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Vanguards of postmodernity: Rethinking midlife women

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Abstract

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My thesis explores the ways middle-aged Anglo-Australian women reconstitute their ageing, embodied subjectivities in contemporary postmodern Australian society in which changing understandings of gender, ageing and identity have taken place over the last 50 years. I argue that midlife women are the vanguards of postmodernity. Although they grew up in an era of high patriarchy, recent feminisms have provided an alternative value system and enabled women to reconstitute their identities in more empowering ways. Changes in understandings of gender have been paralleled by individualised, autobiographical ways of constructing identity and remaking the self, in which the body plays a central role. Contemporary understandings of midlife "reflection", "growth" and "crisis", and of "menopausal women" provide discursive frames for women to interpret their ageing experience. I explore ways in which women contest and subvert dominant understandings of being an ageing woman in Australian society in the early 21st century.

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Disclaimer

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Jennifer R. Higgins

Glossary of Terms

AGEING - Ageing has three dimensions: Chronological ageing refers to the years one has lived; social age refers to a person's location along the life course and the social expectations associated with chronological age; and physiological ageing refers to a person's functional ability and the gradual decline in bone density, muscle tone and strength as they get older. The concept of social age is most relevant for my thesis.

CLIMACTERIC - While menopause literally refers to the last menstruation, as menarche refers to the first, the term climacteric is often used to refer to the phase in a woman's life where the reproductive system is in the process of change. Grimwade (1995) proposes that the relationship between menopause and the climacteric is similar to the relationship between menarche and puberty, one the event and the other the process.

DISCOURSE - The centrality of language in poststructural theory as the structuring principle of subjectivity decentres the rational, essential subject of humanism and focuses instead on the constitution of subjectivity through specific discourses. Discourses provide meaning and frame an understanding of individual experience. Multiple and conflicting discourses produce conscious thinking subjects who give meaning to social relations and experiences.

DISCURSIVE PRACTICES - Subjectivity is produced by and in the individual through "discursive practices" (Weedon 1987:21), which are linguistic expressions such as formal discussions, informal conversations, or narratives such as storytelling, through which discourse is personalised.

EMBODIMENT - The term embodiment refers to subjectivity and identity as experienced and mediated by one's existence of having/being specific bodies. I argue that subjectivities are constituted through having bodies of a certain age and gender.

GENDER - The concept of gender is used here to refer to culturally-appropriate expressions associated with each sex referred to as femininity or masculinity. For women, these involve the bodily presentations, personality characteristics and activities which are generally associated with femininity.

GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY - Gendered subjectivity refers to the way in which subjectivity is constituted in specifically gendered ways. Gendered ways are often informed by certain rules of behaviour relating to appropriately feminine or masculine ways of being, for example, how women think they should look, behave, think and feel which are offered as "natural" ways of being a woman, and which are often reinforced by dominant social institutions such as the medical profession.

IDENTITY - Identity is defined in my thesis as the process of constructing a social self from a range of cultural attributes which have personal meaning and are prioritised over other cultural attributes and sources of meaning. Identities are dynamic, they take shape within a specific sociohistorical context and can change and be reshaped "when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society" (Castells 1997:8). Identity, then, is the way a person describes themselves as a socially-positioned actor within their broader sociohistorical context.

LIFECOURSE - The lifecourse approach links individual biographies with sociocultural context as part of an ongoing continuum of historical change (Hareven and Adams 1982:2). It moves away from rigid, sequential and progressive models of human "development" and enables an understanding of women's lived and embodied experiences within the context of contemporary social frameworks.

LIVED BODY - The body is not a raw, passive or natural object onto which culture and gender are inscribed. The lived body is a cultural, social and political object which produces and is produced by culture. Sexual difference feminists see the body as interwoven with systems of meaning, signification and representation.

LIVED EXPERIENCE - The concept of *lived* experience moves away from an understanding of experience as having an essential and inherent meaning. Instead, lived experience is interpretive and conditioned by cultural values and situational specificities. The "meaning" people make out of lived experience is also interpretive, highly individualised, temporal and situationally specific.

MENOPAUSE - I use a standard definition of menopause according to a three-part division outlined by Margaret Lock (1986b): The premenopausal phase refers to women who have menstruated within the past three months; the perimenopausal phase refers to women who have not menstruated within the past three months but have menstruated within the past twelve months, and the postmenopausal phase refers to women who have not menstruated for over a year (1986b:29).

MIDLIFE - The term midlife is a contemporary term referring to the period of middle-age between youth and old age. The replacement of the term middle-age with the new term midlife represents a cultural shift away from prioritising chronologically-based definitions of age, and a distancing from the ageing process itself. The earlier conceptualisation of middle age as a static period between and youth and old age has been replaced by a "new middle age" redefined as "midlife" and which today is represented as a time of activity and excitement, more closely aligned with what is expected of youth rather than old age.

NOMADIC SUBJECTIVITY - A figuration of subjectivity theorised by Braidotti (1994) to refer to an embodied, "mobile" subjectivity which is evolving and processual, moves away from hegemonic categorisation and subverts conventional ways of being. I apply Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity to elucidate an understanding of the narratives of the women in my study.

PATRIARCHY - Where the term patriarchy is used in my thesis I refer to Chris Weedon's definition of "power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In

patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male" (1997:1-2).

POSTMODERNITY - Postmodernity refers to the sociocultural transformations in which fixed, localised, social structures and hierarchies of modernity have been displaced by a global economy with more fluid, unstable and diversified social conditions and flows of power and information. Modernity is associated with humanism, essentialism and the belief in absolute truths. Postmodernity is associated with the notion of a decentred human subject, relativism, and the acknowledgment of difference and situational specificities. Of relevance to my thesis is the postmodern understanding of identity which moves away from the belief in an essential, unified self with an ascribed, given social identity towards an understanding of the fragmented, processual, embodied self and the fluid construction of autobiographical identities.

SELF - I refer to the self as an interpretive, embodied, autobiographical account of one's subject position. While I acknowledge the concept of "self" is a Western construct, it is a concept commonly referred to by the women in my study, and is of value in elucidating their stories.

SOCIAL CHANGE - By the term social change I refer to the sociohistorical shift from modernity to postmodernity including the sociopolitical processes incorporating second-wave feminism, and women's entry into the paid workforce, and the effects of these changes on social understandings of "gender", "masculinity" and "femininity".

SUBJECTIVITY - The term subjectivity refers to "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (Weedon 1989:32). My thesis takes the theoretical position of *subjectivity as a process*, which sees the individual as subjectively constituted through language which gives meaning to experience through a range of socially-constructed discourses.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1

Vanguards of postmodernity:

Rethinking midlife women

In contemporary Australian society, sociocultural understandings about older women's lives are framed by two homogenising and stereotypical assumptions: First, that at midlife women are "interrupted" by menopause, a biologically-induced hormone deficiency disease which can be physiologically understood and treated by the medical profession; and second, once they have reached menopause women slide progressively towards physical decline and social redundancy. I argue that discourses of the "menopausal woman" obscure broader sociohistorical processes which can account for women's changing subjectivities at midlife. Located between contrasting modernist and postmodernist understandings of gendered ways of being and constructing identities, midlife women represent the vanguard of sociocultural change. I further argue that a woman's subjective change at midlife is largely attributable to changing expectations of gender and women's position in society. Moreover, far from experiencing ageing as a process of decline instigated by menopause, many women's reconstitution of subjectivity leads them to expand their interests and abilities in ways that they experience as "empowering" and life-enhancing, and which position them as socially productive, creative and vital human beings.

MENOPAUSE, CULTURE AND AGEING

My study of ageing women at midlife began with an interest in menopause and whether it was a transitional event in women's lives. I was fortunate to discover there was a thriving community of scholars around the world, possibly women of menopausal age

themselves, who were gathering evidence to refute the biomedical model of menopause as a "deficiency disease" which, it was claimed, marked the onset of age and the end of a woman's viability in Western societies. The biomedical model common to the late 20th century prompted the belief that once a woman experienced menopause life was a down-hill slide towards decline, decay and obsolescence. For many decades the biomedical perception of menopause, with its negative implications for women at midlife, has shaped sociocultural understandings of the menopausal process. Happily, the cultural image of the dowdy, depressed and anxiety-ridden menopausal woman, who supposedly represented the biological reality of menopause, is now being challenged and new images of menopause and midlife as a time of transition, empowerment and "post menopausal zest" are being constructed in its wake.

Broader understandings of menopause and ageing in recent years can be attributed largely to crosscultural research, which has convincingly shown that most menopausal symptoms are not universal, but are particular to the culture in which women experience them. Women's (and doctors') interpretations of physical symptoms are linked to the value placed on ageing women in specific societies.

Feminist researchers have critiqued patriarchal perspectives that stereotype menopausal women as socially redundant. They work to present a more woman-centred view of the menopausal experience based on women's narratives of "self" and "meaning". While many Western women do experience difficult physiological symptoms such as hot flushes, which are attributed to hormonal changes at menopause, research on menopause which takes into account a range of women's experiences suggests that menopause as a biological process is neither a major event in, nor a significant constraint to, the lives of most women. Instead, sociocultural understandings of ageing processes and the value placed on ageing in contemporary Australian society are more valuable perspectives from which to explore the experience of Australian women of menopausal age.

Crosscultural research on the sociocultural context of the menopausal experience, and feminist empirical research on the experience of menopause from women's points of view, suggest that menopause is largely a social experience and its passage registers almost unnoticed for many women. Despite the social contextualisation of women's perspectives, contemporary cultural images of menopausal women continue to be framed by alarmist, universalising and deterministic biological discourses of decline and disease. The biomedical perspective, which constructs menopause as a potentially terminal and catastrophic "disease" with dire consequences unless managed properly, dominates mainstream cultural understandings. The medical construction of menopause as a deficiency disease leading to decline parallels sociocultural images of older women as socially redundant, ossified and obsolete.

The perspective of menopause as a significant change in women's lives is reinforced by influential social discourses of midlife as a time of "transition", associated with specific experiences. Contemporary psychosocial theoretical explanations of ageing for women of menopausal age are couched within discourses of "midlife". "Midlife" is constructed as a unique experience characterised by subjective "transitions" which distinguish it from both youth and old age. While midlife discourse often constructs this time as a positive experience, its constitution as a unique transitional phase in a "lifecourse" reinforces the perception that midlife and menopause are transitional experiences. In contradistinction to discourses of midlife and menopause as transitional experiences often seen to lead to a termination of women's creativity and productivity, I argue that midlife women are an increasingly vibrant, powerful and diverse public presence in Western societies today. Influential and successful midlife women appear regularly in public life and the media in areas as diverse as politics, academia, community services and development, science and the arts. Their strength and persuasiveness as "experts" and decision makers in their fields dispel myths about menopause and midlife women as socially redundant and nonproductive.

Many contemporary midlife women have taken advantage of new opportunities in the workforce not available to women of preceding generations. Far from having feelings of decline and redundancy, they are enriched by new challenges and changes, and many of my participants reported increased feelings of self-confidence, competence, independence and life satisfaction compared with their younger selves.

Yet parallel to images of powerful ageing women, older women as a social group continue to be undermined by homogenising sociocultural and biomedical discourses. Stereotypical portrayals of "menopausal women" or "old women" obscure the diversity of older women's lives. In a culture in which youthful values and qualities are valorised and ageing is disparaged, menopause becomes a symbolic marker of ageing that devalues ageing women despite the heterogeneity of their personal experience of menopause, and despite their lived experience as productive, engaged and active participants in work, community and family life.

If menopause continues to symbolise decline at a time when women are becoming more "empowered", how do they negotiate the paradox? How do women experience ageing and menopause, and how do women subvert dominant discourse to redefine their identities as ageing women? A fruitful line of investigation is to explore the sociocultural value placed on ageing women in Western societies, how competing discourses of ageing shape women's identities and subjectivities as they age, and how women engage with dominant and subversive narratives in order to redefine their identities and reshape their subjectivities.

I dispute the argument that midlife and menopause are major transitional experiences for women. I argue instead that a more plausible explanation of midlife women's subjective change is rendered by examining women's stories within their particular sociocultural context. Each context generates sociocultural expectations of gender throughout midlife women's chronological lived experiences and provides an

arena in which they inscribe their subjectivities and reshape their identities as ageing women in postmodern societies.

Structured and predictable modernist forms of identity construction, which for women centred around the private "sphere" of reproduction, domesticity and gendered roles within the nuclear family have been transformed in and through "postmodern" sociocultural shifts. I argue that midlife women's historical location within the transition from "modernity" to "postmodernity" in Australia positions them as vanguards of social change regarding gendered ways of being in contemporary society. Throughout midlife women's lives, limited and homogenising understandings of "femininity", "womanhood" and women's position in society have been challenged by new perspectives for understanding the relationships between women and men, and women and society. The competing power relations generated by the conflicting value systems of patriarchy and feminism which provide women with alternative subject positions for reconstituting gendered identity, also create conflicts for women who were raised in a more overtly patriarchal society and who aged at a time when feminist ideas have overtly and covertly shaped women's consciousness of gendered identities, as well as their work lives and family relationships.

Institutionalised, preordained social "roles", formerly defined through work and family, have been replaced by individualised and personalised constructions of subjective meaning. Women create and use subjective meaning to constitute their sense of self within broader, multifaceted social identities. At the present time, more fluid ways of living "gender" and flexible, individualistic, autobiographical approaches to constructing social identity provide women with new ways of reconstituting their subjectivities as ageing women. Rigid definitions of gender are decentred and family "roles" supplement but do not define a woman's identity in contemporary Australian society. Of equal significance is the shift to postmodern ways of remaking the "self". The body, through these new frames and modes of being, has become a site of personal

significance as a component of social identity and an outward representation of self. Nevertheless, the move towards a consciousness of embodied corporeality can pose particular problems for midlife women.

In contemporary Western societies, where youth is valorised and ageing is denigrated, ageing bodies can be perceived as problematic. Contemporary discourses of ageing encourage youthfulness in attitude and appearance for people of all ages, yet the ageing body defies this social imperative. For women whose fertile, youthful and "beautiful" bodies have been a central and defining aspect of their identities and social value, ageing bodies challenge many women to redefine themselves in new ways. Former subject positions that were assumed by earlier generations of ageing women are no longer available and many contemporary midlife women in Australia are currently exploring uncharted terrain to reconstruct their social identities and find new "meaning".

Changing understandings of "gender" and "ageing", as well as new ways of constructing identity challenged many women in my study to reconstitute their subjectivities in new and unfamiliar ways. Discursive frameworks of "menopause" and "midlife" as transitional events provided ways for women to constitute new subject positions through narrative reconstructions and interpretations of their experiences.

I use terms such as "midlife", "menopausal", "lifecourse" and "ageing" throughout my thesis and offer a definition of these terms in my glossary. They are contemporary terms, commonly used in Australian culture and by the women in my study. I understand their capacity to categorise, yet at the same time I work to subvert their hegemonic application throughout the thesis. I also use terms such as "experience", "lived experience", "subjectivity", "identity", and "self", and offer a definition of these terms in my glossary. I understand they are Western concepts which are limited to their sociocultural context. But they enable me to interpret my informants' stories *within*

their sociocultural context. I use the term "subjectivity" to refer to a woman's sense of herself and her perceived relation to the world. I use the term "identity" to refer to women's self-description of cultural attributes which provide meaning and position individuals within a sociocultural context. The term "self" refers to women's interpretive, embodied, autobiographical accounts of their subject positions. Although the concept of "self" has been radically critiqued by postmodern theorists, it is a helpful frame for my informants' perception of who they are and how they have changed throughout personal spatio-temporal continuums. The terms refer to changing, processual, sociohistorically contextualised ways of being. While these terms are defined separately here, their meanings overlap in the accounts of the women whose stories are told.

I also use the terms "old woman", "menopausal woman" and "granny" to refer to ways in which dominant discourses construct demeaning and homogenising stereotypical portrayals of older women. I frequently draw on these discursive constructions as a counterpoint to the stories of my participants who reveal the diversity and richness of older women's lives and who work to subvert stereotypical portrayals.

The expressions referred to above appear in scare quotes in my introduction. I also use scare quotes throughout the thesis to signify my critical reading strategy of these terms. However the expressions form a significant base for contemporary theoretical approaches and are in common use in contemporary culture. Consequently, to avoid overwhelming the text with the use of parentheses, in the introductory paragraphs of each chapter I enclose the terms in parentheses, but thereafter the terms stand alone.

My thesis focuses on the processes of change that women may encounter in the reconstitution of their gendered, embodied subjectivity. I use the theoretical framework of embodied subjectivity as a process, and rely on Rosi Braidotti's (1994) figuration of the theoretical nomad in order to elucidate the stories of changing subjectivity of the

women in my study. The figuration of the nomad enables an understanding of how women's ageing and embodied subjectivities are interwoven with sociocultural shifts from modernity to postmodernity. I propose that these shifts have brought changing understandings of gender and womanhood, that they work to provide new, more autobiographical and individualistic ways of constructing identity, and they shape an arena for women to reconstitute their gendered subjectivities. As such, Braidotti's theoretical conception of nomadic subjectivity enables an examination of women's changing consciousness and how this inscribes their subjectivities. I discuss the theoretical frame of the study in Chapter 2.

The thesis thereby takes an autobiographical and sociohistorical approach to examining how past and present interweave throughout women's lives to create counterdiscourses to hegemonic constructions of "the menopausal woman" in Australia. The autobiographical narratives presented and examined herein emerged from interviews with forty-seven Anglo-Australian women from metropolitan Melbourne and rural and regional Victoria, whose ages ranged from 45 to 65. In order to elicit autobiographical stories from my participants I chose an in-depth interview technique. Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The identities of the participants have been changed to ensure their anonymity, and I have also exchanged identifying information between women for those whose stories are quoted herein to further protect the privacy of the women and honour my obligation of confidentiality. In Chapter 3 I provide a detailed description of the methodological approach I have used for my study.

I begin with an examination of biosociocultural understandings of menopause and explore crosscultural research in Chapter 4 to locate contemporary Australian understandings of menopause within contemporary discursive frameworks. Based on crosscultural evidence I contend that biomedical understandings of "menopausal" are cultural constructs, and I deconstruct the concept of "menopausal embodiment". I argue instead that the concept of "midlife embodiment" enables midlife women's bodies to be

viewed as lived bodies that experience a range of embodied experiences, which may include menopausal symptoms, at midlife.

Crosscultural research into menopause has highlighted the importance of positioning an examination of "menopause" within contemporary sociocultural understandings and social values that are imbricated in the ageing process. In Chapter 5 I consequently examine sociocultural understandings of ageing and discuss competing discourses within the discursive field of ageing. Chapter 6 focuses specifically on "midlife" and examines postmodern understandings of "midlife" in Western cultures, as well as competing theories which attempt to construct midlife as a unique time in the lifecourse associated with age-related, transitional experiences.

I offer a counter theory to the assumed "midlife transition" in Chapter 7 and argue that the reconstitution of subjectivity for women at midlife can be more accurately understood by examining women's unique position within the shift from modernity to postmodernity. I argue that midlife women are the vanguards of sociocultural change and their changing subjectivities are reconstituted by and through new understandings of gendered ways of being, and new ways of reconstructing identity in contemporary postmodern society.

As ways of making identity have changed and the body becomes important to an individual's construction of self and subjectivity, it is important to explore the relationship between the body and society. I discuss theoretical understandings of the relationship between the body and society in Chapter 8. In Chapter 9 I examine the stories of ageing embodiment of the women in my study, and explore how women work to undermine demeaning understandings of ageing women's bodies as in decline and obsolete.

In Chapter 10 the alignment of women with their bodies and the ways this has led to the social silencing of older women, and their sociocultural omission as knowledge bearers

bearers is portrayed. I examine the ways in which women work to subvert assumptions about their perceived social redundancy and reconstruct their identities in more empowered ways. Chapter 11 brings my thesis towards its conclusion as I present the stories of the women in my study to reveal how, in postmodernity, women inscribe their subjectivities in new ways. I use the concept of "pilgrimage" to frame the ways that women reconfigure their midlives. I explore the concomitant themes of "journeying" and "homecoming" to elucidate how and where women may locate themselves as "nomadic subjects" in contemporary Australian society.

My thesis contributes to broader understandings of Australian elder women, of their challenges, hopes, needs and fears, and of the ways in which dominant disempowering discourses and rigid structures can demean and denigrate the vital and vibrant social contributions of Australian women.

CHAPTER 2

Ageing and embodied subjectivity:

Theoretical framework

At the time I began my project there was little sociological research in Australia about the experience of ageing for midlife women which did not focus centrally on menopause. Today there is still a need for research which explores women's embodied experience of ageing and how women reconstitute their subjectivities and reshape their identities as they age. My project is designed to contribute knowledge to this arena. My thesis addresses the question of how women experience ageing at "midlife", and examines women's embodied and subjective experience of "ageing" as narrated by the participants of the study.

Arber and Ginn propose that:

> As we age we are influenced by the societal, cultural, economic and political context prevailing at different times in our life course. We are also profoundly influenced by our gender and by shifts in gender relations over the life course. Thus the connectedness of gender and ageing stems both from social change over time and from age-related life course events; social history and personal biography are interwoven over time. (1995:1)

Arber and Ginn suggest the subjective experience of ageing is contingent upon one's gendered embodiment, and subjectivity is in a continual flux of reconstitution and reinterpretation over the lifecourse. This has specific implications for women's embodied consciousness.

My thesis explores the embodied consciousness and subjective experiences of one group of ageing women in midlife in contemporary Australian society. Guided by the literature, but in order to broaden the study of ageing at midlife to include a range of experiences and understand how these interact, I have focussed on four key areas which framed in-depth, open-ended interviews with fifty Australian women: the nature and experience of menopause; the social experience of ageing in contemporary Australian society; the embodied experience of ageing; and the effect of changing social expectations of gendered behaviour.

I take a sociocultural approach to the study of women at midlife in that I relate the individual subjectivities of ageing women to larger cultural understandings and social structures from which dominant discourses of gender, the self, ageing, the body, and menopause emerge. I begin by providing an overview of how "midlife women" have become objects of research.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH ON MIDLIFE WOMEN

The accumulation of research on midlife women until the mid 1970s was framed by patriarchal understandings of women's "nature" and biomedical and social theoretical paradigms which causally linked women to their biology (conceptualised as their reproductivity and sexuality) and their conventional roles within the patriarchal nuclear family. Research, when directed towards women in midlife, focussed almost exclusively on health problems such as depression. Like other psychosocial problems for women categorised within the age group of 45 to 55, depression was attributed to menopause. Because problems categorised as menopausal often coincide with changing family arrangements, sociological investigations of midlife women restricted their investigations to women's lives within the patriarchal family, and highlighted assumptions about "role loss" and "empty nest" as central to understanding midlife in women's lives. Mutually-supportive theories thereby reinforced a construction of the "menopausal woman" as depressed, anxious, asexual and socially redundant, painting a

bleak picture of ageing for women.

From the 1970s onwards, in response to limited theoretical constructions of the "menopausal woman", extensive feminist research on menopause and women of menopausal age followed, and brought new understandings to bear on the experience of menopause and ageing for midlife women. Many researchers have challenged claims to scientific objectivity as a premise on which the findings of earlier research rest, and have highlighted methodological flaws in both sampling and research strategies.[1] Critics argue that early research findings regarding menopausal-aged women were based largely on clinical samples and reflect the researchers' preconceived assumptions and interests, ignoring issues of importance drawn from dialogue with midlife women.

Feminist scholars broadened the epistemological scope of social research to include a heterogeneous cross-section of women, not limited to women drawn from clinical samples, in order to more accurately portray women's experience of "menopause". Importantly, they incorporated emerging feminist theoretical insights which critiqued traditional researchers' positioning of women as "objects" of research. Feminist scholars prioritised women's experience as *subjects,* who created knowledge by providing detailed accounts of their lives and experiences from women's points of view. The accumulated findings of the research has led to a redefinition of "menopause" and "midlife" away from sociobiomedical images of physical and social decline. As a consequence the findings strongly suggest that women and their experiences do not fit within limited theoretical frames by which they were previously defined. Yet discourses which represent patriarchal, biomedical, as well as feminist interests are still current and compete to define the experience of midlife and menopause for women.

[1]Feminists' epistemological and methodological critique of science's claim to objective knowledge is extensive and well-established. I draw on, but do not offer a review of, the important writings on the subject, see Bordo (1987), Fausto-Sterling (1985), Harding (1986, 1991), Longino (1990).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MIDLIFE

Literature from a broad range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives - feminist, social constructionist, functionalist, psychological human development, biomedical - constructs contemporary Western midlife as a unique phase in the lifecourse with distinctive experiences which demark it from youth and old age. However, there is rigorous disagreement as to the cause of assumed midlife changes. I briefly outline three major theoretical perspectives that dominate understandings of midlife:[2]

Menopause as a biosocial transition

A biosocial perspective argues that the biological changes of menopause mark a transition from youth to the onset of ageing at midlife and that the biological process can impact on a woman's psychology and identity. Many health problems at midlife are attributed by doctors and by women to what is referred to as a "menopausal syndrome". Thus, a range of health problems which women may be experiencing at midlife can be defined by them or their doctors as a part of the menopausal transition.

The psychosocial construction of a midlife transition

Sociological theories suggest that midlife changes are the result of social factors such as changing work and family patterns. More recently attention has turned to "midlife" as a transitional experience associated with specific experiences. New understandings of midlife relate to changing social understandings of ageing and new, more individualised and autobiographical ways of constructing identity in a postmodern world. Midlife is theoretically characterised by three major transitional processes: midlife is seen to be a time of "self reflection", "growth" and "development" based on an awareness that one is moving away from youth and closer to old age; midlife is a time when both women

[2]I analyse these three theoretical perspectives in more detail in Chapters 4 and 6.

and men "cross over" and take on qualities that were previously considered characteristic of the opposite sex, which can mean that women become more "empowered" as they age; and midlife is a time when women are vulnerable to the "double standard of ageing" because of their cultural alignment with the youthful, fertile, sexualised body. These changes can be experienced and interpreted as a "time of reflection", an opportunity for "growth" and "development", or a "midlife crisis".[3]

Midlife as a "stage" of development

Scholars taking a human development or psychological approach base their arguments on an inherent "stage" model of development. Their perspective argues that the lifespan is characterised by internal "triggers" which lead to new "stages" of growth in an individual's development. The stages are seen to be linear, sequential, progressive and chronologically based, and there are certain "developmental tasks" which are specific to midlife and need to be accomplished if the individual wishes to enjoy a well-adjusted older age.[4]

These varied theoretical perspectives offer explanations for a range of possible experiences for women at midlife, and are reiterated in the narratives of the women in my study. But herein lies a difficulty, for the above theoretical perspectives of midlife and ageing do not satisfactorily address the complex embodied and subjective experiences of ageing at midlife for women. Although they each engage with life processualisation to some extent, they do not enact a critical reading strategy of "midlife" from women's perspective. Further, as the topic of ageing has emerged as a neglected yet important area of social research, academic interest has also developed in

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[3]I explore and critique psychosocial theories of midlife as a transition in more detail in Chapter 6.

[4]The stage-based model of human development has been criticised on a number of grounds. I discuss the theory and its critique in detail in Chapter 6.

the issue of "midlife", and has brought new understandings of the experience of ageing and the "lifecourse".

Consequently, I argue that the *gendered* experience of ageing is often overlooked. The theories fail to problematise "gender" and to highlight the distinct yet diverse experience of midlife in women's lives within a changing social environment, in which redefinitions of ageing and midlife are interlaced with new understandings and expectations of gender, femininity, and women's social positions. They fail to account for the ways that women's embodiment *as women* in contemporary Western societies (which aligns women with their bodies and men with their minds), shapes ageing women's subjectivities differently to men. Feminist theories do, of course, use gender as their focal point, but they frequently overlook the nexus of gender and age and therefore do not address how women's gendered identities change as they age.

The theories also neglect to incorporate a critical review of the sociocultural context of people's ageing experiences, and how the sociocultural value placed on ageing, and the meanings attached to the ageing process, influence an individual's experience of ageing. Further, the theories are limited by age boundaries. The theories outlined above are delineated and therefore truncated by the socially-constructed boundaries of "midlife". Finally, the theories do not consider the embodied experience of ageing in contemporary Australian society. While menopause is given prominent status in studies of midlife women, its central focus overshadows other, often more important aspects of ageing for midlife women. There is, for example, little research which explores the nature of embodied ageing for women in contemporary Australian society and how their changing embodiment inscribes their subjectivity.

There is a need for research that decentres menopause as its research focus, yet incorporates the subjective, embodied experience of ageing in contemporary Australian society. This focus, I propose, can best be explored through an exploration of

autobiographical narratives which render the subjective experience of ageing and embodied consciousness from women's points of view.

POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINISM

Feminist poststructuralist theory argues for the centrality of gender in constituting an individual's subjectivity and places their gendered subjectivity within a context of social relationships which involve acceptance, rejection or resistance to patriarchal structures and forms of power made manifest by institutions and social practices. Yet the term patriarchy is a highly disputed descriptor between feminists (Ramazanoglu 1990:33), and is often used to imply a reductionist, biologically-essentialist and universal form of domination by men over women. Such an implication fails to acknowledge the different specificities of women's lives and the different degrees of power individual or groups of women may have within the situational context of their lives in relation to men and other groups of women. As Ramazanoglu contends, "women [are] far from equally oppressed" (1990:58). They stand in unequal relationships in terms of their ability to challenge or subvert patriarchal discourses which work to construct them in homogenising and disempowering ways, as the stories of the women in my study demonstrate. While some of my participants' lived experiences enable them to construct a more empowered definition of self, others interpret their ageing experience through disempowering discursive constructions of ageing as a process of redundancy and decline.

> Women's lives are contradictory in the sense that we are not an oppressed minority who can clearly see our oppression as women. We are biologically distinguished from men by our sex. The cultural meanings and social practices which have become attached to the two sexes are not, however, uniform or fixed. Being a woman or being a man is not the same experience in all places and at all times. The knowledge and skills needed to survive, the value attached to what is defined as masculine and what as [sic] feminine, the choices exercised over

> personal action, and the power exercised over others are all variable. While it may be very generally established that men exercise power over women it is not universally so, and such power is variable and can be resisted. Sometimes men have little power over anyone, sometimes women have power over men, as for example in slave societies, in racially divided societies, or as employers. (Ramazanoglu 1990:19)

While I acknowledge the historical and situational specificities of power relations which challenge universalist assumptions regarding patriarchal power, the term "patriarchy" remains a valuable theoretical tool with which to elucidate the context in which women's ageing and embodied subjectivities are reconstituted. When used in this thesis, "patriarchy" refers to:

> power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male. (Weedon 1997:1-2)

The recent postmodern emphasis on difference and a shift away from overriding fixed structures tends to downplay universalistic concepts often implicated by the use of the term patriarchy. However, like Banner, who argues for the "protean nature of patriarchy able to take on differing shapes in differing eras" (1992:6), I argue that patriarchy is a powerful, overriding and continuous presence in contemporary Western societies and, while I accept that its effects may vary in degree and kind, the concept of patriarchy as a major social structuring force of gender relations is valid. As Banner notes:

> Gender hierarchy based on the subordination of women often engages in a

> negativizing redefinition of images, idealizations, and stereotypes regarding women, especially when an improvement in women's position seems threatening. (1992:8)

Banner's shrewd observation, that negative stereotypes flourish when the subordinate groups to whom the stereotyping is directed become more empowered, encapsulates the position of ageing women in contemporary Australian society. Their increased self-confidence and empowerment is undermined by homogenising and disempowering stereotyping and discourses of older women as "menopausal", "grannies" or "old women.[5] The stereotypes fail to acknowledge the complexities and specificities of women's lived experience. An understanding of the multifaceted and nuanced lives of older women needs to be generated from women's interpretive understandings of their experiences and their perceived position in and relationship with society.

A feminist standpoint

Poststructural feminism offers an alternative perspective for analysing midlife women's stories of ageing based on women's lived experience, and enhances an understanding of the meanings women ascribe to their experiences. Such a perspective, or "feminist standpoint":

> carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible. (Hartsock 1987:159)

Writers such as Alcoff and Potter (1993), Kathryn Anderson et. al. (1990), Sandra Harding (1986, 1993), Nancy Hartsock (1987), Dorothy Smith (1987a, 1987b) and others have articulated the way in which women who have been the "objects" of the

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[5]See my introduction, Chapter 1, pages 2-4.

research gaze experience a disjunction between research findings, literature and epistemological knowledge about them on the one hand, and their lived experience on the other. Because hegemonic discourses represent the perspectives and serve the interests of dominant groups which are reproduced by social structures, institutions and social practices, the voices of more marginalised groups in society are either misrepresented or remain unheard. In contradistinction to objectifying, homogenising, dominant assumptions about ageing women, my research "privileges" women's voices, which enables me to better understand "women's composition and expression of their lived experience as modes of consciousness" (Johnson 1997:149).

A feminist standpoint emphasises the generation of knowledge by locating women as *subjects* who can contribute to knowledge production, and thus offers an alternative perspective from which to understand the experience of ageing and the meaning women create through their experiences. Their marginalised voices can provide new material from which to ask critical questions about the social world (Alcoff and Potter, 1993). Taking a feminist standpoint from which to explore women's experience of ageing, therefore, does not produce one coherent, homogeneous discourse, but rather women's voices are "multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory or incoherent" (Alcoff and Potter 1993:65). In order to interpret women's stories in which the subjective interpretation of their experience is rendered, a theory of subjectivity is required which is sensitive to the heterogeneous and multifaceted nature of women's stories and considers the social, historical and political contexts in which the discourses were generated. It is to the theoretical understandings of subjectivity that I now turn.

THEORISING EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY

An understanding of the nature of the constitution of the "self", and subjectivity is important for interpreting women's stories in my study. The stories of the midlife women in the study are rich with accounts of how women have redefined their identities, and reconstituted their subjectivities, in response to changing social

understandings of gender, ageing and embodiment. Women's narratives reveal fluid, changeable, conflicting and fragmented subjectivities, informed by and reconstituted through the body. Their narratives also reveal transforming subjectivities which have responded in various ways to changing social conditions, calling upon new discourses of "womanhood" and gendered social relations in an attempt to give meaning and bring clarity to their experience.

Concurrent with changing definitions of womanhood and changing social expectations of gender, women have also aged chronologically. New social definitions of ageing have thereby emerged to overlay the old, and alternative frameworks for women to articulate and give meaning to their lived and embodied experience of ageing have evolved. The complex, dynamic and often paradoxical nature of the lives and subjectivities of women needs to be explored through the lens of a theoretical perspective which is sensitive to the complexities of midlife women's lives and allows the richly textured and multilayered nature of women's discourses and life histories to be revealed.

Subjectivity as a process

My thesis, therefore, takes the perspective of, and argues for, a poststructural theory of *subjectivity as a process*, which sees the individual as subjectively constituted through language which gives meaning to experience through a range of socially-constructed discourses. The postmodern theoretical position of subjectivity as a process break from the humanist perspective of the individual as a rational, unique, unitary, coherent being with a "true" nature or essence which pre-exists language and experience.[6]

[6]I rely on Weedon's (1997:32) definition of subjectivity as comprising our thoughts and emotions, our ways of understanding our relation to the world, how we ascribe meaning to our position within our social environment and our personal experiences within social relations.

Rosi Braidotti likens this processual form of subjectivity to a "nomadic" subject position. She uses the concept of "figuration" to refer to a 'politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity' (Braidotti 1994:1). Further, Braidotti's nomadic subject is in a state of becoming, a subject in process, rather than a fixed, completed, realised self. Braidotti relies on the figuration of the nomad to envision an embodied subjectivity which resists categorisation, particularly into dominant phallocentric definitions of ageing womanhood. I argue the nomadic subjective figuration is relevant to midlife women's subjectivities, which have traversed new territory as women's new understandings of gender and womanhood and new modes of being an ageing women in contemporary postmodern society have evolved.

Indeed, although contemporary writings on identity often highlight the mobile and transmigratory nature of modern life, the nomad is not necessarily a traveller in the literal sense. The figuration of the nomad can also refer to a subjective form of mobility and traversity. For example, postmodern theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman argue that movement in the form of migration, travel and relocation characterises contemporary living, and 'immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change' (1998:2). Not only are people on the move literally, but people's subjectivities and identities are in constant flux and undergo a continual process of reconstitution and redefinition. Pamela's story, for example, suggests she has been "on the move" (to use Bauman's term) both figuratively and literally.

> *You think you're going to be a teacher all your life, and you're not. I've had about four different job changes in the last eight, nine years, and each one has opened doors and allowed me to grow. They keep happening and when they do I think "where will this lead me?" You don't stay in one place. Having been brought up in the country and thinking this is where I'll stay suddenly I'm in Hong Kong, in Belgium, in Darwin, and back here in Melbourne.*
>
> *Pamela, 47, remarried, teacher trainer*

Pamela's literal act of travelling from one place to another has inscribed her changing subjectivity. Her experience is a familiar theme in the stories of the women in my study. Pamela's geographical nomadic state is mirrored by her nomadic subjectivity in which new career experiences in different countries have "opened doors" and enabled her to "grow" in unplanned and unpredictable ways: "where will this lead me?" Physical and subjective mobility interact to produce a discursive reconstruction of the postmodern subject on the move. Pamela's processual, evolving and unstable nomadic subjectivity reveals a decentred subject, rather than a fixed, essential, rational self.

The nomad as subversive

Braidotti's theoretical construction of the nomad goes beyond the figurative state of travel, geographically, psychically and intellectually, to incorporate the possibility of migration away from dominant discourses to embrace alternate subject positions. Braidotti positions women's nomadic state as a distancing from and transgression of conventional, restrictive and prescriptive boundaries. For Braidotti it is 'the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling' (Braidotti 1994:5). Her figuration of the nomad is a fruitful concept with which to interpret the stories of the midlife women in my study as they reveal evolving and processual subjectivities which are influenced by changing embodiment, context and lived experience. Like the nomad they reveal subjectivities which not only resist conventional categorisation but overturn devaluing and homogenising dominant subject positions of the ageing or menopausal woman, as Barbara's story highlights.

> *At around forty things started falling into place. A greater understanding of things in general. Taking charge of myself. Deciding I'm going to sort out what's for me.*
>
> *At forty-two I made a transition.... I was rather fed up with being treated like a neurotic housewife when I fronted up at the doctors with sinusitis. I remarked to*

the [male] doctor that I was not going to have any more antihistamines and I'd do it myself. I found a wonderful homoeopath and that started me on a path which I've stayed on.

Barbara, 59, married, natural healer

Barbara's act of resistance to a male biomedical practitioner is clearly a subversion of Australia's established hierarchy of gender, authority and power at that time. Barbara challenged her doctor who had patronisingly ignored her voicing her experience of sinusitis. Rather than acknowledging the specificities of her condition he dismissed her as a "neurotic housewife" and prescribed more medication. By contesting dominant medical discourse and seeking treatment through homeopathic medicine, Barbara was able to find an alternative cure for her condition. Impressed by the therapeutic effects of homeopathy, Barbara was impelled to travel a "new path" as a natural healer, which enabled her to reconstitute her subjectivity and remake her identity in radically different ways.

Braidotti's configuration of the nomadic subject as resistant through her "subversion of set conventions" is precisely what draws me to her theoretical construct. It is useful for understanding the women in my study, as it shares a subversive quality which also characterises the majority of my participants' stories. They defy cultural images of the ageing or menopausal woman and reconstruct their identities through different interpretations of their multiple experiences. As Barbara exemplifies, "nomadic consciousness... is a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self" (Braidotti 1994:25). Barbara's description of her act of resistance alerted me to the importance of women's bodies as a site of contested meanings from which they reconstitute their subjectivities, an issue I now examine.

Women's ageing embodiment

Important to understanding women's subjectivity is their ageing, and therefore changing

embodiment, within the context of contemporary, youth-oriented, body-conscious Australian society. With the exception of menopausal embodiment, women's ageing bodies have been overlooked in studies about ageing women. Such an omission renders insights into the social situation of women partial at best, because women's ageing bodies are a key site of their social devaluation.

> If we take antihumanist critiques of personal identity seriously, feminists can meaningfully talk about women as an oppressed group or a site of possible resistance only by means of the specificity of the female body and its place in locating women's lived experiences and social position.... As pliable flesh, the body is the unspecified raw matter of social inscription, producing subjects as subjects of a particular kind. (Grosz 1993:195)

As Grosz (1993) points out, antihumanist critiques of identity, which conceive of subjectivity as a process, must incorporate the embodiment of women and the sociocultural meanings ascribed to their embodiment as central to the reconstitution of subjectivity.

In postmodern societies it is argued that the body is increasingly important as a site of cultural inscription. Grosz interprets the relationship between the body and society as a möbius strip in which twisting strands inform and reinforce the other (1994:xii)[7] in an "'inflection' of mind into body and body into mind" (Williams and Bendelow 1998:3). The möbius strip configuration enables me to interpret the experience of ageing for women as an interplay between two strands which produces and reproduces women's subjective experience of ageing.

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[7] I discuss this concept in more detail in Chapter 8.

Feminist theorists have pointed out how women's bodies have been conceptualised in terms of fluidity and flow, thereby crossing boundaries and resisting containment (Gatens 1996, Grosz 1994, Irigaray, 1985, Young 1990). "Fluids, unlike objects, have no definite border; they are unstable... fluids surge and move (Young 1990:193)". Grosz posits that women's bodies are symbolically conceptualised as a model of "seepage" (1994:203). I argue the menopausal body is symbolically conceptualised in opposition to seepage, that is a body which is ossifying.[8] By implication the older woman is socially and creatively perceived as desiccated, as becoming redundant and having no further contribution to make to society. This social view of older women, discursively constructed through the conceptualisation of the "granny" or the "old woman", is challenged and resisted by many women in my study. In contrast, their narratives show that the relationship between gender, discourse and power in constructing women's selves and transforming their subjectivities, is essential to an understanding of the changing and contradictory nature of women's subjectivities within a society in which patriarchal understandings of womanhood and femininity prevail. I consequently discuss the significance of language to structure experience and shape women's interpretations of the meaning of their experience.

LANGUAGE, EXPERIENCE AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

The centrality of language in poststructural theory as the structuring principle of subjectivity decentres the rational, essential subject of humanism and focuses instead on the constitution of subjectivity through specific discourses which provide meaning and frame an understanding of individual experience. Multiple and conflicting discourses constitute subjectivities by producing "selves" as conscious thinking subjects who give meaning to social relations, our experiences, and sociocultural context. Subjectivity is

[8]I discuss the concept of the menopausal body as "drying up" in more detail on page 69.

produced in the individual through "discursive practices" (Weedon 1997:21), which are linguistic expressions such as formal discussions, informal conversations, or narratives such as storytelling, through which discourse is personalised.

Further, Weedon argues that what is perceived as "reality" is constructed by language through a range of sociopolitically-generated discourses, in circulation within specific cultural and historical contexts that constitute social reality and structure the meaning of lived experience (1997:22). The perception of "reality", then, does not preexist language and language does not label a "real world":

> Neither social reality nor the 'natural' world has fixed intrinsic meanings which language reflects or expresses. Different languages and different discourses within the same language divide up the world and give it meaning in different ways which cannot be reduced to one another through translation or by an appeal to universally shared concepts reflecting a fixed reality. (Weedon 1997:22)

The insight that language shapes reality and constitutes our subjectivities was first theorised by Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), who argued that language does not reflect an existing reality, but rather constitutes reality for us. He argued that language is a system of signs containing the signifier (word or written image) and the signified (the meaning attached to the signifier), and while he argued for an arbitrary relationship between the two, he believed that language contained a fixed, pre-given structure *a priori* to writing or speech. Postmodern theorist Jacques Derrida (1976), whose work also takes language as its central focus in the construction of meaning, questioned the essentialist assumption that language contains an inherent, abstract structure, arguing instead that language is always located in an historical and social context. It is within an evolving sociohistorical context that language, in the form of discourse, takes on meaning. Language, then, is effected through sociohistorically-located discourses which, in turn, become the structuring principle of society (Weedon 1997).

Discourse and power

By freeing language from the notion of an *a priori* structure and reconceiving it as fluid and evolving, language as discursive practice becomes a vehicle through which cultural, social, historical and political interests are manifest. Discourses, then, are politically-driven and represent particular interests, they structure social relations, social institutions and practices, and shape modes of thought as well as individual subjectivity. Discursive practices are thus sites of power and they take place within what Foucault termed "discursive fields" which comprise the 'relationship between language, social institutions, subjectivity and power' (in Weedon 1997:35).

While it is through discursive practices that an individual's subjectivity is constructed, discursive fields can become sites where conflicting versions of meaning are contested.

> How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent. (Weedon 1987:26)

Because the interests of different groups are represented through specific discourses, a number of discourses can exist within the same discursive field, and often there is an unequal power relationship between discourses. While dominant discourses may interpellate[9] individuals as subjects into prescribed subject positions such as versions of feminine gender ide[illegible]propriate to, for example, the "good mother", or more specific to ageing wo[illegible]e "good grandmother", competing and marginalised

[9]A term used by Althusser (1971) to refer to the function of ideology which "interpellates" its subjects, that is, it constitutes an individual's subjectivity in a language of which she perceives herself to be the author.

discourses challenge the hegemony of dominant discourse and provide alternative ways in which subjects can define and ascribe meaning to various subject positions and to their own experience. "The crone", for example, who has been resurrected through feminist discourse from her former derogatory status within the patriarchal paradigm, now represents a positive image of the wise, powerful, independent older woman and provides an alternative subject position to the benign, homely, asexual grandmother whose interests and usefulness are limited to serving others. For midlife women, two subject positions, the "menopausal woman" whose subjectivity and identity is subordinated to her biological state within biomedical discourse, and the "empowered older woman", represented in "human development" discourses which suggest "growth" and "exploration", or essentialist feminist discourses which suggest enhanced spirituality and empowerment, provide contrasting and polarised subject positions between which women discursively constitute their experiences.

Many women use multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses to articulate their experiences. The stories of the women in my study reveal how, for women, evolving subjectivities are shaped by and through parallel evolving sociohistorical discourses which compete to define women's lived experiences and provide alternative ways in which women can interpret meaning from their experiences. The following transcript reveals the centrality of both the patriarchal and the feminist value systems, and the way women may traffic the tension between the two, as well as the way in which women use patriarchal and feminist discourses in order to articulate their experiences. In this case, Tanya calls upon discourses of gender and ageing in order to revisit and transform her experience and her subjectivity.

> *I had to have a total hysterectomy very young... and I think that in some way I felt a failure because I hadn't been able to have children... I felt I really had to succeed somewhere else.... For a while in my thirties I tried to do everything. I tried to be the perfect housewife, be a success at work, be a good stepmother....*

As a result of the feminist movement I felt it was one of my duties or obligations to achieve in a career sense and the result of that is that I pushed myself beyond my own limits. I suffered personally and emotionally and my relationship with my husband suffered and it's only in the last twelve months I've said to myself "it doesn't matter if I'm not a shaker and mover as long as I'm happy with what I'm doing".

HOW DID YOU COME TO THAT UNDERSTANDING?

I basically had a breakdown. I bit the bullet and realised there was something wrong with me and went to see a psychiatrist. It was really a life crisis... I started to ease up on myself. To say "you don't have to do everything and be everything, you've got to be yourself and sit back and enjoy. You're pretty much an okay person, you've done all right in life, nice house, good relationship, a step daughter who loves you".

Tanya, 48, remarried, teacher

Tanya's transcript suggests the power of discourse to construct a disempowered subjectivity, the power of dialectic in reconstructing (with the help of a psychiatrist) a more empowered definition of self, and thereby the malleability of subjectivity. Tanya's early experience of feeling unfeminine because she could not produce children is an understandable response in a society where the emphasis is on motherhood as a normative state for women, and central to her legitimate place in society and her feminine identity. In this case limited patriarchal discourses about women's social value and standards of femininity led her to feel a "failure". In subverting the patriarchal discourse of femininity in which fertility is a valued component, Tanya identifies herself with the feminist movement's imperative, as she understands it, that women succeed in the workplace. However, Tanya also responded to mainstream cultural suggestions which subvert the feminist message that women can "have it all" by buying into the subtext that women must also "do it all". Her difficulty in measuring up

to this standard is reflected in what could be interpreted as a "backlash" against feminism. Tanya held "feminism" responsible for her overachieving tendencies.

Tanya's resolution of her problem emerged through a dialogue between competing value systems of patriarchy and feminism, facilitated by her psychiatrist, through which she came to a new understanding of her self in relation to her social world. Her new understanding, which she normalised as a "life crisis", is resolved through the "self-actualising" discourse characteristic of the Human Potential Movement which emphasises self-acceptance, fulfilment and personal growth (Ehrenreich 1983). The theme is familiar in humanistic "positive ageing" and "midlife" discourses which also encourage their subjects to believe that "you've got to be yourself and sit back and enjoy" their lives.

As discourses are historically and culturally specific, the constitution of subjectivities and the meanings ascribed to experience are only comprehensible within their historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, with specific discourses, the individual assumes historically- and culturally-specific forms of subjectivity (Weedon 1997:31). Midlife women's life stories reveal the historically specific nature of their changing subjectivities and the reconstitution of their subjectivities around contemporary discourses of gender, ageing, midlife and menopause. Competing discourses, then, not only have the potential to frame a person's identity within a particular sociopolitical context, they also enable individuals to interpret and understand their experiences through the discursive creation of meaning.

The discursive construction of meaning

Poststructuralists argue that experience has no essential, inherent meaning, but is given meaning through discourses which contain meaning systems. Indeed, experience is "lived", interpretive and conditioned by cultural values, and differently-positioned actors may think and value differently. Narratives contain terms which are culturally

significant and they enable people to "express their experience of culture's grip on individual lives" (Wikan 1990:18). But while women are to some degree in the "grip" of culture, they also subvert cultural constraints and make meaning out of their experience in individualised ways.

> Meanings should be such as people themselves entertain at some level of consciousness and expression... We need to observe actual people, differently positioned, making use of such expressions for particular ends to make sense of their interpersonal experiences. (Wikan 1990:15)

Wikan urges that an understanding of how individuals interpret their experience requires paying conscientious attention to "lived significance" of people's concerns, the particularities of their lives, and how they interpret themselves and each other within their own forms of discourse (1990:xxiv).

Within the discursive field of ageing, competing discourses circulate in society which attempt to define and articulate the meaning and experience of ageing. For example, sociobiomedical discourse defines ageing as a process of physical decline and social withdrawal; psychological discourse constructs the ageing process as a series of inherent stages of personal growth and development; and feminist discourse argues that ageing can be an opportunity for women to be freed from the restrictions of patriarchally-defined reproductive and sexual definitions of womanhood. From the subjective position of the speaker, a woman may call upon any or all of these discourses, or alternatively fashion her own, unique discursive interpretation in order to articulate her own understandings of her experience of ageing.

Due to the multiplicity of discourses within a discursive field the individual is a site of conflicting forms of subjectivity. While language gives meaning to experience, competing discourses enable alternative ways of constituting meaning. Exposure to new discourses within a discursive field avails women of multiple ways of constituting

the meaning of their experience. Encounters with women's groups, for example, may open women to new ways of defining gendered experiences (Weedon 1987:34).

> The political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change. In making our subjectivity the product of the society and culture within which we live, feminist poststructuralism insists that forms of subjectivity are produced historically and change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them. (Weedon 1997:33)

Hence, the discursive practices in which women engage both construct and reflect the multiple meanings of a given subject within a society. As discourses of gender in Western society create and reflect multiple and competing modes of "masculinity" and "femininity", discourses of ageing in contemporary Australian society create and reflect multiple modes of being an ageing woman. Women's attempts to contest conventional categorisations to which ageing women are subject and reconstitute alternative identities are reflected in women's use of alternative, subversive and resistant discourses as they work to redefine the meaning of their experiences.

The multiple discourses of ageing, gender and embodiment from which women draw, blend and alchemise with their lived experience to produce specifically positioned, interpretive accounts of self, subjectivity and identity. In postmodern societies, in which emphasis is placed on individual constructions of identity through narrative autobiography, discursive practices reveal how women constitute the meaning of their experiences and reconstitute their ageing subjectivities. I now discuss how identities are constructed in contemporary postmodern societies, and then examine the importance of autobiographical narrative for reconstituting a person's sense of self and identity in postmodernity.

POSTMODERNITY AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AND IDENTITY

Contemporary theorists of ageing are increasingly exploring the ways in which individuality is constituted in a modern, or postmodern world. The postmodern view argues that a social transformation has taken place from a focus on production and the universalising, grand theories of class and capitalism, to a focus on consumption in mass society where 'social actors increasingly are marked out by their manner of consumption as by the role they perform in the economy' (Gilleard and Higgs 1996). Mass consumption has replaced the collective identities associated with class with a cohort-based culture (Gilleard and Higgs 1996:86). Identity can be constructed, and even purchased in a range of ways such as engagement with leisure activities, therapy, fashion, political and spiritual alignment. 'Identity is not so much given—by family name or as the image of God—or ascribed as produced, the result of an ongoing process of discovery... Modern style control is still sought, but meaning is less than apparent' (Lyons 2000:69). In these ways, I propose that the identity of an ageing individual is constructed through:

> an amalgam of both past and present consumption and exposure/ engagement with mass culture.... Presented with the task of decoding this overabundance of cultural and symbolic signs the individual was allowed a choice of lifestyle and a "pick'n mix" approach to the creation of a social identity. (Gilleard and Higgs 1996:82-84)

The postmodern viewpoint outlined by Gilleard and Higgs (1996) above emphasises signification over meaning in the formation of identity and the construction of self. Featherstone and Hepworth refer to the phenomenon as the cultivation of "designer lives", in that one styles one's identity via "consumer accoutrements" to create a certain effect (1989:146). While I agree that signification has become an important component

of identity making in contemporary Western societies, I also argue that for the women in my study meaning was equally important. The sources of meaning from which women drew and incorporated into their identities moved away from earlier prescribed, conventional forms of meaning elicited from family ties and responsibilities toward a more individual and eclectic approach, in which personal biography, spirituality, and community connections had become important.

Postmodern subjects are constructed in multiple ways through the process of selective consumption from a range of choices that are potential building blocks with which to design and construct the subject's dynamic and multifaceted identity. Because identity construction becomes a central preoccupation in the postmodern world, engaged with through a continual process of discovery and rediscovery, the body becomes increasingly important as an active component in the creation of identity. Many of my participants suggested that their ageing, changing embodiment can also be interpreted as self-transformation and can be infused with symbolic meaning such as women who interpreted menopause as a "transition", an opportunity for "reflection" and a time for "reconciliation".[10] For others, bodily signification was an outward expression of personal beliefs or political values. Given the fragmentary and temporal nature of identity, postmodern subjects continually reaffirm themselves through autobiographical, historical, geospatial, biological and relational narratives which momentarily affirm a continuous and stable sense of self. The construction of a coherent, unified self and social identity rely on autobiography. I now discuss understandings of the "self" and "identity" and the importance of narrative autobiography for consolidating and articulating women's understandings of identity and the self.

[10] The stories of women who constructed menopause as a "transition" are discussed in Chapter 4.

Autobiographical constructions of self and identity

Postmodern feminist theorists have critiqued dominant Western philosophical understandings of the "self" as *homo economicus*, free, rational and individualistic, and argued for a perspective of self as historically and socially situated, decentred, not transparent, and constructed through narrative (Meyers 1997). Battaglia argues that the construction of self is a rhetorical enterprise, for the self cannot exist in an 'essential, preexisting sense to be fashioned... under rhetoric's influence, the self cannot be the stable product of its own manufacture' (Battaglia 1995:1). The self is made through multiple rhetorics, which interact and emerge from a diversity of social situations and interpersonal relations. In the interactive field of rhetoric and sociality, the self can be more lucidly conceived of as self-action embedded within power relations. Rhetoric in this sense is an 'uncertain and provisional social project' (Battaglia 1995:2), which emphasises more the political nature of the self rather than a concept of a "true", "essential" or "transcendent" self. The self becomes 'a socially enacted agenda or ideology, a practical capacity of human culture rather than of human nature' (Battaglia 1995:3), i.e. a collaboration between rhetoric and sociality. The self is therefore embodied and historically situated.

In my thesis I use the term "self" to emphasise a personal interpretive, embodied, autobiographical account of one's subject position, and the term subjectivity to elucidate the processual, experiential nature of the reconstitution of self. Both the self and subjectivity are personal and experiential. Identity refers to the process of constructing a social self from a range of cultural attributes which have personal meaning and are prioritised over other cultural attributes and sources of meaning. Identities are dynamic, they take shape within a specific sociohistorical context and can change and be reshaped "when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society" (Castells 1997:8). I use the term "identity" when emphasising a person's

narrative construction of their sociohistorical positioning in society.[11]

The meanings of the terms "self", "subjectivity" and "identity" overlap and are often used interchangeably by my participants, as well as in popular and academic literature, such as Braidotti's (1994) explication of the decentred self:

> there is no triumphant cognito supervising the contingency of the self; the nomad stands for moveable diversity, the nomad's identity is an inventory of traces. (1994:14).

Indeed, in examining the stories of my participants the distinction between "self" and "identity" is also blurred. While the broad categories of "social" and "personal" are helpful indicators of "identity" or "self", and while I attempt to distinguish between subjectivity, self and identity in my thesis, at times the distinction seems awkward and contrived and my interpretation and use of the terms is by necessity also blurred.

In postmodern society individuals' understandings of their "selves" and identities relies on personal history recollected and reconstructed through autobiographical narratives in order to produce a meaningful, coherent and stable sense of self. Gergen and Gergen argue "the narrative is the central means by which people endow their lives with meaning across time" (1993:193). I suggest that it is not only the lived experience that produces an autobiography, but also the retrospective autobiography which constructs a person's identity and sense of a coherent, unified self.

The recollection of the past and the reconstruction of self and social identity through narrative relies on "memory work" (Gillis 1994:3) and involves both remembering and

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[11] I give a detailed definition of these terms in my glossary. While I briefly define self, subjectivity and identity in my introduction, I reiterate their definition here to clarify the theoretical framework of my thesis.

forgetting. An individual's story elicits a "rediscovery" of the past which provides a grounding for the present through the reconstruction of meaning (Fortier 1999). Both memory and forgetting are complicit in producing historical and autobiographical narratives of self which construct a self in process. Stories of history and geography constitute a "rediscovery" of the past, providing a grounding for the present 'grasped through reconstruction' (Fortier 1999:47). Braidotti argues that understandings of self and social identity are retrospective and narrated in the form of a map of where we have been (Braidotti 1994:35). "The nomad's identity is a map of where s/he has already been; s/he can always reconstruct it a posteriori, as a set of steps in an itinerary" (Braidotti 1994:14).

Carol's story elucidates how she has reconstituted her sense of self through an evolving social identity, both of which rely on a process of retrospective reconstruction through autobiographical narrative, of traces of where she has been in order to construct a present identity.

> *I wouldn't be surprised if, looking back in a couple of years, this was a new stage with the consultant work. I see it as all the life skills and experience coming together to enable me to do that. I needed all that experience, the work skills, the gay son and having the strength to walk out on my marriage and the beautiful antique filled home in South Yarra. All of that has come together.*
>
> *Carol, 58, remarried, consultant*

Carol's narrative, discursively constructed through the retrospective process of "looking back", enabled her to consolidate a "meaningful" identity from past fragments which she perceived as having "come together". Carol had changed careers and at the time of the interview was working as a consultant. Her ability to define her (then) current situation as a "new stage", built upon the "coming together" of disparate past experiences suggests she takes a developmental view of self where these experiences

are perceived as having a cumulative benefit and purpose. Carol's act of discursive reconstruction of self and social identity is spontaneous, rendered meaningful through the interview process in response to my question about how Carol saw her life. While memory and reconstruction are vital to the reconstruction of self, it is not an essential, unified self/identity which is reconstructed through memory, but threads of memory which are drawn together and woven in a reconstructive process. Blair's story suggests how identity is fragmented, evolving, and constructed from experience rather than being the product of a contingent, essential self:

> *Through all those community issues I've been involved with, it's been a opportunity for me to learn about things, to read and talk to other people, and I suppose that's how my own identity, and my own views, have developed.*
>
> *Blair, 51, married, administrator*

Blair's story suggests the interactive nature of self, identity, and society as a product of lived experience and sociality. For my participants, identity is constructed through remembered and imagined ways of being, and is reconstructed through new ways of perceiving experience and constituting meaning.

I have argued that women construct their social identities and selves through autobiographical narratives. The midlife women in my study articulate their autobiographical interpretations of ageing and embodiment within the range of discourses on "midlife". Yet a closer reading of their stories suggests the significance of sociohistorical context in informing and inscribing women's autobiographical reconstructions of their subjectivities and social identities, as Tanya's story on pages 29-30 highlights.

Women's embodied narratives

For women, embodiment is a significant aspect of their sense of self, particularly

because of women's cultural alignment with their bodies, as I have discussed, and as the stories of the women in my study explicate. A critical reading of narrative is a particularly valuable research tool in elucidating the ways in which women's changing subjectivities are embodied. A gendered analysis of autobiography reveals how women's stories suggest changing embodiment through their life trajectory. The importance of embodiment appears early in women's stories: childhood and adolescent recollections convey the embodied nature of women's lived experiences, highlighting the degree to which embodiment is an important component of identity, particularly for women. Gergen and Gergen write that:

> [a] woman's sense of identity remains closely tied to her physical condition. It is not so much that the body is used instrumentally - as a means to some other end outside the body [as for men]. Rather, to be in a certain bodily condition is to "be oneself.... For women, appearance constitutes an integral part of every story they tell and they are often keenly aware of shaping their bodies for ulterior ends... to create an impression... through... appearance". (1993:205-206)

The authors allege that because women constitute their subjectivity via a close association with their body any violation of their embodiment is profoundly threatening to their sense of identity. Women's autobiographies often include lovers, children, parents, "those with whom the body has been intimately shared" (Gergen and Gergen 1993:212). A comparison of autobiographies reveals that while men's stories are linear, goal-focussed, unemotional and largely disembodied, "[w]omen's stories usually weave together themes of achievement, along with themes of family obligations, personal development, love lives, children's welfare, and friendship... Because of these multiple themes and self-expressions, the tone or movement of women's stories are never unidirectional, focused, or contained" (Gergen and Gergen 1993). My participants' stories do indeed reveal discontinuities with past embodied selves, discontinuities that centre around issues of gender and ageing. Stories of ageing reflect discontinuities with

youthful interpretations of self and reconstructions of new ageing, embodied selves.

The sociohistorical context of autobiographical narratives

The autobiographical narratives of my study reflect the changing historical and cultural processes that have shaped Australian society and women's subjectivities since the second half of the 20th century. The participants of my study, I argue, represent a cohort of women who are at the vanguard of postmodern change. When my participants were growing up, modernist ways of identity making seemed predictable, stable, and enduring, unlike Australia's globalised, electronically mediated, fragmented and ever-changing postmodern society of today. Modernist expectations of family ties and gender identity, career options and employment patterns, as well as religious and community life, were shaped by definitive and limited ways of doing and being. Particularly for women, dominant representations of femininity and ontological understandings of women's "nature" in this conservative, hyperpatriarchal era constructed boundary markers which constricted possibilities for women's identity construction and limited society's imagination of what women could become. Their recollections of girlhood within the haven of a nuclear family, discursively reconstructed through autobiographical narrative, reveal young lives constrained by conventional forms of femininity and truncated imaginations of their future selves as self-sacrificing wives and mothers within a nuclear family.

When feminism presented a differing political consciousness and asserted an alternative value system to Australian patriarchy and provided women with new possibilities and new ways of constructing their identities, fractures in the continuum of women's conventional lives precipitated a reconstruction of subjectivity for many of my participants. As they entered midlife, and the millennium neared, possibilities in the ongoing process of the reconstitution of subjectivity for my participants expanded to

embrace unprecedented choices for identity making in the 21st century, as their narratives explicate.[12] Women's autobiographical narratives reveal the ways in which they have reconceived their identities and reconstituted their subjectivities. Stories of revisiting the past to pick up new threads, of self-exploration with therapists, counsellors and psychiatrists, link to their analysis of the embodied experience of menopause as a way to create meaning out of lived experience. My participants' narratives reveal certain themes around which their postmodern identities are being reformed: stories of location and place, of image and style, and of finding meaning through work, art, bodywork or spirituality, and of connecting with women's groups or networks.

CONCLUSION

Because a focus of my research is to elucidate women's narratives of changing subjectivities within and as a response to changing social conditions regarding women's position in society, both as ageing and gendered beings, it is important to explore the forms of discourse women call upon to articulate the social and embodied changes they have experienced. Midlife women's discursive practices reflect a range of subject positions within a range of discursive fields. In the discursive field encompassing the "meanings" and "experience" of "midlife", many women articulate their experiences through a range of competing discourses.

Some women articulate discourses that assume an essential "true" self, which they see as the core of the individual and which progresses through various stages of "growth" and "development " towards a fully "authentic" or "realised" self. They use terms such as "midlife crisis", "midlife transitions", "finding the real me", and becoming a "whole person", through "personal growth" or "personal development". The terms reflect

[12] See Chapter 11 for an exploration of how women are reconstituting their identities.

contemporary psychosocial discourses which attempt to define the meaning and experience of midlife through psychological and human development models of experience. Other women's understandings of the changes they perceive at midlife range from biomedical discourses, which locate their experiences within the discursive field encompassing the menopausal or ageing body, calling upon dominant biomedical themes of "decline" such as "loss of energy", "hormonal changes" or the body "winding down". Other women call upon feminist discourses that locate their subjective experiences around the feminist theme of "empowerment", which suggest a process of disengagement with patriarchal values and a more woman-centred understanding of self, women's spirituality, and women's connection with nature and the earth, themes which sometimes also parallel New Age discourses of spirituality. Occasionally, postmodern discourses articulate women's subjective experience of change, calling upon language which reflects a volatile, fragmented and contradictory understanding of subjectivity, and/or by using themes of postmodern consumerism where the individual "chooses" aspects of contemporary culture such as dress or political or spiritual orientations with which they "design" their identities. That poststructural discourses are articulated by the more highly educated women in the study reinforces the poststructuralist argument that discourse can structure people's interpretation of meaning in experience.

Discursive understandings of the self give meaning to women's sense of changing, fragmented and contradictory subjectivities. It is also important to note that midlife women are not necessarily consistent in the discourses with which they articulate their subjectivities, but may also articulate multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses within a discursive field in the process of constructing their subjectivities through the telling of the life histories which frame and give meaning to their lives. The value of historical narrative in elucidating the experience of ageing highlights the advantages of qualitative, in-depth interviews for research of this kind, and it is to these methodological issues that I now turn.

CHAPTER 3

Unbridling the scold:

Research design and the women in my study

Western societies have silenced "old women" who, as postmenopausal women, were often freed from the patriarchal control of their fathers or husbands, could serve no further purpose in terms of reproducing children, and were thus seen as redundant, anomalous and an economic drain on society. The perspective of old women as superfluous persists today in medical discourses which argue that women's putatively brittle and depleted bodies are a potential financial burden on younger citizens.[13]

Often the silencing of old women has been subtle, such as the social devaluing of women's knowledge in contemporary Australia by stereotyping older women as grandmothers. The stereotypical caricature of the powerless and benign grandmother is captured by Goren, a participant in my study and a grandmother. She informed me that "nobody wants to know what granny knows".

Other forms of silencing women have been brutal and terrifying, such as the use of a device called the "scold's bridle": a metal cage which covered a woman's head and which drove a spike through her tongue or cheek. The device was inflicted on women toward the end of the witchhunt era in Europe, and its purpose was to silence outspoken women, or "scolds", thereby coercing them to conform to new, urban standards of femininity. The methodological strategy I have used is intended to "unbridle the scold",

[13] I discuss this issue in more detail in Chapters 4 and 10.

that is, to allow women's outspoken, scolding, critical, wise and informed voices to inform a broader understanding of embodied and subjective ageing in contemporary Australian society.

THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE

To elicit stories of women's thoughts, experiences and understandings of their gendered subjectivities within an evolving sociocultural milieu in which competing discourses of ageing and femininity vie for meaning, I used the face-to-face interview technique in order to yield rich, qualitative data. I chose the in-depth, open-ended question format for my study to equate to the project's methodological and theoretical parameters in which "learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women" (Reinharz 1992:19).

I conducted a total of fifty interviews, of which I use forty-seven here.[14] The interviews took between one to three hours and all but four were taped. Data from the four untaped interviews are based on written notes. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participant's home, some were conducted in an office, usually the participant's place of work, and one interview was conducted in my home. All the taped interviews were transcribed by me, which assured a high degree of accuracy of transcription.

The interview schedule[15] was semi-structured and divided into five sections: gendered identity, relationships, life changes, ageing and menopause. The interview schedule was developed by myself but I also reworked questions from three other studies: Mary Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*

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[14]One of the interviews was rejected because the tape was inaudible, another was rejected because the participant became involved at an academic level in the project, so her transcript was extracted for ethical reasons. The third was rejected because, due to a misunderstanding, the participant's age (71) was beyond the midlife age range set for the project.

[15]See Appendix 1.

(1986), Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982), and Elissa Melamed's *Mirror Mirror: The Terror of Not Being Young* (1983).

While the interview schedule was semi-structured as I wanted to cover key themes, women were free to articulate their stories with minimal direction, and I took the lead of the women I interviewed, where possible, when moving on to a new theme. The value of the in-depth interview technique is that it enabled my women to give an oral history of their experiences and the meaning they ascribe to those experiences, and to reflect upon their stories to provide a richer, multilayered portrayal of their experiences.

> When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the "truths" of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories. Interviews with women can explore private realms... to tell us what women actually did instead of what experts thought they did or should have done. Interviews can also tell us how women felt about what they did and can interpret the personal meaning and value of particular activities. (Anderson et al. 1990:95)

Because women articulate their experiences through discourse, and because competing discourses represent the power of social institutions and practices from which they are generated, the in-depth interview allowed me to understand where midlife women situate themselves in relation to social and cultural discourses, the forms of power they represent, and whether they conform, resist, or subvert these discourses. I was able to understand how women viewed and valued themselves as ageing women within the context of their sociocultural milieu, and how they accepted, resisted or redefined cultural myths and stereotypes about ageing women. Further, the in-depth interview allowed me to trace the patterns of thought which led the women I interviewed to make meaning out of their experiences, and to more closely investigate the nuances and subtleties of their linguistic practices: the self-doubts and hesitations, as well as the

contradictions which appear in women's narratives when their private understandings seem at odds with cultural myths about how ageing women are expected to think and feel (Anderson et al. 1990:102).

THE INTERVIEW SETTING AND THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

While the in-depth interview gives the researcher access to "people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz 1992:19), and by telling their stories women are able to communicate the meaning they ascribe to their experiences, access is contingent upon the kind of interview environment in which the communication takes place. In order to create an environment in which the women I interviewed would feel comfortable telling their stories I adopted a friendly, open, egalitarian style of interviewing which encouraged self-disclosure both on the part of the participant and myself. My approach links with feminist forms of interviewing which break with the hierarchal, objective approach of "scientific" interviewing (Oakley 1981, Reinharz 1992).

As a middle aged women interviewing other middle aged women about their experiences of ageing, I believed that to position the interviewer and interviewee on the same plane creates an atmosphere of trust in which the participants felt knowledgeable and valued as individuals and would be comfortable in sharing their stories. In hindsight this proved not only to be a fruitful methodological strategy, but a highly rewarding experience for both myself and the participants. Rather than taking a position of separation from the interviewee, my position as "one of" the participants served to facilitate my acceptance in women's private spaces and allowed me to be privy to their more intimate feelings and experiences about the issues we discussed. As Ann Oakley writes in her classic paper on feminist interviewing:

> the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchal and when the

> interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (1981:41)

The value of self-disclosure on the part of the researcher, essential in such an interview setting, is discussed by other researchers such as Oakley (1981) Reinharz (1992) and Melamed (1983). Elissa Melamed for example, in her interviews with ageing women, initially encountered a reluctance on the part of her participants to discuss their thoughts about ageing. After she began to share with her participants her own fear of ageing the women she interviewed became more comfortable in disclosing their thoughts and feelings. Such a reciprocal sharing of information fosters intimacy and rapport between interviewer and participant. It was through the approach of giving as well as receiving information that I established a relationship of trust and rapport with the women I interviewed, and which fostered the rich, detailed and intimate nature of the women's stories which follow. I believe that by adopting a more formal style of interviewing the quality of data would have been seriously compromised. There were two or three women with whom I did not develop a rapport, usually when they had negative feelings towards "feminists" and their suspicions included me, or they found it problematic that my personal history differed from theirs. For example, the fact that I am not a mother seemed to alienate one woman who strongly identified with her role of mother.

The epistemological value of allowing the voice of women to speak has been eloquently demonstrated in a number of landmark studies on women's understandings of self and embodied identity within the context of specific sociocultural milieux (for example Belenky et al. 1986, Gilligan 1982, Martin 1987), and the in-depth style of interviewing employed in my study enabled women to indeed "find their voice" and "speak out" about issues close to them. As other interviewers have observed, there is an ease of

communication between women (see Anderson 1990[16], Oakley 1981), which one woman in the study whom I named Dallas defined as "the pleasure of womanly interaction", and what Shulamit Reinharz (1992:23) terms "woman-to-woman talk".

The value of "woman-to-woman talk" is that it provides an environment for the potential of consciousness-raising because "feminist researchers who interview women frequently discuss topics that are not part of typical public or academic discourse and therefore have no name" (Reinharz 1992:23). Without exception, the women I interviewed always sought out what the other participants had to say on the topic of ageing. Many women saw the interview process as an opportunity to explore unspoken and unrevealed realms of the ageing experience by drawing upon my accumulation of stories from the private discourses of other women in order to situate their own. Thus the interview itself, as well as the time preceding or following the interview, became an opportunity to share information gathered from other women's stories. Participants also sought my advice on certain topics. While I claimed no expertise and did not personally give advice, I did take to each interview brochures from women's health and information centres which I handed out to participants, as well as recommending books on menopause if they asked.

The "pleasure of womanly interaction" that Dallas refers to was present during of most of my interview encounters. The hospitality of the participants was warm and willingly given, some offering tea and biscuits, several providing lunch or dinner, and two women from country towns accommodated me in their homes for the evening. The participants also seemed to welcome and enjoy the interview experience. Most of the women I interviewed took a great interest in the topic and believed the research project

[16]Anderson et al. (1990:98) found that in trying to stick to her prepared interview schedule rather than "listening" more fully and following up on the emotionally laden expressions of her informants she overlooked the nuanced and detailed texture of her informants' discourses, missing what was a potentially rich source of data.

was beneficial to women in general. Many women valued the opportunity to share their stories, and in several cases I suspect the interview provided the participants with a well-needed opportunity to speak their minds freely and without interruption on matters of importance to them. As such, the interview seemed to serve as "therapy" for some women, a situation other researchers have encountered (Oakley 1981).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All participants signed a "Consent Form" (Appendix 2) as required by Monash University's Standing Committee on Ethics in Research on Humans. Participants were also handed a formal "Explanatory Statement" (Appendix 3) outlining the rights and responsibilities of the participant and researcher. The form also included a contact address for the Ethics Committee should the participant have an inquiry or complaint about the interview process, as well as information on support services in Melbourne which provide assistance free of charge. I also arranged for a backup counselling service to be available free of charge to any of the participants if they required support as a result of information revealed during the interview process. Yet, as pointed out earlier, the reverse seemed the case with interviews experienced as therapeutic by most of the respondents. The participants were guaranteed anonymity and any identifying details or information has been omitted from my research. Pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' actual names.

Because of my commitment of anonymity to the participants I was particularly concerned to ensure that none could be identified by anyone who may read my thesis. Many of the women shared with me highly personal information such as their experience of mental illness, marital affairs, abortion and the adoption of children who did not know their biological histories. For this reason, to honour my promise to these women and to protect their privacy, I have changed the participant profiles of the women slightly by swapping information such as age, number of children, profession, and residential location, between two women with similar histories. I have been

particularly diligent to disguise the identities of the women whose stories are quoted in my thesis. I acknowledge that my creation of composite identities lessens the authenticity of the participant profile summary. However, the overall profile of the sample is accurate and where I have changed critical information I have ensured that the substitute information is as similar as possible so as to still render a meaningful profile of the women whose stories are included herein.

SAMPLE RECRUITMENT

Fifty women between the ages of 45 to 65 years were interviewed. A survey of the literature reveals the midlife age range varies. The age range chosen was based on knowledge that turning forty is a symbolic marker of ageing in many academic and literary writings (as I discuss in Chapter 5), and as women's ability to reflect on their lives and experiences within an historical context is central to an exploration of reconstituting subjectivity and of interpreting the meaning of their experiences within their sociocultural context, I set the age criteria five years beyond the forty marker and the age sixty retirement age for women so as to render the most useful data.

The women live in Melbourne, regional and rural areas of Victoria. Some live on rural properties, while others live in the inner city of Melbourne, the suburbs, outskirts and regional towns. At the time of the interview, all but two of the sample were or had been married. Twenty women were in their first marriage, twelve had repartnered, ten were divorced and remained single, three were widowed and two had never married. Forty-three of the forty-seven women had children.

Initial efforts to obtain a random sample involved approaching two organisations, BreastScreen and the Electoral Roll, and requesting access to their name and address lists in order to use them as a base from which to select a random sample. However, both organisations refused permission so it was decided the recruitment of participants

would be done through snowball sampling, but using a range of networks to recruit a diverse sample of women from different socioeconomic, educational and geographical backgrounds.

I did this by approaching a range of social outlets including women's health organisations, hydrotherapy classes at a number of sub/urban swimming centres, church groups, singles' groups, groups for retired women such as Probis, community groups such as the Older Women's network, women's information centres such as Women's Information Referral Exchange (WIRE), a women's housing group, a women workers' union group, as well as attending talks and seminars on issues relating to ageing, midlife or menopause and handing out recruitment pamphlets to attendees. I also placed posters at community centres, information centres and women's health centres and advertised the study in a range of newsletters published by community organisations and health centres. The activities were conducted both in Melbourne and in two large rural towns in Victoria. Names of possible participants were also obtained from friends and acquaintances who knew of women who would fit the criteria. Of particular value was a friend who works as a tradesman and who, through a similar snowballing approach, enabled access to the wives and women associates of men in a range of trades, which significantly increased the number of women from what could be described as "working class" backgrounds and helped balance an otherwise overly "middle class" sample.

Whilst diversity of the backgrounds of the participants was important, there were certain limiting criteria to which I adhered. First, I limited the study to women who identified themselves as heterosexual because I wanted to explore understandings of gender identity and femininity, both within a changing sociohistorical context and as women's changing, embodied subjectivities interacted with the range of discourses (patriarchal, feminist, biomedical) of the ageing woman. Lesbian women's identities and subjectivities may not be as shaped by dominant patriarchal discourses of beauty,

femininity and sexuality which promote compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, I believed that more pertinent data would be rendered by tapping into the lived experiences of women's gendered identities within the framework of heterosexual relationships.

Second, I wanted to explore women's experience of ageing in mainstream Australian (Western) society in which, according to dominant discourses and cultural myths, women's status and value declines with age, as a central component of this inquiry is women's conformity or resistance to dominant patriarchal discourses of ageing. Given the wide crosscultural diversity of meanings and value placed on ageing, I decided to restrict the sample to women from Anglo-European backgrounds. Further, as my own ethnic background is Anglo-European, with a combination of English, Dutch and American ancestry, and having recently returned from a long period of living outside Australia, I believed at the time the study was undertaken that I lacked the experience or the background to explore the issue of Australian cultural diversity as a dimension of the ageing experience. While the large majority of the women interviewed were born in Australia, there are a small number who came as immigrants from Europe, Britain and Canada, some whose parents came to Australia as migrants, and many who have migrated across state and regional borders.

Further, over half my participants have travelled to a range of overseas destinations. Many have also spent extended periods living abroad in places such as Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Many women describe how their travelling and expatriate experiences have shaped and inscribed their subjectivities and influenced their identities as middle aged women in contemporary Australian society. While my participants identify as culturally "Australian" their engagement with other cultural practices have shaped their identities in ways consistent with contemporary postmodern nomadic subjectivity.

I understand that the parameters by which my sample was selected might be considered methodologically problematic in the context of a postmodern intellectual framework

which prioritises the importance of exploring difference and of listening to marginalised voices. I have already highlighted the importance of hearing ag. ıng women's marginalised voices within the broader context of discourses of ageing. Nevertheless, I argue that the narratives of the women in my study can make a valuable contribution to understandings of ageing in contemporary Australian society. A strength of my thesis is the number of voices from similar backgrounds which speak their experiences of ageing and gender in an Australian cultural context. My findings can therefore provide a useful body of knowledge with which to contrast voices from more diverse backgrounds within a multicultural Australian context.

ANALYSING QUALITATIVE DATA

Analysis of data was assisted by the use of NUD*IST software for qualitative data analysis. NUD*IST enabled me to organise and code a large amount of qualitative data into categories and identify emerging themes as the coding process evolved. In particular it proved particularly useful in drawing out and grouping together accumulated data on specific themes from many women at different points in their transcripts so as to focus on and identify relevant patterns of thought and experience relevant to each theme. While NUD*IST was a valuable aid in organising thematic categories, I also regularly referred back to the original interview transcripts, reading and rereading women's stories within the larger context of their biographies in order to deepen my understanding of the meanings constructed through their discourses.

As with all qualitative research, analysing and coding data is complex and requires the researcher to make interpretive decisions about the data. Often data overlap thematic categories, so the researcher must decide where the information will be located within the overall framework. All interpretive decisions were made with the intention of remaining true to the assumed meaning of the participants' discourses. At times, where there was ambiguity or contradiction, this has been highlighted and discussed in the

relevant chapter.

As this is a qualitative study, quotations from respondents' statements are relied on heavily throughout to illustrate or emphasise the point being made relative to various issues. The quotations are a valuable source of information as they provide a detailed discursive account of the complexity and diversity of experiences by allowing women's voices to speak for themselves rather than relying on the interpretation or paraphrasing of the researcher. I have, in some cases, made minor editorial changes to smooth over repetitive or grammatically incorrect sentences while remaining true to the intention of the speaker in order for the narratives to express the speakers' stories most effectively. In so doing I was careful to be as faithful to the intent of the narrative as possible so as not to distort the original meanings of women's statements.

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS

As well as the semi-structured interview schedule, I also asked each participant to complete a short questionnaire called a "Background Information Sheet" with closed questions seeking demographic information. My sheet provided information about the participant's occupation, educational attainment, marital status, duration of marriage, number of children, date and place of birth, family income and whether they were buying, renting or owned their home.

An important consideration in any sociological study is the socioeconomic status of the participants. The grouping of people into relevant socioeconomic categories continues to be an intractable sociological problem, particularly for women, as their social position is often determined by their marital status and the position of their partners. These complications are reflected in my study, where women who "married well" have a secondary level education and have not been in paid employment since marriage and are secure and comfortable financially, while professional or educated single women from "middle class" backgrounds may be struggling financially.

Table 1: Socioeconomic profile of participants

EDUCATION			HOME OWNERSHIP			INCOME		
Secondary	12	26%	Renting	4	9%	<$25k	6	13%
Diploma	6	12%	Buying	8	17%	$25-35k	12	26%
Tertiary	29	62%	Own	35	74%	$35-50k	11	23%
						$50-75k	8	17%
						$75k>	10	21%
	47	**100%**		**47**	**100%**		**47**	**100%**

As Table 1 above shows, the sample of women in my study are generally well educated and enjoy a reasonable level of financial security. It is important to note, however, that where women are married, these figures represent joint home ownership and joint incomes.

Of the forty-seven participants, twenty nine had tertiary qualifications, six had a diploma, and twelve had a secondary level education, and of these twelve five had some tertiary education but had not received a Bachelor's Degree. Of the women who had completed tertiary degrees, most were in teaching, the arts, health or the community service professions.

Thirty-five of the women own their own homes singly or with their husbands. Eight women were buying their own homes singly or with their husbands, and four women were renting at the time of the interview. Two of the renters are single women on incomes below $25,000, a third is a single woman on an average income of $35-50,000, and all three of these women have a secondary level education. The fourth renter is

married with tertiary education and average joint income of $35-50,000.

While the sample of women have an even spread of income levels throughout the lowest four income groups, there are a high number of women in the highest income group of over $75,000.[17] All except one are married. All income levels reflect the joint incomes for women who are married. However, for some couples the husband has retired so "joint income" may actually refer to the wife's income.

Because of the diversity of occupations of the participants, occupation is not included in the above table. At the time of the interviews two women were long-term unemployed and worked as unpaid volunteers, eight women described themselves as homemakers, and a further five had retired from full-time professional occupations. The rest of the sample worked in a full-time or part-time capacity in professional or semiprofessional occupations such as teachers, health workers, managers, administrators, counsellors, secretaries, or consultants.

I now introduce the reader to the women whose stories are represented in my thesis, and I follow with a brief profile of each of the participants.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

ANN - 51 years old. Ann is in her first marriage of thirty-one years and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as a lecturer. After spending a number of years living with her family in Europe she now lives in suburban Melbourne. She and her husband are buying their own home and have a joint income of over $75,000.

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[17]Income is divided into five levels: Under $25,000 is defined as very low, between $25-$35,000 is defined as a low income, between $35- $50,000 is defined as an average income; between $50,000-$75,000 is defined as a high income, and over $75,000 is defined as a very high income. Where women are living with their partners, income levels are based on joint incomes. Income, of course, does not take account of wealth.

BARBARA - 59 years old. Barbara is in her first marriage of thirty-four years and has three adult children. She has a secondary school education and works as a natural healer. She lives in suburban Melbourne. She and her husband own their home and have a joint income of $50-75,000.

BLAIR - 51 years old. Blair is in her first marriage of twenty-nine years and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as an administrator. She lives on the outskirts of a large regional town in Victoria. Blair and her husband own their property and have a joint income of between $35-50,000.

BETH - 48 years old. Beth is in her first marriage of twenty years and has four children. She has a tertiary degree and is a social worker. She grew up in Melbourne but moved to a large regional town in Victoria fifteen years ago. Beth and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $25-35,000.

BETTY - 47 years old. Betty is divorced and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and is a manager. She migrated to Australia from Britain twenty-eight years ago and moved from interstate to a suburb of Melbourne where she now lives. Betty is buying her own home and has an income of between $35-50,000.

CARA - 53 years old. Cara is in her first marriage of seventeen years and has no children. Cara has a tertiary degree and works as a researcher. She lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. Cara and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $50-75,000.

CAROL - 58 years old. Carol is in her second marriage of seventeen years and has three adult children from her first marriage. She has some tertiary education and works as a consultant. She spent much of her life in Melbourne but now lives on a rural property outside of Melbourne. Carol and her husband own their property and have a joint income of between $35-50,000.

CASEY - 47 years old. Casey is divorced and has one adult son. She has a secondary school education and is not in paid employment, but works as a volunteer counsellor. She lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. Casey rents her home and has an income of less than $25,000.

CATHY - 61 years old. Cathy is divorced and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and is a recently-retired school principal. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Cathy owns her home and has an income of between $25-35,000.

CILLA - 51 years old. Cilla is in her first marriage of twenty-seven years and has no children. She has some tertiary education and is a homemaker. She lives on a property outside a regional town in Victoria. Cilla and her husband own their property and have a joint income of between $35-50,000.

CHRIS - 56 years old. Chris is in her first marriage of thirty-four years and has four adult children. She has a diploma and is employed part-time as a secretary. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Chris and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $25-35,000.

DALLAS - 52 years old. Dallas is remarried and has three adult children from her former marriage. She has a tertiary degree and is a part-time celebrant. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Dallas and her partner are buying their own home and have a joint income of less than $25,000.

DOT - 59 years old. Dot has been widowed eight years after thirty years of marriage, and has six adult children. She has a secondary school education and is a homemaker. She lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Dot owns her home and has an income of between $25-35,000.

ELISE - 48 years old. Elise has never married and does not have children. She has a

secondary school education and works as an office manager. She lives in an inner city suburb of Melbourne. Elise owns her own home and has an income of between $35-50,000.

GAYLE - 47 years old. Gayle is in her first marriage of twenty-four years and has one young and two adult children. She has a tertiary degree and is a homemaker. She lives on a rural property near a regional town in Victoria. Gayle and her husband own their property and have a joint income of between $50-75,000.

GERMAINE - 52 years old. Germaine is remarried and has two children from her second marriage. She has a tertiary degree and has recently retired from her job as a teacher in order to develop her artistic talents. She is a first generation Australian and was raised in Melbourne by European immigrant parents. Germaine lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. She and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $35-50,000.

GILLIAN - 61 years old. Gillian was married for twenty years before being widowed eighteen years ago, and has four adult children. She has a tertiary degree and has retired from her job as a school bursar. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Gillian owns her own home and has an income of below $25,000.

GOREN - 58 years old. Goren is in her first marriage of thirty-five years and has three adult children. She has a secondary school education and is a homemaker. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Goren and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $25-35,000.

GRACE - 50 years old. Grace is in her second marriage of ten years and has two children, one from each marriage. She has a diploma and works as a nurse in a medical centre. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Grace and her husband rent their home and have a joint income of between $35-50,000.

GRETA - 53 years old. Greta is her first marriage of thirty years and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works part time as a celebrant. She lives on a rural property near a regional town in Victoria. Greta and her husband own their property and have a joint income of between $35-50,000.

HEATHER - 54 years old. Heather is in her first marriage of twenty-nine years and has one adult child. She has a tertiary degree and is a homemaker, and also works part time as a caterer. She lives in a regional town in Victoria. Heather and her husband own their home and have a joint income of over $75,000.

HILARY - 46 years old. Hilary is divorced and has two adult children. She has a secondary school education and is a part-time student. She works part time as a dancer and moved from interstate and now lives in an inner city suburb of Melbourne. She is renting her home and has an income of between $35-50,000.

JANE - 58 years old. Jane is divorced and has one adult son. She has a secondary school education and works as an administrative assistant. She migrated to Australia from Canada 20 years ago and now lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. She rents her home and has an income of less than $25,000.

JESSIE - 61 years old. Jessie is in her first marriage of thirty-five years and has four adult children. She has a diploma and recently retired from her job as a financial adviser. She grew up in a small country town and now lives in a large rural town in Victoria. Jessie and her husband own their home and have a joint income of less than $25,000.

KAREN - 51 years old. Karen is in her first marriage of thirty years and has three adult children. She has a diploma and works as a nurse in a public hospital. She lives in a large regional town in Victoria. She and her husband own their home and earn a joint income of over $75,000.

KITTY - 60 years old. Kitty is in her first marriage of thirty-five years and has one adult child. She is a homemaker with a secondary school education and lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Kitty and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $50-75,000.

LILY - 58 years old. Lily is recently widowed, after a first marriage which lasted thirty-three years. She has two adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as an consultant. She lives in a large regional town in Victoria. Lily owns her own home and has an income of between $25-35,000.

MANDY - 50 years old. Mandy is in her first marriage of twenty-eight years and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and is a homemaker. She lives on a rural property outside a large regional town in Victoria. Mandy and her husband own their property and have a joint income of over $75,000.

MARINA - 45 years old. Marina is divorced and has three adult children. She is a part-time carer and part-time student, currently pursuing a tertiary diploma. She lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. Marina owns her own home and has an income of below $25,000.

MAXINE - 55 years old. Maxine is in her first marriage of thirty years and has five adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as a part-time nurse. She lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Maxine and her husband own their home and have a joint income of below $25,000.

MOIRA - 53 years old. Moira is divorced and has two adult children. She has a secondary school education and works in sales. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Moira owns her own home and has an income of between $35-50,000.

NELL - 50 years old. Nell is divorced and has two adult children. She has a diploma

and works as a teacher. She returned from living in Europe fifteen years ago and now lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Nell owns her own home and has an income of between $25-35,000.

OLIVIA - 47 years old. Olivia is divorced and has no children. She has recently returned to Australia after living in Asia and works as a physiotherapist. She has a tertiary degree and lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. Olivia is buying her own home and has an income of between $35-50,000.

PAMELA - 47 years old. Pamela is in her second marriage of eleven years and has one child from her former marriage. She has some tertiary education and is a manager. She is a first generation Australian of European parents and spent most of her life in rural Victoria but now lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Pamela and her husband are buying their own home and have a joint income of over $75,000.

PAULA - 56 years old. Paula is remarried and has three adult children from her first marriage. She has a tertiary degree and works as a social worker. She lived in Melbourne until the last fifteen years and now lives on a rural property outside a large regional town in Victoria. Paula and her husband are buying their own home and have a joint income of between $25-35,000.

PATSY - 47 years old. Patsy is in her first marriage of twenty-eight years and has one adult son. Patsy has a tertiary degree and works as a manager. She lives on a rural property outside a large regional town in Victoria. Patsy and her husband own their property and have a joint income of over $75,000.

PETRA - 55 years old. Petra is in her second marriage of twenty-seven years and has three adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as a translator. She migrated to Australia from Europe just prior to her marriage, and lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Petra and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $[illegible]-75,000.

SAMANTHA- 50 years old. Samantha is remarried with two children from her first marriage. She has a tertiary degree and works part time as a teacher. She is also studying part time. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. Samantha and her husband own their home and have a joint income of less than $25,000.

TANYA - 48 years old. Tanya is in her second marriage and has no children. She has a tertiary degree and works as a researcher. She moved from interstate and now lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Tanya and her husband own their home and have a joint income of over $75,000.

TARA - 55 years old. Tara is in her second marriage and has four adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as a writer. She lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. She and her husband own their home and have a joint income of over $75,000.

TESS - 57 years old. Tess is in her first marriage of thirty-five years and has two children. She is a retired vice principal and has a tertiary degree. She lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Tess and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $50-75,000.

THEA - 65 years old. Thea is in her first marriage of forty-three years and has three adult children. She is retired from running her own business and is now a homemaker. She has a secondary school education and lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Thea and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $25-35,000.

TRUDY - 50 years old. Trudy is in her first marriage of twenty-six years and has two adult children. She has a tertiary degree and is a homemaker. She grew up in a regional centre of Victoria and now lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Trudy and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $50-75,000.

TYNE - 46 years old. Tyne has never married and has no children. She has a secondary

school education and is not in paid employment. She works as a volunteer carer. She lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Tyne owns her home and has an income of less than $25,000.

URSULA - 46 years old. Ursula is in her second marriage and has three children from her second marriage. She has recently re-entered the paid workforce as a receptionist She has a secondary school education and after living in a number of countries before returning to Australia, recently moved from a regional town in northern Victoria and now lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Ursula and her husband are buying their own home and have a joint income of over $75,000.

WILMA - 52 years old. Wilma is in her second marriage of fourteen years with two adult children from her first marriage. She has a tertiary degree and is a project director. She lives in an inner suburb of Melbourne. Wilma and her husband own their home and have a joint income of between $50-75,000.

YVONNE - 53 years old. Yvonne is divorced and has two adult children. She has a tertiary degree and works as a senior administrator. She relocated from interstate and now lives in a suburb of Melbourne. Yvonne owns her own home and has an income of over $75,000.

CHAPTER 4

I don't have time for menopause:

Decentring menopausal embodiment

Quantum, a "cutting edge" weekly science series broadcast on ABC Television, aired a recently-produced documentary entitled *The Menopause* on 22 June, 2000. The documentary opened with footage of a baby girl lying on her back, kicking her feet and crying loudly. Her distressed, vulnerable image was accompanied by a solemn narrator's voice who warned his viewers that "this baby girl is on the path to menopause". The opening segment of the documentary left its audience in no doubt as to the main message of the program: that menopause is a central, transformative and potentially physically challenging event in every middle aged woman's life. Despite the range of perspectives from so-called "experts" and "menopausal" women interviewed on the program, whose testimony taken together suggests that the menopausal experience is variable, resists definition, and is usually not a significant disruption in most women's lives, *Quantum's* message, heavily weighed towards the biomedical point of view, presented menopause as a threatening and difficult process of incremental loss and decline.

I argue that *Quantum's* message represents a microcosm of the broader biosociocultural picture of menopausal and old women in contemporary Western societies. Women are aligned with "the body" (Bordo 1993, Sulieman 1985, Young 1990) (and men with "the mind"),[18] and biological, social and cultural discourses construct old women (and their

[18]I discuss this point further in Chapter 9.

bodies) as unproductive, desiccated and obsolete. The biomedical construction of menopause symbolically represents cultural perceptions and stereotypes of ageing women in Western societies. The biomedical perspective, which constructs menopause as a potentially terminal and catastrophic "disease" with dire consequences unless managed properly (i.e. treated with HRT), dominates mainstream cultural understandings of menopausal symptoms and interpretations of the menopausal experience. Despite the substantial accumulation of evidence which suggests that menopause is largely a social experience linked to cultural perceptions of ageing, and that many women do not experience menopausal symptoms as overly distressing, the threatening biomedical discourse of disease, ossification and decline prevails.

Yet dominant discourses rarely exist unchallenged, and within the discursive field of menopause social constructionist and essentialist feminist discourses, critical of the biomedical construction of midlife women as deficient and diseased, attempt to subvert the biological model and down-play the role of the body in women's midlives. Alternatively, they present menopause as a psychosocial or psychobiological transition to a more empowered stage or time of life. Unfortunately, both dominant and subversive theoretical perspectives, while taking oppositional standpoints, collaborate in defining and constructing menopause as a discrete stage, time or transition in a woman's life, distinct from the rest of the lifecourse, and locate menopause as the locus of both embodied and subjective change at midlife. The opposing but combined discourses which centralise menopause as a biological, social, or psychospiritual transition operate as "closed thought systems" (Wei Leng 1996:42) which reinforce the notion of a "knowable", essentialist menopausal body unaffected by culture or lived experience. Feminist theorists, who have contributed so much to deconstructing the biomedical perspective by focussing on the social aspects of ageing for women in contemporary patriarchal, youth-oriented Western societies in which older women are disadvantaged by both ageism and sexism, do not extend their deconstruction to the presupposition of menopause's discrete status within the lifecourse.

I suggest that current explanatory frameworks which grant menopause discrete status need to be reconceptualised. I argue the menopausal experience can be more effectively understood by decentring menopause as the defining midlife event and incorporating menopausal embodiment within a broader framework of midlife embodiment. I further argue that menopausal symptoms do not constitute a "menopausal" biophysical condition, but are experienced by most women as random, variable and individualised embodied phenomena, thus menopause resists definition and distinction.

Having said this, for some women menopause *is* interpreted and experienced as a "time of life" or a "transition", but this is because they anticipate, or hope, that it *will* be one. Discursive frameworks of menopause which construct it as discrete, hormonal and transitional enable women to meaningfully interpret embodied and lived experiences through them and reconstitute their subjectivities. The menopausal body is a site which culturally legitimises the reconstitution of subjectivity through interwoven discourses of psychotransition and menopausal embodiment. A similar example from a different cultural context is that of the discursive construction of meaning through culturally-specific illnesses that provide "accepted emotional outlets", described by Miles in terms of Andean women's subjective, culturally-specific interpretations of their embodied experience of being ill (1998:40).

The discursive construction of meaning through menopausal discourses provide women with answers to existential questions about identity and self in a postmodern society in which conventional gender roles and ways of being an ageing woman have given way to more individualised, self-reflective and embodied autobiographical narratives which enable the reconstruction of subjectivity and identity. Menopause, discursively constructed as both a medical syndrome and a time of life, provides women with ways of making sense of their experiences and reconstituting their subjectivities through the midlife discourses

In this chapter I explore the sociocultural construction of menopause within the biomedical framework, examine evidence which challenges this perspective, and discuss competing theories. I then explore the findings of my study and propose a new theory of menopause within the context of midlife women's lives.

MENOPAUSE AS A (WESTERN) CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Medical systems can be seen as sociocultural systems which reflect the values of the larger society from which they are generated (Comaroff 1978, Helman 1990, Kleinman 1975, Lock 1998, 1993, Press 1980, Unschuld 1980). Historical and crosscultural studies of medical systems reveal they share two distinct but related healing functions: 'control of the sickness [or *disease*] and provision of *meaning* for the individual's experience of it' (Kleinman et al. 1979:8). In contemporary Western cultures such as Australia biomedical discourse dominates social understandings regarding the experience and treatment of menopause (Lock 1982). Biomedicine defines menopause as a "hormone deficiency *disease*" and treats it with Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). *Meaning* is provided for women's perceived experience of menopause through sociocultural discourses which construct menopause as a "stage", "transition" or a "time of life".

The limitations of conventional medicine have been articulated in a large body of literature on the subject (Herzlich et al. 1987, Illich 1976, Jones 1991, Kleinman and Sung 1979, Lupton 1994, Martin 1987, Stacey 1988). In particular, criticism is directed at the way in which women are assessed and defined in terms of their reproductive status (Barbre 1993, Martin 1987, Nathanson 1975), itself a reflection of a woman's value and position in a patriarchal society, and one which undermines women's subjective embodiment.

A medical system can be defined as 'a system of symbolic meanings which structure the experience of illness and, in part, creates the form the disease takes' (Kleinman

cited in Jones 1991:24). If medical systems emerge from sociocultural systems, how are the values of a Western worldview discursively reproduced in biomedical constructions of menopause? Since the early 20th century the discursive construction of the biological body has been based on a model of industrialised society, first as a machine, and in recent years as a factory concerned with production and commanded by a central control, the brain, which receives signals and transmits messages to a hierarchical collection of body organs and parts in a dualist mind/body configuration (Martin 1987:37-45). In the case of disease, where there has been a "breakdown in communication" leading to a "failure in production", the strategy of biomedicine is to isolate and repair, replace or remove the problem (Dickson 1993, Martin 1987). According to the production model of the biomedical body, menopause represents a failure in the authority structure of the body where a once potentially productive body becomes nonproductive.

The metaphor of industrial production inscribed through the body as an interpretive schema for embodied experiences highlights how the body mediates between culture and identity.

> The body can be regarded as a kind of hinge or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more sociopolitical exteriority that produces interiority through the inscription of the body's outer surface. (Grosz 1993:196)

The mechanistic, production-oriented metaphor of industrialised, modern society, inscribed through the body, becomes an explanatory framework for the female reproductive system. If the female organs are controlled by a signalling system, then the end of the reproductive cycle is viewed as a terminal failure of the hormonal transmission signals within the biomedical model of production. From this perspective, it is easy to see why the biological language of menopause contains negative terms such as breakdown, decline, decay, and withering of senile ovaries which 'cease to respond

and fail to produce' (Martin 1987:43). Given the sociocultural emphasis on women's embodiment and reproductivity a clear connection can be made between the metaphor of a defunct factory in the state of breakdown and failed production, and the redundancy of the postmenopausal woman who, according to the biomedical model of production, has also broken down and is in the process of decline and decay.

The medicalisation of menopause

"Menopause" literally refers to the end of menstruation, however in popular culture the term has come to refer to a range of physical and psychological experiences which can last up to ten years, as well as a discrete "time" or "transition" in a woman's life more accurately covered by the term *climacteric*.[19] In Western societies, the standard definition of menopause refers to three phases outlined by Margaret Lock (1986b). The premenopausal phase refers to women who have menstruated within the past three months; the perimenopausal phase refers to women who have not menstruated within the past three months but have menstruated within the past twelve months, and the postmenopausal phase refers to women who have not menstruated for over a year (1986b:29). However, relying on such definitions can be problematic in crosscultural studies where many women (such as Greek, Japanese, Mayan and Newfoundland women) do not use amenorrhoea as a marker of the onset of menopause (Kaufert et al., 1986). In Newfoundland, for example, women rely on specific life events, chronological age or the menopausal status of women in their peer group to determine whether they are "menopausal". In Japan, understandings of "menopause" include a complex array of physiological changes relating to the ageing process which may, or may not, include the cessation of menstruation.

[19]While the term climacteric refers to the transition from the reproductive to post-reproductive phase of life (Leidy 1994), I use the term "menopause" throughout my thesis because of its frequent usage in literature, culture and by the women in my study.

The conceptualisation of menopause as a "disease" has led to its medicalisation. The biomedical model for menopause makes it '"knowable'" by a clinician independently of - and even despite - what a woman says' (Kaufert and Gilbert 1986a:10). It is therefore not surprising that research recurrently describes a discrepancy between women's subjective experience of menopause as variable and indefinable, and the biomedical definition of menopause as an "oestrogen deficiency disease", and the tendency of biomedical doctors to attribute a variety of health complaints in women of menopausal age to symptoms of a menopausal syndrome (Kaufert et al. 1981, Lock 1982, Lock et al. 1988, Martin 1987, Townsend et al. 1980, Guillemin 1999).

The medicalisation of menopause 'turns it from being a stage in the normal processes of aging into a hazard to health' (Kaufert and Gilbert 1986a:9) and a hazard for which the treatment of hormone replacement therapy is recommended (Bell 1987, Davis 1986, Kaufert and Gilbert 1986a). By defining menopause as a disease and prescribing a cure in the form of oestrogen replacement therapy, moral obligations are placed on both physicians and patients to respond to menopausal symptoms by seeking treatment for the "disease" which, so named, becomes the responsibility of the medical profession (Kaufert and Gilbert 1986a:10). The biological facts of menopause are reduced oestrogen levels and cessation of menstruation (Lock 1982:264). While a variety of complaints are diagnosed as symptoms of a menopausal "syndrome" (Kaufert et al. 1981, Lock 1982, Lock et al. 1988, Martin 1987) many have their origins elsewhere, such as the environmental context of women's lives or fear of ageing due to the devaluation of women in contemporary Australian society.

Underpinning the definition of menopause as a disease is the tacit suggestion that through a decline in oestrogen women will become less "feminine", that is, less attractive by cultural standards and less functional sexually. Beth, who was premenopausal, perceived menopause as threatening: "I worry that I won't be attractive any more. But why do I still want to be attractive to men?" Yet the complex

and contradictory nature of menopausal discourses compete to define her future menopausal self-image. Beth both feared the loss of attractiveness yet questioned the value of conforming to patriarchal standards of beauty and desirability.

The suggestion that postmenopausal women become less attractive reflects a sociocultural fear of the defunct, desiccated old woman who becomes a social and economic burden on society, a fear explicit in the following quotes by Wilson (1966) and Lufkin and Ory (1989).

In the 1960s when HRT was developed it was widely promoted as a way to prevent the loss of femininity. Experts argued women would become sexually "neutered" by the supposedly devastating effects of menopause. Robert A. Wilson, a gynaecologist and early proponent of HRT, popularised the use of the new drug through his international best-seller *Feminine Forever* (1966). He warns:

> Castration is a drastic event that affects the entire body.... The effects of menopausal castration... is by no means confined to the sexual organs. Because the chemical balance of the entire organism is disrupted, menopausal castration amounts to a mutilation of the whole body... [N]o woman can be sure of escaping the horror of this living decay. Every woman faces the threat of extreme suffering and incapacity. (Wilson 1966:37-39, 72).

No doubt in many cases women do suffer from the effects of reduced oestrogen levels and the prescription of HRT is justified, however it is offered routinely and prolifically to patients for health concerns which are not pathological, but are normal signs of the ageing process (Lock 1998). As well as the claim that HRT relieves a range of menopausal "symptoms" women are urged to consider the possible consequences of not taking HRT later in their lives. They put themselves at risk of osteoporosis or heart

disease, but the potential dangers associated with the use of HRT are not as widely publicised.[20] The coercion of dominant discourse is not always transparent. A new approach to marketing HRT, which seemingly tends towards equality in doctor/patient relationships, obscures more subtle forms of power relations.

Postmenopausal women as ossified and socially redundant

The use of HRT continues to be rigorously promoted in the early 21st century. Now its marketing strategy is couched within a patient-friendly discourse of choice and risk, in keeping with postmodern trends towards individualism and empowerment. While many doctors have moved away from earlier strategies where they informed women of the "facts" of menopause and directed them toward solutions, doctors now offer women both information and advice so they can "make up their own minds". The key word in contemporary medical discourses involving menopause is choice. Yet the "choice" of whether or not to take HRT is still couched within the biomedical conceptualisation of decline and desiccation, thereby coercing women into making a "responsible" choice by taking HRT.

> An unwelcome consequence of increased longevity, osteoporosis eventually develops in almost all untreated Caucasian women who reach their 80th year. The direct cost of osteoporotic fractures is estimated to be $7 to $10 billion each year in the United States alone, and the population of postmenopausal women is continually increasing. (Lufkin and Ory, 1989:205 in Lock 1998:45)

Discourses such as those promoted by Wilson and Lufkin and Ory above are thinly-disguised vitriolic, contemptuous attacks which infer the obsolescence and superfluousity of the postmenopausal woman. As Lock (1998) argues:

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[20]As mounting evidence shows, there are health risks from using HRT. See, for example, Dr Deborah Saltman's (1994) *In Transition: A Guide to Menopause* Choice Books: Sydney.

> The universalized oddity of the ageing, failing, costly, Caucasian, middle-class female body is the primary target of medicalization, but all women are expected to calculate in terms of risks and benefits how they measure up against her image. (Lock 1998:46).

In spite of extreme scaremongering by medical "experts" to promote HRT as a way to "survive" menopause, many women in my study were suspicious of HRT and refused to take it, even though their doctors frequently urged them to do so. Jessie, after reading that osteoporosis is hereditary, decided to stop her HRT treatment:

> *My doctor said "but you'll get brittle bones." and I said, "No I won't. None of my family have had it so I don't believe I will. Anyway I wouldn't take HRT just for that. It's too dangerous." And she got quite cranky. And I said, "What about having a pap smear and a mammogram every year?" and she said to forget about it because I wasn't taking HRT. I thought that was outrageous!*
>
> *Jessie, 61, married, retired financial adviser*

Jessie's story suggests the resistance many women experience from their doctor when attempting to take control of their menopausal bodies. Jessie's redefinition of osteoporosis as hereditary is in opposition to her doctor's framework of osteoporosis as potentially symptomatic of a universalising and dangerous menopausal syndrome. The doctor's refusal to monitor Jessie's health by providing annual preventative Pap smears and mammograms raises serious questions regarding power relations between doctor and patient, and the homogenising approach of some doctors who view their patients as a disease rather than a person.

Lily found that after her hysterectomy fourteen years ago, HRT was "the first alternative you're presented with". Her doctor's eagerness to prescribe HRT was reiterated by many women in my study in more recent encounters with biomedical practitioners. Despite many of the women in my study being offered HRT as the first

option for menopausal symptoms, most refused their doctor. They see menopause as a natural process. Moira, like many women I interviewed, believes the menopausal body is:

> *a self regulating system. I think that HRT is a denial of the natural flow, and while it will give some benefits I think it is dangerous ground to be walking on. You can't cure a natural condition, it's like curing a period.*
>
> *Moira, 53, divorced, sales manager*

Prescribing HRT as a first line of defence against the attack of menopause does not have its parallel in all cultures. The first resort of Japanese doctors when treating otherwise healthy patients of menopausal age is to encourage exercise and healthy dietary practices, supplemented with herbal medicine. In Japan HRT is not commonly prescribed, although its use is increasing (Lock 1998:51).

I argue that the medicalisation of menopause and its "treatment' with HRT obscures yet reinforces a more sinister theme underlying dominant discourses of old women. Constructed as unproductive and therefore obsolete, old women are often viewed as a "cultural artefact" (Lock 1993) in medical and sociobiological writings on middle aged and postmenopausal women because they are "the only mammal" who does not reproduce after middle age (Wilson 1966). Lock chillingly points out that:

> the end of menstruation has become a synecdoche for middle-aged women in all their variety, who appear in current discourse as an estrogen-starved population, at risk of hot flashes, future heart attacks and broken bones....
>
> [Cultural artefact] arguments suggest that the very existence of older women goes against Nature's purpose. The thinly disguised assumption is that female life is about the reproduction of the species, and that the non-reproductive postmenopausal woman is a perambulating anomaly. (Lock 1998:40-41).

Postmodern theorist Liz Grosz (1993, 1994) draws attention to the centrality of the symbolic nature of menstruation, which is a universal experience for all women, in shaping dominant cultural perceptions of the female body as "polluting" and "uncontrollable", influencing women's lived experience in ways which are qualitatively different from men's. Grosz hypothesises that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage which carries with it the metaphor of uncontrollability, volatility and fluidity.[21] Yet she does not mention the menopausal body. I argue that the menopausal body is culturally conceptualised in opposition to the menstruating body, as dried up and ossified.

The women's symbolic alignment with their bodies, configured as "seepage" or "drying up" is evident in the work of human development theorist Erik Erikson. Writing from a sociobiological point of view, Erikson discusses women's "nature" at length in his paper *Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood* (1964), in which he aligns women with their fertile and potentially-pregnant bodies and defines motherhood as a normative state for women.[22]

> [T]he very importance of the promises and the limitations of the inner productive space [which] exposes women to a sense of specific loneliness, to a fear of being left empty or deprived of treasures, of remaining unfulfilled and of drying up.... [E]ach menstruation [is re-experienced as] crying to heaven in the mourning over a child; and it becomes a permanent scar in the menopause. (1964:596).

The menopausal body is often referred to in sociomedical literature as "drying up", "withering", and "ossifying" and of being beset by a deficiency disease, suggesting the

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[21]I refer to Grosz' metaphorical configuration of women's bodies as "seepage" in Chapter 2.

[22]I discuss the assumption that motherhood is "normative" for women in Chapter 6.

symbolic nature of the body as a social text. Characteristic of Western cultures the body is not seen simply as a flat surface onto which culture is stamped, but rather, Western capitalist body forms :

> are considered expressions of an interior, not inscriptions of a flat surface. By constructing a soul or psyche for itself, the "civilized body" forms libidinal flows, sensations, experiences and intensities into needs, wants and commodified desires that can gain a calculable gratification. The body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into. Social law is incarnated, "corporealized", correlatively, bodies are textualized, "read" by others as *expressive* of a subject's psychic interior. A storehouse of inscriptions and messages between its internal and external boundaries, it generates or constructs the body's movements into "behaviour," which then have interpersonally and socially identifiable meanings and functions within the social system. (Grosz 1993:198)

The menopausal body becomes a synecdoche for the ageing, female body, and the metaphorical image of the drying up, withering, nonproductive body becomes attributed to the social identity of the homogeneous category of ageing woman. Menopause is seen as an abnormal condition, and menopausal women are often depicted as anomalies, particularly by the medical profession which, in the U.S.A., has produced the largest amount of scientific literature on middle aged women (Lock 1993) despite it being a relatively healthy time in women's lives. The concept of pathology of no-longer menstruating bodies has led to the medicalisation of menopause.

The medicalisation of menopause and its "treatment" with HRT constructs menopause as an unnatural state of disease, decline and decrepitude, and postmenopausal women as "unnatural". This position implies that women's sole purpose and social value is limited to their ability to reproduce the species. As Lock suggests, the "unnaturalness"

of the postmenopausal body in contemporary Western societies reflects deeper historical-cultural references to a conceptualisation of old women as redundant and nonproductive.[23]

I have argued so far that menopause is a cultural experience and that in Western societies biomedical discourse dominates understandings of menopause and shapes women's experience of it. To more richly understand the ways in which the menopausal experience and its treatment are shaped by biomedical discourse requires an exploration of menopausal symptomatology and interpretation beyond the boundaries of contemporary Western culture. I now present some crosscultural research that can be used as a launching pad for a deconstruction of Western understandings of menopause.

CROSSCULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF MENOPAUSE

Crosscultural research reveals that menopausal experiences vary and are imbedded in cultural understandings of women's embodiment and social position as ageing women. In many cultures women achieve a position of prestige once past reproductive age and welcome menopause, together with the increased status its passing will bring (Beyene 1986, Davis 1986, George 1988). In some cultures women are released from the restrictions imposed upon them through pollution taboos associated with menstruation. In Flint's 1975 study of 483 Indian women of the Rajput caste, very few had problems with menopause and 'there were no incidence of depression, dizziness, incapacitation or any of the symptoms commonly associated with "menopausal syndrome" in our culture' (cited in Townsend and Carbone 1980:231). Postmenopausal Sikh women benefit from increased status in their society and while they consider menopause to be a

[23] I explore the historical precedence to contemporary disdain for old women in Chapter 10 when I discuss their omission as knowledge bearers in society, and their persecution and disempowerment as witches and grandmothers.

significant event in their lives, they reported no psychological or psychosomatic symptoms (George 1988:303). Yewoubdar Beyene infers from crosscultural studies that the:

> response to menopause is conditioned by the cultural context which shapes the pattern of a woman's roles.... [In] many non-Western cultures, for example, Islamic societies and most African societies... women experience few, if any, of the physiological and psychological symptoms of which Western women commonly complain in connection with menopause. (1986:49)

Yet as the link between postmenopausal women and their sociocultural position is complex and multinuanced, clear-cut assumptions cannot be drawn between non-Western postmenopausal women and an increase in status on the one hand and Western postmenopausal women and a decrease in status on the other. There is considerable variation within and between cultures and 'although expectations of the event are shaped by the cultural stereotype, actual experience does not necessarily conform to expectations' (Lock 1986a:3). Nor can one generalise that postmenopausal women with increased status will suffer less during menopause. In a culture that values endurance, the Newfoundland women studied by Davis (1986) believe "the change" to be a difficult stage in their lives. Because menopause is seen as a challenge to be overcome its stoic sufferance actually enhances a woman's postmenopausal status.

The association of assumed symptoms with menopause also varies depending on the culture in question. For example, the hot flush is seen by biomedicine as a universal symptom of menopause and rates highly on the symptom reporting list of Western cultures. In Japan the hot flush is experienced in only 20% of perimenopausal women surveyed in Japan compared with 69.2% of Canadian women surveyed in another study (see Lock 1986b:34), with 'stiff shoulder' being the most prevalent symptom reported during the menopausal transition in Japan, a symptom rarely, if ever, reported as a

menopausal symptom in Western culture (Lock 1986b). Of the Canadian Sikh women referred to above, only 8% reported experiencing hot flushes and described them as a minor inconvenience unrelated to menopause or any other aspect of female biology (George 1988:303). Nor are hot flushes always experienced negatively. In a small village in South Wales, while anticipating the "unknown dangers" of menopause, hot flushes were seen to be a good omen in a safe and speedy menopausal transition (Skultans 1988:154). Lock states that 'while hot flushes and sweats probably occur in all cultures [they] are by no means inevitable, and are not necessarily associated with menopause' (1982:264). Hot flushes, night sweats and other symptoms of menopause could be influenced by factors such as genetics, diet or ambient temperature (Beyene 1986, George 1988:304, Lock 1986:3), however there has been little investigation of the effects of these variables.

The wide variability in type and degree of symptoms crossculturally suggests that the concept of menopause itself is a cultural construct. Crosscultural research shows that in a number of cultures the concept of menopause does not exist. In Japan, for example, the term *konenki* was deliberately created at the end of the last century through the influence of German medicine to describe the "change of life" which, prior to that time did not exist as an independent concept (Lock, 1986b:27). For Japanese women the "change of life" is believed to be part of the ageing process and is not synonymous with amenorrhoea. The Canadian Sikh women referred to earlier do not have a linguistic construction of menopause as a discrete entity. Menopause simply means the end of menstruation (George 1988:302).

Unlike many cultures in which menopause plays a minor role in culturally defining the experience of midlife for women, in Western societies menopause defines the midlife experience: the midlife woman is constructed as the "menopausal woman" who is under constant threat of physical depletion. The authority of the biological framework for interpreting menopause is called into question by crosscultural evidence, yet its

construction of the menopausal woman and its dominance in defining and medicalising the menopausal experience at both a sociocultural and an individual level continues to prosper.

THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE "MENOPAUSAL WOMAN"

The extensive and convincing accumulation of crosscultural evidence which highlights the socioculturally-conditioned nature and symptomatology of the menopausal experience supports the argument that the Western biomedical concept of menopause as a deficiency disease leading to loss and decline is a cultural construct.

I argue that as the concept of menopause is a Western cultural construct, so too is the concept of the menopausal woman. Once again, crosscultural evidence illuminates Western "knowledge". In northeast Thailand there is no linguistic concept which constructs a woman as "menopausal" (Chirawatkul and Manderson 1994:1547) and menopause merely demarks reproductive from nonreproductive life. For many women menopause is freeing, as this Thai woman explains:

> After the final cessation, I felt I was not as strong as before. It might be the result of the ageing. However when I reached menopause I didn't have menstrual blood, so I no longer feel disgusted.... I'm so glad it (menopause) is over. Now I can go to the temple without anxiety of menstruation or spotting. I can go to other places very far from here to make merit as well. (in Chirawatkul and Manderson 1994:1549)

The cultural themes woven through this woman's postmenopausal narrative reveal the discursive construction of sociocultural meaning. Menopause brings freedom from menstruation and associated taboos, viewed as polluting within the Thai sociocultural context. This Thai woman is now free to practice her religion and enhance her spiritual life through visits to Buddhist temples where she can "make merit". She also indicates

the degree to which menopause and ageing are inseparable experiences, and menopausal "symptoms" are ambiguous and indefinable.

In Western cultures both biomedical and feminist discourses construct menopause as a "transition". The role of the menopausal body is either constructed as the central, defining feature of women's impending decline as in biomedical discourse, or the embodiment of menopause is subordinated to a perceived empowering sociopsychological transition at menopause, as in social constructionist and essential feminist discourses. Like other discursive fields on ageing and midlife, menopausal discourses are also dualistic and oppositional and construct menopause from either decline or empowerment perspectives. The perspectives centralise and isolate menopause as a discrete time of life, discursively constructing the image of the menopausal woman.

I dispute the construction of the "menopausal woman" who is in "transition" and argue that menopause is not a discrete stage or unique embodied experience, and that the embodied physicality of menopause cannot be separated from the embodied, lived experience of ageing. I argue the construction of menopause as a biological or psychosocial transition provides a discursive framework for women to interpret their changing, embodied subjectivities at midlife. Both dominant medical and subversive feminist discourses enable women to reconstruct their identities as ageing women in contemporary Australian society. I draw on the stories of the women in my study to challenge theoretical arguments that construct menopause as a "transition."

The "diseased" menopausal woman

The dominance of biomedicine in defining menopause as an oestrogen deficiency disease with dire implications for women's health if left untreated has led to menopause being constructed as central to women's health. The biomedical assertion that menopause is a major health issue "perpetuate[s] the reductionist perspective that

women's reproductive organs are the central focus of their life and health" (DeLorey 1981:295). In Western cultures, the biomedical construct of menopause as a deficiency disease leading to gradual depletion, decline and decay, is symbolised by exaggerated stereotypes of the menopausal woman as depressed, anxious, emotional fragile and socially dysfunctional (Kaufert and Syrotuik 1981, Kozlowski 1993).

In medical literature on menopause, the oestrogen deficiency model is implied to inclusively represent the entire menopausal experience (Kaufert and Gilbert 1986a:9). The imprecise and unbounded definition can apply to any woman of menopausal age who experiences physiological or emotional distress, who is then labelled "menopausal".

In the following biomedically-oriented account of the menopausal "transition", an interplay of discourses link the physiological to the psychological. The author of a text on women's health, published four years ago by a prominent menopause clinic in Melbourne, argues that hormonal changes at menopause can lead to "a time of major reflection and reassessment" (Grimwade 1997:119), for women. This universalising assumption links women's menopausal experience to women's position within a conventional model of the nuclear family lifecycle:

> Menopause can be an opportunity for a woman to spend some time doing something that she really enjoys, whatever it may be. In many instances perimenopausal women feel better when they set some positive goals to help them meet their own aspirations. Just like anyone at any age, perimenopausal women need to get out and about, have some fun and a few good laughs. Menopause does not mean women have to shut the door on the world and give up. If a woman is not happy with her lot, wallowing in self-pity will not make

her feel any better. Nor will it help her cope with her menopause. (Grimwade, 1997:119)[24]

For Grimwade, menopause is the central driving force in a woman's life, rather than being an adjunct to the life she is already living. She makes unsustainable claims which assume a connection between menopause and lifestyle, painting a picture of the menopausal woman as idle and depressed. In contrast to the stereotype, many women I questioned did not regret their loss of fertility but view the shift to non-reproduction as a positive life transition, as other researchers have found (Datan 1986, George 1988). For women who do experience loss and grief at menopause, their grief is often not because of their loss of reproductivity, but of what they perceive to be lost years, and their grief involves "coming to terms" with past pain which has been long suppressed (Guillemin 1999:65).

Conceiving of menopause as a specific time in one's life which is seen to be somehow different from any other time, a perspective which is evident in both biomedical discourse and some feminist writings, is counterintuitive to the discursive constructions of menopause by the participants in my study. For the majority of my women Grimwade's advice is matronising, irrelevant and 30 years out of date. Most contemporary Australian women are in the workforce or looking after relatives, and have active social networks and busy lives. Even women with severe symptoms do not sit around wringing their hands but find solutions in order to minimise the disruption to their lives. For women who have physically challenging symptoms, they become problems to be managed, not encompassing and defining, as Wilma's experience shows:

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[24]In *The Body of Knowledge: Everything You Need to Know about the Female Cycle* (1995) a book on women's health coauthored by two senior colleagues from the Jean Hailes (menopausal) Clinic at Monash Medical Centre in Melbourne, seen to be at the forefront of menopausal research and treatment.

I've had two curettes. The continual bleeding has meant that I'm low on iron and because I've had other mineral deficiencies, I get leg cramps and things like that. I can't have that kind of bleeding and carry on a job. The choices are limited and I haven't been terribly happy with the advice. Finding a specialist was appalling. I said I'd like to try alternative treatment, I didn't want to go on HRT but I ended up going on it because she said you can't keep having curettes. Last time I saw her I said I want to go off HRT and she said no. I went to my GP and he said if you want to go off it go off it. But I can't stop the bleeding so I went back on it for another year.

Wilma, 52, remarried, project director

Wilma's narrative of her experience of heavy bleeding and leg cramps suggests that, despite their severity and her description of them as menopausal symptoms, she did not define herself as a "menopausal woman". Rather she described her symptoms as problems to be managed so Wilma could minimise their disruption to her life. The physical imposition caused by "continual bleeding" was exacerbated by the context of her life as a busy professional with a demanding career. Her comment that "I can't have that kind of bleeding and carry on a job" suggests women's interpretation of menopause within both a sociocultural context, and the specificity of their lived experience, influence how women experience and interpret menopausal symptoms. In Wilma's case, her discursive contextualisation of continual bleeding in relation to their disruption to her professional responsibilities suggests that menopausal "symptoms" cannot be reduced to simplistic biological explanations.[25] Further, because continual bleeding is often associated with menopausal problems, but it also affects younger and premenopausal women, its definition as a menopausal symptom is problematic.

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[25]On page 102 I discuss how the experience of menopausal symptoms is influenced by the context in which they are experienced, to forward my argument that menopausal symptoms cannot be reduced to simplistic biological explanations.

Certainly biological explanations, which rely particularly on hormonal change, have come to dominate both medical and popular understandings of menopause and menopausal women. But reductionist biological explanations do not attribute any subjectivity or lived experience to the body, it is an inert object knowable by science. "To suggest that hormones can fully represent the materiality of the human subject would be to distort their interaction with other factors - discursive, cultural, as well as fleshy" (Rothfield 1997:33).

An emphasis on the biological experience of menopause has led to many researching women in midlife to focus their investigation of menopause solely on symptomatology. This singular view of 'defining menopause in terms of menstrual cessation and assessing "symptoms" as those changes, measured by validated survey instruments, that accompany menstrual cessation or correspond with shifts in blood hormone levels... fails to give credence to women's own accounts of what menopause means to them' (Daly 1997:260). In addition, the scrutinising gaze of the biomedical eye which defines women according to their biology serves to further marginalise women as "other", as Jessie acutely asserts:

> *I don't think menopause needs to be made so much of. I don't agree with there being special clinics for women. In a way it's a sort of apartheid. It's another form of treating women differently.*
>
> *Jessie, 61, married, retired financial adviser*

Jessie believed that menopause clinics promote menopause as central and defining in midlife women's lives, thereby reinforcing the "otherness" and assumed pathology of menopausal women, which Jessie likens to a form of apartheid. While biomedical discourse centralises menopause as a biological transition, feminist discourses centralise menopause as a psychosocial transition. Both support the construction of the "menopausal woman".

The "empowered" menopausal woman

Essentialist feminists, critical of the biomedical construct of menopause as a deficiency, redefine menopause as an empowering transition to a new stage of life. Drawing heavily from humanist constructions of the "stage" model of the lifecourse, in which menopause fits neatly with midlife as a "transition" and a "time of reflection"[26], as well as feminist essentialist constructions of a "true nature" of womanhood suppressed by patriarchy but freed through menopause, the essentialist feminist discourses likewise construct menopause as a discrete "stage" in the lifecourse. The constructions suggest a passage from one state to another, or a transitional time of reflection leading to change.

Germaine Greer's widely publicised book on menopause, *The Change* (1991), popularised the concept that '[t]he climacteric is a time of stock-taking, of spiritual as well as physical change' (1991:4) and ushered in a new image of menopause as a potentially transforming experience which can liberate women from patriarchal definitions of "older women" and lead to personal empowerment.

The "empowerment" position has presented a challenge to the hegemony of biological discourse and provided women with an alternative subject position within the menopausal discursive field. Greer, writing from an essentialist position, believes that menopause can be an opportunity for women to "reclaim" their femininity from patriarchally-defined subject positions. Menopause is also configured as a "transition" by feminists taking a social constructionist position. They emphasise the potentially transforming possibilities of women's lives at menopause within the broader context of the lifecourse, in accord with discourses of "growth" and "development" proposed by midlife theorists. Feminists of both essentialist and social constructionist positions dispute the biomedical construction of menopause as of impending decline. Instead,

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[26]I discuss the perspective of midlife as a "stage", "transition" and "time of reflection" in detail in Chapter 6.

readers are encouraged they can now experience what Margaret Mead first termed "postmenopausal zest" (in Formanek 1990). Writers in this genre claim hot flushes can become "power surges" (Callahan 1993),[27] hail menopause as a "symbol of freedom" (Bowles 1990:162), and a 'transformation... on all levels, physical, mental emotional, spiritual' (Van Eyk McCain 1993:64). Leslie Kenton's popular text on menopause titled *A Passage to Power* reinforces this claim:

> Menopause is a time of celebration when our creativity is no longer bound to our obligation as a member of the human race to propagate the species. Often, for the first time in a woman's life, her creativity can be set free for use in whatever way the whispers of her soul dictate. (Kenton 1995: back cover)

While "empowerment" discourses offer women an alternative way of interpreting their menopausal experience, they reinforce the assumption that menopause is defining and central to women's lives and reinforce the construction of the menopausal woman. Some women in my study were critical of perspectives of menopause as a transitional event, arguing that publications which focus on the assumed transformative potential of menopause catapult it to centre stage thereby overemphasising its biological and psychosocial importance in the mind of the public. Further, discourses that argue menopause is transitional and transformative reinforce its status as a deterministic and defining experience in women's lives. Women like Ann were critical of what they saw as the inflated importance of menopause in contemporary culture:

> *People like Germaine Greer don't help. That stupid book she wrote,* The Change. *I don't want to sit in meetings and have men knowing what's going on. Let's get on with our lives. One day I was sitting in a meeting and I said "God*

[27] A banner with the slogan "They are not hot flashes... they are power surges" is held by participants of the conference "Menopause: A Midlife Passage" held in Lexington, Kentucky USA in 1989, and appears on the cover of a book by the same name.

it's hot in here, I think I'll take off my coat" and one of them said "people of your age shouldn't say that, they'll think you're having a hot flush" because people are talking about it. We don't talk about prostate cancer. We don't need publicity to say you're having a hot flush. I wasn't.

Ann, 51, married, lecturer

Menopause is now discussed widely in the public arena of Western societies. Overinflating discourses of menopause as transformative and transitional have drawn attention to menopause and raised awareness as to what women may experience at menopausal age. A number of the women in my study believed that the public profile of menopause has allowed stereotypical images of menopausal and older women to proliferate. As Wilma points out:

I'm not sure it's for the better. In the past women and their [menopausal] bodies were ignored. That was probably a better attitude than many men now who say "she's going through that stage just ignore your mother".

Wilma, 52, remarried, project director

The engulfing public profile of menopause enables almost any feeling of anxiety or stress at midlife to be labelled as menopausal (in the same way younger women's putative mood swings are attributed to PMT), further reinforcing homogenising stereotypes of menopausal women. Certainly the increased awareness of menopause has reshaped public attitudes towards older women, if only by giving them a public presence they did not have in the past. However, labelling women as "menopausal" obscures both the reality and diversity of women's daily lives.

Midlife women, and their busy, complex and multifaceted lives are obscured by discourses which construct women as "menopausal" and as "in transition". The active and important contribution of older women in the public and private sectors is dismissed by reductionist menopausal discourses. Other aspects of women's lives, such

as pursuing interests and activities outside the family, are constructed as *consequences* of the menopausal experience, rather than expressions of women's individuality which refute the homogenisation and stereotyping of middle aged women. In order to represent the heterogeneity of women's lived experiences I now turn to the stories told to me by the women in my study to challenge and decentre assumptions about the menopausal body and offer a new theoretical position of menopause in women's lives.

The discursive construction of the menopausal transition

In a postmodern world where new ways of identity making involve choosing from an array of options to both construct identity and make sense of lived experiences, the discursive construction of menopause as both a hormonal deficiency, and/or a transition, provides many women with a framework for understanding subjective experience and remaking their lives. Midlife women, who are at the forefront of postmodern change, articulate specific experiences relating to new understandings of femininity, womanhood and women's position in society. For the women in my study who perceive menopause to be a "transition" they, as Lyn Richards observed in her study[28], are 'the ones who choose to make it so' (1997a:9). The discursive construction of the menopausal transition enables some women to remake the self and reconstitute their subjectivities through the menopausal body.

The discursive construction of menopause as an explanatory framework, not just for hormonally-triggered embodied experiences but for existential experiences associated with the sociohistorical shift to modernity, has allowed the concept of a male menopause to emerge as a discursive framework for midlife experiences.

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[28]A multi-method study conducted by the Key Centre for Women's Heath in Melbourne from 1991-1993 including face-to-face and telephone interviews and a mail-out survey of 3000 women also found that most women do not experience menopause as a transition, see Richards 1997a).

With the permeability of the boundaries of what constitutes menopause, and with the contemporary popularity of the "midlife crisis" a discursive explanatory framework for men's changes at midlife, the "male menopause" has gained credibility as an embodied experience similar to women's menopause (Hepworth and Featherstone 1998). Male menopause, like "menopausal syndrome" features an array of psychosomatic and existential "symptoms" such as confusion and social pressure, uncertainty and the quest for meaning which occur at a time of hormonal change (Hepworth and Featherstone 1998). This mixture leads to a blurring of midlife crisis and male menopause, and while there is some evidence that the male menopause is biologically driven, there is much more evidence that it is a lived experience (Hepworth and Featherstone 1998). The very social acceptance of a concept such as the "male menopause" is evidence of the degree to which menopause as a "transition" is a social construct, reinforcing my argument that menopause resists definition and clarification of what can actually be attributed to the biological menopause and what is actually a response to social change.

> It is the element of ambiguity inherent in cultural representations of ageing which contribute to the construction/reconstruction of both female and male midlife as a period of uncertainty and anxiety and generate the quest for meaningful accounts. (Hepworth and Featherstone 1998:284)

New understandings of women's lives, envisioned through feminist research and discourse, challenge the decline perspective of biomedicine. Their scholarship has encouraged a more woman-centred view of menopause to develop. Nonetheless, the new scholarship may still promote menopause as a central, defining experience in midlife women's lives, such as the essentialist feminist approach discussed above. The new discourses are informed by more subjective accounts of midlife and menopause and enable alternative images of menopausal embodiment to emerge and coexist with biomedical accounts. The consequence of the research on menopause critical of the decline perspective cited above, which has convincingly shown that menopause need

not be a negative experience for women, is that it has allowed menopause to be reconceptualised based on the perspective of women themselves.

For some menopausal women, the biological "transition" from fertile to infertile helps to transform their subjectivity. The lived embodiment of changing menstruation patterns shapes their changing subjectivity because menopause symbolises being a different kind of woman. For Yvonne, for example, the cessation of menstruation raised the question of "what am I now that I'm not that?" For some, the need to reconstitute a nonreproductive identity is a reminder of the passage of time and therefore does not pass by without some acknowledgment. Most took a less philosophical approach, although recognising that the biological transition of menopause means a change in reproductive status, it had little symbolic significance in their lives. For most women in my study the end of their fertility was viewed positively. Many had closed the option of fertility by having tubal ligations or hysterectomies before the onset of menopause. I now explore new understandings of menopause and the meanings they provide for the women in my study.

Germaine had recently left her teaching position which she held for many years to "become an artist". In so doing so she was trying to redefine herself in more "worthwhile" ways which, she hoped, would lead to a change in her subjectivity and enhance her self esteem and sense of fulfilment.[29]

Germaine was:

> *hoping [menopause] will be a transition.*

Germaine was sexually abused by her alcoholic father when she was a child:

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[29]I discuss the process Germaine is undergoing to remake her identity in Chapter 11.

I'm finding now I need to go back to that and pick up some of the threads that I've left aside because I was too busy with my job or my children.

She was experiencing hot flushes which were:

bothersome but not painful, like when you have the flu and you get hot and cold.

She also felt:

depressed and constantly tired. But I've always been an anxious person so I've always been tired.

She was taking HRT although:

I don't like the idea at all. But it could be a miracle. I could really fix myself up here.

Germaine went to a menopause clinic to gain insight into her subjective distress. When she arrived she:

burst into tears and the doctor sent me off to a psychiatrist.

Germaine, 52, remarried, artist

Germaine's physiological experience of menopause was limited to "bothersome" hot flushes. Yet they provided an embodied cue for Germaine to "fix herself up" through HRT and by "picking up past threads" with the assistance of a psychiatrist. Germaine's active discursive engagement with social understandings of the "menopausal woman" (she was attending a menopause clinic) and of menopause as a "transition" suggests that she was attempting to reconstitute her subjectivity through these discourses. Uniting the threads of past sexual abuse together with current visits to her psychiatrist is likely to produce some change in subjectivity. Given Germaine's preconceived expectations

of menopause, shaped by a dominant discourse, and her belief in the transitional possibilities of menopause, any change in her subjectivity is likely to be attributed to a menopausal "transition".

Beth also interpreted menopause as an opportunity to resolve painful emotional experiences. Beth hoped "menopause" would lead to a reconstitution of subjectivity in the form of reconciling and laying to rest long-standing issues, to help her reach a new level of self-acceptance. Beth discursively constructed menopause as a symbolic, self-transformational experience, articulated by her grim determination that it would be so:

> *I haven't hit the end of menopause. I know the last few years I have reached a level of acceptance and understanding about a lot of things that have happened and about why I am the way I am. Relating that to my early years of life. Menopause is a time for a reconciliation of fantasy and reality and truth. A coming to terms with who you are rather than who you thought you were and the things that have happened to you in your life. A reconciliation time.*
>
> *Beth, 48, married, social worker*

Beth's discursive construction of menopause as a transitional "time" which she hoped would bring resolution and reconciliation is similar to Germaine's construction of menopause as a transitional opportunity to "fix herself up". Like Germaine and Beth, who were attempting to reconstitute their subjectivity through a discourse of menopause as a "transition", other women described ways of reconceiving themselves as ageing women through discourses which construct menopause as a "time of reflection".

For women like Greta, whose lives have been committed to the care of others, the discursive conceptualisation of menopause as a "time of reflection" can "allow" them to "reclaim" the latter part of their lives. To Greta, menopause symbolised a lifestyle transition which permits the winding down of conventional family roles and

responsibilities:

> *I think menopause is a nice time in your life. You've got time to reflect. You can sit back and take a different look at things. Different things become important. Working with flowers, floral art, painting, travelling. I've done my father's history. Before you didn't have time because you were ferrying kids everywhere.*
>
> *Greta, 53, married, celebrant*

Greta's conceptualisation of menopause as a "time" to "take a different look" at her life suggests a discontinuity with the past where time was short because she was "ferrying kids everywhere". Since "menopause" time has become a resource from which springs a myriad of identity-making options for Greta in the 21st century - floral art, travelling, reconstructing family history. As Greta's earlier life patterns recede, her "different look" brought new opportunities into sharper relief. Greta's "transition" was constructed through a humanistic discourse of postmenopausal embodiment where menopause is a "time" in which you "reflect" on your life and a transition to a new, time-rich phase.

Greta's discursive construction of menopause as a "time" to "reflect" suggests her perception of menopause as a transition to a new lifestyle. She was not burdened too heavily by physical symptoms of menopause, experiencing "only hot flushes" which she "didn't really like". She had a hysterectomy years ago which she "thanks God" for, and after having produced three children the end of fertility was not something she regretted. While she was "very happy to be older" and felt "a lot more confident and wiser" and "at peace", Greta's health had been troublesome for many years and had compromised her quality of life. Greta attributed her subjective transformation to a more reflective state where she can "sit back" to a menopausal transition, not to ill health, suggesting cultural discourses of menopause as a "time of reflection" have

influenced her perception of her experience.

Other women like Ann claimed they "don't have time" for menopause, also suggesting a perceived connection between the menopausal experience and lifestyle. When I asked Ann, a lecturer, whether menopause had any significance to her, she laughed, then answered:

> *Our mothers might have been able to sit around on the chaise lounge and have hot flushes but we don't have time for that. We're all too busy now. Our age group is all too busy now. You're doing a PhD, I'm too busy. We're all too busy. I can't have a hot flush.*
>
> *Ann, 51, married, lecturer*

Ann's narrative elucidates a distinction between her mother's generation and her own. For women of her mother's generation, whom she suggests were less likely to be in paid work during their middle years, menopause may have been a more significant marker of ageing. Ann's cohort of women, for whom changing social conditions and expectations of women's working lives frame their lifestyles during their middle years, "don't have time" for menopause. For the women "too busy" for menopause, their approach to distressing symptoms was to control them as effectively as possible. Some women were taking HRT, and others were "putting up" with difficult symptoms and hoping they would soon pass.

I have argued that menopause is not a discrete and knowable embodied experience, despite pervasive and influential discourses which reinforce the notion of "menopausal women" and a "menopausal transition". Yet some women rely on discursive constructions of menopause as a "transition" in order to interpret their subjective engagement with changing understandings of gendered behaviour. I posit that embodied change for women at midlife can best be interpreted through a theoretical construct of

midlife embodiment and the concept of the menopausal body needs to be rethought.

THE VOLATILE "MENOPAUSAL" BODY

Of the forty-one women who are peri- or postmenopausal, over half, twenty-three, did not credit menopause with any symbolic transitional significance or meaning.[30] Thirteen of the twenty-three women described menopause in relation to the cessation of menstruation, as a "relief" or a "freedom" from periods or unwelcome pregnancies. The remaining ten of the twenty-three women located their experience in menopause as a lived experience with varying degrees of significance or disruption to their lives. Many saw it as having a fairly minor impact on their lives, either they "didn't have time" for menopause or it "passed them by" or they had hot flushes or other symptoms which were "no big deal", while others found it to be "a bloody nuisance", or in the case of Cara, a "disaster" depending on the degree to which the symptoms impinged upon their lives. A recurring theme in almost all of the forty-one women's stories is the complex and indefinable nature of menopause and the difficulty women experience in disentangling "it" from other embodied and lived experiences.

"I can't pin menopause down"

As the women in my study illustrate, the experience of menopause can be much more complex than current discourses suggest. Menopause culturally represents the end of a woman's reproductive capabilities. It is viewed biologically as a midlife marker and its physical timing often coincides with other changes relating to family, employment and relationships.

With convincing regularity, eighteen of my forty-one participants who did experience discomforting symptoms at menopause were unclear as to what constituted menopause

[30]Six women claimed they had not yet begun "menopause" so they are excluded in the count of 41.

within the context of midlife embodiment. Physical symptoms which could be attributed to menopause were entangled with other health problems or stressful life events. Symptoms and causes "get mixed in together". For some women "menopause" provided the discursive framework within which they interpret their distress. Others were more cautious about using menopause as an explanation for what some perceive as "the normal process of ageing".

The women in my study found menopause and menopausal symptoms resist definition and classification. In trying to understand whether her sleeplessness was a result of menopausal change or a recent trauma, Tess found that "you can't pin anything down". Similarly Wilma's experience of menopause was that it had "no distinct phase, you can't tie it down". Paula's hot flushes and memory problems occurred at a time when her mother-in-law's long stay placed added stress on her family and she was having difficulty finding a job. Paula's perceived menopausal "symptoms" cannot, therefore, be reduced to a simplistic biological explanation of menopause. Pamela, on the other hand, claimed she experienced hot flushes when she drank champagne!

Because of the deterministic, dualistic and restrictive discursive frameworks from which women attempt to interpret their experiences, most of my participants found defining menopause raised more questions than it answered. Blair rejected a redundancy package and was demoted after her organisation downsized:

> *Five years ago when I was in my middle forties, the organisation that I was working for was defunded. And it was coincidental that at that time I was also approaching menopause. I found it a stressful time and I was having migraines for the first time in my life, and moved on to have hot flushes, mood swings and aches and pains. I wasn't sure about what was happening and how I was going to cope with this.*
>
> *I think I'm through menopause now, but I still get these days when I feel really*

blue. Is that part of the mood swings, the depression that you can get with menopause? Or is it because of the frustrations with the job? I don't have any answers. But in menopause your hormones tend to play tricks on you. Is [the depression] because of where I am in the hierarchy at work? Or is it because of where I am physically, in the menopause? And the headaches, the tension and the stiff necks, is that because of the frustrations of the job, or is it a part of getting older?

Blair, 51 married, administrator

The questions Blair posed regarding the possible causes of her physical experiences reflect the complex phenomenology of menopausal embodiment as both a lived experience and a biological process. Blair's embodied experience of migraines, mood swings, aches and pains, and hot flushes occurred at a time when her position was made redundant and she was forced to take an administrative job at a lower level on the organisational hierarchy. At the age of forty-six, she was also approaching the mean menopausal age of fifty-one. Five years later, at age fifty-one, she perceived herself to be "through" menopause. She had settled in to her new position, but felt it to be a "demotion". Blair still had days when she felt "really blue" but was not sure whether her "depression" was caused by "menopause" or whether it was work related. Blair also experienced headaches, tension and stiff neck, and questioned whether they were symptomatic of the frustrations of her administrative job, or whether they are signs of the normal ageing process.

The physicality of ageing poses similar questions. For perimenopausal women, the symptoms of what they perceived as the "normal" process of ageing become confused with what women think may be menopause, particularly when other stressful life events occur at the same time. Some women in my study experienced a range of health problems as well as social and emotional stresses and, like the medical profession, have difficulty diagnosing what is menopause and what is not. The anxiety some midlife

women experience may not be caused by menopausal changes, but by the fear of getting older due to the negative value placed on ageing in Western society:

> *I'm getting old. And I'm falling apart. I'm hoping it's just a transition. Menopause has knocked me a bit. I turned fifty and I felt I was falling apart. But four years ago my mother died. She was eighty-four but she died suddenly. That had a devastating effect. It was a very significant time in my life. And I developed diverticulitis. Menopause was just around the corner. So there was mum's death, and then getting health problems, and then menopause. It wasn't just physical, it was also forgetfulness. That was a year ago. I couldn't talk to you like this, I would have been in tears. I lost faith in myself. These physical things have tripped me up. Because I don't think fifty-three is that decrepit. I don't feel that old. I still feel very lively. But I'm getting older and it's having a greater affect on me than I thought.*
>
> *Cara, 53, married, researcher*

While menopause is a complex experience for many women, the degree to which women's lived and ageing embodiment shapes subjectivities is highly individual. Cara perceived her changing embodied psychosubjectivity as fragmenting, believing she was "falling apart", which she chronologically linked with "turning fifty". For Cara, embodied changes and the loss of her mother, occurring concurrently were experienced as "devastating". Yet menopause, which occurred later, was woven into her narrative of embodiment and the menopausal discourse of decline shaped the reconstruction of her identity as someone who was "getting older", although Cara didn't feel old, or believe that fifty-three is "decrepit".

For Thea it was not menopause, but her ageing embodiment which had shaped her subjectivity:

> *The change of life went by fairly well. It wasn't very traumatic, but since then*

I've had some health problems. I see myself differently now because I cannot do some things. I did give up line dancing but apart from that I do everything else. I get by pretty well but there are days... I get migraines and they obliterate me from the planet for a couple of days.

Thea, 65, married, retired business owner

In contrast to Blair and Cara above, for Thea menopause had little impact on her life. Instead, the physical limitations of her ageing body had influenced her subjectivity as an ageing woman. Thea identified "migraines" as her major health problem, yet migraines affect both women and men of all ages and are not specifically associated with ageing.

Because the embodiment of ageing, menopause, and lived experience are inseparable, menopause resists definition and classification, as the stories of Blair, Cara and Thea demonstrate. In the following section I show that the menopausal experience is also shaped by sociocultural and environmental factors.

Menopausal bodies in public places

The degree of discomfort generated by physiological changes at menopause, such as hot flushes, are also influenced by context. It is not the menopausal body itself, but the lived menopausal body which influences women's subjective experience of menopause. In contemporary Australian society a disciplined, healthy body is the norm. The body is viewed as an outward representation of a controlled, successful self and the body is increasingly important in the construction of identity and the reconstitution of embodied subjectivity. While the groomed and attired social body has a public presence, the biological body (which secretes hormones, digests, sweats, and excretes) is sequestered from public life, much like the public/private divide which until recently characterised the binary divide of gendered behaviour. Unlike the biological body, the social body functions to present a certain kind of controlled, contained expression of self. If the

body as a biological organism is sequestered from public life, then it is not surprising that any physiological symptoms which highlight the body's interiority, its fluids and flushes, when they impinge on public life, are a source of embarrassment.

In Goffman's (1969) analysis of body management, the successfully-managed body is one which does not cause embarrassment. Private bodily functions which are aired publicly, such as belches, are embarrassing and inappropriate. In contemporary society successful body management is also signified by an outwardly healthy body. In line with the biomedical definition of menopause as a deficiency disease, menopausal symptoms suggest ill-health. Other physical symptoms which convey signs of ill health such as asthma attacks, fainting, flu symptoms or an epileptic fit, like the hot flush, signal deviance from the healthy norm when they occur in an inappropriate, public context such as the conference room. That a hot flush is experienced as more distressing within the context of professional life highlights the importance of understanding the menopausal body as a lived body.[31] Bodily sensations which are interpreted as symptoms of menopause are influenced by social context and therefore cannot be reduced to simplistic biological cause and effect explanations.

Cara again shares the distress caused by hot flushes within the context of her engaged and productive working life:

> *I'm in the process of going through menopause. The most significant are the hot flushes and I was getting ten a day. Now I get three a day. You have hot flushes where you really do change colour and your face goes quite red and you become quite self-conscious when you're engaged in conversation.... People at work knew what was happening because they could see it. I wanted to talk about it because I thought it was worth talking about and I wanted people to understand*

[31] I discuss the concept of the "lived body" in detail in Chapter 8.

how I feel. I didn't want them to think I wanted to be excused [from some work obligations], but just that I was having trouble dealing with it and I didn't know how I could solve it.

Cara, 53, married, researcher

Cara's "self-consciousness" during a hot flush at work suggests that the lived, embodied experience of menopause is shaped by context. The context in which the hot flushes occur, her workplace, and their intrusion into her working life and perceived work performance, contributed to her discomfort and the need to explain her physical experience to colleagues. Cara, despite severely distressing symptoms, refused to take Hormone Replacement Therapy and visited a naturopath who described Cara as her "greatest challenge". While Cara knows Hormone Replacement Therapy may alleviate her hot flushes, she saw menopause as a "natural" process and was suspicious of possible side effects of HRT in years to come.

Concomitant with new theoretical approaches to menopause, sociologically-oriented research, tending towards a qualitative, autobiographical approach, reveals the degree to which both positive and negative images of menopause influence midlife women's perceptions and expectations of it (Richards 1997a:227). Qualitative research suggests that the experience of midlife, and menopause itself, is highly variable, subject to a range of influences, and that there are 'multiple ways of knowing and living menopause' (Guillemin 1999:56). Yet fearful and disempowering myths regarding menopause and the "menopausal woman" persist despite convincing evidence to the contrary, as well as the efforts by many writers to present menopause in a more positive light.

"MIDLIFE EMBODIMENT" - DECENTRING MENOPAUSE

The social debate generated by biomedical and social constructionist discourses, each defining what "causes" menopause and constitutes menopausal symptoms, reinforces a

binary view of the menopausal body, constructed around the dualism of body/mind. Biomedical arguments conceive of menopausal symptoms as hormonally-induced and see menopause itself as a deficiency disease leading to decline. The biomedical view ignores the experience of the lived body, and stresses the objectivity of the physical body as a source of knowledge and treatment.

Essentialist and social constructionist feminist discourses argue alternatively that most "symptoms" attributed to menopause are a sociopsychological response to ageing women's devalued status in society. Feminists dispute the "decline" perspective and argue that menopause is a "natural" process. They tend to minimise the role of hormones and emphasise the psychosocial context and experience of menopause, emphasising the "empowering", potentially transformative, developmental opportunities menopause is presumed to bring. Feminists taking this position believe women's experience reveals a "truer" picture of menopause than the biomedical position, however the subjectively-driven approach to knowledge production assumes women's experience is transparent and knowable, that is, that women can interpret and understand their embodied experiences with accuracy and clarity.

In biomedical discourse, hormonal explanations are conceptualised in terms of the underlying cause, the physiological event. The manifestations of the physiological event are equated with women's "experience", conceptualised as the physical or psychological consequence. This body/mind dualism reduces an understanding of menopause to a one-way cause and effect relationship which obscures the situation and individual variability of women along their lifecourse. Rather, conceiving both hormones and experience as interactive, each mutually influencing the other, provides a richer understanding of the embodied experience of menopause.

It cannot be denied that menopause is a physiological experience in which changing hormonal levels produce a cessation of menstruation. The hormonal changes which

cause menopause can also induce other physiological symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats and profuse bleeding, or flooding. These physiological symptoms are highly variable, with some women suffering severe and debilitating symptoms while other women are almost unaffected. Physiological symptoms fluctuate across a woman's lifecourse, and she may experience one or several symptoms with varying intensity at different times.

Further, it is not the physiological symptom itself, but the context in which the symptom occurs, which influences how it is experienced. When symptoms intrude into women's professional working life they are likely to be experienced as more disruptive than if they had occurred privately. The embarrassment of private physiological changes expressing themselves in public places highlights the importance of viewing the menopausal body as a lived body. My study suggests, as do those of Daly (1997), Richards (1997a), Rothfield (1997), that the experience of menopause cannot be reduced to simplistic physiological cause-effect relationships. Samantha explains:

> *I don't know how I could separate menopause or hormones and all that stuff from who I am and how I feel.*
>
> *Samantha, 50, remarried, teacher*

Samantha's explanation reveals the degree to which women experience themselves as embodied selves, and how their subjectivities are shaped by their midlife embodiment. My research does not support the construct of menopause as either a biological or a psychosocial transition. Women who are experiencing a range of physical, emotional and social problems are unclear as to the influence of menopause on their physicality. For others, menopausal discourse provides an explanatory framework for their problems. The women who construct menopause as a 'transition' in their lives chose to make it so. For a third of my sample menopause was barely a ripple in their daily experience.

The women in my study take menopause to *mean* a range of things. For some women, menopause is defined according to its biological function, for others their definition of menopause encompasses a range of midlife experiences. Some women see menopause as an opportunity to experience a "transition" in their lives, while for others menopause is a sociopolitical construction designed to control and profit from women's bodies.[32] My participants also attest that menopause as an embodied experience is intermittent, and fluctuating, varying in degree, intensity and frequency, each woman having their unique experience. The women in my study also point to the degree to which other factors in a woman's life contribute to their embodied physicality in midlife. The lived and embodied experience of menopause is indeterminate and blurred, inseparable from other biosociocultural influences.

It is the ambiguity between the lived and embodied experience of menopause which leads to Philipa Rothfield's (1997) conceptualisation of "menopausal embodiment". Rothfield argues that while menopause is seen as an experience of the body, her conceptualisation brings together both body and mind in an explanation of the menopausal experience, and highlights the degree to which the menopausal body is a symbolic construct for the experience of ageing for women.

As Rothfield's account of her pregnant embodiment accents, pregnancy, like menopause, is not one kind of experience, but is mutable and variable. The degree to which Rothfield was active or inactive influenced how she experienced morning sickness. Not only is Rothfield's experience multifaceted, but it is opaque and not readily elucidated and articulated, as I have shown menopause to be. Rothfield's changing experience throughout the course of her pregnancy, as well as varying according to the differently lived context of her life, reflects the experience of the

[32] I do not examine the politicisation of menopause in my thesis. In *The Menopause Industry* Sandra Coney (1991) critically examines the political and economic dimensions of menopause and HRT.

menopausally-embodied women in my study. Rothfield makes valuable use of her pregnant embodiment to draw parallels with menopause. I nonetheless question how closely an alignment between pregnancy and menopause can be drawn. Pregnancy is clearly a transformative experience if it results in the birth of a child, (and for many women even when it does not), whereas menopause may not be, and my research has found it usually is not. The pregnant, lifebearing body feeds and grows another, births it and the parturient woman becomes a mother. Her new state of parenthood has long-term and irreversible consequences - emotionally, financially, existentially. My research suggests that menopause usually does not.

Richards, in her co-authored text on women and midlife entitled *Intermission*, also disagrees that menopause is a "transition", or a change from one state to another, seeing it instead as an 'intermission, interruption, sometimes minimal, sometimes critically serious, in their lives' (1997a:9). Nevertheless, her construction of menopause as an "intermission" reinforces its discrete status as distinct from the "normal" lifecourse, as something most women pass through and come out the other side much the same as they entered. For many women in my study, even the modified configuration of menopause as an "intermission" rather than a "transition" overstates their experience. Richards' perspective still credits menopause with a special status distinguished from other phases in the lifecourse, albeit temporarily.

Both Richards' conceptualisation of menopause as an "intermission" and Rothfield's configuration of "menopausal embodiment" reinforces the centrality of menopause in women's midlives. I argue instead that a more accurate interpretation is one which decentres menopause as a theoretical explanation for women's lived and embodied experience at menopausal age, and that "midlife embodiment" is a more accurate conceptualisation of women's embodied experiences at midlife.

The women in my study inform me that what they understand to be menopause is

multifaceted and mutable, with symptoms irregular and intermittent, rising and falling in intensity, duration and frequency, and influenced by situational context. What they understand to be symptoms of menopause are dappled through women's lives in different degrees of frequency, severity and duration. Yet many women cannot discern whether menopause aggravates their psychoemotional physicality or whether their psychosocial embodiment aggravates their experience of menopause. My conceptualisation of midlife embodiment positions menopause as an inconsistent, variable and fragmented array of symptoms and sensations which may rise to the surface of a woman's embodied conscious to different degrees. The degree of intensity of these symptoms and sensations is influenced by the ebbs and flows of women's lived experiences and thus interact with environmental and psychosocial factors. Symptoms, like waves, are only "present" when they are on the surface, although they are generated from deep beneath the surface, blurring the distinction between surface and depth. Biological and social influences interact to produce a lived body (Grosz 1994)[33] which informs the embodied, subjective experience of midlife.

CONCLUSION

Biomedical discourse dominates sociocultural understandings of menopause. Biomedicine defines it as a deficiency disease and presents menopause as a central and inevitable event in women's midlives. Competing discourses of menopause as a "transition" and a source of "empowerment" further reinforce the assumed discrete status of menopause in a woman's lifecourse. Yet crosscultural and empirical research suggest that women's experience of menopause is variable, contextual, and resists definition. Menopause is one of many bodily experiences encountered at midlife and,

[33] I discuss Grosz' theory of the lived body in Chapter 8.

as the stories of my participants show, the symptoms of menopause cannot be separated from a woman's ageing embodiment and lived experience.

Despite the ambiguity of what constitutes menopause, and the complexity of lived embodiment at midlife, powerful biomedical and transitional discourses vie for meaning, and women of menopausal age locate their physical, emotional, ageing and identity problems within a discursive framework of menopause as a biological and/or psychological transition in order to understand their lived and embodied experiences and redefine their subjectivities.

Along with biomedical discourses which medicalise menopause as a pathological state, covert sociocultural discourses make alarmist claims about postmenopausal women's bodies as ossified and defunct, and older women as socially redundant and obsolete, a future economic burden on society. An exploration of the experience of ageing for women needs to go beyond menopause to explore cultural factors associated with ageing and embodiment. I examine changing sociocultural understandings of ageing in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

We don't feel like the elders of the tribe:

Ageing, culture and gender

In contemporary Western societies such as Australia, social discourses and media representations abound with images of attractive, young, fun-loving people who are presented as "having it all" and enjoying the best years of their lives. The values of youthfulness are proffered as lifestyle qualities worth emulating, regardless of age, if we wish to be seen as successfully living our lives. As Turner suggests :

> youthfulness has become a desirable attribute of all social groups almost regardless of their actual age.... Age has become profoundly downgraded as a value in the culture of western societies. (1989:596)

The modern concept of "youth" emerged in the 1950s and was associated with a distinctive lifestyle and culture. Seen to symbolise change in that conservative and rigid decade, youth culture augured a challenge to prevailing social and moral values, and male youths in particular were portrayed as a threat to the stability of society (Wyn and White 1997). By the 1960s the popular image of youth culture expanded to incorporate pleasure-seeking young men and women who embodied health, sexuality, progress and freedom (Coffield 1987). Today, in contemporary Western societies in which people are encouraged to 'consume and throw away... [y]outh is a metaphor for energy, restless mobility, appetite: for the state of "wanting"' (Sontag 1972:31).

Concurrent with images of rebellion and desire, youth also represents innocence, vulnerability and optimism (Wyn and White 1998). Both representations of youth

conjure an image of excitement, discovery and future potential; qualities not associated with age. By reversing the descriptors to create a contrasting image of age we can speculate that age represents that which is sluggish, conservative, dull and asexual, symbolic of the past rather than the future. While images of both youth and age are a distortion of reality, there is some credence to the assumption that youth and age are seen as exclusive and opposite, reinforcing the denigration of ageing in Western societies:

> the symbolic themes represented in the glorification of the youthful, competitively self-reliant and action-oriented "Pepsi Generation" present a set of core values contradictory and harmful to the self-esteem of the old. (Sokolovsky 1990: 2)

No wonder middle age, the necessary chronological passage from youth to old age is seen as a "transition" in contemporary Western societies frequently culminating in a "midlife crisis". The concept of a midlife "transition", elaborated in popular and academic literature as a time of "reflection", "reassessment", "growth" and "development" almost presupposes a crisis of identity leading to self-transformation, which for women is seen to be intensified by the definitive biological "transition" of menopause.

Today, as conventional markers of youth, adulthood, middle age, and old age (puberty, marriage, "empty nest", retirement) which shaped predictable work patterns and family cycles are increasingly eroded, youthfulness is no longer contingent upon chronological age. Instead, the concept of youthfulness evokes an idealised youthful lifestyle, characterised more by attitude than age, which embodies qualities which are seen to represent the young. By disconnecting the cultural image of youthfulness as an inherent life stage or embodied social status, and redefining it as a lifestyle, youthfulness has become a commodity which is available to anyone with the financial means whether

young or old. Now the boundaries of youth are extended beyond mere chronological age and it is no longer youth itself, but youthfulness that is desired and pursued.

In contemporary Western postmodern societies, established norms regarding age-related behaviours and identities diminish under revolutionary technological innovations. Global electronic communications collapse time and space, eroding conventional boundaries of culture, class and citizenship which once precepted identity. Medical technologies stretch the limitations of reproductivity, biological decline and body image and the body becomes malleable and resistant to the effects of physical ageing. Youthfulness today can be an "attitude" in which one emulates the qualities of youth through bodily presentations and leisure activities, or a personal project through diet and exercise which reshape the body, and even a consumer choice through cosmetic treatments or surgeries which transform bodily surfaces and depths through specific procedures. Ageing or youthfulness is more exclusively an embodied experience in contemporary Western societies than in the past, as the body has become an integral part in the construction of identity. It is the effect of bodily practices with which we engage in order to produce our embodied social identity which is seen to represent "who" we "are" (Bytheway 1995).

Women, for whom cultural standards of beauty may be more socially imperative than for men, the embodied nature of identity, and the consequence of ageing embodiment on subjectivity is particularly significant. In Australian cities, like other contemporary Western societies, media images set the standard for the presentation of self as successful, stylish and beautiful. In print and on screen the consumption of youthfulness becomes apparent in the regular parade of remodelled, revitalised, age-defying images of well-known media personalities who reinforce youthfulness as a normative standard in Western cultures. Women such as Jane Fonda, Tina Turner and Joan Collins, aided by rigorous daily workouts and/or cosmetic surgery, according to the tabloids, become embodiments of "positive ageing". They are portrayed as "proof"

that ageing women can still be attractive and "defy" ageing. Famous women, argued Susan Sontag (1972) in her now landmark and still pertinent article on the "double standard of ageing":

> are admired precisely because they are exceptions, because they have managed (at least so it seems in the photographs) to outwit nature.... What makes these women seem beautiful to us is precisely that they do not look their real age. Society allows no place in our imagination for a beautiful older woman who does look like an old woman. (Sontag 1972:36)

Social admiration of women who "defy" ageing are confirmation of the role of the body as a status symbol in contemporary Western cultures such as Australia, and the degree to which the ageing body is feared and vilified. Western culture's distancing from and denial of age, and aversion to the ageing body, is underpinned by disempowering and fearful myths and stereotypes of old age, and the dread of old age itself. The vilification of the old female body is apparent in Simone de Beauvoir's confronting text on her experience of ageing, and her observations of the effects of ageing on other women. The cruel twist of ageing for women, according to de Beauvoir, is that a woman's erotic desires outlive her attractiveness as an object of sexual desire:

> If [a man] goes on desiring her she easily puts up with her body's aging. But at the first sign of coldness she feels her ugliness in all its horror, she is disgusted with her image and cannot bear to expose her poor person to others. This lack of assurance strengthens her fear of other people's opinions: she knows how censorious they are towards old women who do not play their proper role of serene and passion-free grandmothers. (1972:349).

Tanya's fear of ageing captures the aversion and disdain Western societies in general show towards ageing people:

I don't see any advantages to getting older for anyone. I'm looking at this from midlife and I think it's a pretty nasty old world out there at times and old age is one of the areas of life that most of Western society has little time or respect for. Western society is based on youth and energy and looking good and looking beautiful and not having wrinkles.

Tanya, 48, remarried, researcher

Tanya, who reflects on ageing from a midlife perspective, described her understanding old age as characterised by a loss of social respect and status. Tanya's position reflects dominant discourses of ageing which predict that older people become distanced and alienated from the values of youth-oriented, body-conscious Western culture, and this process leads them to experience their social environment as a "nasty old world". While Tanya's discursive construction of ageing reflects the dominant perspective, it is an homogenising and limited view which reveals her perception of old people as outside mainstream society.

Further, sociocultural understandings of menopause which construct it as being a "deficiency disease" which marks the end of a woman's social usefulness and the onset of physical and social decline are reinforced by powerful dominant discourses which further discriminate against older women by undermining their social recognition as vital, creative and productive human beings at a time in their lives when many midlife women are feeling more empowered and socially engaged than earlier in their lives.

Contemporary attitudes towards ageing and the ageing body, as well as meanings attributed to the ageing process, reflect the endpoint of a cultural history in which I trace the convolutions of the dualistic but inseparable connection between the ageing body and society. An exploration of the historical shifts in beliefs associated with ageing reveals the underlying assumptions which illuminate the contemporary Western ageing experience. I now explore this history, but I first draw a brief crosscultural picture of

ageing in order to bring the condition of ageing under Western eyes as a product of culture, epistemology and society, into sharper focus.

AGEING AS A CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Ageing is a complex experience which can be best understood within an historical and cultural context. The meaning of the ageing process and the shared expectations of ageing held by different social groups varies both across and within cultures and emerges from cultural understandings of ageing which are interconnected with understandings of body, self and society, and reflect paradigmatic beliefs and values of the culture from which they were generated.

In some cultures elders are revered and younger members of the group are committed to their care, however incapacitated they may become, while in other cultures younger members expel their elderly citizens or hasten their death. Anthropological studies offer convincing evidence that in tribal societies where elderly people hold cultural knowledge or spiritual power they remain the authorities in their group and are valued members of their communities (Sokolovsky 1990:7). For example the !Kung elderly perform important social roles and are cared for with compassion and respect by both males and females until their death, without a sense from either party that they are a burden (Rosenberg 1990:15) In !Kung culture death is not inexorably linked to old age, and elders engage in life-giving activities such as healing (Rosenberg 1990:21).

Even within Australian society people from different cultural backgrounds understand ageing differently. Positioning a discussion of ageing in the context of Australian indigenous people's practices highlights the degree to which concepts of age, ageing and old age are culturally and ethnocentrically bound. Australian indigenous peoples suffer much poorer health than the rest of the population as well as lower educational levels, higher rates of unemployment and higher levels of poverty, so the experience of ageing, and the application of familiar Western notions such as "midlife growth" and

"positive ageing", to which I refer throughout this thesis, are inappropriate to their lives, particularly as their higher rate of mortality, three times the national average, is notable within the "midlife" range of 35-44 years of age. Indigenous Australians comprise 1.7% of the total Australian population, but only 0.5% of the total population of persons over 55 years of age (ABS 1995).[34] The average life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is 55.2 years for men, compared to 72.9 for the total male population and 63.6 for women compared to 79.2 for the total female population[35] (Graetz and McAllister 1994). Hence, "old age" can have very different meanings to different groups of Australians, and the access an individual has within a culture to age "positively" can be based on a number of factors such as gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Little research has been done on issues concerning ageing women in Indigenous Australian cultures or women from other cultural backgrounds (Feldman 1995). However, anthropological studies and autobiographical stories do provide some insight into experiences of ageing for Australians from a range of cultural backgrounds. In Indigenous cultures, for example, women as mothers and bearers of children have authority and status within their group. Consequently, Indigenous Australian cultures recognise the wise old woman and the term "grandmother" does not hold the negative connotations that it does in Anglo-Australian culture (Scutt 1993). But women are not only respected for their reproductive roles. Senior women are also accepted as authorities in ceremonies such as the Antikirinja songlines and their knowledge is respected by the men in the group (Scutt 1993). In mainstream Australian society in which Indigenous Australian issues are explored, such as the Reconciliation process between indigenous and nonindigenous Australians which has been a prominent part of

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[34] The Australian Bureau of Statistics is referred throughout my thesis as the ABS.

[35] Graetz and McAllister's figures are from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 1992.

Australian cultural history in the year 2000, most Australians are familiar with the concept that in Indigenous Australian communities tribal Elders are consulted for authority and guidance on matters of importance. However, in Anglo-Australian society we no longer use the term "elder" to refer to our older citizens, we use the term "old". "Elder" carries the connotation of respect for the wisdom of elderly people. The term "old", on the other hand, is a word which is devoid of respect and connotes something which has lost its value and is ready to be discarded. This is particularly true for old women who are seen as having outlived their usefulness once they are no longer able to reproduce. From a medical and sociobiological perspective, old women are often perceived to be superfluous anomalies in Western societies because they live beyond reproductive age (Lock 1993).[36]

This cursory cross-cultural glimpse of ageing reveals that the interpretation of the ageing process, and the meanings societies and individuals attach to ageing are embedded in and emerge from broader sociocultural frames to human activity and interaction. However, while the significance of age and ageing in various societies differs, there is no doubt that in all cultures ageing carries with it certain expectations, meanings and statuses relevant to the individual's relationship to society, as well as to life and death. If our contemporary understandings of ageing emerge from broader sociocultural processes, what are the cultural values and beliefs which shape our understandings of ageing in mainstream Australian society today? While a crosscultural understanding of ageing can highlight the ethnocentric nature of a society's attitudes towards the ageing process and its ageing citizens, history can illuminate the development of assumptions which underlie them.

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[36] I discuss the perspective of old women as anomalous and superfluous in Western societies in more detail later in this Chapter, page 124, the link between menopause and social perspectives of old women as redundant in Chapter 4, page 76, and the historical persecution and silencing of old women in Chapter 10.

TRACING THE HISTORICAL MEANINGS OF AGEING

In early Western societies, as in other contemporary societies across the globe, chronological age had little relevance in defining an individual's aged identity and status. Other events, structured around community understandings of time, ritual and passage, marked the ageing process of an individual throughout the lifecourse (Cole 1992, Hareven 1995). In contemporary Western individualistic societies chronological age has become the significant marker of an individual's passage from one "stage" of life to another.

Western culture's emphasis on the chronology of age has enabled the lifecourse to be conceived of as comprising discrete, age-based stages. The distinction between childhood, middle age and old age as stages in the lifecourse associated with specific types of activities and behaviour is a fairly recent phenomenon. The development of old age as a specific phase in the lifecourse was preceded by the creation of earlier life stages such as childhood in the early 19th century, accompanying the emergence of child-centred, middle class urban families. Adolescence was "discovered" later in the 19th century with the emergence of a youth culture which reflected its own styles of behaviour. Interest in middle age as a unique period of adult life came much later, toward the middle of the 20th century, through the need to distinguish the unique social and psychological concerns of middle aged from old aged populations (Hareven 1995). More recently, writers are describing a distinction between old age, and deep old age (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989) based on the embodied condition of the individual. "Old age" distinguishes relatively active, healthy, independent older people from their frailer, less able-bodied counterparts, the "deep old aged".

Age as a spiritual journey

Like age itself, the perspective a society takes of the ageing process and the value a society places on its ageing population is determined by the prevailing paradigms of the

period. Prior to the rise of science as the dominant epistemological paradigm, when Western societies were more strongly influenced by a religious worldview, the ageing process offered hope for spiritual redemption, and the lifespan was seen as a spiritual journey which culminated in death and spiritual transcendence. The redemptive qualities of ageing allowed the degrees of physical decline to be accepted as an inevitable part of the ageing process (Cole 1992), thus the pains and discomforts of the ageing process were balanced, at least in part, by a belief in the transcendent nature of ageing and death, and the failings of the body were not interpreted in the solely negative terms they are today. At this time social attitudes towards ageing applauded an individual's "attaining longevity", the achievement of which carried a certain status. Elders were respected and venerated because relatively few elderly people survived in these early communities (Cherlin 1983, Hareven 1995, Turner 1989).

Ageing as physical decline

The concept of the lifespan as a spiritual voyage in which one comes closer to salvation with age was seriously challenged with the rise of science as a paradigmatic alternative to religion. Scientific, and specifically biologically-based, explanatory frameworks of ageing focus on the ageing body as gripped by the inevitable and relentless one-way process of physical decline.

At the end of the 19th century, an interest in workplace efficiency generated by the demands of capitalist industrialisation led to studies on human (and specifically male) productivity (Cole 1992; Hareven 1995). An historical analysis of famous and successful people conducted in the United States by a respected doctor in the late 1800s[37] concluded that at forty an individual reaches their peak, after which there is a

[37]George Miller Beard, a medical student at Yale, derived the "law of the relation of age to work" from which he concluded that the most productive creative output peaks at age forty then steadily declines. His work was based on an historical analysis of "great" people. His theory is outlined in his 1881 publication *American Nervousness* New York: Putnam.

sharp and steady decline both physically and intellectually. The influence of this work established the cultural credence of middle age as a "turning point", and ageing beyond middle age as a process of decline (Cole 1992). The notion that there is a "middle" period in the lifespan which distinguishes it from the years before and the years to follow, and marks a turning point away from youth, growth and creativity towards ageing, decline and loss of creative power was reconceived as an existential dilemma later termed the "midlife crisis" in the mid 1960s (Jaques 1965 in Hepworth and Featherstone 1982).

The emergent discipline of gerontology in the early 20th century focussed its attention on what it saw as physical and mental deterioration accompanying the ageing process, for which it recommended medical intervention and treatment (Cole 1992:232). Gerontologists and health care professionals identified specific needs and problems in relation to ageing. As a consequence, old age came to be seen as 'a distinct period of life characterized by decline, weakness, and obsolescence' (Hareven 1995:120). The singular approach of science, medicine and the social sciences until the last three decades has been to investigate issues regarding the health problems of ageing populations, and the equation of ageing with decline persists today.

Ageing as social decline

Concurrent with the medical model of ageing as "decline" which has as its focus the biological body, social research into ageing, taking a functionalist perspective, focuses on the productive social body and proposes two sub-theories: disengagement theory, which emphasises the individual's gradual withdrawal from the productive (particularly paid work) sphere of social life; and role or activity theory, which focuses on an individual's adjustment to new roles and activities as they relinquished the old. The notion of "disengagement" is based on the assumption that as an individual ages she or he becomes less able to contribute to the productive sphere of society. Ageing beyond middle age and into old age is seen to embody a progressive loss of capabilities causing

an underperformance of social roles in which these abilities are utilised, imposing a consequent withdrawal from the primary functions of society. Widowhood has been considered the marker of disengagement for women (Philippson 1987:159), suggesting the degree to which women are responsible for caring for spouses, parents and other elderly relatives. The thrust of the "disengagement" strand of social research has been to portray old age as a social problem and to focus on the adjustment of individuals to such events as compulsory retirement, changing family structure, and new lifestyles. The functionalist solution to the "problem" of age was based on successful resocialisation of older citizens to their new place in society.

Ageism

Ageing, then, came to be seen as a process of both physical and social decline. Age as a basis for status is reflected in both the biomedical view of the human body and the sociological view of the productive individual. Bryan Turner writes that :

> While within medical science ageing is properly understood in terms of biochemical explanations of the pathological deterioration of the human organism through time, the social sciences take a different view of ageing as a cultural and sociological process by which human beings are classified and ranked by reference to their chronology. The sociological view is that age and ageing are socially constructed categories for the classification of persons....[which] are historically and culturally specific...[T]he problem of age and ageing [is] relative to various social and historical contexts. (1989:595)

The assumption that older people withdraw from the productive realms of society, particularly through retirement from paid work, created a chronological marker of old age (Butler 1985, Cole 1992) inadvertently leading to the marginalisation of the ageing population and the increasing denigration of ageing itself. Today chronological age is considered by many to be one of the most important pieces of information about people

in contemporary Western societies and recording a person's age is standard procedure in almost every formal encounter with state and private bureaucracies, institutions, and organisations. Not only is chronological age an important piece of demographic information, it also influences how people are perceived by others, as well as how they perceive themselves. Chronological age 'conveys precise information... that directly contributes to the construction of an image of the person being described' (Bytheway 1995:8). In Western societies there are expectations that people will behave in age-specific ways and these expectations are backed by age-specific stereotypes which reinforce social understandings of age-specific behaviour and social roles appropriate to individuals across the lifespan (Bytheway 1995). The chronological categorisation of individuals into age-specific categories leads to stereotypical assumptions which obscure differences between people such as health, able-bodiedness, lifestyle choices, employment status, access to material resources as well as attitudes towards and adjustments to the ageing experience (Bytheway 1995, Arber and Ginn 1995). Thus the consequence of ageism and categorical assumptions about people of specific ages is that it leads to a denigration and fear of the ageing process and the stereotyping and stigmatisation of ageing people. Once again Tanya shared her fears of the ageing process. Her narrative reveals stereotypical images and assumptions about ageing and old age:

> *The loneliness is one of the things that concerns me about old age. My mother-in-law was actually in a nursing home. She's ninety now and I look at the kind of existence that she has and that's why old age worries me. I don't want to decay slowly. I'd rather pop a bottle of pills and go to sleep thank you very much. I don't want to eke out an existence in a hospital bed.*
>
> *Tanya, 48, second marriage, researcher*

While Tanya's fears were based on observation and were not unfounded, her imagery of "loneliness", "decay", "eking out an existence" and "nursing homes" encapsulates

stereotypical fears of ageing in contemporary society. Her descriptors once again construct a picture of life which is in opposition to the lifestyle qualities valued in contemporary Western societies: health, able-bodiedness, independence, growth, and energetic productivity.

Population ageing, an increase in the proportion of older persons relative to their younger counterparts, is a worldwide phenomenon, but developed countries have the fastest growing number of elderly citizens relative to their population (Albert and Cattell 1994:36), most of whom are women. With contemporary fears about the greying of the population, ageing people are often described in the media as a future unsustainable expense on younger, tax-paying citizens. Defining older people as a dependent social group ignores their diversity of access to material resources and social networks. The "politics of resentment" (Turner 1989:601), whereby the elderly are seen as a "dependent" generation, obscures their unpaid work contribution which is as invisible today as women's unpaid work. It fails to acknowledge people's past contribution to society, the legitimacy of their claims on later generations (Arber and Ginn 1995), as well as the vast contribution of older volunteers to Australian society. The homogenising, universalising assumptions of dependency directed against ageing citizens also fails to acknowledge the fullness of ageing people's lives, which is characterised more by diversity than conformity (Cole 1992). The fullness and diversity of older people's lives contradicts, but does not overturn, prevailing stereotypes in which '[i]mages of aging represent bodies which become increasingly fixed and inflexible as they move towards the end of the lifecourse in terms of the range of cultural messages they are allowed to depict' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995:11), reinforcing social perceptions of older people as "other" (Bytheway 1995).

Old women as a social problem

Ageism develops an added dimension when gender is taken into consideration. Writers including Arber and Ginn (1991), de Beauvoir (1972), Friedan (1993), Gibson (1996),

Greer (1991), Macdonald (1993), Reed (1999), Sontag (1972), and Walker (1985) have all highlighted the degree to which women are doubly discriminated against by both ageism and sexism as they age. As ageing is devalued in contemporary Western societies, women are doubly disadvantaged because they are aligned with their youthful, attractive appearance, which is seen to decline as they age. Stereotypes such as images of lonely, frail, osteoporotic elderly women wilting away in nursing homes, as Tanya graphically described, or images of the neurotic, masculinised "menopausal woman" present a bleak picture of ageing and promote the perception that ageing is a wholly negative experience to be avoided as long as possible. The knowledge, skills and contribution older women make to society in a range of ways is ignored by devaluing, homogenising discourses of older women as superfluous. As Dallas has experienced, "we don't feel like the elders of the tribe".[38]

Like the study of ageing in general, the earlier focus of feminist analysis was on the negative, "problematic" aspects of ageing embedded in biosocial discourses of biological and social decline, familiar themes in nonfeminist research on menopause and functionalist role theories. Feminist research has raised questions and added new insights to what has been, until the last two decades, a neglected and marginalised area in both sociology and feminism (Feldman 1995, Gibson 1996, Harrington and Kunkel 1996). The broad range of scholarship in recent years has raised awareness of the difficulties and inequalities of being old and female in Western societies (Gibson 1996), perhaps inadvertently reinforcing negative cultural stereotyp s of the ageing woman. Today research is accumulating which shows that middle aged and older women lead active, productive and fulfilling lives, contradicting the stereotypes which characterise them. Current research suggests that women's responses to widowhood are mixed and many women live full and rewarding lives after the loss of a spouse. Widows, while

[38]I expand on Dallas' observations in Chapter 10.

having to adjust to being single again, maintain and build on friendships and social networks (Feldman and Poole 1999). Gillian, who had been a widow for eighteen years, described her social life and the network of friends and acquaintances she had developed since retirement a few years earlier:

> *I'm a great believer that you shouldn't expect your children to provide your social life for you. I don't expect [my son] to say "it's Sunday, I'd better see what mum's doing." In order to do that you have to establish your own network of friends. I've established various networks where I've met people and some people are close friends and some people are friend-acquaintance.*
>
> *Gillian, 61, widowed, retired school bursar*

Gillian's lifestyle belies images of ageing widows as lonely, dependent and housebound. Gillian was active in the community and had a wide network of friends and acquaintances. Writers such as Gibson (1996) and Kamler and Feldman (1995) point to a gap in the literature and argue that limiting the research agenda to the problematic aspects of ageing faced by many ageing women may 'unintentionally obscure not only the heterogeneity of old women but more importantly the aspects of being old and female which are a source of both celebration and strength' (Gibson 1996:17). Such sources of strength can be found, for example, in women's more cohesive social networks and ties with friends and family members from which they give and receive support, thus protecting them from the isolation which some elderly men may suffer (Gibson 1996). Older women's absence from an adult lifespan of full time paid work may disadvantage them economically but stands them in good stead in the area of social relations. Recent feminist literature also suggests that for some women there may be an emerging or increasing sense of spirituality that may take a variety of forms and which enriches older women's lives and provides them with a sense of inner strength (Cole 1992, Gibson 1996). However, research on the problems women (and men) face in old age is important and has not been set aside completely,

as many researchers have demonstrated the importance of addressing issues such as the serious economic disadvantages many elderly women face.

In an effort towards bringing women's voices into the research process scholars have tended towards anthologies and autobiographical histories or life stories (Feldman 1996). The texts have enabled an understanding of the particular, lived experiences of individual women, which contradict stereotypical views or grand theoretical approaches that tend to homogenise the ageing experience and ageing women. While a more balanced view of the lives of older women may have started to make inroads into the body of academic knowledge, social portrayals of ageing and old women still present a negative picture as frequently call on stereotypes of older women as sexless, unattractive and either odd or useless in their representations. Gibson argues that the "problematic view" of older women is based on a midlife perspective of old age (1996:26), suggesting that artificial boundaries between midlife and old age are based on a fear of ageing and construct the older woman as doubly "other", to emphasise de Beauvoir's point.

In summary, as the number of ageing people per capita in Western societies continues to grow and enjoy an improved quality of life compared with earlier generations of older people, they are rejecting the "decline" model of ageing and constructing new, more positive images of what it means to be elderly for many people in Western societies. In recent years focus has shifted to the positive pole of the ageing theoretical binary, highlighting the more life enhancing aspects of ageing, and downplaying the negative "decline" approach. In contemporary Australian society, like other Western cultures, newer postmodern discourses of ageless, leisure-oriented lifestyles overlay more entrenched discourses of ageing which offer fresh perspectives for interpreting the ageing experience. Long-established biologically-based models of ageing as a process of physical and social decline and disengagement, which have overshadowed the ageing experience since early last century have been challenged by a lifestyle-based approach

which posits "positive ageing" as a viable alternative. As I explore this theoretical perspective of ageing I juxtapose it alongside stories of the women in my study, whose lived experiences provide a more nuanced and revitalised picture of ageing, that incorporates a range of experiences.

AGEING YOUTHFULLY: THE "POSITIVE AGEING" RESPONSE

The political insurgence by ageing activists challenging the concept of ageing as a decline in productivity and ability has opened the way for a new discourse to take shape in contemporary Western society. By the late 1960s and early 1970s a challenge to biomedical and functional theories of ageing emerged, which heralded a new way to age, reflected in the cultural shift towards "positive ageing".

Today, with the erosion of institutionalised life stages and age-related roles and behaviours brought about by a consumption-oriented postmodern culture, there is a move away from discrete stages of life and their accompanying expectations, behaviours and lifestyles. Postmodern writers (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989, 1991, Gilleard and Higgs 1996) point out that age boundaries are collapsing as traditional work, family and reproductive patterns give way to more flexible lifestyles and family structures. The postmodern view posits that leisure pursuits as well as styles of dress and presentation of self are taking on a more "uni age" look. In middle class families the more authoritarian roles of parents are giving way, and children are gaining access through electronic forms of media and communication to what were previously exclusively adult spheres of social life - sex, money, politics - as these modes of information and entertainment make it easier to circumvent the intervention and control of parents. Today it is no longer our chronological age but the effect of our bodily regimes and presentations which reflects how "successfully" we are ageing.

Theories of disengagement and decline have received wide criticism in the last two decades (Baltes and Baltes 1990, Birren 1985, Butler 1985, Friedan 1993, Gutmann

1987, Rowland 1991) and have been challenged by a new "positive" approach to ageing, also referred to as "successful ageing" (Baltes and Baltes 1990), and "productive ageing" (Butler 1985). Whereas the "decline" perspective based its assumptions on objective biosocial measures, "positive ageing" is determined by both objective and subjective aspects of ageing (Baltes and Baltes 1990). Positive ageing theorists urge the reconceptualisation of the concept of productivity, arguing it cannot be based solely on physical vitality. They highlight an increase in qualities such as "competence", "creativity" and "wisdom" in older people (Butler 1985).

Researchers who support the "positive ageing" perspective argue there is accumulating evidence which refutes the claim that sexual, mental and physiological capacities decline in old age (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989) and point out that an emphasis on depletion has lead to the neglect of an awareness of the developmental possibilities in older life (Gutmann 1987). Experts comment on a "newfound optimism" in response to an increasing awareness of the "untapped reserves" and "potential for change" of ageing people (Baltes and Baltes 1990:4). Notions of the elderly as sick and dependent are being replaced by an empowerment or emancipatory perspective (Walker and Minichiello 1996).

The greying population, benefiting from the developments of medicine and the policies of state, are living healthier, more active and more financially secure lives than the generations of elderly that preceded them (Butler 1985, Cole 1992). As they create lifestyles which belie derogatory stereotypes, and identify more closely with the qualities of youthfulness than age, a new distinction has been created between active, consumer, leisure-oriented third-agers, and the frailty and physical dependency of a fourth, deep old age (Gilleard and Higgs 1996, Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). With the improved health of the ageing population the "positive ageing" perspective may be more representative of the ageing experience for many older citizens, as Betty's observations suggest:

The elderly people I know have all got lots of energy. They lobby about things they are concerned about. By what they do they show younger people how [to age]. They're dedicated to causes, play sports, have careers, and even though their bodies are becoming more frail they can cope with that and still be leaders. They are still active and interested in the world.

Betty, 47, divorced, manager

Betty's observations point out that the model of ageing as physical and social decline is an inadequate framework with which to understand the ageing experience of many elderly people in contemporary Australian society. Further, her elderly friends highlight how diverse the lived experience of ageing can be, suggesting that a singular, simplistic model which fails to incorporate the lived experience of ageing is seriously limited.

In contradistinction to the "decline" perspective, which takes an unequivocally negative approach to ageing, and focuses solely on the biosocial embodiment of the individual ordered into chronological categories, "positive ageing" suggests a disembodied subjectivity. It works to dismiss the relevance of chronology entirely and downplay the significance of physical decline, focussing instead on opportunities for growth, fulfilment, self-actualisation, and the pursuit of leisure activities. It aligns with new human potential theories of midlife as a time of growth and reflection[39], resulting in a blurring of chronological age boundaries, and a distancing from deep old age.

The new trend towards positive ageing is also reflected in recent understandings of retirement which is constructed today as a time of leisure and relaxation. In the past retirement was seen to be associated with "passive old age" (Hepworth 1987:146),

[39]See Chapter 6 for a full discussion of the relevant theories of midlife, including those which construct it as a time of "growth" and "reflection".

however today it can be an active, exciting new phase in one's life. A leading retirement magazine reflects the trend in its advice to women:

> Time was when once you were forty or so you could climb into a "uniform" of a long black skirt, severe blouse and sensible shoes, sit back and officially enter old age for ever... Now, when your husband is going to be home most of the time, is the moment to make him sit up and take notice of your elegant new image. (*Retirement Choice* November 1987:18-19, cited in Hepworth 1987:146)

The above quotation suggests that positive ageing trends toward an active and exciting old age also incorporate sexual attractiveness and activity, breaking from earlier social images of retirees as sexually unattractive and inactive. In some cases this new wave of positive ageing literature takes an almost age-defying approach, often focussing on the exceptional, such as the 1994 cover photo of *Australian Cultural History* showing Reg Hitch suspended in mid-air on his first parachuting adventure at the age of eighty three. Images such as this may overstate the elderly's ability to age "positively", inadvertently distancing them from the very individuals they are purported to represent.

The "positive" ageing approach which urges older people to "defy" ageing by acting young at heart, denies the biological process and embodied experience of ageing. Thea, the oldest woman in my sample, exposed the tension between seeing herself as a younger woman and the physical signs which remind her of impending old age, revealing the inadequacy of the "positive ageing" approach in providing a theoretical understanding of the lived experience of ageing:

> *I don't think of myself as elderly. One of the groups I belong to is called "Ageing with Attitude". I would be one of the youngest in the group and I don't mind the "attitude" but I don't like the "ageing". I don't consider myself elderly. Although my mind tells me that if I'm not, I'm getting there.*

I try not to see myself as an older person. I try to keep my outlooks still as they were years ago, but in my own secret self I know that I'm ageing and I'm suffering. When I stand up after sitting down I feel pain and it takes me a bit to get moving.

Thea, 65, married, retired business owner

At sixty-five, Thea is the oldest woman in my study. Her story suggests she attempted to construct her ageing experience through a "positive" ageing discourse which, as I mentioned above, focuses on the disembodied subjectivity of the individual and ignores the physical signs of deterioration. Thea's attempt to "defy" ageing by assuming a youthful "attitude" and trying not to "see herself" as an older person, was undermined by bodily betrayals such as stiff joints, which impinged on her subjectivity. Yet Thea's story also suggests that subjectively Thea did not feel "old" or live a lifestyle which reflects ageing stereotypes of decline and social disengagement. In Thea's case, both the biosocial model of "decline" and its counterpart, "positive ageing" are simplistic binaries which cannot account for the complex and multiple experience of ageing.

An uncommon cautionary note in the new wave of "positive ageing" literature advises that successful ageing does not rest solely on the expression of growth, vitality and creativity, but factors such as health, suitable housing, adequate income and interaction with friends, family and social networks also influence how well an individual adjusts to the ageing process (Birren 1985). The lived and embodied individuality of the ageing experience, obscured by both the "decline" and "success" perspectives, is revealed through the stories of my participants. My research underscores the importance of social context in how women experience the ageing process. The stories of Jane and Barbara, two physically active and healthy women of approximately the same age, highlight the inadequacy of theories such as "decline" or "success" which fail to incorporate the individual specificities and lived experience of the ageing process. Jane says:

I don't think society is very kind to older women. There's a sense of place for an older woman in our society if she's a grandmother or she's widowed and if she's an older woman in the traditional roles. But I don't see what's so great about getting older in my life. I don't see any benefits except that I'm no threat in the workplace.

Jane, 58, divorced, administrative assistant

Jane migrated to Australia 20 years ago, divorced several years later, and has not repartnered. She lives in a rented apartment in an inner-city suburb of Melbourne, and works as an administrative assistant, earning less than $35,000 per year. With little savings and a low-paid job, Jane's financial situation was precarious and unlikely to improve. Her limited social support system was also fragile. An attractive woman and former model, her awareness of no longer being a "threat in the workplace" was based on her experience that with a loss of attractiveness comes a loss of social status. In contrast to the harsh reality of ageing in Jane's case, Barbara took a more philosophical approach:

I'm starting to realise I'm not as [physically] strong as I was five years ago.... In every other aspect, you have to be getting wiser all the time. There's such a chance to learn so much. I adore gardening... seeing seeds grow when they can no longer grow inside. You notice how wonderful it is to see things growing. That's one way you're still nurturing the world.

Barbara, 59, married, natural healer

Barbara was living with her husband in their comfortable, Californian bungalow-style home, which they owned, in a leafy eastern suburb of Melbourne. They had a joint income of $50-75,000 per year and were financially secure due to investments and inheritances. Barbara was happily married and worked in her chosen career as a natural healer, which did not bring in a high income but was high in intrinsic rewards. Jane and

Barbara's experiences of ageing were strongly influenced by their lived experiences and the socioeconomic conditions of their lives. Jane, faced with hardship and poverty, took no comfort in discourses of "positive ageing" which, in her situation, were shallow and unrealistic. Barbara, on the other hand, was free to contemplate new forms of spirituality and embodiment as she aged, secure in the knowledge that she had the comfort of both emotional and financial security.

The concept of "positive ageing" suggested a denial of physical deterioration and death, as I have discussed. Yet many women were engaged in caring for sick and dying people, and the findings of my study show that for some participants both their own physical decline, and the decline and death of family members influenced their experience of ageing in ways which suggest an acceptance of the lived and embodied experience of ageing rather than a denial. Women's intimacy with dying and death often leads to a reconstitution of subjectivity and a reinterpretation of how they contextualise their own ageing, embodied midlives. Tara explains this process for her:

> *[Ageing] is like turning around. Letting go of the full time work and creating those spaces. The accumulation of wisdom of all that one's been and not having to strive so hard. Part of ageing is acknowledging that there's life and death and identifying those fears and looking at them and going through them. My father dying was the most wonderful experience.... Middle age pilgrimages, when one contemplates death. It's part of the ageing process. That's when one looks at the context of one's life.*
>
> *Tara, 55, married, writer*

Tara's experience of ageing reveals that for her the process was complex and involved, celebrating the present as well as acknowledging impending physical decline and death. Her story is similar to several women's accounts of ageing where they have personally experienced serious and sometimes life-threatening illnesses, or have cared for or

supported friends or relatives who were ill or dying. Tara's midlife pilgrimage, traversed through her father's dying process, captures the essence of these experiences for some of my participants, and inspires the title for Chapter 11 of my thesis. Other women in my study perform voluntary or paid work in areas such as palliative care, grief counselling or in the case of two of my participants, as funeral celebrants, and another has written eulogies for relatives. Tyne had been working as a volunteer in a nursing home for the last 18 months where she has befriended an elderly lady. The intimate conversations they shared lead her to redefine her own future image of herself as an ageing woman. Tyne described her relationship with her elderly friend:

> *I've found I have a lot to learn in life and you never stop learning. I can look forward to my old age because I would like to be like that elderly lady. Wise and gracefully growing old.*
>
> *Tyne, 46, never married, volunteer carer*

For Tyne, her close observations of the process of ageing and death did not provoke fear and disdain. Rather, she expressed an awe and respect for ageing and her dying friend. This enabled her to reenvision herself as an ageing woman, and to reinterpret the dying process in more positive terms than discursive constructions of ageing suggest. Perhaps because illness and death are more tangible and present in the lives of older women who carry the cultural mandate to care for the sick and dying, the denial of death underlying the "positive" approach to ageing is seen as superficial and unrealistic.

In summary, the new discourse of "positive ageing" is linked to and underpinned by the old, negative, "decline" model of ageing. Alongside ebullient images of youthful retirees merged into a uniage, carefree, pleasure-seeking lifestyle, greying baby boomers are also perceived as a future burden on society, and this perspective has resurfaced with the contemporary trend toward economic rationalism where the welfare system is being dismantled and replaced by a user-pays system. The fear and dread of

ageing and old age, discursively constructed through the biosocial model of ageing as "decline", and its opposite, subversive discourse of "positive ageing" which focuses on the psychosubjective and ignores the biophysical nature of ageing, are simplistic binaries which present a dualist and reductionist picture of ageing. Both fail to adequately explain gendered differences in the ageing process, and consequently neither render the fullness of the lived experience of ageing for women.

I argue that the experience of ageing is a much more complex and varied experience than these theories allow, and that individual subject positions inform the ageing experience for women. In the chapters that follow I uncover the diversity and richness of the ageing experience for my participants. Their stories cast serious doubt on theoretical models of ageing outlined in this chapter. Most women rely on their own embodied and lived experience which they also weave with discourses of "decline" or "success". Sometimes these opposing discourses exist in the same stories, highlighting the complex and often contradictory nature of the ageing experience.

CONCLUSION

Cultural and historical pictures of ageing provide a starting point for an understanding of the sociocultural assumptions regarding ageing as a lived and embodied experience in contemporary Australian society. However, the contemporary theories of ageing outlined above are inadequate to understand the detailed and socially contextualised experience of ageing for women today.

For the group of women in my study, whose ages range from 45 to 65, it is important to explore the current cultural emphasis on midlife as a "transitional" phase in the ageing process in order to understand how the dynamics of the symbolic and socially constructed nature of youth and old age interact and inform the subjectivities of women of middle age. Chapter 6 explores this theme.

CHAPTER 6

In France middle age doesn't exist:

The social construction of the midlife transition

Middle age, the period between "youth" and "old" age, has flexible boundaries and multiple definitions. Midlife is broadly defined from age 35 to 64 (Long and Porter 1984:109) and today's midlife women make up 19.1% of the total Australian population (ABS 1999b). In Western societies middle age has historically been perceived as a turning point away from the vitality of youth and toward the feebleness of age. This perspective has been reinforced by more recent biomedical and sociological perspectives regarding ageing as an organic and social process of decline. In contemporary Australian society midlife is seen to be associated with particular transitional experiences which are believed to be intrinsic to its unique position in the lifecourse as a turning point. While earlier discourses of ageing constructed this turning point as a move away from growth towards decline, it is now being conceptualised in popular culture as a "new direction" which can bring unexplored opportunities. There is a strong argument by scholars from a range of theoretical perspectives that midlife is a time of "self reflection" based on an awareness of getting older, but which can also lead to a "midlife crisis". Midlife is also depicted as a time of "growth" and "development", often when both women and men are seen to take on qualities that were previously considered appropriate to the opposite sex. I argue that while midlife can be interpreted and experienced as a time of growth, reflection, or a crisis, it is not midlife itself, but an individual's lived experience and ageing embodiment within a broader sociocultural context, in which the ageing experience is rendered meaningful, that shapes the experience of midlife.

"MIDLIFE": THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW MIDDLE AGE

In contemporary Australian society, where many people are living longer, enjoying better health, and adjusting their lifestyles to suit a new consumer-oriented cultural ethos, the meaning of middle age has changed. Until the last two decades middle age was seen as a relatively uneventful, transitory period between youth and old age. Reaching adulthood carried with it a sense of "having arrived", after which one "settled down", suggesting a 'plateau between growing up and growing old' which remained fairly consistent and predictable until one reached old age (Burgoyne 1987:51). In the past, middle age meant the end of youth and there are many literary references to attest to the belief that by the age of fifty the best of life was over (Hepworth 1987).

In response to changing demographic patterns there has been a shift away from the earlier image of middle age as a static period between youth and old age. It has been replaced by a "new middle age", redefined as "midlife", which today is represented as a time of activity and excitement, more closely aligned with what is expected of youth rather than old age. The new term, "midlife" also represents a cultural shift away from prioritising chronologically-based definitions of age, and a distancing from the ageing process itself.

> To put mid-life culture into a nutshell, during the last twenty to thirty years middle age has increasingly become a cause for concern. The public stereotype of middle age as a kind of "mature" interlude with relatively unambiguous physical and psychological boundaries between young adulthood and declining old age has been replaced by an ideal of active prolonged midlife which has more in common with youth than age. (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989:152)

The social construction of a new middle age reflects the values of the post-war, ageing, baby-boom generation, new social perceptions of ageing, and changing population demographics, particularly the lengthening of the lifespan and the increasing number of

elderly citizens in Western societies. My informants suggested to me, however, that the concept of middle age, with its specific connotations, as distinct from youth and old age is a cultural artefact. Petra, who is French, explains that in France ageing is not discursively constructed as a process of decline and loss. Consequently, the concept of middle age has little meaning:

> *In Australia I would call myself middle aged but in France it doesn't exist, and when I tell my friends I'm getting old they laugh!*
>
> *Petra, 55, remarried, translator*

The reconceptualisation of middle age as midlife has been shaped by a number of factors. Young adulthood has become protracted and events which in the past were considered markers of adulthood, such as marriage and childbearing, are happening for many at a later age. Social changes leading to flexible work and family patterns make formerly anticipated events within the life span less certain and predictable (Hepworth and Featherstone 1982, Hepworth 1987). The health of midlife and older citizens has also markedly improved which, along with increasing longevity, particularly for women, has stretched the boundaries of midlife. And finally, the dread of and stigma against old age, reinforced by negative stereotypes of ageing as frailty, decline and dependence, has contributed to an extension of the boundary into what traditionally was seen as old age in an effort to distance middle age from the disparaging image of the very old (Brooks-Gunn and Kirsh 1984:13-14).

The distinctions which used to demark youth from middle age have become blurred. In contemporary Australian society some women become mothers at the same time as their daughters and there is also a burgeoning field of literature on the "new father", many of whom are well into middle age. Alternatively, midlifers can lead similar "singles" lifestyles to those in their twenties, dating, wearing similar clothes, living in apartment buildings or townhouses and sharing similar social interests, in 'a conscious effort to

continue young adulthood in appearance, activities, and values' (Brooks-Gunn and Kirsh 1984:21). The new discourse on midlife, like ageing, is more closely associated with youth rather than age (Hepworth 1987). For earlier generations a change to a more sober and staid lifestyle was the cultural imperative at midlife. In the twenty-first century, midlife is revealed by what can be perceived to be bodily "betrayals" such as grey hairs and wrinkles rather than a socially-imposed change in lifestyle.

The proliferation of popular books, from the 1950s to the 1970s, on the topic of middle age constructed this period as a positive time of "growth" within a model of stages of human development. Since the 1970s the popularity of the concept of a "midlife crisis" and the increasing emphasis placed on menopause (both male and female) as a transformative personal experience displaced the prominence of inherent age-linked stages with an alternative perspective of the lifecourse as a more individualised and flexible experience. This enabled "the individual" to shed chronologically-bound concepts of conventional sex role behaviours, life-cycle expectations and lifestyle patterns and instead explore personal growth and fulfilment (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989:152). The concept of a midlife crisis has become an explanatory framework for any subjective contradictions and physical concerns people may experience at this time in their lives. Mandy's narrative suggests how commonplace the use of the term "midlife crisis" has become:

> *My husband went through a midlife crisis. Although I didn't have one he really had quite a severe one. It was quite earth shattering for him. Then two years later he turned fifty and he found that very difficult. He was very good looking and I suppose he really did find it hard to start losing his looks and he went grey and started losing his hair. He hasn't coped at all well.*
>
> *Mandy, 50, married, homemaker*

Mandy's story reveals how her husband interpreted distressful subjective responses to

his ageing embodiment to a "midlife crisis". For Mandy's husband "losing his looks" and "his hair" was followed by his fiftieth birthday. Mandy's story suggests how important embodiment is to an individual's sense of self, and highlights how changes in body image can, for some people, destabilise a stable sense of identity. Despite the minimisation of the importance of chronology in postmodern discourse, which suggests the ageing experience is aligned more with attitude than actual age, its significance is apparent in Mandy's story, as well as in the stories of other women in my study.[40]

The concept of "midlife" suggests an apparent denial of the relevance of age-graded statuses, and a distancing from the biological process of ageing which is taking place. The replacement of the term "age" with "life" suggests its alliance with active lifestyles and a cultural infatuation with reflecting youthfulness in behaviour and presentation. Further, marker events traditionally associated with midlife (such as children leaving home) are no longer tied to a specific chronological period but can occur at varying stages along the lifecourse. The move away from age-graded status may be justified on the basis of the heterogeneity of the ageing population in which biological age and chronological age have no necessary symbiosis. With keep-fit bodily regimes such as exercise and healthy diets, those who participate may avoid the physical discomforts and ill-health of members of their less-fit age cohorts.

Patsy's comments below reflect the changing meanings of midlife in contemporary Australian society, in which fixed, deterministic age-based identities and social positions have given way to freer, more fluid, individualised ways of constructing ageing identities:

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[40] Chronology is described as a significant marker of ageing in the stories of Barbara page 23, Casey page 217, Samantha page 219 and Tara page 256.

I grew up when middle aged women were middle aged from age thirty and they dressed differently and did their hair differently. I don't do that. I don't wear a bikini or go swimming in public, but that's about the only thing [that's changed]. I don't think [ageing is] changing the way I behave.

I can look at a group of clothes on a clothes rack and think that's still too old for me because it's sort of a thin belt and crimplene skirt and that's certainly not my image. If I had been this age twenty years ago that might have been my image, but I think perhaps a lot of those external parameters of what measured time [have changed].

I can remember being shocked when Junie Morosi wore her hair in a ponytail or a woman over forty wore her hair loose. It wasn't right back in those days and I think we're probably very fortunate that a lot of those things have gone and bigger women can wear slacks and you can wear your hair up or down and you can wear makeup or bright red lipstick and it's not shocking and you don't have to cover up your head with a blue rinse in it or keep it deadly black.

Patsy, 47, married, manager

Patsy's observations about changing social expectations at middle age are articulated through a discourse of gendered embodiment reflecting the centrality of the body as a social symbol of ageing for women. Her observations suggest that restricting cultural standards of age-based gendered presentations which are in contradiction to a woman's sense of self can disempower and undermine women.[41] New standards of self presentation in which the body becomes a representation of the "self" and a source of identity reflect new understandings of middle age as more individualised, self-expressive and less tied to chronological age.

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[41] I discuss this theme in detail in Chapter 10.

The reconceptualisation of midlife, then, represents a move away from chronological conceptions of limiting and restrictive age boundaries to an emphasis on shared experiences, a distancing from earlier cultural links between retirement and old age, and dissociation from the powerlessness and dependence of deep old age, suggesting that the significance of chronological age itself is declining in contemporary Western cultures. Today, the term "midlife" has come to refer to:

> a rather loosely arranged collection of ideals which intersect around the concept of youthfulness and its capacity for personal and social change and the irrelevance of chronologically determined age-related statuses. (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989:153).

Middle age today is no longer seen as a static phase in the lifecourse but is associated with certain experiences which are seen to lead to personal growth. In particular, midlife is seen as being a time of self reflection based on an awareness of getting older, which leads to a refocussing of direction and goals. In postmodern times sociocultural change has ushered in a new way of assigning meaning to subjective change. Transitional midlife discourses of "growth", "development" and "crisis", and discourses of midlife as a "time of reflection", provide women with avenues to reinterpret their experiences and reconstitute their subjectivities. I now outline competing theories which attempt to construct midlife as a unique phase in the lifecourse, characterised by certain experiences, before presenting a counter theory based on the findings of my study.

MIDLIFE "TRANSITIONS" AND THE FAMILY LIFECYCLE

The claim that midlife is a time of "reflection" and "growth" for many women is supported by a wealth of literature on midlife transitions, crises and "change of life" (Baruch, Barnett and Rivers 1983, Giele 1982a, 1982b, Hepworth and Featherstone 1982, Long and Porter 1984, Lowenthal 1975, Neugarten 1968, Notman 1980, Rossi

1980, Rubin 1979). Literature about midlife, from a range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives is in broad agreement that midlife is a unique phase in the lifecourse, that generates experiences that are claimed to distinguish it from the rest of the lifecourse. Renowned gerontologist Bernice Neugarten defines midlife as a time when one experiences "a heightened sensitivity to one's position within a complex social environment, and the theme of reassessment of the self" implying that a greater understanding of the relationship between "self" and society may lead to personal change (cited in Notman 1980:89). There are competing views as to what women may experience at this time of life, whether all women experience changes, and if so whether changes are a consequence of social, psychological, or biological factors, or a combination of all three.

The family lifecycle and midlife as "loss"

Early functionalist sociological research of the 1950s and 1960s restricted its analysis to women's "roles" within the patriarchal nuclear family. Functionalist theorists, who assumed conventional stages of a "family lifecycle" within the nuclear family as normative, investigated events as they presented themselves to women within the context of women's roles as wives and mothers. Many earlier studies were concerned with the first half of adult life and focussed on or emphasised "the family", "sex roles" and "role conflict" as essential to understanding women's lives (Long and Porter 1984:119). Their overemphasis on women's family roles has led to midlife being characterised as a time of loss, diminishment and redundancy rather than a positive time in the lifecourse (Long and Porter 1984:110). Lifecycle theorists argued that midlife was a time when women's roles in the family were winding down and women's midlives were characterised as "role loss" and "empty nest", a term which refers to the time in a woman's "lifecycle" when it is expected her children have reached adulthood and are expected to leave home (Baruch 1984:168). Due to the assumption that motherhood is a woman's primary source of fulfilment, the "empty nest" was frequently

described as the precipitator of a midlife crisis in early literature on middle aged women. Significantly, some women in my study discursively constructed painful emotional experiences through cultural understandings of "empty nest". Beth, reluctantly forced to relocate with her *young* children because of her husband's new job, left her friends and family in the city to move to the country in her mid-thirties. Following the move she became depressed and experienced a "sense of loss" which she attributed to "early empty nest":

> *It was due to moving to the country and sending the children to boarding school. There was a sense of loss. Early empty nest syndrome.*
>
> *Beth, 48, married, social worker*

The assumed centrality of motherhood as a woman's primary source of fulfilment enables a range of complex emotions to be discursively constructed as "empty nest". Beth experienced the distress of leaving family and friends, of moving from Melbourne and relocating to the country, and the absence of her children during school semesters. The combined sense of loss experienced by these changes was attributed to "empty nest". In contrast, for some women midlife is a time in women's lives when they welcome the freedom from the restrictions and responsibilities raising children can bring. Hilary was enjoying her current life because:

> *I'm able to be myself, I've got the kids off my hands, I can do what I want to do. Going out and coming home and not having to answer to anybody. Even when I was on my own with the children you have to consider them first and if you have a male in your life... I'm much happier being by myself and being me.*
>
> *Hilary, 46, divorced, dancer*

The overemphasis on women's reproductive functions and family roles in functionalist theories, implied women became redundant in midlife, when their reproductive capabilities and intensive mothering responsibilities are coming to an end (Notman

1980). The perspective ignores or downplays other aspects of women's lives which women may find fulfilling and enhancing. Research has found many women do not experience feelings of loss when children leave home. Instead, many women welcome the freedom from childraising responsibilities and the opportunities to develop other interests (Baruch 1984:168, Greene 1990). Psychologist Grace Baruch argues that "being at home with small children can be much more threatening to wellbeing than the empty nest" (Baruch 1984:168), and research has shown that women who do have difficulties when their children leave home are those who have devoted their lives to motherhood and homemaker roles (Baruch 1984:170; Long et al. 1984:144).

The timing of events within the lifecycle

An alternative, more positive sociological approach to midlife within the lifecycle model argues that whether midlife is experienced positively or negatively is affected by the timing of events relevant to changes in the family or the individual lifecourse (Lennon 1982). The "timing of events" model moves away from the notion of inevitable life crises assumed to be brought about by "role loss" and "empty nest", but argues instead that people experience a gradual change in their perspective of time from years since birth to time left to live. The temporal shift is accompanied by an increasingly introspective reassessment of a person's life contexts which provide "cues" to the appropriate timing of developmental transitions rather than to their chronological age. In the model it is the cultural and social environment which provides norms and expectations relating to ageing along the lifecourse, thus the individual's subjective change occurs in response to these cues.

By the late 1970s the concept of a lifecycle was being criticised for presupposing 'sequential stages through which a population's members must all pass' (Harris 1987:25). Further, "lifecycle" studies which assume women's development is restricted to the family, ignore the effects of employment, education and other forms of self-development (Long and Porter 1984). More importantly, the family life-cycle came to

be criticised for assuming women's traditional roles within a stable nuclear family as normative, and deviantising difference, such as in the case of women who are divorced, remarried, never-married or childless (Murphy 1987:37).

As many subsequent studies have shown, family transitions as markers of development for women are no longer reliable (Long and Porter 1984, Notman 1980). With the combination of family types such as mature age mothers, single mothers, blended families, second families, single women and childless women, family cycle as a marker for development has become irrelevant to the contemporary lives of many women (Baruch, Barnett, Rivers 1983). Further, women who choose to have a family often delay childrearing until their career is firmly established, thus the age range of mothers varies to the degree that one women can give birth to her first child at the same age as another becomes a grandmother. A further criticism of the lifecycle model is that while it allows for the interaction of social context and personal experience, it also fails to incorporate a consideration of the biological effects of ageing (Rossi 1980), and it ignores the individual's lived and embodied experience within patriarchal and cultural frameworks of the ideal social body.

PSYCHOBIOLOGICAL MODELS OF MIDLIFE DEVELOPMENT

Parallel to functionalist models of the family lifecycle, which argued that women's position within the family lifecycle was key to understanding their subjective experiences at midlife, a competing theory proposed that midlife was a specific "stage" of development in women's and men's lives, characterised by inherent psychological developmental processes.

Midlife as an inherent "stage" of development

In the 1970s psychological models of human development were incorporated into the sociological branch of social psychology. They proposed that midlife was characterised by a specific "stage" leading to "growth" and "development". Stage theorists argued that each stage emerges during the lifecourse as a result of specific biological "triggers" and can present the individual with a "crisis", and challenged the "timing of events" model based on the family lifecycle.

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives on midlife "growth" is the age-based stage model of human development. It was first outlined by Erik Erikson (1978), in his adaptation of evolutionary theory to the lifecycle. It is based on eight inherent, sequential and inevitable stages of development from childhood to old age which occur at specific ages and through which each individual must pass in order to reach full maturity. The model 'assumes an inherent ground plan to all human development' (Rossi 1980:10) and argues that development or growth is triggered by an age-based biological imperative which leads to a new stage of development. The model is also referred to as a "normative crisis" model of human development because it assumes that the specific developmental tasks presented at specific ages confront the individual with a crisis or transformation in identity (O'Rand and Krecker 1990:245).

Moira articulates her understanding of the "stage" model of human development as a discursive framework for interpreting her fears of ageing. She reinterprets Erikson's concept of age-based developmental "tasks" that individuals need to accomplish along their life trajectory to articulate what the ageing process means to her:

> *Midlife is ageing. It's coming to terms with inevitable things like death. Losing the fear of death, acknowledging that it's inevitable and not avoiding it like the plague. That's the task that has to be done at this stage. And accepting ageing*

and all that stuff, that's hard.

Moira, 53, sales manager

For Moira, midlife is associated with certain "tasks" such as "coming to terms" with one's own mortality, a theme which is characteristic in "stage" based theories of "human development". Erikson's age-based stage model of human development is based on empirical studies of white middle class males and valorises the successful adoption of a stereotypical "masculine" role characterised by autonomy, achievement and success in the workforce. There is 'a linear progression of development in which an individual is seen as passing through a definite series of stages' (Notman 1980:87). Such a description is characteristic of the "self-made man" who builds his career through a series of steps. Within the model a woman's developmental task is motherhood which leaves her without a separate, individuated identity. Defining motherhood as a woman's "developmental task" ignores the reality of women without children and marginalises them as deviant or deficient. Do they not "develop" and become "mature" adults too? Further, prioritising a woman's reproductive function as a marker of maturity has negative implications for women at midlife when their reproductive capabilities begin to diminish. The approach fails to incorporate the ways women may nurture others as social rather than biological mothers, the effects of unexpected and unplanned events such as divorce, changing relationships, or new employment patterns which affect women's (and men's) lives. It also ignores how impoverished socioeconomic conditions may preclude personal "development" for some.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow attempted to unify the biologically-driven psychological theories of human development with phenomenological experience in an approach he termed "existential psychology". Maslow (1968) believed that through "motivational growth" experiences people could realise their creative potential and become "self-actualised" human beings. Maslow identified a hierarchy of needs, and acknowledged

that basic needs must be met before the individual can experience a series of "peak experiences" leading to "self actualisation". Despite his more contextual approach to subjectivity his theory is universalising and based on a white, male, middle class model of assumed human development. Self-actualisation may not be a viable option for a single mother raising children and juggling family responsibilities with a dead-end, part-time job in order to make ends meet. Is she therefore, positioned on a lower rung of the hierarchy of "human development"?

The "self-made man" model was rigorously challenged by psychologist Carol Gilligan in her now eminent text *In a Different Voice* (1982) as to its accuracy in defining "human" development. Women's assumed "development", Gilligan argues, is based on their understanding of relationship, not achievement, which she sees as emerging from the tension between self-sacrifice and self-development and the importance of connection and communication between people rather than the autonomy and individualism of the "self-made man". Gilligan's theory highlights a serious methodological bias in assuming middle class white males represent a universal model of humanity, or a standard by which others are measured. Further, Gilligan shows how the particularity of the lives of the women she interviewed, many of whom were outside the corporate public sphere characteristic of "self-made men" represent an unheard minority who "developed" according to the imperatives and contexts of their environment. However, the process and the women's stories which brought Gilligan's new theory to light, had been overlooked in previous studies.

Despite Gilligan's insights, her theory has been criticised because it reflects a dualistic biological essentialism which limits women's "development" to conventional "feminine" qualities, ignores the social difference and particularities of women's lives, and fails to incorporate women's embodiment beyond their physiology as a criterion for changing subjectivity (Kerber et al. 1986).

The cross-over hypothesis: women becoming more "masculine"

When midlife women *are* the subjects of research into change at midlife within the "stage" model of development, gender is seen as the central issue around which change occurs. Notman, writing twenty years ago from a human development perspective argues, for example, that the 'the very ideology of midlife development implies growth of the personality to encompass some characteristics that had stereotypically in the past been assigned to the opposite sex' (1980:90). She suggests a loosening of appropriately "feminine" behaviour and an incorporation of qualities previously seen as "masculine" into women's identities. Her perspective was developed by David Gutmann in his frequently-cited text on ageing women *Reclaimed Powers* (1987). Gutmann proposes a biologically-based "cross-over" hypothesis, arguing that women gain in dominance and assertiveness as they age while men relinquish their dominance over women, get more in touch with their feelings, and focus more on interpersonal relationships.

Gutmann's work is also related to the work of Carl Jung in the early 20th century. Jung saw human development as an interactive process between internal, unconscious forces and external social influences. Jung believed that "masculinity" and "femininity" are psychic components of a "store of substances", both inherent in men and women (Campbell 1971:16). He argued that in the first half of life these components are used unequally, that men use their "masculine" and women their "feminine" substances. At midlife the "repressed" components come to the fore. Jung believes the cross-gender switch is not a mere unfolding of new dimensions of the personality, but marks a break with the past, and can bring about a complete transformation of self (Campbell 1971).

Gutmann bases the cross-over hypothesis on both his own research, which leads him to identify what he terms the 'protean energy of the older women' (1987:158), as well as anthropological evidence of what he refers to as a 'surgent developmental awakening' (1987:183) in older women crossculturally, which is manifest in the expression of more "masculine" qualities. Gutmann clearly acknowledges the role of culture and society in

shaping gender-related behaviour, claiming that women suppress "masculine" qualities such as aggression during childrearing years. He argues that once her children have grown women 'take back into themselves the aggressive energy lived out vicariously during their parental years, through identification with the husband' (1987:206). However, Gutmann argues that culture is responding to the imperatives of evolutionary biology, and not the inverse. In subtle contrast, anthropological scholars critique the Western alignment of power with the public sphere. Karim, for example, argues that "typical" Western assumptions about "typical" male and female behaviour cannot be applied crossculturally. Concomitantly, Karim disputes universal assumptions of male dominance over women and points out that in Southeast Asian cultures women's input into political and religious life, which is generated in the informal sphere, is equally important in shaping sociopolitical and spiritual life (Karim 1995).

Gutmann's (1987) perception of the emergence of women's midlife empowerment presents itself in the form of an 'eruptive energy'. He substantiates his biologically-based theory of older women's empowerment by drawing on crosscultural evidence from which he cites a number of reasons: in Chipewyan cultures of Northwest Canada, Amazonian Brazil, Samoa and parts of India 'the aging husband gives up interest in secular power'; throughout Africa, in Tonga and parts of Asia and India ageing women 'gain domestic power through [their] son'; in Ghana and Amerindian cultures of Northwest Canada and Southwest USA postmenopausal women are 'acceptable in sacred places'; and in Morocco, New Guinea and parts of Africa and Asia older women are seen to possess supernatural powers (1987:202). Further, older "American" women are more dominant in the family and take a more maternal and managerial role towards their husbands. None of Gutmann's explanations, in my view, defend his hypothesis that women's so-called midlife "empowerment" is biologically based. His explanations are vested in the culturally ascribed allocation of social power which does not give women equal power with men, or even significant social power. Rather they gain in domestic power in relation to their husbands or female relatives, and become more

"acceptable" socially.

From a sociological perspective Gutmann's theory overlooks sociocultural factors and assumes conventional binary gender qualities as being inherent and universal to each sex. Gutmann does not problematise the notion that "assertiveness" and "domination" are defined as "masculine" qualities, nor does he problematise the premise of a universal and normative state of motherhood for women. A range of anthropological studies have confirmed that middle aged women gain in power and status in many cultures, with fewer restrictions and a wider sphere of authority over others, and often performing important social roles (Brown and Kerns 1985). Any "empowerment" women experience is based on cultural concessions related to sociocultural understandings of ageing, and not biological triggers. Blair, who has worked with women's groups for the last twenty-five years, has observed:

> *If you talk to women now, especially women around forty when their child bearing years are over and they're looking at their own life you can almost pick the relationships that are not going to survive, depending on the attitude of the men in those relationships.*
>
> *The women will grow, and they will gain in knowledge and awareness and links with other women and unless the men change that very autocratic kind of attitude, women won't stay in that kind of relationship. It's not only a social thing, it's like they have to, it's like a force they can't stop.*
>
> *Blair, 51, married, administrator*

Blair interpreted the observations of women around her who appeared to be more "empowered" in biologically-deterministic terms, confirming Gutmann's configuration of midlife women's empowerment as an "eruptive energy" that provides a discursive framework for understanding women's subjective change at midlife. Although her observation is significant, it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. In contradistinction I

argue women's "forcefulness" is not biologically-driven, but a response to changing expectations of "gender" which is particularly salient for the currently middle aged cohort of women. That women are responding to contemporary social imperatives in which egalitarian marriage relationships have replaced conventional patriarchal marriages where authority was vested in the husband has, for me, greater explanatory power.[42]

Gutmann's hypothesis, like that of lifecycle theorists, fails to examine the ways in which women who are not mothers construct their social identity. Many never-married, divorced women, career women, lesbians, infertile, and disabled women do not have children either by choice (Faux, 1984, Morell 1994) or because physical or biological conditions prevent them from so doing. Do they also, as Gutmann claims, become more "androgynous, sexually bimodal, a mixture.... of mother and father?" (1987:205). Or does he universally dismiss childless women as "developmental casualties", as he suggested in an earlier work (1980)? Gutmann's hyperpatriarchal viewpoint reduces women's social value and personal potential to their biology, reinforcing sociobiological claims that postmenopausal women are superfluous and anomalous.

The idea of inherent sequential stages on which successful adult development rests has been criticised widely (for example, Baruch, Barnett, Rivers 1983, Featherstone and Hepworth 1989, Giele 1982a). Many scholars, critical of age and stage-based theories of development, are also critical of Gutmann's cross-over hypothesis. Some studies find no support for a "cross-over" of gender-based qualities at midlife, while other studies reflect a range of inconsistencies and raise methodological questions in relation to Gutmann's findings.[43] While some women's subjectivities may be reconstituted in

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[42]I discuss contemporary trends in marriage relationships in more detail in Chapter 7.

[43]See James et al (1995) for a full discussion and critique of Gutmann's cross-over hypothesis.

ways which reflect progressive "stages", others do not. Featherstone and Hepworth flatly contest the model.

> The assumptions which underpin psychological models of universal stages of life development can be shown to be flawed.... [I]ndividual development is artificially isolated from its social context, and the life course is not fully taken into account as a social institution in its own right interconnected with other parts of the social structure. (1989:143)

In Western societies a link can be made between women's so-called "empowerment" and a reduction in family obligations. I agree with Arber and Ginn (1995) that many women enjoy a reduction of household tasks and obligatory roles in the family as they age, and this is the more likely explanation for their sense of "empowerment", as Hilary's transcript earlier in this chapter reflects. As the stories of other women in my study also exemplify, as structured, modernist sources of identity such as family "roles" are being replaced by more individualised, autobiographical and flexible approaches to identity construction, many women may feel freer to reinvent themselves in more challenging, enriching, and therefore "empowering" ways. Yet defining motherhood as normative links with and reinforces understandings of postmenopausal women as redundant.

Motherhood as normative

The "stage" model of human development has been criticised for ignoring the social and cultural context of women's lived experience, as well as their personal biography. Lifecycle arguments have been criticised on the basis that women's lives are no longer tied to family or work cycles and in contemporary society there is a fluidity and flexibility in family patterns, work histories and individual biographies which render lifecycle perspectives irrelevant. Both theoretical perspectives conceive of women's roles as wives and mothers as central to their existence. While both theoretical

perspectives fall on opposite sides of the "nature/nurture" debate, what they have in common is the belief that women's lives are circumscribed to their roles within the nuclear family, and that midlife is experienced negatively as women's usefulness comes to an end.

The emphasis by lifecycle and stage theorists on motherhood as both normative and central to the wellbeing of women has been criticised by feminist scholarship because they define, describe and limit women according to their reproductive status and their "roles" as wives and mothers (Ireland 1993). In both cycle and stage models of human development, the assumption that motherhood is normative f women and therefore necessary to "mature" adult "development" is implicit. Theorists supporting stage and cycle models centre the concept of motherhood around the act of pregnancy, child birth and child rearing.[44] Defining the birthing and rearing of children as normative reinforces social stereotypes of old women as abnormal and redundant, and underscores the perceived invisibility and unimportance of older women within the patriarchal framework of contemporary Western societies.

The assumed centrality of motherhood ignores the lives of women who are not mothers. Childless women are overlooked in most research on women, yet the number of women who choose not to have children is growing (ABS 1999a). Studies on wellbeing in women find 'no differences in happiness or satisfaction between mothers and childless women' and no evidence that being a parent 'enhances a woman's wellbeing' (Baruch 1984). Depner's study found that 'there is little evidence that the childless are yearning for a role which they do not have' (in Baruch 1984). A study of widows between the ages of sixty and seventy-five showed that children had only a slight effect on life satisfaction and wellbeing compared to the quality of other social relationships (Beckman and Houser 1982 in Baruch 1984). With changing family patterns in

[44]I discuss Erikson's alignment of womanhood with fecundity and child rearing in Chapter 4.

contemporary Australian society it is more likely that middle aged women are less likely to experience "empty nest" than they are to have adult children return home for periods of time, and to assume responsibility for the care of their ageing relatives.

The current accumulation of research suggests that for many women, whether they are mothers or not, midlife is a positive time in their lives. Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983) conducted research into the experience of midlife for women which reinforced the accumulating evidence that the lifecycle and stage models of midlife development, and its correlate the "timing of events" model, are inadequate to describe the complexity of midlife women's lives. The authors asserted that wellbeing for women, regardless of their family configuration, is premised on fulfilment in both paid work and intimate relationships. Baruch, Barnett and Rivers' (1983) study of midlife women suggests that women's lives involve much more diversity of experience and that any theoretical model of midlife for women must incorporate social changes and the influences of both work and relationships. Anderson and Stewart's (1994) study of never married and divorced women at midlife, and Ireland's (1993) research into childless women, suggest that many women lead rewarding and fulfilling lives that are not dependent on marriage or motherhood. A singular focus on women's family roles inherent in both lifecycle and stage theories ignores women's accumulated life experiences in realms outside the family (Long and Porter 1984). This oversight has diminished the social recognition of women's rich and valuable contribution to the political and social landscape of Western societies which is so apparent in my research. Most importantly, the theories give insufficient attention to women's subjective experience of ageing at midlife.

The theories I have discussed so far do not fit with the complex and flexible patterns of women's lives. The limitations of these theories suggested I turn to a competing perspective on possible change at midlife which uses societal rather than biological frameworks for its central theoretical argument. In contemporary sociology, the lifecourse perspective has become the most popular theoretical tool with which to

examine midlife within the ageing continuum.

A LIFECOURSE PERSPECTIVE AND THE POSTMODERN SELF

The universalising approach of the theories I have outlined so far fails to acknowledge the specificities of individuals' lived and embodied experiences, and their sociocultural context within contemporary Australian society.

The lifecourse approach links individual biographies with sociocultural context as part of an ongoing continuum of historical change (Hareven and Adams 1982:2). It moves away from rigid, sequential and progressive models of human "development" and enables an understanding of women's lived and embodied experiences within the context of contemporary social frameworks. It is the theoretical approach I have appropriated to frame my thesis, because it fits with the perceptions and concepts articulated by many of my informants.

The lifecourse is seen as a multidimensional process in which social, biological and biographical factors interact within a specific historical and cultural context. This perspective acknowledges that with 'increasing age, there is increasing variation among individuals in lifecourse processes' (Albert and Cattell 1994:59), bringing into question assumptions about studies which tend to view age groups of people, such as the middle aged or the elderly, as homogeneous groups with shared lifestyles, interests and needs. Thus, for lifecourse researchers, a range of different phenomena such as cultural and social contexts, social, historical and economic change and the processes effecting these can be investigated (Albert and Cattell 1994:57).

Central to lifecourse studies is the concept of time and the intersection and coordination of the passage of time over an individual's life with social processes and individual ageing experience. Difficulties arise in lifecourse studies by trying to distinguish individual change or "development" with cohort effects or historical processes, thus it is

difficult to know when a characteristic of "middle age" should be attributed to the individual ageing process, to a particular experience common to a birth cohort, or to an historical event which relates to neither (Albert and Cattell 1994, Smith and Moen 1988). A lifecourse approach is clearly directed towards understanding the macro social and demographic processes which affect human lives and, with rare exception (for example Rossi (1980) who argues for the inclusion of biological processes in lifecycle studies of ageing), embodiment itself is a largely unexamined area within the theoretical framework.

> A life-course theoretical approach posits that the relationships between women's marital and parental role transitions and their labor force behaviour in the middle years of adulthood cannot be specified without some reference to the multiple meanings of age - as a biological aging process, a life stage, and a historical context. (Moen 1991:136)

As a consequence of current social trends which are seen to reflect postmodernity there appears to be a reversal in the processes of modernisation and industrialisation which lead to institutionalised life stages and their accompanying rules governing social practices such as childhood, employment, marriage and retirement. Today an individual's lifecourse is being deconstructed in response to social changes and there is a:

> blurring of what appeared previously to be relatively clearly marked stages and the experiences and characteristic behaviour which were associated with those stages. Today there is less emphasis on age-specific role transitions and scheduled identity development than in the past. (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989:144)

Other studies of midlife women and ageing, mindful of the limitations of earlier theories, have taken a lifecourse perspective in order to understand women's changing

subjectivity as they age. Theorists who take a sociohistorical perspective on the lifecourse argue that any "reassessment" at midlife for women can be explained by taking into account the interconnectedness between individual biography and major social changes in the last thirty years relating to gender and work expectations (Albert and Cattell 1994, Featherstone and Hepworth 1989, Hareven and Adams 1982, Rossi 1980).

As subjective experiences, which can be interpreted as a transition or a crisis, can occur at any time in the lifecourse there is a reasonable probability of presumed "transitional" experiences occurring at midlife. Since transitional experiences are often preceded or followed by some degree of introspection, it is suggested that this "time of reflection" is not unique to the midlife period but is an effect of the transitional events themselves (Baruch 1984, Baruch, Barnett, Rivers 1983, Giele 1982a).

The lifecourse perspective suggests that "reassessment" is not specifically tied to midlife itself. A range of significant life events such as divorce and, or (re)entry into the paid work force may be cause for "reassessment" because they propel one into different social contexts which require unfamiliar ways of dealing with new social relationships and life events. Postmodern lifecourse theorists argue that midlife is a time when one can explore new identities and lifestyles. Hence, the concept of midlife as a time of "growth and development" has shifted from being seen as biologically driven, to a personal project based on consumerism and identity construction in which the body plays an important part. I argue that in order to understand the subjective change of women at midlife it is essential to contextualise processual subjectivities within a broader sociohistorical framework. An understanding of women's midlives that requires sensitivity to the lived specificities of changing social expectations of gender and women's participation in paid work and public life over the last thirty years, and the interaction of these changes with women's ageing subjectivities, is relevant. Further, new ways of constructing identity in postmodern society, which move away

from fixed and given sources of identity associated with work and family life to more individualised, biographical ways of remaking identity, may also present particular contradictions and challenges to midlife women as they reshape their subjectivities and reconstruct their identities as contemporary ageing women.

THE MIDLIFE "TRANSITION" AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

I argue that midlife women are the forerunners of social change in which modernist ways of identity making around structures such as "the family" are being replaced by more individualised, biographical and flexible approaches to identity. Changing expectations of gender and new ways of remaking identity may enable women to reinvent themselves in more rewarding, challenging, and therefore empowered ways.[45] I also propose that women use discourses of "midlife crisis", "growth and development" and "reflection", which construct midlife as a distinct phase in the lifecourse associated with specific experiences, to interpret and articulate subjective contradictions and transformations.

With the breakdown of conventional nuclear family patterns alternative sources for remaking the "self" have taken the place of household and family in identity construction (Gilleard and Higgs 1996). The fixed and bounded structures which once defined women's social identities and relationships have eroded. Postmodern subjectivity is increasingly an individualised, fluid, self-reflexive process which incorporates the subject's lived, embodied experience, and is shaped by and within the prevailing historical and social contexts of the individual's life trajectory.

[45] I examine changing expectations of gender and how these may reshape women's subjectivities in more detail in Chapter 7.

Nell's story reflects the influence of changing expectations of "midlife" and how midlife discourses help women frame and interpret subjective change which may have its roots in changing expectations of marriage and women's position in society. Nell divorced her husband, relocated to Melbourne and changed careers at around age forty. Nell interpreted her subjective experience of change at this time through discourse of midlife as both a "turning point" and a "time of reflection".

> *A self-examination of all this stuff never really happened until after I turned forty. Before I turned forty I was still too busy being young and having a wonderful time and I had a full life and I worked in the hospitality industry and it was all go and living on momentum all the time. You don't stop to reflect. After I turned forty and a change of lifestyle it slowed me down. Put my thinking in other directions.*
>
> *Nell, 50, divorced, teacher*

Centred on "turning forty", Nell constructed her experience of this pivotal age as the closure of youthfulness and "being young". Her construction of youthfulness as "busy", "all go" and "living on momentum" is characteristic of stereotypical images of "youth". In contrast, her post-forty lifestyle is characteristic of images of ageing, she is "slowing down". Nell also interpreted the axis of her turning point through a discourse of "self reflection". Her process of self reflection led to a "change of lifestyle" and new "directions", suggesting her discursive reconstruction of subjectivity in accord with developmental theoretical models of age-related lifestyle expectations within the lifecycle.

Yet the findings of my study suggest that middle age itself is not a discrete time in the lifecourse in which a period of "self reflection" is imposed on the individual. I argue that social change leading to new ways of constituting identity and reconstructing gender identity in postmodern society may lead some women to experience a

disjunction from earlier ways of self-understanding, and discourses of midlife as a time of "reflection" and "growth" provide ways for women to understand and transform their experiences. Karen had to return to the workforce after she and her husband experienced some financial difficulties. She narrated her experience of the reconstitution of her subjectivity within the context of changing conventional gender roles within a marriage towards a more egalitarian relationship in line with contemporary marriage trends.[46] Karen's increased independence and self reliance has changed her relationship with her husband, on whom she used to be financially dependent:

> *I think that he looks at the fact that I've grown so much in so many areas and perhaps he is a little bit frightened, because now he knows that I'd be quite competent on my own, whereas maybe ten years ago I wouldn't have been. I would have been more the housewife.*
>
> *Karen, 51, married, nurse*

Karen interpreted her changing subjectivity through discourses of "growth". She described her development of "competence" and independence, characteristics associated with assumed midlife development which I discuss throughout this chapter. Yet Karen's story highlights how her "growth" is centred around new understandings of gender and work which have changed dramatically over the thirty years she has been married.

Olivia had recently divorced and returned to Australia after living overseas. She was concerned about her future economic position. Since her divorce, she was attempting to take more responsibility for the financial management of her affairs than she had in the past. As well as the pressures relating to relationship and financial issues, Olivia was

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[46]In the following Chapter 7 I discuss specifically gendered ways of reconstituting identity and contextualise this reconstitution within changing social meanings and expectations of gender.

also visiting a psychiatrist because she felt her "feminine" conditioning has limited her ability to "fulfil her potential":

> *You've chosen the right time [to interview me] because I'm in the middle of a crisis. Most of my life I've been a good girl for my parents. I want to go in a new direction but I'm not sure what that is. I'm having a midlife crisis now. It's the realisation that my potential hasn't been tapped properly. I haven't been able to break away from my repressions. Midlife is causing me to think very hard about why this is the case and what I can do about it.*
>
> *Olivia, 47, divorced, physiotherapist*

Olivia identifies her conflict between conventional, patriarchal understandings of femininity and contemporary understandings of gender, however she discursively constructs her subjective challenges and conflicts as a "midlife crisis". Her perception of "untapped potential" is interpreted as an age-based manifestation of "midlife" which is "causing me to think very hard" about her situation. I argue, alternatively, that Olivia's experience can be interpreted through an understanding of sociohistorical change bringing new understandings and expectations of femininity and womanhood in contemporary Australian society.

Nell, Karen and Olivia's stories reveal how they interpreted their subjective change at midlife through transitional discourses of "reflection", "growth" and "midlife crisis". Yet for all three women, change centred around reconstituting their gendered identity in line with new understandings and expectations of "gender" and "womanhood" in contemporary postmodern society. Changing social understandings and expectations of gender, which have been brought about by a restructuring of workplaces and the economy, as well as a feminist challenge to patriarchal ways of understanding gender, have also led to revolutionary changes in the perceptions and the positioning of women in contemporary Western societies. As Gillian, one of my participants, comments:

"grandmothers work now, they're not sitting home knitting."

Midlife women's historical location within a changing social context positions them as vanguards of postmodern social change. Many women may undertake a process of remaking themselves away from former gender-based identities and conventional understandings of the "role" of ageing women in society to more individualised and flexible ways of being.[47] I argue that it is not midlife itself, but women's unique sociohistorical position which positions them between two competing cultural perspectives of "gender" and the socially appropriate expectations associated with the perspectives which are at the crux of midlife change for women. Yet women's narratives rely upon discourses of midlife "transitions", "crisis", "growth" and "development" to interpret their changing identities and the ways new expectations of gender and inscribe their subjectivities. My argument is clearly articulated by Beth, the mother of teenage children, who was experiencing a process of subjective change:

> *From a developmental point of view I'd see the last ten years as a time of growing away from a lot of things that have gone before and for the first time being more independent [from my family] and aware of myself as a person. Having my own needs and crediting my own desires and aspirations. Prior to that my life was based on some kind of fulfilment that I thought would come from having the children. I was starting to take that path before because I went back to university when I was thirty eight and I was looking for, and starting to feel, the freedom in my own right. I was looking for fulfilment. My marriage was not happy. I was looking for some sort of affirmation of who I was outside the roles of wife and mother.*
>
> *Beth, 48, married, project manager*

[47] I discuss the idea of women as "vanguards of social change" in which they remake themselves away from gendered identities in more detail in Chapters 9, 10 and 11.

Beth articulated her changing subjectivity in terms of "growth" and "development" in line with humanistic theories of human development which suggest an "essential self" that progressively "develops" toward "self-actualisation". Through returning to university she sought the "fulfilment" which she presumed would come with the "growth" that education can bring. Nonetheless, her transforming subjectivity is also narrated as a story of changing assumptions and beliefs linked with gendered identity. Beth has moved away from the "dependence" of her place within the family. Her assumptions about the fulfilment motherhood is assumed to bring, inherent in patriarchal discourses of women's roles within the nuclear family, and a discourse familiar to Beth who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, have disappointed.[48] Subsequently, Beth takes a more individualised approach to the construction of identity and the search for fulfilment and affirmation of "who she is". She is attempting to identify and fulfil her own needs, desires and aspirations, aligning with postmodernist constructions of identity in which the "self" is an ongoing project comprising a range of continually transforming components.

Nell, Karen, Olivia and Beth represent a cohort of middle aged women who, I argue, are at the vanguard of postmodern change. All four women's stories illuminate the centrality of concerns relating to new understandings of gender and womanhood in contemporary postmodern Australian society. Their narratives highlight the key issues which present themselves to many midlife women of this generation. The issues involve changing marriage relationships, financial and emotional independence, a shift away from what has conventionally been seen as typically "feminine" interests and behaviour, and the "development" of a more self-focussed, individualistic approach to the construction of meaning and fulfilment in their lives.

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[48] I discuss patriarchal and feminist discourses of gendered identity, and ideological constructions of the patriarchal nuclear family in detail in Chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

Midlife is constructed as a specific time in the lifecourse associated with particular experiences. Social understandings of midlife are framed by discourses of "reflection", "growth", "development" and "midlife crisis" which are seen to characterise people's experience at this point in their lifecourse. I contend that these discourses allow women to assign meaning to their subjective experiences. I counterpropose that "midlife" itself does not lead to subjective change, but that changing social understandings of gender and work, and new ways of constructing social identities in postmodern contexts, have greater explanatory power to elucidate the hows and whys of subjective changes at midlife. I consequently take a lifecourse approach to explore this issue further in the following chapter.

In Chapter 7 I focus on the unique sociohistorical position of midlife women who, born and raised within and through processes of modernity, are the vanguards of postmodernity. Throughout their lifecourse gendered ways of constructing identity and inscribing subjectivity have dramatically transformed. I examine the ways in which women have inscribed their subjectivities in relation to changing sociohistorical contexts of "gender", and question how the process of change has taken place.

CHAPTER 7

I've chosen the best of my mother's generation: Redefining gendered identity

MIDLIFE WOMEN AS VANGUARDS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Middle aged women are the first generation of women to age in Western societies in which women's lives and identities are no longer restricted to narrow biosocial understandings of ageing and women's roles within the family. The changing position of women in Australian society, and new sociocultural understandings of gender and womanhood, position midlife women between the contradictory and conflicting value systems of patriarchy and feminism. Further, stable and given forms of identity making associated with modernist structures such as family, work and community roles are being reconfigured as more fluid, individualistic and biographical forms of social identities, in which the construction of identity is constantly in process. The transformations which have taken place in the second half of the 20th century regarding new sociocultural expectations of women and new ways of constructing identity in contemporary society position midlife women as vanguards of postmodern change.

Midlife women in postmodern societies are differently situated than their male counterparts. The reflexivity of identity construction involves, for many women, redefining themselves in ways which distance and differentiate them from the restrictions of former gendered subject positions. Midlife women's younger subjectivities have been discursively constructed through their patriarchal objectification based on their sexuality, reproductive capacity, and their social value as wives and mothers. The reconstruction of identity and the reconstitution of subjectivity

for many women in my study involves decentring gender, rejecting dominant representations of ageing women's subjectivities, and exploring alternate ways of remaking the self.

Like the postmodern figuration of the theoretical nomad[49], women are crossing sociohistorical boundaries by exploring uncharted ways of ageing as women in Western societies that displace them from earlier modes of expressing their gendered subjectivities. Midlife women's sociohistorical location as vanguards of social change position them as pioneers in the project of remaking the self as an older women in society. Rigid, gender binaries as ways of inscribing subjectivity and reconstituting the self have surrendered to more individualised, personalised modes of constructing social identity in which qualities "traditionally" constituted as "masculine" and "feminine" may form a part.

The nomadic reconstruction of identity away from conventional forms of femininity to a more personal project in which rigid gender definition plays a less central role is an ongoing process for many women, but is experienced differently through their lifecourse. The process can be intensified by an event or experience which is subjectively interpreted as contradictory or difficult, and then reactivated by other epiphanic events or encounters at a later date. The narratives of the women in my study overwhelmingly confirm the significance of gender as a site of conflict and contention and as a central issue around which subjective change occurs.

While the sociopolitical challenge to patriarchal modes of expressing gender and constructing gendered identity is not a current historical event, it continues to shape the subjectivities and identities of the ageing women in my study. I therefore offer a brief

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[49]I discuss the theoretical figuration of the nomad as a tool for understanding the processual subjectivities of the women in my study in Chapter 2.

sociohistorical analysis of the events that have taken place over the lifecourse of my informants, and follow with an analysis of the ways that sociopolitical changes have fashioned women's lives and inscribed their gendered subjectivities.

PATRIARCHY, FEMININITY AND THE INSCRIPTION OF GENDERED IDENTITY

The last thirty years have seen revolutionary and irreversible changes in the position of women in Western societies. An outpouring of feminist agitation in the wake of the 1960s social movements in the West gave birth to powerful, articulate and multifaceted women's movements that began to demand social equality and equal opportunity for women in society. At the same time, the social systems and institutions of "modernity" were being transformed by global forces which subsequently reshaped economic conditions, and restructured work and employment practices (Appadurai 1996, Braidotti 1994, Bauman 1998, Castells 1997, Lyons 2000, Maffesoli 1996). The global restructuring of the economic forces of production resulted in a shift, in many Western countries such as Australia, away from manufacturing to service industries. Changing labour market conditions were ideally suited to the needs and work histories of women, who often seek flexible employment to suit the demands of their family lives (Castells 1997), and thus provided the opportunity for an unprecedented number of women across the socioeconomic spectrum, and notably married women, to (re)enter paid work.[50]

The changing status of women in contemporary Western society presents a particular challenge to the women in my study. Contemporary Australian midlife women have experienced the highest degree of "segregated sexual division of labour in the home and the labor force" in comparison to their younger and older counterparts (Long and Porter

[50]While women from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have long participated in paid work, the changing conditions of the workplace allowed women from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds to enter the labour market in positions other than those that have characterised working class women's participation.

1984:144). With an early socialisation experience in which the construction of bipolar gender roles as "reality" was at its height, these women came of age and matured at a time in history when feminism confronted conventional beliefs about women's "roles" as wives and mothers. A shift in the 1970s from a climate where women were primarily homemakers to the present day in which the majority of women have some sort of paid work has challenged many women who grew up with conventional family values and reached adulthood in the 1960s. Now in midlife, research indicates that many women have undergone a process of change in their subjectivities, where they have moved away from more restricted gendered identities and "roles" characteristic of their younger lives, to defining themselves in terms which reflect a decentring of dominant and restrictive discourses about gender. Ursula's story conveys the contradictions between patriarchal and feminist value systems regarding womanhood and women's position in the family and society, and how these contradictory tensions inscribe women's subjectivities and identities:

> *My mother was always a home mother and throughout my life she didn't go to work. She's always been at home, and I was brought up in the belief that that was a mother's place. I moved to Melbourne and discovered that so many women had careers. I feel very strongly that women should have equality but I think true equality is having the choice. If a woman really wants to have a career then I think that's terrific, but I think it would be nice not to feel under pressure about that. But I really don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to be a mother at home and looking after your kids because I think that's a full time career.*
>
> *I guess I resented [having to join the labour force] for a while. I didn't really want to be doing that, because I saw it as being an abnormal thing. But now I'm beginning to see that maybe what I grew up with wasn't that normal.*
>
> *Ursula, 46, remarried, receptionist*

Changing social conditions for women relating to work and family have generated new discourses of gender and womanhood in which conventional understandings of femininity play a less central role, as Ursula's story reveals. Her reinterpretation of what constitutes "normal" womanhood reflects changing social understandings of women's relationship to a society where a shift from domesticity to paid work has taken place. While Ursula speaks of the way she traffics the tension between conventional and career frames as ways of being for women, the rise of feminism in contemporary Western societies has provided many women with an alternative value system to patriarchy, enabling the reconstitution of subjectivity in more "empowered" ways, as many of my participants discuss. For this reason I now explore how the influence of two areas central to women's lives: changing expectations of family, marriage and gendered relationships; and women's more equal participation in paid work, have shaped women's subjectivities, and the process by which this has occurred.

Marriage and motherhood

My study is a study of women who are, or have been married. As Table 1 shows, forty-five of the forty-seven women in my study are currently, or have been married.[51] Twenty are in their first marriage, twelve are remarried,[52] ten are divorced and three are widows who have not remarried. Only two women have never married.

The average age of the women in my study at the time they were interviewed is fifty-two, making their average year of birth 1944, just prior to the end of the Second World War. The period following the Second World War and the 1950s in Australia is noted

[51]Of the two never-married women, one is currently in a relationship, although she and her partner do not live together. The other never-married woman has had many relationships but has never lived in a partnered relationship, and is not currently in a relationship.

[52]One woman in the study has not legally remarried but is living with her partner in a long-term, committed relationship and is classified as remarried.

for its proliferation of the isolated nuclear family with its sharp gender distinctions and rigid division of labour (Gilding 1991, 1997, Summers 1976).

Table 2: Current marital status and the women in my study

MARRIED		SINGLE			TOTAL
1st Marriage	Remarried	Divorced	Widowed	Never Marr.	
20	12	10	3	2	47
32		15			47

At that time marriage represented an important status transition for young women and men, "the gateway to leaving home, legitimate sexuality, status, an independent household, [and] a preferred position in the workforce (for men)" (Burns 1991:23). In the decades that followed the perceptions of marriage in Australian society shifted from it being seen as an important status transition to a lifestyle option for many people. Changing social trends reflect the changing value of marriage, in which 'partnering and reproductive behaviour has slipped out of society's control and into the hands of individuals' (Burns 1991:23). Further, expectations of marriage have changed and partners now place more emphasis on companionship and partnership rather than the rigidly gendered work role divisions of previous decades (Gittens 1993). The median age of first marriage for women in 1971 was twenty-one (ABS 1999a). Given that the mean age of the women in this study was twenty-seven in 1971, six years older than the median age of first marriage in that year, and that all but two are or have been married, it is reasonable to assume that many of the women in this study were married by 1971.

The women entered into their first marriages between three and four decades ago. Their narratives suggest that the expectations they had of marriage at that time were, for many, closely aligned with the dominant ideology of marriage and women's

expectations of fulfilment were centred around the nuclear family. Women believed that their lives would be fulfilled through marriage and motherhood, and both they and their partners had expectations of each other characteristic of accepted stereotyped notions of "femininity" and "masculinity", and the gender role expectations of husbands and wives. For the vast majority of the women in this study the reconstitution of gendered subjectivities evolved as a response to the marriage relationship and the changing status of marriage and gender roles in society over the last twenty-five years.

Women's rethinking of family ideology and the role of marriage is not surprising given the demographic trends which reflect changing family patterns, much higher rates of divorce and remarriage and a postponement of and decline in childbirth (Burns 1991). All reflect a shift away from the conventional nuclear family with its bipolar roles and separate spheres towards more fluid and less permanent family arrangements. Further, historical documentation tracing family, marriage, and gender conventions in the 20th century convincingly show that conventional nuclear family ideology is a culturally and historically specific social construct (Evans and Saunders 1992). Samantha explains:

> *I was brought up soaking in advertisements of mothers with aprons on waving the kids goodbye at the door and being moral and virtuous and upstanding and being there for everybody and being a good listener. This whole thing of the virgin and the gipsy. Who you're supposed to be for one person and who you're supposed to be for another. And the face you show to the outer world. It's just unreal. I don't think there have been any greater actresses than women over the last hundred years as we've tried to come to terms with all these different roles.*
>
> *For a long time I divided myself into sections. I don't think I put the jigsaw together. I didn't have a sense of being a whole person because I was too much at odds and playing roles. Not deliberately. I was not trying to be anything other than what I was but I didn't feel a strong sense of there being a link*

between these different selves. And in the end I was looking for a definition of self that was worthwhile.

Samantha, 50, remarried, teacher

Samantha's story links with broader sociological understandings of the ways that gender and womanhood have changed over the last thirty years in Australia, and the particular challenges women at the forefront of postmodern change face in reconstituting their subjectivities around new understandings of gender and womanhood. Her story also reveals the power of patriarchal discourse in shaping her early subjectivity and how challenging dominant discourses may enable women to redefine their experience and reposition themselves in their social world. In Samantha's case, her younger subjectivity was shaped by patriarchal discursive constructions of motherhood which claim the "roles" of wife and motherhood are a woman's primary and encompassing source of fulfilment. Samantha later challenged this discourse, which she found "fragmenting", through a transformed consciousness suggestive of a more emancipatory feminist perspective. She reconstituted her subjectivity via more contemporary self-making discourses which provided her with a "definition of self" which was "worthwhile" and through which she felt a "whole person". Her perception of a more fragmented self which was made "whole" through more worthwhile pursuits suggests the processual and decentred nature of human subjectivity.

As essentialist understandings of bipolar gender identities have collapsed, the ideology of marriage and relationships between husbands and wives have also changed (Richards 1997b). The rigid social expectations placed on marriage partners in the form of roles and obligations are falling away and not only do spouses see now marriage as a source of personal fulfilment, but marriage has become a lifestyle option for many. New understandings of gender have led to new expectations of companionship within the marriage relationship and a rejection of relationships based on conventional roles. Indeed, almost 50% of my participants have divorced and a further 25% of the sample

who were in their first marriages described negotiating new conditions within their marriage relationship, or had attempted to and met with resistance from their partners. They were engaging with alternative discourses provided by feminism that generated a more woman-centred alternative to the patriarchal value system in which they had grown up (Burns 1991:33), appropriating them to rewrite personal experience and restructure marital relationships.

All but four of my participants entered a marriage relationship based on what they described as a conventional division of labour. At the time of the interviews, thirty of the forty-seven women were in, or had retired from, full-time paid work.[53] For the majority of women in this study, conventional expectations of domestic life have been revised as women have moved into the labour market, many taking up career opportunities that were not available to women of earlier generations. Changing social conditions have also marked many individual's lives within marriage. For many married women, making change in their own lives required a corresponding change in the relationship with their partner. For most of the women in my study, a marriage relationship, either past or present, was the core around which changes in their constitution of a gendered identity occurred.

Divorce and the reconstitution of gendered subjectivity

Twenty two (almost half) of the forty-seven women in my study had been divorced, and over 25% of these had remarried.[54] For many women, divorce was the catalyst for what

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[53]Of the remaining seventeen, four combine study and part-time work, (Dallas, Marina, Hilary and Samantha), four are in part-time paid work (Barbara, Maxine, Greta and Heather), five contribute to the family business or farm enterprise on an as-needed basis but are primarily responsible for the home (Gayle, Cilla, Trudy, Mandy and Goren), and the remaining four are not in any form of paid work or family enterprise (Casey, Tyne Dot and Kitty). However Casey and Tyne work part-time as volunteer counsellors.

[54]The average age at divorce decree for women is 38, (ABS 1999a), suggesting that women are more likely to divorce as they approach midlife.

they described as a period of self reflection which led to a reconstitution of identity away from patriarchal definitions of gender, femininity, and women's roles towards a more empowered identity. While statistics show that remarriage rates are high, it is possible that the intervening period between repartnerships, which requires women to head their own families, be independent and locate themselves outside private and patriarchal structures, may have led to a dilution of patriarchal authority in subsequent repairings (Castells 1997). The claim is supported by my women's stories which show that overwhelmingly the dissatisfaction women felt with their former marriages was its conventional structure characteristic of the patriarchal nuclear family. A recurrent theme in the transcripts of the ten women who had not remarried is that the transition from marriage to single life proved challenging. Many women's identities had been constructed around traditional roles and feminine qualities and the erosion of their marriages required many to actively and consciously engage in a process of identity construction. Most women in my study who remarried claimed that their current marriages were more egalitarian than their first. Their claims link with research which shows that those who currently choose marriage are more likely to expect sexual satisfaction, companionship and the opportunity for personal fulfilment within the relationship, in comparison with their mothers and fathers who sought partners based on expectations of them being good providers, or good wives and mothers (Gilding 1991). For most women in my study, a marriage breakdown occurred because the couple was unable to negotiate a more egalitarian relationship. Many women then described a process where they needed to reconstruct a "new" identity outside their married identity. In the following story, Nell described her experience:

> *At the end of the marriage I didn't have an identity. I had to fight very hard inwardly to get my identity back because over the 19 years of the relationship I had lost my identity. I had become an extension of his identity. I had come away from [my marriage] feeling a bit of a failure because I was brought up in that culture where no matter what happened in your relationship you're*

supposed to stick it out.... So you carry a lot of rubbish around with you. And you keep adding to it and the load gets heavier and one day you discard it all and start again.

I suppose I feel comfortable with myself now and it took a lot of years to get to that. It didn't happen until the last four years, five years, when I started to look at myself and think "don't worry about these things, if you're not perfect who cares." From about forty-five onward I started to look at myself differently.

Nell, 50, divorced, counsellor

Nell experienced a "loss" of identity in marriage, common to many women in my study who had divorced. Nell's married identity, as "an extension of his identity", is suggestive of the way in which women's individuality is compromised by limiting constructions of women's "roles" within the nuclear family. She expresses her change in subjectivity, from seeing herself in patriarchally-defined ways within the nuclear family to a more individualistic, self accepting self-image characteristic of postmodern ways of reconstructing identity. Her sense of "failure" because of her divorce, and her subsequent "fight to get her identity back" and "see herself differently" also suggests a struggle between two contradictory subject positions generated by her changing notions of gendered identity. Nell's story reflects the ways in which divorce was the catalyst for subjective change for a number of divorced women in my study.

Paid work and the reconstitution of gendered subjectivity

Women's participation in the paid workforce increased from 22 per cent in 1947 to 32 per cent in 1971 (Gilding 1991:118) and to 44 per cent in 2000 (ABS 2000), largely due to the increased participation of married women (Gilding 1991:118; Graetz and McAllister 1994:51). Women's increased participation in the workforce is reflected in changing social attitudes towards women working outside the home. In the 1960s approximately four-fifths of husbands stated they disapproved of their wives working

(Gilding 1991:118). While there had been increasing efforts on an institutional and policy level to "equalise" women's participation in the workforce women still faced barriers in realising their personal aspirations. Although the "equal pay for work of equal value" ruling had been made in 1969, when the average age of the women in my study were twenty-five, it was not until 1984 that the *Federal Sex Discrimination Act* was introduced, when the average age of the women in my study were forty years old.

Current research suggests that both women's and men's attitudes towards women's social position have changed considerably. By the 1990s the vast majority of both women and men supported women's participation in the paid labour force (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:313), and other surveys have shown that 'it is now widely accepted that women should have equal opportunities at work, supported by equal pay initiatives, equal employment opportunity legislation, childcare, education and retraining' (Bulbeck 1997:69). Women's greater participation in the workforce over the last thirty years, while still largely in "pink collar" occupations, gives women a much greater presence in public life and generates a perception of greater social equality. While statistics show that women's participation in the paid work force is by no means equal (Bulbeck 1997:70), it has improved. The perception of equality and equal rights for women has led to a redefinition of conventional gender role expectations for both women and men.

Despite legal and political changes the workplace is still dominated by male cultural standards and practices. Discourses that suggest social equality for woman such as "equal opportunity" and "equal pay" mask the hidden barriers women face in developing skills to help them succeed in a male-oriented work culture. Because the workplace is often dominated by "masculine" values, most women not only need to develop new work skills, they need to develop new ways of thinking and communicating in the workplace as well. New ways of thinking and interacting have predicated new ways for women to reconceptualise themselves.

It wasn't until I started working at about thirty-five that somebody actually thought I had a brain and wanted to pay me for doing a job that I was having such fun doing. [Then] I saw an ad for Churchill Fellowships and I applied to learn more about film production. I got it and went overseas. And the next year I was awarded a scholarship to do a management course. So all of these things made me see myself as more than John's wife and the mother of these kids and doing housewifely things. Suddenly the focus shifted. I was managing staff, I was managing the division of a company that was turning over a lot of money, so I suddenly saw myself differently.

Carol, 58, remarried, consultant

Carol's story demonstrates how paid work can be an important factor in reconstituting women's gendered subjectivity. Carol particularly highlights how the development of new skills and abilities enables women to see themselves differently and reposition themselves in contemporary society in line with new expectations of women's position in the labour market. In Carol's case, her personal insight enabled her to see herself as "more than John's wife and the mother of these kids". She was consequently able to challenge the subservience of her position within the marriage in relation to her husband, whom she subsequently divorced. The development or acknowledgment of women's experience and expertise in areas outside the home is a major theme which has emerged from my interviewees.

New understandings of gender and womanhood enabled women to conceive of and imagine lives outside and beyond the low-paid supportive roles which had typically characterised women's participation in paid work. The acquisition of new skills and abilities, which were often developed in the workplace, as well as the financial independence paid work afforded women, also enabled them to renegotiate relationships on a more equal footing with their partners. Their new skills and abilities, acquired in an environment which enabled women to be seen differently, led to a sense of

empowerment, as well as the demystification of male power.

In the following story, Jessie describes the way paid work shaped her subjectivity. As one of the oldest women in the group, and one of the first women in her male dominated profession, she was proud to be a role model for younger women. Being a success in her career and working as an equal with men gave her a sense of self-confidence and empowerment:

> *I feel like I'm more important. I am more important that I used to be. I think I know my strengths and my weaknesses and I think I've got a lot to give anybody. Anybody I worked with I would probably give my all to. And working with a lot of people over the years, you find out that really you're twice as intelligent as others, and people you've held up - a solicitor, an accountant - they're absolutely fallible!*
>
> *Jessie, 61, married, retired financial adviser*

Jessie's unique position at the forefront of social change regarding women's work roles, and her ability to succeed in a male dominated profession, has enabled her to recognise her own abilities and see her colleagues' abilities more realistically. The "equalling" of relations between men and women becomes evident in the stories of women who reenter the workforce, develop or update employable skills and gain a degree of financial independence from their husbands. Jessie's story is also interesting from the perspective of age. As an attractive, vibrant woman of sixty-one who was, as her story suggests, self-confident, active and independent, she contradicts dominant discourses which construct older women as being obsolete and in decline.[55]

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[55]I discuss the perceived obsolescence and diminishment of older women in detail in Chapter 10.

Changing understandings and social expectations of gender and womanhood, and the reconstitution of identity through paid work and reassessing conventional gender relations have enabled women to reconstitute their identities. Feminist value systems have provided alternative ways of being to patriarchal understandings of gender for women, consequently many participants' stories suggest they have decentred "gender" as a determining aspect of their identity and, in line with postmodern modes of self-making, consciously construct a gendered identity around specific qualities.

DECENTRING GENDER

In a postmodern world, new ways of constructing gendered identity reflect cultural trends away from dualistic, fixed, sex-specific characteristics. Rather than women acting in sex-specific ways in order to develop a sense of themselves as "feminine", many women see the range of ways of being and acting as options which they can incorporate into their identities, giving a flexibility, choice and style in the construction of gendered identity. Consequently, many women describe coming to see qualities previously associated with "masculinity" and "femininity" as flexible, malleable and optional, and which can be emphasised or de-emphasised, rather than perceiving them as necessary, inevitable and biologically-determined, sex-based characteristics. Decentring the gendered subject allows women the freedom to choose how they want to remake the self and subsequently "present" their gendered social identities. Women's narratives reflect a shift in social understandings of gendered identities that parallel the emergence of postmodern notions of identity construction.

Rather than gendered subjectivity being seen as a given, or imposed by external, patriarchal standards, some women construct a gendered identity around components of "masculinity" and "femininity" which they inscribe into their subjectivities, as does Wilma below. As well as inscribing subjectivities with components of gendered qualities, gendered forms of presentation may still play a part in constructing a woman's identity. The ways in which women present their gendered image and display

themselves in gendered ways, can be flexible and varied to suit the situational specificities of their lives, as Yvonne describes (on page 185).

Wilma's story shows how the reconstruction of gender identity has been a conscious and deliberate project. She chose qualities she saw as both "masculine" and "feminine", blending them together to inscribe her gendered subjectivity:

> *I can choose a whole range of identities and the one I've chosen is to take the best of what I consider of my mother's generation. I don't mind the softness and the nurturance.... And the things that I've chosen that men have held dear is intellectual rigour, the organisational ability. The ability to stand firm and not be pushed around. The ability to make decisions. I've made them part of my identity without taking on the masculine ruthlessness and patronising everybody else in the sense that they have a way of looking down at those who haven't made it.*
>
> *But I don't think it's been easy to come to any of those decisions. It's been not only a case of rejecting some bits of a traditional woman's life, it's also been grabbing hold of other bits. It's also recognising that I can accept some of the qualities that might have traditionally been put down as masculine without seeing that I was a masculine person.*
>
> *Wilma, 52, remarried, project director*

Wilma reveals a profoundly sophisticated and articulate understanding of the experience of working through issues relating to gender identity. Wilma's story is representative of the experience of reconstituting gender identity referred to by half the women sampled in this study, who tell stories of a reconstitution of gender identity brought about by contesting binary and essentialist conceptualisations of sex-based gender qualities. Wilma's narrative reveals a move away from a fixed, bipolar understandings of gender and woman's roles, towards a more fluid gendered identity in which she feels free to

choose aspects of gender to "design" an identity. Wilma's description of redefining her gendered identity reflects broader sociohistorical transformations in understandings of gendered ways of being which have taken place over the last thirty years.

Wilma's story highlights the importance of decentring the gendered subject. She engages with the "project" of constructing a postmodern self, which hinges on a more flexible understanding of gender, one which can adapt to a range of circumstances such as the need for either "softness and nurturance", "intellectual rigour" or "the ability to stand firm and not be pushed around". She highlights the flexibility and selectivity of gendered identities which fit in with the lives of many women who strive to balance both family and career demands in contemporary society, characteristic of this midlife cohort of women.

Wilma's experience today of "choosing a whole range of identities" reinforces the postmodernist notion of the self as fragmented and multiple, but capable of being pieced together by selectively choosing the desired components, in Wilma's case, from different generations and genders. The intentional choosing and piecing together of different components of gender suggests an imaginary core, or set of values which compose Wilma's self image, and which guides the choice of particular components, and enables them to take on a coherent yet flexible unity which is open to change.

Wilma's "empowerment" has taken place in a sociocultural milieu in which there are opportunities for women to take up powerful roles in the workplace. However, it is also possible to read Wilma's "empowerment" as a consequence of new definitions and expectations of ageing, and her story could reflect both a feminist reconstruction of gendered identity, as well as a contemporary expression of positive ageing and a discursive construction of midlife as a time of "growth and development", in which Wilma is "fulfilling her potential".

Parallel to new ways of inscribing subjectivities with components of gender to remake

the gendered self, women also rely on certain forms of gendered presentations in order to enhance their gendered selves. The process is flexible, situational and interactive, and varies within the changing contexts of women's lives, as Yvonne's story shows:

> *I think we make up our gender identity in the morning when we decide what clothes we are going to wear and I think it varies. Clearly there is some kind of a core but I think we play it out differently. Day to day and different interactions with different people. So I have a notion of a whole overlaying sense of identities, not a single one.*
>
> *Yvonne, 53, divorced, senior administrator*

An educated women who is fluent in both feminist and postmodernist theory, Yvonne's understanding of gender reveals the postmodern discourse of "designing" a gender identity which is flexible, mutable, and not fixed to essentialist notions of womanhood or patriarchal constructions of femininity. As Yvonne suggests, the body plays a central role in the presentation of gender, however it is no longer a biologically determined body, but a social body which serves as a vehicle for self expression. Yvonne's belief that there is "some kind of a core" of "womanhood" suggests postmodern understandings of the lived body (Grosz 1994) which shapes subjectivity through the experience of being female. As significantly, women who no longer see themselves in patriarchally-defined terms still value their "conventional" roles in the family as well as their careers. My participants' stories about their gendered identities reveal complex, often conflicting and sometimes confusing portrayals of gendered subjectivity. They highlight the changeable and flexible nature of gendered identity for women in contemporary Australian society, and how it is influenced not only by context, but in some situations by the day to day variability of women's emotions and self image.

In summary, the process by which women reconstitute their subjectivities is highly variable. Many women no longer see gender as a determining factor of their identity,

but a quality which is flexible, and is structured through their ability to "choose" aspects of "masculinity" and "femininity" and incorporate them into their overall image of who they see themselves to be.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this chapter that a transformation of sociocultural understandings of gender and womanhood, and changing patterns of paid work for women have taken place over the lifecourse of the participants in my study. Midlife women's sociohistorical position within the shift away from modernity situates them as vanguards of postmodernity. I assert that changes in women's subjectivities and identities are likely to correlate to, and be inscribed by, sociocultural change. As postmodern ways of identity construction comprise fluid, individualist ways of remaking the self in which gender plays a less central role, the body becomes more important to an individual's sense of self. I discuss theoretical perspectives of the body and society in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 8

I have to dye my hair or I feel old:

Ageing embodiment

Although ageing is an embodied experience the embodiment of ageing is underrepresented in sociological studies of ageing. While different models of embodiment, such as the biomedical approach to ageing and menopause, have influenced the social sciences, their function serves as a social blueprint for the management of ageing populations, rather than stimulating research on the embodied experience of ageing for middle aged and older populations. This oversight is a consequence of the underrepresentation of the body, and embodied experiences, in the social sciences in general. I now outline how the body has been neglected as a subject of investigation in sociology and social theory (Turner 1992) in order to incorporate the body adequately into the study of ageing in the social sciences.

SOCIAL THEORY AND THE BODY

Turner writes that "there has been little serious attempt by sociologists to understand, comparatively and historically, the interaction between various forms of human embodiment, the physiological process of aging, and the socio-cultural definitions of aging" (1995:246). While much ageing research has taken a "decline" perspective which is based on a biological understanding of bodily processes, the perspective is limited. As I discussed in Chapter 5, it fails to account for subjective experiences and sociocultural understandings of embodiment and differences between differently

embodied individuals. Until recently even feminist scholarship[56] has avoided exploring the embodied nature of women's differently sexed bodies, wary of contributing to the argument of biological essentialism on which women's subordinate social status has been premised, preferring instead to focus on the socially-constructed concept of gender. Feminist scholars who do focus on women's embodiment have provided important insights into the malleability of the female body and how it is fashioned, shaped and modified to fit the changing historical, and cultural imperatives of femininity, and alternatively how the female body resists or subverts these imperatives. As I discussed earlier[57], embodied research relevant to midlife women, with rare exception, focuses on the effects of menopause and the social consequences of women's cessation of fertility.

Western philosophical traditions and the absence of the body

The neglect of the corporeal nature of human existence in the social sciences has a long history and rests on the Western philosophical tradition of dualism and more recently the enlightenment and humanist emphasis on the reason/emotion; culture/nature; mind/body split in which the body and its needs, drives and impulses is viewed as something which must be transcended or overcome in order for the human being to become fully civilised. This philosophical and epistemological tradition has perceived the body as having little to offer in understanding the human condition, arguing that any knowledge which is worthwhile to this endeavour is a product of the reasoning of the mind. The contribution of the bodily senses to our empirical understanding of the

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[56]Some early feminist writings have taken an embodied approach to women's social position. For example, essentialist/cultural feminists such as Daly (1978) *Gyn/Ecology*, Firestone (1971) *Dialectic of Sex*, Griffin (1978) *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, O'Brien (1981) *The Politics of Reproduction* and Rich (1976) *Of Woman Born*. However they view the body as biologically fixed and do not explore the ways in which the mutually reinforcing and evolving interaction between bodies and cultures constitute embodied subjectivity.

[57] I discuss menopause in detail in Chapter 4.

world, therefore, must be subject to and transformed by the intellectual practice of reason to have any value.

Even the way in which the body itself is conceptualised, studied, and known reflects the nature/culture dualism of Western thought. The body is treated as an object of study, and is divided into two aspects. The material body - that beneath the surface, or inner, physical body - has been seen as the domain of the natural sciences such as biology and physiology, whereas the social and cognitive aspects of embodiment such as thinking, behaviour, language and emotions - the outer or social body - have been the domain of the social sciences. Thus by accepting the mind/body dichotomy, the material body, with few exceptions, has been ignored as a significant defining factor in the lived experience of human beings within the social sciences (Shilling 1993).

Yet it has not been altogether absent. Shilling argues that the body has had an "absent presence" in sociology. The body has been absent in the sense that the embodied nature of the human being has not been the focus of social inquiry, but the body has been present in that the social sciences implicitly study embodied human beings and the way they are subject to and interact with the social structures and processes of the societies in which they live. Sociological studies of racism, social inequality, social mobility, education and even health and illness focus on the 'movement, location, care and education of bodies' (Shilling 1993:20) but are less concerned with the phenomenologically-embodied nature of their subjects and the ways in which social structures and institutions socialise, regulate, monitor and discipline the bodies of subjects. However, aspects of phenomenological embodiment have been important to the development of social theory, such as the acquisition of language and consciousness. Further, while the corporeality of bodies is largely ignored in mainstream social theory, feminism has highlighted the importance of understanding the sexed body within the context of both macro and micro social processes. Because of major gaps in knowledge regarding the body's role in social life, writers are

increasingly pointing to the limitations of the dualistic split of nature/culture, body/mind, reason/emotion that Western culture has inherited and are arguing for the need to develop theoretical perspectives which acknowledge the importance and interrelationship of body and mind in the production of culture (Grosz 1993, 1994, Gatens 1996, Shilling 1993, Williams and Bendelow 1998).

The rise of the body's importance in social theory

Since the 1980s interest has developed in the body as an active agent in shaping human existence, and studies of the body by feminists and gender theorists (Bordo 1986, 1987, 1993, Braidotti 1994, Butler 1990, Connell 1995, Grosz 1983, 1984, Gatens 1996, Irigaray 1985, Martin 1987, Suleiman 1985, Urla and Terry 1995, and Young 1990) and social theorists, (such as Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (1991), and Williams and Bendelow 1998) are being more fully incorporated into the discipline of sociology. The current interest in the body as a subject of sociological inquiry has emerged through several factors.

First, the focus of second wave feminism drew attention to the exploitation of women's bodies as objects of social control and led to the consequent actions on the part of women to "take control" of their bodies, particularly in the reproductive and sexual sphere, by agitating for women's rights over issues of abortion and fertility, and later by debating issues such as prostitution, pornography, medical interventions into menopause treatment and reproductive technologies.

> As well as using the body as a vehicle of political action and protest, feminist analyses of women's oppression brought the body into academic conceptualizations of patriarchy. In contrast to those theories which identify the family as the basis of women's position in society, a number of feminists gave primacy to the biological body as the source of patriarchy. (Shilling 1993:31)

Recently academics have explored the embodiment of men and focussed particularly on areas such as masculinity, homosexuality and body image (Kimmel 1987; Connell 1995), as well as the shift away from an identification with the "breadwinner" as a source of identity towards a concern with self-identity and consumption, in which the body plays a more central role (Bourdieu 1984, Ehrenreich, 1983, Featherstone 1991, Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991).

Second, current interest in the body has been stimulated by the changing significance of the body as a constituting factor in individual identity. With the shift in the social structures of Western societies away from production as a source of identity and towards consumption, and a greater emphasis on consumption and leisure, the body becomes central to the "presentation of self" (Goffman 1969). Together with a centring of the body in the construction of identity there has also been an increase in bodily maintenance and health practices, and the body has become socially constructed as an outward reflection of the inner self. Body scrutiny and maintenance have become a central preoccupation in Western societies, leading many people to perceive of their bodies as "projects" in the ongoing construction of identity (Shilling 1993). Thus the body and the self are cojoined in the construction of identity. Turner explains:

> the body becomes a project alongside, or extricably bound up with, the self as a project. To take one specific issue, in a culture in which the surface of the body is seen to be that which carries the signs of one's inner moral condition, aging is something which has to be denied. With aging, the outer body can be interpreted as a betrayal of the youthfulness of the inner body.... aging intensifies the reflexivity which is forced upon us in a world in which we are all compelled to choose a lifestyle embodying tastes. (Turner 1995:257).

A third factor in the rise of the centrality of the body is the degree to which the fixed and impermeable boundaries of the body have been challenged in the latter part of the

20th century. Medical and technological developments allow for more interventions, remodifications, and bodily controls. When aligned to personal endeavours to control the body through health, fitness and dietary regimes, the body's ontological status takes on a new meaning. Writers are questioning what constitutes the body and where the body's boundaries end. The metaphor of the body as a machine[58] still prevails, and individuals increasingly take the perspective that the body is an individual possession for which they must take personal responsibility through self-maintenance (Shilling 1993:37). Further, with the rise of the consolidated power of the state it is argued that the body is more subject to the regulation, management and discipline of institutional controls such as medicine (Foucault 1973, Illich 1976), and writers have further pointed out how the gendered nature of such regulation and management takes place (Ehrenreich and English 1978, Hochschild 1983, Lupton 1994, Martin 1987).

Finally, and significantly, current interest in the body is stimulated by the ageing of the populations of Western societies and has focussed attention on the political economy of ageing and of the possible health problems of ageing populations.[59] As the body becomes increasingly central to one's quality of life as one ages, the ageing body becomes increasingly the focus of interest for sociologists (Shilling 1993:35). I now trace the major theoretical strands regarding the body before examining the ageing, gendered body.

There have been two approaches to Western studies of the body's role in human social life. Naturalistic or essentialist theories argue for the biological supremacy of the body in conditioning and determining social existence. In contrast, social constructionist theories argue that the body is a bearer of social and cultural meaning, and is "trained" to behave in socially appropriate ways relevant to the position of the individual within

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[58]I discuss the symbolic construction of the body as a machine in Chapter 4.

[59]I discuss the political economy of ageing in Chapter 5.

their social contexts, but the body does not have deterministic bearing on how bodily behaviours are manifest.

The naturalistic view of the body

The naturalistic view which emerged in the 18th century, sees the body as the 'pre-social, biological basis on which the superstructures of the self and society are founded' (Shilling 1993:41). By assuming a biologically "essential" nature to human beings and their social situation, social inequality is often explained away as given and as determined by biological factors which produce differently-constituted bodies having unequal biological material, an assumption on which ageism and age discrimination rests given that the ageing body is viewed biologically as in the process of decline. Naturalism has its contemporary parallel in the theory of sociobiology (Dawkins 1976, Tiger and Fox 1978, Wilson 1975), which emerged in the 1970s and attempts to explain a biological, and specifically genetic, basis for human behaviour, and particularly gender. Naturalism argues that biology determines gender[60] and that women's inferior social position is based on, and a necessary consequence of, their reproductive functions, and doubly so for ageing women. The perspective has been staunchly challenged by feminists. Nonetheless, the belief prevails in contemporary society that women's "nature" and assumed abilities are often perceived to be bounded and restricted by their biology, justification for limiting women's participation and equality in areas of public life. Sociobiological theories are also used to justify other conservative ideologies such as 'competition, patriarchy, heterosexuality and the nuclear family as both natural and desirable' (Shilling 1993:49). Thus the major criticism directed at the "naturalistic" approach is that it justifies and legitimates social inequalities between different socioeconomic/racial/gender categories and further legitimises their different access to power, material and social resources. It has also been criticised on

[60]See Connell 1987:67 for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

methodological grounds as being "pseudo-biological" (Connell 1987:69) because its conclusions are based on investigations of social life and not biology (Connell 1987, de Lepervanche 1984). Claims of biological difference between the sexes in behaviour and temperament, such as male aggression and female coyness, are exaggerated, overstated and based on hypothesis, according to Connell (1987).

The gendered body, and the dualistic cultural alignment of women with their bodies (and men with their minds) has been a site of analysis in feminist writings (Bordo 1993, Sulieman 1985, Young 1990). The argument of natural difference also has a presence in feminist theory in the work of liberal and essentialist (cultural) feminists. The two groups position the female body as divided within the naturalistic paradigm. They view it as either problematic (Firestone 1971), or privileged (Daly 1978, Griffin 1978, O'Brien 1981, Rich 1976), in their theoretical analyses. For liberal feminists, the female body with its reproductive processes and cycles is an obstacle which limits women's access to equality in the public sphere. Shulamith Firestone (1971), for example, argues that reproduction is the basis for the "biological family" and that women's reproductivity, their pregnant, lactating and maternal bodies, is the source of their inferior social situation, their dependence on men and a hindrance to women's full equality in contemporary Western cultures. From her standpoint the body must be "overcome" in some way in order for women to take up their equal place in pursuing the activities of culture and the mind.

Essentialist feminists take a different approach and argue that women's "essential" nature has been distorted and oppressed by patriarchy and women have adopted a patriarchal view of womanhood.

> Cultural feminism is the ideology of a female nature or female essence reappropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes. (Alcoff 1988:408)

In this sense women have become alienated from the natural impulses of their bodies and they urge women to discover and celebrate women's "true" nature. True nature or essential womanhood is seen as a unique means of access to female-based knowledge and more liberating ways of living, as suggested by Germaine Greer (1991) in her approach to menopause. For both liberal and essential feminists the biologically female body is the source of women's oppression. Like earlier criticisms of the sociobiological approach, naturalistic feminist approaches have also been criticised for being ahistorical (Mitchell 1973), for assuming the body is 'biologically determined and alien to cultural and intellectual achievements' (Grosz 1994:16), for assuming a universal women's nature and oppression by patriarchy (Eisenstein 1984:xvi, Mohanty et al. 1991) and thereby 'reproduc[ing] dominant cultural assumptions about women' (Alcoff 1988:413), and for their failure to incorporate the complexities, differences and specificities of bodies (Grosz 1994.)

Other views of the female body as a naturalistic medium attempt to go beyond pure naturalism and examine the role of cultural imperatives in the formation of the female body. In the work of Orbach (1978) and Chernin (1983), eating disorders are a consequence of a perception of the female body which is seen to be distorted from what is suggested to be a normal or "natural" shape (Shilling 1993) in the pursuit of achieving the standards of the ideal feminine body. Here the body is not presocial, but is shaped by culture. The theorists prioritise the body in the production of cultural representations and suggest the ways in which we can synthesise understandings of the body and consciousness in the production of culture. Susan Bordo has argued how illnesses such as hysteria and anorexia nervosa represent a pathological extension of the culturally specific inscription of the norms of femininity, but are also a form of protest against these rules (1986). Bordo clarifies how she conceives of the body as 'a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form' (1986:20). I read her work as suggesting a hyperfeminine body also produces culture, both a conventional form of slender

femininity as well as a subversive form of pathological femininity. The work of these theorists suggests the degree to which the body is not just inscribed by culture, but also produces culture. It is both the inscribed and the imaginary body which reproduce the bodily forms specific to a society at a given point in history. For a more explicit account of the role of society and culture in shaping the social body I now turn to the perspective of social constructionism.

The socially constructed view of the body

The social constructionist perspective of the body by both feminists (Barrett 1980, Chodorow 1978, Mitchell 1971) and nonfeminists (Frank 1991, Foucault, 1973, 1979, 1981[61] and Goffman 1968, 1969, 1979) takes an opposing view to the naturalistic approach, and argues that, rather than generating social meaning, the body receives and is a bearer of social meaning, and is therefore shaped and constrained by society. Thus, for social constructionists the body can be conceived of as a 'surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed' (Grosz 1993:196). In this "inscriptive" theory, the body is a social or public phenomenon which is marked, transformed or constructed 'by the various regimes of institutional, discursive, and nondiscursive power as a particular kind of body' (Grosz 1993:197). Feminists who take a social constructionist approach (including Marxist and psychoanalytical feminists) do not see the biological body itself as socially and politically significant, but rather it is the social and political values and meanings ascribed to women's biological cycles, functions and potentialities which are significant. For social constructionists it is 'the ways in which the social system organises and gives meaning to biology that is oppressive to women. The distinction between the 'real' biological body and the body as an object of

[61]While Foucault is generally considered a postmodern theorist, in his treatment of the body both Shilling and Grosz categorise him as a social constructionist because he views the body as a neutral undifferentiated medium which conveys specific forms of cultural practices rather than having an agency or specificity of its own. I have modified the category to avoid labelling the theorists, preferring instead to focus on their treatment of bodies rather than defining the theorists themselves.

representation is a fundamental presumption' (Grosz 1994:17). Social constructionist feminists focus on the ways in which the female body has been constructed within a binary schema in materialist, ideological terms as being aligned with reproduction/nature in opposition to the male alignment with production/culture, and how material alignment produces different social roles, personalities and behaviours for each sex (Ortner 1974).

The assumption that the body is a neutral and passive surface onto which culture and socialisation are inscribed has been criticised by Moira Gatens (1996). She argues that the sex/gender distinction employed by social constructionists (which uses "gender" as the explanatory category by which women are oppressed under patriarchy and thus assumes an *a priori* equality underneath gender socialisation) fails to acknowledge the sexual specificity of the subject or that the system of patriarchal social organisation is constructed around *sexual* difference, not *gender* difference. Thus the degendering approach assumes a sexed body which is inhabited by an asexual consciousness.

> Feminists who propose degendering propose it outside history and often fail to consider the resilience of expressions of sexual difference along with the network of linguistic and other systems of signification that both constitute and perpetuate this difference. (Gatens 1996:10)

Nonfeminist theorists have provided important insights into how the body is constructed by society and the way in which the body receives, responds and interacts with this information. In particular, the contrasting views of Erving Goffman (1968, 1969, 1979, and Michel Foucault (1973, 1979, 1981) are important. Goffman, taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, focuses on bodily actions and interactions between individuals which, he argues, are shaped by and imbued with symbolic social meaning and which construct the individual as a certain socially-positioned *actor* within specific social locations and roles. For Goffman, the management of the body is central to the

maintenance of an individual's social roles and relationships, and 'mediates the relationship between an individual's self-identity and their social identity' (Shilling 1993:74). Thus, the body becomes a resource which can be shaped in certain ways to construct a 'version of the self' (Shilling 1993:74). The notion of the body as representative of a stylised self is evident in the work of Featherstone (1991).

Goffman argues that the success to which the individual, or actor, is able to produce a socially impressionable self will determine the social status which is imputed by the person(s) with whom the actor is interacting. While Goffman's work renders important insights regarding the presentation of the body as representative of self, as well as the social statuses of bodies, his work fails to incorporate other, more subversive forms of interaction and individual agency in either modifying and personalising certain gestures, or selectively choosing some and not others. Goffman does not detail how the individual has given consideration to and made selective choices about the ways s/he will or will not engage with physical/ gestural/ behavioural imperatives. For Goffman, the body appears to be essentially inert but animated by the imperatives of social convention and rituals.

Goffman's work has been criticised for ignoring macro-sociological processes and for overemphasising the importance of the social significance of classifications as determining factors in individual lives. While he fails to provide a theoretical elucidation of the body in society, he does provide insights into how individual subjectivities can be fashioned and fragmented by contradictory social feedback. For Goffman, it is more the physical gestures and expressions between individuals that construct social meaning, rather than structural forms of power such as discourse, which is the concern for Foucault.

Foucault takes a more poststructuralist perspective, arguing that the body is controlled and constructed by discourses, rather than interactions, which operate within a

framework of institutionalised power. Rather than bodily interactions, linguistic interactions form the core of Foucault's understandings of the body. For Foucault, the body is a 'link between daily practices on the one hand and the large scale organization of power on the other' (Shilling 1993:75 quoting Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). Foucault does not view bodies as distinct entities whose biology limits and restrains the individual and their human capacities, but rather sees them as 'highly malleable phenomena which can be invested with various and changing forms of power' (Shilling 1993:79). Foucault ignores what Turner (1984) terms the "phenomenology of embodiment" and minimises the importance of lived experience (Shilling 1993:80). Cunningham-Burley and Backett-Milburn (1998) argue that it is not so much the docility of the body which characterises social interaction, as Foucault suggests, but rather the control of the body, as in Goffman's work. While social constructionist theorists provide important insights into the location of the body within specific social contexts, their theories are limited, as I now discuss.

Critique of social constructionist approaches to the body

Social constructionist approaches have been criticised for overlooking the importance of the phenomenology of the body. While the body as a concept is central to their analyses, the materiality of the body and its significance for human action is neglected. There is a lack of analysis of the body itself and what is actually meant by "the body" in social constructionist accounts. Rather than overcoming the dualisms of body and mind, they reproduce dualisms of a different sort (Shilling 1993:72). Further, the social constructionist perspective of the body as an inscribed surface fails to consider the body's agency in the collusion with or resistance to such practices. In these theories the body is a passive and ineffectual vehicle for the practices and processes of acculturation, and the body itself is seen as a neutral medium with no specificities which mark it out for certain rituals and not others. Foucault's account of "docile bodies" assumes "the body", or "bodies" are one thing and fails to acknowledge the different

constitutions of bodies, differences between men's and women's sexed bodies, and the different relationships between individuals and the institutions and social relationships within his schema of institutional power (Bartky 1988: 63).

While social constructionist theories provide important insights into the role of the body within discursive and nondiscursive social relations, they fail to take the body's materiality into account. Rather, the body is often depicted as animated by the social, or alternatively a passive surface inscribed by the social, rather than being seen as central to the process of identity construction and social relations.

> [T]he body is not simply constrained by or invested with social relations, but also actually forms a basis for and contributes towards these relations. (Shilling 1993:13)

It is what is related to - a person's ageing *body* - within a certain social framework that incorporates understandings of "who" we are. The embodied nature of our existence is inescapable. As Shilling points out:

> in addition to the possibilities of agency that exist by virtue of us *having* bodies, we are also constrained by the brute fact of *being* bodies. They constitute a condition which both provides us with life and ensures our ultimate death. (1993:23)

I now present the specifically feminist focus of writers who have attempted to move beyond the two paradigms of the body, either from a naturalistic perspective of the body as a biological "phenomenon", or the perspective of social constructionism of the body as "infinitely malleable" (Shilling 1993:17).

The lived body

Both the naturalistic and constructionist approaches to the body mentioned above view

the body as biologically determined, fixed and ahistorical. Both maintain the mind/body dualism whereby the body as naturalistic and precultural 'provides the base, the raw materials for the inculcation of and interpellation into ideology' (Grosz 1994:17) and the mind remains 'a social, cultural and historical object, a product of ideology' (Grosz 1994:17). In relation to these theoretical approaches to the body, a feminist postmodernist approach argued by sexual difference feminists sees the lived body as crucial in understanding women's subjective and social existence. The lived body is no longer understood as ahistorical, biologically given, and acultural, but is a lived body in that it is represented and used in specific ways. Sexual difference feminists see the body as interwoven with systems of meaning, signification and representation. 'On the one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange' (Grosz 1994:18). The body is not a raw, passive or natural object onto which is inscribed culture and gender, the body itself is a cultural, social and political object which produces and is produced by culture. Ann gives an example:

DO YOU THINK APPEARANCES ARE IMPORTANT?

Sure. It's the first thing that hits you. Oh yes. And also you have to say to yourself what sort of environment are you in. If you want to play football you wear football boots. In a corporate environment you've got to look corporate. You know. When I'm down at the beach I'm looking scruffy but when I come to work I play the game. When I was a student I looked like all the other students because that's how I preferred to look..... It says something about you.

Ann, 51, married, lecturer

Ann's interpretation of the body as a vehicle for self-presentation suggests a fluid, adaptable self which communicates through the body. In Ann's case, the body empowers her sense of self, however, for other women their ageing embodiment

undermines their self confidence.[62]

The problematic nature of the body in feminist theory has resulted in its subordination to the concept of gender, and consequently feminist theory reflects a reluctance to 'conceptualize the female body as playing a major role in women's oppression' (Grosz 1993:195). By taking the perspective of the lived body, however, the body does not necessarily have to be conceptualised in biologically essentialist or naturalistic terms.

> The body cannot be understood as a neutral screen, a *tabula rasa* onto which masculine or feminine could be indifferently projected. Instead of seeing sex as an essentialist and gender as a constructionist category, these thinkers are concerned to undermine the dichotomy. The concept of the social body is a major strategy in this goal. As sexually specific, the body codes the meanings projected onto it in sexually determinate ways. (Grosz 1994:18)

From this perspective the body is the site of various forms of power and is a social and discursive object.[63]

> Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles. (Grosz 1994:19)

The sexual difference perspective of the lived body sees a fundamental irreducible difference between sexes, but the perspective differs from the essentialist position in that there is an understanding and acknowledgment of differences between members of the same sex. They do not support the notion that there is a universal nature or feminine

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[62]For example, Casey experienced her ageing body as socially-disadvantaged and disempowering in Chapter 9.

[63]I discuss Ann's decision to "go grey" as a subversion of dominant discourses of age and beauty in Chapter 9.

essence which all women share but focus on differences and specificities. The specificity of bodies in historical and sociocultural contexts is emphasised, 'there is no body as such: there are only *bodies* - male or female, black, brown, white, large or small - and the gradations in between' (Grosz 1994:19).

To have concepts which reflect the variety of human beings, differences between subjects must be accepted, and these differences are not biologically preordained but experienced both by and through the body. Grosz (1994) argues that any analysis of the body which incorporates postmodern theorisations of women's social position and moves away from humanist notions of an essential self or feminine nature and argues instead for a decentring of the human subject must start with the embodiment of women.

Grosz, in attempting to think beyond the dualism of body/mind, conceptualises the relationship as a möbius strip (1994:xii)[64], where two surfaces twist into each other so that the inner surface becomes the outer surface and vice versa, transcending the binary relationship of surface and depth, inner and outer, and a reductionism which presupposes a causal relationship from one to the other. The body is not a blank slate onto which culture is written, but rather the configuration is similar to a process of etching, in which the ink of culture must take account of the medium onto which it inscribes its message.

> It enables subjectivity to be understood not as the combination of a psychical depth and a corporeal superficiality but as a surface whose inscriptions and rotations in three dimensional space produce all the effects of depth. It enables subjectivity to be understood as fully material and for materiality to be extended

[64]I refer to the configuration of a möbius strip as an alternative concept to the binary of body/mind Chapter 4, but offer a more detailed analysis here.

and to include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance. (Grosz 1994:209-210)

Betty's experience of illness suggests the interconnection between the body and subjectivity and the changing relationship between these and society in reconstituting the self:

> *[My spiritual development] started with Chronic Fatigue in the last ten years and going through all the alternative therapies. I think that Western medicine itself is really limited and doesn't really deal with many problems. I have my own little blend of how I look after my body. Yoga, Tai Chi, massage, chiropractor, Chinese herbs, hypnosis. The whole thing about working out what's important to you and how to personalise some beliefs. My only spiritual activity is mind body knowing yourself.*
>
> *Betty, 47, divorced, manager*

For Betty, healing the body involved transforming the self by "personalising beliefs" and taking a spiritual, holistic approach to the relationship between the body and mind. Betty's spiritual transformation was shaped by contemporary cultural trends in which New Age understandings of health wellness are preferred over objective biomedical approaches. Betty's lived embodiment, and the changes she perceived to have taken place in her health and wellbeing, have reshaped her subjectivity.

Like Grosz, Gatens' analysis brings to the fore the centrality of the body, and specifically the sexed body as both a biological object and as a lived experience in shaping social systems and relations. Gatens advances the concept of an 'imaginary body' which is:

> asocially and historically specific in that it is constructed by: a shared language; the shared psychical significance and privileging of various zones of the body

(for example, the mouth, the anus, the genitals); and common institutional practices and discourses (for example, medical, juridical and educational) which act on and through the body. (1996:12)

The insights of Grosz and Gatens of the lived body as an intersection between culture and biology, and the imaginary body as an intersection between the symbolic and the subjective enable an understanding of the female body within the theoretical framework of postmodernism which views the body as central to embodied identity, both as a medium of self representation and as a site of resistance within the discursive field of ageing and gender.

THE POSTMODERN BODY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

In contemporary Australian culture, with its trend towards postmodernity, as the individual becomes more responsible for constructing meaning and shaping her own identity around personal sources of signification, the body is becoming increasingly central to a person's identity and the constitution of a sense of self. Bryan Turner (1995) refers to the phenomenon as the 'somatization of the self' and argues that 'any discussion of the project of the self ought to include a discussion of the project of the body in the debate about detraditionalization and postmodernity' (Turner 1995:255).

In Western societies the body serves as a symbol which is seen to reflect, and represent, the self. With the rise of consumer culture, people are increasingly turning to modes of signification and bodily regimes in order to demark their identities, and the body becomes an outward representation of the self. In the 'somatic society' (Turner 1992) there is a heightened concern with 'the health, shape and appearance of their own bodies as expressions of individual identity' (Shilling 1993:10). The body is 'potentially no longer subject to the constraints and limitations that once characterized its existence' (Shilling 1993:3). Not only are diet and exercise embodied pursuits for many people, but the body can be modified through plastic surgery, and a range of surgical

techniques. Magazines regularly feature articles which advise the reader how to look slimmer, more sexy and attractive, and cosmetic, weight loss and keep fit companies are multi-million dollar industries (Bordo 1993, Shilling 1993, Wolf 1990). The increased availability of shaping and modifying the body, as well as reproductive technology which can engineer the reproductive futures of both men and women, increases the potential for controlling and reshaping one's body and delaying or modifying the biological process of ageing (Bordo 1993, Shilling 1993). Even people without the financial resources to opt for plastic surgery can diet, exercise, dress and use bodily significations such as haircuts, tattoos, earrings and cosmetics in order to produce a certain style of body.

> In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self identity... Recognizing that the body has become a project for many modern persons entails accepting that its appearance, size, shape and even its contents, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner... This involves a practical recognition of the significance of bodies; both as personal resources and as social symbols which give off messages about a person's self-identity. (Shilling 1993:5)

Within the configuration of the body as a project, the individual is seen to work towards producing a healthy body, a desired image of oneself, or one which is representative of an "inner" self or more "authentic" identity. Nonetheless, the body as a representation of the self is problematic for ageing persons who find it increasingly difficult to maintain an outward presentation of their more youthful selves.

The ageing body as a postmodern project

As the concept of youthfulness increasingly becomes a desired expression of self,

maintaining a youthful body has become central for many middle aged and ageing people. In contemporary society, advanced technologies enable the modification of ageing bodies to present a more youthful appearance. In line with the postmodern notion of the construction of designer identities, one can redesign bodies to reflect a more youthful and beautiful identity, via body building, facelifts, implants and liposuction (Featherstone 1991, Gilleard and Higgs 1996:89). Reproductive age can also be redesigned through new reproductive technologies in which post menopausal women can give birth or avoid menopause altogether with the aid of hormone replacement therapy.[65] A healthier, younger body can be achieved via body parts such as hearts and hips which can be replaced if they wear out (Gilleard and Higgs 1996:89). Many of these "products" are restricted to consumption by the middle class, but increasingly these options are becoming affordable and are being purchased by a broader spectrum of society's individuals.

> The wrinkles, sagging flesh, tendency towards middle-age spread, hair loss, etc. which accompany ageing should be combated by energetic body maintenance on the part of the individual - with help from the cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries. (Featherstone 1991:178)

Despite the range of practices people may engage with in order to maintain an appearance of youthfulness, ageing is a stark reminder of the limitations of the body, highlighting the embodied nature of our subjectivities. Bodies also have the tendency to resist being moulded into a desired image or shape.[66] The irony of youthfulness for ageing people is, as Turner argues, that the ageing process leads to a "contradictory

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[65]See Chapter 4 for a discussion of HRT and the medicalisation of menopause.

[66]Both Kim Chernin (1983) *Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness*, and Susie Orbach (1978) *Fat is a Feminist Issue* discuss how many women's larger bodies resist dieting, and thereby resist being moulded into a more socially desirable and feminine slender shape.

relationship between the subjective sense of an inner youthfulness and an exterior process of biological aging' (1995:258).

The bodily redesigns made possible by science and medical technology have altered both the subjective meaning and embodied physicality of ageing. Many writers suggest that ageing is experienced on two levels, the inner ageing self, and within consumer culture, 'the inner and outer body become cojoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body' (Featherstone 1991:171). For women, the cultural emphasis on youth, fertility and beauty raises important questions in regard to ageing embodiment.

> Old age is also seen to be characteristically defined as a mask which conceals the essential identity of the person beneath. This view of the ageing process as a mask or disguise concealing the essentially youthful self beneath is one which appears to be increasingly popular... it is the ageing mask which is pathological or deviant and the inner essential self which remains... as normal. (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991:379)

Although this observation provides an insight into the contradictions of the ageing experience for many people, viewing the ageing body as a mask hiding an essential inner self is a humanist argument which presupposes a dualist "outer" self and "inner" self which become increasingly at odds as a person ages. My study suggests, as other researchers have found (Kamler and Feldman 1995), that this simplistic view overlooks the complexity of the embodied experience of ageing:

> *My body's beginning to decay, my teeth hurt, my gums are shrinking, one of my eyes is not seeing very well. I find it difficult to take off weight. I have to dye my hair or I feel really old.*
>
> *I have to look after myself in a way I didn't before. There's a lot of maintenance*

that I didn't have to do and you know that the maintenance isn't going to work in the long run. One has a strong sense of inevitable decline. But on the other hand I'm probably healthier than I was ten to fifteen years ago because of the maintenance program and having more exercise.

I don't really mind looking older. I look in the mirror and say "my God, I look like my mother." Overall I don't really mind it, although I do have a few regrets. It's one of those tensions, you have to negotiate it.

Yvonne, 53, divorced, senior administrator

Yvonne reveals the tensions many women face ageing in a youth-oriented society where women are culturally aligned with their bodies and valued for their appearance. Yvonne was experiencing a number of "symptoms" of ageing to do with teeth, eye sight and weight-gain, yet it was her hair colour that determined whether she felt old. The signs of physical ageing have less of an impact on her subjectivity as an ageing woman than the signs of social ageing. While conforming to social pressure to look younger, Yvonne claimed she "doesn't really mind looking older" suggesting a conflict between the social pressure on women to look young and women's self-acceptance of their ageing appearance. Yvonne's embodied experience of ageing suggests the binary configuration of ageing as an inner self/outer self dichotomy does not enable the more subtle and complex aspects of ageing embodiment to be explored.

CONCLUSION

Research on the embodiment of ageing which addresses specific issues relating to midlife women is an underresearched area. The accumulated history of academic interest in the body is partial and has not yet rendered a meaningful reading of women's ageing bodies in contemporary society, and how women experience this process within the context of their own lived experience.

Women's experience of the lived body which inscribes subjective experience highlights the significance of sociocultural context in shaping women's ageing subjectivities. In particular, an exploration of the ways in which gender and ageing link to shape women's subjectivities and provide interpretive meanings of their ageing process is a fruitful area of inquiry. I now explore the stories of my women who articulate the relationships between sociocultural meanings of ageing, and ageing embodiment, and how the interaction inscribes women's lived experience. I also explore how women contest and subvert sociocultural meanings of ageing and beauty and discursively construct new images of themselves as ageing women in contemporary society.

CHAPTER 9

The package is ageing:

Women's ageing bodies and society

In the previous chapter I argued that in contemporary postmodern cultures, as an individual becomes more responsible for remaking her own identity around personal sources of meaning and signification, the body becomes a vehicle for self-expression and self-realisation. Thus the body is central to a person's identity and sense of oneself as a worthwhile person (Gilleard & Higgs 1996, Hepworth 1991, Shilling 1993, Turner 1995). With the cultural emphasis on youthfulness as a valued component of personhood, maintaining a youthful body and appearance becomes important for middle aged and ageing people. If the body is central to a person's identity and self esteem, any changes in the body are likely to influence a person's subjectivity.

The importance of the body to the constitution of subjectivity has profound implications for ageing women in contemporary Australian where appearance is emphasised and a youthful standard of beauty is the cultural norm by which women's attractiveness and sexual desirability is measured. In contemporary Western societies beauty is a status symbol (Synnott 1990) and there is evidence to suggest that "good looks and high incomes are highly correlated" (Synnott 1989:609). For women, dominant discourses that devalue the ageing body are reinforced by menopausal discourses which promote menopause as a process of deficiency and disease. Many writers have argued that older women are stigmatised by both age and gender, and experience a "double standard of ageing" (Sontag 1972) where women are judged more harshly because appearance is seen as more important for women than men (de Beauvoir 1972, Greer 1991, Melamed 1983, Sontag 1972). In counterdistinction to the "loss of beauty" perspective, recent

research proposes that appearance is not as central as earlier writers suggest, and that some women are more comfortable and freer to "express themselves" when they are older because they are less pressured to conform to the restrictive standards of beauty and bodily presentation to which they felt bound when they were young (Fairhurst 1998, Feldman 1996 et al., Feldman and Poole 1999, Scutt 1993).

The intent of this chapter is to explore the changing and contradictory experience of embodiment as women age and become culturally distanced from the pervasive standards of beauty in youth-oriented contemporary Australian society, and how women's changing embodiment shapes and inscribes their subjectivities.

THE EMBODIMENT OF AGEING

Ageing is essentially an embodied experience, and in a culture in which the ageing experience is specifically gendered, differently sexed bodies experience and interpret certain aspects of the ageing process in culturally-specific ways. In contemporary Western societies, dualist epistemology presupposes biological and cultural alignments which link gender with specific human qualities and capabilities: male/mind/productivity and female/body/reproductivity (Bordo 1993, Brison 1995, Ruddick 1989, Suleiman 1985, Young 1990). The female body has historically been presented as "the antithesis to reason" (Brison 1997:15) and due to the alignment of women with their bodies, so have women themselves. The ideal female body is one which is firm, slender, and youthful. Older women's bodies are depreciated cultural capital when measured by this standard. As Bartky highlights:

> The requirement that a woman maintain a smooth and hairless skin carries further the theme of inexperience...[as does] a face that never ages or furrows its brow in thought. The face of the ideally feminine woman must never display the marks of character, wisdom, and experience that we so admire in men. (Bartky 1988:73)

Older women as a social group, because they have not generally been valued for their minds or acknowledged socially for their accumulation of wisdom and experience, are considered marginal to the vibrant and creative flow of mainstream social production. A common observation made by writers (de Beauvoir 1972, Greer 1991, Melamed 1985, Sontag 1972) as well as by older women themselves, is that women become "invisible" as they age. "Invisibility" can be interpreted on two levels. Women are seen to become "invisible" to the "male gaze", that is, women fade out as objects of desirability and attractiveness according to conventional norms of beauty, because they are no longer seen as attractive. "Invisibility" is also claimed to occur on a social level. Women's social value has been aligned with the body and not the mind, therefore women are not generally acknowledged or valued as knowledgeable or wise members of society in mainstream cultural representations.[67]

Many writings on ageing women reflect this standpoint, and voice a position which exposes society's demeaning view of women. In 1972 Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag both published writings which drew the public's attention to the social stigma of ageing, as have other writers since (Bartky 1988, Bytheway 1995, Greer 1991, Melamed 1983). Emphasising women's "invisibility" on a physical level, both de Beauvoir and Sontag emphasised the "double standard of ageing" for women in Western societies. Sontag argues that, because of youthful standards of beauty in Western societies and the cultural emphasis on appearance for women, they experience social ageing more acutely than men. Men, she argues, have two standards of attractiveness, boyish good looks as well as the weathered handsomeness which reflects signs of age and experience. A standard of mature attractiveness exists for men and they can still be viewed as attractive when they are older. Whereas for women of all ages the standard of beauty and sexual attractiveness is the young woman. Older

[67] I explore this theme further in Chapter 10.

women who *are* seen as attractive when they are older, are so admired because they *do not look* their age.

Both Sontag and de Beauvoir initiated a discourse on ageing continued by other writers (Bytheway 1995, Featherstone and Hepworth 1991, Turner 1995), that it is not physical ageing itself, but social ageing, or the outward signs of ageing and what they represent socially, which leads to the stigmatisation of older women. Subjectively we do not age, but because of the ageing nature of our embodiment the self is perceived as having aged and is identified with age-specific stereotypes. For de Beauvoir, women's social ageing represents a painful process of social disqualification. Sontag agrees:

> Old age is a genuine ordeal, one that men and women undergo in a similar way. Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination - a moral disease, a social pathology - intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men. It is particularly women who experience growing older... with such distaste and shame. (Sontag 1972:29)

The insecurity which older women may experience regarding their ageing appearance in relation to cultural standards of youthful beauty has been labelled "appearance anxiety" by psychologist-researcher Elissa Melamed in her book on the subject revealingly titled *Mirror, Mirror: The Terror of not being Young* (1983). Germaine Greer *(The Change*, 1991) also focuses on the connection between declining physical attractiveness and women's loss of social status as they age. Her insights reveal Greer's own insecurities in relation to her changing appearance. Greer urges women not to define themselves according to patriarchal standards of beauty, suggesting that:

> [o]nly when a woman ceases the fretful struggle to be beautiful can she turn her gaze outward, find the beautiful and feed upon it. She can at last transcend the body that was what other people principally valued her for, and be set free both

from their expectations and her own capitulation to them. (Greer 1991:430)

While it is important to expose how mainstream cultural discourses which place an emphasis on youthful, slender beauty as a measure of women's worth represent a double standard of ageing that may disadvantage older women, competing and more empowering discourses exist through which older women can reconstitute their subjectivities. Perspectives that present the position of ageing women as both victims of social disapproval and as consumed by regret over the "loss" of "beauty" are at best only partial insights into the experience of women's ageing embodiment, and overshadow richer and more rewarding aspects of their lived and embodied experiences. While affirming the observations of earlier researchers such as de Beauvoir and Sontag regarding the double standard of ageing for women in Western societies and the negative impact this may have on women's sense of self, recent research highlights how women also experience their ageing embodiment positively (Feldman et al. 1996, Feldman and Poole 1999, Fairhurst 1998, Scutt 1993).

In a culture where youthful beauty is the benchmark for women, and where cultural standards of beauty pressure conformity with cultural standards, particularly for younger women, ageing often frees women to express themselves in more individualised ways. Further, dominant social values do not necessarily reflect the subjective experience of women and, as Fairhurst's research with ageing women suggests (1998), while women are aware of the link between youth and attractiveness, 'the ways in which they orient to this aspect of cultural knowledge varies according to the meaning they place on growing older' (1998:261).

The body signifies a specific set of social symbols thereby conveying a social meaning, but it also carries a personal meaning which is incorporated into the individual's self-identity. In this sense, the body mediates interaction between the self and the social. It is through the body that people perform social roles through their encounters with others

(Shilling 1993:83). Cunningham Burley and Backett-Milburn, taking a phenomenological approach, argue that the body is the site of autobiographical experience and is 'central to understanding mid life' (1998:143). They argue that we should study the lived experience of people 'from the body up' because '[w]e have no direct or "innocent" knowledge of our bodies but rather are always "reading" our bodies through the lenses of various interpretive schemes' (1998:143).

Women's ageing bodies become symbolic terrain where feelings about the ageing process are expressed, and social meanings subverted. Embodied presentations enable women to reassert their place in the social world and demark their identities. Many women in my study demark their identities in ways which belie social stereotypes of both youthful beauty and the ageing grandmother, and find their own style of presentation through which they experience a sense of "freedom" from standardised cultural imperatives to which they once felt bound.

My research shows that while older women's bodies may be perceived by society and even by women themselves as depreciated cultural capital when viewed through mainstream patriarchal discourses, other discourses challenge and subvert this viewpoint and provide alternative subject positions for the older woman. Further, my findings highlight that any "anxiety" older women may experience regarding their ageing bodies has more to do with society's failure to accommodate a position in society which credits older women as attractive and worthwhile in their own right. While most women in my study claimed some dissatisfaction with their appearance, for many the source of their dissatisfaction was not so much with their body image but with social perceptions of ageing women which fail to acknowledge middle aged women as appealing, vibrant and sexually attractive.

The findings of my research are structured around three aspects of ageing embodiment for women. I begin with the stories of women who articulate their experience through

discourses which suggest the difficulties some women experience growing older, that appear to align with dominant discourses of ageing for women. I follow with stories of women who articulate the conflict between society's devalued perception of ageing women and their more positive perceptions of ageing women in general, as well as their own embodied experience. Finally, I end with the stories of women who have found alternative ways of interpreting their embodied experiences and who redefine attractiveness around more empowering discourses that suggest they have developed their own sense of style, self-expression and freedom which perhaps younger women have yet to discover.

I've been put out to pasture

Thirty-four out of forty-seven women responded negatively to the question "How do you feel when you look in the mirror?" giving answers which reflect the anti-ageing sentiment of western society towards older women. It has been suggested that for most women a sense of bodily deficiency is the norm (Bartky 1988) and I suggest that for some women this sense of deficiency is enhanced by age.

For Casey, whose story follows, the chronological boundary of turning forty leads to the reconstitution of her subjectivity around a perception of being no longer young:

> *I feel like I've been put out to pasture and I'm only forty-seven. We live in a very ageist society and everything revolves around youth and beauty and my youth disappeared really when I hit forty. I hung on to it quite well but once I hit forty I couldn't... the changes of my body and face, maybe it was just me, but I felt I was getting different reactions from people. At forty I realised it was much harder to get work. At forty I realised I was starting to look old. Up until then I had a few wrinkles but at forty the saggyness started. When I realised it was really hard to keep looking good at forty I started to think "what am I going to do about this? How am I going to accept this?" I didn't just flow easily into*

it. It wasn't a natural course of events. I had to nut it out..... It was horrible not to be able to say "I'm thirty-something". Youth and young, that's where all the advantages are in our society..... I still feel twenty-something except when I'm down on the floor and I've got to get up. I feel the same sort of person, perhaps a bit wiser about some things. I know more than I did when I was twenty, but behind these eyes looking out it's much the same as it was twenty years go.

Casey, 47, divorced, volunteer counsellor

Casey's perceived change of status, redefined by age, is accompanied by an altered perception of her gendered social identity, and marks a clear transition for Casey from seeing herself as attractive to seeing herself as unattractive, highlighting the important link between chronological age and older women's devalued social status. Her perceived transition from young/attractive to old/unattractive, around the socially-constructed chronological marker of turning forty is evidence of the processual nature of subjectivity and the rhetorical nature of self-making through discourse.

Casey was long-term unemployed with limited finances and had restricted access to contemporary "consumer" options for "self-development" and sources of meaning around individualistic pursuits such as educational courses, travel, psychiatrists or artistic practice, which enable some women in my study to reconstruct their selves and social identities. Casey's ability to remake her gendered identity has been compromised by limited options and as she ages and old ways of living gender become inappropriate, she has experienced a sense of loss and confusion.

Casey's reconceptualisation of herself as an older woman is discursively constructed almost exclusively through dominant patriarchal discourses which disenfranchise ageing women. Believing that "youth and young" are where "all the advantages are" in society, Casey clearly aligned herself with a disempowered social position after she "hit forty". It is her perception of her own physical appearance in relation to standards of

beauty and its importance in contemporary Australian society, rather than her embodied ageing physicality when she's "down on the floor and [has] got to get up" which impacted negatively on her sense of self. In contrast to her perception that her "youth disappeared" she still feels "twenty-something", supporting the theory that we age socially but not subjectively. The recognition that she is wiser and knows more is little comfort to Casey, an unpaid volunteer worker who was supporting herself through social security payments and perceives herself as being of little value in society at large.

For Samantha the embodied experience of ageing not only centred around appearance, but incorporated broader aspects of femininity such as fertility, as well as an awareness of moving along one's life trajectory away from youth toward old age. Her experience is articulated through a midlife discourse triggered by the chronological marker of turning forty-five:

> *Coming to terms with the fact that I was forty-five was quite something. It was no easy thing.... This whole thing of midlife, it really runs deep.*
>
> *The first thing I had to acknowledge was that I would no longer be able to bear children.... The knowledge that the fertile, life-giving, life-affirming virility was going fast and I would no longer have the choice. And I had no control over it and I had to accept it and give over to it and acknowledge that my own daughters and their friends were coming into their full flowering of womanhood and they were the ones who would be gorgeous and young.*
>
> *And there was this whole thing about wrinkling and coming to terms with the outward aspects of ageing and of not having the same energy level and of having to cope with the physical things of midlife. Not good at all.*
>
> *Samantha, 50, remarried, teacher*

For Samantha, like Casey, midlife seems to mark a turning point which led her to

redefine herself as no longer young. The dominant discursive construction of midlife as either a transition or a crisis accompanied by a process of self reflection was suggested by Samantha's perception that midlife "runs deep" and she is having difficulty "coming to terms" with it. Her story suggests the symbolic meaning she placed on embodied change through which women like Samantha reconstruct their subjectivities around new age-specific social positions. Samantha's story also suggests that she felt a sense of redundancy as she passed beyond youthfulness and fertility. Her perception that her "life-affirming virility" was fading and she had to "give over to it" suggests a perceived relinquishing of her position as "gorgeous and young" to younger women and assume a disempowered status assigned to older women, over which she has "no choice". Her words echo dominant discourse which defines the menopausal woman as in the process of both physical and social decline and the symbolic conceptualisation of the menopausal woman as withered and drying up physically and productively.

Samantha was part-way through a course in natural medicine at the time of the interview and was intending to become a practitioner. Samantha's story, therefore, can also be interpreted within a framework of social change in which her reconstitution of subjectivity and remaking identity reflects new understandings of gender and new ways of constructing identity and meaning in postmodern societies.

While Casey and Samantha above interpret their ageing embodiment in terms which suggest alignments with patriarchal value systems such as beauty and fertility, some women in my study were aware of homogenising patriarchal objectifications of women and ageing women's devalued status in society, but they contested and subverted these discourses.

You lose the gaze of a hell of a lot of blokes

In the previous chapter I discussed a theory of ageing which argues that there is a contradictory relationship between the individual's subjective sense of themselves as

eternally youthful and their outer, ageing body (Turner 1995).[68] This observation was expressed by Casey above. In my research I have found that while some participants did comment on the discrepancy between how young they feel and how old they see themselves as looking, of far greater significance to their subjectivities was the discrepancy between their sense of viability and attractiveness as women of middle age, and the overwhelmingly stereotyped and demeaned public presence of middle aged women in society at large, particularly as conveyed by the media. The lack of social recognition for an older standard of beauty for women in contemporary Western societies which acknowledges attractiveness and vitality in older women as they are, without having to attempt to look young, is a key issue raised by the women in my study. While social representations of beauty render older women invisible, middle aged women themselves see attractiveness as incorporating a much wider range of attributes than contemporary standards allow. Nell's perception of media portrayals of older women encapsulate this view:

> *If you're not twenty and look like Elle McPherson you're not a complete woman. It makes me so cross. And yet you look at older women and they are mature and they've got all the beauty and character in their faces and you think "God, she's gorgeous" because it's something that only comes with a bit of maturity. We can't all stay twenty yet they try so hard to make us feel guilty because we don't look like that any more. Because our bodies haven't got that image.*
>
> *Nell, 50, divorced, teacher*

Despite the transformation in subjectivity and social identity for many women to more individualistic, "empowering" ways of being, dominant discourses continue to homogenise women and define them according to modernist, patriarchal associations of

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[68]I refer to the theoretical perspective of ageing as a contradictory experience involving an ageless inner self and an ageing outer body in the previous chapter.

women with beauty and fertility, thus perceive older women as uninteresting and redundant. The lack of social recognition in societies such as Australia of older women as attractive in their own right, and the pervasive cultural focus on youthful beauty as the standard by which all women's attractiveness is measured, leads to a social invisibility of older women (Greer 1991) where, as Yvonne points out, "nobody looks at you any more". Goren describes her experience:

> *I don't think anyone really looks at you. They don't look closely. As you get older people don't really look at you. People don't see [older women] as themselves, they see them as their mum.*
>
> *Goren, 58, married, homemaker*

Many women in my study were acutely aware that society demeans older women, and challenge dominant discourses because they contradict their own sense of self as ageing women. In Kamler and Feldman's research with older women they also reported many women felt publicly "invisible" and described situations such as being overlooked by sales assistants when shopping, being spoken to slowly or loudly, or people averting their gaze on the street (1995). Moira, whose story follows, succinctly recognises that dominant discourses homogenise and devalue older women and once they are no longer young "the package is ageing" for women in mainstream Western societies.

> *I'm livelier than many women younger than me, I've got dutch courage, I've got all these things going for me but actually, the package is ageing. And I am what's considered old. Nearly fifty-four. You couldn't say I'm young. If you were writing in the papers you'd say "an older woman". Old comes into the equation. I'm getting past middle age.*
>
> *Moira, 53, divorced, sales manager*

Moira's story reflects the contradiction between her own sense of self as a vital and attractive woman of fifty-four and society's view of her as an "older woman", socially

associated with stereotypical and demeaning connotations which suggest a loss of social value and viability. Moira's contestation of this subject position suggests "a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self" (Braidotti 1994:25).

Women's so-called invisibility is, for some women, experienced as a sexual disqualification where, as Yvonne relates "you lose the gaze of a hell of a lot of blokes". Many authors have commented on the ways in which women have been positioned as objects of the "male gaze" (Berger 1972, Mulvey 1975, Sulieman 1985, Tseelon 1995, Young 1990). Brook (1997) suggests that femininity can be a "set of properties and attributes directed towards men: attributes we are taught to view and value from a masculine perspective" (1997:106). The set of ideal "feminine" attributes characteristic of contemporary Australian society are inflected with meanings relating to race, ethnicity, class and age (Brook 1997:105). Berger has written that a component of femininity incorporates a sense of being watched. Women, he argues "watch themselves being looked at". In cultural images of women, such as art and advertising, women are depicted differently from men because the spectator is assumed to be male. Body image and self concept are therefore closely related for women, and embodied "cultural concerns get translated into personal concerns" (Tseelon 1995:54). The social anxiety tied up with beauty and youthfulness can become a personal anxiety for women as they age, as Casey describes.[69]

For ageing women, becoming "invisible" is often a confusing and contradictory experience. Some women stated they missed the loss of social confirmation that they are attractive through the "male gaze". Yet being an "object" of the "gaze" can also be an alienating experience and many women also found the attention they received when they were young was often experienced as unwanted, objectifying and self-denying,

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[69] See page 217.

thus they also described the "loss" of the "gaze" as liberating.[70] The liberation they described related to the lack of pressure to conform to conventional standards of femininity and being "freer" to express their individuality through bodily presentations as Jessie is doing.[71]

Women's "invisibility" as attractive sexual beings is reinforced by social pressures to conform to a desexualised standard of presentation. Social injunctions which impel women to "act their age" and warn against acting as "mutton dressed as lamb" have ensured that women make the appropriate social transition in their outward appearance to reflect their ageing status which they may not be willing to make. The injunction to "act your age" is a euphemism which pressures older women to desexualise their embodied presentations, highlighting the cultural separation between ageing and sexuality for older women, and which compromises the sexual expressiveness of the no-longer young in contemporary Australian society. For mutton to dress as lamb would be to invert the symbolic sociocultural order which equates youth and fertility with vibrancy and passion, and age and infertility with dullness and inertia.

For women who are coerced by the injunction to "act their age" with its imputed desexualisation of behaviour, this can lead to a conflict between sexual expressiveness and their internalised standards of femininity, as Heather, whose story follows, reveals. For many women such as Heather, the "male gaze" represents social confirmation of sexual desirability which enables women to respond as a sexual object. The "gaze" and the "*femme fatale*" represent comfortable forms of gendered sexualised behaviour which conform to conventional forms of passive femininity for Heather. When the legitimacy of this subject position is challenged by new, age-appropriate, desexualising

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[70] See Wilma, page 226.

[71] See page 228.

discourses relevant to ageing women, this leads to an unstable subject position which threatened the coherence of Heather's subjectivity:

> *I'm not assailed by male interest [any more]. I feel that it's easier. I don't think about it very much. A lot of the time I pretty much forget how I look, although that's not to say that I haven't been aware that getting older is an issue. When I see photos I realise things have happened to my face and my body and it shakes me a bit. And that's how it is and sometimes that seems to matter.*
>
> IN WHAT WAY?
>
> *I suppose what matters is that I can no longer see myself as a desirable sexual object. And since I wasn't really brought up to think of myself as a sexual agent it's confusing for me. Sometimes I feel these things are resolved and other times I don't. When I say they're unresolved feelings I suppose I mean that I haven't quite given up wanting to be the femme fatale. Obviously in practice I have. I don't dress up like a femme fatale. But in my inner life I'm aware that I can't quite let go of that. And I'm not quite sure what to replace it with.*
>
> *Heather, 52, remarried, homemaker/caterer*

Heather's story highlights the fragmented and processual nature of subjectivity and the interconnection between lived experience and embodied subjectivity. While she no longer saw herself as "a desirable sexual object" her self-expressiveness as a sexual being was hindered by social junctions which prevent her from "dressing up" like a *femme fatale*. However the repression of her sexual expressiveness was in conflict with her "inner life" where new ways of coding the body preempt more spontaneous forms of sexualised expressions. Heather's "confusion" in resolving the contradiction

between sexual object and sexual agent suggests that new standards of femininity and gendered identity are challenging for some midlife women.[72]

While older women are encouraged not to present themselves as "mutton dressed as lamb", there is also strong social pressure that women should not "let themselves go". The perception that women should at least "try" to maintain a presentable appearance by conventional standards is a judgment which is made by a few women in my study:

> *A lot of women don't take care of themselves. They get into this ideal of the grandmother role and don't go out of their way to look after their skin or their body or keep themselves fresh mentally. I think a lot of women do it to themselves.*
>
> *Hilary, 46, divorced, dancer*

Hilary's comment reflects society's view of "grandmothers" as the opposite of that which is sexually appealing and attractive. Her judgment was accompanied by the harsh criticism that when women fall too far short of the standard by which they are judged, it is they who are responsible for their social marginalisation because they "do it to themselves".

In contrast to Hilary, some women such as Wilma below describe their "invisibility" as liberating and felt more comfortable in their day-to-day interactions with men and freer to express their sexuality and individuality.

> *I think there is a sense of freedom, the kind that Germaine Greer talks about, and you haven't got the hassles of being viewed as a sexually available person and that you are considered to be wiser. People ask your advice, quite*

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[72]I discuss changing social expectations regarding gender, and how these changes have shaped some women's subjectivities in Chapter 7.

seriously, and men ask your advice too, which they wouldn't do when you were young. And that gives you a security with men so that I can socially be with men and not think "is this the first step for wanting to take me to bed?" It gives you a sense of security that they like being with you as a person, it's not in that kind of sphere any more. You don't have to continually fight to look beautiful or to look attainable or be any part of the beauty myth, you can let it go.

Wilma, 52 remarried, project director

For Wilma, a financially secure, successful career woman, her conscious figuration of an alternative subjectivity defies set conventions relating to ageing women and allows Wilma to assume an empowered subject position. For her, "letting go" of the beauty myth was welcomed and balanced by a stronger sense of being taken seriously and valued for her wisdom and her personality. However, her experience of being taken more seriously by men may also reflect the changing profile of women in public life and the market place in positions of influence and power where appearance is secondary to performance, and the contextualities of social interactions demand they be taken more seriously.

Subverting standards of beauty

For most women in my study, appearance is only a partial aspect of their embodied identity and, while women's attention may be drawn to their appearance at certain times during the day, it is mostly overshadowed by other aspects of their lives. Many women in my study enjoy the feminine rituals associated with shopping for clothes, or making their own and putting outfits together, which they see as expressing their individual personalities. For these women it is often a process which enables them to construct a positive identity as attractive ageing women.

Some women like Wilma above describe a process of "letting go" of beauty, recognising the benefits of getting older in terms of their own self confidence and

knowledge. Many also experience a sense of freedom both from the male gaze, and the stringent cultural standards of physical "beauty" for which younger women are impelled to strive. Rather than experiencing the ageing body as alien from the self, many women felt more comfortable with their bodies than they did when they were younger. Some women who felt fragmented and distanced from their bodies in the past now have a greater acceptance of their bodies. Many describe a feeling of freedom of self expression through the body which they did not have when they were young. The following women rejected dominant discourses which equate standards of attractiveness with youthfulness, and found their own embodied expressions through which they reconstituted their ageing identity as attractive older women:

> *I like being firm and it's got nothing to do with looking like Elle McPherson. I like the physicalness of it. I just like the physical exercise because I feel better as a result of it. All those endorphins racing around. I try to take more care of myself. I realise I'm mortal.*
>
> *Tanya, 48, remarried, researcher*

In an earlier part of Tanya's story she recounted that when she was younger her "swimmer's build" and inability to bear children left her feeling unfeminine and unattractive. As a midlife woman Tanya likes the way she looks, and her lived embodiment through exercise enhanced both her self-presentation and identity, and her subjectivity as an ageing woman. As Poole (1999) has found in her study of women attending fitness classes, while appearance is important to women, it is not the main reason they attend. Rather, sociality, maintaining fitness, and feeling good about themselves were more important reasons given for their attendance. While for Tanya her embodied expressiveness had to do with reshaping the physical body through exercise, in the following story, Jessie's sense of personal style through dress and self-presentation enabled her to reconstitute her subjectivity positively as an ageing woman:

I think I've become better dressed because I've had more money. And you know, getting the natural look, or any look, is very expensive. You don't get it for nothing. I earnt money and it was nice because I could buy nice clothes and have my hair cut which I'd never been able to do.

Jessie, 61, married, retired financial adviser

For Jessie, getting the right "look" which was afforded by her improved financial situation, enabled her to reconstruct her identity as an ageing woman in ways that enhanced her subjectivity. Her stylish presentation and self-confidence belie conventional notions of ageing women as unattractive and asexual.

A major site of contestation through which women challenge discourses that equate beauty with youth is their greying hair. Hair is associated with concepts of femininity and beauty (Banner 1983), but hair can also be politicised (Synnott 1990). For many women, dyeing their hair or letting it go grey was a deliberate and sometimes political decision through which they constructed their identities as ageing women. In the following story, Ann, an attractive, stylish woman, subverts mainstream discourses which impel women to remain youthful through an act of empowerment by going grey:

Now that I'm older I don't care so much [what other people think]. That's why I let my hair go grey. It's a bit of a statement that I'm not going to care so much. If I'm dyeing my hair the message is that I don't accept that I'm getting older.

Ann, 51, married, lecturer

Ann's grey hair constitutes a symbolic site of resistance to conventional standards of youthful beauty. "Going grey" represented freedom from cultural standards of beauty and the freedom of self expression she has found age to bring. "Going grey" for this energetic and attractive woman belies the notion that postmenopausal women are redundant and physically and socially in decline. While for Ann her greying hair was a statement of empowerment as an ageing women, for others their grey hair represented

an inevitable transition in the reconstruction of their identities as ageing women. In the following story, Elise's greying hair represents a threat to her continued sense of self, highlighting the degree to which the body constitutes women's subjectivities:

> *I don't worry about getting older other than my health. But other than that, not really. And not being able to dye my hair. If I can't have it done every six weeks I get into a bit of a state because the roots come through.*
>
> HAVE YOU THOUGHT OF LETTING IT GO NATURALLY?
>
> *It would be too much of a shock. It would be white. But I often wonder about that. I'm going to have to make the transition sooner or later. I often fantasise about letting it go and having it short. Short and grey. But it would make me look so totally different. But I often wonder "what am I going to do about the hair?" Because as you get older... I've got really long hair and you can't have this really long hair for ever.*
>
> *Elise, 48, single, office manager*

For Elise, going grey presented her with a similar dilemma to Heather's conflict over the expression of her sexuality. Elise's long hair, which has been a significant component of her identity and sense of herself as feminine and attractive, was perceived as becoming socially inappropriate as she aged, in accord with dominant discourses of "mutton dressed as lamb". Changing her appearance by cutting her hair and going grey would mean a significant "transition" in her embodied identity.

While some of my participants, including Tanya, Jessie and Ann above, told stories which suggest the empowerment some older women can experience through their ageing embodiment, it is important not to take postmodern perspectives on the ageing body as remakeable through consumer choices to an extreme. These three women have had successful careers and are well positioned socioeconomically and thus have the

opportunity to "make the most" of their ageing embodiment. Postmodern discourses which construct individuals as active, empowered subjects who subvert dominant discourses can lead to what Bordo terms a 'postmodern flattening of the terrain of power relations' (1993:261) where inequalities resulting from different race, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic subject positions can be glossed over. Bordo argues that empowerment through difference:

> is won through ongoing political struggle rather than through an act of creative interpretation.... The metaphor of the body as a battleground, rather than a postmodern playground, captures, as well, the practical difficulties involved in the political struggle to empower "difference". (1993:261)

While some women in my study do empower themselves through embodied presentations which resist or subvert cultural standards of youthful beauty, I agree with Bordo (1993) that the empowerment of bodies which differ from the cultural norm cannot be achieved solely by "an act of creative interpretation" through consumer choice. Older women as a group still remain disadvantaged in relation to men by a double standard of ageing, due to the absence of social recognition of an older standard of beauty for women and the overwhelmingly powerful influence of dominant discourse which "packages" women into a stereotyped role of "old women" and renders them "invisible" as attractive and worthwhile people.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary, youth-oriented Australian society where a youthful "attractive" body is socially esteemed and seen to reflect a woman's social value, women's ageing bodies contribute to their social devaluation and disparagement. The women in my study described a range of often conflicting emotions regarding their ageing embodiment. Some women aligned themselves with discourses that suggested decline and loss of beauty, while others subverted dominant discourses which put women "out to pasture"

as they aged. For the women in my study, rather than experiencing a sense of regret over the "loss" of "beauty" as they aged, of far greater concern was the hegemonic social denial of ageing women as attractive, vibrant and sexually appealing in their own right. Many women in my study subverted conventional standards of beauty by redefining attractiveness around a sense of personal style and individual expression.

Due to the cultural alignment of men with the mind and women with the body, older women's disadvantaged status in society is compounded by their invisibility as "knowers" in society. They are undervalued for their accumulation of knowledge and skills in Western cultures such as Australia due to entrenched dualist perceptions which align women with the body and men with the mind, and consequently fail to acknowledge the intellect, skills and creative productivity of older women as a social group. The experiences of the women in my study in relation to this situation are articulated in Chapter 10, which follows.

CHAPTER 10

Nobody wants to know what granny knows: Old women and society

A HISTORY OF SILENCING OLD WOMEN

In the previous chapter I presented the argument that Western culture's dualist epistemology aligns women with the body and men with the mind. Because of the cultural and symbolic association of menopause with decline and decay, old women are seen as both socially and physically redundant. I also explored the consequences of women's presumed physical redundancy on their subjectivities. In this chapter I discuss the effect of women's social invisibility as knowers and bearers of wisdom. While the failure to recognise the skills and wisdom of older women as a social group is evident today, and has a coercive and undermining influence on older women's sense of self and identities, it is premised on a long history of silencing and persecuting older women for their knowledge and wisdom in Western societies. I now investigate this history, by tracing changing sociocultural attitudes towards, and social positions of, the crone, the witch and the grandmother.

The crone

Historian Barbara Walker (1985) has written that in prepatriarchal societies the crone was a "wise woman" who performed rites and seasonal ceremonies, advised on matters of law, acted as a healer and midwife and provided her community with moral leadership. However, she also nursed the dying and presided over death and through her ritualistic association with the dying process she later came to be associated with

"pagan" activities during the times of the witch hunts.

> The original crones of the matriarchal community were women past the age of menopause, in whom the blood of life no longer appeared outside the body... When the aged mothers of the prehistoric tribe ceased to menstruate, it was assumed that their magic blood was retained within the body for another wonderful purpose. Since it was usually described as wise blood, and old women were described as the wisest of mortals, it is not surprising to find that retained menstrual blood was often regarded as the source of their wisdom. (Walker 1985:49)

Crones were postmenopausal women in early European cultures. They were the healers who held knowledge of herbs and medicines, skills of healing techniques and midwifery, and they acquired their knowledge from other women. Women's traditional wisdom and healing skills were challenged with the rise of science and medicine in the 18th century, but the persecution of postmenopausal women started much earlier. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witch hunts were widespread in towns and villages across Europe (Ehrenreich and English 1978) and later New England, USA (Karlsen 1987).

While some women who were accused as witches practiced sorcery and had little medical and healing knowledge, most of the "crimes" with which wise women, or witches, were charged and consequently burned related to providing medical and healing services, particularly performing abortions, providing contraception, and administering drugs to ease labour pains. By the 18th century, legitimate medics were male, university-trained physicians whose medical knowledge was largely theoretical rather than empirically based, and who competed with wise women for clients, and whose formal education afforded them more status (Ehrenreich and English 1978).

The witch

While witch hunts targeted women of all ages, middle aged and older women who had acquired the knowledge, wisdom and skill to be healers, were more likely candidates (Briggs 1996, Karlsen 1987, Quaife 1987).[73] Karlsen suggests that in New England, USA, menopause may have been a major factor in the accusation of witchcraft because postmenopausal women:

> had reached the point in their lives when they were no longer performing what Puritans considered to be the major role of women: they were no longer bearing children. (Karlsen 1987:71)

In preindustrial Europe, interconnecting social developments brought about upheaval in village communities and with the rise of urbanisation new family formations led to changing gender roles for women and a new urban ideal of femininity. In medieval households public and private activities had overlapped and women, while subservient to men, often held positions outside the family which carried economic and legal responsibilities. The new ideals of domesticity promoted the notion of "complementary" gender roles where women and men were assigned distinct and separate spheres, and women were prohibited from entering the male, public sphere. With the development of the nuclear family and the decline of the extended family, an increasing number of older women found themselves outside family protection and became financially dependent on a resentful and potentially hostile community and vulnerable to charges of witchcraft (Quaife 1987:88-89).

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[73]While the stereotypical witch is female, in reality men made up approximately 25 per cent of the number of executions for witchcraft in Europe, Scandinavia and New England, USA. But there is large variation over time, with women more likely to be accused in times of greatest social turmoil. (See Karlsen (1987) for further discussion of age-related witch persecution New England, USA, and Quaife (1987) for further discussion of age-related witch persecution in Europe).

During this period women's "natures" were seen to be driven by their sexuality, and older women were often believed to be procurers of prostitutes and controllers of a witchcraft culture which aimed to dominate men through their bodies. With the rise of the reformation older women became prime targets of witchcraft persecution (Banner 1992:168).

> At a time when women's natures were seen to be governed by their sexual drives, postmenopausal women who exhibited any sign of an active sexuality were seen to be somewhat perverse, and were often open to charges of witchcraft. (Banner 1992:167)

With the rise of Protestantism and humanism and the emergence of rationalist worldviews new ideas developed regarding the social roles of women within the family. With the spread of the reformation in the late 17th century and the rise of nuclear family values, Luther's claims that old women past their childbearing years were more likely to be witches had a powerful impact on a society in which suspicion could marginalise postmenopausal women and expose them to persecution (Brauner 1995:63-64). It was not only the menopausal woman who was a target, so was the "shrewish wife" or the "dominating bad wife" who were seen as being unfeminine and a threat to the institution of marriage (Brauner 1995:40).

The women who were usually accused of witchcraft were poor rural women who were sharp-tongued, defiant, outspoken and self-assertive, qualities which challenged the submissive, docile and subservient demeanour of the ideal of femininity suited to the new urban housewife of the middle and upper classes. The urbanisation of Europe affected women's legal and economic status as well as their social roles within the community, and many women found their economic situation worsened. With the growth of capitalism and a new Protestant ethic the safety net of community support broke down and many more marginalised women found themselves facing charges of

witchcraft by other members of the community (Brauner 1995:180-81).

The accused witch's predicament was exacerbated by an assertive, defiant response, which violated the standards of femininity of the new urban classes, and reinforced accusations.

> [M]any of those arrested as witches responded with angry threats and curses, the very sort of proud defiance that had lead to the allegations against them... Her one power left was the power of her voice: with her sharp tongue and rich vocabulary, she displayed a spirited character that would not be cowed or bowed. Socially dependent because of her miserable condition, she refused to be socially subservient. (Brauner 1995:19)

In response to women's defiant and outspoken retaliations, female scolding was defined as a crime in parts of Europe and a "scold's bridle", an instrument in which a woman's head was locked inside an iron cage which drove spikes through her cheeks or tongue, was used to silence her, a punishment which persisted until the 19th century (Walker 1985:137). Charges with which women could be convicted and condemned as witches were no longer restricted to charges of practicing medicine or sorcery, now the sharp-tongued, defiant voice of an older woman could bring about punishment. With the annihilating social oppression and persecution as either witches or scolds:

> "[o]ld women could survive in such a society by assuming the lowest possible profile, to be always self-effacing, undemanding, hardworking, and anxious to please. Old women who dared to be cranky, crotchety, or outspoken could even be marched off to prison. If they were too critical or insulting toward men, they could lose their lives for it. (Walker 1985:137).

The silencing of older women in preindustrial societies has its parallel in contemporary Western societies. Many women continue to be pressured to conform to limiting norms

and standards of femininity and to remain silent, servile and compliant. Wilma elaborates:

> *Parts of me were nicer [when I was younger] than they are now. I wouldn't have had such a strong sense of self or a sense that it was okay to say no or even that it's okay not to have the right answer.... My first husband used to say "people like you, you're really easy to get on with" and I think people liked me more than they do now but that was because my whole life was set up to please people. So I probably offend more people now and more people would be annoyed with me than they ever would in the past, but I can live with that.*
>
> *The way to solve problems [then] was not to raise your voice or get involved in temper tantrums. If you wanted your own way you did it underneath and subtly rather than head on. Women's needs were repressed and that was certainly true for me.*
>
> *Wilma, 52, remarried, project director*

Wilma's experience of being female in contemporary Western societies indicates how conventional standards of femininity pressure women to "be nice" by "pleas[ing] people" and to repress their own needs. The self-denial of a woman's needs today is based on a more subtle form of silencing women in the form of social condemnation. When women do speak out and assert their needs they risk the disapproval of others who may judge them as selfish and uncaring. Social disapproval of women who assert their needs may be particularly difficult for women for whom close and harmonious relationships with others is a central and important aspect of their identity and self esteem.

Carol Gilligan argued in her landmark text *In a Different Voice* (1982) that women experience a conflict between what she terms "self development" and self-sacrifice. She argues that when women attend to their own interests and needs they are judged as

selfish (Gilligan 1982:128). There is a fear that freedom for women will lead to abandonment of traditional family values.

> The notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women's development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and choice. In addition, the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the concept of rights that has, in the past century, supported women's claim to a fair share of social justice. (Gilligan 1982:132)

Women's histories of self-sacrificing their own needs and desires to support their husbands and children has meant women have had limited access to pursue interests and opportunities outside the family context. This has restricted women's public presence as authoritative spokespersons and has contributed to their social marginalisation and devaluation as knowledge-bearers. As in the past, contemporary Western societies lack a legitimate symbol of the powerful older woman.

With the demise of the crone and the wise woman as symbols of female wisdom and power, the social position of old women in society has been eroded to the point where today they are dismissed as "little old ladies" or "grannies" who are often mocked, derided and even despised. The long history of silencing older women has left an indelible imprint on the collective memory of Western female culture and shows traces in the form of more subtle practices which continue to deny the authority and voice of older women. One explanation for why older women are represented so poorly in Western culture both currently and in the past is, as Melamed claims, that in our culture the symbol of ageing is the older woman. "The older woman is the symbol that falls most readily to hand for the worthless, expendable human being - the Other, the one who is not us. By focusing our fear and loathing of aging on her, we succeed in denying its reality for our own lives" (Melamed 1983:51). As older women culturally symbolise ageing, they embody our projected fears of ageing, decline and decay.

The grandmother

While the older woman has a limited and marginalised presence in scholarly literature, the grandmother is almost nonexistent. Literature on the mother usually refers to women on the "young side of middle age" (Woodward 1995) with young children, often juggling the demands of paid work and childcare.

Given the patriarchal cultural linkage between women's usefulness and women's bodies which emphasise sexual attractiveness and fertility, it is not surprising that women who cease to be youthfully attractive and fertile, or life-giving, within this social context are depicted as ineffective and sexually redundant (Melamed 1983:53). While positive images of older, powerful men exist, there are no parallels for women. The dominant stereotype of older women in today's society is the benign, domestic grandmother.

Contemporary understandings of the modern grandmother emerged with a historical shift in the perceived nature of ageing women as driven by a "voracious sexuality" to a post-18th century understanding of ageing women's nature as being infused with a superior spirituality, which for a short time in the history of Western cultures afforded older women a degree of authority, albeit within the confines of the nuclear family (Banner 1992). The desexualised model of the postmenopausal woman, perceived as possessing a greater spirituality, was seen to be well suited to dispense a new standard of family morality in line with changing sociocultural and family values.

But by the late 19th century, with the discovery of the role of hormones in women's reproductive functioning, women were again presumed to be driven by their sexuality. The 1920s brought a powerful medical profession reestablishing its concerns about older women's heightened sexuality, thereby undermining the notion of women's superior moral character. The power that older women were beginning to build through women's networks, which had developed with the political activities of the reformers and women's rights activists, were undermined by "experts" such as sexologist

Havelock Ellis who warned against the risk of lesbianism (Banner 1992). The grandmother once again assumed a benign and quietly-spoken character in order to avoid drawing unwanted social attention and accusations.

While the contemporary stereotype of the grandmother does embody some positive connotations - she is associated with an image of warmth and care and is someone we are "fond of" - her image is nevertheless benign, desexualised and disempowered. She is restricted to the domestic sphere offering service to others, either cooking, cleaning or looking after the grandchildren as an unpaid helper and adjunct to the nuclear family.

The experiences of being a grandmother, and of having a grandmother suggest, however, that while the stereotypes may prevail, the reality can be somewhat different. Black feminist writer bell hooks (1990) describes her grandmother as a woman with a "renegade nature" who was her teacher and inspiration. Psychoanalyst Kathleen Woodward (1995) reveals the strong emotional connection and "mutual recognition" she experienced while on vacation with her grandmother at the age of 10. After returning to their hotel room from the beach one afternoon, "painfully sunburnt", she recalls:

> We could put nothing against our bodies. Not a single sheet. We lay still and naked on the twin beds, complaining, laughing, talking. Two twinned, different, sunburned bodies - the body of a ten year old girl and the body of a sixty-two year old woman. (Woodward 1995:79)

In this intimate scene between grandmother and grand-daughter, both their sameness and their difference reduces the importance of age and hierarchy and highlights the mutuality and connectedness of their femaleness and kinship, presenting a different view of relationships between the two generations.

Despite the experience of being a grandmother for some women, ageing feminist Baba

Copper has written that the traditional role of grandmother, with its inbuilt "humiliation and self-sacrifice" is one of the "horrors" of old age (1983:6). The grandmother is not respected or valued for any accumulation of wisdom associated with her years of experience, is not seen as, nor permitted to be, a sexual being, and has no authority either within the family or outside it. As Goren astutely observed of her ageing experience "nobody wants to know what granny knows."

CONTESTING THE GRANDMOTHER STEREOTYPE

Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith defines authority as "a form of power that is a distinctive capacity to get things done in words" (1987a:29). She argues that the male voice is the authoritative voice in contemporary Western society and that men represent the power and authority of the "institutionalised structures that govern the society" (1987a:30). Because of the perception of authority as a masculine force, and the cultural history of silencing older women by denying them their right as authoritative spokespersons, women can have difficulty asserting their own authority and in seeing other women as authorities. The lack of authority invested socially in women is directly correlated with women's silence. Because the authoritative voice is male, and women's voices have historically been silenced, many women perceive themselves as passive and unable to act in the world without direction (Belenky et al. 1986).

In the following story, Goren's expression of personal authority emerged as a result of becoming aware that the advice she had followed regarding contraception was not only lacking in an understanding of women's lived experience, but could be damaging to women. The pain and suffering she and her husband experienced after the birth of their fourth child who died several days later, made her query Church doctrine and reconsider her Catholic belief that contraception was wrong.

> *I hate the fact men make all the decisions for us women. I used to think what ever the men said was okay. Now I realise it isn't. I was brought up by nuns as*

a Christian but I don't agree with the Pope any more. I still go to church. But now I challenge the men's point of views.

WHY IS THAT?

Slowly seeing the way things are. It may have been associated with childbirth. Being a good Christian I never practiced contraception. I was told after my third child that I should slow down [and not have any more children because of health problems]. But because the nuns taught us everything by the letter of the law I imposed that on my husband and he didn't think that way. I just began to see that that's not right what [the nuns] are saying. They can't say that to everybody.

Goren, 58, married, homemaker

In the above case, the contraceptive advice which had proven so inadequate in dealing with the life experiences of women, was administered by nuns, serving as representatives of the Catholic church But for Goren the ability to critique Church doctrine on contraception lead to a greater awareness of the broader structures of patriarchal power that creates an unequal relationship between women and men.

Goren's awareness of patriarchal authority as a form of social control that does not take into account the personal circumstances of the individual, emerged from her own experience. A further pregnancy, which terminated in the birth of her stillborn child, was carried through, against the advice of her doctors but in line with the policy of the Catholic Church on contraception, inflicted suffering on her family and herself. Her experience led Goren to "see the way things are" and to conclude that "I hate the fact that men make all the decisions for us women", decisions which she now challenges. Her transcript also suggests that perhaps the anti-contraception stance taken by the Church is out of step with contemporary society where changing attitudes towards sexuality, marriage and cohabitation make conformity difficult for many individuals.

Goren's insight highlights, as many recent writers have done, the specificities of peoples' lived experience and the importance of acknowledging difference and the particular (Abu-Lughod 1998, Johnson 1995, Moore 1994, Wikan 1996). These writers' theoretical stance works against homogenising women by imposing totalising rules, as the Catholic church has done, which also attempt to control women's sexuality and reproductivity. Goren's ability to resist Church doctrine and assert her own understanding can further be interpreted as an effect of broader social shifts away from structurally-defined ways of conceptualising self and society. Goren shows how acknowledging a sense of personal authority can be difficult for many women.

Older women are rarely portrayed in the media as authoritative spokespersons (Scutt 1993:1) and when they are, are usually undermined by public mockery and reduction to stereotype. If the accumulated wisdom and skills of older women were acknowledged publicly and more fully in contemporary Australian culture, older women would have a place in society with more status and power than their current position allows, and be more able to contribute to society. Further, if older women's present contribution in the voluntary and unpaid market, as well as their caring and household labour were socially acknowledged, older women would receive due recognition for the valuable services they perform, as Dallas proposes.[74] Instead, older women are silenced and invisible in mainstream culture as vital, productive knowledge-bearers, and are instead feared and portrayed as a future economic burden on society.

The stigmatisation of older women has important implications for the way in which women reconstitute their subjectivities as middle aged women. Most women in my study are keenly aware of the marginalised status of middle aged women in mainstream Australian society. They point out that older women's strengths and diversity are

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[74] See page 245.

ignored. Women are stereotyped, misrepresented, or mocked in mainstream cultural and media representations instead.

> *I think society is short-changing itself by not paying more attention to middle aged women. And when they do they tend to do it in terms of the tall poppy stuff, like Joan Kirner or Margaret Thatcher. People want to put older women down in some way.*
>
> *Moira, 53, divorced, sales manager*

The sociocultural denial of the strengths and value of older women, as well as the complexity and richness of older women's lives is maintained by negative and limiting stereotypes. When older women do take up powerful and authoritative roles in society they are perceived as presenting a threat to stereotypes of older women as nonproductive and socially redundant. As Moira observes, contemporary Australian social portrayals of "old women" undermine their authority by "putting older women down", thereby denying their legitimate right to be represented as knowledgeable spokespersons in society.

While there is accumulating evidence that ageing for women is associated with increasing knowledge and a sense of empowerment, socially older women are not viewed as embodying wisdom, or authority. Conversely the authoritative and sexual older woman is often either ridiculed or ignored, confirming the notion that there is no place in patriarchal society for the powerful older woman, as Dallas identifies:

> *I know that there's a condition, a phobia, and it's a fear of old women. There's been enough coverage in the media to change ideas, but it seems to me [they haven't]. We obviously don't feel like the elders of the tribe, do we? We feel that our value to the community is entirely conceived of as sexual or reproductive. Once we're no longer seen as sexually desirable or capable of bearing children we certainly have been given the impression that our usefulness*

is at an end. Yet, when I look at my mother's friends they're all rushing around looking after other elderly people who are even more elderly or disabled than they are. If you knocked out all the postmenopausal women in the world things would grind to a halt very quickly.

Dallas, 52, remarried, celebrant

Dallas' observations, and her experience of being an older women in contemporary Australian society, echoes centuries-old myths and fears about ageing women in which "phobias" about old women undermine their value as "elders of the tribe". Dallas highlights the contradiction between the patriarchal alignment of women with their bodies that perceives and limits their value to society in reproductive and sexual terms. Yet Dallas was acutely aware of the valuable contribution old women make to society in supporting and caring for other older members of society. Despite both the social contribution older women make, as well as changing media coverage which presents a broader and more diverse picture of ageing women's lives, homogenising and devaluing discourses that undermine older women's social positions dominate.

Dallas' insight brings into focus the disjunction between social images of ageing women and the 'reality' of the ageing experience as a complex, lived, embodied experience. My participants' astute observations about cultural attitudes towards ageing women, led them to the awareness that middle aged women are an undervalued resource in contemporary Australian society. My research shows that while older women as a group are indeed suppressed by patriarchal constructions and perceptions of their place in, and limited value to, society, many subvert social understandings and stereotypes of ageing women, overcoming their social disadvantage and turning others' perceptions of them to their own advantage, as Hilary shows:

There's still a bit of a stigma against women when they get older, like in the workforce, or the woman who's in no man's land. The middle aged woman with

no partner. But it can be used to your advantage too. I went to the [government office] and they were so willing to help me because you're in that category, female and over forty and in no man's land. People tend to put you on the shelf when you're over forty and female. Which is a pain in the arse. It's good and it's bad. But you can put it to your advantage because they have no idea, they haven't been there yet. I had a friend who turned forty the other day and I said, "you might think turning forty is devastating but it only gets better." I've found a lot of advantages to getting older.

ANY DISADVANTAGES?

Beauty contests are out!

Hilary, 46, divorced dancer

Hilary's astute reading of the relationship between older women and society suggests she is sharply aware of the "stigma" of being an ageing woman in contemporary Australian society. Hilary's experience of ageing exposes the paradox of women's devalued status as "on the shelf" (suggesting redundancy and uselessness) on the one hand and their sharp-minded intelligence on the other.

Goffman argues that bodily presentation is vital to a person's identity and self-esteem as a worthwhile human being and valued member of society. The degree of success to which people are able to manage bodily idioms and convey an acceptable social identity is what characterises them as either "normal" or as having a "spoiled identity". Central to this concept is Goffman's work on "stigma" (Goffman 1968). Goffman defines a stigma as the relationship between physical attribute and stereotype, where the person is identified by the physical attribute. Shur (1983) argues women are a "deviant status" because they are socioculturally defined by their femaleness. As de Beauvoir alleged, women comprise the category of "other" (1952). Often the stigmatised person or group are seen as inferior, sometimes subhuman, leading to various types of discrimination

and disadvantage. In some cases the stigmatised group are seen to possess undesirable supernatural qualities (Goffman 1968), as in the case of older women who have historically been persecuted as witches and scolds. Urla and Terry have observed that in Western societies scientific classificatory systems demark "deviant bodies" from the norm (1995:7). I argue that older women are socially stigmatised by their "embodied deviance" (1995:9) from youthful, slender, standards of beauty and the fertile "norm" of female embodiment. Thus the terms "stigma" and "embodied deviance" have relevance in illuminating the social categories of both "menopausal women" and "old women", who are doubly stigmatised because of their disadvantaged and marginalised social position. The devalued status to which "old women" are relegated involves an homogenising process which "normalises" certain qualities, whereas idiosyncratic or contradictory qualities are exceptionalised (Shur 1983:30). Despite older women's "stigmatised" status in society, Hilary was able to subvert the assumptions of disadvantage by others and turn their perception of her disempowerment to her benefit. In the following story Blair, active in local government policy and planning and committed to changing "conservative" community attitudes, used both her femininity and her diplomacy as an older women to "get things done":

> *Being confident, and being a local person, I'm able to approach people and use the connections I have. That's how you play politics. It's good to know how to get things done. And older men especially, as well as men of my own generation, are prepared to be obliging to a woman if she, you know, gives them respect and behaves as they expect a woman to behave. That's a bit manipulative, isn't it?*
>
> *Blair, 51, married, administrator*

Like Hilary, Blair also subverts dominant discourse by maximising stereotypical assumptions about women and using the benefit of her age and experience to "play politics" and "get things done". Blair's astute manoeuvring reveals her intelligence and

productivity, once again undermining limited and reactionary stereotypes of ageing women.

Despite women's devalued status in society, many women themselves experience ageing positively, as the stories of my women suggest, highlighting a contradiction between limiting stereotypes of ageing women and their diverse and complex lived experiences. The stories of my participants assert that despite disempowering stereotypes women are able to subvert discourses that undermine their worth and capabilities, and reconstitute their subjectivities in empowering ways. While negative images of ageing for women continue to shape dominant discourse, my research demonstrates that for many, if not most, women the ageing experience can be positive and fulfilling.

CONCLUSION

I have argued throughout my thesis that older women are symbolically conceptualised and discursively constructed as socially and physically redundant once they reach menopause. In this chapter I have discussed the historical silencing and persecution of older women in Western societies. I argue older women are a stigmatised group in contemporary Western societies because of their "embodied deviance" which marks them as different from the "norm" of youthful beauty and fertility. Because of women's alignment with their bodies there is a social denial and a lack of recognition of women's contribution to society as knowers and bearers of skill and wisdom. This oversight denies older women's knowledge, skills and contribution to societies. In the following chapter I discuss how midlife women are reconstituting their subjectivities in empowering and meaningful ways which contest dominant discourses of ageing women.

CHAPTER 11

Middle-aged pilgrimages:

Journeys and homecomings

I have argued throughout my thesis that in postmodern society individualised, elective, autobiographical identity configurations, as well as revised cultural perceptions of ageing and midlife, foster new ways of interpreting the influence of sociocultural change on the individual and of reconceiving the ageing self. I have also argued that midlife women's sociohistorical location, amid cultural shifts in perceptions of gender and women's social status, position them at the vanguard of sociocultural change.[75] Feminist thought and action in the last thirty years, and women's altered participation in the workforce, has brought an unprecedented and far reaching revolution in cultural perceptions of possibilities for women. Thus, I assert that it is not middle age itself, but new social perceptions, understandings and expectations of "gender" and "ageing" that are more likely to account for disjunctions and reconceptualisations of subjectivity at midlife. Yet reconceptualisations of identity and subjectivity are often interpreted through humanistic discourses of midlife transition and growth.

As I have theorised[76], midlife women's subjectivities, evolving, transforming and incorporating or resisting aspects of dominant and subversive discourses, can be likened to the figuration of a nomad (Braidotti 1994). The nomadic state involves crossing boundaries - social and psychological as well as geographical - by gathering

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[75] See Chapter 7.

[76] See Chapter 2.

experiences and encounters with which to reshape women's changing subjectivities. Nonetheless, the importance of finding one's roots at midlife and calling somewhere "home" becomes important in many women's narratives and rhetorical reconstructions of self. They suggested to me that the concept of pilgrimage, while presupposing travel, may be an apposite descriptor because it may also contain the possibility of homecoming; the homeland either to be discovered, or to which the pilgrim can return.

In Chapter 6 I examined theories which attempt to explain the subjective change women may encounter at midlife. I have argued that it is not midlife itself, but women's sociohistorical position amid changing and contradictory value systems relating to gendered ways of being in contemporary society that is a more likely explanation for subjective change. The stories of the women in my study reveal the highly gendered nature of women's transforming subjectivities. I have also argued that new ways of constructing identity in postmodern society centre around biographical, individualised sources of significance and meaning. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the ways in which midlife women are reconstituting their identities in contemporary Australian society.

The concept of a nomadic subjectivity is a pivotal construct with which to engage and challenge as I explore and extrapolate from the stories of my participants. Yet the stories of how women interpret their midlives tells something more. Women are on the move, and many are changing direction, but with a clear purpose in mind. At middle age their narratives suggest pilgrimage: for some a search for roots, for others geographical returns to cultural origins, and yet others psychical journeys to past experiences through the help of psychiatrists or therapists. For many, pilgrimage involves changing direction and exploring more meaningful ways of living through work, community or spiritual life.

I propose the women in my study are a unique group, being the vanguards of postmodern

change in which their younger lives were shaped by the limited and distorted conceptualisations of gender and womanhood generated by the high patriarchal era of modernity. As they have aged radically new understandings of gender and women's position in society, and new ways of constructing identity in postmodern culture, confront and challenge many women in unprecedented ways to find new modes of being and constructing meaning, and interpreting their subjective experiences.

I do not claim that pilgrimages are restricted to middle age. In the postmodern era it is possible that people of all ages are seeking to consolidate their identities through pilgrimages of one kind or another. I argue that the concept of pilgrimage is a valuable theoretical tool with which to interpret the stories of many women in my study. My participants, differently situated to men as well as younger and older women within the historiocultural shift into postmodernity, are exploring new, individualised ways of identity making that ease the adjustment to new social expectations of gender which have particularly shaped women's lives. My women's stories suggest that a nomadic subjectivity involves moving away from familiar and conventional ways of being, to explore challenging experiences and opportunities. I now consider the modes by which the figuration of the nomad can be applied to women in midlife. The stories of the women in my study suggest midlife subjectivities are reconfigured through journeys as well as homecomings.

JOURNEYS

As the women in my study have articulated, many women have moved away from earlier ways of constructing identity around modernist and fixed structures of family and work, and are today exploring new and unfamiliar ways of remaking their identities. For many women in my study, as structured and boundaried ways of making identity give way to flexible, fluid, and multifaceted approaches to identity, new ways of remaking a sense of self involve geographical or symbolic journeys in order to connect past and present and reconstruct a more unified sense of self. Some women suggested

the importance of journeying, either geographically or psychically, in order to consolidate a fragmented and discontinuous sense of self. For some, their journeys involved a symbolic return to the past in order to find roots and reconnect with former "selves". For others, their journeys involved breaking with the past in order to chart new directions to enable them to (re)create new social identities through which they could reconstitute their subjectivities.

Finding roots

Finding roots, for some women, became important to their reconstitution of identity in the postmodern world. In the following story, Petra, a French woman born and raised in Morocco, came to Australia in her thirties after marrying an Australian man. She describes her feeling of being an "outsider" in Australia after the French nuclear testing in the Pacific during the mid 1990s. Petra found the harsh criticisms of France by Australians enhanced a feeling of alienation and destabilised her sense of belonging and place. Petra's subsequent sense of alienation precipitated an "identity crisis" which prompted her to return to her cultural origins:

> *I went back to my roots. Explored some of my past. I didn't realise I was very French because I grew up in North Africa. When I went to France I felt different but when I came to Australia I realised that I was very French in the way I was looking at life. You don't realise how the culture and schooling affects you.*

For Petra, returning to her roots enabled her to reconstitute her identity around cultural sources of signification. In realising she was "very French" she was able to consolidate a sense of self that had been fragmented by her alienating experience as an outsider in Australian society:

> *I went back this year. Two weeks in Morocco and two weeks in France. Now I want to go back three or four times a year when I retire. That would be my*

dream. I can't live without my family. My children are here. My husband is here. I've spent a lot of my life here but at the same time there's something... I went to Provence and I discovered in Provence there are a lot of things like in Morocco. The weather, the olive trees, and I was very welcome. I have friends there who I can go home to.

Petra, 55, remarried, translator

Petra's reconstitution of subjectivity around cultural identity is enhanced by finding a location in France that reminds her of her childhood in Morocco, and which geographically enables her to recollect a Moroccan experience. Petra resolved her conflict between cultural identity and family identity by sharing her time between both France and Australia. Petra's family was in Australia and while she may feel an alien in Australia, her Australian family comprised a core component of her identity. Petra's story can also be read as a sociohistorical text of evolving gendered identity. Conventional forms of identity construction in which given family roles comprised a woman's identity are giving way to postmodern ways of identity construction in which autobiographical narratives, that rely on "memory work" (Gillis 1994), enable the individual to reconstruct a stable sense of self.

Finding roots does not have to involve geographical dislocation. For some women a symbolic "return" to past ways of being helps consolidate a sense of constituting a core identity. Betty's reconnection with her younger self was contemplated through resuming her maiden name:

In the last couple of years I've been thinking of going back to my maiden name, but in Australia everyone knows me by this name, and I do feel like a different person than when I had my maiden name. It was before I had the political awareness and the awareness of being female and how that works.

Betty, 47, divorced, manager

Betty came to Australia as a young, married woman and settled in a large rural town in New South Wales. Her marriage dissolved twelve years later and she moved with her children to Melbourne where she began work with a community organisation. One of the ways in which women like Betty produce a sense of continuity and connection in their displaced lives is by reconnecting with their past, as Petra was doing. Betty believed that one way of strengthening a sense of continuity with her earlier self may be by reverting to her "maiden name". However, there is a tension because she "feels like a different person" to whom she was before she married. Once again, changing social understandings of gender influenced Betty's remaking of identity as she was contemplating changing from her married name to her premarried signifier of identity.

The importance of a sense of "roots" in the absence of more fixed and given ways of constructing identity, is evident in Jane's story. The victim of child abuse, Jane left her family home at a young age and came to Australia from North America thirty years ago with her husband, whom she subsequently divorced. Jane attributes her sense of fragmentation and lack of cohesiveness to the feeling that she does not have "roots somewhere". Her story suggests how important a sense of cultural or psychic rootedness is to maintaining a coherent identity within the context of a continually transforming subjectivity and a changing sociocultural landscape:

> *I have been many people, sometimes I wonder would I recognise me if I passed me on the street. Twenty years ago. Who was I then? I don't have the knowledge that there are roots somewhere.*
>
> *Jane, 58, divorced, administrative assistant*

Jane's story reveals how a sense of "rootlessness" can enhance a sense of fragmentation and disjuncture in postmodern society. Jane's precarious financial situation precludes some of the contemporary identity making options around which many women in my

study reconstructed their social identities and reconstituted their subjectivities. While Jane migrated to Australia, the possibility of her revisiting her homeland, should she wish to do so, is unlikely because of her financial position. In contrast, for Petra and Betty, reestablishing a sense of roots was important to their reconstruction of identity, but for other women their journeys involved finding a "new direction" that would provide them with a revitalised sense of self.

New Directions

Another way in which journeys provide women with a sense of coherence and solidarity is by "looking back" on their past in order to plot new directions. As previous ways of identity making give way, and as changing sociocultural understandings of ageing and society encourage more active and engaged participation in society, women explore new paths and find ways of redefining themselves in more individualistic, and personal ways. For Tara "looking back" enabled her to consolidate her experiences into a cohesive rhetoric of self and contemplate her future:

> *My fiftieth birthday was a fantastic party. It was a real celebration turning fifty. It was a time of looking back with these transitions in age every ten years. They are important. Its a time for taking stock and acknowledging where one's at and how does one really want to spend time. To be able to plan out the time and I'm beginning to do that now. To do the things I've always wanted to do like painting and reading poetry and things that I feel are too much of a luxury. And I still haven't taken time to sit down and read during the day.*
>
> *Tara, 55, remarried, writer*

For Tara, looking back enabled her to develop a sense of purpose. Her "stock taking" suggests a discursive framework of midlife in which "transition" and "reflection", centred around the chronological marker of age fifty. "Taking stock" enabled Tara to reflect upon and assess her life to date and to construct a future self in which "painting"

and "reading poetry" could become individual sources of meaning.

Other women's stories elucidated that ways they were looking forward and exploring new modes of reconstructing themselves as ageing women in postmodern society which involved, for many women, developing a greater sense of self-direction. In the following transcript Yvonne, divorced several years ago with adult children, was actively attempting to gain a stronger sense of control over her future, wanting to "steer" rather than to "drift":

> *One of the reasons I'm going to the shrink is that I feel I am in that transition period. Jung said you "can't expect to live the last thirty years of your life the way you lived the other fifty". I'm going down the slippery slope. I am trying to work out where I am. How I will be over the next period [of my life]. How I want to be. To even decide to do that is a big step. That's probably the first time I've taken hold of that need. I haven't before, I've drifted. That's not quite true, but I've steered a bit more blindly.*
>
> *Yvonne, 53, divorced, senior administrator*

Yvonne, a successful professional in a senior management position was, for "the first time" at midlife, "taking hold of that need" to "decide how she wants to be" which she described as a "big step", to be in control of her life rather than "drifting" or following the direction of others. Yvonne reinterprets Jung's notion of gender conversion at midlife within the "stage" model of human development in order to conceptualise and explain her subjective conflict between passivity and action. But an alternative understanding of Yvonne's narrative suggests she is experiencing a shift from conventionally "feminine" ways of being to more individualist, self-directed ways

characteristic of postmodernity.[77] Yvonne's success professionally, as a senior administrator in charge of managing a department and staff, is contrasted with her need to exercise more control over the direction of her private life. The complex interaction of success and need highlights the diverse and multilayered nature of subjectivities and how they interact with sociocultural changes of the second half of the 20th century.

Germaine's search for a new direction, in subtle contrast, involved redefining herself in a way that she perceived as more worthwhile and meaningful, as an artist. She had resigned from her job in order to focus on and develop her artistic talents. For Germaine, this requires a reconfiguration of "self" away from familiar modes of creating a social identity to explore new, uncharted modes of being:

> *You've caught me at a crossroads. What's important at the moment is finding some sort of worth and meaningful ways of spending the rest of my life. That's why I resigned from my job. I didn't want to be the old lady who'd be bitter about what I hadn't done. I've decided I should be an artist rather than talking about being an artist.... Where I work I'm the oldest person in my department... I feel I should have achieved a lot more. At my age you're an old master or you have to have something.*
>
> *I felt I was becoming less and less capable, mainly because I've been teaching and worrying about the students.... I thought, "this is crazy, I'm fifty two and I haven't been an artist".... So I've been feeling a bit of a fake.... I feel like a loser.... I have a lot of trouble taking my artwork seriously and I have to find a way of seeing myself as an artist.*
>
> *Germaine, 52, remarried, artist*

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[77]I discuss Jung's theory of midlife development, and the "stage" model of human development in detail in Chapter 6.

Germaine's transcript suggests that in the workplace of a university art department where her primary function, either by choice or default, was as a teacher, while her [mostly male] colleagues were gaining recognition as artists, Germaine's situation compromised her sense of self as an artist. Her new direction involved reconstituting her identity as a bona fide artist, by focussing her time and attention on artistic practices. Germaine's situation reveals the tension between competing ways of being a woman in the contemporary postmodern workplace where success is measured in terms of professional achievement but assumptions about women's qualities (as nurturers of students) are still salient and position them differently to their male colleagues. Germaine's new direction was motivated in part by fears of becoming a stereotypical "old woman", whom she constructed as "unproductive" and "bitter".

Within the theoretical construct of pilgrimage, I have discussed two ways in which women's journeys enable them to reconstitute their subjectivities in postmodernity: finding roots, and taking new directions. The stories of journeying reflect subjectivities in process and reveal the tensions which women experience in reconstituting their subjectivities and remaking their social identities in postmodern ways that require decentring gender and engaging with individualistic modes of being in the 21st century. Another aspect of women's pilgrimage is a sense of "homecoming" which involves returning "home", reinterpreting one's place within contemporary Australian culture, and of establishing localised communities around common interests. I now explore the stories of the women in my study in relation to homecoming.

HOMECOMINGS

In contemporary writings theorists evoke paradigmatic figurations of the nomad, refugee, exile or migrant (Appadurai 1996, Bauman 1998, Braidotti 1994) to emphasise the mobile, global, and transnational character of identities which 'break down [their] contiguousness with a geographically bounded locality' (Fortier 1999:41). The parallel

configuration of the rhizome, a horizontal root-like growth which runs on or just beneath the surface, which sends down shoots and up leaves, provides an alternative image to the vertical, deep, fixed root.

Yet in contradistinction to the perspective that fixity and roots no longer constitute postmodern identity, the women in my study often discursively construct their identities in relation to "roots", the place of origin and the cultural specificities of their "homeland", in what Fortier calls the "terrains of belonging" (Fortier 1999:41). Terrains of belonging incorporate imaginary historical and cultural collections from past and present, appropriated and assembled as part of an identity project. "Genealogy and geography are worked into the creation of new grounds of belonging" (Fortier 1999:43) but different interpretations result in contested meanings and histories. The women in my study describe laying down roots in a number of ways including a renewed sense of "Australianness" and finding a "common ground" with others through shared political community and spiritual values and beliefs.

Calling Australia Home

For a number of my participants, a renewed sense of identity around "Australianness" was evoked through identification with contemporary cultural themes such as "country", "home" and "the land". Ursula's husband was employed by an international mining company. Ursula and her family had relocated every few years, moving from country to country, setting up house and forming new friendships. She and her husband decided to return to Australia permanently and settle down in the Australian countryside near a large regional town where they could build a house of their own and raise "country kids":

> *I've lived my life in a series of camp situations. Going from place to place. Living with different cultures. That really broadened my horizons. That opened my eyes to the world and made me a much better person. We decided to make*

the move back to Australia and live in the country so we could raise country kids. We were only there for about nine months, we'd just moved into our own home, and the company announced they were moving to Melbourne. We had no way out, we had no option but to move with them. I was depressed at having to move to Melbourne. It was a very bad year.

Ursula, 46, remarried, receptionist

Ursula had two children in their early teens. Since moving to Melbourne the high cost of living has meant Ursula had to return to the workforce. She had not been in paid employment since before she was married and has resented having to forgo her desire to be a "home mother". Her ideal, to "live in the country and raise country kids" suggests that imaginary constructions of place and identity help women construct a more integrated sense of self. Displacement from the country and city life meant that Ursula would not be able to fulfil her desire to live a country lifestyle.

In Ursula's case, the image of the "country home" is a refuge from the impermanence and motion of transnational movement with an international mining company, in which she and her husband were posted to a series of overseas locations in a "series of camp situations". While her translocality has "broadened her horizons" "opened her eyes" and made Ursula a "better person", it is the ideology of permanence and place which enabled her to reconstitute her identity as a "home mother" raising "country kids". Her sense of displacement was not brought about by her constant movement from one country to another, but from a relocation from rural Victoria to Melbourne, a distance of less than two hours drive. It is the concept of "home", "permanence" and "rootedness" which provides "terrains of belonging" around which she desired to reconstruct her identity.

An important way in which women reconfigure their subjectivities is through a sense of cultural identity in comparison with their travelling experiences, and their

reinterpretation of identity around a sense of place and homeland after they return. Many participants cite travelling or living overseas as having a major influence on their self-conceptions. Often travel experiences are credited with "opening my eyes to the world" or "broadening my horizons" and women see themselves as being more "tolerant" and a "better person" through exposure to different cultures and people. A number of women also connect travelling with a deepening sense of spirituality, as Elise does. Travelling also provides women with a viewpoint from which to view their lives, in the way that Fortier points out that "fixity and rootedness are positioned as experiences from which we withdraw from the world and take a look at it, whereas movement and travel are much more viewed as the 'reality' of the experience of daily life in the contemporary world" (Fortier 1999:41):

> *Peace of mind. Being grateful for what you've got. Travelling did that. It's not religion or Jungism, there's nothing that's grabbed me and said "you must be a follower" but I like to look at what's there and be grateful. Sometimes you just like to see that you're on the right track. One of my friends was always going into a church and she would always light a candle. And it was a nice way to travel. It makes it easier to be a part of it and find out more about people, find about Dreamtime in Darwin and that sort of thing. When you travel you find out what people followed and why they are the way they are. In Greece. Those ruins. That was fantastic. I really feel I've travelled where the Gods have been.*
>
> *Elise, 48, never married, office manager*

For Elise, travel enables her to "see that I'm on the right track" and "be grateful for what you've got". Through "understanding more about people" and other cultures she comes to a surer understanding of herself and her place in Australian society which brings her "peace of mind".

For many women in my study travel provides women with a view from a distance, a way to "withdraw from" the familiarity and sturdiness of their more localised and less

mobile existences and "take stock" of their lives. While I agree that mobility and pilgrimage are central themes in the reconstitution of identity, most women in my study would agree that it's "good to be home". For many women in my study, a sense of place, and of rootedness is significant in reconstituting their identities. Women both participate in and resist the rootlessness of postmodern transmigration, and both figuratively and literally discursively construct a sense of belonging through place. For example, Paula was raised in Melbourne, travelled and lived overseas, and now lives on a rural property near a large regional town. The importance of place emerges as significant to her sense of self:

> *I like to go out and look at the stars and look at the sky and breathe in what's around. It might be close to the Aboriginal spirituality and being at one with the land. I can get a lot of strength from those sort of things. I'm not into organised religion but I never put the organised stuff down.*
>
> *Paula, 56, remarried, social worker*

Paula has reinterpreted and personalised a sense of "Aboriginal spirituality" in which she connects with "nature" and a sense of place to produce an experience of "oneness" characteristic of individualistic modes of reconstructing self and identity in postmodern society, in which she rejects "organised religion".

For many women in my study, who have migrated to Australia, travelled and lived overseas, "calling Australia home" becomes an important way in which they unify and consolidate their identities around a sense of place and belonging. Another aspect of belonging involves, for many women, establishing a sense of "common ground" with like-minded groups and communities.

Common ground

The figuration of pilgrimage enables a theoretical understanding of the migratory and processual subjectivities of the women in my study, which incorporates both travel and

homecoming as salient components of reconstituting subjectivity and remaking social identity. However, the notion of homecoming does not imply a "realised" self. Rather, the homeland provides multiple sources of identity options from which women can continue to remake their identities. For the women in my study areas of common ground include political and community interests as well as a redefined sense of spirituality.

In postmodern societies, groups, communities and networks coalesce around common interest, linked by the situational specificities of the actors. These groups and communities are often comprised of transient and semitemporal members (Appadurai 1996). Group membership is often temporal, with members withdrawing their connection with some groups and maintaining ties with others, as well as making new connections as their interests, beliefs and needs change over time. Maffesoli (1996) argues that in postmodernity, changing social infrastructure, in which lifelong identities were built into the institutions of our society, have given way to new forms of "tribal" identities which coalesce around common sentiments, interests and purpose. He suggests that neotribalism is evident in the interest-based collectivities that proliferate in postmodernity: environmental movements, political groups, consumer groups, and spiritual groups, among others. Relevant to my study are two sources of common interest which emerged in the stories of the women in my study: political and community life. Further, women also often identify with new forms of spirituality that are more individualistic in nature but which coalesce around common themes which are characteristic of postmodern "new age" ways of interpreting spirituality. I discuss the themes below.

Casey is unemployed but works as a volunteer counsellor for a women's counselling organisation. She has reconstituted a sense of meaning and purpose around political identity. For Casey, the biggest change in her life was:

> *Becoming a feminist. Admitting that to myself and being able to act on those*

principles. It was a gradual thing. When I started counselling in 1986 I was a feminist but nowhere near what I am now. I started to question the role of men, hearing women's lives and the problems on the phone. That started it and from there I became more and more committed to feminism. My truth. It got stronger and stronger.

Casey, 47, divorced, volunteer counsellor

For Casey, her reconstituted identity has coalesced around the values of feminism. "Becoming a feminist" was a "gradual thing", suggesting the processual nature of subjective change. At the time of the interview she claimed that feminism is "my truth", suggesting she has remade her identity around the sociopolitical ideals of feminism. For Blair, a sense of identity centred around community is important:

I've lived in [this town] all my life and it's important to me to be part of the community, and to feel I belong. My family's been here for many generations and that's important too. I feel I know where I fit in and I can be happy about all of that. I like to feel I'm contributing to the community and making a difference.

Blair, 51, married, administrator

Blair's earlier life was family centred and she described a process of wanting to enter paid work and be an active member of the community. While she has lived in her community "all her life" women's entry into public life is a fairly recent change for this conservative country town. Blair has reconstituted her identity around being a "contributing" member of the community where she is "making a difference".

Another important source of identity and subjective change for many women in my study is a stronger sense of female-centredness which is often described in terms of female friendships and networks:

One of the things I appreciate about being a woman is that I do think there's a

sense of community of women and a sense of support or comradeship, or friendship, of being able to do ordinary things together.

Martina, 45, divorced, carer

Marina recognises a "sense of community of women" which provides "support", "comradeship" and "friendship". Her perspective is characteristic of many women in my study who, in the process of redefining gendered relationships, have found female associations to be a rewarding source of community and strength. Marina's claims reflect changing understandings of gender in which women's greater "empowerment" and participation in social life has enabled a stronger sense of group identity and comradeship between women.

A significant area around which women describe reconstituting their subjectivities is a renewed sense of spirituality, which breaks from conventional forms of spirituality such as organised religion, but suggests a more individualised approach. Women's reconstituted spiritualities coalesce around collective understandings of the spiritual "self". Cara explains how her sense of spirituality has changed and enabled her to reconstitute a more empowered and outspoken sense of self:

My spiritual life has [changed]. I got in touch with where my faith is. I'm not afraid to stand up in a group of a hundred people even if I'm the only one. My faith gives me strength and a belief in what I'm doing. It doesn't tell me that I'm right all the time but if this is how I feel at this particular moment then this is how I must act. I have no choice. I will now take action whereas before I mightn't. That basic trust and strength will always be there. I pray and meditate. That's part of everyday life.

Cara, 53, married, researcher

Cara's narrative of her spiritual identity suggests a sense of "empowerment" and "authority" characteristic of women's changing position in society. Her narrative also suggests a move away from former subject positions of Christian practitioners

characterised more by "faith" and "humility" than "speaking out" and "taking action", in line with more individualistic notions of identity in postmodern society. Wilma's discussion of her changing spiritual beliefs also reflects a move away from conventional Christian belief systems:

> *I have a more universal view. I still believe in a supreme being or a spiritual base but I'm willing to accept that it could be through Buddhism or whatever else but because I was born a Christian I've stayed a Christian. But I don't believe in the trinity or the virgin birth. I do believe there's a spiritual dimension to us.*
>
> *Wilma, 52, remarried, project director*

Wilma's narrative suggests she has reinterpreted her Christian beliefs away from doctrinal interpretations of the bible, towards a more "universal" view of human spirituality characterised by tolerance and the acceptance of difference. While Wilma's beliefs are still anchored in her Christianness, her story also suggests a move away from fixed, structural interpretations of Christianity toward more flexible understandings of spirituality characteristic of postmodernity.

The stories of the women I have examined suggest the importance of homecoming and common ground in reconstituting women's subjectivities and social identities in postmodern Australian society. While a sense of place and homeland is important for some women, for others reconstructing identity around group-membership and shared values is important, and enables them to recreate identities and selves around new sources of meaning and significance.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that many women's midlives are characterised by a sense of "pilgrimage", either journeying to develop a sense of rootedness or by taking new directions, in order to recreate themselves as postmodern subjects. I have also explored

the theme of homecoming for women, and examined ways in which they reconstitute their subjectivities around cultural understandings of Australianness or micro-sociopolitical group identities or spiritual associations. The stories of the women in this chapter suggest that in the reconstitution of postmodern subjectivities and the remaking of social identities, many women break from earlier understandings of self by decentring gender and moving away from conventional understandings of womanhood.

CHAPTER 12

Conclusion

Throughout my thesis I have argued that midlife women are in a unique sociohistorical position as vanguards of postmodernity. My initial investigation of the experience of midlife for women commenced with exploring the degree to which commonly-assumed "experiences" such as "menopause", "midlife crises", and midlife "growth" and "development" had shaped women's midlives. I wanted to understand how women made the "transition" from their starting point as young women, shaped and inscribed by the patriarchal structural forces of modernity, toward a more feminist subject position in midlife, and discern the salient experiences in women's lives which shaped their assumed transition. It seemed clear to me that feminism had substantially reshaped society and would consequently have inscribed women's lives, identities and subjectivities in significant ways.

During the course of the interviews with my participants I became aware that simple models of "transition" from one state to another were inadequate to describe the diverse, nuanced and multifarious experiences and processes women articulated to me to describe their embodied midlife experiences. Complex and conflicting narratives of lived experience, self and identity, which sometimes seemed to be born in the telling, alerted me to the processual, fragmented and interpretive nature of subjectivities, and to the power of language to articulate the personal construction of meaning. It became clear that the stories of the women I interviewed were not so much stories of women, differently liberated from the constraints and distortions of patriarchy who were searching for and getting in touch with their "true" or "essential" selves by shedding their "feminine gender socialisation" or a "false consciousness". Many of the women I

interviewed were indeed "liberated" from the constraints and distortions of patriarchy compared to their younger lives, but others had not interpreted their lives in these terms. While gendered identity seemed a pivotal point of issue for many women, their reconstitution of subjectivity took many forms and suggested an ongoing engagement with culture and sociality rather than the emergence of an "essential self".

Instead, they were stories of journeys which defied intended purpose or direction. Theoretical frameworks of menopause and midlife were inadequate and incomplete in explicating women's journeys. As I argue in Chapter 11, women's journeys at midlife often represent pilgrimages. As women's former understandings of themselves and their place in society have eroded they are exploring original, individual and biographical ways of reconstituting themselves as ageing women in society. As the women in my study are on a journey, so too have I been. The theoretical perspective of nomadic subjectivity argues that nomadic migration can be an intellectual journey as well as a geographical one. The production of my thesis represents an intellectual journey. New ways of understanding midlife and reinterpreting the experience of midlife emerged as I reexamined the data from a new perspective. As the theoretical perspectives and scholarly writings of "midlife" and "menopause" with their assumed transitions became untenable as an interpretation for the women in my study, I broadened my focus and began to investigate social meanings and understandings of ageing in contemporary Western societies.

The parallels between ageing discourses and menopausal discourses as interpretive explanatory frameworks for defining the midlife experience are startling, and alerted me to the power of discourse in shaping societal, and sometimes women's, understandings of their ageing experience. The discourses are mutually-reinforcing: the powerful and pervasive dominant discursive construction of menopause as an embodied transitional process defined as a disease and leading to decline supports insidious discourses of ageing, in which "midlife" is constructed as a transitional turning point away from youth and towards ageing. While midlife can be characterised by "positive"

experiences, this is in polarity to the "decline" perspective, and both instil a fear of the ageing process, and reinforce ageist discourses which revile ageing and disparage older people as an economic burden on society. As the population ages, the proportion of females increases, so when dominant discourses promote acrimonious ageisms, their target is largely older women. Further, historical evidence is indisputable that until recent times old women were persecuted for being outspoken, sharp-witted and "unbridled", and are still silenced and ignored as powerful, wise and indispensable contributors to society.

I have identified three discursive strands that weave together to reinforce negativising, ageist presumptions about postmenopausal women: menopause as disease and ossification, ageing as a process of social and physical decline, and old women as obsolete and socially burdensome. The overwhelmingly as objects negative and devaluing discourses which dominate mainstream cultural images of ageing for women persist, yet as my research has shown, they are reiterated by a mere fraction of the stories told to me by the participants of my study.

The power of discourse to influence public perceptions of minority social groups such as midlife and older women, which are often in direct contrast and contradiction to the lived experience of the people to whom the discourse is directed, highlights the politicised nature of discourse as a form of power to structure and control certain groups of people.

Images of menopause as a deficiency disease leading to decline and ossification are generated by a powerful and dominant discourses in contemporary Western societies which shape contemporary perceptions of menopause and menopausal women. The decline discourse is underpinned by medical beliefs that promote HRT as a way of "curing" the "symptoms" of menopause. Yet the majority of the women in my study were wary, and even contemptuous of the medical profession's enchantment with and overprescription of HRT. My women told me that while they may have debilitating

symptoms at some point in their lives, the concept of menopause was largely a social construct. However, because biomedicine's framework for defining menopausal symptoms is so broad it confuses more than it illuminates. The range of physical and psychosocial experiences at midlife, which are produced from an interaction with culture and lived experience, are more accurately defined as midlife embodiment rather than menopausal embodiment. Five years ago (when I was in my early forties) I visited a chiropractor to treat a pain in my heel. I thought it may have been caused by poor posture. The chiropractor's first question was to ask me if I was menopausal. His rationale was that a drop in oestrogen could lead to gradual collapse of the supportive muscles which would in turn cause a weakening of skeletal support. (I had what was later diagnosed by X-ray as a small spur in my heel which was causing inflammation of the surrounding tissue. I replaced my shoulder bag with a backpack and the pain went away.) The engulfing power of biomedicine to construct menopause in such loose terms means that almost any physical and psychosocial experience at midlife can be defined as menopausal, even by "alternative" health practitioners.

Most women in my study subverted menopausal discourse by dismissing it as overblown and inappropriate to their lived experience, or at the very least found it confounded their attempts to comprehend their midlife embodiment. Other women actively engaged with menopausal discourse, but transformed it to suit the specificities of their lives, by drawing upon "transitional" discourses to bring about subjective change, either justifying their right to have "more time" to themselves, or employing menopausal discourse as a transformative tool with which to reconcile the past and reconstitute more positive subjectivities. The stories of the women who both subverted biomedical discourse, or applied it as a discursive tool with which to transform their lives, suggests that current understandings of menopause need to be reconceptualised, that menopause needs to be decentred as a defining concept, and instead the concept of midlife embodiment is a more accurate term to describe women's embodied experiences at midlife.

Likewise, midlife discourses which construct this time in a woman's life in "transitional" terms are not supported by the narrative reconstructions of identity and subjectivity of the women in my study. My participants overwhelmingly point to reconceptualisations in gendered identity and the position of women in society as pivotal points around which subjective change occurs. Yet their stories also highlight how, in the shift from modernity to postmodernity, new, individualised and autobiographical ways of reconstructing a sense of a unified, stable and coherent self replace former, ascribed and structured identities contained by gender identities and family and social "roles". Stories of midlife "transition" are stories of gendered "transition" in a postmodern society, in which former expectations of fulfilment from marriage and family life are surrendering to stories of "transition" and "growth" in relation to work and reeducation experiences that, in turn, lead to the reconstitution of subjectivity for many women. Thus, the twin social transformational processes of feminism and postmodernity create the conditions for remaking the self and social identities in individualised ways, in which gender is decentred but aspects of gender are "chosen" as components in the reconstruction of postmodern selves and identities.

I have discussed current discourses of ageing as constructing the process of ageing through imagery of decline and decay. Discourses of ageing embodiment have particular significance for women whose social value is often associated with their appearance, sexuality and fertility. In contemporary postmodern society, the body is seen to play a more central role in the construction of identity, and is seen to be an outward reflection of one's self.

For many women in my study ageing embodiment is a site of contention. Women continually traffic the tension between their embodied experience of ageing and the image and contemporary discourses of ageing women in which women gradually lose status and are seen to be less attractive and appealing. Many women in my study found ways of redefining beauty based on alternative understandings of aged attractiveness, such as letting their hair go grey, or by feeling "freer" to express themselves through

dress than when they were younger and felt they had to conform to narrower standards of presentation. Others were also acutely aware of the sexual disqualification of women as they age (as in the media), as well as the prevalence of older women who are public personalities being mocked, derided or undermined in some way which takes focus away from their achievements and focuses instead on insignificances (such as Joan Kirner's spotted dress or Bronwyn Bishop's hair). However some women felt the sting of sexual disqualification. Several women were despairing about their ageing appearance and were acutely aware that they had been "put out to pasture". Despite the disparagement of women's ageing bodies in social discourse, of far greater concern to the women in my study was the lack of an alternative subject position for women as attractive as older women. Many women themselves were reasonably happy with their appearance and the appearance of other older women, yet they were indignant that society does not acknowledge older women as attractive, vibrant sexual beings in their own right.

The absence of the recognition of older women's contribution to society confirms the power of patriarchal discourse to shape public interest and understandings of what is considered socially important and valuable. The "importance" of sport to Australian society needs no introduction. During the football season media reports are dominated by stories on the status of footballers' injuries. The work of older women is unheard and unacknowledged. Yet as the stories of the participants of my study testify, older women are caring for the sick and dying, presiding as celebrants over funeral services and writing eulogies for their deceased relatives and friends. They also network in mutually supportive groups to care for older and younger friends and relatives, and contribute generously and widely to the unpaid labour force as volunteers, serve on hospital and Landcare committees, and are active in political and community life. This work goes unacknowledged, yet without it, as Dallas acknowledges, society would "fall apart".

The findings of my study highlight that patriarchy, while taking a more covert form than

during the formative years of the women in my study, continues to thrive and to distort, misrepresent and negativise understandings of menopause, ageing, and ageing women. For most women in my study, the degree to which they enjoy the ageing experience or were demeaned and reduced by it was conditional upon the lived context of their lives. Women who were financially secure, in a stable, happy relationship and had good health were more likely to experience ageing positively than those who were not.

My thesis has focused on the process of change of women's identities from a lifecourse perspective. My intention was to explore the stories of women's reconstitution of gendered identity as a retrospective process in order to understand how women's subjectivities have been reshaped by new understandings of gender, ageing and embodiment in contemporary society. Having done so, there is another story to be told. The stories of the women in Chapter 11 describing midlife pilgrimages suggest a launching place for future research. My cursory glimpse into postmodern ways women reconstitute their midlife subjectivities is merely suggestive of the possibilities for further research in this area. Themes such as women's networks, spirituality, political affiliations and community networks would be fruitful areas of further inquiry. An exploration of these areas would illuminate in more detail the rich and diverse ways women remake themselves at midlife and the meanings they apply to their experiences.

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

The following schedule should be read as a loose guide to the interviews. Certain key questions were asked of all participants, other questions were designed to open up a topic or start the participant talking. The reader should refer to Chapter 2 for further information on the interview process.

GENDER

1.1 I'd like to ask you about your life in general, what's important about your life today?

1.2 In terms of relationships, what relationships are important to you in your life today?

1.3 How would you describe your qualities as a person?

1.4 Is the way you see yourself now different from how you saw yourself in the past?

1.5 Do you think there are any particular qualities to being a woman? Anything that makes women unique from men?

1.6 What do you think are the pros and cons of being a woman today?

1.7 What does being a woman mean to you?

1.8 Has your sense of yourself as a woman changed over time?

1.9 Do you think women are missing out if they don't have children?

1.10 Have the expectations you have in your relationships changed over time?

1.11 Does romance and sex play an important part in your life?

1.12 Do you think men have changed?

1.13 Have your attitudes towards men changed?

1.14 If you could be in an ideal relationship, how would you describe it?

TRANSITIONS

2.1 Do you see your life as a continuum or as a series of stages?

2.2 As you look back on your life, were there any incidents or turning points which were significant for you in terms of how you see yourself?

2.3 What would be the most important change you would describe about yourself?

2.4 You've mentioned ways in which you have changed, what has stayed the same?

2.5 Have any of the changes you have described affected your relationships with other people? In what way?

2.6 There are a lot of psychology and self-help books on the market these days, have you been influenced by anything like this?

2.7 There's a lot of emphasis these days on a more holistic or spiritual approach to wellbeing. Have you incorporated any activities like this in your life? How has it changed you?

GETTING OLDER

3.1 There are many different attitudes towards middle age, some people say they are over the hill and others say life is just beginning, how do you feel?

3.2 Would you describe yourself as middle aged?

3.3 Does your real age match your inside feeling of your age?

3.4 What do you think when you look in the mirror?

3.5 Do you think that women as they get older are seen as less attractive or desirable? What is your experience?

3.6 Do you see yourself as having changed in terms of appearance or attractiveness?

3.7 Has the change in your appearance lead to a change in the way you act with people?

3.8 Have you had anything you would describe as a midlife crisis?

3.9 A lot of people worry about getting older, what about you? Why?

3.10 Do you see any advantages of getting older for women? Disadvantages?

3.11 How do you think midlife women are portrayed by the media?

3.12 Looking back over the last ten years and the way our bodies change, how would you describe the changes in your body which are significant for you?

3.13 Have these changes led you to alter the way you think about yourself?

3.14 Do you think more about your body, say taking care of yourself, than you did in the past? Why is that important now?

MENOPAUSE

4.1 Let me ask whether you have you gone through menopause yet?

4.2 YES- What sort of symptoms did you experience?

4.3 Did you seek any kind of medical advice?

4.4 Were you satisfied with your doctor's/this advice?

4.5 How do you feel about Hormone Replacement Therapy?

4.6 Have you sought any forms of alternative therapy?

4.7 What did/do you imagine menopause would/will be like from the things you heard about it?

4.8 Do you know of any myths or stereotypes about menopause or menopausal women?

4.9 Do you see menopause as an important transition?

4.10 Does/did menopause have any particular meaning for you?

4.11 Do you think attitudes towards menopause or menopausal women have changed over the years?

4.12 Why do you think some women have difficulties at menopause and others don't?

4.13 Some people take the opportunity at menopause to heal old emotional problems, have you heard anything like this?

4.14 Do you think women regret the loss of their fertility or feel less feminine once they have past menopause?

GENERAL

5.1 Do you think older women can act as role models for younger women? In what way?

5.2 What would you teach them about being a woman today?

5.3 Is there anything you would like to add?

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