experience loss of energy, illness, and ailments as part of their ageing. These aspects are talked about as natural and inevitable, although sometimes frustrating and painful. Even if these aspects are naturalized, illness and loss of energy *is* part of the women's experiences of ageing and can therefore not be separated from individual processes, from how these women perceive ageing on the whole. The strategies to deal with changes in relation to illness and pain, unveiled in the women's accounts, are shown in their efforts to redefine their selves in relation to these changes. (Seen in, for example, Yvonne's effort to build up physical strength through exercise, or Marie's definition of herself as "a survivor"). I suggest that their inclusion of illness and ailments as part of their processes of defining ageing, may be a helpful strategy in dealing with the difficult challenges and changes they face.

In the women's perceptions of their bodies, images appear that contain both continuity and change. There are elements of stability, in, for example, self-acceptance of gray hair, facial features, or in viewing oneself as sexually active. Krekula refers to these stable aspects of self as "central identities" (2004:35). She also points to the multifaceted view older women have of their bodies, revealing the simultaneous existence of acceptance of physical change as part of ageing, and of dislike of certain bodily aspects. Changes in the perception of the body are revealed by the respondents; they say that how they feel about themselves and their bodies change from day to day. Thus, body image, and embodied sense of self, do not appear as constant, but as fluid in relation to internal and external situations and contexts.

Moreover, a shift in values is displayed in relation to the body. The informant's approaches to their embodied changes is to re-evaluate these in constructive ways, mainly focusing on what they value more than physical youthfulness, which is mobility and well-being. This same observation is made by Trossholmen (2000) in her study of twelve senior women. Likewise, Hurd states that "an older woman might value physical function over physical attractiveness" (2000:81), yet she acknowledges that there is little research examining this possibility. I found that the informants' accounts in my study conform to Hurd's presupposition. The women affirm that physical mobility and wellness is something they value more than physical attractiveness. Trossholmen further declares that a positive retirement experience is strongly related to good health, and that ageing in itself is not an obstacle for those who are blessed with good health (2000:187). The opinions of the women in this particular study would agree with Trossholmen's conclusion – good health and general well-being is highly valued by all six.

Health, though, is a concept with many dimensions. As a sociological concept, health signifies an individual's level of functioning, in terms of mental and physical fitness, in relation to a social role in society. (Compare Hugosson, 2003) Antonovski (1991) considers health as a continuum between two polarities: with health and ill health at each end. Depending upon historical, social, and cultural context as well as socio-economic background, but also childhood socialization and genetic makeup, we all appear to move along this linear conception. I would like to re-envision the concept of health, not simply as a linear movement between dichotomies between 'good' or 'bad', but as a multi-dimensional embodied experience that is perceptual, emotional and physical in its reality; and as something that changes in relation to contexts, situations, to internal and external factors as presented above.

I found that the women in this study experience their bodies and their embodied well-being in different ways depending on many different factors. The women's perceptions change from day to day and with different embodied experiences. I also found that the women's perceptions of illness had a profound effect on their everyday lives, yet they had a generally positive outlook on life in spite of one or many experiences of severe illness(es). I found them coping with these physical conditions in impressive manners, showing signs of great inner strength and constructive ways of adjusting to and dealing with challenges, while at the same time enjoying their bodies' abilities to experience various forms of pleasure. One example of this is Sara who emphasized and displayed her sense of humour and positive attitude to life as her way of not just enduring physically painful experiences, but also as a way to enjoy everyday life, to laugh a lot, in spite of chronic pains and decreased mobility.

Even though the six informants in my study all have experienced serious illnesses at some point in later life, their general approach to life is imbued with physical activities, involving social, intellectual and creative aspects. Being active is, according to Trossholmen, essential for having a positive retirement experience (Trossholmen, 2000:186-188). Activity is here not only defined as physical actions but also as mental activities such as reading. The informants in this study emphasize physical, social and creative activities as part of what contributes to well-being and quality of life. The women are active in different ways, both physically and mentally, and hold that these activities contribute to their overall wellbeing. Yvonne, as one example, emphasizes all her physical activities as important aspects of feeling physically strong and therefore good about herself. In addition, I found a sense of gratitude for the level of health and physical mobility/ability

the women embodied at the time of the interviews. Even Sara, the person who faced the greatest challenges in physical mobility, expressed gratitude for those days that she defined as “good”, when she felt less pain and got inspired to be active in one way or the other.

Finally, I would like to underline the women’s sense of humour that emerged as an important strategy to cope with life’s challenges, especially the embodied aspects of dis-ease and serious illnesses. These women exemplified with stories, jokes, as well as in body language and verbal/non-verbal cues during the interview, humoristic approaches to physical changes and challenges. They were able to laugh at difficulties in a contagious and inspiring way that also prevented me from feeling any sort of pity for the situation they described. They presented their accounts of pains and physical challenges in a manner that creatively embodied agency in a situation that could have been victimizing. That is, the interview context could have been a situation of victimization, yet because of their strategies of using humour, I laughed *with* them, and felt *with* them, without pitying.

4.2.2 Weight and embodied ageing

It is difficult to ignore the pressure on women to stay fit and to look young(er) that permeates the public contexts of Western society, especially when faced with numerous media representations of a beauty norm that excludes signs of ageing and misrepresents older women by focusing on thinness, fitness, and youthfulness as desirable attainments. Hurd states that “the contemporary focus on weight control and weight loss relates to the historical trend toward thinness²⁵ as a cultural exemplar of beauty” (2000:83), which is why it is not surprising that women of all ages generally consider themselves too ‘fat’, whether considered medically overweight or not. (See also Brumberg in Macdonald, 1995)

On top of this, Hurd declares that “weight has been found to be one of the most significant body issues concerning women of all ages” (2000:82), but that there is little research on how this actually affects older women. Although a relative weight increase is normative for women as they age, Hurd finds it reasonable to assume that weight increase is an issue for older women, which is also what she finds in her qualitative study²⁶. With this in mind, it is not surprising then that weight loss is a common subject also among the women of this study. Marie, Inez and Yvonne all mention that women of their age talk about weight loss in general. None of the women connect their relatively small weight increase with age as a natural process. Rather it is something they wish to

loose, or felt good losing. Weight is, in their views, an issue to some degree since it is mentioned in negative terms.²⁷

All in all, old age cannot be detached from a life of gendered experiences. Women of any age who live within a “cultural context that equates beauty with youthfulness, slimness and fitness while simultaneously denigrating oldness, fatness and physical decay” (Hurd, 2000:86) may find it difficult *not* to internalize these ageist/sexist values, as reflected in their body images. Yet it is problematic to determine to what degree these values affect older women. Although the respondents reveal ambivalence towards their bodies, and express a wish to lose weight, they also demonstrate a shift in values where health and wellbeing is emphasized over weight and other aspects of appearances. It appears to me that weight loss is not a priority in their lives, nor do they express much focus on trying to ‘look younger’. Even though their ambivalence around weight points towards internalized gendered conceptions of femininity, I cannot with certainty claim that the respondents embody internalized sexist and ageist beauty norms with regards to their body images. And even if internalization of these values to some degree is the cause of their ambivalence towards their bodies, the women also reveal resistance to these gendered norms of beauty and femininity, exemplified by their critical stand towards media representations of beauty, ageing and older women, and by their simultaneous acceptance of the physical aspects of ageing, which complicates the analysis of their body images and sense of selves.

The conclusion that I draw from these seemingly contradictory results, with coexisting and diverse views of the body within one person, is that a woman’s sense of embodied self is complex, influenced by structural forces, relationships as well as individual agency.²⁸ These women’s body images are stable to some degree; yet also change according to contexts and situations.

4.2.3 Sexuality in later life

“The destabilizing effect which older women have on the feminine ideal explains in part the marginalization of older women in this culture and their exclusion from the public arena as well as their continued representation as physically weak, giving rise to the ‘truth’ of an older woman’s body as diseased, particularly those parts of the anatomy which are associated with reproduction.” (O’Beirne, 1999:296)

The women of this study are all assumed by me to be heterosexual to some degree, not because they are, or have been, married to a man at least once, but because they mention only male partners and make no allusions to same-sex sexual preferences or experiences. Most of the women are more or less sexually active, one way or another (in relationships or with themselves). Sexuality does not

necessarily have to involve a partner, as noted by Barbro. It can also be expressed and experienced in other sensuous ways, such as physical intimacy and touch rather than sex. (Trossholmen, 2000) Madeleine is one informant who gives examples of intimacy within friendships that does not involve sexual intercourse, yet are fulfilling. Trossholmen (2000:192) found in her study that this need for physical touch and sensuous experiences in relation to others does not decrease with old age.

Trossholmen further declares that a general perception of ageing involves the disappearance of sexual desire in old age. It is clear that women's sexual desire does not necessarily diminish with age, as found in the accounts by Marie and Barbro. And even if the desire diminishes, the sexual capacity may remain, and vice versa. Women's sexualities are both "complicated, and context dependent" (Loe, 1999:307). Some women may, for example, want to be more active than they are, some prefer forms of intimacy other than sexual depending upon past and current experiences, situations and upon ability and availability, only to mention a few influences.²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir claims, in her account of *Old Age* (1978) that older women's capacity for sexual pleasure does not diminish with age – on the contrary. "Biologically women's sexuality is less affected by age than men's [...] There is nothing to prevent her from going on with her sexual activities until the end of her life" (p.386). Still, de Beauvoir states that "all research shows that women have a less active sexual life than men" (p.386-7) and attributes this to a general stigma regarding older women's sexuality. "A woman of seventy is no longer regarded by anyone as an erotic object" (de Beauvoir, 1978:386). Macdonald adds to this that "women have long been encouraged to view their bodies as intrinsically related to their sexual desirability. Female sexuality, in media and advertising discourse, is normally perceived to end by the time a woman enters her forties" (1995:194).

The respondents point to a social taboo linked to their sexuality. Yvonne, for example, says that she and other women around her do not talk about sex, other than in a joking manner. Yvonne suggests that this is rooted in her generation, a form of cohort effect, of having experienced an upbringing coloured by a general taboo and silence surrounding sexuality in the middle half of the 20th century. The other women also refer to this general silence around sexuality in their youth, even though Inez' mother educated her in a different way, and Madeleine read books on the subject and informed her peers. The point is though that all of the women talk about the existence

of a current “taboo” (Madeleine) to talk about sexual desire with others, whether friends or family, a silence that persists in their everyday lives.

Trossholmen holds that sexuality is much more taboo for older women than for older men (2000:192). As Giddens points out, it is still less socially accepted for an older woman to be sexually active with a younger man than vice versa (1994:259). The taboo around older women’s sexuality is also reflected in cultural representations of older women’s sexuality as harmful. Trossholmen writes that if older women are assumed to have a sexuality, then this may be stereotyped as “dangerous” (2000:11). For example, Eklund in Trossholmen maintains that the “horny old woman” stereotype signifies a woman who denies her own ageing, because “horniness” is associated with youth, and accepting old age means accepting “sexlessness” (2000:11).

While it may seem contradictory then that younger women’s sexuality (or rather, the sexualised and objectified image of women’s sexuality from the perspective of a presumed male viewer) is visually omnipresent in media, whereas older women’s is virtually absent, these images could be considered to serve a function. By *not* acknowledging a woman’s life long capacity to sexual pleasure she is also made culturally impotent; defined by other social expectations and assigning her to a social role of servitude in the form of grandmother hood and/or in-home caretaker of spouse. Thus, I assert that the stereotypes of absent or dangerous sexuality function as inhibitors for older women to express their sexuality. (Compare Macdonald, 1995) It is important to highlight sexuality in old age to illustrate diversity in forms of desire and activity in order to destabilize myths of older women’s sexuality, and allow them (and the future selves of currently younger women) the freedom to explore, express and define sexuality also in old age. Even if some of the women in the study are relieved by the fact that they are no longer are viewed as sexual objects, and yet others choose to not be sexually expressive or active, it should not be assumed that women are not sexual just because they are old³⁰.

The fact that in most western cultures older women are not generally expected to be sexually active (Karlsson & Lekberg, 2000; Loe, 2004), is also reflected in a general absence of positive images of older women’s sexualities in old age in media, such as the film industry. The Tattooed Widow (Molin, 1998), however, is an interesting exception that illustrates my point. The protagonist of the movie (played by Mona Malm) causes outrage in the family when she prioritises her own needs above those of her children (e.g. refuses to baby-sit) and also embraces her sexual desire and acquires several lovers at the same time. Her children explicitly and overtly disapprove

of her non-traditional life style choices. In the movie, the unspoken social rules of grandmotherhood are defined and unveiled, as they are broken.

The silence around, and the stigma attached to, older women's sexuality is given little attention in most contexts, whether private or public. The women in my study note the general absence in media coverage of sexuality in old age, and most of them wish for this silence to be broken, for sex and desire in old age to be talked about. Barbro, for example, feels that she is left to figure it out for herself. This leaves the door open to questions of how older women's experiences, approaches and preferences would plausibly change, if openness on the matter of sex in old age increased in the media, in society at large, and in everyday lives.

4.3 Later life relationships

The women in this study have all developed relatively large social networks of friends of different ages, family, and, in four cases, partners. They emphasise the importance of these networks as sources of support and continued learning as well as contributing to quality of life. One important function of relationships they see in them is being an aid during challenging situations in old age. Yet relationships are also complex and sometimes challenging due to conflicts or expectations. Communication, which involves elements of learning, of curiosity and honesty, is a strategy used by all informants in how they approach relationships; in changes and challenges within these.

The women's accounts of their relationships also point toward a dialectic process at work, in which change occurs in interaction, in sharing of experiences, thoughts, and feelings, with others. Their experiences show that relationships in later life are not static, and that some of the changes found, reflect changes established by the women themselves. Thus older women's inner dynamic, e.g. increased self-confidence and esteem, causes changes within their relationships as well. Finally, these findings are important also for the sake of debunking myths around older women's relationships in later life.

4.3.1. The importance of relationships

The significance of relationships is observed in other research as well³¹. Ruth Harriet Jacobs, for example, claims in "Friendships Among Old Women" (in Rosenthal, 1990:28) that "[a]fter their children have grown and their husbands experience the earlier mortality of men, old women are often sustained by friendships developed over the years and by new ones made in later life." A supportive social network has also been found to be one of the foundations for experiencing old

age in a positive way. (Trossholmen, 2000) In this regard, friendships may be as important as, and sometimes more than, family relationships or partnerships. For these six women, both family and friends contribute to their experience of quality of life.

Other relationships can also contribute to new insights, and a heightened sense of quality of life. Trossholmen (2000) indicates that mental activity is important for the informants' wellbeing³². Amongst my informants Marie, for example, stresses the value of experiencing younger generations' tendency to question taken for granted beliefs, and feel that this keeps her mind open and youthful, while Madeleine highlights the value of mutual understanding and sharing in the process of personal growth. In my understanding, engagement in social relationships involves, among other things, mental activity and thereby, as noted in the accounts of Marie and Madeleine, contributes to continued expansion of the mind, of learning and growth for the individuals. Thus relationships may contribute to quality of life through a heightened awareness generated via communication or closeness.

4.3.2. Facing challenges in relationships

Some of the challenges in relationships that women face in later life, are interconnected with social expectations on them as women, e.g. mothers, grandmothers, partners, etc. Women have, throughout history in most cultures, been assigned the roles of caregivers and nurturers. (de Beauvoir, 1949; Trossholmen, 2000) Although the informants speak mostly in positive terms about their various relationships, those may sometimes be demanding. The role of caregiver in later life is noted by three of the women, (Madeleine, Inez, Barbro), yet they have all experienced the role of care giving earlier, for example as mothers. The women reveal both acceptance and resistance to these gendered norms of femininity, but have also to some degree accepted this role.

During the care giving period of their lives the women dedicated energy and support in various ways, in two cases several years, caring for their loved ones. Examples are seen in their accounts of taking care of parents (Madeleine, Inez, Marie) or spouse (Barbro) presented above. They describe these care giving times as very demanding, yet rewarding in that they felt they did the 'right thing' and also that the caring brought them closer to the care receiver in some ways. When the cared for person passed away, a shift occurred in their lives. Although they express grief, they also talk about a sense of relief with the fact that their caregiver role, and related responsibilities, is over. Thus the discontinuity of responsibilities generates a new sense of freedom; of time to care for oneself again.

There are, however, also other signs of, and forms of, challenges in relationships. Marie finds her mother to be demanding, in that she is 'ruling' her life with unspoken and verbally expressed expectations. Marie is also concerned over her son's choice to take complete distance from her, which she reflects on daily, indicating hope for resolution in the future, yet voicing her frustration with and sadness over the current situation. Marie is not the only one who finds some relationships difficult. Barbro expresses concern over communication difficulties with one of her children, and conveys grief over this unresolved issue in her life. Yvonne indicates some relationship challenges when saying that she is in a working progress with her husband concerning more "openness" in their relationship. Obviously, as these examples show, there are many dimensions to these women's different relationships, and all are not friction free, harmonious or simply rewarding.

These six women are indeed facing many challenges, for example in the form of losing spouses, relatives or friends, or in experiencing illnesses. Therefore it could be assumed that continuity, in the form of trustworthy stable relationships and a large social support network, would ease the transitions or changes. Hence continuity in relationships could be considered an important factor of wellbeing for the women. (Lowenthal & Haven in Tornstam 2005:197) Continuity in terms of relationships can be seen in long-term friendships, partnerships, and in the frequent contact with family members. This continuity though, in my understanding of the women's accounts, could also be attributed to an interpersonal commitment to working through issues within relationships by communicating about feelings and solving problems. This is seen in, for example, Sara's description of her relationship to her daughter, or in Yvonne's commitment to communicate, working towards more "openness" within her marriage. Hence, I understand continuity, and the creation of intimacy or closeness within relationships, not as automatic, but as a result of communicative efforts on the part of the interacting individuals.

Just as we all have to learn a language as infants, we have to learn to communicate within relationships. Women, who are generally socialized to become good communicators (Trossholmen, 2000; Tornstam, 2005), thus provide the interactive social web of emotional, physical and verbal support within partnerships and families. The women in this study have decades of lived experiences, of relationships, of interaction and communication, and have thus developed their abilities along the way. They are still communicating, and adding to their skills and knowledge in their interactions with others. These women, like many others, are trained through life long experiences of being nurturers in their gendered roles of girls, women, sisters,

daughters, mothers, and reveal in their accounts a sense of responsibility in maintaining their networks. Considering the fact that women, due to gendered training, are generally more accomplished at, and socially expected to, maintaining relationship networks than is the other sex/gender (Tornstam in Tornstam 2005:139) it is not surprising that the strategy of talking, of a verbal communication based on honesty and curiosity, is an important strategy of dealing with relationships – with the changes and challenges that occur also in later life.

4.3.3. Changes in relationships and roles

Changes in relationships in later life can be attributed to many different factors, such as experiences of death and dying (e.g. parents, partners, friends). There are, however, other changes in relationships in old age, less dramatic, although still significant, than the loss of someone through death. One of these talked about by all of the women are changes in expectations, whether perceived internally or expressed by others, in the women's own perceptions. In connection to these changes, the informants describe an increased ability to set limits to expectations and demands of others and a resistance to the social pressure of doing things the way others may want them to. Yvonne and Inez, for example, who express a lot of joy in being with their grandchild(ren), also declare that they have no troubles saying no to their children when asked to baby-sit, if this is not convenient for them. The six women also talk about a decrease in energy to do certain things compared to when they were younger and explain their need to set limits as a result of physical limitations. Hence, the ability to cope with ageing and physical changes such as having less energy, being physically less capable of doing certain things, e.g. playing with grandchildren, can be viewed in relation to their ability to set limits, and to communicate about their own needs.

Another change in old age is the shift from working life to life without paid work. Retirement, as a transition from a life of paid work to a life outside of this public sphere of productivity, has in some research been shown to affect women in a different way than men. In North America, where women are homemakers to a larger extent than women are in Sweden, women's identities are considered less tied to their work and more to their roles as mothers and wives. (See Keating & Cole, 1980; McDonald & Wanner, 1990) Therefore, it is assumed that women experience retirement as less negative, in the sense that they do not 'lose' their identities as careerists or workers as do men. In addition, because women generally continue their unpaid household work also after the onset of retirement³³, although sometimes sharing this work with their spouses to an

increased degree, this creates continuity in everyday lives, and identity, for women. Those women who have identified themselves with their working status, or made a career, are more likely to find the loss of this work role through retirement more challenging than those who have identified their roles more towards family relations. (Trossholmen, 2000)

The six informants of my study have worked most of their lives, with interruptions around childbirths, and half of them have had a career in terms of education and work within specific fields. They all, however, highly value the social network that they have obtained throughout the course of life, including at work, and continue to maintain these relationships in later life as well. Thorsen in Trossholmen (2000:115-6) concludes that women have a greater social capital, an investment in friends and social networks that makes them better equipped to deal with old age after retirement. Trossholmen (2000) also suggests that women, more than men, tend to focus on self-realisation in old age. I draw the same conclusion from my informants' accounts. In the six women's stories I did not get any impression of, or accounts of, retirement as a negative experience, rather the contrary, in that they are making retirement a pleasant experience by cultivating interests and relationships. Three of the women even retired earlier than the expected age of 65. Marie however, mentions her financial situation as a limitation, being the only negative aspect of her retirement, and that she would travel a lot more if she had the means for it.

Role changes are common for many older women. Tornstam (2005) claims that the norms for different roles according to age become more and more flexible and liberal with increased age. Older people are considered "freer" to live their lives in "less conventional ways" (Tornstam, 2005:142). This may be true to some degree, but I hold that if the increase of 'freedom', or 'free' time, occurs, it is still a gendered experience, and that it is different for women than for men. Just by the fact, as noted above, that women in heterosexual partnerships continue to do more household work after retirement limits their freedom to spend the time and energy on other things. Often women of the age 65 and older have grandchildren or great grandchildren and, as grandmothers, they are usually expected to provide care for younger generations. These expectations may be explicit or implicit, they may be welcomed by the older women and not considered a negative social pressure, but they may also be perceived as an imposed obligation causing feelings of guilt when refusing the baby-sitter role.

How the women perceive their roles as grandmothers, and how they deal with related expectations or obligations varies from person to person, from one context or situation to the next.

Resistance, however, in combination with increased self-confidence, emerge as a common strategy among these women.

4.3.4 Change in resistance

Trossholmen affirms that throughout life, women's time has been put in relation to other's time and other's possession of theirs (2000:172). The elderly women in Trossholmen's study were found to have lived lives directed by their relations to others, in roles of mothers, wives, workers, etc., and that it was not until old age that these seniors claimed their own rights and stood up for own needs (2000:172). The same observation applies to the six interviewees in this study. Although, as I have presented above, it is essential for them to meet other people and engage in social activities with family and friends, they too hold that social engagement with others must take place on their terms. (Compare Trossholmen, 2000:187)

Whereas some use decreased energy levels as a reason for this, increased self-esteem, here defined as an inner sense of value as a person, is also linked to setting limits towards others' demands. Yvonne and Madeleine make an explicit connection between the two: Yvonne declares that as you age you also know yourself better; what you want and do not want, and are less afraid of standing up for your values because you also care less what others think. The roots or causes of increased self-esteem are complex, but some clues are found in the women's stories. Inez, for example attributes most of her self-confidence (here defined as a belief in one's abilities to achieve and perform), to her "safe" and nurturing childhood, whereas Barbro and Yvonne accredit some of their increased self-esteem to education in adulthood. Barbro and Yvonne claim that their scholastic achievements, especially as adults later in life, have given them a sense of accomplishment and pride in their ability to learn. They say that this made them feel good about themselves, and proved that they were smarter than they first had thought, a feeling which has made them increasingly trusting of their own value and ability to cope as they age. Self-confidence is, according to three of the women in the study, (Barbro, Madeleine, Yvonne), also connected to ageing and viewed as part of the process of maturing as person.

The changes that occur in relationships are talked about in connection to the informants' individual changes, which Yvonne, for example, describes as a result of her own choices and actions. That is, when she decides to set a limit to others' demands, she expects others to accept the new terms for the interaction or the relationship. Therefore, the changes that occur in relationships could be reflected by the changes that occur within the individual, as well as their actions. In this

sense then, I believe that increased self-confidence might be linked to a greater ability to set limits to other people's expectations and family demands. Thus, creating a positive spiral of increased ability to say no to things the women don't want while saying yes to their own desires, while feeling less guilty – feeling entitled and worthy of their own 'free' time. As Yvonne puts it, "I have worked my whole life, I deserve to do what I want now." Or, as Madeleine claims, "to say 'no' to others is also to say 'yes' to oneself".

Moreover, resistance to normative expectations can be powerful signifiers of an underlying social structure of hidden norms and gendered expectations outlined for womanhood in old age.³⁴ Older women's lives may be limited by socially preconceived ideas of what is appropriate for their gendered roles of grandmothers, wives/partners, widows, etc. – roles linked to expectations. Individuals, however, may not perceive expectations as limitations, especially if or when they feel they can express their needs and wants. Older women may also feel more confident and therefore resist the social pressures they perceive. Inez' resistance to internalized values of keeping a tidy home, is one example of this. As Macdonald (2001) points out in "Look me in the Eye", an old woman may very well rebel against such pressures, thereby liberating herself and making space for a new way of living and interacting with others.

4.3.5 Challenging stereotypes

These women's lived experiences of relationships contest myths of older women as being "narrow-minded" (Aiken, 1995:231), "lonely" (Rosenthal, 1990:6), or isolated through generational segregation (Tornstam, 2005). Their experiences furthermore stand in stark contrast to images of elderly's isolation often portrayed in media. (Compare Åkerman in Tornstam, 2005:83) Their lives do not display the generational segregation that is sometimes real, but more often assumed, among elderly women. They engage with others of various age groups, in different contexts of family, friends and community involvements. These informants can thus be considered to be relatively socially active, as opposed to isolated from other people or from younger generations. Madeleine, the only one who considers herself to be geographically isolated in the countryside with few public transportation options, still maintains a rich network of friends over the phone, via letters, and she plans to move to a location that suits her social needs more.

The assumption that elderly are abandoned by other generations and therefore lonely can be traced to the societal shift in family constellations from agricultural extended families' living arrangements, to nuclear families and new forms of living such as single households, that are

assumed to segregate other generations of family members. (Compare Tornstam, 2005) People also move and migrate to a higher degree today compared to a hundred years ago, which leads to a spreading of family members across larger geographical distances. (Tornstam, 2005) The social integration of elderly in society is often assumed to be worse than it in actuality is (Tornstam, 2005), and this assumption of generational segregation has been contested by empirical research, which show that elderly today are generally well integrated in society and have good relationships with their children (Tornstam, 2005:83).

Furthermore, the informants point to how their relationships provide opportunities for continued learning – as demonstrated by their emphasis on mutual communication, honesty, curiosity, and openness to new thoughts and ideas. As Jacobs in Rosenthal states, friendships “enrich and develop us” also in old age (1990:28). The informants’ accounts reveal that they are all in processes of learning in the sense of personal growth, in relation to significant others, whether friends, family members, or partners. The aspect of continued growth and learning is important to display because this debunks any myth of mental/emotional stagnation and rigidity due to old age per se, as seen in some stereotypes of older women found in, among other contexts, the mass media.

4.4 Ageing in relation to media

“Ageing in a youth-oriented society such as ours means, in part, departing from our socially constructed rigid standards of physical attractiveness. Departing from our beauty is not a “fade to ugly” process, but rather a process of growing invisible, becoming one of the nondescript masses, blending into the background, becoming a nonperson according to the standards by which we measure and evaluate beauty.” (Nelson & Robinson, 1999:463)

The image of self and body is complex in its workings and interconnected with larger structural influences, such as gender relations and youth centred cultural values. These values are reflected and (re-)produced within popular media. And, although I maintain that there is no media conspiracy against women, the media is still male dominated, which affects the media output at large. (Itzin, 1986; Lindell, 2004; Ekman 1998) Media such as television, newspapers and magazines have a central role in mediating illustrations of societal norms of gendered beauty (Itzin, 1986; Lindell, 2004) and of ageing and old age (Tornstam, 2005). These norms serve many functions, mostly commercialised such, e.g. ‘buy this product and you will be happier’ through soft pornography in which women are used as symbols for a sexualised consumption. (Hirdman, 2004) Inherent in these images is the intersection of sexism and ageism. (Itzin, 1986) In other

words, “[f]or women, ageing is constructed as a process to be feared and avoided as long as possible” (Macdonald, 1995:194).

Normative feminine beauty as an ideal can rarely be achieved – even those women presented in advertisement who portray the ideal, have their bodies airbrushed through computers to look more ‘perfect’. The ideal for women is embedded in youth, which for older women, by definition then becomes an impossibility to strive for. (Nelson & Robinson, 1999) As noted by Madeleine, the feminine beauty ideal becomes a subconscious norm by which women measure and value themselves – lest we are consciously aware and critical of the same. The inability to live up to an ideal may generate a sense of inadequacy, a feeling of not being beautiful, good or valuable enough as one is. (Steinem, 1993) Yet these are norms created and reproduced by people within the culture, not only the people of this culture within the media. The various media do not exist outside of the social world, but within it, and although many media are powerful in terms of social influence, the media cannot be held solely responsible for the sexist/ageist imagery and discourses that prevail. Furthermore, women are, as noted in the quote below and as revealed by the informants’ accounts, not “puppets” (Smith, 1990:204) of normative gender ideals, but active agents within these structures of gendered discourse.

“When the codes and images are viewed as women use, play with, break with, and oppose them, the discourse of femininity appears not as a managed construct of the fashion industry manipulating people as puppets, but as ongoing, unfolding, historically evolving, social organization in which women and sometimes men are actively at work.” (Smith, 1990:204)

The women in this study are generally critical towards the many commercialised and sexualised images of feminine beauty ideals for women. A critical stand, a filter of resistance in mind, attitude and actions, appears to be one of the ways women deal with societal messages of sexist/ageist discourses as mediated via media. There is also some indication that other ideals of femininity may be more important to the women than the current norms are, seen in the example of Barbro who value the fashions styles of the 50’s. Hurd also found that the older women in her study “continue to hold beauty ideals that were the standard when they were younger [which Hurd means] reflect their socialization and earlier experiences ” (2000:91).

In addition, advertisement and television commercials are more widespread and frequent in society today than 40 or 60 years ago³⁵. Older women may also be less affected by media images of normative femininity³⁶, because they have lived through the shift from a society focused on

production towards an information society, and have thus experienced periods of less media images.

The women also verbally downplay the power of the media in their lives. They are selective in their choices of what to read, view, and listen to, and when they do engage with media they do so with a critical mind. These approaches are displayed in the choice to distance themselves from ageist and sexist media messages, and critically examine the content as “not real”, “disgusting”, “bullshit” or “totally wacko”, to mention a few of the informants’ reactions. These are words mostly related to anti-wrinkle commercials, but also to plastic surgery for the sake of looking younger, and to the commercialized ‘world’ of beauty models. Yvonne, as another example, says that these aspects of the media gives her “nothing”, and she thereby distances herself from it all.

Another important strategy, other than resistance through critical thinking, is displayed in the informants’ choices to value other aspects of life, seen in their active and social lifestyles in which they value things that contribute to quality of life, such as wellbeing and relationships. All the women emphasize physical and mental health and mobility as more important than appearances or fashion. The women are, in my understanding, constructive in their strategies of dealing with reality as they perceive it, and choose to perceive it in a way that is beneficial to them, a way that allows them to be proud of who they are and to enjoy their lives by ignoring pressures to conform to feminine beauty ideals. Ignoring, or using irony, and even laughing at normative feminine beauty, which these women do, are ways to resist external pressure to perform and conform. This way, these women demand to be liked the way that they are, challenging the current beauty norms by claiming the right to be loved and appreciated despite non-conformity to the ideal. As Sara says, “they have to like me as I am!”

Resistance to cultural norms of youthfulness is further illustrated by the women in their critical stand towards misrepresentation of older women (e.g. in soap operas), and in their views of current beauty ideals as constructed illusions, i.e. “unreal” (Inez), and therefore something, which they cannot relate to lived experiences. The issue of misrepresentation is not only noted by Marie, in terms of old women as viciously calculating soap opera personalities, but also by the other women. Barbro reacts to a tendency to ridicule elderly, whereas Yvonne perceives an image of elderly as being very segregated, which is not her lived experience. Absence or silence of older women’s lived experiences within the mass media is another form of mis- (or non-) representation critically noted by the women. Thus there is a tension between media representation and lived realities, a

tension marked by distortion, misrepresentation, absence – and critical resistance to these phenomena grounded in women’s everyday experiences.

To shift the value of external conformity to normative beauty towards other values, whether external or internal (e.g. exercise, artistic creativity, or intellectual engagement – an embodied activity is both internal and external to some degree), is an act of resistance – an act of agency. Resistance to the permeating beauty/youth discourse has been revealed through the women’s approaches of critical thinking, selectivity in choice of what to view/read/listen to, and in their laughing at, expressing anger towards, or ignoring disempowering aspects of ageist/sexist discourses in popular media. Even though it is hard to estimate to what level or degree these six women are affected by media imagery, and even if there are indications of negative influences, it is clear that these women are not ‘puppets’ of the beauty industry’s production of femininity as mediated via (and (re-) produced by) the media.

4.5 Coping strategies and agency as a factor in identity formation

“[Wisdom is] not what comes from reading great books. When it comes to understanding life, experiential learning is the only worthwhile kind; everything else is a hearsay.” (Joan Erikson)³⁷

The women in this study display many different strategies in dealing with the changes and challenges of ageing in relation to their bodies, significant others, and the media representations of ageing and older women. Their strategies are developed over years of lived experiences within structures of societal influences³⁸. Although the women’s lives are interlinked with changes in time, history, geographic and demographic locations, they are not simply entities conditioned by childhood experiences, socialized by external cultural forces, or ‘dupes’ of mass media influences. Rather they are active agents within larger interwoven social structures on both macro and micro levels of existence. That is, although they live within contexts of cultural norms, expectations on older women, and are affected by those to various degrees, they are active and aware agents within their personal contexts, making choices of constructing and deconstructing frameworks of how to live their lives as it suits them. They display awareness of and resistance to ageist/sexist phenomena in society, reflected in their critical approach to media images, and in their strategies of dealing with imposed social and societal expectations on them as older women.

The women in this study could, just as the twelve women in Trossholmen’s research (2000), be seen as unconventional in their approach to ageing and life at large, if put in relation to the historical context that they have been and are living in. I maintain that the informants embody not

only adaptation to societal changes and social expectations, but also reveal various forms of resistance to structural changes, reflected in their daily life contexts. This can be seen in, for example, Sara's active efforts to change the situation of the local shut down of a senior day centers, or in Yvonne's declaration that she expects her children to respect her 'no-s', thus resisting expectations on social roles (e.g. as grandmothers). I hold that these women reveal their own power to make choices and hence unveil individual agency.

Trossholmen (2000:194) concludes in her qualitative study that older women develop different coping and adjustment strategies throughout their lives. Trossholmen indicates that the twelve informants construct their lived realities on the basis of the opportunities and limitations that their societal and individual contexts provide, and have provided in the past. It is my understanding that the women in my study make choices within frameworks of opportunities and limitations of their lived realities, and that agency is an element of identity formation also in old age. Ageing involves, for these women, as well as Trossholmen's informants, increased self-esteem and self-realization, aspects that enable agency to be acted out in everyday relationships and contexts.

In the scarce research on identity formation in old age, little attention is paid to agency as an active individual force within larger contexts of relationships and societal influences. The fact that identity development continues in later life has "sometimes not even been considered applicable to older women" (Trossholmen, 2000:171). Perhaps the general stereotypical assumption in Swedish society that old age signifies "stagnation" (Trossholmen, 2000:173) is reflected in this research trend, since so little interest is paid to identity formation in later life. The tendency to "homogenize" the elderly, as seen within mass media and various opinion polls (Trossholmen, 2000:173), possibly also contributes to a dis-interest in the subject of identity formation in old age.

Yet, as Trossholmen (2000) indicates, diversity among older women is so rich due to the fact that lived experiences are so different between individuals. Lived experiences, however, must be situated in contexts of time and history as well as geographic and social location, in order to grasp the complexity of differences in actions, views, and voices, within and between individuals. The fact that great diversity resides among and within older women, should, I claim, evoke a great interest in the subject of older women's views and voices, not only for the sake of exploring diversity and complexity in identity from lifelong lived experiences, but also because we are all, if we live long enough, going to experience ageing in old age. Older women, if listened to, can provide valuable insights into strategies of dealing with embodied situations, relationships and

popular media messages about ageing. Older women can lead us to explore and expand upon the multi-dimensional complexity of identity formation, and a richness of lived experiences that contribute to the understanding of processes of growing old in age.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I have given voice to six women's views, perceptions and feelings of their bodies, relationships and popular media. This was partly done in an effort to counter the widespread societal/cultural silence and absence of older women's lived experiences – a current issue reflected also in academic research and in media representations of ageing and elderly women. I suggest that these women's stories and strategies are important insights into understanding ageing in old age as a process of change and that their accounts are valid views of the embodied wisdom that come from lived experiences.

The participants of this study reveal different strategies of dealing with life and challenges as they age, and they exhibit great diversity in individual approaches. But even though the informants' responses to various aspects of ageing are individually different, I detected themes in terms of coping strategies, such as shifting values from appearances towards wellbeing; ways of communicating within relationships that involve continued learning and growth; and forms of resistance to ageist/sexist occurrences in mass media, as every day life approaches. These strategies are not confined to one particular area of their lives, but rather overlap into many different contexts and situations.

I have found that the informants' approaches to their bodies reveal a shift in values that focuses more on health and wellbeing than appearances, and emphasising activities that are creative, social and physical as contributing to quality of life. Humour is exposed in relation to bodily aspects such as physical changes and challenges, as well as to sexuality, revealed mostly in jokes and in the interaction during the interviews with the women. The strategies of shifting their values and using their sense of humour enable the informants to face challenges of physical changes in their bodies, especially illness and pain, and to laugh and enjoy life in the midst of difficulties. The women also, however, display several different coping strategies in relation to their bodies, such as redefining self as more 'confident' in old age, and connect this to their increased ability to set limits to other people's expectations. Setting limits is also a form of resistance to expectations and to social norms of womanhood in old age.

It is clear that relationships are valuable to the women and have beneficial impacts on their lives. The informants maintain that many of their relationships, whether friends, family, or partners, function as support networks, contribute to quality of life, and are sources of continued learning and personal growth. Resistance to explicit or implicit expectations within these relationships is one way of dealing with demands, while facing decreased physical abilities, and a source of change within relationships towards greater freedom to do what the women want for themselves. Communicating their needs and wants, such as setting limits, is a strategy applied to relationships that creates positive change for the women as they age, allows them to do more of what they want for themselves.

In their responses to media representation of ageing and old age, they all disclose critical views of current youth and beauty norms, and of misrepresentation or absence of older women within popular mass media. Resistance is revealed in their critical thinking and selective approach to the media outlet. A critical stand towards ageist/sexist images is revealed by, for example, their criticisms of anti-wrinkle commercials.

Moreover, the women of this study embody a definition of ageing that involves continued learning through life, openness to personal growth, and curiosity. Even though they are influenced by larger structures, and by their relationships to significant others, they have, through lived experiences, developed ways of dealing with embodied challenges, relationships, and media misrepresentations of women. By using many different strategies in everyday life, they are active agents within larger structures, who thereby create a greater sense of autonomy in their lives.

On the whole, when set within a larger context of societal influences, older women's experiences and perceptions of their bodies and relationships cannot be separated from their cultural and historical context. Nor can they be isolated from gender relations – from a lifetime of experiences as girls, wives, mothers, and the accompanying expectations on them as women. The structural influences are reflected in expectations on women within relationships in the roles of being, for example, nurturers, household workers, as well as in media discourses of femininity that dictate youthfulness and thinness.

One example of these influences is detected in the women's body images in which weight, at least to some degree, is an issue. The women state that even though they like their bodies, they also express ambivalence towards their body weight. This could be considered a result of the influence of cultural discourses of femininity, as mediated via media images. Yet, the influences of popular

mass media per se are questionable since none of the women put much emphasis on this part of their lives. The women's values lay elsewhere, in such aspects of life as their wellbeing, and in relationships to significant others. Furthermore, they are very selective in what they watch on TV and read in magazines, and criticize the discourses of femininity as well as the commercial focus on anti-ageing.

Another example of structural influences is seen in the intersection of sexism/ageism, reflected in the taboo and silence around older women's sexuality. This is a silence, which the informants experience in their relationships as well. The women's resistance to expectations within relationships signify the existence of larger underlying forces, such as gender relations, in their everyday lives. Furthermore, their resistance to expectations, their critical stands towards the media, and other forms of coping strategies, unveil their own inner power of choice and action within these structures, their agency. Although silenced and misrepresented in the public contexts of media and academia, they resist ageist/sexist influences in their everyday lives.

Finally, rather than simply coping, in the psychological sense of the term, they are actively and consciously involved with their own ageing as embodied processes, in their social relationships, and in their reactions to media portrayals of ageing and elderly women. Their strategies unveil agency in individual approaches to everyday life situations, which are set within the larger structural and contextual influences of, for example, gender relations. In their individual approaches of defining and redefining themselves in relation to experiences, relationships and cultural/historical contexts, they reveal both continuity and change in ongoing interactive internal and external processes of selfhood and personal growth that does not cease with old age.

NOTES

- ¹ Quote taken from “Playing Chess with the Heart. Beatrice Wood at 100,” by Wood & Wallace (1994). This wisdom filled book by a woman who has lived for a hundred years served as a source of inspiration for this research. The Front page print is made by Anna Hedlund, inspired by the quote ”Ageing is a process [...] that resembles a mosaic rather than a continuum” (Hess in Rosenthal, 1990:xii).
- ² This paper is a shorter adaptation from the original 104 page version to 40 pages for a master’s thesis at Lund university. The longer version contains the women’s actual stories and voices in a findings section, a larger feminist methodology section, along with extensive self-reflexivity sections, as well as suggestions for future research.
- ³ A similar observation is made by Trossholmen (2000) in her study in that her participants felt positive about sharing of their lives and thoughts, and of being listened to.
- ⁴ This age difference should be noted as important. Elderly people are often ‘lumped together’ as one homogenized age group (Trossholmen, 2000) in spite of significant generational differences. The age differences between a 65 year old and an 85-year-old could be compared to the differences of people aged 25-45. Hence, to homogenize all older people as one group without any consideration for cohort effects would be a mistake.
- ⁵ There are some indications that status, social power within the hierarchy of cultural values, means less to the individual in old age. See Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence (2005:280-305).
- ⁶ These norms can be seen in, to use one example, ‘comedic’ shows that stereotype older women with beige trench coat holding a handbag tightly in her hand. See description of the Swedish lady, “den svenska tanten” (p.10-11) and other stereotypes in Trossholmen (2000).
- ⁷ For further discussion on agency, see Giddens (1991).
- ⁸ Within gerontology, the focus is mostly on illness and needs (Trossholmen 2000:14). Krekula further explicates the impact of scientific disciplines in generating a certain definition of ageing by focusing on the degenerative effects of ageing. The focus on ageing as a loss of abilities (Närvänen in Krekula 2005), does not, I believe, contribute to a view of later life as a time of active involvement – to individual agency – nor does it generate a view of older adults as individuals who act and think in accordance with ideas and values from a lifetime of experiences that may, or may not, involve resistance to age and gender specific norms. Furthermore, within feminist research, older women are only recently an area of growing interest. For further discussion see, Krekula, 2003: ”En åldersblind feminism? – om osynliggörandet av äldre kvinnor i feministisk forskning”.
- ⁹ Western societies are immersed in an ideological structure of male domination, in which the ‘white’, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied male is the norm that also defines the subordinated ‘other’. (Connell; 1995, 2000) This is also referred to as ‘patriarchy’, the rule of the father, within feminist discourse. I prefer the term ‘gender relations’, which allows for power relations to be viewed as multidimensional, rather than as a simple form of top-down domination. See Dorothy Smith, “Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring the relations of ruling” (1990) for in-depth discussion of power within gender relations. There are different forms of power, and both genders express power, however in different ways in different contexts and situations. “Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault, 1980:98) Male domination refers to the prevailing inequities based on sex, to the fact that males, and what is defined as ‘masculine’, are generally granted more power in most spheres of society, and that females and thus what is defined as ‘feminine’ is subjugated to a lesser value and position. See quantitative examples of this social fact in SCB, ”På tal om kvinnor och män, 2004”, and ”Slagen Dam: Mäns våld mot kvinnor I jämställda Sverige – en omfångsundersökning” by Lundgren et al. (2001).
I also distinguish between ‘sex’, which refers to physiological and biological differences between females and males, and gender, which refers to the social construction of masculinity and femininity. Hence a ‘woman’ or ‘man’ can embody sex and gender in various forms. For further discussion of the complexity of sex and gender, see Fausto-Sterling’s “Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality” (2000); and Bem’s “Dismantling Gender Polarization and Compulsory Heterosexuality: Should We Turn the Volume Down or Up?” (1995).
- ¹⁰ This thought system dates back, at least as far as to Aristotle (384 BCE –322 BCE) according to Val Plumwood (1994:207-220). See also the feminist analysis of gender dualisms, “genusdualism”, in Gemzöe (2005:81-89).
- ¹¹ My translation from the Swedish version: ”Diskriminering på grund av ålder (”ageism”) är en ideologi på samma sätt som sexism och rasism. Det finns lika många falska stereotypa uppfattningar om äldre människor som det finns fördomar om andra grupper” (Giddens, 1994:259).
- ¹² ‘Western’ here in the meaning of industrialised, or northern, or so called over-developed, information and consumption societies.
- ¹³ Both Jönsson 2002) and Tornstam (2005) discuss how the growing population of elderly in Sweden is being defined as the elderly bomb, ‘äldrebomben’, and Tornstam holds media partly responsible for this.
- ¹⁴ Brown and Jasper in Hurd assert that because “the way women’s bodies look bears greatly on how other people relate to them and is directly connected with women’s economic value in society, women learn that looking good is a form of currency in

- the world” (Hurd, 2000:81) Hurd means that the social (de-) evaluation of women’s bodies affect women’s sense of selves, and identities, especially when ageing makes it increasingly harder to conform to the ideal form of femininity.
- ¹⁵ This is a form of ‘double jeopardy’, a term first coined in relation to being both old and black, a double stigma, and therefore facing more difficulties imposed by a prejudiced society. (Dowd & Bengtson in Tornstam, 2005:97) Here, however, the double jeopardy or standard, refers to the notion that women not only have to face ageism as they age, but simultaneously also the effects of sexism. Sontag (1972) maintains that old women become sexually disqualified, and that men, within a patriarchal (male dominated) society, are not judged by their sexual attractiveness in the same way.
- ¹⁶ This is my own observation from watching examples from soap opera over the past twenty years, starting with Falcon Crest (for example, the older woman character ‘Angela Channing’). Marie, one of the women in this study, has made the same observation, which will be revealed below in the findings section.
- ¹⁷ In his classical work on suicide, Émile Durkheim (1952) argued that women, because of their lesser involvement in the public sphere, were less prone to commit suicide. His rather condescending attitude seen in the above quote, is a reflection, and only one out of many examples, of how older women’s perspectives have been ignored, considered unimportant, and spurred little interest throughout the history of sociological theory development. See also Bradley (2003) for an example of the marginalization of women’s experiences in class theory; and Krekula (2003) on the invisibility of older women in feminist and gender studies.
- ¹⁸ Within the field of social gerontology, Lars Tornstam, is a Swedish foreground figure. His standard work, “The Social Gerontology of Ageing” (2005), of 335 pages does not, however, contain any feminist or gender analysis, with an exception on page 204-205 where he recognizes the existence of a “gender perspective”. The ‘gender perspective’ is, however, not applied to the research results he presents throughout the book. Although Tornstam presents some gendered research results, such as the difference in living standards between female and male seniors, he does not explicate this discordance any further. Tornstam’s publication is only one out of many on how the gendered experience of ageing from the perspective of women, is a neglected area of research. The general absence of interest for older women’s lived experiences within the, to this day, male dominated academia is, again, reflecting and reinforcing the ageist/ sexist attitude towards older women’s lived experiences.
- ¹⁹ In “Åldersfrågan i diskussionen om intersektionalitet” (2005), Krekula refers to several explanations to this effect, one being that feminists are not unaffected by societal influences such as ageist stereotypes of older women and of ageing (2005:3-4) where she problematizes the sexist/ageist intersectionality. Siegel (1990) reflects on the isolating effect of ageist stereotyping on women over sixty and identifies older women’s need to be heard. Siegel who is a therapist reports from her own support group for women over sixty, and states that “silences and invisibilities” in the field of women’s studies “also cause our own ageing to be problematic and isolated” (p.82) and express her own experiences of ageist exclusions and avoidances.
- ²⁰ See great examples like “Look Me in the Eye: Old Women Ageing and Ageism” by Barbara Macdonald with Cynthia Rich (1991), or the edited work by Rosenthal on “Women, Aging and Ageism” (1990).
- ²¹ Many studies that are conducted also focus on ageing as a societal health problem, a matter of economic sustainability (Jönsson, 2002). See the ageing bomb, “aldrebomben” (Tornstam, 2005:71), or the elderly chock, “aldrechocken” (Jönsson, 2002:19). The question raised in media is whether the social economy/ political system is willing to fund the future care for the growing population of elderly people as longevity among individuals increases. Thus there is a tendency to consider older people a liability for the welfare system that younger generations have to pay for. (Tornstam, 2005; Jönsson, 2002)
- ²² Itzin refers to the UK, but her observation is applicable to other Western societies such as Sweden.
- ²³ Social learning theory postulate gender to develop according to rewards for gender appropriate behaviour (and subsequent punishments for gender-inappropriate behaviour). According to this theory modelling is important (i.e. the child observing and imitating gendered behaviours of others.) According to cognitive theory, gender identity is developed in stages following the child’s growing awareness and conceptualization of self, basically a form of self-socialization process towards “gender constancy” (Nelson & Robinson, 1999:71). Social psychological theories on gender involve elements of symbolic interactionism, rooted in the classical works by Max Weber, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. According to social psychological theories, gender grows through the process of role taking and interaction with significant others, and generalized (abstract) others. For more gender socialisation theories, see for example Nelson & Robinson (1999). These theories pertain to childhood and youth, and cannot be assumed to automatically apply to identity formation in old age. See Krekula (2004) for further criticisms of social psychological and sociological theories on identity formation.
- ²⁴ I, to use one example, embody the values of Swedish culture expressed through my values of being *for* a social democracy. I am also a feminist, with values inscribed in my physical reactions to for example sexual harassment which I react to in words and body language with an affirmative ‘NO’.
- ²⁵ I would like to add to this that thinness has not always, historically, been defined as beauty. The beauty norms for men and women have changed through historical periods in time, and in fact, ‘fatness’ used to be a sign of wealth and therefore status and desirability two hundred years ago. Up until the 50’s the norm was more towards ‘plumpness’, or rather what I consider to be ‘normal’ body fat, exemplified by for example Marilyn Monroe. This norm was replaced by a different ideal of skinny models in the 60’s, exemplified by the super model ‘Twiggy’. Thinness as an ideal feminine beauty trait is still the norm. See

- Macdonald (1995) for historical changes in body ideal and a critical overview of the feminine beauty norm for women during the 20th century.
- ²⁶ Hurd's study on "Older Women's Body Image and Embodied Experience: An Exploration", involved approximately 100 hours of semi-structured interviews with 22 women between the ages of 61 and 92. The findings of her study correspond with the result in this study, in that the ageing process "seems to be accompanied by a shift in priorities such that an emphasis on physical beauty [...] is replaced by a valuation of health" (2000:92).
- ²⁷ That is, the women talked about weight as something they would like to lose some of, that less weight would, for example, make their clothes fit better, which, they say would make them feel better. I did not perceive anyone of them as significantly 'overweight', nor in need for dieting. In my perspective they were all 'normal' in size, and, in my eyes, both vibrant, attractive and interesting. This perception, though, is my own, and cannot be generalized. Nor can my perception overrule theirs, because how they feel about their bodies, is what matters in the context of this paper. And on the whole they all said to feel good in or like their bodies.
- ²⁸ Women's body images in old age is an area of research that few have explored. (Hurd, 2000) More research is needed in order to grasp all aspects of what influences and woman's embodied sense of self in old age; of how contexts, situations, structures and embodied experiences and changes affect the body image.
- ²⁹ This study is very limited in this respect, and I acknowledge the need for more focused research in the area of older women's sexualities and sexual desires to answer questions of the relation between sexual desire, preferences, capacities and lived realities as voiced by the women themselves.
- ³⁰ Fredelius (1994) writes that "ageing does not mean that women's sexual desire stops, or that the normal need for physical touch disappears [...] but the opportunity to sexual satisfaction remains as long as we have the energy to experience it" (p.136).
- ³¹ See Tornstam, 2005:196-198, for other examples of studies supporting this statement.
- ³² Other factors such as material comfort, personal safety and activity have been related to quality of life in old age. (Flanagan in Hugosson, p.24)
- ³³ Women's roles as household workers does not usually cease with retirement, in that they continue to do most of the domestic chores within heterosexual partnerships. This continuity of household work is supposed to mean that life after retirement does not change as drastically for women as for men (Carlsson-Wetterberg in Trossholmen 2000:22). The six informants in this study are all doing household work.
- ³⁴ See Macdonald, 2001.
- ³⁵ Although cable TV has been available for longer, it is only within the past two decades that Swedish television has incorporated channels with commercial advertisement.
- ³⁶ A person who lives in a larger city is every day fed with between 2000 and 4000 images, and these images are very influential, according to Anja Hirdman in Örnkölsviks Allehanda (June 5, 2006). In Tidningen Arbetaren (April 9-22, 2004) Hirdman further claims that media is obsessed with women – as "symbols for a sexualized consumption" (p.15) and that the public room of media is becoming increasingly more pornographic. Hirdman shows that the pornography in the 'men's' magazine "Fib Aktuell" in the 70's is the current feminine ideal found in the magazine "Veckorevyn" (directed at teenage girls). Thus the sexualisation of the young woman's body, in which the message is sexualised in order to generate consumption, is today a soft pornography which has become normalized, officially accepted, and is widespread in the images that we encounter every day in commercials, music videos and many television shows. See also Karin Ekman's "Varsågod – Makt, kön och media" (1998) for reflections on the impact and power of media in individual women's lives: "En tidning med en genomsnittlig upplaga om 100.000 exemplar och ambitionen att spegla attityder och tillgodose behov, äger också makten att skapa dem" (p.42).
- ³⁷ Joan Erikson is the less heard of wife of the famous psychologist Erik Erikson who developed a psycho-analytical theory of the formation of selfhood based on eight series of stages towards maturity, rooted in lifecycle related crises and how well the individual deals with these. (Erikson, 1950) Joan Erikson continued to develop these ideas into a ninth stage, in which the individual reevaluates the past stages of developmental crises and questions what has been learned. (Tornstam, 2005:223) This idea is based upon a linear thought of personal growth, in which a person cannot reach the next stage unless the previous ones have been successful. This theory also homogenizes human experiences as universal, without cultural variations. I find this theory too simplistic in its linearity and universality, and have therefore not applied it to this study. The quote by Joan Erikson is found in the notes of Steinem's "Revolution from within: A Book of Self-Esteem" (1993:391).
- ³⁸ Trossholmen found that the twelve women in her study have, during their whole life utilized many different strategies in order to master problematic situations, and that they continue to use these in old age. (2001:182-183)

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APPENDIX

1. Interview guide (in Swedish)

- Berätta lite om dig själv – om din uppväxt och din relation till dina föräldrar, syskon?
- Berätta om de människor i din närhet som var viktiga, betydde mycket för dig som barn och tonåring?
- Hur upplevde du puberteten och förvandlingen från barn till vuxen – från flicka till kvinna?
- Har du familj, egna barn? Hur var det att bilda familj? Hur upplevde du då denna förändring?
- Hur ser din situation ut idag: Hur ser ditt sociala nätverk ut? Varifrån får du stöd?
- Hur har dina nära relationer förändrats om du jämför hur de är nu, med hur de var då du var tonåring eller ung kvinna?

- Vilka förväntningar känner du att du förväntas leva upp till?
- Upplever du att förväntningarna ändrats med tiden – med att du blivit äldre?
- Vad hände om du sa 'nej' till någons förväntning eller förfrågan när du var yngre? Är det någon skillnad på hur andra reagerade då och hur de reagerar nu, tycker du?
- Vad ser du för fördelar med att åldras som kvinna?
- Upplever du att det finns några nackdelar med att åldras som kvinna?
- Har du någonsin känt dig diskriminerad för att du är äldre och kvinna?

- Hur ser du på din kropp idag?
- Hur upplever du andras reaktioner på din kropp som äldre kvinna?
- Hur ser din sexualitet ut idag? Hur uppfattas äldre kvinnors sexualitet, tycker du?
- Är sexualitet något du diskuterar med andra?
- Vad är 'kvinnligt' och 'feminint' för dig?
- Hur har din syn på kvinnlig skönhet förändrats med tiden?
- Hur skulle du beskriva dagens skönhetsideal och hur upplever du detta?
- Vilken är medias bild av skönhet – och hur påverkas medias bilder av skönhet dig?
- Vad anser du att medias skönhetsideal ger för budskap till äldre kvinnor?
- Hur upplever du att media framställer just äldre kvinnor?
- Hur upplever du att dina intressent, i egenskap av äldre kvinna, är representerade i media?
- Vad finns det för förebilder med och för äldre kvinnor, anser du?

- Hur skulle du vilja att äldre kvinnor representas av och i media?
- Vad skulle du vilja säga till de yngre kvinnor som oroar sig för att åldras fysiskt?
- Vad är det bästa, anser du, med att bli äldre som kvinna? Vad ger dig kraft i livet? Vad inspirerar dig, vad ger dig livslust?
- Är det något mer du vill tillägga?
- Vilket alias namn vill du ha när jag refererar till det du har sagt?

2. Informed consent (in Swedish)

LUNDS UNIVERSITET
SOCIOLOGISKA INSTITUTIONEN

Deltagarens medgivande till intervju

Kvinnors åldrande i media och i verklighet

Du blir härmed inbjuden som deltagare i en studie av pensionerade kvinnors erfarenheter av **Kvinnors åldrande i media och i verklighet** som utförs av Anna Hedlund. Anna Hedlund gör en studie på D-nivå i sociologi vid sociologiska institutionen i Lund och du är välkommen att kontakta henne för ytterligare frågor kring studien.

Tel: 0454-84288

Email: amhedlund@yahoo.com

Denna studie är en del av min magisteruppsats och utförs under översikt av min handledare Johanna Esseveld. Johanna Esseveld kan kontaktas på telefon via Lunds Universitet 046-222 00 00.

Målet med forskningen är att skapa medvetenhet och förståelse kring äldre kvinnors situation och självbild i dagens samhälle.

Du har valts att tillfrågas för en intervju därför att du är en äldre kvinna med mycket livserfarenhet. Om du väljer att delta i denna studie så kommer din medverkan att innebära att frågor ställs till dig bla. om hur du upplever att det är att åldras och om medias bild av äldre kvinnor. Med din tillåtelse så spelas intervjun in på band så att jag kan referera ordagrant till det du har sagt.

Det finns inga uppenbara risker med detta intervjudeltagande, men intervjun innehåller frågor som kanske kan väcka känslor, och om detta leder till obehag så är du helt berättigad att inte svara, att göra en paus, eller att avbryta intervjun. Du är garanterad att, utan att behöva förklara dig, närsomhelst under processen ändra dig och tacka nej till din medverkan. Då kommer, om du så vill, materialet med din medverkan ditintills att förstöras och aldrig användas i studien.

För att föräkra mig om att du frivilligt fortsätter att vilja ta del av denna studie så kommer jag att under intervjun fråga om du vill gå vidare med frågorna. Om jag märker att du upplever obehag så kommer jag även då att fråga om du vill fortsätta. Det finns inga krav på fullföljande utan du är helt fri att avbryta när du vill.

Din anonymitet kommer att vara intakt och din identitet helt skyddad. Information som skulle kunna avslöja vem du är kommer att utelämnas eller omskrivas för att skydda dig. Du får själv välja ett alias namn om du vill det. Intervjuerna, dvs. inspelningsbanden och det transkriberade inspelningsmaterialet (på dator, diskett och papper) kommer, när studien och uppsatsen är avslutad, att förstöras för alltid så att ingen information finns kvar som skulle kunna avslöja att just du deltagit.

Ingen annan än Anna Hedlund kommer att ha tillgång till intervjumaterialet.

Din underskrift nedan påvisar att du förstått ovanstående information, att du gjort ett frivilligt val att delta i intervjun och att du har haft möjlighet att ställa frågor till intervjuaren Anna Hedlund och att få svar på dessa av vederbörande.

Deltagarens namn

Underskrift

Datum

3. Short introduction to participants (in Swedish)

YVONNE (65)

Yvonne är född i Skåne och kommer ifrån en medelklassfamilj. Föräldrarna var egna företagare och Yvonne och hennes tre syskon flyttade mycket under uppväxten. Hon upplever sig som 'auktoritärt fostrad' av föräldrarna, men minns barndomen som ljus. Särskild betydelse hade hennes farmor och familjens hembitråde. Yvonne fortsatte studera efter realskolan och gick ett år på handelsskolan. Hon avbröt studierna och började arbeta som sekreterare vilket hon fortsatte med på olika företag under största delen av sitt yrkesverksamma liv. I tidiga tonåren träffade hon sin första make, en relation som varade tills hon var ca 25. Yvonne skiljde sig när maken hade haft en relation med en annan kvinna under en lång tid. Yvonne reste och hade många sexuella febindelser en period efter detta tills hon träffade sin nuvarande make, vid 29 års ålder som hon nu har två barn med. Yvonne har också ett barnbarn som hon ser som "livets efterrätt" och njuter av att umgås med. Yvonne har inga vänner från barndomen men umgås mycket med sin familj och släkt. Hon har också vänner från 20 årsåldern som hon träffar ibland. Yvonne är politiskt aktiv med politiska uppdrag, hon går på tai chi och zon terapi, hon läser och promenerar. Yvonne tycker att det är viktigt att engagera sig i samhället, vilket hon gjort mer och mer sedan hon gick i förtidspension vid 60. I samband med pensioneringen fick Yvonne cancer, vilket dämpade glädjen över att sluta arbeta. Yvonne är stolt över vad hon åstadkommit under sitt arbetsliv, men välkomnar friheten i att slippa anpassa sig efter dess regler och tidsscheman. Nu gör hon vad hon vill med sin tid och tycker det är allmänt "behagligt att åldras".

MARIE (69)

Marie föddes i Göteborg 1937 och växte upp i Belgien under andra världskriget. Den svenska modern var sjuksköterska, men båda föräldrarna tillhörde överklassen. Fadern, en belgisk läkare, var ledare för en underjordisk rörelse som hjälpte krigsfångar ur tyska koncentrationsläger och gömde dem på den stora gården, samtidigt som familjen tvingades härbärgera fiendestyrkornas officerare under samma tak. Då Marie, äldst av fyra syskon, var åtta så flyttade familjen till Nederländska Indien (Indonesien), till farmoderns stora ägor, där familjen bodde fram till 1949 då Sukarno kom till makten staten konfiskerade allt de ägde. Utblottade flyttade familjen tillbaka till Sverige där fadern fick jobb. Marie, som då var 14 år, fick gå i en högre flickskola där hon trivdes och fick många vänner som hon har kontakt med än idag. Efter skolan fick Marie jobb direkt på en resebyrå och har därefter haft ett antal olika arbeten. I fyrtioårsåldern gick hon på folkhögskola, Komvux, och utbildade sig senare vid lärarhögskolan. Marie har varit gift och skiljts två gånger. Den först relationen, som varade ett antal månader under vilka hon levde isolerad, kontrollerad och under våld och hot, flydde hon bokstavligen ifrån och den slutade med rättegång om vårdnaden av det gemensamma barnet. Marie och hennes nye man fick vårdnaden, bla. pga foton på Marie's blåslagna kropp. När vårdnadstvisten var klar fick Marie ytterligare ett barn i det andra äktenskapet som varade i 20 år. Under denna skilsmässa så mådde Marie väldigt dåligt och försökte ta livet av sig. Men Marie överlevde både bilkrash och tablettöverdos. Dessutom har hon överlevt cancer tre gånger. Hon definierar sig själv som en överlevare. Marie är idag mycket engagerad inom olika organisationer och arbetar frivilligt inom dessa. Hennes stora resintresse är numera begränsad av den låga folkpensionen, men hon läser mycket, särskilt historia, går på teater, föredrag och konstutställningar. Hennes nyfikenhet är hennes drivkraft.

INEZ (68)

Inez är född och uppvuxen i en liten by i Norrbotten i ett medelklasshem där fadern var flottningsinspektör medan modern var hemma. Hon minns sin barndom som harmonisk, trygg och med mycket kramar. Inez, som var enda barnet, hade många vänner och umgicks med bybor i alla åldrar. Efter skolan jobbade Inez några år bla som kocka innan hon började studera till lärare, vilket hon sedan jobbade som fram till pensionen. Under en tid arbetade hon också som reseguide i bla. Norge och det var under denna period runt 30 som hon träffade sin nuvarande make som hon varit lyckligt gift med i över 37 år. De har två barn tillsammans med vilka relationen och kommunikationen är mycket god.

Efter förtidspensioneringen vid 60 drabbades Inez av en hjärtsjukdom, vilket ledde till flera sjukhusbesök, men Inez upplevelse av sin mors cancer som hon levde med i flera decennier, hjälpte henne hantera sjukdomen och sjukhusvistelsen. Denna sjukdomsupplevelse har gjort att Inez tar livet som det kommer dag för dag, och planerar inte så mycket i förväg. Hon gör också det hon vill och har lust med mer (tex. trädgårdsarbete) istället för det hon tycker hon kanske borde göra (tex. städa). Inez intresse för språk har lett till många resor, särskilt sedan hon pensionerades. Detta intresse delar hon med sin man, liksom intresset för växter och odling, och att läsa böcker. Inez har också många vänner kvar sedan skoltiden som hon umgås regelbundet med, men har också många andra vänner i olika åldrar. Hon är social och intresserad av kommunikation på alla plan, särskilt roligt tycker hon det är att vara med sina två barnbarn. Inez ser sig själv som väldigt rak och ärlig i sin kommunikation med andra och upplever att detta, för det mesta, uppskattas av omgivningen.

MADELEINE (73)

Madeleine föddes 1931 i en liten by i Blekinge. Hennes far var inkallad under kriget och drabbades av psykisk sjukdom när Madeleine var i tonåren. Modern, som var hemmafru, tog hand om honom. Som femtonåring flyttade Madeleine hemifrån, till en större stad, och studerade sedermera till barnsköterska. I skåne fick hon jobb hos en 'fin' familj som privat barnsköterska. Madelein gifte sig och skaffade barn i 20-årsåldern. Då var hon hemma några år med barnen. I 30-årsåldern började hon att studera till lärare/ fritidspedagog. Madeleine tog hand om allt i hushållet; den stora lägenheten, studierna, mannen, barnen, och sydde dessutom sina egna kläder. I 40-års åldern, efter 21 års äktenskap, skilde sig Madeleine. Under sitt yrkesverksamma liv har Madeleine haft otaliga arbeten, bla.som specialpedagog för funktionshindrade. I femtiofemårsåldern upplevde hon utbrändhet. Vid fyrtio började Madeleine gå i terapi för första gången. Hon utforskade under åren däreftersig själv genom bla Gestaltterapi och Rosenterapi, men också olika självutvecklingskurser (bla. drama, frigörande andning, frigörande dans, yoga). Hon har ett stort intresse för personlig utveckling och går på föredrag och läser böcker i ämnet. Madeleine har många djupt närande relationer till vänner och familj vilka hon värderar högt. Madeleine menar att hon utvecklas som människa genom mötet med andra människor. Madeleine lever ensam i sitt föräldrahem som hon flyttat tillbaka efter att ha bott på ett otal ställen i Sverige, från norr till söder, under sitt liv. Hon njuter av naturen, men vill flytta till en stad för att det underlättar den dagliga kontakten med vänner och familj där.

SARA (81)

Sara föddes 1924 i en liten by i Skåne som ett av fyra barn i en arbetarklassfamilj. Fadern var först bonde, sedan skomakare medan modern var hemmafru som också arbetade i makens skomakeri. Sara stod sin far närmast och identifierade sig mer med hans positiva livssyn. Modern ingav henne ett gott självförtroende. Genom sin mor blev Sara delaktig i pingstkyrkan tills hon, 23år gammal, tvingades välja mellan att vara kvar eller gifta sig med en som inte var medlem. Sara valde det senare. Maken var äldre än Sara, en sjöman och sedermera bilförsäljare som hon fick två flickor

med. Den äldsta dottern dog 15 år gammal av sjukdom. Strax därefter hade maken en sexuell relation med en annan kvinna och efter 25 års äktenskap skildes de. Sara flydde med dottern till annan ort, utan makens vetskap, för att undvika makens fysiska våld mot henne.

Som ung jobbade Sara i föräldrarnas företag och i olika mjölkaffärer och under åren som gift var hon delvis hemmafru, delvis jobbade hon i makes budfirma, men hade också dagbarn. Sara har därefter försörjt sig som dagmamma i många år. Efter skilsmässan, i 50-årsåldern, hade Sara en relation i hemlighet med en gift man som hon avslutade efter en kort tid. Idag har hon ingen partner och även om hon saknar gemenskapen så vill hon inte ha sexuell intimitet, vilket har gjort att hon avböjer inviter från män.

Sara har en mycket god relation till sin dotter som ringer varje dag, och hon har många vänner som hon umgås med. Blä så har hon 'tjejmiddag' regelbundet med några andra kvinnor i staden där hon bor. Sara stora intresse för att skjuta pistol, vilket ledde till många fina tävlingspriser, har hon slutat med blä pga minskad rörlighet – sjukdomsrelaterade funktionshinder. Hon har också svårare för att läsa, men njuter av kreativt arbete. Genom en pensionärsorganisation har hon tillgång till kreativa former av handarbete och konstnärligt uttryck. Sara har engagerat sig aktivt och agiterat i mediasammanhang för att få behålla rätten till detta dagcenter. Hon bakar, lagar mat, umgås socialt och trivs med att vara pensionär. Sara använder sin humor i vardagen och ser sig själv som en person med väldigt positiv inställning till livet.

BARBRO (85)

Barbro föddes 1920 i en liten by i Blekinge. Fadern var smed medan modern tog hand om hem och 7 barn. Det var fattigt och barnen fostrades att "lyda överheten". Efter konfirmationen förväntades Barbro försörja sig själv och började som piga. När hon var 16 träffade hon en nio år äldre man som hon inledde en relation med. När hon några år senare träffade sin blivande make så var hon sexuellt erfaren vilket han inte uppskattade.

Barbro gjorde en klassresa tillsammans med sin man, från arbetarklass till medelklass, och de hade under årens lopp flera olika företag, blä. glassbil, begravningsfirma, hotell och restaurang. Barbro var delaktig i alla företag, men skötte dessutom allt i hemmet och tog hand om deras 4 barn. Barbros arbetslivserfarenhet inkluderar även jobb som kokerska och sjukvårdare på sjukhus. I femtioårsåldern läste hon en kvällskurs i psykologi och den upplevelsen gav henne självförtroende. En svår period upplevde Barbro när hon gjorde en abort hos en "abortör"¹. Det var maken som övertalade henne och han försökte övertala henne ytterligare en gång, men den andra gången vägrade hon och behöll barnet som blev nummer tre i skaran. Barbro har haft en kristen tro sedan barndomen och gick som vuxen under en tid med i en kyrklig församling. Tron upplever hon som ett stöd genom livet men är inte kyrkligt aktiv längre. Däremot är hon en aktiv medlem av en skrivklubb som har publicerat en del av hennes poesi och korta noveller. Dessutom målar hon tavlor och plockar svamp. Maken drabbades av sjukdom under slutet av sitt liv och Barbro skötte honom i hemmet under flera år innan han avled för några år sedan. Då glömde hon bort att ta hand om sig själv, vilket hon känner att hon gör nu. Idag har Barbro två män som uppvaktar henne på olika sätt och vars sällskap hon njuter av. Hon umgås också mycket med sina barn, men även en del med barnbarn och barnbarnsbarn. Hon har dessutom daglig telefonkontakt med sin syster. Det är viktigt för Barbro att känna att hon hjälper andra tex ett barnbarn. Just nu har hon en grannkvinna som hon stödjer på olika vis. Att göra "små saker" för andra människor inspirerar henne.

¹ Abortlagstifningen som den ser ut idag, fritt vald abort fram till vecka 18, tillkom 1975. När Barbro gjorde abort var det mycket svårare att få tillstånd – särskilda medicinska skäl måste föreligga, vilket det inte gjorde. Därför var aborten illegal och utfördes av en abortör. Se Abortlagstifningens historia i Sverige.