BEING 50:
A psycho-social study of a cohort of women in contemporary society from a life course perspective

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Abstract

The economic, demographic and social changes of the latter half of the C20th have influenced the experience of individuals now at ‘midlife’. Arguably the impact of these changes has been more profound for women; specifically in the UK for those educated to be the wives, mothers and carers of industrial Britain (Newsom, 1963). Now around 50 years old this group of women are likely to experience a lengthy period of ‘postmaternity’ (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009) extending to over thirty years in many cases. This research considers the experience of this metaphorically entitled ‘telescopic’ cohort (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999). The major corpus of age related research assumes a linear developmental progression of life stages (Erikson, 1951, 1968; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1996; Klohnen et al., 1996; Miner-Rubinio, 2004). Drawing on life course theory (Elder, 1995; Runyan, 1982; Super, 1980) enables this research to explore how women may have changed assumptions about themselves and their expectations as the social world has changed around them, moreover offers an alternative to the essentialist, linear, deterministic models of ageing. This feminist poststructuralist examination of the experience of women at ‘midlife’ is divided into two parts; firstly the ‘lived life’ which examines demographic changes, and drawing on material from ‘Jackie’ magazine, considers discourses of femininity and the expectations for, and of, girls. The ‘told story’ is then explored using narrative interview material. How women ‘story’ their lives and their understanding of ‘self’ at midlife is examined within the context of the changing world and their ageing bodies. The research revealed that the experience of ‘midlife’ for this cohort of women is narrated as a time of change in social circumstances with some ‘gains’ and some ‘losses’, however it is not storied as a time of inevitable ‘crisis’. Moreover despite the plethora of literature portraying the menopause as problematic, this was not supported by the interview material.

Key words; life course, feminism, post structuralist, critical realist
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Introduction

Being 50: A reflexive prologue

There seems to be an expectation that any birthday ending with a 'zero' marks a milestone in one's life. This is perhaps best evidenced by plethora of birthday cards commiserating with the recipient for their age, or congratulating them for having 'survived' thus far. One's fiftieth birthday is apparently no exception. This research evolved from my unashamedly subjective opinion that at '50' or thereabouts, myself, and my peer group, were 'younger' than our mothers had been. It appeared to me that we had different jobs, different expectations, different lifestyles, and indeed different hairstyles than previous generations. I wondered why.

Reflecting back I began to understand that the jobs and careers undertaken by many of my peer group were either unknown to previous generations or, for some reason, unavailable to women. Again, I wondered why. It also seemed that our expectations of home and family may be different than those held by previous generations. As we reached 50 I looked around and pondered on what we should expect: a crisis perhaps? The Internet suggested that everyone from teenage footballers to oil companies have midlife crises. Why wouldn't we? How should we act? Should we take to wearing 'cardies', 'elasticated waists' and comfy shoes? Should we perhaps 'wear purple with a red hat that doesn't go' as the poet Jenny Joseph (1961) advised? Or indeed were we 'invisible' as Marge Piercy (2006) suggested.

This research was born from my quest to explore the experience of a contemporary cohort of 50 year old women. I considered if the notion that we
are younger than previous generations might draw on the analogy of ‘adolescence’, a time between childhood and adulthood which has been conceptualised as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2002). Adolescence is a definable life stage of older than childhood but not yet fully adult. Moreover has been described as ‘a distinctive period of heightened exploration, instability and social versatility…both exciting and daunting (Korobov and Thorne, 2009: 52) Perhaps the notion that the contemporary cohort of women aged around 50 are ‘different’ from, or ‘younger’ than, previous cohorts is based on the notion of an ‘emerging’ experience of this part of adulthood. I wanted to explore if we are perhaps ‘middlescent’. Thus I undertook this present research.

**Research Overview**

Chapter 1 begins by exploring existing literature of midlife and in particular that specifically based on women. Several emergent issues are then explored further, with an examination of notions of midlife crisis, the gendered meanings of midlife and the impact of physically ageing bodies. The next part of the chapter explores some of the social and historical changes of the last few decades and considers how these might have impacted on the lives of women now aged around 50. Further, the parameters for defining this particular cohort are clarified. The research aims are then highlighted.

The second chapter is concerned with how the theoretical framework was devised and includes a discussion of how life course theory is utilised throughout this research. The philosophical underpinnings of the epistemology and ontological assumptions made in the research are clarified and the reasons for adopting a feminist constructionist approach are made apparent. Chapter 3
builds upon the themes emerging from the previous chapters and sets out the argument for utilising poststructuralism and discourse analysis, in the research. Moreover, why it seemed appropriate to make critical realist assumptions is discussed. This research is informed by a feminist perspective and the role myself as the researcher plays in the research is explored and clarified.

The next section is concerned with the ‘lived life’ of the cohort in the research and the usefulness of ‘Jackie’ magazine as a source of contextual material is made apparent. Chapter 4 explores the process of sourcing the material and outlines why a discourse analysis was appropriate and how it was undertaken. In Chapter 5 a content analysis of ‘Jackie’ and a discourse analysis of three items from this magazine are undertaken and the findings discussed, concluding with a summary of what the analysis has contributed to the understanding of the experience of the cohort of women in the research.

Chapter 6 considers the ‘lived life of this cohort and makes clear why a narrative approach is appropriate to explore the experience of participating women. How and why the participants were recruited for the research is explained and the ethical implications of undertaking narrative interviews explored. The method used and the process of interviewing and analysing the interview material are then discussed, refined and made explicit.

The next section contains the analysis and discussion of the interview material. Chapter 7 considers the ‘told stories’ of Pauline and Amanda and explores notions of the separate spheres of the private and public worlds. Issues of matriarchy, patriarchy and age appropriate behaviour emerge and are discussed within the analysis.
The following chapter concerns the stories of Lesley and Diane within constructions of duties of care. The emergent themes of midlife crisis, the sandwich generation and life-long learning are explored and discussed. Chapter 9 is concerned with Mattie’s story of being a daughter, wife and mother and coping with changing worlds of education and work. The issues of physical ageing and adapting to change in a changing society are explored and discussed.

In the final chapter the research is summarised and the emergent findings from the research are reviewed. The efficacy of the methodology and the methods are evaluated and issues of midlife crisis, relative ageing, invisibility and the ageing body are revisited.
Chapter 1: The journey to midlife

Introduction

This research is about women who were born in the mid 20th century. It is inspired by the notion that ‘women in midlife (however they define it) differ considerably from women of different generations’ (Muhlbauer and Chrisler, 2007: 2 [original brackets]). This research concerns how these women ‘differ’ and what this means for the women of ‘50’ in contemporary UK society.

It is widely acknowledged that the social world of the early 21st century is very different from that of a hundred years ago. Following half a century of war and economic depression, from the 1950s onwards almost every aspect of life in Britain changed (Wadsworth, 2003: 123). Those individuals reaching midlife in the early millennium have lived through an era of industrial and social change, political upheaval and alterations in family structure. Demographic changes to population distribution and the changing economic base have contributed to both men and women having a different life experience than that of their parents. The career opportunities might have changed for men, but arguably for women the expectation that they might have a career at all, and the financial independence this has brought for some, is significant. For many women at midlife, in contemporary UK society, their experience bears little resemblance to that of previous generations (Makepeace et al., 2003).

Midlife: tasks, transition and crisis

‘Middle age’ or midlife has a relatively small body of literature compared with other ages and stages of life. This period of life has been has been variously
The journey to midlife

portrayed as a time of transition and change (Erikson, 1951, 1968; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1996) and possibly as a time of crisis (Jaques, 1965; Jung, 2002). However, it is also evident that there are gendered interpretations of the midlife period which must be considered and furthermore, that a woman’s body is often emphasised in terms of her ageing appearance or her menopausal experience (Greer, 1991; McQuaide, 1998; Ostrove and Stewart, 1998; Ussher, 1989, 2006).

This research is entitled ‘Being 50’ and that may appear to be an arbitrary marker for ‘midlife’. Indeed from a physiological perspective it is clearly past the ‘midway’ point for many (Finch, 2001). Yet by highlighting the notion that ‘being 50’ might have significance, and that this might be called ‘midlife’, I acknowledge that chronological age may be important in contemporary society. It must be noted however, that the debate surrounding what ‘age’ actually means has many contributors. Pilcher (1995) for example, points out that chronological age is not determinist, but is subject to social and cultural intervention at different times and different places. Hepworth (1987) argues that age status is not presumed but is dependent on the value society places on roles performed at different ages and varies across culture and time. Moreover Featherstone (1991) adds that the concept of ‘middle age’ is stigmatised and should be (and indeed largely has been) replaced by that of ‘midlife’. ‘Midlife’, they suggest, is a broad band category now encompassing everyone between 35 and 60 years. However, Pilcher (1995) accepts that there are visible biological differences between people of different ages, and of interest is the emphasis placed on these differences by society. Gergen (2007) adds to the debate by pointing out that ‘the public, developmental psychologists and
gerontologists alike have concurred that 50 is the new 40, 60 is the new 50 etc’. (Gergen, 2007: vi). Perhaps as Laz (1998: 85) suggests, it is not chronological age that is important but rather the notion that one should ‘act one’s age’. She suggests we all perform and enact our age constantly and, through this conform to social norms. It seems necessary therefore, to begin by exploring what shape the ‘performance’ of midlife might take, by examining the literature for how midlife is conceptualised.

**Psychological perspectives of midlife**

Developmental psychology was initially concerned with the psychological development of children and adolescents. In particular development of language and cognitive and perceptive processes were the focus of concern (see for example Bowlby, 1955; Kohlberg, 1969; Bandura, 1969; Piaget, 1960). The adult years have only recently come to interest researchers, indeed the middle years have been encapsulated as the ‘last uncharted territory in human development’ (Brim, 2001: xi). Early contributions to the study of psychological development included: Binet (1905, cited by Demetriou, 1998), Hall (1922) and Watson (1924) yet none of these offer a concise argument for a distinct ‘midlife’ stage of development.

Among the earliest theories of midlife is the work of C. G. Jung 1865-1961. In his theory of analytical psychology, writing in 1933, Jung (2002) refers to ‘the noon of life’ when one reached midlife to be a time when an individual realised the second half of life could not be lived the same way as the first. Jung (2002) makes the analogy of daylight on the earth; the light is of a different hue in the morning and illuminates the earth in a different way than in the evening. Midlife
The journey to midlife

like midday is a time to adapt one’s outlook to the changing light. Life may be divided into four quarters with childhood and young adulthood occurring in the morning of life ‘before noon’ and mature adulthood and old age occurring in the ‘afternoon and evening’ of life (Jung, 2002). Jung generally based his work on men, however in one reference to women he finds that whereas men become more feminised as they age ‘…women develop rough deep voices, incipient moustaches, hard facial expressions and other masculine traits…’ (Jung, 2002:109). It seems unlikely that a contemporary cohort of women are sporting the facial hair that Jung suggests, however there may be concern with an ageing appearance and weight gain in a youth orientated ‘body beautiful’ society (Chrisler, 2007; Faircloth, 2003). A woman may or may not develop the physical attributes suggested by Jung, but she may find herself reflecting on her maturing self in the ‘afternoon’ of her life.

Following the work of Jung, Jaques (1965) introduced the notion of a ‘midlife crisis’ and suggested that midlife was a time of profound change in individuals. By studying creativity in artistic production he pointed out a change in the style of the work produced as the artists aged. He proposed that the ‘hot from the fire creativity’ of youth and young adulthood is replaced at midlife with a more sculptured and thoughtful production (Jaques, 1965:503). For Jaques (1965) at midlife there is a re-emergence of a depressive position, first encountered in early childhood, and re-encountered as an adaptive response to ambiguity and loss throughout life, moreover that midlife is a time of ambiguity. The ‘loss’ at midlife to be encountered is the acceptance that one is mortal and personal death is inevitable. This ‘crisis’ view is one of adaptive change in the individual with the recognition that life is not finite, and further, different aspects become
privileged in the second half of life. Jaques (1965) suggests that the midlife crisis occurs around the age of thirty-five years and is a process of transition. This transition can run for some years and is experienced in different ways by men and women. At midlife Jaques (1965) suggests women are likely to face a crisis as they adapt to loss, possibly the loss of youth and/or fertility.

Perhaps for those in midlife in the early 21st the physical aspects of the ageing process will have an impact on their psychological development, but the particular physical changes may be specific to the current culture. For the contemporary cohort there may be more concern with an ageing appearance and weight gain in a youth orientated society, than with changed facial features. Thus it seems Jung (2002) may have relevance by suggesting that psychological adaptation to physiological changes is necessary; yet how the particular physiological changes are interpreted may be culturally dictated.

**Paradox of crisis**

It seems both Jung (2002) and Jaques (1965) informed by psycho-dynamic theory, position midlife as a time of change and reflection. Others have continued the theme of stages and transitions in which adults are considered to face similar age related difficulties and experiences (Erikson, 1951, 1968; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1996). For example, for Erikson (1951, 1968) development occurs with an eight stage psycho-social identity model within which individuals change within a changing society. Moreover as the individual develops society places demands upon them to which s/he must adapt. Each new demand provokes an emotional crisis, the successful resolution of which leads to the development of a new virtue or vital strength.
Erikson theorises that this development is ordered rather than random, and is a cumulative process occurring in accordance with a timetable. There are eight psycho-social tasks or crises in this theory, these are dimensions rather than polar opposites, the outcomes being somewhere along the continuum between the two poles. Pertinent for this research are the stages of adult development; *identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation,* and *ego integrity versus despair and disgust.* It is not hard to surmise which Erikson believed to be the preferred outcome of each of the binaries. Within this model failure to resolve these psycho-social tasks results in an inevitable ‘crisis’. Moreover individuals must resolve these polarities in turn in order to progress through their life stages and age ‘successfully’. However it is worth remembering that Erikson was a clinical analyst and as Kruger (1994) points out;

> ‘in this alarmist framework, psychological disturbance and dysfunction are seen as normative, and depressive breakdown and character deterioration are only avoided through timely analytical intervention’ (Kruger,1994:1301).

It seems that the notion of a ‘midlife crisis’ resulting from unresolved psycho-social stages is deeply embedded within psycho-dynamic theory moreover based on patients or clients of psycho-therapists. This perhaps makes this psycho-dynamic theory of crisis difficult to extrapolate from a clinical setting to a non therapeutic application.

There is opposition to a ‘crisis’ model of adult development. For example McCrae and Costa (1990) concluded that at any given time only a small
percentage of men are in crisis and for Shek (1996) these are unlikely to cluster at any particular age. In one of very few studies of women and ‘midlife crisis’ Robertson (1978) considers midlife for women not as a time of ‘crisis’ but ‘adjustment’ to new social roles. It seems that the notion of a psychological crisis for men or women is challenged. Kruger (1994) argues that given the lack of evidence outside of psycho-dynamic theory, a midlife crisis is a chimera ‘an unreal creature of the imagination’. He proposes that ‘a crisis’ is a contemporary social construct (Kruger, 1994:1299). Moreover he proposes that the notion of crisis is born out of the increased prosperity amongst the North American and Western European white middle classes who have the time and prosperity to have a midlife crisis. Fiske (1979) agrees that the notion of ‘midlife crisis’ may itself be a self- fulfilling prophecy the more it is expected, the more likely it is to appear. However there is some support for the notion of ‘midlife crisis’, for example McAdams, (1993). Yet this is not whole hearted endorsement. What he does point out is that ‘the midlife crisis is an example of a good concept that has been trivialised by popular culture’ (McAdams, 1993: 195). Perhaps, it would be useful to consider that despite the ‘frequent debunking of the inevitability of the midlife crisis … the term remains a media staple’ (Wethington, 2000: 85).

Thus whether based in psychological theory or not, the notion of midlife crisis cannot be entirely discarded. However perhaps more pertinent to this research is the absence of the experience of women in most of the studies concerning midlife crisis, they are written by men and about men, and if used to consider the experience of women must inevitably locate the experience of women as the same as that of men. Indeed as Muhlbauser and Chrisler (2007) remind us
the assumptions of midlife crisis seem based in the ‘existing political constellation (i.e., male supremacy) … and is at the core of the socio-cultural representations of both gender and age (Muhlbauer and Chrisler, 2007:1). It seems necessary to reconsider these representations from a feminist perspective.

A search of the Internet reveals that although the notion of midlife crisis may have emerged from psychology, the term is applied to many diverse situations and entities. However for the purpose of exploring the lived experience of women at midlife there is a useful interpretation offered by Caspi and Moffitt (1993) that might be applicable. They point out that the Chinese symbol for crisis is in fact and amalgam of two representations one of danger and the other opportunity. It is perhaps this paradox of both dangers and opportunities emerging at the time of novel, ambiguous and uncertain life transitions that have led to the popular adoption of the term. Perhaps at midlife women and men are faced with dangers and opportunities which might be embraced, resisted or ignored. Perhaps the ‘dangers and opportunities of midlife’ are of particular relevance to women who are reaching midlife in the wake of ‘four decades of massive societal change’ (Chrisler, 2007:1). Moreover, perhaps a challenge to any ‘task and transition’ model of psychological ageing is required. These all assume a linear, progressive, inevitable and necessary process of individual ageing. The ‘task and transition’ theories of ageing are informed by ‘grand narratives of modernity’ (Crotty, 1998: 211) which might be challenged by a less determinist approach. Furthermore, task and transition models may have had most relevance in a society where a linear progression in education, work and family life was the norm. For a cohort ageing in a time of social
change with varying work and family patterns perhaps a different model of ageing must be considered.

**Gendered meanings of midlife**

This research is underpinned by feminism and concerns the experience of women. Importantly for women at midlife, it seems that most of the studies focus on men, moreover the men are largely white and middle class (see for example Levinson, 1978; Gould, 1978; Erikson, 1953, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Hermans, 1999). This research is acknowledged to be about women and within much of the literature it seems there is an assumption ‘that what is true for the gander is true for the goose’ (McQuaide, 1998:21). Furthermore, as Stewart and Ostrove (1998) observe, the literature on women focuses on menopause (Sherwin, 2008; Wegesin and Stern, 2004; Hamill and Goldberg, 1997) empty nest (Hobody, et al., 2007; White, 1990), caring for elderly parents (Grundy and Henretta, 2006; Perrig-Chiello, 2005) and new opportunities for activity and self-expression (Levinson, 1996; Sheehy, 1992), that is to say mainly conceptualising midlife in terms of physiology and caring roles of others The literature on men conversely concentrates on midlife crises, executive personality, and withdrawal from the youthful male world of competition and work (see Levinson, 1978; Howard and Bray, 1988; Franz, 1997).

Levinson (1996) points out; that midlife is a complex time of transition for a woman that encompasses a broad spectrum of experience full of contradiction and change. These contradictions and changes may result in a crisis for some women at midlife however for others this may be a time of positive challenges. Yet as most of the literature concentrates on men, women are often
marginalised or even rendered ‘invisible’ and vulnerable to misrepresentation. Furthermore;

‘… the invisibility of women at midlife in the research literature leaves a woman at the mercy of cultural stereotypes and media portrayals or lack of portrayals….. Images of miserable empty nesters, women being left for younger women, menopausal madness and dowager’s humps can become self fulfilling prophecies. A woman without alternative models may see her future in a limited way’ (McQuaide, 1998: 22).

It seems that without women centred research this stereotyping will go unchallenged and prevail. Rather than assume women will have an inevitable midlife crisis due to the loss of fertility and social roles, it is surely prudent to explore how women actually experience this time of their lives.

However, despite McQuaide’s (1998) claim that women are invisible in the literature, it seems there is a corpus of research concerning women at midlife. Moreover with some evidence that this time is experienced in a more positive light than that of ‘menopausal madness’ or ‘miserable empty nests’. There are several studies that draw on Erikson’s (1951, 1968) theory of psycho-social identity and are specifically concerned with the experience of women (Ostrove and Stewart, 1998; Stewart and Ostrove, 1998; Stewart et al 2001; Miner-Rubinio et al., 2004; Zucker et al., 2002). For example Stewart and Ostrove (1998) highlighted that there was a need for models of ageing that took account of the intersections of history, gender, and individual development, and pointed out that the midlife transition of women should not merely be considered in
terms of menopause and empty nests but should consider elements more generally addressed in studies of men, for example midlife crisis, generativity, and concern about ageing. Further, they pointed out that these issues were indeed important to women. Following this Stewart et al (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002) concluded that college educated women from the ‘baby boom’ cohort reported feeling more certain about their identity, more confident and more powerful at midlife compared to earlier ages. This led to the suggestion that ‘college educated women do not see ageing as process of decline, but rather as a process of gaining in positive feelings about the self’ (Miner-Rubinio, 2004:1599). These studies whilst interesting, do draw on a theory of psycho-social development that was originally developed with regards to men and later revised for women (Erikson, 1951, 1968). This in itself is not entirely problematical and the research findings of Stewart and Ostrove (1998), Stewart et al (2001), Miner-Rubinio et al. (2004) and Zucker et al. (2002) go some way to redress the male bias of earlier literature, and the negative aspects of midlife highlighted for women elsewhere. Yet it remains the case that this theoretical underpinning of psycho-social tasks and transitions assumes a linear, progressive and inevitable process of ageing. This whilst useful, might be challenged for the underlying assumption that women, or indeed men, are a single homogenous group.

It would seem pertinent to explore more positive aspects of midlife for women based on alternative theoretical perspectives. In their edited volume regarding the psychological perspectives of women over 50 Muhlbauer and Chrisler (2007) address many issues experienced by women over the age of 50. The experience of the ‘baby boomers’ is presented as fulfilling and significant. Thus
it appears there is a challenge to the notion of women over 50 being defined as ‘miserable’, ‘invisible’ or even ‘mad’. Yet some caution is required. It seems that in common with Stewart and Ostrove (1998) Stewart et al (2001) Miner-Rubinio et al. (2004) and Zucker et al. (2002), Muhlbauer and Chrisler (2007) predominantly consider the experience of American women, and though attention is paid to social roles there are reasons why that research is not necessarily entirely applicable to the experience of a cohort of British women. Firstly, much of the research features cohorts of women born during the American ‘baby boom’. This indicates that they may be 15 years older than the cohort of interest to this study. This age difference may impact on their midlife experience. As Elder (1994, 1974) suggests, the experience of a life stage may be dependent on the social and historical timings of life events. In addition the findings of Kurlansky (2005) and Hall (2000) highlight the social and cultural differences between the US and the UK in the 1960s and 1970s. It seems the education offered, the opportunity for college education, prospects of work and familial expectations, may have differed significantly between the UK and the USA. Therefore, the experience of ‘being 50’ is likely to vary between American women and British women. It seems there is a place for research considering the experience of a cohort of younger non American women.

**Changing bodies**

Midlife for Lippert (1997) is defined not only by chronological age but also by the condition of one’s body. Two separate yet interrelated themes can be distinguished in the literature of midlife for women; the loss of fertility with the menopause (Avis, 1991; Banister, 1999; Becerra-Ayala, 2006; Dan, 1989; Gannon, 1999; Golden, 1984; Greer, 1991; Harding, 1977; Rossi, 2004;
Sheehey, 1992; Ussher, 2006) and the ageing process, leading to perceived loss of youth and beauty (Lewis and Cachelin, 2001; Thompson, 1995; Tiggemann, 2004, 1992; Willinge, 2006).

The menopause

The average age of menopause is 51 years (Rossi, 2004) and a woman’s subjective understanding of this change may impact on her experience of midlife. McQuaide (1988) argues that the cultural narrative provided for women at midlife is strongly biased to medical and menopausal issues. Harding (1997) points out there are two differing discourses of menopause; the ‘medical’ and the ‘women’s health’. This perhaps draws attention to the discrepancy between encapsulating the menopause as a ‘benign transition’ (Rossi, 2005) or as a medical deficiency (Ussher, 2006). In the medical discourse:

‘the body of a post menopausal woman is the site of a sex linked disease of endocrine deficiency, producing both short term symptoms and long term disease, occasioning medical intervention, including treatment and surveillance, for all women from menopause until death’ (Harding, 1997:138).

This concurs with a contemporary prevailing conceptualisation of a ‘medicalised’ body, agreeing with Hughes (2000) who claims that the body in the C20th was discursively constructed in the language of biomedicine. Perhaps as Faircloth (2003) reminds us there is assumption that the ‘body’ and in particular the ageing body is in need of medical attention to ‘cure’ or delay the ageing process. However, conversely:
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‘in women’s health discourse, the body of the post menopausal woman is constituted as the site of normal physiological processes, not typically requiring treatment’ (Harding, 1997: 139).

These two views highlight different ways that the menopause can be constructed; either as an illness or deficiency which can be therefore treated or as unremarkable and unexceptional. Gannon points out that assuming a woman’s menopausal body is in need of medical intervention might be considered as a means by which medical and psychological professions maintain and enhance their power, and moreover reinforce ‘social and medical misogyny’ (Gannon, 1998: 285). Indeed Ussher (2006) reminds us that the female body has been medicalised and controlled and portrayed as pathological. Yet, the menopause may not be experienced the same way for every woman. Indeed a substantial amount of literature suggests that for the majority of women the menopause passes if not unnoticed then unremarkably, and for some it is welcomed (Avis, 1991; Gergen, 1990; Mitchell and Helson, 1990; Neugarten, 1965; Rossi, 2004)

Nonetheless, it seems the menopause gives rise to negative images of women ‘… in the discourse of woman as reproducer, where woman is defined through her body, her sexuality, her fecundity, the menopausal woman is redundant’ (Ussher, 1992: 52). As the notion of redundancy implies ‘out of work’ or ‘not working’ surely to suggest a menopausal body is ‘redundant’ is an assumption that women are only useful if fertile and capable of reproduction. Indeed Ussher indicates this ‘redundancy’ due to lack of fertility is evidenced with the ‘post menopausal woman represented primarily as ‘the crone, the hag or the dried up grandmother’ (Ussher, 2006: 126) within the media in high and popular culture
The menopause has been called ‘the last taboo’ (Sheehy, 1992) and books such as The Change (Greer, 1991) and The Silent Passage (Sheehy, 1992) were written to address this. However texts such as these may not be helpful because they are not research based and moreover as McQuaide (1998) points out may ‘lead to more constructions of a woman’s midlife experience that are biologically oriented’ (McQuaide, 1998: 21).

Indeed with the plethora of negative images about menopause and middle age it would be difficult for women not to internalise these to a certain extent. Moreover it seems in the media older women are most often represented within strict cultural stereo-types such as the ‘Grandma’ (Markson, 2003). Further despite older males being cast to be the ‘romantic interest’ for young women, for example; Sean Connery, Clint Eastwood and Jack Nicholson all in their 70s (Chrisler, 2007), older women are rarely portrayed as sexual. Notable exceptions are perhaps Diane Keaton, who appeared as a 50 year old woman who ‘stole’ her daughter’s lover and, Anne Reid, who played an older woman enjoying a sexual relationship with a much younger man. In the Keaton film (Meyers, 2003) the plot was premised on the embarrassment of the older woman revealing her body. In the Reid film (Michell, 2003) the sexuality of the older woman was variously reviewed as ‘jarring’ or ‘disgusting’ (Ussher, 2006). It might be surmised that these negative images of ‘loss’ with menopause and the post menopausal body could contribute to a midlife crisis of sorts in women, however if the lived experience of menopause does pass unremarkably then there is no reason to suppose this would be the case. It seems important however to consider the negative stereotypes and how if at all these are indeed internalised by women today.
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A time for reappraisal

The end of her fertility may not be the only physical concern for a woman at midlife. If she is defined by her bodily changes, then not only her loss of fertility but also the general ageing process may cause a reconsideration of her self image. As one woman writes;

‘… there are some aspects of being a 50 year old woman that cannot be cured and must be endured. Sooner or later a middle-aged woman becomes aware of a change in the attitude of people towards her. She can no longer trade on her appearance, something which she has done unconsciously all her life. There is no defined role for her in modern society …’ (Greer, 1991:7)

Assuming women do trade on their appearance, as Greer suggests, then midlife may indeed be a time for reappraisal. Yet Greer may be challenged for assuming women do actually ‘trade on their appearance’ this seems to denigrate women and assume women have the ‘commodity’ to trade. Moreover the assumption of ‘no defined’ role surely assumes that, to date, her role has been ‘age related’. Featherstone (1991) claims; that the development of the fashion industry, and a consumer culture in the C20th. has given a special emphasis to the surface of the body. For Chrisler (2007) in contemporary culture notions of beauty and femininity are closely tied to youth. Moreover we are reminded by Willinge (2006) and Shilling (1993) that more than ever that the privileged body is the young, slim, able body. Perhaps as Faircloth (2003) points out; it is the ‘visual representations of ageing in our culture (that) make for a constant self monitoring of bodily transformation’ (Faircloth, 2003: 3).
In recent years it seems that ‘stringent body size ideals have been emphasised and reinforced in almost all spheres of Western society’ (Willinge, 2006: 576). Moreover there is now ‘a universal equation of slenderness with beauty’ (Bordo, 1993:102). The implication for women Chernin (1981) suggests, in her eponymously entitled book, is the ‘tyranny of slenderness’. This in turn leads Smith (1988) to observe that women’s bodies are always imperfect, and they always need fixing. The result for Thompson (1995) is that body dissatisfaction is often described as ‘normative’ among women in contemporary Western society. Lewis and Cachelin (2001) found a positive relationship between fears of ageing and disordered eating, and further that socio cultural standards of body image and pressure towards thinness affect different generations of older women in similar ways.

The literature has tended to concentrate on young adults and adolescents and it seems that a large proportion of women are dissatisfied with their body image (Willinge, 2006; Cash et al., 2004; Kostanski, 1998; Tiggerman, 2004, 1992; Wardle, 1986). However, the research that exists for older women suggests less consistent conclusions. For example; Franzoi and Koeher (1998) Tiggerman and Stevens (1999) and Rebuffusin et al., (2000) found less dissatisfaction in body image for older women compared to younger women. However, conversely other research has found an increase in body dissatisfaction as women age (Guaraldi et al., 1995 cited in McLaren, 2002). Interestingly Turner (1995) says we subjectively cling to an image of ourselves as unchangingly young, which could be manifest as an ideal body image from an earlier time. Indeed Apter (1995) proposes that the greatest challenge for a woman at midlife is integrating the images formed in adolescence of being
female with those of being a woman in midlife. It seems women indeed may find their subjective experience of midlife influenced by their ageing physical appearance.

Thus it appears that if a woman were to experience a ‘crisis’ at midlife it might involve ‘a loss of beauty’ or difficulty adjusting to an altering body image. Yet not all research concerning the bodies of women at midlife is negative. As Chrisler (2007) points out, a response is often due to how a question is asked, therefore it is not surprising that ‘when asked about how they feel about their bodies women will respond with a negative comment’ (Chrisler, 2007:17). Golub (1992) found post-menopausal women felt better, calmer and freer than before, and drawing on Foerster (2001) that women were generally satisfied with their body image. Moreover that some felt better about their bodies at midlife than in their youth. Interestingly Burns and Leonard (2005) and (Arnold 2005) found women less preoccupied by appearance as they aged than with the opportunities they were presented with in their ‘post maternal’ age (Gullette, 2004).

Therefore the literature regarding menopause and body image has revealed different ways of regarding a woman’s ageing body. Moreover it seems that in literature and popular culture middle aged women are either a subject of ridicule or absent. It appears that some middle aged women are depicted very negatively, being portrayed as ‘over the hill’, ‘unattractive’ and ‘sexually irrelevant’. It is claimed she is a ‘witch’ a ‘hag’ or a ‘crone’ (Ussher, 2006; Greer, 1991; Helibrun, 1988). Moreover Ussher (2006) points out that if she appears as sexually active she is threatening to men and an object of fascination or disgust. Yet, as Burns and Leonard (2005) and Arnold (2005) note; for others their physicality is not their overriding issue at midlife.
In 1992, Ussher pointed out that popular discourse presents menopausal women as a joke; the proverbial mother-in-law, pining over an empty nest now her children have gone, and meddling in their adult lives, unfulfilled, unwanted, moody and melancholic. For Greer (1991) women of 50 and over are ‘invisible’ and are absent in literature, she further suggests that women themselves contribute to this invisibility by writing books with ‘young heroines’. However some literature suggests that even a short chronological difference in age can have profound implications for how the individual experiences an event (Elder, 1974, 1995; Erikson, 1975) For example Elder (1974) in his study of the Great Depression found that the age the person was whilst living through this time had a profound effect on how they experienced it. Thus whilst these observations of Ussher (1992) and Greer (1991) are interesting these authors wrote 15 years ago, possibly half a generation, it seems important to consider the lives of women within the context of their own social timing. More recent literature on women at midlife has considered ‘middleageism’ (Gullette, 2004) and ‘postmaternity’ colloquially ‘the empty nest’ (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009). Yet it seems that the corpus of literature exploring the positive aspects of ageing and the midlife experience of women at midlife in the early C21st is relatively small. In comparison a greater proportion of the literature assumes a ‘pathology’ of menopause or defines the experience of women at midlife in terms then gendered role of motherhood, and therefore inevitable ‘loss’. However, as Muhlbauer and Chrisler (2007) remind us by moving away from the traditional socio-cultural constructs, women at midlife have perhaps the opportunity to engender more positive meanings for ‘midlife’. 
Growing up in a changing world

Muhlbauer and Chrisler (2007) suggest that a fundamental shift has taken place recently in the cultural perceptions of women at midlife. It seems that the historical timing of lives cannot be ignored and that social and economic changes over their lives may impact on the subjective understandings a contemporary cohort of women may have of midlife. Perhaps as Laz (1998) would put it; how she ‘acts her age’ has changed. As Wadsworth (2003) pointed out the latter half of the C20th brought change to almost every aspect of life in Britain. Hakim (2000) proposes five major ways social and economic changes have impacted on the lives of women. These are: the contraceptive revolution, the equal opportunities revolution, the expansion of white collar occupations, the creation of jobs for secondary earners and the increasing importance of attitudes values and personal preferences in life style choices. Hakim (2000) notes that these five changes have affected women in different societies, at different times and in a varying order of occurrence. Hakim’s position on female employment has been challenged by some feminist sociologists who claim she fails to support some of her arguments and is ‘provocative in her conclusions’ (Ginn et al., 1996:167). Yet it seems her summary of factors affecting female employment in the latter half of the C20th is broadly compatible with wider economic and social changes. To reach a better understanding of the journey a contemporary cohort of women in Britain have made to midlife, it seems necessary to explore the education, work and family opportunities offered to them.
Educating girls

From the start of compulsory schooling gender differences appeared in education and continued into the mid 20th. It seems that boys were taught to work and girls to care. For example, Norwood (1943) professed the accepted view that the destiny of boys was to have a job and be academically successful; it was the lot of girls to be married and become mothers. Newsom (1963) reiterated this by suggesting that marriage and motherhood were the main function of females as was work for men. In his classic work exploring class structure Willis (1977) highlighted the view that the education of boys led to the reproduction of the labour force, with working class boys entering trades or manufacturing and middle class boys trained to be their managers. Not only did the education system feed the needs of the labour market, but the very processes reinforced class divisions and power imbalances. The boys and girls of this time period were being educated for their social roles. (Ashton and Maguire, 1980). Girls were largely absent from this study by Willis (1977); the sexual division of labour at that time was exposed by others (Davies, 1975; Walby, 1986). So too was the way the work force ‘learned’ to labour. It was noted that;

‘Education builds on what the family have already commenced … its reproduction of the sexual division of labour by different categorisation and classification of girl pupils’ (Deem, 1978:51).

It seems that the education offered to girls was informed by an assumption that girls and boys should be educated differently in preparation for their future roles. Weiner (1980) points out that from their earliest years children are influenced by
their parents’ notions of appropriate gender roles and the schools continued this process. The schooling provided for the young people of the 1960’s was intent on reproducing the ‘traditional’ male and female roles. For a woman at midlife today, it is likely that the beginning of her secondary education would have been very gender specific, even in comprehensive schools (Weiner, 1985; Deem, 1980; McDonald, 1980; Byrne, 1978). That secondary education was gender biased has been highlighted by many; girls were offered ‘girls’ subjects generally arts based; sciences and engineering were largely ignored (Davies, 1975; Sharpe, 1976; Weiner, 1985; Tooley, 2002). The options offered to girls potentially limited choices at school and may have restricted their later career opportunities.

Second-wave feminism is generally dated from the early 1960’s thus women who are now at midlife were born before second-wave feminism, but during their school days feminists began to raise awareness of gender inequalities (Tooley, 2002; Weiner, 1980; Ord and Quigley, 1985). However it is unlikely that this would have had much impact on women who left school in the mid 1970’s. Hughes, (1985) claims that the supporters of the second wave women’s movement wanted to see an extension to education for all females at every stage of their lives. Ord and Quigley (1985) remind us that some teachers tried to address sexist practices in schools starting with themselves in some cases. For example by endeavouring to be known as Ms. Other measures such as ‘desexing’ registers were implemented, and from the late 1970’s it seems feminist teachers in some schools tried to reduce the level of sexism from male teachers and boy pupils (Tooley, 2002). These challenges may have paved the way for some girls to pursue an education and therefore careers, closed to their
mothers. However the impact of their efforts was slight for many years, thus not many school leavers of the 1970s would have been affected. Moreover we are reminded by Griffin (1985) and Weiner (1980) that even if teachers succeeded in paving the way for girls to take less gendered subjects these were not always available, or necessarily taken up by the girls where strong cultures of girls subjects and boys subjects existed.

The support of the teaching staff alone may not have been enough to encourage some young women to continue with their schooling. Their problems in education at this time came from a variety of sources, and the reality for many young women did not necessarily reflect their own wishes or the efforts of their teachers. In some households the teenage daughter was expected to look after her younger siblings or nieces and nephews to allow the older women, and the men, to work (Weiner, 1985; Fuller, 1980). However even for those staying on at school problems arose. Some ‘A’ level students were found to have been offered limited opportunities at school despite supposed equality, others felt disengaged with the men’s world of work and they themselves expected to marry and become mothers in their early 20’s (Weiner, 1985; Fuller, 1980). As Anderson (1985) points out this was in line with the prevailing cultural expectations.

The reasons for the gendered patterns of education may go beyond academic skills. Halsey et al (1980) postulated that a major function of formal education from its inception was not only to teach literacy and numeracy but also to teach children to conform, sit still, obey authority, be punctual and polite, and respect authority; prerequisites for an orderly work force. Clarricoates (1980) claims that segregated gendered education begins on the streets outside schools with girls
taught to conform to this work force of their future, with the support of their mothers. For Crowcroft (1983) to educate a boy was to educate a person but to educate a girl was to educate a family. This assumes that the mother of a family will take the responsibility for reproducing the social ‘norms’ of the family and ensure that boys and girls grow up with the necessary social capital to be successful in their world. The mothers of the girls in the early 1960s were a product of the post war era’s renewed drive to domesticity, critiqued as ‘the feminine mystique’ (Friedan, 1963). Although Friedan and others highlighted the frustrations, inequalities and discriminatory nature of how women were positioned, this was still the prevailing culture in many households. As Bourdieu (1977) points out a child’s ability to ‘succeed’ at school may be dependent on the degree of cultural capital held by that child. Wrigley (1992), drawing on Bourdieu (1977), proposed that capitalist societies reproduce themselves through the interplay of a dominant culture, school knowledge and individual biographies. Culture, she suggests, is used by the dominant group in society to distinguish itself from other groups. The dominant culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s was still an industrial ‘man’s’ world. Success in the working world was not encouraged for women. Sharpe (1976) claims that to maintain the dominant culture possibly some girls ‘feared success’ (Sharpe, 1976: 135).

**Changing world of work: a new place for women**

Not all girls at this time entered traditional prescribed careers, some did go on to university. The demographic change in the uptake of further education began in the 1970’s and now in the early C21st more women than men attend university (see Figure.1).
To reach a better understanding of the life course trajectories of women now at midlife, some insight can be gained from data related to educational achievements. Figure 1 (above) shows the comparative numbers of men and women entering higher education in successive cohorts.

It can be seen that in 1970 there were more men than women in every stage of further and higher education. In 1980 the only section where women outnumbered men was in full time further education. It should be noted that the numbers of men and women entering further and higher education has steadily increased over the last thirty years, but the percentage increase of women is significantly larger than that of men (Social Trends, 38). In 2006 the number of women at every stage of further and higher education outstripped the number of men (Social Trends, 38). These figures do not indicate the distribution of subjects studied at university. For example Abbott (1997) and Sharpe (1976) point out that in 1976 only 25% of those entering medical school were women,
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and professions such as law and accountancy were regarded as ‘male’ professions.

The majority of girls leaving school and progressing to further education, or a job prior to the mid 1970s, were doing so within the ‘norms’ of women’s work; becoming teachers, nurses, bank clerks and secretaries (Sharpe, 1976; Deem, 1980). Grint (2005) claims that the choices offered in career planning underlined that girls would need something to fall back on should they want to return to the work place after having children. Moreover, they would adopt a fragmented or two phase career; pre and post child rearing (Grint, 2005, 1998). As Weiner (1980) points out it seems for women there was a bias toward secretarial and clerical work, and men toward mechanics and engineering. Of this cohort, it is significant that 38% of women obtained a clerical/secretarial qualification compared to only 1.7% of men, yet 52% of men obtained a technical or mechanical qualification compared with less than 13% of women (Makepeace, 2003). Thus it seems, as Byrne (1978) points out, girls in many schools were funnelled into secretarial work, teaching and nursing and men into engineering. It seems girls were offered a ‘restricted cafeteria of choice’ (Byrne, 1978:16).

The women now at midlife were educated for, and conformed to, a work force deemed ‘natural’ at the time (Clarricoates, 1980). Grint (2005, 1998) reminds us that the economy of the UK in first half of the C20th was industrial and manufacturing. Post war production was based on a mode of production known as ‘Fordism’, a system of standardising production and consumption. This efficient standardised production was applied to many types of goods. However, manufacturing declined, new technologies and more globally diverse areas of
production replaced ‘Fordism’ and altered the face of industry in the UK. This move to ‘Post Fordism’ for Scott, (1995) was a much more abrupt transition than that of the industrial revolution or the post industrial changes. It was an economic system derived from particular technologies, affecting the entire social system and indeed a whole set of ideological norms. ‘…the stately progression of social schemas has been replaced by a paradigm shift’ (Scott, 1995: 91). The women now at midlife were caught up in the transitions in the economy and work place that occurred in the latter part of the C20th. In1983 29% of male employees’ jobs were in manufacturing, but by 2006 this had fallen to 17%. In the same period female employee jobs in the manufacturing sector fell from 18% to just 6%. The largest increase in jobs during this period was in the financial and business sector, which accounted for a fifth of male and female jobs by June 2006 (Social Trends 38). The work place changed from one of uniformity and predictability to one of diversity, choice and change (Grint, 2005, 1998; Scott, 1995)

Since 1975 the general picture of employment has changed considerably in Britain (Grint, 2005; Hakim, 2000). The work available has been reshaped by new technologies and new organisational patterns in work and industry. Walby (1986) claims that the decline in industry and manufacturing was beneficial to women overall because although employers still tended to discriminate against women, women were over represented in those industries least affected by unemployment. Where there was development of new modes of working, computer technology for example, more women already possessed keyboard skills than men (Makepeace, 2003). The shift in the economy towards service
industries and increased demands for white-collar jobs has forced unheard of levels of equality in these occupations (Grint, 1998; Hakim 2000). Furthermore:

‘…many service sector occupations include an element of ‘caring’ or personalised service. This privileges women’s skills at a interpersonal communication as well as making jobs more attractive to women.’ (Hakim, 2000: 63)

Hakim’s comments might be considered to underpin gender stereotyping of women as ‘carers’, yet implies that the education system which channelled girls into ‘women’s work’ served to give those women unique career opportunities when the economy changed. Grint (1998) claims that in the five years from 1983-88 there was an astonishing inversion of traditional job creation and destruction of old industries. However there was also job creation. In this period more than 0.75 million new part time jobs went to women. However as Warren (2001) points out in some societies where large numbers of women are employed on a part-time basis the ‘male bread winner role’ is underpinned. The lower wages paid to this group assume financial support from another source, moreover the women working part time remain responsible for the family caring in an unpaid capacity. There were over 0.5 million new full time jobs for women, contrasted with increase of part time jobs for men of under 0.25 million and a reduction by 0.1 million full time jobs for men. Warren (2001) supports Beck (2000) in claiming that women, by necessity in many cases, took on new roles to supplement the loss of their husband’s income and remained in or returned to the work force in greater numbers than in any previous peacetime generation. Women it seems had opportunities to work that were unavailable to previous cohorts. Furthermore, for the majority of families of this cohort and
younger, the woman’s income became vital to the family budget (Hakim, 2000; Beck, 2000; Warren, 2001).

Towards midlife: the lengthening transition

While it seems that the changing economy has affected the working lives of the women now at midlife, there are other reasons why her life may be different from that of other generations. The generation who, were the ‘new teenagers’ or adolescents are arguably now who I have colloquially termed the ‘middlescents’. Indeed, Muhlbauer and Chrisler (2007) have claimed that the societal shifts over the last four decades have resulted in the generation born in the 1950s ‘refusing to see themselves as ageing’ moreover constructing a ‘new middle aged identity’ (Muhlbauer and Chrisler, 2007:1). However it is also important to consider the population demographic, the pattern of which has altered over the latter half of the C20th. Some of these demographic changes need to be explored for their relevance to the contemporary experience of midlife.

Family ties

Figure 2 (below) shows the changing age profile of the population between 1971 and 2006, with the prediction for 2031. It is noticeable that the ‘shape’ of the demographic has changed. The broad base of the 1971 table indicates the increasing birth rate after the Second World War, sometimes known as the ‘Baby Boom’. This ‘bulge’ of ‘baby boomers’ is evident in the middle of the 2006/2031, model and those at midlife in contemporary society are within this grouping. It can be seen that there is now proportionally many more people in middle and late adulthood than in 1971(Social Trends, 38). There is a trend
toward increased longevity with an estimate from government actuaries that in 2003/5 on reaching 50 years of age, men could expect to live until 86 years and women until 90 years of age on average. This is on average 5 years longer for men and 4 years for women since the 1980/82 prediction (Social Trends, 37). It can be seen in Figure 2 that there were three times more people aged over 90 in 2002 than there were in 1971.

These statistics have interesting implications for the women now at midlife; they are likely to live for longer than any previous cohorts furthermore so are their parents. Statistics alone cannot shed light on experiences; neither do general trends expose underlying differentials. The average life expectancy differs significantly between areas within the UK, further, men and women from lower social classes, and different ethnic groups, have a shorter life expectancy than their middle and upper class white coevals (Acheson, 1998; Social Trends, 37; Marmot Review, 2010). It seems that individuals at midlife in the early C21st, in
the wealthier regions, who are white and of middle or upper classes are the ones most likely to live longer, and have parents alive and in good health.

The ‘telescopic’ society

However there are other demographic changes of significance, importantly the timing of child rearing. In a society with increasing longevity there may be a danger of overpopulation. There are two alternatives to over-crowding; population ‘stretching’ or ‘telescoping’ (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999:741). In a ‘stretched’ profile, childbirth is delayed amongst the younger generation, meaning there is a much greater chronological range between the generations. Individuals of the ‘telescopic’ society have their children at a young age, but have a lengthy period when they have no dependent children, no grandchildren and independent parents. This is the experience for many of the contemporary midlife cohort (Ferri and Smith, 2003; Lonborg, 2007; Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009).

During the 1970s there was a ‘right time’ to marry not found in any period before the second world war, and people married in a much narrower age band than before or since (Anderson, 1985:69). In 1971 the average age at first marriage was 25 years for men and 23 years for women; this has increased steadily reaching 32 years for men and 29 years for women in 2005 (Social Trends,37). Significantly in the 1970’s and early 1980’s the trend for this early marriage had already begun to change for the upper social classes. It seems that for the generation now at midlife the timing of marriage and childbirth was influenced by class status; those from the lower middle and skilled working class would anticipate marriage, whereas for those in the same generation from higher social classes marriage might be delayed in favour of education and career.
In 1971 the average age of first time motherhood was 24 years. This had risen to 28 years in 2006 (Social Trends, 38). Within this ‘average’ there are significant polarities. In the early 21st century in the UK, the teenage pregnancy rate remains high, yet middle class, highly educated women have delayed childbirth (McRae, 1999; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Warren, 2001). Births to women over thirty years of age are around 40%, with many women in managerial or professional positions delaying pregnancy even further, or remaining childless. This has implications for those reaching midlife; unlike previous generations, for many of current cohort, being 50 does not mean being a grandmother. They are part of the ‘telescopic’ generation (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999), they have a lengthier period of time after parenting responsibilities or ‘postmaternity’ (Gulette, 2004; Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009) than previous cohorts. It would be over simplistic to assume that all women had the same experience of family distribution nor did they all embrace the ‘contraceptive revolution’. However as Fodor and Franks, (1990) point out women in contemporary society are expected to live for at least thirty years after their children leave home. It is this possible ‘thirty year’ expanse of time that defines the ‘telescopic’ cohort.

Defining the cohort; a group within a group

It is evident from the literature reviewed so far that the women born in the 1950s have not all shared every experience. Moreover I am mindful that as Muhlbauer and Chrisler (2007) point out that there is ‘great variability within the generation that has been privileged to undergo the cultural transformations’ of the last five decades (Muhlbauer and Chrisler, 2007:2). Women at midlife in the millennium can be considered part of the ‘post war baby boom’. As shown in Figure 2 the ‘teenagers of the 1960s and 1970s formed a large group of the population.
Hedbidge (1979) claims that the large numbers of individuals of the same age, the growth in consumer spending and the development of media such as television and the music industry all contributed to make the ‘teenagers’ of the 1960s and 1970s a significant social group. Moreover Osgerby (1998) points out that women reaching midlife in the early C21st were born into a society in which ‘youth’ was becoming a distinct cultural entity. By the time this cohort was entering adolescence they were a recognised demographic group. Yet it is clear they could not all have experienced the social and cultural changes over their lives to date in the same way.

It is evident that those women born in the late 1950s, as with every other generation, are not all one homogenous group, with the same experiences of childhood, adulthood, education, working and family. The historic location may apply to all but individual life trajectories are likely to have been subject to the impact of social location and educational opportunity, which in turn impinges on individual agency. It seems therefore important to explore the defining parameters of this cohort.

Burnett (2003) recognises some confusion between the concept of cohort and generation, and suggests that although they may be taken in some instances as interchangeable a distinction can be made. A generation Burnett (2003) proposes is a group of individuals born within a specific time frame however a cohort has a much clearer point of entry; for example a group of women may all be born the same year and train as nurses, yet they will not all begin their training at the same time. The cohort would be defined by the point of entry to nurse training, and in this example would include individuals who started nursing at the same time, even if they did not share the year of birth.
Another view is that ‘generation is a structural term in kinship studies denoting the parent/child relationship’ (Pilcher, 1995: 5). However Burnett (2003) points out that a distinction must be made between this structural term and a ‘folk model’ term denoting shared cultural experiences and consequent world views that would be better referred to as cohorts; ‘the sixties’ generation, the ‘baby boomers’ or ‘Generation X’ for example. In other words for this research a cohort is a group born in the same year or within a five-year interval, who age together, but are also largely exposed to the same historical and cultural phenomena, perhaps a group within a generation. This research is about a cohort of women who were not only born within the same year parameters but were also exposed to similar expectations and education which may have differed from others of their generation.

It is the ‘telescopic’ nature of the generation spread that differentiates midlife experience of this generation from previous and possibly future ones. However it seems that this telescopic effect may not be evident in the lives of every member of the generation, but for a cohort within the generation. The cohort of interest to this study are the women who were educated to be the wives and mothers of industrial Britain and in accordance with the social expectation of their historical and social location had their children within a narrow time span. Therefore at midlife they have grown up children and an expectation of longevity unknown to previous cohorts. It might be possible to use social class stratifications, yet as (Roberts, 2001) reminds us although class is one of the most used terms in social research there is no agreed definition. Moreover studies of class for many years were ‘gender blind’, written as though women did not exist (Giddens, 1997). This could be problematic for research
specifically concerning women, however it seems that the social position of the families is influential in defining this cohort and this needs a further examination.

According to Radford (1998) the children of working class parents tend to opt for careers which are not too dissimilar to those of their fathers and children of professionals more likely to aspire to professional careers. Elston (1980) informs us that in the mid 1970s although only 25% of medical students were female the majority were drawn from upper and professional classes. Accountancy and architecture are further examples of professions where women were under represented and those who did pursue these careers were drawn from families with sufficient financial resources to fund the lengthy and expensive training (Silverstone, 1980; Wigfall, 1980). Anderson (1985) found that by the early 1980’s the professional and upper middle classes were delaying motherhood. This would indicate that the women from upper and professional classes are much less likely to be part of the ‘telescopic cohort’ than those drawn from other classes, as such may have a different experience of midlife. McRae (1999) reminds us that in the UK the teenage pregnancy rate is the highest in Europe, moreover that it is women from the unskilled class that are most likely to be teenage mothers. It might be assumed that the women in this class are not part of a telescopic spread of generations either and also have a different subjective experience of their midlife.

It is important to consider at this stage that the assumption of a class structure as an exact entity has its roots in a positivist- empiricist view of the world. Earlier in this chapter I acknowledged discomfort with psychological theories that assumed a linear or ‘true’ developmental process. Similarly with a notion of ‘class’ is seems problematical to assume a ‘true’ definition might be reached. It
seems rather than a ‘truism’ or a definite entity it important to recognise that ‘social class’ might be considered to be a set of discourses, or chains of meaning, based in language which ‘hold in place images of human beings divided from each other on the basis of different categories’ (Parker, 2005:88). These categories might include class, gender and/or race for example.

**Defining the ‘telescopic’ cohort**

Perhaps it is useful to define the class of the ‘telescopic’ generation of women in terms of the social expectations placed upon them by the dominant discourses of their historical and social location. It seems that the women who are around 50 years of age in the early C21st have lived through a period of social and economic change leading to many varied and diverse opportunities. Further it is clear that not all the women in this age group have had equal access to these opportunities and changes in lifestyle. It would be a mistake to assume that women are a homogenous group with similar aspirations or access to opportunities. For example the women who worked in manufacturing, without relevant transferable skills are likely to have been greatly disadvantaged by economic change and will have their own stories of change and adaptation. Moreover the women of this cohort who on leaving education entered professions such as medicine, law and accountancy have inevitably been influenced by the changing world of work. However arguably this will not be the same as the change for women who did not expect a ‘career’, or perhaps more significantly not educated to expect a career. Thus it seems that within the generation of women now at midlife there have been differing opportunities. Some will have expected to have a ‘girl’s’ job and were educated thus, yet with economic change they have possibly undergone a significant deviation from
their expected life trajectory. A woman now at midlife may be in a position to earn more money and pursue a more varied career than she ever expected, or alternatively she may not.

In family life for some grandparenthood may occur when their daughters are teenagers, financially dependent, ‘trapped in the benefit system’ and in need of financial and social support from their parents (Lewis, 1992:32). For many however, grand-parenting will occur only when their daughters have well established careers and financial security. Unlike previous generations some of the women at midlife in contemporary British society are part of the ‘telescopic’ generation. They conformed by entering ‘girls jobs’ and became wives and mothers at a young age, when society changed, they had the opportunity to change with it. These women may be free to explore options unavailable to previous cohorts resulting in a chance to make lifestyle choices unconsidered by, and unavailable to, previous generations. They may be free from direct parental responsibilities and have a window of time, due to the ‘telescopic spread of generations, which makes their cohort unique.

Research Aims

This research therefore explores the lives of women born in the latter half of the C20th who were educated to be the wives, mother, carers and supporters of industrial Britain for whom the horizons widened. I have metaphorically identified this cohort of women the ‘telescopic cohort’. The aim of this research was to explore the midlife experience of this cohort of women.
The specific objectives for the research were:

- to gain social and historical understanding of the formative years of a contemporary cohort of women at midlife,
- to gain an appreciation of how women at midlife experience and make sense of their life course
- to obtain insight into how women experience this ‘telescopic’ spread of generations
- To reach a comprehensive understanding of a specific cohort of midlife women at the start of the C21st
Chapter 2: Devising a theoretical framework

This chapter considers how the experience of the ‘telescopic’ cohort might best be understood. Current theory and past research posed several important questions which I had to address when developing the theoretical framework. It seemed evident that the perspective adopted in this research must allow the experience of a contemporary cohort of women to be explored through the lens of their social and historical location. The theoretical perspective developed would inform the methodology and give rise to the methods used in the research (Crotty, 1998). More specifically:

‘the process of knowing involves employing a practical method, that is derived from an epistemology (theory of knowledge) which is in turn grounded in an ontology (set of assumptions about the nature of life’ (McLeod, 2001:55)

McLeod (2001) reminds us that the questions asked in research can only provide certain answers. Thus the method chosen had to be appropriate for exploring the experience of women and addressing the questions posed. For example an empirical study of the average age a woman is likely to experience menopause would give no insight into whether and to what extent this impacts upon an individual. Likewise a case study of one woman’s experience of combining her career with her role as inter-generational family carer would reveal little by way of statistical knowledge about the number, or demographic profile, of individuals undertaking these dual roles. Both these research areas would consider women but they address different questions, with differing epistemologies. It seemed important at this stage to be clear about not only
Devising a theoretical framework

what kind of knowledge this research was intended to explore and what knowledge might be generated, but also what could be found with the approach chosen. Moreover it needed to be clear how I, as the researcher, might impact on the research and the outcomes generated. In short the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the selected methodology had to be clear before the question could be addressed.

Life course theory: an alternative to ‘ages and stages’?

Early sociological studies conceptualised life ages and stages in terms of a ‘life cycle’ (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1961, both cited by Giele and Elder, 1998) however there are some limitations with this framework. A life ‘cycle’, implies a continuous revolution of birth, growth, and a journey towards decline. Further; a life cycle assumes an inevitable and determined progress through developmental stages, which as discussed in Chapter 1 may limit the exploration of ageing in a changing social world.

Moving from a notion of a cycle, Baltes et al. (1980) offer a ‘life span’ or life course approach encompassing a more general orientation to development. Rather than a particular theory, ‘life course’ is characterised by a number of propositions, including but not exclusively, that development is a life-long process and is an expression of biological, social, historical and cultural process (Rossi, 1980; Hareven and Adams, 1982; Allatt, 1987). For Elder (1994) the life course represented a major change in how human lives could be studied, he suggested at that time it was a paradigm shift in methodology. He proposed that the growth in life course studies was part of a general conceptual trend that brought time, process and context to the forefront in theory and analysis.
Furthermore, that the salient issues in the study of lives are the social forces which shape the life course and the developmental consequences. As this present research had committed to exploring the social changes across the lives of a cohort of women, and the consequences of these to their midlife experience, a notion of ‘life course’ seemed a promising start.

Life course approaches allow for a departure from the notion of ‘multiple turns’ and research indicating that life experience is relatively fixed, or an inevitable series of biological ages and stages. The notion of life course allows an exploration of how a life stage is positioned within an entire life continuum (Hareven, 1982, cited by Pilcher, 1995). Furthermore, life course developmental psychology offers a ‘potentially integrative umbrella under which different aspects of development can be explored and understood’ (Sugarman, 1986; 13). Perhaps as Elder (1994) offered; ‘… [in concept] the life course generally refers to the interweaving of age-graded trajectories that are subject to changing conditions and future options and to short term transitions’ (Elder, 1994: 5). In other words as an individual ages the changing social and historical circumstances can be seen to impact on their life choices and expectations, each one affecting the next part of their experience. Moreover, the life course has defined a common field of enquiry that can explore the impact of changing societies on developing lives. It seemed that a life course approach would allow an exploration of the experience of midlife within the changing social world. A life course perspective has been used in many studies including; the exploration of age stratification studies (Elder, 1974), inter-generational studies (Burton and Bengston, 1985), women’s well being at midlife (Stewart and Vanderwater, 1999) and issues of women’s health (Kuh and Hardy, 2002). More recent
Devising a theoretical framework

studies include transitions into retirement (Wang et al., 2008), a study of women’s career patterns (Huang et al., 2007), an exploration of relationships in old age (Blieszner, 2006), young adults and mental health (Stein et al., 2007) and continuity in psychological constructs (Fraley and Roberts, 2005).

This seemed a promising starting point to explore the experience of a cohort of women living through a time of social and demographic change. For a contemporary group of women, for whom the expected life stages have not been ‘fixed,’ their experience does not necessarily reflect the social ‘ages and stages’ applicable to previous cohorts. It appeared perhaps life course theory would allow consideration of how the economic world changed and the job market altered thus affecting the lived experience of the women of the telescopic cohort. As Riley (1998) points out; an individual cannot be considered in isolation from the society she lives in and that social structures and individual lives are conceptually distinct yet inter-dependent dynamisms (Riley, 1998). However a note of caution was needed as one author wrote; ‘the life course cannot be conceived of as tabula rasa, something which culture can write on at will’ (Featherstone, 1994:72). There are limits to how culture can be inscribed onto nature, limits which are defined by the particular structure and processes of body and life, the physical ageing process will still occur. A theoretical framework using life course theory would need to accommodate the inevitable physical ageing process alongside social and cultural change.

**Modelling the life course**

The next step in the research was to find a way of conceptualising the experience of a cohort of women that gave adequate credence to their historical
location yet allowed an individual exploration of subjective experience. As Runyan (1982) pointed out there are different approaches within a life course perspective offering different insights. For example a *micro* perspective of the life course focuses on the processes influencing the course of experiences within lives; the social and historical context is a background against which individuals act. A *macro* perspective would be more of a sociological study placing more emphasis on the changing social demographic and historical conditions. This research, whilst interested in the impact of social and historical change, is primarily a psycho-social study concerned with the subjective experience of women and will therefore assume a micro perspective of the life course.

Several theorists have devised models to illustrate the interrelationship between the individual and their social roles over the life course (for example; Super, 1980; Rapoport and Rapoport, 1975; Runyan, 1982). For example the life course has been depicted as a ‘rainbow’ representing the ageing individual and life stages as an arch of growth and decline, and indicates the salience of social roles over this time (Super, 1980).

Figure 3 depicts Super’s (1980) model of the life course, incorporating life stages in relation to the expected ages and social roles of individuals. This is perhaps a useful model to encapsulate the social roles over a life career but offers little to identify social change or individual choice. Further it depicts the life course as uni-directional heading towards decline.
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Another representation is a ‘triple helix’ model of different developmental domains, recognising the entwining of the individual time trajectories of occupation, family and leisure. Figure 4 represents this triple helix and the intersection of trajectories. This model was devised from one used by Rapaport et al. (1978) in an examination of leisure and family life, and has been modified to explore the career paths of women (see White, 1995; Surjani et al., 2008). This is a useful model to illustrate how different developmental trajectories might intersect at salient points of the life course. For example at midlife in family time, one might find children have left home, whereas in occupational time, a career change may happen by choice or redundancy, further, in leisure time one might have to stop playing an exerting sport or be in a position to take up a new more time consuming one.
Figure 4: Triple Helix Model Rapoport and Rapoport (1980)

This triple helix model could help reach an understanding of an individual in the here and now but is less useful to explore the social forces that lead to this point.

Missing or underplayed from the ‘rainbow’ model (Super, 1980) and the ‘triple helix’ model (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) is an emphasis on the importance of historical time and social change. Hareven (1982) takes a life course perspective when researching the interrelationships between individual and collective family behaviour, as they constantly change over the duration of lives, and in the context of historical conditions. She suggests that the individual passes through personal and historical time and the familial relationships add the dimension of family time. For Hareven an understanding of the synchronisation of these different levels of timing is essential to the investigation.
Devising a theoretical framework between discrete lives and the larger processes of social change. Harris (1987) offers the view that life course is the intersection between personal time and historical time, and a means of studying how people constitute and are constituted by the historical process. Chapter 1 explored some of the social changes that have occurred across the life course of the ‘telescopic’ cohort. A conceptualisation of the life course that incorporates an acknowledgment of historical timing would appear to provide a means to explore the impact of these social changes on women’s lives.

**Transitions and trajectories**

Central to a life course perspective are notions of transitions, between ages and social roles, and the context of social structure and historical change (Pilcher, 1995). For the ‘telescopic’ cohort perhaps the transition to ‘worker’ from ‘student’ in the context of changing educational needs, or the transition to motherhood in the context of economic commitments, might impact on their experience of midlife. A transition may include a change in the assumptions an individual had made about his or herself, which has required a corresponding change in behaviour or relationships (Hopson, 1976). A consequence of transitions across the life course is the trajectory. ‘Trajectories are long term patterns of stability and change, often involving multiple transitions that can be reliably differentiated from alternate patterns’ (George, 1993: 385). A woman’s experience of midlife would not be seen in isolation but in terms of how it is placed in her life course. The preceding transitions and trajectories can be identified, and how these transitions and trajectories impacted on the experience of midlife might be uncovered (Hareven, 1982). By considering the full life course the analysis is sensitive to the consequences of early transitions.
for later experiences and events. As Elder (1994) points out; developmental outcomes are shaped by social trajectories. For the women of the ‘telescopic’ cohort taking a life course perspective would enable an exploration of their current subjective understanding within the context of the changing world across their lives. Moreover this perspective would facilitate an exploration of how each transition impacted on the next leading to their contemporary social location.

Runyan (1982) offers a diagrammatic representation (Figure 5) of how during a transition the individual interacts with social forces and the resulting behaviour impacts on the next trajectory.

![Figure 5: The dynamic interaction of the person and the situation giving rise to behaviour. Adapted from Runyan (1982)](image)

Runyan proposes human behaviour is not random nor determined solely by societal factors, but is a result of an interaction between the environment, the individual, and subsequent choices made. For Runyan (1982) life course
trajectories are dependent on these and will be continually in tension with individual, historical and social time.

In this model *historical* time can be the particular situation at any given time, for example during the historical time of 1980s there was a prolonged strike by coal miners. For an individual whose income was dependent on coal mining to support a family this strike may have had serious economic consequences. Conversely however those in the police force who may have experienced unprecedented levels of ‘overtime pay’ may have had a completely different experience of this historical time. In turn this may have impacted on the social time of these individuals, those with extra, or overtime, income may have found the opportunity to start a family thus moving into the social time of ‘new parent’. Those without income may have delayed this transition. Thus future trajectories will be influenced by these transitions; for example at the individual time of 50 years old, one woman may still be in the social time of ‘new parent’, whilst another that of ‘post-maternity’ or ‘grandparent’ (Gullette, 2004).

The application of this model in this research would enable an exploration of how a woman may have had to change her assumptions about herself and her expectations as her social world changed around her. The consequence of one transition resulting in a life trajectory which affected the subsequent transitions can be revealed. For example, for a young woman, the transitions from education into the work force will have resulted in a particular career trajectory, which may in turn have been influenced by a transition into motherhood. The trajectory resulting from motherhood may have been itself influenced by some social changes. If for example the woman had chosen to be a ‘stay at home mother’, in keeping with her expectations on leaving education, she may have
faced the unexpected transition of returning to the work force as opportunities arose, and economic expectations altered. Conversely a transition into higher education and a professional career on leaving school might result in the decision to delay a transition to motherhood, producing a different trajectory, perhaps resulting in a level of economic expectation affecting future transitions. Either of these transitions and trajectories may have led the woman to change previously held assumptions about herself, and cause reconsideration of future transitions in the light of these. However it seemed hasty to dismiss the ‘triple helix’ conceptualisation of life course as it might prove a useful representation of the intersection of social roles at different points of the life course. Thus it seemed aspects of both models of the life course were useful to reveal how women subjectively understand their ‘midlife’ selves.

Life course theory in general proved to be a good starting point to develop a framework, yet a clearer direction to develop the methodology was needed. A central concern within this piece of research was that the experience of women at midlife in contemporary society is not the same as that of previous generations. Embedded in this is the assumption that the experience of a life course is dependent on historical timing. Perhaps that:

‘...people's lived experience is shaped by historical and geographic location, relations or social ties to others, variations in the timings of biographical events, and individual agency or personal control’

(Elliott, 2005:176)

This suggests that the contemporary experience of ‘midlife’ is shaped by these factors. Of particular interest in the above citation is the reference to historic
location, timings and individual agency. These three are of particular relevance to the cohort of women I have termed the ‘telescopic’ generation. To try to reach an understanding of their lives in the ‘here and now’ it seems important to locate their present within their past. In other words there is an assumption that the subjective experience of the cohort of women cannot be isolated from their historical background. Thus it became appropriate to have two main strands of exploration; experience and context. This dichotomy allows a framework to be developed using life course theory that explores the interplay between the context of lives giving rise to the transitions that influenced the trajectories and the experience of those trajectories. The context or background can be divided into two areas of concern; demographic patterns and social practices, and the dominant discourses of social and gender roles across the life course of the participants. Their contemporary subjective experience might then be explored in relation to this experiential location.

What is ‘woman’?

Life course theory provided a promising conceptual framework yet there were other considerations in developing the theoretical framework, namely what kind of knowledge the theoretical framework intended to make available. It was necessary at this stage to explore some ontological and epistemological assumptions and how these might inform the research design. It was also clear at this point that this research is a ‘feminist’ work. Feminist research is based on women’s own knowledge. A female perspective is to be regarded as central to the research, not as an additional or comparative viewpoint (Wilkinson, 1996:2). Thus as part of the process of developing a theoretical framework for the methodology an exploration was needed of the complicated, inter-
connected and opposing theories of positivism, modernism, post modernism, constructionism and feminism.

‘Woman’ in a positivist world

The basis of psychological and sociological enquiry was from an early stage modelled on the empiricism of natural science, indeed early psychology was defined as the science of experience, it seemed psychology was to ‘uncover facts about the inner world of consciousness’ (Ashworth, 2003:5) There was an assumption that there is a definite truth to be discovered and a real world that might be defined. This ontological position is one of being as opposed to becoming and real as opposed to relative. A theoretical framework informed by a positivist empiricist epistemology might be considered to be ‘modernist’ and defined thus:

‘modernism in the sense of modernity and modernisation evinces great faith in the ability of reason to discover absolute forms of knowledge…modernisation is synonymous with progress’ (Crotty, 1998:185)

This implies the realist ontology of a world of absolute truths, scientifically testable hypotheses, and the ongoing possibility of finding even more accurate knowledge. Modernism assumes progress is always possible (Ashworth, 2003). A woman at midlife from a modernist perspective would be defined by objective and measurable criteria, and in her complete form waiting to be discovered. This view assumes all women are somewhat homogenous, that there is an essential ‘woman’ who might be classified according to scientific, verifiable ‘truths’ and perhaps be defined by a broad physiological, sociological or
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psychological categorisation. This is already problematical for this research where there is an assertion that women are *not* a homogenous group. Women’s experience of class position, race and the timing of life events such as becoming mothers and grandmothers are some of the ways that challenge the notion of the homogeneity of ‘women’. This research concerns a cohort of women within a generation, the ‘telescopic’ cohort (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999). It is inappropriate to consider this group of women as being ‘all the same’.

Before dismissing positivism and modernism it is worth considering what these might offer to an exploration of the experience of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women. Perhaps the most simplified approach within this objective epistemology would be to consider woman as being an amalgam of genetic material, or indeed a biological ‘fact’ (see for example Ridley, 1999). A similarly determinist and reductionist model of being a woman would be to assume that a ‘woman’ is basically a product of socio-biology and evolutionary processes. These explanations suggest that there is a universal human nature based in evolved physiological mechanisms (Barkow et. al., 1992, cited by Ashworth, 2000). However, as Abbott and Wallace (1997) point out: defining a woman by her biological and reproductive function infers that women are ‘closer to nature’ than men and this leads to an unreasonable justification for male domination (Abbott and Wallace, 1997:10). This theory is obviously more attractive to some people than it is to others and is at odds with the experience of women revealed in the literature reviewed. It positions women as necessarily weaker and less powerful than men and, by suggesting this is essential femininity, ignores the social and historical location of women. It seems there is little room
within a theory of psycho-social determinism for women to be individuals or to explore different ways of experiencing their midlife.

This is a very basic assessment of ‘woman’ as a production of evolution and a somewhat naïve consideration of genetic inheritance and the influence of culture. It became clear in Chapter 1 that within the literature a woman at midlife is often defined by her menopausal body and physical ageing (McQuaide, 1998; Ussher, 2006; Gulleter, 2004; Chrisler, 2007). This physical definition is reflected within some contemporary medico-social models that would position a woman objectively in the world as a product of her physiological processes. A woman within this reductionist biological model can be objectified and measured, she is a being who although constantly changing is doing so within the precise parameters of femaleness as defined by biochemistry. This medicalised biochemical woman of contemporary Britain may bear little relation to the notion of ‘woman’ of other times or places, yet the reductionist perspective of ‘woman’ might hold considerable influence for how ‘middle aged woman’ is currently conceptualised. It seems unlikely that a methodology developed within a positivist epistemology would offer a helpful insight into the subjective experience of women at midlife. However, whilst striving to find an alternative to ‘women’ being a homogenous group some caution is needed. As Featherstone (1994) reminded us, women do physically age there is a biological process that is inevitable. Importantly for this research a framework was needed that might reveal what women subjectively understand of these physical changes. Furthermore the figures relating to work, education and population demography have already been discussed in statistical terms. To reject all notions of a ‘real’ world and measurable ‘facts’ might be counter productive.
Devising a theoretical framework

Nonetheless, it seems that a conceptual framework situated within a positivist epistemology would not offer a comprehensive insight to the subjective experience of women. It is true to say that a statistical exploration of demographic detail has offered contextual information on the lives of women. However another framework is needed to explore the context of their lived experience and how their lives have followed the trajectories across their life course, furthermore to access their subjective understanding of midlife. The approach generated must recognise the women as individuals and not a homogenous group, nor privilege one experience or understanding over another. Moreover it must enable an individual’s experience of ‘midlife’ to be considered within the context of her historical and social times across her life course. Thus it seems an alternative to a ‘modernist’ approach, with an assumption of one discoverable truth, must be developed.

An alternative to the modernist world view is the ‘postmodern’ world view. This can mean different things in different disciplines however broadly as Burr (2003) puts it:

‘Postmodernism rejects the idea that the world can be understood in terms of grand theories and meta-narratives and emphasises instead the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation dependent ways of life’ (Burr, 2003:12)

In rejecting the notion of absolute truths one view suggests postmodernism ‘...commits itself to ambiguity, relativity, fragmentation, particularity and discontinuity’ (Crotty, 1998: 185). It is evident that concepts of ‘post modernism’ are varied and complicated. For some authors the term ‘postmodernism is a
misnomer as by some interpretations the concepts pre date modernism (Foster, 1983; Kvale, 1992). For the purposes of this research a reasonable compromise of interpretation might be that: ‘modernity’ might be defined as an assumption that ongoing progress is possible and expected that there is ‘a non negotiable, solid truth or reality about which it is possible to attain even more accurate knowledge’ (Ashworth, 2000; 150). However postmodernity in contrast:

‘can be viewed as a cultural movement for which such fixity of criteria of validity of reasoning in all realms is no longer accepted, and for which the idea of progress has nothing to refer to, because there is no standard against which to judge an innovation of theory, practice product or policy which would enable one to see that it is an improvement over what previously existed’ (Ashworth, 2000: 150 original italics).

Without a ‘standard against to judge’ much of the existing corpus of literature of midlife must be questioned. The ‘modernist’ theoretical frameworks for example of Erikson (1963), Levinson (1978, 1996) Gould (1978) assume how women will ‘be’ on a linear, progressive, developmental continuum. In a postmodern theoretical framework there is no ‘real’ way for a woman to ‘be’. There is no notion of progress because there is nothing to which to refer. Moreover in postmodern thinking psychology can no longer present itself as outside society looking in, but rather as one of the ‘discourses’ within society (Ashworth, 2000).

**Constructing ‘woman’**

From a position of objectivism the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ lies within the object under consideration, irrespective of subjective rationalisation. If an objective
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epistemology is used in this research the subjective experience of the participants could be subsumed by a deterministic view of their midlife experience. An alternative to objectivism can be found in ‘constructionism’ where meaning is not ‘discovered’ but ‘constructed’ (Crotty, 1998:42)

A constructionist perspective is that:

‘All knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world’ (Crotty, 1998:42)

A ‘woman’ within a constructionist epistemology is not an objectively definable, predetermined entity waiting to be discovered, but a construction of how individuals engage with the world. Underpinning constructionism is the assumption that nothing can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it. Furthermore a constructionist perspective assumes there is a world to be experienced, the world and its objects are in themselves meaningless yet they are our partners in the generation of meaning (Crotty, 1998).

Burr (2003) purports that human experience, including perception, is mediated, historically, culturally and linguistically, never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but an individual’s reading of it. This suggests knowledge is ‘plural’ rather than unknowable. As Willig (2001) points out rather than one ‘knowledge’ there are ‘knowledges’. It seems within a constructionist framework there is an opportunity to explore how a woman of the ‘telescopic’ cohort ‘read’ her environment, what she drew on and what influenced her life trajectories.
Chapter 2

The notions of how a woman can ‘be’ within a constructionist epistemology are dependent on the interactions between the woman and the world she inhabits. Of interest perhaps for a study of ‘woman’ in the early C21st might be not so much how ‘woman’ is positioned within a collective generation and transmission of meaning, but rather how she herself makes sense of being ‘woman’. Modernist science might believe there is a discoverable ‘truth’ but in postmodernity ‘truth’ is subject to the community discourses and not universal, non contingent discoveries (Gergen, 1994). In this research which utilises life course theory it seems that the notion that a woman’s subjective understanding is contingent on the world she inhabits, and moreover has inhabited over her life course is a very useful starting point.

Woman as ‘other’

Although constructionism might address some of the issues raised by a positivist epistemology it is necessary to explore the centrality of women to this research. It is interesting to consider the existential phenomenology of Sartre (1969) and Merleau Ponty (1962) who proposed that man is forced to define who he is through living, while objects are what they are until destroyed. This ontological position suggests that if one is not one’s own self one is ‘other than self’ and this dissociated ‘other’ is a threat. Sartre wrote of ‘man’ and ‘men’ and it was fellow existentialist de Beauvoir (1949) who developed this distinction of ‘self’ and ‘other’ to highlight the relationship between men and women. For de Beauvoir (1997:16) women are ‘located as the second sex’ where man is positioned as ‘self’ and woman is ‘other’. From this position a woman is ‘not a man’ and is a second class citizen. The contribution of de Beauvoir offers a way to understand how women may have been sidelined, ignored or considered
inferior in the work of other psychologists, the ‘male-stream’ psychologists (Abbot and Wallace, 1997).

The ‘ages and stages’ theories of psychological development reviewed in Chapter 1 were mostly written by men about men (Erikson, 1953, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Gould, 1978). Indeed it is worthy of note that much early psychology was based entirely on a male perspective (Wilkinson, 1996). Psychologists were mainly male and psychological experimentation was producing ‘evidence’ of women as ‘other’ and inferior. The experience of men was taken to be the experience of all. Weisstein (1993) suggested psychology had nothing to say about what women were really like because the discipline worked entirely from the male point of view.

**Feminist perspectives**

Abbott and Wallace (1997) found the assumptions from “male-stream” research to be beyond altering to suit ‘other’ than male. Feminist researchers have attempted to redress this imbalance in different ways. The design underlying the methodology must include a consideration of how different feminist approaches inform or challenge different theoretical assumptions. It must be noted that there are many, often contradictory, feminist perspectives and that ‘feminist psychology is fundamentally a contest over meanings …what questions can be asked and what constitutes legitimate answers (Kitzinger, 1991:49 cited by Gergen 2001). Harding (1986) distinguished three philosophical feminist epistemologies, Gergen (2001) drew on these to explore feminist approaches within psychology and categorised these as: feminist empiricist, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodern theories (Gergen, 2001: 11).
As Gergen (2001) points out, feminist empiricist psychologists have tried to counter sexist practices in psychology; by highlighting how women’s issues have been ignored in mainstream journals, by pointing out how gender as a variable has been ignored to the advantage of men and how much research initially carried out on men made women ‘other’ and lesser (see for example McHugh et al., 1986). From a feminist empiricist perspective, women fare best in society if granted equal status with men and therefore women should not be subordinated by segregation. However, as Gergen (2001) notes, merely by highlighting that research must not bias against women positions the researcher as not ‘neutral’ and the researcher is therefore evident within the research. This is recognition of how problematical it is to assume that any research can be entirely independent of the researcher. By defining any parameters in research the researcher is influencing the nature of the research and therefore what the research might reveal. Furthermore, gender-neutral enquiry implicitly serves to conform to the masculine traits and traditions within psychology.

Another critique of the feminist empiricist approach highlights the ‘servant/master’ relationship between the subject and the researcher and suggests this replicates the patriarchal relations within society (Gergen, 2001).

To address the male bias, some authors have taken a feminist standpoint position supporting a view that knowledge is derived from experience (see for example Harraway, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Smith, 1991). Developing the notion that traditional science cannot claim universality because it is ‘men’s science’, feminist standpoint pioneers called for an alternative position that did not claim universality or the ‘God’s eye view’ but one that represented women’s knowledge (Haraway, 1988). However, by suggesting that
Devising a theoretical framework

women have a ‘different voice’ there is danger of implying that all women have the same ‘voice’ once again assuming women to be a single homogenous group. The problem remains that there is an underlying notion of determinism in psychological development and other epistemological positions may be more helpful to this research. It seems that whilst acknowledging that this research is informed by ‘feminism’ the feminist positions informed by positivist or essentialist epistemologies are not helpful in addressing the aims of the research. It will be necessary to return to this issue before the theoretical framework and methodology can be fully developed.

An interim summary

Life course theory seems a useful way to consider the lives of the ‘telescopic’ cohort in the light of historical change, social ties and personal trajectories. However it is recognised that the ontological and epistemological position adopted within the research will influence ‘what can be known’ about the experience of this cohort of women. It seems a modernist, linear theoretical perspective might limit the potential of the research by the assumption that there is a ‘truth’ a ‘reality’ and a ‘right answer’ to any questions raised. Thus a constructionist epistemology might offer an alternative and allow an exploration without an assumption of ‘linear’ development. However if there is an assumption that world is entirely constructed and there is no ‘real world’, if all is discourse and relative (Edwards, 2003), there is little room to consider the ‘reality’ of ageing bodies or the constrictions of social structures for example. Indeed the parameters used to define the telescopic cohort would no longer be appropriate. This research began by assuming that social change across a life course might influence subjective experience of midlife. If everything is ‘relative’
and nothing is ‘real’ the assumption that the same social change applies to all the participants in this research would have to be revised. It seems that a constructionist epistemology is appropriate whilst acknowledging that a life course perspective assumes that women exist within certain constraints, for example physical ageing and the historical and cultural changes to social structures.
Chapter 3: Developing a methodology

The first two chapters have outlined the rationale for this research, and argued the case for adopting a feminist life course approach, for the exploration of the subjective experience of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women in contemporary UK society. The previous chapter introduced the notion that the philosophical underpinning of a theoretical framework dictates ‘what can be known’. Consequently it is imperative in this chapter to make clear ontological and epistemological positions, and therefore assumptions within the proposed methodology, that inform the development of the framework. Moreover how a feminist perspective informs the research framework, and what this implies for me, the researcher.

There has been debate about the relative merits of qualitative versus quantitative methods in social sciences which Beck (2006) likened to the worship of alternative Gods. As an overarching aim of this research is to explore the subjective experience of midlife, and qualitative research is mainly concerned with meaning it seems that qualitative methods should be adopted. However as life course theory calls for the lived life to be explored in context, and involves exploring numerical evidence of demographic change some quantitative methods will be needed. Recently there has been an increase in the popularity of ‘mixed method’ research (Bergman, 2008) and it seems the ‘two cultures’ (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006) may have found some common ground. It would be an exaggeration to claim this research adopts a comprehensively ‘mixed methods’ approach however some quantitative data is
drawn on to reach a better understanding of the lived life of the ‘telescopic’ cohort.

**The turn to language**

The previous chapter highlighted that a methodology informed by a ‘post modernist’ epistemology would allow a subjective exploration of the midlife experience and challenge the essentialist notion of linear development from a positivistic understanding. The suggestion that individuals are ‘constructed’ appeared to be a useful starting point. Moreover it seems that ‘the study of everyday language use or discourse has become one of the major tenets of a new paradigm in psychology’ (Harré and Langenhove, 1999: 1). Emerging from the notion of individuals as constructors or perceivers is the question of how this construction or perception might take place. Ashworth (2003) reminds us that three main issues arise. Firstly that language and other cultural sign systems have especial importance as a means by which individuals construct reality. Secondly that a person is understood less as an individual and more as a member of society, and thirdly that the psychologist is very much part of the cultural construction. These all have implications for how the experience of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women can be understood and what part I, the researcher, play in this research.

From the work of Mead (1934) the notion emerges that the use of language, or more generally a symbol system, allows the development of the mind. For Mead (1934) the mind and body are not separate as in a Cartesian dualism but are both socially produced. The infant internalises the language and gestures, of firstly the mother, then wider society, to establish a system of ‘meaning’.
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Meanings thereafter are evolved from cultural symbols including language. The symbols being internalised and used as means of interaction can be considered to be discourse. In this context a discourse can be defined as ‘spoken interaction, written material of all kinds, and meaningful actions…referred to broadly as text’ (Ashworth, 2000:138). For Potter and Wetherell (1987) social texts do not merely reflect or mirror pre-existent subjects, events or categories but actively construct these. This highlights the question of ‘what process of construction the researchers themselves employed in coming up with the findings they have presented’ (Ashworth, 2003:19).

**Structuralism and poststructuralism**

The ‘turn to language’ in psychology reflected an interest in socio linguistics within the broader academies of anthropology and sociology. Perhaps the most significant early work relevant to psychology was from Saussure et al. (1974) who understood language to be dependent on ‘signs and signifiers’, where neither has intrinsic meaning but can only be understood in relation to each other. For example water can be understood as not a beer and, ‘beer and water can be understood as not cheese or bread or indeed a dog. This theoretical perspective assumes underlying structures to language which underpin knowledge and understanding. This structuralist approach although accepting that subjectivity and identity are understood by language, also assumes fixed and ‘real’ underlying understandings. The problem for this research is the structuralist premise that once meaning is located within the sign or signifier it may become ‘fixed’ and change is no longer possible. Formulating a methodology to explore subjectivity across a life course it seems ‘fixing’ understandings in signs and signifiers of age, social expectations and social
processes would imply that change would not be possible and identity and subjective understanding if ‘unchangeable’ might prove problematic when considering women’s lives across a life course.

Underpinning social construction is the assumption that communities create understanding through language practices and new ‘discourses’ are formed as we interact with each other. Moreover within this postmodern thought is the notion that knowledge is not determined by logic or rationality but by the ‘twists and turns of language’ (Crossley, 2000:26). It seems that a theoretical framework which recognises the constructive power of language is a starting point, yet an essentialist notion of identity would not address the research aim of exploring subjective understanding. Poststructuralism seems to offer an alternative. The ‘poststructuralist’ movement is not against structuralism but perhaps a useful definition is:

‘poststructuralism retains commitment to de Saussure’s view that the meaning of words derives from their relationship to one another and not from any postulated relationship to non-linguistic reality’ (Crotty, 1998:205)

Subjectivity is central to poststructuralism. This is a crucial difference from humanist approaches to self which presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual (for example Rogers, 1967; Maslow, 1970). This essence is unique, fixed and a coherent subjectivity as opposed to a poststructuralist subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and constantly reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak. Moreover as Gavey (2002, drawing on Hollway,
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1984) points out poststructuralism challenges the ‘individual- social dualism which…characterised…traditional psychology’ (Gavey, 2002:432)

However it seems that the term poststructuralist does not have one fixed meaning but is generally applied to a range of theoretical positions developed from the work of for example Althusser and Brewster (1971), Derrida et al. (1973), Derrida and Spivak, (1976), Foucault (1978, 1979) and Derrida (1981). Moreover not all poststructuralist theories are the same and not all are useful to feminism (Henwood, 1998).

**Feminism and poststructuralism**

Importantly for this research is the suggestion that feminist research is a ‘praxis’ or ‘a theory that connects experience and action’ (Stanley, 1990). This seems an important feature when taking a life course approach to researching the lives of women. The conceptual framework must accommodate an exploration of the context of the lived life in addition to the subjective experience of the participating women. It seems an alternative to a feminist empiricist or standpoint position must be considered, and postmodern feminist concepts surely challenge both feminist empiricist and some feminist standpoint epistemologies. In a constructed world there is no place for essentialist notions of what is woman, either from an empirical positivist or from a humanist perspective. Gill (1998) reminds us that although ‘there is no single feminist position, but rather many diverse perspectives’, most feminists share a critique of traditional social science research, and furthermore have challenged the notion that the producer of the knowledge is irrelevant (Gill, 1998: 23). However it seems notions of postmodern feminism are diverse. Hollway (1984) and
Hollway and Jefferson (2000) for example take a poststructuralist perspective which assumes that language is a system always existing in historically specific discourses. Analysing discourse appears to offer a methodology for exploring the subjective understanding of the ‘telescopic’ cohort at their contemporary individual, social and historical time, and therefore is appropriate for a feminist life course approach. Moreover it seemed a useful method might be developed to explore material from an early part of the life course of this ‘telescopic’ cohort for what this might reveal about the context of their life course.

**Discourse analysis: the pros and cons**

Discourses might be considered to be a set of constructions that make available a certain way of seeing the world. For Parker (1992) there are a variety of discourses within society which implicitly shape the way we see ourselves and the world. In other words:

‘A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories statements and so on which in some way produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of person’ (Burr, 2003: 64).

Discourse analysis is a qualitative method of analysis which has emerged from the ‘turn to language’ in many fields of research (Willig, 2001). Discourse analysis assumes that many different versions of events are potentially possible, and surrounding each event, person or article there are several alternate discourses or versions of the ‘truth’. In other words discourses construct rather than reflect reality. Discourse analysis challenges cognitive psychology theory with an alternative way of conceptualising language. This
methodology offers an insight into the construction of social reality. Hollway (1984) made an interesting contribution to an understanding of discourse in psycho-social research. She identified three discourses of heterosexuality: ‘the have/hold’ the ‘male sex drive’ and the ‘permissive’, through these she offered a way for gender difference to be explored. Drawing on Hollway (1984) it seems discourses might be identified that were made available to women, who are now at midlife, across their life course. It seems that a useful insight into the subjective experience of women at midlife, and of the historical and cultural context of their life course might be gained by exploring discourses.

The methodology for this research will be a discourse analysis, which will focus upon the discursive resources available to a cohort of women across their life course. These discourses will be assumed to have made a certain way of seeing and being in the world, available to these women (Willig, 2001). To reach an understanding of the historical time the women now at midlife have lived through an analysis of the culturally available discourses from their youth would make a useful contribution. Moreover the discursive resources women draw on in contemporary society is an interesting area for exploration. For example: discourses of mental and physical life such as psycho-dynamic therapy, socio biology, genetics and cognitive psychology are powerful discourses among people today, as are those of the advantage of youth, the ‘body beautiful’ ‘having it all’. Many of these may (or indeed may not) affect the experience of women at midlife.

It is important to recognise that ‘discourse analysis’ is not one single method but there is a proliferation of various models (Hook, 2001), and Gergen (2001) offers two distinct positions: deconstruction and reconstruction. Deconstruction
centres on the nature of language and deconstructionists questioning all conventional meanings and words and suggesting that what might be considered firm facts are in fact open to interpretation. Willig (2001) distinguishes between ‘discursive psychology’, or ‘reconstruction’ which is primarily concerned with interpersonal communication, and ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis’ or ‘deconstruction’ which explores the relationship between discourse and how people think and feel. The differences between these two, for some, are merely variation in the emphasis and focus for each approach (Potter and Wetherell, 1995). For others they are distinct theoretical frameworks e.g. Parker (1997). A distinction might be drawn between what people do with their talking and writing and what they draw on to talk and write. As Willig (2001) puts it Foucauldian discourse analysis is used to find out ‘what characterizes the discursive worlds people inhabit, and what are their implications for possible ways of being’? (Willig, 2001:121). For this study I shall be drawing on a Foucauldian discourse analysis which, as Parker (1994) points out, makes no assumption about what the writer ‘meant’ to say, or how it was said, rather why it was said and what assumptions the writer and the reader make about the world. It must be appreciated that as Hook (2001) reminds us there is no strictly Foucauldian method of analysing discourse as ‘Foucault’s conception of discourse is situated far more closely to knowledge, materiality and power than it is to language’ (Hook, 2001:542). However for this research Willig’s use of Foucault’s work seems a useful starting point in that a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis ‘focuses upon the availability of discursive resources within a culture’ (Willig, 2001:107).
From this initial exploration it seems several issues have emerged which had to be considered carefully. Firstly using discourse analysis would not be without criticism: these methods are informed by constructionism and as such challenge hypothetico-deductive, objective, empiricist frameworks traditionally favoured in psychology. This is not insurmountable indeed, as Willig (1999) puts it discourse analysis is attractive ‘because it allows researchers to problematise the categories used in mainstream psychology’ (Willig, 1999:2). If for example ‘middle age’ is a social construction, then discourse analysis might ‘deconstruct’ and explore what is being drawn on to form this assumption. Secondly, an issue which must be resolved is how discourse analysis can be used to consider the lives of women from a life course perspective. Thirdly it is evident that within this methodology the role of the researcher is deeply involved with the analytical process and it is important that I make my own role or ‘stake’ in the research explicit. The challenge therefore was to develop methods out of this methodology, from a constructionist epistemology that can explore the discursive world of the cohort of women across their life course, furthermore can facilitate a subjective exploration of their midlife.

But is it real?

The inspiration for embarking on this research was my observation that my experience as a ‘middle aged’ women was very different from the experience of my own mother or grandmother. On reflecting on this statement whilst considering the philosophical underpinning of the research it seems important to address the debate about the nature of the ‘real’ world. For example Edwards (2003) insists there can be no assumption of a ‘real’ world, everything is relative. This is seen as the ‘relativist’s dilemma’: because a relativist must treat
everything as equally valid. From a feminist perspective Willott (1998) points out that ‘extreme relativism’ impedes social critique and political action, moreover if there is not ‘truth’ there is nothing to measure change against. It seems Edwards (2003) is suggesting that although some things cannot, or indeed should not, be denied, he cites for example the Holocaust, poverty or famine, what might be considered to be ‘the way things are’ is in fact only ‘the sense we make of it’ (Crotty, 1998:64). In other words: ‘truth’ is only ever relative to some discursive and cultural frame of reference (Wetherell et al., 2001; Hepburn, 2003).

Relevant to the exploration of women across their life course is how to resolve the conflict between relativist ontology and an assumption of changing social structures and, how these have impact on women’s lives. As Willig (2007) puts it, within this relativist framework the non-discursive are material practices, produced by and thereby secondary to, discursive practices. However, when using a life course approach it is implicit that the participant’s life trajectories are embedded in their historical and cultural location. Some social structures have been considered crucial to their life trajectories: for example education, work and gender role expectations have changed across the lives of these women. Statistical evidence has been drawn on to examine social changes so it seems I have already assumed a notion of a ‘real world’. As such the non-discursive or material world cannot be readily assumed as secondary to the discursive world.

It seems necessary to adopt a position that supports a constructionist epistemology yet allows a ‘real’ world to exist. A critical realist ontology offers a way to explore discursive practices within a material world. In this approach language is understood as constructing social realities, yet these are shaped by
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the possibilities and constraints available in the material world. Willig (2007) uses critical realism to explore motherhood and child care and argues that the economic and familial resources available to mothers are of equal importance to discourses of parenting, families and gender roles drawn on. Critical realism therefore argues that there is a ‘material dimension to lives that is, at least, partially non-discursive’ (Willig, 2007:103). Critical realism has underpinned research in areas such as: embodiment, government power and the physical world (Cromby, 1999), physical coercion (Parker, 1992) and motherhood (Sims-Schouten, et al., 2007). This present research acknowledges the ‘real’ impact of social structures across the life course of women thus a critical realist perspective seems useful.

A critical realist perspective may be criticised. Drawing on Stainton-Rogers (1997) Pujol (1999) argues that that critical realism ‘aims to identify the underlying structures shaping social reality’ implying one ideological position from which events must be read (Pujol, 1999: 92 [original italics]). However this does not seem in tension with the aims of this research. For example, although it is important to acknowledge the ‘reality’ of physical ageing there is no assumption that all women will experience this physical process in the same way nor will it reveal one ‘reality’ of the ageing process. Rather this research seeks to explore how individual women subjectively understand this ‘reality’. Potentially problematic is the suggestion that a critical realist discourse analysis might ignore the researcher’s role in the production of the data. Speer (2007) for example points out that the researcher’s notion of the non-discursive elements in the material world are likely to impact on any response by participants in an interview setting. If the researcher neglects to make explicit how the non-
discursive elements have been identified and conceptualised, the power relation between the researcher and those being researched is detrimentally skewed. Therefore I, the researcher, may fail to appreciate why a participant in this research might privilege one discursive construction over another.

The ‘lived life’ and the ‘told story’

This chapter thus far has explored the development of a methodology which will enable the research aims to be addressed. Using life course theory enables a consideration of this ‘telescopic’ cohort of women within the context of their historical, social and personal time. However at this point it is important to turn to another aim, which is to explore the subjective understandings the participant women have of their midlife. To give direction it seems important to consider at this point how these separate strands can be approached, and the development an overarching frame to shape the research. For Ochberg (1988) studying life course gives access to a person’s subjective experience, and Becker (1966) suggested a better understanding of a person is achieved by looking at the alternatives that person had available. To access subjective experience the methodology must allow the participants to explore the alternatives they thought they had available and try to reach an understanding of their subjective experience of the unfolding of their life course.

Thus it, is appropriate to have two main strands of exploration: experience and context. This dichotomy allows a framework to be developed using life course theory that explores the interplay between the context of lives, giving rise to the transitions that influenced the trajectories and the experience of those trajectories. The context or background can be divided into two areas of
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concern: the demographic patterns and social practices, and the dominant discourses of social and gender roles across the life course of the participants. To more fully understand the implications of this I turn to (Wengraf, 2000) who proposes that the ‘story’ told by an individual can best be understood within the context of a wider social understanding. This framework is used in biographic interpretative methods (see Wengraf, 1996; Chamberlayne et al., 2000) as a means of separating the ‘facts’ such as dates, times and verifiable issues, from ‘stories’ told during the interviews. In this method the two areas are analysed separately. For the purposes of this research it seemed that an adaptation of this dichotomy would be useful.

In Chapter 1 the historical changes across the life course of the women in this research were explored. These might be considered part of the experience of ‘lived life’. However further than only considering these ‘facts’ to explore the life course trajectories of this cohort of women it seems important to contextualise their experience in another way. As has been suggested the quantitative data regarding education, employment and family structure may indicate general social and historical trends but will not entirely provide an understanding of the experience of living through the historical and social changes over the life course. To address, this in keeping with a discursive methodology, it seems important to consider the prevailing discourses from an earlier part of the life course of the ‘telescopic’ cohort. Moreover, to explore how these may have impacted on the life course trajectories of this cohort of women.
Resolving some dilemmas

Critical realist discourse analysis as defined by Willig (2007) proved to be a promising start to developing a methodology for exploring the lives of women from a feminist life course perspective. It is evident that several issues needed to be addressed to refine the process. The broad design of the research so far is to consider ‘the lived life’ and the ‘told story’ thus there are two major areas to explore. The lived life should be considered in the context of the material world inhabited by a cohort of women. Empirical demographic data has already been introduced and it seems there is potential to use discourse analysis to explore the context of women’s lives across their life course.

The proponents of discourse analysis suggest ‘it is important to remember that virtually the entirety of anyone’s understanding of the social world is mediated by discourse in the form of conversations, newspapers, novels, TV stories etc’. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 17). Moreover discourses are represented in many kinds of texts encountered everyday in advertising, television and magazines represented by ‘chains of images’ we come to believe are ‘true’ (Parker, 2005:88). It seemed that material from earlier in the life course of the cohort of women in this research may well provide a rich source of these images and the discourses they represent. Further it would seem that critical realist discourse analysis had potential for exploring the subjective experience at midlife from an interpretative perspective yet acknowledging non-discursive components. However a note of caution has been introduced and the issue next to be addressed was my role as the researcher and what methodological and ethical implications this has for the research.
Positioning myself in the research

As already stated my starting point for undertaking this research was my belief that my life at midlife differed from my mother’s and grandmothers’. From the outset I was subjectively engaged with the research topic. This position is immediately in opposition to the hypothetico-deductive epistemology of established mainstream psychology. The main critiques of ‘male-stream’ (Abbott and Wallace, 1997) science are: the acceptance of the male as ‘normal’ and ‘the God trick’ on the part of the researcher claiming objectivity. The rationale for this research immediately challenged these assumptions of ‘good science’. However it might be argued that ‘research is always carried out from a standpoint, and the pretence to neutrality in many quantitative studies in psychology is disingenuous’ (Parker, 1994:13).

It seems that a criticism levelled at many qualitative methodologies is the subjectivity of the researcher. Whereas an objective epistemology assumes the researcher is detached and remote from the process, constructionist approaches including discourse analysis challenge this assumption. Moreover, if everything is constructed so too is scientific knowledge, with the result that even scientific papers produced from a supposedly objective position are in fact discursive constructions. Indeed constructionism is itself a discourse (Burr, 2003). The researcher in discourse analysis ‘authors, rather than discovers knowledge’ (Willig, 2001:121). Thus it seems that imperative to this methodology is that, I as the researcher, must be reflexively aware of my own position within the research. Indeed reflexivity might be considered to be ‘one of the most distinctive features of qualitative research’ (Tindall, 1994: 149 [original
however being reflexively aware of my own position is challenging to accomplish, perhaps encapsulated by this assertion:

‘the process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure’ (Finlay, 2002:209).

In developing the methodology I had to be aware of this ‘muddy ambiguity’ and acknowledge my presence in the research at each stage. The methods chosen to explore the context of a ‘lived life’ and the subjective experience of the ‘told story’ of a cohort of women must recognise that I myself am of that cohort, yet should facilitate the ‘voices’ of other women from the cohort to be heard.

**Summarising the framework**

To explore the experience of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women at midlife it seems a life course approach facilitates the examination of their experience in the light of their ‘lived life’ and their ‘told story’. Moreover by adopting a constructionist, poststructurally informed, methodology I could consider the discursive constructions available to the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women across their life course. A critical realist perspective would facilitate a negotiation between the discursive and non-discursive realms of their lives. However, as I am a woman at midlife from the ‘telescopic’ cohort, I had to beware of my own place within the discursive constructions of ‘midlife’ and my understanding of the ‘non-discursive’ aspects of social structures and historical changes across the life course. The methods adopted in this research had to allow an exploration of the ‘lived life’ and the ‘told story’ of a cohort of women whilst ‘negotiating the swamp’ (Finlay, 2002) of my own reflexive understanding.
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The next step

This research is divided into three phases. Phase one has already explored the demographic, economic and social changes over the life course of this cohort. Phases two and three will utilise methods informed by a Foucauldian discourse analysis methodology to explore contextual material from an earlier point in the life course and a subjective contemporary understanding of ‘midlife’.
Chapter 4: Lives in context: the ‘Jackie’ girls

In the preceding chapters I have highlighted that the economic and social changes over the last 50 years have impacted on the experience of the cohort of women now at midlife. Furthermore, it has become clear that I myself have been caught up in the changes leading to this research. This chapter will outline the method for providing contextual data for the teenage years of the women in the research. As was indicated in Chapter 1, this research is not intended to explore the lives of every individual now at midlife, but of a specific ‘telescopic’ cohort. The challenge was to find a method that allows an exploration of the social context in which they grew up. Government archives and demographic studies provided information about education and working patterns (for example Social Trends, 34, 36, 38; Newsom, 1963; McRae, 1999; Makepeace, 2003; Wadsworth, 2003), yet it seemed important to examine the social world and expectations of this cohort.

In contrast to an ‘ages and stages’ approach (Erikson, 1951, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1996; Gould, 1978) this research takes a life course perspective to the study of lives (Elder, 1994; Pilcher, 1995; Hareven, 1982). A defining parameter of this ‘telescopic’ cohort is their chronological age, which means they have lived through the same ‘historical time’. A strength of life course theory is that it enables an examination of the social and individual time an individual experienced historical events. Due to the constraints of time and words for this PhD research, one particular period of time from the life course of this cohort has been chosen: prior to the transition from school, when the foundations for the trajectories of careers and family commitments were being
laid. At this point the members of the ‘telescopic’ cohort were at the individual time of their teenage years, and due to the education system were at the social time of ‘school girl’. As they were all the same age the historical time was also the same for them all. However after the age of compulsory education, 16 years for these coevals, their life transitions would be dependent on many factors and each transition leading to a trajectory affecting subsequent transitions (Runyan, 1982)

This chapter develops a method to explore the social and historical context of the teenage years of the ‘telescopic’ cohort, and furthermore indicates why the material chosen: ‘Jackie’ magazine, was a useful source of contextual data. Moreover my reflexive account is included, to locate my own subject position (Parker, 2005) as a middle aged woman located within the ‘telescopic’ cohort of my generation.

**Finding a data source**

The literature on women and media has considered soap opera (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985) romantic fiction (Radway, 1984) and magazines (White, 1970; McRobbie, 1978, 2000). Whereas these writers disagree about the tensions between the enjoyment of ‘soaps’ or romantic fiction and feminist ideals, there is a common suggestion that the actual reading or viewing is not the only consideration of these media. It seems the consumption of these texts are contributory to the accumulation of cultural capital, that is to say gaining knowledge that confers power and status (Bourdieu, 1986). For young teenage girls this might mean knowing enough about fashion/pop/ television for example to be ‘cool’. Moreover it is suggested that:
by turning to magazines to learn more about themselves, young women are tuned into the texts of meanings of femininity and heterosexuality that are produced and reproduced in every section of the magazine’ (Jackson, 2005:296).

A magazine aimed at the teenage readership of the 1970s seemed a potentially rich source of contextual data for the cohort in this research.

Women now at midlife in the millennium can be considered part of the ‘post war baby boom’. The large numbers of individuals, the growth in consumer spending and the development of media such as television and the music industry all contributed to make the ‘teenagers’ of the 1960s and 1970s a significant social group (Hebdige, 1979). The women reaching midlife in the early 21st were born into a society in which ‘youth’ was becoming a distinct cultural entity (Osgerby, 1998). By the time this cohort was entering adolescence they were a recognised demographic group. The emergence of this teenage culture made way for publications aimed at this young consumer market. For over ten years from 1964 ‘Jackie’ was the best selling teen magazine and was widely read by girls aged 12-16 years (White, 1970; McRobbie, 2000). The definition of ‘class’ has been identified as problematic in Chapter 1 however a contemporary source indicated that over 80% of the readership were drawn from social classes B and C (Winship, 1987). This is a reasonable parameter to define the ‘telescopic’ cohort. McRobbie (1978) offers another useful demographic marker in that the content of ‘Jackie’ was not ‘high culture’ but was aimed at the ‘masses’. However by default the readership had to buy the magazine thus a certain level of family income is implied. Thus if ‘Jackie’ was available to, and popular with the ‘telescopic’ cohort, this supported

Perhaps the most significant relevant work, for this research, was an exploration of the ideology of female adolescence by McRobbie (1978). Drawing on ‘Jackie’ magazine she noted that across youth culture discourses, girls were peripheral to the dominant boys, and ‘allowed little more than the back seat on a draughty motor bike’ (McRobbie, 1991:20). The magazine ‘Jackie’, she suggested, provided a means for young teenage girls to develop a social identity. The pinups were ‘safe’ and unthreatening. It did not cost much to conform to this fashion, moreover, girls were given the opportunity to romanticise ‘boys’ and love without actually having to go out and expose themselves to the dangerous world of real boys (McRobbie, 1978). She noted that the content of ‘Jackie’ dealt with fashion and appearance, underpinning the notion that girls were meant to be looked at. McRobbie (1978) also found that ‘Jackie’ focussed on the personal, and presented ‘romantic individualism’ with no room for female solidarity or even female friendship. She concluded that the discourses taking
shape in ‘Jackie’ every week were very powerful, yet there was little way of knowing how much was absorbed by the readership without question. However:

‘…as a vehicle for meanings that remain with us, perhaps even for life, ‘Jackie’s’ influence should not be under-estimated…its success is mapped out by its remembered status in the landscape of teenage femininity’ (McRobbie, 1991:132).

The original work by McRobbie in 1978, was revised in 1991, and 2000. The initial work drew on issues of ‘Jackie’ prior to 1977. McRobbie revisited ‘Jackie’ in the 1980’s in Jackie and Just Seventeen in the 1980’s and noted the change in content of the publication. Romance was being usurped by ‘real life’ stories, and interest in the lives of pop stars and television was burgeoning. It seems the ‘Jackie’ of the 1970’s read by the ‘telescopic’ cohort had gone. Yet of interest is if ‘Jackie’ perhaps contributed to the shaping of life for this cohort?

**Considering the method**

McRobbie’s (1978) analysis, informed by a structuralist methodology, has been critiqued by others and indeed by McRobbie herself (1991, 2000, 2009). She acknowledges that her initial work was restricted to purely textual analysis and this served to create an image of ‘Jackie’ as a ‘massive ideological block in which readers were implicitly imprisoned’ (McRobbie, 2000:141). She draws on Barker (1986) and Fraser (1987) and reviews her analysis by acknowledging there was room for ‘partial reading’ of the texts and for the reader to bring her own interpretation to the texts, furthermore that the readers were not necessarily ‘victims’ of the text. It was my intention to take this further and analyse the magazine for ways ‘Jackie’ readers were both imprisoned and even
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might, in some circumstances, possibly be liberated by the discourses drawn on within the text.

The contribution of McRobbie (1978) provided a useful starting point to consider ‘Jackie’ as a source of contextual data. By drawing on a magazine she is acknowledging the place that texts and language occupy in the production of discourse. We are reminded that ‘it is important to remember that virtually the entirety of anyone’s understanding of the social world is mediated by discourse in the form of conversations, newspapers, novels, TV stories etc. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 17). This method of data analysis offers an insight into the construction of social reality and an analysis of the discourses in ‘Jackie’ might reveal important contextual insights.

The approach McRobbie (1978) took was structuralist, meshing a semiotic awareness of structure and sign with a Marxist analysis of social hegemony (Ballaster, 1991). This method therefore explored the formal features of text and meaning. For example McRobbie (1978) points out that the Cathy and Claire problem page was printed in black and white to indicate the serious nature of the content. This approach emphasises the ‘performative’ qualities of discourse; what is done with language and text to produce the discourse (Willig, 2001:91). This means that the researcher considers how language might be used to negotiate and manage social interactions and relationships.

The popularity of ‘Jackie’ might have been due not so much to the content as the way the content was used to give cohesion to the social group of those who read the magazine (McRobbie:1978). Knowledge of the ‘looks’ fashion, make-up and pop music may contribute to the legitimising of the social grouping of the
young female British teenager. However of interest to the present research are the discourses drawn on in this material and the ideals of femininity, work, and future expectations presented to the readership. ‘Foucauldian’ discourse analysis, although still informed by the turn to language in psychology, does not consider the structure of the text but rather the discursive resources available and drawn on in the production or mobilisation of the discourses. As Elliott (2005) puts it: in keeping with a post modern concept of self, this poststructuralist approach examines how subjectivity is shaped and maintained within a social world. The ‘self’ becomes less essentialist and more fluid and determined by context. With reference to de Beauvoir (1953) a poststructuralist analysis of ‘Jackie’ would explore how a person ‘becomes a woman’ by drawing on the discourses presented.

For this phase of the study I drew on a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis which as Parker (1994) points out makes no assumption about what the writer ‘meant’ to say or how it was said, rather what assumptions the writer and the reader make about the world. It seems in the present research ‘Jackie’ can be considered as a social text which provided culturally specific constructions and discourses which its readers are likely to have mobilised in making sense of the world, their place in it and ways of ‘being’ available to them. Moreover, in keeping with life course theory the historical and cultural location of individual lives is crucial. This present research is concerned with social change across the life course of its participants, and with reference to a critical realist approach (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007) as discussed in the previous chapter, the ‘material conditions’ of the participants lives: the education offered, work opportunities,
and financial potential, will be considered alongside the ‘discursive practices’ (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007:101)

Planning the analysis of ‘Jackie’

At this stage of the research I had to consider the copyright of the data, my personal involvement with the material and a plan for analysis. As it would be unrealistic and inappropriate, given the arguments already made regarding the change in content of ‘Jackie’ in later years, to analyse every issue of ‘Jackie’, a sampling framework was developed. During the ten year period from 1965-1974, the cohort of women in the present research were according to McRobbie (1978), the target readership of ‘Jackie’. It seemed reasonable to select one issue from each of these years for analysis. The purpose of the analysis was not intended to scrutinise major changes across the ten years of sampling but to explore the ideologies in the discourses presented to the readership. To that end I selected to analyse the ‘Jackie’ issued during the first week of March for this ten year period. This week would have no ‘extraordinary’ events such as Christmas, New Year, St Valentine’s Day, Easter or the major summer holidays. Thus this sample can be argued to represent the usual every week issues. However, the journey to rediscover ‘Jackie’ revealed a much richer data source than I had anticipated and this initial plan was to be revised.

‘Jackie’ and me

Prior to viewing the selected magazines I reflected on my own involvement with the material. I was very aware of the nostalgia I personally felt for ‘Jackie’. My experience of discussing the publication with my supervisors, my friends and even listening to a report on the radio (Woman’s Hour, 2005) and a television
documentary (Lee, 2007) alerted me to my sentimental involvement. I thought this might prove problematic as my personal interest could lead me to ‘read’ the data in my own way ignoring any alternate interpretation. This does not mean that I expected to be completely detached from my assumptions and perspectives of ‘Jackie’ during the research. Indeed as feminist critics point out the researcher’s identity and standpoint fundamentally shape all research processes and outcomes, even in supposedly objective and positivist informed epistemologies (Willig, 2001). Rather I needed to consider my presence reflexively.

Finlay (2002) conceptualises reflexivity as self awareness and consideration of one’s position within the research process, moreover:

‘reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics and the research process itself…it involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective…to recognising that we actively construct our knowledge’ (Finlay, 2002:532).

Parker (2005) postulates three layers for reflexive consideration in the academic context of research: historical assumptions about the nature of research and researchers, institutional constraints on what might be asked in research and personal alliances which might ‘open or close’ some issues. This third point was particularly relevant to my analysis of ‘Jackie’.

It seemed appropriate to reflect on my memories and assumptions of ‘Jackie’ before accessing an archive. Writing my own memory of ‘Jackie’ led me to design my initial plan for analysis, which was to consider one type of article in
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each pre-selected issue of ‘Jackie’. Once faced with the archive collection I noticed how narrow my recollection had been and how much more might be revealed by changing the parameters of which articles to analyse. Parker (2005) suggests a diary is a way to maintain some distance between what is being studied and the object of research. In accordance with this I maintained a diary and a reflective log over the research process.

Finding ‘Jackie’

There were some problems with locating copies of ‘Jackie’ magazine. Published by D.C. Thompson in Dundee ‘Jackie’ was issued weekly on coloured newsprint, with an ‘annual’ compendium published for the Christmas market. The publisher is a privately owned non unionised company (Ferguson, 1983). When I contacted the publisher they confirmed they had no remaining accessible record of exact sales figures, or the target demographic audience of the magazine, nor an archive of material. Sales figures and demographic readership patterns were obtained from an independent source in Winship (1987). Having drawn up a working plan for how I should analyse the data I arranged to view selected issues at the British Library Newspaper archive.

‘Jackie’ is held in original volumes and consequently the paper is fragile, the only way to take samples of text was to obtain a photocopy. Denscombe (2003) noted that ownership of images is an important issue and images cannot be reproduced in violation of copyright laws. It seems for an academic thesis there is no copyright restriction on my reproducing the copied images in my research. Problems would arise if the paper was to be published commercially. To include images from this archive, copies had to be ordered from the British Library’s
own copiers. This proved to be a fairly expensive procedure, the articles I had selected each spread across several pages.

A solution to gaining access and copying of articles from ‘Jackie’ emerged from a very 21st vehicle, Ebay. By bidding for individual copies of the magazine from different sources I obtained several copies of ‘Jackie’ covering the period I had specified. The advantage of this was that I held the entire magazine and could concentrate on many more types of articles. A disadvantage was the temptation to neglect putting a ‘space’ between myself and the material. I tried to address this as far as possible by storing my copies of ‘Jackie’ without reading them until I had gathered them all and thought out a frame for analysis.

**The ‘Jackie’ impact**

My diary reflects my own memories of ‘Jackie’ I was nostalgic and eager to revisit this ‘part of my youth’. However it became apparent that I was not alone in my recollection of ‘Jackie’ and the place this magazine held in the teenage years of many ‘middle aged’ women. I did not feel that an extensive exploration of how ‘Jackie’ was recalled would contribute to this particular research and rejected the idea of gathering this data, yet some reference framework was needed to structure my analysis of ‘Jackie’. It soon became evident to me that those who did remember ‘Jackie’ had quite diverse and detailed memories. One of my supervisors for the present research was forthcoming with her own memories of ‘Jackie’ somewhat to the bemusement of her two younger colleagues. My supervisor’s reaction to the mention of ‘Jackie’, alerted me to the benefits of recording all recollections and anecdotes offered whenever I mentioned my research or ‘Jackie’ to women of my generation. I was sensitive
to the reaction of others when the subject of ‘Jackie’ was raised. I recorded these comments in a diary and I was to draw on these to structure my analysis. It was important however not to use any material from my reflective log that might identify the person remembering ‘Jackie’. In order to avoid this I did not name the contributors and the document remained my own personal reflection and record, with no identifiable contribution from any other party.

My diary record shows how women, and some men, recalled particular features and articles, for some it was the fashion and beauty tips, others talked about the ‘pop’ music and pin ups. Almost without exception the ‘Cathy and Claire’ problem page was mentioned. Those who read ‘Jackie’ recalled the magazine in different ways, further some felt ‘Jackie’ had nothing to ‘say’ and, in their own experience had been irrelevant to their adolescence. This highlighted the notion that the generation of this study were not a homogenous group and within the cohort different aspects of ‘Jackie’ had different relevance.

Further insight into ‘Jackie’ came from a radio interview (Woman’s Hour, 2005). Here a past editor of ‘Jackie’ discussing the ethos of the magazine revealed that the intention of ‘Jackie’s’ editorial team was to deliver a magazine that ‘aimed to be a benign older sister without the sibling rivalry’ (Myskow, 2005 [Woman’s Hour]). In the same interview Angela McRobbie reflected on her work (McRobbie, 1978, 1991) saying:

‘I was really completely horrified that in the seventies, the moment when feminism was so important, teenage girls were being fed this constrictive kind of ideology. This world that it created for young women was very narrowly circumscribed. When I looked at for
instance the picture love stories what I could see was that week in
and week out there was a very conventional and conformist narrative
structure that inscribed young women as subordinate, as passive and
as always waiting for the engagement ring to appear out of the
pocket’ (McRobbie, 2005 [Woman’s Hour])

Myskow took issue with this and pointed out that:

‘there was a lot about romance and a lot about boys because that is
what the girls wanted to read about (but) …the girls were not
encouraged to be passive they were encouraged to think for
themselves, to be themselves, to be individuals… be aware that they
could have a future’ (Myskow, 2005 [Woman’s Hour]).

However Myskow’s comments contrast with the recollections of another
contributor, comedienne Jackie Clune:

‘I think there is no doubt it was totally unreconstructed misogyny in a
way (laughter) I mean there was the emphasis on getting a boyfriend
and sometimes there was career advice – like ‘perhaps you would
like to become a beautician or look after tiny animals for a vet’- not
be a vet, be a vet nurse…I don’t think it really influenced me that
much especially the bit about boys because I went on the be a
lesbian for 10 years’. (Clune, 2005 [Woman’s Hour])

These contributions to the debate about ‘Jackie’ highlighted several issues for
me. Firstly the editorial input obviously influenced the material the ‘Jackie’
readership had access to. By being ‘an older sister’ the magazine ‘spoke’ to the
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Jackie readership. However as Clune (2005) pointed out some of the ideology was rejected by her and potentially other members of the readership. The almost universal interest in Cathy and Claire from those who remembered ‘Jackie’ suggested to me that this interest may have been fostered because this was an opportunity for the reader’s words to appear. The romance ‘picture’ stories highlighted by McRobbie were a third contributor to the entity that was ‘Jackie’, but the question arose ‘did the ‘Jackie’ readership unquestioningly accept the notions of romance and ‘ideologies of femininity’ or were there signs that some of the ideologies were being resisted?

The framework takes shape

Initially I was rather daunted by the amount of material I had gathered and had sympathy with the suggested ‘feelings of muddle and confusion overwhelming a researcher approaching the text for the first time’ (Parker, 1994:96). It was evident at this stage that it was neither practical nor necessarily useful to analyse many different issues of ‘Jackie’. A broad examination of content would reveal what was in ‘Jackie’ but not necessarily how it might be read. It appeared that a rigorous analysis of a small selection of articles would offer insight into the teenage world of the women in this present study. However the problem presented was how to select which articles to analyse. The solution I chose was to select one copy of ‘Jackie’ and use two different methods to analyse the data.

The ‘Jackie’ I selected was published in 1973 (Jackie, 1973a) when the ‘telescopic’ cohort of this present research were in their early teens. There were obviously many issues of ‘Jackie’ when these coevals were teenagers, this was an ‘opportunistic’ selection: I owned a copy of this issue and therefore it was
available to me. I would supplement my analysis by drawing some examples from other issues but these would not form a large corpus of data. I found a need to bring some order to the material I had amassed. I had a growing awareness that different aspects of ‘Jackie’ were recalled by readers and that my memories of ‘Jackie’ might impinge on my analysis, therefore before undertaking the discourse analysis it seemed prudent to explore the content of the magazine systematically. This was intended to produce an overview of what ‘Jackie’ contained and how it was presented. This part of the analysis was intended to be informative and provide contextual data about the cultural world of the teenage reader. A content analysis ‘provides a means for quantifying the contents of a text’ (Denscombe, 2003:222). Not losing sight that the ‘Jackie’ analysis contributes only part of the contextual understanding of the participants in this research it was important that the content analysis was simple and informative. Thus the method used was simply counting and analysing the percentage of content.

The method refined

The final step in developing the method to explore the teenage life in context was to develop a method that allowed a thorough exploration of a small amount of text. The process of analysing discourses has been set out by Parker (1992) which he acknowledges will render the novice analyst bewildered. He assures that this feeling will pass and the contribution discourse analysis makes to qualitative research in psychology is significant. Potter and Wetherell (1987) put forward a twelve step process for discourse analysis. Willig (2001) has modified this and identifies six stages. These she suggests:
‘allow the researcher to map the discursive resources used in a text, and the subject positions they contain and to explore their implications for subjectivity and practice’ (Willig, 2001:109).

However before analysis can begin it is important to ensure the ‘text can be analysed’ (Parker, 2005:92). Parker goes on to suggest four questions to ask of ‘ready-made’ texts, such as teenage magazines, for their potential for analysis. Firstly one must consider why the text is interesting and secondly, what is known about the material out of which it is constructed. Thirdly we must consider the effects of ‘different readings’ of the text, and finally how the texts conforms to or challenges patterns of power (Parker, 2005:92). This highlighted the importance of selecting the items to be analysed for how they could contribute to an understanding of a life in context.

Having selected the texts the process might continue with the six steps set out by Willig (2001). Stage one involves identifying discursive constructions. The second stage is to locate the discourse within a wider discourse. The third stage of the analysis is to consider what is to be gained by constructing the objects of the story in this way, the fourth stage is the positioning of the subject. In the fifth stage the relationship between discourse and practice can be explored. The final stage in the analysis is to explore the consequences of taking up the subject positions and the impact of positioning within a particular discourse might have on the actors. This seemed a useful starting point for the method, however I was interested by the contribution of Parker (2005) who notes ‘four ideas’: the ‘multivoicedness’ of language which explores the contradictions between ‘speaking and being spoken of’ (Parker, 2005:89). In this use of ‘voice’ the intention is to examine how one word is different from another therefore
‘speaks in a different way’, rather than to ‘give voice’ to a specific group. In other words ‘multivoicedness’ here attends to how things or people are ‘made to fit into certain categories and how we are marked out as different and how the contradictions in and within the categories work’ (Parker, 1995:89). The next consideration is of the semiotics or the way language is put together and resistance, or how language keeps certain power relations in place (Parker, 2005: 90). He continues by linking these three ideas with a fourth which is the notion of ‘discourse as a chain of words and images’ which form language into a social bond.

Parker (2005) uses a similar analytical process to Willig (2001) but his steps are slightly different in format and on further scrutiny seemed to lend themselves particularly well to pictorial texts as well as to language. With twelve steps instead of six the process is described in more detail. These can perhaps best be understood whilst briefly considering an example of an advert in ‘Jackie’ (Figure 6) Parker’s first step is to turn the text into words. For example in relation to the picture in Figure 6, this is an advert appearing in ‘Jackie’ magazine (‘Jackie’, 1973b). It is a recruitment advert for school leavers to join an insurance company. The second step is identifying what is known about the material: in this instance it is aimed at school leavers who therefore are young. Interestingly they are specifically recruiting ‘new girls’. The jobs are office based, and clerical skills will be required. Step three identifies what is of significance in the objects in the text, here the girl is pictured looking fashionably made up perhaps with ‘psychedelic’ (fashionable at the time) hair, the detail of the job is small compared to the information that it is based in London.
Figure 6: Advert from 'Jackie'
In step four the focus is on how the objects are constructed in the text. In this example the girl is constructed as pretty and fashionable and appears to be anticipating enjoying the fast cars and beautiful jewellery, or living in London. Step five itemises the subjects in the text: girls, jobs, cars, jewellery, London, ‘tall dark people’, ‘fires’, ‘interesting’, ‘insurance’ etc. Step six elaborates what else might be said by the subjects: in this case ‘fringe benefits’ for example the ‘marriage gratuity’ girls might anticipate getting married, ‘cheap lunches’, so even if the pay is poor she can eat, the jobs are ‘girls jobs’. In step seven the networks of relationships in the text are set out. Here the jobs are being offered to ‘school leavers’ it is their first job, and the work is in ‘London’ which might be an exciting prospect, the ‘salary is good’ and the ‘lunches are cheap’ for example, moreover the advert is for ‘girls’ plural therefore there is likely to be girls of the same age working together, perhaps friendship is on offer. In step eight the positions of the subjects in relation to each other are explored, for example if the lunches are cheap perhaps she can afford to work in London. There is a social club perhaps she will make good friends, the company insures ‘almost anything’, it could be interesting, or she might get to meet a ‘pop star’.

In step nine patterns are drawn across the text, for example here the girl is transformed from ‘school leaver’ to ‘young woman about town’: the job is offered as an exciting life style that is affordable to a school leaver. The job is for a girl and will use skills she may already be familiar with, yet she is transformed from ‘school girl’ to ‘secretary’. Step ten contrasts the way in which the same object is positioned in contradictory ways. Here the girl is positioned as working in an interesting office environment which might imply that she would be busy, or that she might be bored, yet she is pictured wearing ‘party hair and make-up’. Her
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work will be insuring cars and jewellery, possibly belonging to pop stars, yet she is pictured as dreaming of ‘owning these’.

The eleventh step highlights how the different ways the text ‘speaks’ can appeal to different audiences this might appeal to a girl interested in joining an insurance company, or a girl who wants to meet a pop star, or a girl who wants to meet a ‘tall dark person’ and enjoy ‘the marriage gratuity’. However it might appeal to a girl who wants to earn enough money to live in London, perhaps leave home, or enter a ‘grown up’ world. Parker’s final step is to identify the ‘social bonds’ or discourses that make the ‘contradictory arrangements between the subjects in the text possible’ (Parker, 2005:94). In this case the discursive assumption of the ‘marriage imperative’ is underpinned by the overt offering of a marriage gratuity but also by suggesting she might meet a ‘tall dark stranger’.

This is a brief analysis of the advert in Figure 6 to highlight the process of critical analysis undertaken rather than deeply explore this text. This method was applied to data from a ‘Jackie’ magazine for a thorough in depth analysis as detailed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

The magazine ‘Jackie’ presented a promising source of contextual data for the teenage years of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women. It had emerged that ‘Jackie’ is recalled by many women, and some men, and a reflective diary was a useful means of recording my own place in this research and the contribution of others ‘memories of ‘Jackie’’, this log was drawn on throughout the analysis. An exploration of methods of discourse analysis led to a framework within which to examine an issue of ‘Jackie, however alongside a discourse analysis a content
analysis would contribute to a contextual understanding of the lives of a specific cohort of women who were teenagers in the 1970s: 'the telescopic cohort'.
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Figure 7: A selection of adverts in ‘Jackie’ 1973
Chapter 5: Re-reading ‘Jackie’

This chapter analyses a ‘Jackie’ magazine for its contribution to our contextual understanding of the teenage years of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women. By taking a life course approach to explore the experiences of women there is an assumption that the subjective experience of a cohort cannot be isolated from their historical background. ‘Jackie’ appears to be a rich source of such contextual data and can be used to reveal how teenage femininity was constructed in the early 1970’s and the discursive constructions drawn on. The analysis will be divided into two main parts: a content analysis of an issue of ‘Jackie’ and a discourse analysis of a small example of material from the magazine (Figure 7). The analysis is informed by a Foucauldian approach (Willig, 2000), yet in accordance with a critical realist discourse analysis (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007) the ‘material’ world of the period must be considered. Therefore this chapter, whilst considering the discourses available to the readers of ‘Jackie’, also reflects on and examines the ‘real’ world in which the reader lived.

The data in its context

In Chapter 1, I defined a metaphorical cohort of women ‘the telescopic’ cohort, (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999) who were the daughters of the middle and skilled working class men of industrial Britain. The readership of ‘Jackie’ fits this demographic profile (White, 1970). The general demographic, family, education and work trends prevalent over the life course of the generation now at midlife were also explored in Chapter 1. However it is it is important here to briefly summarise what this meant for this specific ‘telescopic’ cohort who formed the
majority of ‘Jackie’ readers. Moreover to consider how these factors were reflected in the lived experience of these young women and how the dominant discourses of the day were represented to them. It is interesting in this analysis to consider if, as McRobbie (2005) suggested, ‘teenage girls were being fed this constrictive kind of ideology’ unquestioningly. More importantly, to consider if there was an opportunity to resist the dominant discourse thus presenting the opportunity for some of the women to experience alternate life trajectories.

**A girl’s place**

In the early 1970s the UK economy was based on manufacturing and heavy industry (Grint, 2005). Moreover the notion of ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’ was firmly established: young women left school to enter jobs which they did not necessarily aspire to but were deemed ‘appropriate’ for women by their parents, their careers officers and often themselves (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). It is worth reflecting on the jobs that were available to women of the lower middle and skilled working classes. In an era without computers and digital scanning there was a great demand for secretarial and office based work. Women were recruited as typists, clerks, cashiers and receptionists. Furthermore, in 1976, 90% of nurses were women (Abbot and Wallace, 1997). As Byrne (1978) pointed out some middle class girls in grammar schools ‘crept through the net’ to university or polytechnic, yet girls were not represented in mechanical or technical apprenticeships. There were women’s divisions in the army, navy and air force, recruited to undertake many of the jobs previously held by conscripted men. Women were not involved in active service, nor did they go to sea, they were land based auxiliary personnel, there were also many military nurse training opportunities. The school leaving age was 15 years until 1972 when it
rose to 16 (Education Act, 1944). Thus the ‘Jackie’ readers of the early 1970s were most likely to be at school or recently employed in a ‘girls job’. Indeed as ‘the future wives, mothers, nannies, secretaries, and other support services for husbands, sons, brothers and (male) bosses’ (Byrne, 1978:16).

Kurlansky (2005) reminds us that 1968 was the ‘year that shook the world’ with student demonstrations in Paris, civil rights marches in the US and the ‘summer of love’ in San Francisco, these events reverberated through to the 1970s. Youth culture and the rise of pop music icons like the Beatles introduced teenage culture to the young in the 1960s. By the early 1970s the ‘mod’ and ‘the rocker’ were usurped by the ‘Hippies’ and the ‘Glam Rockers’ (pasttimesproject.co.uk.). However it is debatable whether the ‘hippie’ culture and the ‘permissive society’ of swinging London (Hall, 2000: 173) led to a ‘permissive society’ outside of small pockets in London. Hall (2000) cites Gorer (1971) and points out that in 1969 25% of males and 66% of females were virgins when they married and a further 20% of males and 25% of females married the person with whom they first had intercourse. This is perhaps not surprising when a study in the 1950s had found only a very small percentage of the population believed premarital sexual intercourse to be ‘natural’ (McKibbon, 1998). Anderson (1985) informs us that in the 1970s women married within a narrower age band than at any time before or since. Further that 95% of women expected to marry, the majority of them before they were thirty. However he points out that within these figures the trend was for the upper middle classes to delay marriage until their later twenties, with the working and lower middle classes, the ‘Jackie’ reader, tending to marry in their late teens and early 20s.
There were other factors that may have influenced the timing of marriage. Hall (2000) acknowledges the importance of contraception to the young women of the 1970s. Oral contraception, ‘the pill’, was available, on prescription, to women from the early 1960s but by 1974 it was available free of charge to all women, dependant on medical suitability, irrespective of marital status. The Abortion Act 1967 came into effect in 1968 allowed termination of pregnancy under some circumstances, although not the complete right of women to choose that had been fought for by feminists (Hall, 2000). It seems that the early 1970s was a turning point for fertility control. However to what extent this would impinge on the reading materials for young teenage girls is debatable. Change however was on the horizon: the magazines Cosmopolitan and Company, both launched in the early 1970s were aimed at young working women acknowledging their independence and sexuality (Rowbotham, 1997).

**The feminine mystique**

Second wave feminism is often dated from the publication of the ‘Feminine Mystique’ (Friedan, 1963). This classic text drew attention to inequalities in gender relations, encapsulated as ‘the problem that has no name’ (Friedan, 1963:13). The book explored the boredom and dissatisfaction felt by women who were ‘trapped in domesticity’ and suppressed by patriarchal society. The historical and social location Friedan wrote from is well illustrated in contemporary popular culture. For example ‘Mad Men’ (ABC, 2009) or ‘Life on Mars’ (BBC, 2006), both portray the working and domestic situation of women in the 1960s and early 1970s. Women were expected to ‘look after’ men and be subservient at home and work. Although McRobbie (2005) reminds us how important feminism was in the 1970s it has to be considered that this was still a
‘new’ movement. The first International Women’s Day march took place in London in 1971. Books like The Female Eunuch (Greer, 1970) were entering the mainstream consciousness, but unlikely to be reported or reflected in the weekly magazines of teenage girls, or even those read by the girls’ mothers. Readers of ‘Jackie’ in the early 1970s were living in an economic and social era seemingly settled but it was about to change.

My place in the research

From the outset I have been aware that I am very much involved in this present research being a woman of the ‘telescopic’ cohort (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999). Moreover my own memories of ‘Jackie’ magazine have been reflected upon. Drawing on Coates (1996) I acknowledge my subjectivity and furthermore value ‘women’s talk’ as an important resource in this analysis. As mentioned previously the diary of my research process recorded the comments and reactions of many women and a few men when reflecting on ‘Jackie’, almost all without exception mentioned the ‘Cathy and Claire’ problem page. This indicated to me that this would be a significant data set to analyse. Others recalled different aspects of ‘Jackie’ and I shall draw upon these comments and reflections throughout the analysis.

A Content Analysis

The content analysis was designed to make clearer what was actually in ‘Jackie:’ those items recalled and those forgotten by the contributors to my diary. As indicated in the previous chapter: one issue of ‘Jackie’ was analysed (Jackie, 1973a) however examples from other issues are referred to.
Another aim was to examine the relative space given over to each section. Thirdly in accordance with the notion of ‘multivoicedness’ (Parker, 2005) I was exploring ‘Jackie’ for different ‘voices’ or the contradiction between speaking and being spoken of.

**An initial reading**

I began by dividing each page into 8 sections: this was because the smallest individual unit or item was 1/8th of the full page. I then assessed how these eighths were used. For example the back page was given over entirely to a ‘pin up’ picture of a pop group, thus the category ‘pin-ups’ was allocated all 8 for that page. Another page contained adverts (3/8ths) and a story (5/8ths). I continued this process for the entire magazine the results are shown in figure 8. The division of the page into eighths was a practical measuring tool, however an impractical unit of analysis. The eighths were subsequently converted to percentages for clarity in the results. The categories identified for analysis were pop music, pin-ups, picture stories, narrative stories, readers’ letters (excluding the problem page), problem page, fashion, beauty, health, advertisements and other (which included editorial information and horoscopes).

Figure 8 is a representation of the content of ‘Jackie’ magazine. This breakdown is interesting: adverts amounted to 28% of the total content of the magazine, seemingly the largest single group. However fiction accounted for the same percentage when the picture stories and narratives were combined. Fashion and beauty together only amounted to less than 10% of the total even when adding in ‘health’ the combined representation was less than 15%. The ‘Cathy and Claire’ problem page accounted for a surprisingly small amount of
the whole, at one full page or 3% of the whole. The ‘pin-ups’ contributed to 14% of the whole.

Figure 8: Content analysis of ‘Jackie’

From this initial breakdown I decided to look more closely at several factors: firstly as nearly one third of the magazine was given over to advertising, it seemed important to explore what was being presented to the readership and how it was being presented. Secondly what evidence there was of the consumerist ‘grooming’ described by McRobbie (1978) within the advertising. Perhaps most importantly I was interested to know why my diary indicated that the ‘Cathy and Claire’ page was so widely remembered given the relatively small contribution this made to the whole.

Exploring the contents

Figure 9 indicates the relative amount of advertising for each type of product in ‘Jackie’. Advertising accounts for more than 28% of the ‘Jackie’ content, of this 53% is for beauty products: shampoo, make up and nail varnish. The next
largest contributor is for sanitary products with two full page adverts for sanitary towels and one half page for tampons. Given the memories of some of the readership, recorded in my diary, about the fashion content of ‘Jackie’ there is surprisingly little direct advertising of fashion items and clothing in this issue. However, in keeping with the notion of grooming teenage consumerism (McRobbie, 1978) the 6% of this issue dedicated to fashion was written as an informative article, yet contained the sources and prices of every item reviewed. In this edition 15% of the adverts were for jobs, the majority in the armed forces, and some for nursing.

Figure 9: Advertising by subject
The ‘picture stories’ form a large section of each edition. Almost without fail these stories feature heterosexual teenage romance. The girls in the stories seem to be dressed similarly to the models on ‘Jackie’ fashion pages. Interestingly McRobbie (1978) did not agree with this similarity, perhaps the thirty year evolution of style has blunted my perspective on fashion similarity and difference, and made me unaware of the ‘codes and signs’ being worn.
However unlike the readership of ‘Jackie’ the heroine in the picture story is never at school she is working, but her job is rarely specified or pivotal to the plot. McRobbie (1978) suggested this was to ‘groom’ the reader to want to earn therefore consume, it might equally be suggested that the job was unmentioned because it was unremarkable and ‘Jackie’ readers were not expected to be concerned with a future career.

The overall impression of the content of ‘Jackie’ is of romance and boys not sex or ‘adult’ relationships. There is little indication in the stories and articles that the readership should be considering a career, higher education or becoming politically aware. McRobbie (1978) found ‘Jackie’ to have a ‘sense of solidness and resistance to change…reflected in its thematic content’ (McRobbie, 1978: 10) and my initial content analysis might agree with that. However, an assessment of the relative representation of the voices in ‘Jackie’ was interesting. By dividing the content into three distinct voices the informative or ‘expert’, being those providing information whether this be fashion, make up or advertising was the most prevalent accounting for more than half of the magazine. The voice of the ‘story teller’ made up the next largest contribution, which arguably was also the ‘expert’ voice as the writers were anonymous and in a position of power over the readership. The voice of ‘Jackie’ by way of readers’ letters, true stories or problem sharing was a small part, only 5%. However it is noticeable that the readers’ letters and the responses both to ‘the Editor’ and ‘Cathy and Claire’ had a more questioning tone. Perhaps it is this ‘questioning’ voice that has made Cathy and Claire so widely remembered: certainly it seems important to explore this notion.
A Discourse Analysis

In keeping with Parker (2005) I selected a small representation from the ‘Jackie’ magazine and undertook a discourse analysis. Using the method as explored in the previous chapter I was looking for the multivoicedness, the use of semiotics, the power and resistance representations and the social bonds evident (Parker, 2005). Informed by the content analysis and my research diary notes about reactions to ‘Jackie’, I chose the texts for why they were interesting and what I knew of the material out of which they were constructed (Parker, 2005). I selected an advertisement for a nursing career in the RAF and a letter to Cathy and Claire for analysis. I know about nursing in the 1970s from personal experience and I was interested in the process of recruiting someone into the armed services into a girl’s job. The ‘Cathy and Claire’ page was so well recalled for such a small contribution to ‘Jackie’ as a whole it seemed worthy of scrutiny. The picture strip story featured strongly in my reflective diary; furthermore the style of the story was used in many advertisements indicating it was a popular and useful means of telling a story. Therefore it seemed important to analyse a picture story. Always aware that this analysis is a small contribution to the research whole I restricted myself to these three items from this issue of ‘Jackie’ (Jackie, 1973a) but drew on other examples by way of illustration. Parker’s (2005) twelve step process was broadly followed in all three pieces of texts but was adapted according to the size and nature of the extracts.

The picture strip story

I decided to begin the analysis with an exploration of a picture strip story. These picture strips contributed to 21% of the magazine and consisted of three stories. Two were complete and one was the first part of a serial. I chose one complete
story which covered nearly three full pages of the magazine (see Appendix 1). This is obviously a large piece of text, and to explicitly detail each one of Parker’s (2005) 12 steps, for each frame, would be too lengthy in relation to the contribution it makes to the whole of the research. In the analysis of the picture strip story, following Parker (2005) I began by turning the pictures into a ‘text’ and summarised the whole story. It became clear that to closely explore every frame of the story would be a very lengthy process. It seemed a meaningful insight might be found by considering salient aspects of the story, for how they might contribute to an exploration of the ‘lived life’ of the ‘telescopic cohort’. I decided that it would be useful to use this large text to explore the position a young woman could hold in the world as presented to the ‘Jackie’ reader. Therefore having summarised the pictures as text the next step was to identify a number of frames from the story that illustrated the world of the young women, Sandie and Jenny, as presented to the ‘Jackie’ reader. Those frames were then analysed in turn following the steps set out in Chapter 4 and the findings summarised. Thus in each selected frame:

1. the picture was summarised as words,
2. I identified what was known about the material.
3. I then considered the significance of the objects in the text,
4. and how the objects were constructed
5. the subjects were itemised
6. what else might be said about the subjects considered
7. the network of the relationships within the text was explored
8. the positions of the subjects in relation to each other were reviewed
Re-reading ‘Jackie’

9. patterns were drawn across the text and how objects might be transformed by the text
10. how the same object was positioned in contradictory ways was contrasted
11. How the text might speak to ‘Jackie’ readers was considered
12. The social bonds or discourses that make alternative readings possible were considered

The findings of these steps of analysis are summarised below.

‘It’s all in the stars’

This story concerns Jenny, who is looking at job adverts with her friend Sandie. Sandie reads Jenny her horoscope and tells Jenny to follow it to the letter. To Jenny’s surprise the predictions in the horoscope come true, over the course of the day; she meets a man, Tony, and gets the job. The ‘twist in the tail’ is that Tony had overheard Sandie read Jenny’s horoscope and he contrived to make it come true. Tony confesses, Sandie reads Tony his horoscope which indicates that he is ‘a good person’ really. Jenny forgives him and Sandie makes a pot of tea whilst Jenny and Tony kiss.

Following step 2 of Parker (2005) the next stage was to consider what I knew about the content of the story as a whole. Several issues are interesting as an indication of the social world and expectation of the ‘Jackie’ reader. The use of horoscopes to produce a ‘romantic’ tale is a good reference back to the content of ‘Jackie’, horoscopes featured every week, with quizzes and features based on horoscopes in many issues. As McRobbie (1978) noted the characters in the story are at work, not at school. They live away from the family home and share
a flat with friends. That they need and income to support this and this highlighted in the opening frame when Jenny says ‘I’ve got to get a job today or it’s hey ho for packing up and crawling back to the family’. Jenny needs a job to finance her lifestyle not to improve her career. The working world of the ‘Jackie’ reader, as illustrated in this story, was one without computers or mobile phones however the notion that work might be difficult to find is not explored. Indeed in the early 1970’s, prior to the recession of 1973, the majority of young people would expect to be in employment.

The social position Jenny occupies is evident. Drawing heavily on a discourse of female compliance within the patriarchal working world (Walby, 1986), Jenny is positioned as junior to, and less powerful, than the men and the older females in her working environment. At the employment agency, the prospective employer and Jenny are ‘formal’ in the office setting. Jenny is called ‘Miss Ferguson’, she stands deferentially in front of the employment agent’s desk, her prospective employer is a ‘stickler’, she is told she should respect this. Moreover she is being offered a ‘girl’s job, a ‘clerkess’. So far this seems in agreement with McRobbie (1978) that the teenage reader of ‘Jackie’ was being groomed as consumer in a capitalist society; perhaps that a girl should aspire to get a job to fund her lifestyle. Jenny is a ‘good’ prospective employee, she is punctual, she has the qualifications necessary, in McRobbie’s analysis her diligence will be rewarded with opportunities for more consumption. During the interview Jenny is positioned as ‘a good girl’, one who will obey authority, defer to seniors and men in particular. An alternative construction of this story might be that getting a job would facilitate getting away from home and moreover that qualifications will help with this. For the ‘Jackie’ reader at school this story is
constructing for her what might be achieved after school, a world away from her parents, with money to spend but also with independence. Moreover she might be ‘Miss Ferguson’ today standing in front of the employment agent, but the reader may well have noticed that the employment agent was a woman and in a position of power.

Drawing on Burns (2000), Phillips (2000) and Tolman and Porch (2002), Korobov and Thorne (2009) point out the dominant discourse of ‘compulsory heterosexual romance’. This they say encompasses:

‘a broad range of gender-related expectations and cultural norms that white adolescent young women are believed to grapple with during their indoctrination into the ideology of western heterosexual romance’ (Korobov and Thorne, 2009: 50).

Jenny’s relationship with the ‘stranger’, Tony, is interesting to consider, for what it reveals about the nuances of this ‘compulsory romance’ in the 1970’s. In 1996 McRobbie pointed out that teen magazines were becoming increasingly loaded with sexual material and young women were increasingly defined by their sexuality, however this is not evident in this magazine in 1973. When Tony offers to drive Jenny to a job interview, she accepts a lift from him with no reference to her personal safety but perhaps to her ‘reputation’. She asks ‘do I look like the sort of girl who can be picked up?’ ‘Picked up’ implies two different discourses one ‘female weakness’ of ‘being helped’ as weaker person, or a ‘permissive discourse’ of consensual sexual engagement. The notion of being ‘picked up’ as sexually informed is shown here as something Jenny would not want to do, she indicates that there is a ‘sort’ of girl who would be picked up,
and not a ‘sort’ she approves of. However she ignores this potential construction and opts to join Tony in the car. This can be considered to be an example of ‘multivoicedness’ (Parker, 2005), explicitly the story is being told through Jenny’s conversations with Sandie and the other characters, yet when she ‘thinks’ to herself, an alternative voice questions her actions.

A C21st reading of this car journey is one of concern for Jenny’s personal safety, not her reputation. It is difficult to imagine that a story aimed at young teenage girls in current society would depict the same scene without a warning about the dangers of getting in a car with a stranger. However in this story it is not a ‘stranger danger’ discourse that Jenny draws on but once again the discourse of ‘chastity’ or how ‘good girls might behave’. The construction of danger is not in reference to the car driver and that he might hurt her rather it is constructed that she might ‘hurt herself’. This draws heavily on the ‘male sex drive discourse’ (Hollway, 1984). Situated in this is the assumption that Jenny must beware because ‘men can’t help themselves’. When Jenny gets into the car it is interesting to note that it is ‘open topped’. Perhaps her reputation is secure when although in a car, she remains effectively outside. The subject positioning is negotiated within the story for Jenny to resist the challenge to her ‘reputation’ and continue to invest in being ‘the good girl’.

The element of adventure is furthered in this car journey by Jenny directing the driver to ‘follow that bus’. Drawing on the discourse of ‘escapade’ as seen in ‘spy’ films and ‘cops and robbers’ television, Jenny embarks on a chase. Jenny is proactive in this scene, directing the (male) driver to take her on an adventure. McRobbie (2005) suggested the ‘Jackie’ reader was waiting for the engagement ring to ‘pop out of a boy’s pocket’, drawing on this ‘hetero-sexual
Re-reading ‘Jackie’

marriage imperative’ discourse Jenny could be seen as getting into a car because a good looking male has asked and he is potential boyfriend material. However an alternative discursive construction of Jenny’s action could suggest ‘adventure and independence’; perhaps the suggestion that within your own comfort zone, in Jenny’s case protecting her ‘reputation’, why not seek a bit of adventure?

The style and content of this story draws on a world known to the ‘Jackie’ reader, the horoscopes which featured weekly for example refer the story back to the magazine. Jenny and Tony go swimming, a relatively cheap and easy form of entertainment, and one often recommended in ‘Jackie’ as a good way to exercise and meet boys. Drawing on the discourse of ‘female objectivity’ Jenny is seen to be ‘looked at’. There is an offering of ‘ideal beauty’, Jenny swims but her long hair style remains in place, she wears a bikini, and looks so good Tony says ‘he fainted’ once again drawing on a ‘male sex drive’ assumption. This picture story constructs ‘romance’: Jenny meets a boy, he is flawed because he has lied about his job and car and tricked her into spending the day with him, yet he turns out to be ‘good’ after all and she forgives him. In this story Jenny can be discursively positioned within ‘feminine objectivity’ and where a girl is to be looked at, ‘beauty is imperative’, moreover Jenny is positioned as a compliant and caring female; she has to have a boyfriend even if he has lied and cheated, any boy is better than no boy, and if he is flawed he can be saved by a ‘good girl’. Moreover this ‘good girl’ is perhaps constructed within a discourse of ‘caring femininity’ that would ‘mend the bad boys’ ways’. It is the last frame that provides a counterpoint and perhaps allows Jenny and indeed the ‘Jackie’ reader to resist this discursive assumption. Sandie in the
foreground jokes about ‘fate’, in the background Jenny and Tony are in the ‘clinch’ Myskow (2005) tells us was expected at the end of every story. Sandie could be talking to herself, the friend who has had to take second place to boys and romance, or she could be sharing the joke with the ‘Jackie’ reader, offering an alternative discourse of ‘female solidarity’ and acknowledging that the notions in this romantic tale are after all just for fun.

This story has been analysed using ‘broad brush’ approach and not all Parker’s (2005) steps have been made explicit, yet several issues have revealed a social world of the ‘Jackie’ readers of 1973. Reading this story through the lens of the C21st it is interesting to note the ‘formality’ of the workplace, the assumption of a girls job; ‘the clerkess’ and the construction of heterosexual romance that seems to supersede personal safety. Although McRobbie (1996) has pointed out there has been an increasing emphasis on sexual material in magazines aimed at young women, in this 1973 issue of ‘Jackie’ the predominant discourse is ‘romance’ and ‘chastity’ not romance with sexual activity. It seems however there is opportunity within the discourses presented to consider alternatives to the social world on offer.

**Job adverts**

The next step of the analysis was to make a thorough exploration of a smaller item by considering an advert. The content analysis indicated that adverts contributed to 28% of ‘Jackie’ magazine. In all of the editions of ‘Jackie’ I examined the majority of the job adverts were for: nurse training: State Registered Nurse (SRN), State Enrolled Nurse (SEN) or orthopaedic nursing, and for the women’s divisions of the army, navy and air force. Many of the
adverts were to recruit nurses into these services. Banks and the civil service accounted for almost all of the remainder with an occasional mention of ‘punch card’ operator or telephonist. An overarching theme of all these recruitment programmes was that these were jobs for ‘women’. For example a campaign for National Westminster Bank carries these strap lines ‘Pam’s life at National Westminster’ (Jackie, 1971:21). ‘How Jill combines marriage with National Westminster’ (Jackie, 1973b:6) (see Figure 7). Perhaps more interestingly for her expectations, this from the copy of a bank advert ‘*Linda does not regard her job as a career. We don’t expect her to either*’ (Jackie, 1971:6). This is not surprising when it is noted that in 1978 only 1% of bank managers were women (Rowbotham, 1997). A recruitment poster for Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS) headlined this double page spread ‘*It takes more than sailors to keep a frigate afloat*’. The advert went on to recruit WRNS as radar plotters, weapons analysts, store keepers and administrators (Jackie 1973b:16-17). These examples illustrate some of the advertising slogans and introduce the assumptions that seem to be being made about the working life constructed for the ‘Jackie’ reader. As Oakley (2009) points out, her classic text on housework (Oakley, 1974) was inspired by the discursive construction that it was ‘an aspect of the feminine characteristic that women were satisfied with poorly paid employed work because their primary commitment was to home and family’ (Oakley, 2009:119). These adverts might seem to be for ‘women’s jobs’ perhaps reflecting the discursive assumption of ‘natural homemakers’, and that a girl would have a ‘job’ prior to her ‘real career’ as a wife and mother. However, within the jobs on offer in ‘Jackie’ some were more challenging to this discursive assumption than others, for example ‘weapons analyst’ in WRNS is not
necessarily a precursor to homemaker. Further some jobs that might be construed as girl’s jobs might potentially offer an alternative reading
ADVERTISEMEN
OLLWYN AND HER EXCITING NEW LIFE

"I call it nursing-plus, Jan"

There's me and six others - we're pupil nurses.

We get lots of real nursing but not too much rush so we can enjoy training for our Sen Certificate.

We're not only in Princess Mary's - we're in the RAF too. So we nurse Service people and their families.

And there's masses of young company for off duty times.

Lots to do, plus a chance to travel.


Plus what Ollie?

Plus the RAF

Figure 10: Advert from Jackie (1973)
‘Ollwyn and her exciting new life’

I selected one advert from the issue of ‘Jackie’ chosen for analysis (‘Jackie’, 1973a) (see Figure 10) for a thorough scrutiny. As with the picture strip story I followed step one of Parker (2005) and turned the whole advertisement into text, then selected certain frames to illustrate what might be read about the work and possible future being offered to the ‘Jackie’ reader. Then following the twelve steps set out by Parker (2005) I analysed the selected material and summarised this analysis. The chosen advert combined the two main lines of recruitment revealed in the content analysis; nursing and the armed services. This advertisement fills half of one page and is presented to resemble the ‘romance’ strip picture stories appearing weekly in ‘Jackie’. Ollwyn is telling ‘Jan’ about her life as a trainee nurse in the Princess Mary’s Royal Air Force Nursing Service (PMRAFNS). Ollwyn appears to describe her work, her qualifications, prospects and her social expectations and, as might be expected, the overall tone is one of recommending the job. There seem to be two main points of interest when considering the future of ‘Jackie’ the reader of the advert; what was she to expect from her job, where would she go from here?

Figure 11: Advert frame 1

The first frame shows two aspects of Ollwyn’s ‘life’ (Figure 11). She is seen obviously as a nurse, she is in uniform recognisable in civilian hospitals even if
the PMRAFNS are a military unit. She is pushing a man in a wheelchair; a female ‘carer’ of men’. However she is outside, not in a medical or overtly technically nursing role. Moreover despite being recruited for the armed forces she is in a sunny parkland setting, presumably with time to care for her patient (a man). In the background an off duty nurse (she is wearing her cape usually only worn ‘off duty’), is walking with a man in white coat, presumably a doctor. He has his hands in his pockets in a casual pose, the nurse is walking very close to him. This setting constructs for Ollwyn a social life with a doctor and time for a romantic walk together. Ollwyn explains to Jan that although this is ‘real nursing’ she has time to enjoy herself and she is being trained for a certificate.

Figure 12: Advert frame 2

The next scene, Figure 12, shows Ollwyn administering medicine from a bottle to a young man who is in a hospital bed, supervised by an older male doctor. In the next she is holding a newly delivered baby. She tells Jan a PMRAFN looks after families not only service men. Two of the remaining frames show the lively social life she has and the young men Ollwyn meets, the other shows her getting into an aeroplane getting ready to travel (Figure 13). The reading of Ollwyn’s life draws on many discourses of ‘female caring’, ‘subservience’, and
‘doctors and nurses romance’, in doing so shows a reader a scene where she can do a girls job, meet young men and presumably a husband, travel and get a nursing certificate.

Figure 13: Advert frames 3

Beyond this simple summary of what this recruitment advert is constructing it is interesting to consider different readings of it. Parker (2005) speaks of a ‘multivoicedness’ in text. There is obviously an explicit use of voice in this piece as Ollwyn is talking to Jan. However she is also ‘instructing’ and informing Jan. Ollwyn is speaking in the ‘expert voice’ of the one with knowledge and implicitly a degree of power. Parker (2005) also makes us sensitive to what is not said how one word is different to another. Ollwyn tells us ‘we get lots of real nursing’ this implies there is either some unreal, false or even surreal nursing, or perhaps ‘playing at nursing’. Ollwyn continues constructing her nurse training as ‘fun’ she ‘can enjoy training for our SEN certificate’. Why might she not ‘enjoy’ her training, what would be disagreeable, yet interestingly Ollwyn has constructed nurse training as a shared experience. She is talking about ‘we’ it is ‘our’ certificate. Ollwyn is not constructing solitude within PMRAFNS, but a community. Moreover that getting a certificate in itself might be ‘enjoyable’ is
very interesting. Enjoyment implies ‘fun’ and the nurse is offered a position of not taking the work seriously, perhaps locating her within the romantic ‘doctor-nurse’ discourse presented in the first frame. However an alternative construction is offered with the ‘team spirit sorority’ of professional nurses gaining worthy certificates. Arguably this replaces the discourse of a ‘girl’s job to catch a husband’, and mobilises the alternative construction of ‘qualified and respected professional’.

The third consideration Parker (2005) tells us is that resistance to dominant discourse might be identified. Ollwyn is offering two different constructions of her life in the PMRAFNS in this frame; the professional nurse, studying for a certificate and looking after her patient, or the off duty nurse not spending too much time studying and walking in the park with a doctor. Another discourse that may be resisted here is the dominant heterosexual discourse. Jackson (2005b) points out the ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich,1980) in teenage magazines, and the ‘relative silences around other sexual subjectivities such as lesbian or bisexual sexualities’ (Jackson,2005:297). By framing her experience as ‘we’ and ‘our’ Ollwyn might be seen as rejecting the image of the nurse/doctor, male/female binaries and suggesting a female exclusivity of women bonded together in a training and living unit, perhaps ‘silently’ constructing an alternative.

Parker (2005) refers to the discourse or ‘chains of words and images’ as forming a social bond. This social bond ‘includes certain kinds of people and excludes others’ (Parker, 2005:90). The third frame of this advert (Figure 12) can show us alternative constructions for Ollwyn’s future. In this frame Ollwyn is featured twice, in the foreground she is holding a new baby, presumably
delivered into the ‘family’ of the RAF. In the centre of the frame a young man is in bed, he is sitting up wearing pyjamas, in the background Ollwyn is seen with a medicine bottle and a doctor. If the background of this shot is ignored this frame might position Ollwyn’s future in ‘domesticity’ with her husband and baby. This could be her home and her bed with her husband in it. The background shot however offers an alternative construction. The man in the bed is positioned as the patient, Ollwyn is positioned as the professional nurse and she is administering medicine as prescribed by a doctor. Here she is constructed as part of a team, an experience nurse with a respected role to play. These alternative constructs offer Ollwyn, and therefore the ‘Jackie’ reader, two possible life course trajectories.

This advert in ‘Jackie’ may have encouraged some young women to join the PMRANS in order to travel or find a husband. Indeed the advert might be considered within notion of the ‘massive ideological block’ within which the ‘Jackie’ reader was imprisoned (McRobbie, 2000: 141). This charts the future of the ‘Jackie’ reader in a girl’s job ‘the nurse’ subservient to men ‘the doctor’, and ‘waiting for the engagement ring’. However it may have suggested to the ‘Jackie’ reader that she had the possibility of a future where she could have a professional career and an alternative to the wife and mother roles that she may have considered to be inevitable. Furthermore that she had the power of expertise within her if she wanted. The job adverts in ‘Jackie’ apparently offered a narrow choice of ‘girls work’; supporting McRobbie (1978) that the world presented to girls was very narrowly circumscribed and constricting. Yet this analysis has revealed that alternative constructions might be interpreted by the teenage girls reading ‘Jackie’, further, may have presented opportunities to
resist the dominant discourses of ‘a girl’s job’ and inevitable hetero-sexual monogamy.

The ‘voice’ of the ‘Jackie’ reader

The analysis of the picture story and the job advert has offered an alternative to a structuralist reading of ‘Jackie’ magazine. It seems that alongside the ‘voice’ of authority and expertise in the magazine, in the fashion and beauty features and in the story telling, there is an underlying ‘questioning voice’. The inner thoughts of Jenny and Sandie sharing a joke with the reader suggested a resistance to the dominant discourse of the story. The alternative reading of ‘Ollwyn’s exciting new life’ offered the possibility of resisting expected life course trajectories. It seems important to explore if the ‘Jackie’ reader was open to the suggestion of resisting dominant discourse in her historical and social time. The readers’ letters and the problem page offered the opportunity for the reader of ‘Jackie’ to write in her own words. Jackson (2005a, 2005b) points out that ‘Agony Aunts’ have a long history in women’s magazines, and that advice pages are one of the most popular features of teenage magazines. Moreover, my research diary revealed that it was ‘Cathy and Claire’ that most people recalled and it seemed appropriate to complete this analysis by exploring this ‘voice’ of the ‘Jackie’ reader.

The analytical steps for this letter were slightly different than for the picture strip story of the job advert. The text did not have to be turned into words. The remaining steps were followed and summarised.
Chapter 5

‘Cathy and Claire’

The Cathy and Claire page was the ‘benign older sister’ in ‘Jackie’ (Myskow, 2005). Typically in each edition the page consisted of 10 readers’ letters with the responses from Cathy and Claire, and a couple of pictures. Of all the 10 problems featured on this page in the featured edition (Jackie, 1973a) only 2 did not concern boys, love or romance. The issues concerning teenage girls bodies; menstrual periods, spots, being too tall, too short, too fat or too skinny were dealt with in the weekly ‘Dear Doctor’ column which was about a quarter the size of Cathy and Claire’s page. The ideology expressed in the content of the letters and the replies, the advice from Cathy and Claire, might be encapsulated within discourses of compliance chastity and hetero-sexual romance. Girls were advised to conform to expectations, be good enjoy your friendships and it was ‘normal’ for girls as young as 14 to have steady boyfriends. The letters the readers wrote were perhaps more grounded in their own reality than the romance stories they were reading; problems involved aspects of having a boyfriend that the picture romance seemed to ignore. The problems featured were predominantly about boys; how to kiss one, how to get one to ask you out, and how to stop your best friend from pinching him once you got him. There was no mention of any physical relationship other than kissing and holding hands, this is perhaps particularly illustrative of the historical and social location of the 1970’s. As McRobbie (1996) pointed out by the 1990’s the teenage magazines contained a great deal more sexual material, and perhaps this leads to the notion that by the 1990’s girls were ‘hailed as sexual subjects, who can be (hetero) sexually active as long as they are also sexually responsible’ (Jackson, 2005b:296).
The letters indicated the readers were, as pointed out by McRobbie (1978), at school or college and usually living at home. The future was constructed as one of heterosexual monogamy and settling down.

Dear Cathy and Claire- I've been going out with someone considerably older than me for over a year. I like him a lot, and the fact he isn't young and trendy does not bother me at all. But, because he is much older so too are his friends. They are all either married or engaged, and it's really a bore hearing about their new houses and central heating problems. It doesn't seem right to finish with my boyfriend because of this, as he is the important one not his friends.

If you don’t like the friends of his choice, then in a sense the relationship is not as it should be. However, on the other hand you like your boyfriend and that is, as you say, an important point. Though after a year you should have some clue as to whether your relationship is likely to become more serious or not. So for heavens sake don't decide now whether he is like his friends and will want to spend the rest of his life worrying about the house and a mortgage. If you decide to stick with him it wouldn't be a bad idea to limit the time you are with his friends, and make going to see them less of a habit. In fact try going out with the intention of making new and mutual friends (Jackie, 1973: 39)

Figure 14: Letter to Cathy and Claire

I have selected this (Figure 14) letter for closer scrutiny because I feel it shows an offering of alternative constructions moreover that the voice of ‘Jackie’ is challenging the discourse of early and inevitable domesticity.

This letter appeared alongside several others, including one from a boy, about how to get and keep a boyfriend (or girlfriend).
On first reading of this letter it seems that this reader has written to complain about her boyfriend’s friends but on further exploration the reader’s concerns are more complex than anticipated. Several interesting points are raised both by the reader’s words and the reply from Cathy and Claire.

The writer of this letter constructs the age difference between herself and her boyfriend as non-problematic. She therefore resists the position of ‘too young’ and forestalls a response in this vein from Cathy and Claire. However, the layout of the page constructs a position where the age gap is indeed problematic (Appendix 2). This letter was accompanied by a picture, one of two on the page. One picture shows a girl sitting alone on a park bench; her demeanour in the shot portrays general ‘teenage angst’ — she is quite reflective and forlorn, perhaps illustrating the general tone of the letters. The other is positioned above this letter. It is a picture of a male and a female sitting on a sofa. The male in this picture is clearly a man rather than a boy. He is positioned as domineering, the female is much younger and her body language is tense and seemingly overawed. This picture serves to construct the relationship between the two as imbalanced. The man is powerful and by default the girl is positioned as subservient. This offers the construction that an older boyfriend may be unsuitable without Cathy and Claire challenging the writer’s position directly. The picture contrasts with the happy, unthreatening and seemingly suitable images of the young teenage pop stars in the rest of the magazine. The ‘heartthrobs’ most featured in this issue are Donny Osmond who sang with his brothers and David Cassidy who had starred in a TV programme about a singing family seemingly ‘boy next door’, ‘family friendly’ boys. These underpin the dominant discourse of teenage morality as presented...
to the readership throughout ‘Jackie’; relationships were constructed as ‘romantic’ thus resisting a suggestion of sexuality. The older boyfriend is constructed as dominant and therefore predatory, challenging the discourse of ‘innocent teenage romance’.

That Cathy and Claire possibly let the illustration speak their disapproval might indicate that the challenge presented to the ‘norm’ by a big age difference is a taboo subject for this page. Perhaps the readers should not be exposed to the reasons that an older man might want a relationship with a younger girl. The question of a sexual relationship cannot be addressed if the question is not allowed to be asked. Interestingly as discussed previously in relation to the picture story analysis, in this issue of ‘Jackie’ (1973a) the heroine of the story gets into a car with a complete stranger. It is her reputation she is afraid not for her physical safety. The age gap in the picture story is not mentioned, the assumption is that the two characters are a similar age and this is therefore constructed as normal. It is perhaps the lack of comment on the age gap in the response to this letter that indicates the magnitude of the challenge to a ‘norm’.

There are other interesting confirmations of the dominant discourses in this letter; those of domesticity and young motherhood. The reader starts off by denying that her boyfriend’s lack of trendy clothes is a problem however yet again she has raised the subject ‘lack of trendiness’ perhaps is the issue. Being ‘trendy’ implies taking an interest in current styles and fashions, if this is important to the reader and not to her boyfriend then perhaps they do not have much in common, or perhaps read in conjunction with her comments about her boyfriend’s friends, the reader is bored. She seems to be expressing her boredom and dissatisfaction with the notion of settling down to a domestic idyll,
she may be resisting the feminine mystique (Friedan, 1963) whether or not she has heard of it. It is in her last sentence that the crux of the matter for this reader seems to be highlighted ‘It doesn’t seem right to finish with my boyfriend because of this, as he is the important one not his friends’ one can almost hear the question mark. She may be asking Cathy and Claire for ‘permission’ to remain in this relationship; Jackson (2005) points out that agony aunts ‘more often than not invoke a normalising discourse as to what is and what is not acceptable in their responses’ (Jackson, 2005: 298). However rather than ‘asking permission’ to remain in this relationship this reader may be asking permission to challenge the ‘normalising discourse’. The scene this letter describes is almost exactly the romantic scenario constructed every week in the ‘Jackie’ picture stories. She has a ‘steady boyfriend’ she ‘likes him a lot’ he is mature and is old enough to ‘settle down’. Being older makes him a little bit different drawing on the discourse of ‘exotic’ and different meaning romantic as presented in the picture strip stories. She is facing the ‘fairy tale ending’ hinted at in every story, as McRobbie (2005) put it waiting for the engagement ring to pop out at any time. However doubts are clearly manifesting themselves. Is he really more important? If so, more important than what?

In the words of a ‘Jackie’ reader this letter maybe challenges the discourses of ‘romance’, the ‘set future’, the ‘new house and central heating’. However she does not actually ask the question, thus no answer to ‘is this all there is?’ can be given. Perhaps in the letters page there was room for ‘Jackie’ to raise these questions and the appeal of the Cathy and Claire page was not to share the actual problems featured on the page or even to gloat over the misery of the
other readers. The attraction was what was unsaid; the questions *if this is not all there is what is there?* were sown for those who wanted to read it.

**Conclusion**

Having selectively analysed the content of this edition of ‘Jackie’, it seemed that a better understanding of some of the material could be reached when considering it within the historical location in which it was written. As Parker (2005) points out language does not come out of nowhere and ‘everything that has meaning for us has certain historical preconditions (Parker, 2005: 91). Reflecting on McRobbie’s (2005) interview, her disappointment is understandable that apparently, ‘…teenage girls were being fed this constrictive kind of ideology. This world that it created for young women was very narrowly circumscribed’ (Woman’s Hour, 2005). However the critical realist underpinning of this research acknowledges the ‘real’ world, the teenage girls of the early 1970s *did* live in a narrowly circumscribed world. The material they were in a position to purchase and read was subjected to financial and parental restriction.

The magazine was only affordable due to the advertisers who were potentially ‘grooming’ young consumers, furthermore the content had to be acceptable not only to the readers but to their parents. As McRobbie (1978) pointed out the language of the stories is ‘derived seemingly from the days of the teenage commercial boom it has a particularly 1950s ring about it’ (McRobbie, 1978:17). Surely this ‘teenage boom’ would be recognisable to the parents of the ‘Jackie’ reader of the 1970s. A familiarity with the language and tone might make this magazine acceptable to parents. As Hall (2000) informs us the ‘swinging sixties’
initially only affected small parts of London; the ethos of a permissive society
did not engulf the entire country overnight. It is unlikely that a magazine aimed
at teenage girls promoting premarital sex or indeed overt feminism would have
been deemed acceptable by the readers’ parents. The content analysis
supported the findings of McRobbie’s structuralist approach to analysing
‘Jackie’. However by looking at the discourses drawn upon and looking for the
questioning ‘voice’ of the ‘Jackie’ readership it seems there may be potential for
the reader to resist the ideology constructed for them.

The implication of this analysis for the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women is to
underpin the revelations from the literature. The discourses of teenage
femininity presented to the readership constructed a future expectation of ‘a
girls job’ rather than a ‘career’, and an expectation of a hetero-sexual romantic
relationship, leading to marriage. In contrast with later publications such as
‘More’ and ‘Sugar’ (see Kehily, 1999: McRobbie,1996) teenage girls were not
constructed as ‘sexual’ but as ‘romantic’; the notion of being ‘swept off ones
feet’ offered subject positions of inevitable weakness. The female body was
presented as objectified and to be subjected to the ‘male gaze’, and there is a
construction of ideal femininity encapsulated within the slim, healthy and almost
invariably white body.

Kehily (1999) suggests that female friendship groups actively engage with
issues arising from magazines such as ‘Jackie’ and draw on these to enact ‘a
culture of femininity (which) may, at moments, work to expel other cultures of
femininity’ (Kehiy, 1999:74). The ‘telescopic’ cohort of women in this research
was not exposed to a plethora of magazines; ‘Jackie’ was one of very few and
hugely outsold rival publications in the early 1970s. The discourses of femininity
presented in the weekly magazine may have underpinned prevailing cultures of femininity in the female friendship groups reading it. However in their particular historical and social location, against a background of a changing economy, a more ‘permissive’ society and the rising voice of feminism, alternative readings of the constructions of their future may have become available to increasing numbers of young women. Therefore the female friendship groups enacting ‘cultures of femininity’ were in a position to explore alternative discourses to ‘girls job’ and wife and mother’.

At first reading it seems that ‘Jackie’ may have as McRobbie (1978) feared presented an ideology of femininity being groomed as consumers. However by exploring alternative constructions of the material in ‘Jackie’, and how the reader perhaps ‘read’ this, it appears an alternative is possible. It seems from my analysis that there is indication the reader was being encouraged to think for herself as the editors intended (Myskow, 2005). McRobbie (2005) lamented that the readership of ‘Jackie’ was not being offered a feminist perspective, yet as Ord and Quigley (1985) pointed out, in the 1970s second wave feminists were striving to raise awareness against the tide of entrenched opinions. It might have been difficult in the historical and social time of the early 1970s to present material considered to be contentious to a young readership of girls. Yet the ‘alternative reading’ may have been appreciated by some of the readership. The construction of alternative futures may not have prevented the ‘telescopic’ cohort rejecting the initial social roles of ‘good girl’, ‘wife and mother’ yet may have paved the way for her to explore alternative life trajectories as the social and economic world changed around her.
Chapter 6: Preparing to explore the told story

A life course approach has been adopted in this research aiming to explore the experience of the ‘telescopic’ cohort of women who in their contemporary individual time might be considered to be ‘middle aged’. The methods of the research aimed to explore two different aspects of women’s lives; the ‘lived life’ and the ‘told story’ (Wengraf, 2001). So far, in order to gain an understanding of their formative years, this research has considered the lives of women in the context of their historical and social location. In summary up to this point in the research I have focused on the ‘lived life’. It is appropriate at this stage to turn attention to ‘the told story’ as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. This part of the research aims to gain an appreciation of how women at midlife experience and make sense of their life course and to obtain insight into how women experience the ‘telescopic’ spread of generations (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999).

This chapter revisits the theoretical perspective that informs the methods and considers how best to access the subjective experience of a small number of women. Several very important issues have to be addressed: who would participate, how their subjective experience could be explored, what ethical implications there were for undertaking such an exploration, and once again to what extent I myself was involved in the production of the data. Moreover, in developing this method it was important to consider how the data gathered might be analysed.

Telling stories

The epistemological underpinning of this research is one of constructionism and the analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine drew on discourse analysis (Parker, 1994,
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2005; Willig, 1999, 2001). This section, exploring the subjective understandings that women have of their midlife, adopts a similar position. Women’s experience of identity and self is conceptualised not ‘as the property of an individual psyche, but as the product of social and cultural arrangements or local interactions’ (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999: 229). However, a problem with analysing discourse as identified in previous chapters is the challenge of ‘reality’. A central tenet of life course theory is to consider lives within changing historical and social locations. If a relativist ontology is accepted, (see for example Edwards, 2003) it is problematical to conceptualise ‘a real world’ of social and cultural constraints. In this chapter it seems again problematic to consider women entirely as socially constructed, and some consideration must be given to the non-discursive such as physical ageing or financial constraints for example.

As Apter (1995) pointed out, a woman may find her subjective experience of midlife is influenced by her ageing physical appearance. Indeed the literature revealed that ‘middle aged’ women are often defined by their physicality; be it their ageing body, their menopausal symptoms, their perceived loss of beauty or an apparent inappropriate sexuality (Chrisler, 2007; Greer, 1991; McQuaide, 1998; Ostrove and Stewart, 1998; Ussher, 2006,1989). The method for this part of the research must allow for an exploration of an embodied person within a constructed yet real world. The analysis of ‘Jackie’ adopted a critical realist approach (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007) which will once again be useful to facilitate an exploration of subjectivity within a ‘real’ world of the ageing body, financial constraints and cultural location. However in addition this chapter is concerned with a ‘told story’ and explores how women might tell their story.
Narrative and discourse

As this phase of the research deals with the ‘told story’ we are reminded of the notion of narrative as a methodological concept. Much of everyday life involves telling stories. Indeed telling stories is a very ‘basic human activity’ (McLeod, 2001:29). From newspapers and television to great works of literature ‘stories’ are a familiar concept. Stories are used to express ourselves and to convey meanings. Further ‘the story is a natural package for organising many kinds of information’ (McAdams et al., 1993:27). Linked to the notion of story is that of ‘narrative’. The root of ‘narrate’ means both to tell and to know, and the function of narrative is to bring order to disorder (Elliott, 2005; Murray, 2003; Czarniawska, 2004). ‘In telling a story, the narrator is trying to organise the disorganised and to give it meaning’ (Murray, 2003:114).

A narrative psychological approach shares with postmodernist, discourse and rhetorical analyses the notion of language as a tool for the construction of reality (Crossley, 2000). Furthermore individuals reflect on their progress and experience in life, and use that knowledge to articulate a fundamental sense of self.

‘If you want to know me then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story’ (McAdams, 1993:11).

It would appear that stories are an ideal vehicle for exploring how individuals make sense of their lives and it seems how a woman understands her midlife
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self might be revealed by exploring her story (McAdams et al., 1997, drawing on Bruner, 1990; Ricouer, 1984).

In narrative it is ‘the plot rather than the truth or falsity of story elements that determines the power of narrative as a story’ (Czarniawska 2004:8 my emphasis). This highlights the need to fully understand what the narrative is intended to reveal before beginning to collect narrative accounts. Jackson (1998) points out that one’s memories, and the stories recalled and related could be considered to be either ‘narrative constructions’ or ‘true’ reflections of past events. The epistemological underpinning of this research challenges a positivist ‘discoverable truth’ and rather than consider narrative constructions as ‘true reflections’ instead explores a constructionist alternative. Within a constructionist framework recollections and life stories can be considered to be narratives constructed out of culturally available discourses. Thus we are able to tell particular stories at particular times. Drawing on Plummer (1994), Jackson (1998) explains how constructions and counter constructions can change over time. These discursive shifts allow stories to change. Further, using an example from her own life Jackson (1998) goes on to suggest that memories can be reinterpreted with the broadening of knowledge and experience over time.

When developing the method to explore the ‘told story’ of women’s lives it seems there is potential for women to reflect on their life course and reconsider their discursive positioning throughout their life trajectories. This reflects Giddens’ (1991) suggestion that it is a person’s capacity to keep a narrative going, a continual revision of personal biography that will maintain and develop their sense of self. Self-identity is a reflexive process ‘…. (personal biography)
cannot be wholly fictive, it must continually integrate events which occur in the
external world, and sort them out into the ongoing story about the self
(Giddens, 1991: 54).

This ‘ongoing story’ of self seemed a useful method to explore the lives of
women across their life course, as a means to reveal subjective understandings
of self and identity. As McAdams et al., (1997) explain:

‘Identity …may be viewed as an internalised and evolving life story, a
way of telling the self to the self and others, through stories or sets of
stories, complete with settings, scenes characters plots and themes’
(McAdams et al., 1997:678)

Narrative psychology looks at life stories because they are part of the image
people have about themselves (Gergen and Gergen, 1986; McAdams, 1997).
Further:

‘from a poststructuralist feminist vantage point, the narratives people
compose from personal experiences, informed by broader cultural
scripts, contribute to their construction of identities and selves (Rice,
2009:248)

It seemed that narrative inquiry was compatible with a constructionist
epistemology and a poststructuralist analysis of discourse. However, as Squire
et al. (2008) point out, there are several and sometimes conflicting, versions of
‘narrative’. Moreover how narrative research might be carried out is also open to
interpretation:
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‘Narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points…there are no self evident categories on which to focus…(and) narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation’ (Squire et. al., 2008:1)

It was clear that there were several issues to resolve in the process of developing an appropriate method for exploring the ‘told stories’ of a cohort of women. Problematic with a narrative approach is the ‘tyranny of narrative’ (Riessman, 1997:5) where the line is blurred between talk, text, and academic writing. It seems the popularity of ‘telling one’s story’ on daytime television, in magazines, tabloid or broadsheet newspaper columns, renders narrative reduced to ‘little more than a metaphor’ (Riessman and Quinney, 2005:393). In popular usage a story ‘speaks for itself’ and does not require interpretation, which makes the distinction between academic enquiry and journalistic reporting. However as Squire et al., (2008) remind us, narrative research can offer useful insight into different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, which is a tempting route by which to access individual’s understanding of their ‘midlife’ self. Therefore it seemed imperative that the methodology for this phase of the research enabled the ‘told story’ to emerge in the participants’ own words. Yet crucially should facilitate an insight into the contradictory layers of meaning (Squire et al., 2008) in the stories told. Thus allow analysis of what this reveals about subjective understanding of ‘being 50’.

Perhaps a useful observation for developing the method for this phase of the research is that:
'For the narrative scholar it is analytic attention to how facts got assembled *that* way. For whom was *this* story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose? What cultural resources does it draw on –take for granted? What does it accomplish? Are their gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest alternative counter narratives?' (Reissman and Quinney, 2005: 393 original emphasis)

Drawing on Reissman and Quinney (2005) provided a useful framework to plan this phase of the research. Collecting narratives by interview and analysing them for ‘different and contradictory layers of meaning’ seemed an appropriate method to explore ‘being 50’.

**Collecting stories**

Considering the ‘stories’ told by women of the ‘telescopic’ cohort appeared to be a promising means of accessing subjective understandings of their ‘midlife’. Yet acknowledging Squire et al. (2008) it was important to realise that although narrative inquiry was an appropriate method for this phase of the research there were some issues to consider. Prior to collecting narrative accounts it had to be clear, what the ethical implications were for the participants and the researcher, who would participate, how the narratives would be collected, and, very importantly how the data would be analysed.

Designing an interview schedule was potentially challenging, we are reminded that stories are told to an audience and we are ‘heavily dependent on the willingness of co-actors in the construction of our story’ (Burr, 2003:144). In opting to collect narratives by interviewing participants I needed to be mindful as Kvale (1996) pointed out it is not an ‘inter view’ or an exchange of opinion and
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‘inquisition’ might be a more appropriate term. I had to be aware that as the researcher, and the ‘audience’, stories would be told to me in a certain manner. Furthermore, the way I elicited narratives could limit or prescribe what might be related to me.

An interesting consideration is that an interview does not represent anything else but it is ‘an interaction that becomes recorded or inscribed and that is what it stands for’ (Czarniawska, 2004: 49). This implies that each interview is unique and the relating of narratives in a particular way during the interview is unique to that interview. The narrative is generated by the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. My role as the researcher inevitably would influence the sort of data to emerge from the interview. Furthermore although my position as a woman drawn from the same demographic group as my participants might enable me to locate social and cultural references from their life course, it was imperative to design an interview method that would allow their stories of their own individual time and understandings to be heard. As far as possible the method should allow the participants choice of narrative, stories, emplottment and references.

Ethical issues

Prior to beginning any process of planning and conducting interviews I had to consider the ethical implications of this. According to Parker (2005) the ‘best research…starts with ethical considerations’, and importantly ‘follows them all the way through the work, and then through to the way the research is read and taken up by others’ (Parker, 2005:23). This research has been identified as ‘feminist’ yet as acknowledged in Chapter 2 there is no one ‘feminist’ viewpoint.
From a simplistic stance this research is feminist by being ‘about women’, yet more specifically it shares a common feminist methodology with a ‘focus on experience in terms of whose experience is represented and validated within the research’ (Burman, 1994:124). When considering the ethical implications of this research some issues were outlined by, and specific requirements of, both the University of Bradford and the British Psychological Society (2006). Moreover, as feminism underpins this research it was important to give consideration in particular to issues of power relations within the research, and on ‘reflexivity as a critique of objectivity, and reflexive clarity about the conditions of the production of the research’ (Burman, 1994:124).

The interview process was informed by some basic ethical considerations as outlined by Willig (2001). These state that the participant should give informed consent, there should be no deception of a participant, the participant has the right to withdraw at any time and will be debriefed of any concerns immediately following the interview, the participant should expect to be treated with respect and any data generated should be treated in confidence (Willig, 2001:18). It was not anticipated that undue distress would be caused to the participant, however as the interviews were lengthy and reflecting on personal biography it was incumbent on myself, the interviewer, to ensure that the participant was at all times comfortable to continue with the interview.

In accordance with British Psychological Society (2006) recommendations the consent obtained from the participant at the outset of the interview was not to be regarded as a mandate for the entire interview but the process of consent would be continuous and renegotiated if the interview took a direction that was
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not discussed at the outset (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The participants were interviewed at a mutually convenient location with consideration given to the personal safety of the participants and the interviewer. I identified a colleague who was informed of the date, time and venue when the interview took place. I then informed this colleague when the interview was terminated and I had safely returned home or to my predetermined destination.

The participants were invited by letter (Appendix 3). When a meeting was arranged each was given a participant’s information sheet (Appendix 3) and offered an opportunity to discuss this. The consent form was explained and the participants invited to sign, indicating their consent to participate (Appendix 3). The right of the participant to withdraw consent at any time without detriment, up to the point when the analysis was begun, was highlighted. The participant was assured that in that event all data already gathered relating to that participant would be destroyed. The data generated from the interviews was made anonymous by changing the names and personal details of the participants. All materials involved with the participant interviews was kept privately and secured. Where it was impossible to use the data collected to its full potential without risk of exposing the identity of the participant, this was discussed with the participant and further written consent obtained.

I have acknowledged my place in this research from the outset and have not claimed ‘researcher neutrality’ or to be an extension of a research instrument, objective without a vantage point (Oakley, 1981). Neither does this research claim to ‘unearth truth’ that is uncontested. The interview material is inevitably ‘co-produced’ the narratives were told to ‘me’ and in response to ‘my questions’. Therefore in this research it was important for me clarify my own relationship
with any participants, how they were contacted and where the interviews took place. To maintain balance of power relations within the interview setting Oakley (1981) argued for a relational approach and sharing of stories. However Rice (2009) points out that this is ‘romanticised’ and continues to disregard the power dynamic underlying research relationships. To address this it was incumbent on me to continue to reflect on my own place within the interviews and give clarity to the analytical process and include my own reflexive accounts.

The narrative interview

Several approaches to designing an interviewing framework were considered. For example McAdams (1997) favours a semi-structured interview to serve as a guide, or more specifically the framework for the interview could contain questions about social changes across the participants’ life course (Chamberlyne et al., 2000; Flick, 1998; Elder, 1995). These approaches, whilst potentially useful, are contingent upon myself, the researcher, posing a series of questions. This inevitably means dictating to an extent what the participants could answer. In other words it would be my view of the salient issues of midlife that would be explored, which would not necessarily coincide with those of the participants. Ochberg (1988) proposes life should be narrated in a series of vignettes from which themes emerge of how the person sees what has happened in their lives and Riessman (1993) favours an open-ended question. Flick (1998) emphasises the need to ensure the generative question is indeed going to generate a narrative and the interviewer must strike a balance between active listening and leading the conversation by signalling empathy and interest.
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The crux of a narrative interview must surely be to produce narrative. Alongside this is the need to access as far as possible the participants’ narrative as they themselves relate these. To address this I turned to Wengraf (2006) and his schedule of narrative interviewing. In this method interviews should take place in the format of at least two sections; initially eliciting a response to one prepared question, followed by a more in-depth exploration of the points made in a second session.

Following Wengraf (2001) I crafted a carefully worded question to introduce the research and provoke narratives and accepted his suggestion that visual cues or prompts may be useful. The notion of ‘visual cues’ was interesting and I considered two possibilities: a return to ‘Jackie’ with the interviewee reintroduced to images from her youth, or asking the participants to bring a photograph or other memorabilia from a significant part of their life to discuss at the interview. The obvious way to explore these options was to try them and a ‘pilot’ interview was scheduled.

**Story tellers: The ‘lived lives’**

The recruitment of the participants was contingent upon the criteria discussed fully elsewhere defining the ‘telescopic’ cohort. In summary participants needed to be approximately 50 years of age, and not personally known to myself due to the depth nature of the interviewing. The number of participants needed to be small due to the time consuming nature of the analysis. Moreover as Wengraf (2006) points out the ‘richness’ of the data collected from a small number of cases, rigorously analysed, is more valuable for a narrative analysis than a briefer overview of more cases. Participants were accessed by word of mouth
and a combination of purposive sampling and ‘snowballing’. This method for Denscombe (2003) is well suited to this kind of research project where there is a specific demographic profile for the participants and a relatively small number of participants need to be recruited who are not known to the researcher.

The first consideration for recruitment was age. It was important to keep to a narrow age band because from a life course perspective there is an assumption that life trajectories are influenced by the social and historical timing of events (Elder, 1994, 1974). The literature revealed that notions of youth culture changed rapidly in the 1960s and 70s, moreover that social change was inevitable during this time (Hall, 2000; Kurlansky, 2005). It seemed important to capture the experience of a cohort of women who shared as closely as possible the same point of social and cultural history. The contentious issue of class had to be considered, the focus of my research is the specific group of women educated to be the wives and mothers of the industrial and manufacturing economy, and whose education reflected the report by Newsom (1963) that a girl’s role was to care and a boy’s was to work. However during recruitment I was aware that to limit my participants to those who had taken ‘girls’ jobs might ignore the stories of women who were educated in the same system but followed a seemingly less gendered path. For this phase of the research I recruited 5 participants to interview in depth and a sixth for a pilot interview. In this section I shall introduce the participants and explain how they were recruited, followed by a plan for analysing the data generated.
Preparing to explore the told story

June

The first interview I scheduled was with June and this took place quite early on in the research process. At the time I was considering methodology and method, and was interested to assess the usefulness of asking one, open-ended question. I also wanted to explore the practicality of using photographic prompts to generate narratives. I believed this might fulfil the mandate of allowing the participant to focus on social change across her life course (Elder, 1995) and stimulate narrative topical to the participant (Chamberlyne et al., 2000). June was recruited as a pilot interviewee to assess the efficacy and practicality of my interviewing method. June was introduced to me by my sister. June had shown interest in my research and agreed that I could contact her. I sent her a participant invitation letter (included in Appendix 3) and arranged to meet her in her own home at her request.

June was 50 when I interviewed her, she was an only child, and her parents were both in their early forties when she was born. She attended the village primary school and having passed her ‘11 plus’ progressed to the local girls’ grammar school. She left school with ‘A’ levels and went to teacher training college. After a few months she left teacher training and took a job in a library. She worked in libraries and then for the local authority in a series of other clerical and administrative roles, she still worked for the local authority at the time of the interview. June married first aged 21 and divorced several years later, marrying her present husband about ten years ago. June has never had children herself but has a step daughter. June embraced the notion of showing me photographs with enthusiasm. She showed me more than 20 including those of people, houses and animals.
June’s story was interesting but I had not refined my narrative interviewing skills. I led off with asking her ‘tell me about your life’. June was very willing to talk and show me photographs. However I was unprepared for the times her narrative drew to a close. On reflection, to maintain the ‘flow’ of narrative, I asked June some leading questions, which were my questions and not necessarily issues June herself would have raised. Moreover it seemed that the photographs June brought may have been too numerous. The process of looking at pictures seemed to distract from June’s story. However it was a most useful piloting exercise and June’s story contributed to my understanding of the method used and how to refine it for the remaining interviews.

*Developing the interview schedule*

Following this pilot interview I revised my interview plan by returning to Wengraf (2006) and made changes to the interview schedule designed to produce narrative responses. The interview is conducted in a series of ‘sub sessions’. In sub-session 1 there is an invitation for the participant to tell the ‘story so far’ in response to one carefully worded question, without prompt or interruption taking as long as the participant wishes. The researcher takes brief notes in strict order of the tale and some exact words noted to prompt the shaping of sub-session 2. Wengraf (2006) indicates that the participant will begin her response with the most important issues as she sees them and conclude the session with a salient point, with material less relevant in the middle of the response. The interview is suspended for a short time whilst the interviewer looks through her notes.

The second sub-session proceeds with the interviewer asking the participant to expand on some of the points identified in her initial session. In sub-session 2
Preparing to explore the told story

the intention is to explore more specific stories and elaborate issues. In this method of interviewing Wengraf (2006) proposes that the interviewer should ask only about topics raised by the participant and in the order the participant raised the issues. Furthermore the interviewer should, as far as possible, ask questions by reflecting back some of the words the participant used in the sub-session 1. This, Wengraf (2006) points out, is a way of reintroducing issues that the participant was motivated to raise. Moreover, using participants' own words will prompt the participant to recall the event more clearly, in particular why they raised this issue. By adopting this approach to narrative interviewing, the researcher attempts to understand the issues important to the participant even if these are not necessarily what were expected by the researcher. Using photographs had been interesting when interviewing June but they seemed to dominate rather than compliment the process. I suspected introducing old copies of ‘Jackie’ might have the same effect, so I elected to ask my participants to bring pictures if they wished but to limit these to 5.

There was a gap of quite some time between interviewing June and recruiting my next participant. In the intervening period I explored methods of producing narratives more thoroughly and became more confident about the method and my skill to undertake the interview. The prepared question I asked of all 5 of the remaining participants was:

'As you know, I’m researching the experience of women and what it means to be at midlife, what it means to be 50. I would like you to tell me the story of your life. Anything you recall, anything that seems important, anything that's important to you. You can use pictures if you want. Start anywhere you like. I won’t interrupt whilst you tell
your story unless it seems that you want me to. Then we'll have a break and then I'll pick up on some things to ask you more about’.

After the participants’ initial response I asked them to tell me a more about the issues they raised, in the order the issues were introduced. For Wengraf (2006) this allows issues to be reflected back in accordance with the notion of ‘Gestalt’, which is concerned with the ‘form’ of the interview (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). This mode of storytelling enables the participant rather than the researcher to highlight the choice of narrative.

Pauline

Once again it was my sister who introduced me to this participant. She knew ‘Pauline’, and that she was around 50 years old and thought she would be pleased to talk to me. It happened that Pauline had been in my year, at my school, but not in my class or particularly known to me. After I sent Pauline the details of my research she invited me to interview her in her home.

Pauline was 50 when I interviewed her. She was brought up in a village and attended the local primary school followed by the girls’ grammar school. Pauline left school at 18 with 2 ‘A’ levels and trained as a nursery nurse. As she finished her training she became pregnant. She married Jack, her boyfriend from school when she was 20 and had her first child aged 21 and her second 2 years later, Pauline continued to work as a nursery nurse helped with childcare by both her parents and Jack’s. When she was in her mid thirties she trained as a beauty therapist and worked for several years as a practitioner attached to a large private sports and leisure complex. She has also worked periodically for her father in the family car and garage business.
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When Pauline married Jack he was a policeman. Thirty years later they are still married and Jack has recently retired from the police, and now works at the school where they met and which their children both attended. Her son is now 30 and lives with his girlfriend and their two year old son close to Pauline, her daughter lives with her boyfriend about sixty miles away. Currently she works four days per week and looks after her grandson Alfie on a regular basis. Pauline’s parents divorced when they were 50 and both still live in the area. Her in-laws moved to Wales nearly 20 years ago. Her brother’s wife died last year and Pauline helps him care for his two daughters. Pauline showed me three pictures during the interview; one of herself and Jack, dancing at a wedding the previous year, one of Jack and Alfie ‘gardening’, and one of ‘all of us’, which was a picture of Pauline with her son, her daughter and her boyfriend, Alfie and the dog. Her son’s girlfriend took the picture and Jack was not included in the picture because he was playing golf.

After the interview Pauline showed me a fourth picture, of her class at school ages 14/15 years. She pointed out several girls whose faces and names were familiar but who I did not really remember. Pauline was keen I meet Amanda, her best friend from school and still a close friend. Amanda was therefore recruited by means of ‘snowball’ sampling (Denscombe, 2003).

**Amanda**

I contacted Amanda via email as supplied by Pauline. Amanda lives in North London and I was happy to travel to see her. I met her in her home at her request. Amanda was 51 when I interviewed her; she was brought up in the same village as Pauline, and she attended the local primary school and the
same girls’ grammar school as Pauline. She left school with ‘A’ levels and went to a poly-technic in the Midlands to study architecture. During her training she worked in London and San Francisco. The process of training was lengthy and she had a couple of periods of unemployment. When she qualified she worked in London and progressed to being a senior partner in a company.

She married Pete when she was 29 and has two sons, Tom and Max. When she became pregnant with Tom she left the company she was with and worked for herself from home. As the boys became older she returned to work for a company, part time, and not in a senior position. Amanda spends much of her spare time participating in sport, she and her sons also spend a week or two each year helping at a themed ‘Tudor’ education programme.

Amanda’s husband is four years younger than her; he is from a large family, and works in IT in financial services. He has recently been affected by the crisis in banking and has occasionally been out of work. Her eldest son Tom is 20 and is in the process of setting up a catering business and intends to live in his new premises. Max is 17 and was due to join the army a few weeks after the interview. Her parents still live in her home village; her elder sister lives in the Midlands and she also has a younger brother. Amanda did not show me any pictures; she said she wasn’t sure what to show me but she thought her house would speak for itself. She showed me the extensions she had designed and the costumes she and her sons were making to be ‘Tudors’. Amanda had talked at length about her family and suggested I might talk to her sister.

On reflecting on the transcript of the interview it was apparent that Amanda’s story was very much influenced by her career. During the interview she talked
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at length about her working life and the challenges of her career. It was evident that Amanda’s story was woven around being an architect, and moreover being a woman in this profession. I was aware that she might be identified by her work. I discussed this with Amanda and she was happy for me to include her profession; I have changed her name and other personal details to protect her identity as far as possible.

The next steps

After interviewing Pauline and Amanda I was faced with a few options: to track down the others from Pauline’s school photo: to speak to Amanda’s sister, or consider another source. However I was loath to restrict my participants to the same school and Amanda’s sister was not only from the same school she was also slightly older than my demographic ideal. The ‘ideal’ criteria of being ‘aged around 50’ did include myself and my peer group. I trained as a nurse in a large teaching hospital and therefore with lots of women of the ‘telescopic’ cohort; I decided to follow up contacts from my nurse training days and with this purposive sampling (Denscombe, 2003) I recruited my next three participants. A close friend now works for a large pharmaceutical company employing many women. She sent an email on my behalf to friends and colleagues. As she received the replies she forwarded the names to me and I sent out information sheets (Appendix 3). From five responses I recruited two participants, who coincidently had both trained as nurses.

Diane

I met Diane in her home at her request. Diane was 52 when I interviewed her. She was born in southern England where she went to the local primary school
followed by the girls’ grammar school. She left school with ‘A’ levels and trained as a nurse in a large London teaching hospital. When she qualified she trained as a midwife in Portsmouth then moving back to London, took a job at a smallish private hospital and quickly was promoted to ward sister on a specialist ward.

When she went back to London Diane moved in with her boyfriend Andy, who she married a couple of years later. They moved north with Andy’s job and Diane continued to work for the same hospital group and was involved in setting up a technically challenging department. She had two children: Gemma now 24, and Edward 22. When her children were young Diane worked part time and did nursing ‘bank’ work, and began work for the pharmaceutical company where she met my friend. Diane has recently become interested in ‘alternative’ medicines and has trained as a Reiki practitioner. Diane’s parents are both now dead, and her brother lives abroad. Her daughter and son have both graduated from university and her daughter is living back at home working locally; her son is travelling. Diane is in the process of divorcing her husband, but at present they continue to live in the same house. Diane did not show me any pictures.

Lesley

I did not know how much response I would get from the pharmaceutical company, and I continued to look for potential recruits. I contacted Lesley through ‘Friends Reunited’. We had trained at the same hospital at roughly the same time but had never worked together nor been close friends. I had not seen nor heard of her since we finished training nearly 30 years before. She
responded to my enquiry and I sent her the information sheet. She was keen to participate. I interviewed her at a mutually convenient location.

Lesley was 51 when I interviewed her. She was born in a city centre where she and her parents and brother lived with her grandfather. When she was six she moved to a suburban area of newly built council houses and attended the local primary school. She went to the girls’ grammar school and left at 17 with 5 ‘O’ levels. She started her nurse training as an ophthalmic nurse, progressing to general training two years later. Whilst training she met Phil, whom she married aged 21. She had three daughters in three years, and continued to work part time in nursing throughout. She qualified as a paediatric nurse when she was 40. She then graduated with a degree in nursing and now works in research as a nurse manager.

Lesley is still married to Phil, her eldest daughter, now 27, is an accountant, but has recently resigned from her job to travel. Her middle daughter is a nursery nurse, she is married and was expecting a baby, and her younger daughter lives with her boyfriend and manages a call centre. Lesley’s mother and her father-in-law are both widowed and live in sheltered accommodation. Lesley and Phil are their carers. Lesley showed me 5 pictures: her wedding, her daughter’s wedding, a family group from about 12 years ago, her own graduation picture from 5 years ago and the scan of her first grandchild due later this year.

Lesley was not in touch with, but knew how to contact, several of her class mates from school who she thought would be pleased to talk to me. I intended
to follow this up, but having gathered so much rich data and with another interview already booked I did not immediately pursue this option.

Mattie

Mattie was recruited by my friend in the pharmaceutical company. I knew very little about her other than that she had ‘self selected’ as fitting my criteria. As the participant invitation letter and information sheet indicate, the criteria were that she should be aged around 50, and willing to take part (see Appendix 3). I interviewed Mattie at a mutually convenient location.

Mattie was 52 when I met her. She was born in the Middle East and spent much of her childhood travelling the world with her family. Her father was an engineer and moved constantly. Mattie attended 7 primary schools including one in Europe and one in the USA. When she was 12 she went to a girl’s boarding school. She stayed at that school for four years. She has a brother 15 months younger than herself and a sister ten months younger than him; they stayed at home with their parents and attended the local school. Mattie left boarding school at 16 with 7 ‘O’ levels and went to the co-ed grammar school attended by both her siblings. After one year she left school and went to London to begin her nurse training. When she was 20 Mattie met Paul, a Canadian PhD student, she returned with him to Canada when he left the UK. Leaving Paul in Canada she worked for a while in Dallas, Texas, then returned to the UK to train as a midwife. She continued to work in midwifery for several years, becoming a ward sister and delivery sister.

Paul returned to the UK and started training to be a doctor. They married when Mattie was 28. Mattie initially supported them both financially but Paul then
joined the army who paid him to train. After Paul qualified they moved several times with the army both within the UK and abroad. Her first daughter, Isobel, was born in Aldershot, her second, Poppy, in Hong Kong. Initially Mattie continued to work as a midwife, when they lived in Germany she set up a district midwifery service. However it became impossible for her to work due to the local restrictions of their subsequent foreign postings. When her daughters were 8 and 3 Paul was posted back to the UK but he had already decided to set up a private medical practice in the Far East. Initially Mattie and her daughters lived there too although they had bought a house in the north of England near to her parents. Eventually Mattie returned with her daughters to live there, with the intention that they would visit her husband in the school holidays. Mattie is now divorced. Due to training constraints Mattie could no longer work as a midwife so she returned to general nursing, then studied for a nursing degree specialising in occupational health. Mattie set up, and now runs, the only occupational health nursing unit in a female prison. Mattie’s elder daughter has worked in the States since graduating. Poppy has one year left at college. Mattie’s parents have both died. To the interview she brought pictures of herself as child, as a student nurse, as a staff midwife, her wedding day and herself recently with her daughters.

There are several things in Mattie’s story that make her recognisable, I discussed these with Mattie after the interview and she was happy for them to be included in her story. Her stipulation was that nothing ‘defamatory’ should appear that would betray the confidences of others, which of course I agreed with.
Matching the ‘telescopic’ profile

The six women interviewed for this research can be considered ‘typical’ of the ‘telescopic’ cohort. They were all born between 1955 and 1958, and therefore from a life course perspective shared the same historical and cultural changes which might influence their subsequent life trajectories (Elder, 1977). As the participant invitation letter and information sheet indicate, age was the only stipulated recruitment criterion (Appendix 3). Yet the ‘lived lives’ of all six women followed many of the expected norms for young women of this age explored in Chapter 1. They all married in their 20’s and the timing of their marriage and child bearing agrees with Anderson (1985) as ‘typical’ for the young women of the middle and skilled working classes at that time. As noted in Chapter 1 the issue of ‘class’ for this cohort of women is complicated as classification was usually based on male occupations and even that which claimed to be ‘gender blind’ was usually more pertinent to men (Giddens, 1997). Perhaps a useful parameter emerges when considering the participants schooling, five attended a ‘girls’ grammar school’. This type of schooling was part of the tripartite system informed by the Education Act 1944. It was common to segregate boys from girls into ‘single sex’ schools. Children were allocated a mode of secondary education dependent on an academic assessment or ‘11 plus’ examination. Grammar school education was provided for those passing this exam and varied between education authorities from 10% to 35% of pupils. It seems that the pupils attending grammar schools were much more likely to be drawn from middle class areas (Halsey et al., 1980; Jarvis, 2001; MacNair, 2001). This tripartite system has been criticised elsewhere but significantly for this ‘telescopic’ cohort is that these women were considered to be academically
able and were expected to leave school with GCE ‘O’ levels, and probably ‘A’ levels, and may proceed to further or even higher education. A further way these women’s lives reflected the definition of the ‘telescopic’ cohort was that, on leaving school, 5 of the women interviewed entered typically ‘girls’ jobs’. During the recruitment of the participants only one, Lesley, was specifically contacted because she was a nurse. Mattie and Diane were recruited through a commercial pharmaceutical company where they were not employed as nurses. The fact that they had trained as nurses emerged during the interviews. Interestingly, in accordance with more recent statistics 3 out of the 6 are divorced from their first husbands (Social Trends 38). Relevant to their family responsibilities, two have fit and independent parents, one has a mother living in sheltered accommodation and two have lost both their parents. It seems these 6 women encapsulate the defining characteristics of the ‘telescopic’ cohort which emerged from the literature, with the jobs they took, the timing of their marriages and the spacing of their families. Moreover their life course initially followed the ‘expected’ trajectory of young women, from their historical and social location, as identified in my analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine. They are women born and educated in a ‘man’s’ world and reaching ‘midlife’ in contemporary UK society. Further their stories had so many differences as well as similarities they provided a very apt source of information to explore how these women experience their ‘midlife selves’, or perhaps their ‘middlescence’.

After completing the interviews I was mindful of the researcher/participant power imbalance, I asked the questions and although reflecting back the participants’ words, I remained the ‘driver’ of the interview process. Tindall (1994) proposed that one way to reduce the researcher power is to be mindful
that the interview material is ‘owned’ by the participants. Some feminist writers employ a ‘reiterative’ process which entails the participant receiving the analysis of the data and amending it where they felt it was ‘incorrect’ (Weatherell et al., 2002). However this seemed problematic. Firstly because even by doing so the research had still been posed by myself and I could not ‘disown or shrug off the role of expert’ (Tindall, 1994:155). Moreover the research did not set out to uncover one ‘correct’ version of truth. To address this I asked each participant if they wished to receive a copy of the transcript, on the understanding that any part of it could be deleted by them. Three out of the six asked for a transcript and no one asked for amendments. I was aware that ‘in the final analysis it is the researchers’ version of reality that is given public visibility. It is not possible to achieve complete mutuality and equality’ Tindall (1994:155). It was therefore incumbent on me to make the analytical process as evident as possible, to continue to reflect on the process and acknowledge my own presence in it. Equally importantly to make public ‘the routes and resources that lie behind the analysis’ (Burman, 1994:124)

When I had completed these six interviews I was aware of the rich source of narratives the participants had shared with me. The next stage of the research was to plan how to analyse this information to maximise its potential and to justify the time and effort my participants spent to share their stories. Firstly it is important to make clear exactly what the analysis is intended to explore, and how life course theory informs the analytical process.

This research has adopted a life course perspective to consider the lives of this ‘telescopic’ cohort of women. As discussed in Chapter 2, life course theory challenges the ‘ages and stages’ of an essentially fixed developmental process,
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and instead considers the impact of social and historical changes alongside individual ageing (Pilcher, 1995; Hareven, 1982). One of the parameters defining this cohort was that they should share as closely as possible the same chronological age therefore the same historical location (Elder, 1977). Thus in the analysis of ‘Jackie’ in Chapter 5, the members of this cohort were the same chronological age and, due to constraints of the education system, were all at the social time of ‘school girl’. Their transition to school leaving occurred at slightly different individual times, dependent on how long they remained in education. Thereafter however, although they have lived through the same historical time, their life trajectories may have been influenced by the social and individual timings of each subsequent life transition within the context of the historical time these transitions occurred (Runyan, 1982).

In their contemporary individual time of ‘being 50’ the five participants are all in different social times, for example Pauline is a ‘grandmother’ and Amanda has a child of school age. It is important to explore the interview narratives within the context of the women’s individual time and the historical time at each changing social time. Thus a better understanding might be reached as to how women from the same cohort negotiate their ‘midlife’ identities in the light of their life transitions.

**Method of analysis**

There is no one unquestioned method for analysing narrative data. For example methods drawing on the work of socio-linguists Labov and Waletzky (1967) adopt a structuralist approach and examine the form and syntax of language in the narrative. Where a structuralist analysis looks for meaning and interpretation
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in the deep structure of the narrative, a poststructuralist analysis as Czarniawska (2004) puts it abandons ‘depth’ for ‘surface’. This leads to the assumption that if there is no one deep structure to be discovered then the narrative can be read in many ways. For example McAdams (1997) explores how individuals develop a personal ‘myth’ which comprises of imagoes. ‘All aspects of the self … can be incorporated into the main characters of personal myths’ (McAdams, 1993:127). McAdams’ method would perhaps give insight into a participant’s sense of self across her life course, yet by developing a theory of ‘personal myth’ it seems McAdams approach is assuming an on going story which is fixed and perhaps ‘real’ and waiting to be revealed. This assumption is problematic as it might be considered ‘essentialist’ which is in contention with the constructionist epistemology underpinning this research. Moreover it is not helpful when trying to explore how life stories might be reinterpreted over time within the moving historical, social and individual time of the life course.

The question of ‘agency’

In her work exploring gender identity Riessman (2002) explains that identity is accomplished interactionally, continually renegotiated in linguistic exchange and social performance, and, ‘narratives developed during research interviews provide a window into the process’ (Riessman, 2002:152). By undertaking narrative interviews, this research aimed to examine how women ‘accomplish’ identity. Yet as Czarniawska (2004) reminds us, a criticism of social constructionism is that the world could be conceived as merely a collection of subjectively spun stories. However drawing on Davies (1990) she points out that ‘we are never the sole authors of our own narratives; in every conversation
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a *positioning* takes place’ (Czarniaska, 2004:5 original italics). Harré and Moghaddam (2009) suggest that positioning theory is important to discursive psychology:

> ‘by attending to features of the local context, in particular normative constraints and opportunities for action, within an unfolding story line, it becomes clear that access to and availability of certain practices, both conversational and practical, are determined not by individual levels of competence alone, but by having rights and duties in relation to items in the *local corpus of sayings and doings*’ (Harré and Moghaddam, 2009: 6 original italics)

Using the narrative accounts gathered from my interviewees, in keeping with feminist poststructural theories I was interested in how the women discursively position themselves within their narrative. Indeed a question raised was to what degree women position themselves at all and how far they are positioned by the *‘local corpus of sayings and doings’* (Harré and Moghaddam, 2009).

It seemed that a poststructuralist discourse analysis of the narrative interviews might offer a means of exploring how the participating women ‘take up’ some subject positions and seemingly reject others. However prior to consolidating an analytical method it was important to consider the notion of ‘discourse determinism’ or perhaps that individuals are ‘a product of positions in a multiplicity of discourses (Henriques et al., 1998: xiii) and explore a method by which the participants are not ‘simply the sum total of positions in discourse since birth’. The issue of ‘agency’ was not addressed in the discourse analysis of ‘Jackie’ (Chapter 5), this was a theoretical consideration of the discourses
that might be mobilised and alternative constructions these potentially made available to the magazine readership. The data analysed was fictional and agency could perhaps only be addressed at a conceptual level because arguably fictional characters cannot be agentic it is the author of the fiction that can make choices. However when analysing participant interview material it seemed important to explore to what extent women appeared agentic in their life course transitions and trajectories.

Some authors have drawn on positioning theory (Harré and Langenhove, 1998) and others on a Kleinian informed psycho-dynamic principle of the defended subject (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000:19). For example Hollway (1984) proposed that one could ‘position oneself’ by taking up ‘subject positions’. Moreover ‘discourses make available positions for the subject to take up. These positions are in relation to other people’ (Hollway, 1984:236 my emphasis). Whilst these theoretical underpinnings might offer insight to the experience of the participating women it seems caution is needed when embracing psycho-dynamic theories.

The complexities of various schools of thought within psycho-dynamics are beyond the scope of this research, yet the notion of ‘agency, creativity, change and resistance’ afforded to the participants, that incorporating psycho-dynamic theory offers, is tempting (Henriques et al., 1998: xiii). Problematic, as Gavey (2002) points out, is the underlying essentialist underpinning of psycho-dynamic theoretical frameworks which implicitly assume a ‘real;’ underlying subjectivity that can be known. This research has acknowledged a ‘critical realist’ ontology with regards to social structures and physical ageing, however has explicitly challenged an essentialist notion of identity. The challenge for the method of
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analysis in this phase of the research was to enable an exploration of how the participants subjectively understand their midlife selves, without recourse to complex psycho-dynamic theory. Yet, the method must enable a notion of agency in the construction of the narratives that allows the participants to move beyond being ‘a sum of discursive positions’. To address this I have drawn on Gavey (2002) who proposes that discursively produced subjectivity can be considered as:

’a process that is fluid and complex, and which is determining (or agentic), even if always in a way that is constrained and limited. Thus as subjects we are able to pull at the same time as we are pulled-never capable of truly free choice but still able to exist in a form that feels like our own unique identity and act in ways that feel like choice (Gavey, 2002 :435)

It seems to avoid a detour through complex essentialist psycho-dynamic theories Gavey’s (2002) notion of one’s ‘pulling’ and being ‘pulled’ positioned within the discursive constructions of narrative might be useful. It appears in agreement with the frame work for narrative analysis Riessman (2002) draws upon. Within this, the identities of the participants can be continually renegotiated in ‘linguistic exchange and social performance’, thus they take up positions within discourse by means of a linguistic tool rather than by an underlying psycho-dynamic process. They ‘perform’ their present identity as they negotiate the discursive ‘pulls and pushes’ across their life course. Further, relevant to exploring these interviews is, the notion that subjective understanding is premised on ‘positioning oneself’ or positioning ‘another’, if one positions oneself as ‘right’ the other position cannot be.
Narrative inquiry is a useful means of revealing the normative constraints in an unfolding story line which the narrator expresses in the ‘alternative language of locally valid patterns of rights and duties’ (Harré and Moghaddam, 2009:8). Thus it seems that the discursive positioning a woman assumes in a personal narrative might offer insight to her ongoing sense of self across her life course.

I surmised that my analysis should include:

‘recognition of the force of ‘discursive practices’, the ways people are positioned through these practices and the way the individual’s subjectivity is generated through the learning and use of certain discursive practices’ (Davies and Harré, 1999:32).

Moreover I wanted to explore how the interviewees positioned and repositioned themselves in relating their stories to me, and give consideration to the linguistic resources from different social and historical times through which they have lived. This positioning and repositioning is represented in Figure 15. It can be seen that a discursive action is informed by the interplay of the individual’s story line, the rhetorical speech acts she employs and the position from which she is speaking; that is to say why this story line told; this way at this time. This discursive action dynamically positions the storyteller and by doing so positions ‘other’ in relation to her self. This is not a ‘one way process’, the dynamic positioning of self in relation to others has the reciprocal effect of that ‘other’ positioning the storyteller. Thus this model indicates that the discursive action can be understood as being ‘of oneself or of another’ (Boxer, 2003:261)
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Figure 15: Tripolar discursive action, demonstrating how ‘self’ is positioned and in turn positions others (adapted from Boxer, 2003)

The application of this model might best be illustrated by the following worked example I devised:

‘We had all been working really hard to get the report out on time, and I offered to make a cup of tea. I couldn’t believe she gave me such a flea in my ear - I was only trying to be nice’

In this paragraph the narrator is speaking from the position of ‘team member’, the storyline is one of stress, hard word and confrontation. The rhetorical speech acts is the language being used; ‘only being nice’, and ‘getting a flea in one’s ear’ are not neutral but serve to emphasise the position of the story teller. The discursive action, from the intersection of these three, dynamically positions the narrator as ‘kind and caring’ and by doing so positions the colleagues as ‘ungrateful’ and perhaps ‘unkind’. This very simple example illustrates how the narratives of the participants might be considered for the positions that are made available by relating a particular storyline, and the rhetorical speech act. Moreover if this story was reflected on by the narrator through the lens of a later historical or social time, the story may be interpreted differently and the discursive action offering alternate constructions (Andrews, 2008). For example
if this storyline was told from the position of ‘office manager’ reflecting on her time as an ‘office junior’ she may have ended the story with a ‘laugh’, or added a rhetorical question of ‘what was I thinking’? Here she might construct ‘naivety’ rather than ‘caring’ and the other character becomes repositioned as ‘justified’ for her reaction not ‘unkind’.

This research was acknowledged to be a ‘psycho-social’ study, the subjectivity of the participating women was to be examined in the context of their social surroundings, and across an evolving historical location. It seemed the subjective understanding the participants have of ‘themselves’ might be understood by considering the discursive positions available to them whilst reflecting on their life course. By considering the ways the participants mobilise some discourses and construct resistance to others, the meanings of these discursive positioning can be explored.

The participants in this research were interviewed once therefore the data was not ‘longitudinal’. The discursive positions the women assumed and reflected from their life course was from the position of themselves at midlife. They reflected on their ‘social time’, ‘historical time’ and ‘individual time’ retrospectively and narrated their life through the lens of their current understanding. The ‘told story’ was considered as a means to explore women’s subjective contemporary understanding in the context of their reflections of their life.

**Structuring the analysis**

The method chosen to analyse the narrative interviews draws on Riessman (2002) and explores the transcripts for narrative structure, positioning and
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performance and examines how together these reveal the construction of identity of women at midlife. Riessman (2002) suggests the analysis should consider the immediate discursive context, of the narrative, how the narratives are positioned in the broader social context and how they are positioned in relation to others. It seemed these three aspects provided a framework for exploring how the women interviewed reflect on the social, historical and personal time across their life course. Moreover to specifically address the aims of this research this methodological framework enabled me to gain an appreciation of how women at midlife experience, and continue to make sense, of their life course, and to obtain insight into how women construct the experience of the ‘telescopic’ spread of generations.

The immediate discursive positioning in the interview transcripts allows an exploration of my part in the co-production of the narratives. My position as a researcher and the author of the participant information leaflets used to recruit the women inevitably dictated which narratives they related. My position, as a woman from the same demographic group, indicates that I am a co-producer of the narratives, narratives were related to me because of who I am and the questions I asked. Perhaps most appropriately for a life course perspective was the exploration of how the participants positioned themselves in relation to others in their narrative accounts and how they storied their personal agency in accepting or resisting the ‘push and pull’ of dominant discourses across their life course.
Organising the interview material

Having interviewed six women identified as being from the ‘telescopic’ cohort and explored methods of analysis, the next concern was to set out the method of data analysis into a coherent form. The first step was to carefully read all the transcripts and examine them closely for emergent themes. This first reading of the transcripts included attention to a notion of Gestalt’, meaning ‘form’ in German (Wengraf, 2001). This is consistent with asking one carefully designed question which allowed the interviewee to follow a train of thought uninterrupted by structured or leading questions. The importance of this is stressed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) who point out that to fragment data for analysis, in this case the interview transcript, is to overlook the ‘form’ of the data. In the interview this allowed for the narratives to be related following ‘unconscious logic’ rather than ‘conscious logic’. In analysing the transcripts with a consideration of the Gestalt draws on the notion that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of the parts’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000:68). This is not to say the analysis was ‘structuralist’ exploring for an underlying structure to the narrative to find meaning, but that by acknowledging the context of the narrative a better understanding of subject positioning might be reached. Further it needs to be clear that by suggesting ‘Gestalt’ might be important in this analysis it does not imply that it draws on a psycho-dynamic theory of ‘unconscious logic’. Rather it is an assumption that the interviewees responded to my question within their ‘immediate discursive positioning’, reacting to me, the interviewer, and the question I posed. Moreover by exploring their reflections over their life course to date, their contemporary understandings can be understood through the lens of
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past social structures and expectations which shaped their current understanding of identity.

Steps of analysis

The process of analysing the narrative interviews was undertaken in a series of steps. This method was developed to make clear the process of analysis, and, as far as was possible, to enable an exploration of the issues identified by the participants, not the ones I the researcher wished to explore.

Step one of the process, informed by Malson et al. (2002), was to undertake a close and thorough reading of each transcript. From this, drawing on notions of ‘Gestalt’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), the overarching themes emerging from each interview were identified. Mindful that this was a narrative analysis, a formal thematic analysis was not appropriate. After identifying the emergent overarching themes of the transcripts, step 2 was to identify immediate discursive positionings within the narrative (Riessman, 2002). This was to give thought to why this narrative was told at this time and to me. The third step was to consider the positions taken up by the interviewees and how this in turn positioned others within the narrative (Boxer, 2003). To carry out this third step it was necessary to identify the rhetorical speech acts and story lines drawn on in telling the narratives. Furthermore to consider the position from which this particular narrative was being related (see figure 15). At this stage the discursive constructions mobilised in relating the narratives were considered. The fourth step was to consider what these positionings might reveal about the participants’ subjective experience of ‘being 50’.
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The analysis of this interview data therefore considered the ‘form’ of the whole interview and acknowledged the social and historical locations of the narratives. This facilitated an examination of a contemporary understanding of midlife of the construction of life course to date. Having identified emergent themes the transcripts were then re-examined and broad divisions made in the collected data to enable a coherent analysis, quotes were then identified to illustrate these themes. The transcripts were then continually scrutinised to explore the discursive resources articulated in each category. In the next three chapters the interview material is presented in depth.
Chapter 7: Negotiating the ‘separate spheres’

The notion of ‘separate spheres’ of private and public domains seems a very useful starting point to explore the narrative interviews of Pauline and Amanda. The first readings of their transcripts revealed that Pauline’s story was centred on her home and family and Amanda’s on her career. As Chapman (2002) reminds us, from the C18th, there was increasing demarcation between the domains inhabited by men and women. Women’s lives were considered to be centred on the ‘private’ sphere of home, domesticity and child care, and men’s to the ‘public’ sphere of paid work, politics and commerce.

This was the prevailing culture at the beginning of the C20th when women were excluded from many professions and those that were available most often exercised a ‘marriage bar’ preventing married women continuing to work. This situation not only affected the middle classes but also unionised skilled workers where women were barred from joining trade unions which effectively prevented them training or working in certain industries. Women were conscripted into the work force in the UK during the Second World War, undertaking many jobs from welding to accounting that were traditionally ‘men’s jobs. After the war women were again excluded from the work force in large numbers either overtly because they were required to leave the post free for a man, or covertly as government sponsored child care and nursery provision was withdrawn. ‘The cereal packet’ family structure was a dominant discourse of the 1950’s and 60’s with a home maker or ‘housewife’ role for the woman and ‘breadwinner’ role for the male. It was this social expectation that informed the Newsom (1963) report.
underpinning the social requirement for men to work and women to look after
them.

It seems that negotiating these ‘separate spheres’ dominated the stories of both
women but in very different ways. Amanda’s story was entwined with her life in
the ‘public’ sphere of work, Pauline’s was deeply immersed in the ‘private’
sphere of her home and family.

The lives of Pauline and Amanda are inter-connected on a personal level,
despite following seemingly disparate trajectories. They attended the same
school and have remained ‘best friends’ despite living in different parts of the
country since their school days. Most interestingly however, it seems that their
life courses have followed very different trajectories. Pauline left school at 18
and began a typically ‘girls job’ as a nursery nurse, in her thirties she retrained
as a beauty therapist. Amanda was the only participant to progress to higher
education when she left school, moreover she entered the overtly ‘man’s world’
of architecture. Pauline became a mother at the youngest age of the group, 21
years, Amanda the eldest at 32, consequently whereas Amanda at 51 still has
both her sons living at home, Pauline’s children have left home and she has a
grandson. Pauline still lives in the village where they grew up and Amanda has
lived in London for thirty years, yet they meet up regularly, have taken family
holidays together, and Amanda even organised her 50th birthday party around a
date that Pauline was available. Their interview transcripts included references
to each other in a manner that indicated their narratives ‘flowed’ together. I was
interested to explore the similarities and differences in how they constructed
their experiences.
Pauline: a modern matriarch?

I interviewed Pauline in her own home at her request, she began her story by mentioning her marriage, her children and her house. In accordance with the notion of ‘Gestalt’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) these three aspects featured in and shaped the ‘form’ of almost every story Pauline subsequently told. Moreover these three seem pivotal to Pauline’s reflection on her ‘self’ at midlife. After a careful reading of Pauline's transcript several discourses of home and family were identified. The overarching theme Pauline draws on might be conceptualised as ‘family values’. Within this several themes can be identified as being woven throughout her story; ‘home and hearth’, ‘domestic goddess’, ‘the good old days’ and ‘just like my Mum’?

Home and hearth

In accordance with the notion of Gestalt (Hollway and Jefferson, 2001) I considered the subjects of Pauline’s interview in the order in which she raised them. Pauline began her story by saying: ‘My journey to being 50. Gosh. Quite exciting’. I am reminded that ‘positioning’ is a discursive process where selves are related in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines’ (Davis, 2001:264 my emphasis). This was particularly relevant in my initial observation of Pauline’s story. It seems that to understand her story I could not ignore the circumstances in which it was told and particularly that it was told to me. I had not seen Pauline since we left school, I made contact with her through my sister and Pauline therefore knew that I had moved out of the area and I was now visiting her in a ‘professional capacity’. Pauline had lived in this village for most of her life. She had been married for 31 years and lived in her current home for 28 years. In starting by
declaring her story is ‘exciting’ Pauline seemingly forestalls any suggestion that her life is less exciting than anyone else’s including mine. I had to be mindful that Pauline was possibly relating her story in a particular way because I was the audience. This ‘inter-subjective’ production of the narrative was important to remember during the process of analysis.

Pauline’s next few sentences described her biographical details starting with her marriage to Jack, when she was aged 20, and the births of her two children; Matthew when she was 21 and Amy when she was 23 years old. She then narrated buying her home:

‘we bought our first house thanks to the generosity of (Jack’s) Grandpa’s estate there was little bit of money left so we bought a house. And then when I was expecting Amy, my second baby, we moved here and this house is my home. I absolutely love this house. I love where it is. I love…(pause). This is where I brought up my babies. And it is so important to me this house.

In this extract Pauline draws on the theme I identified as “hearth and home’. Here she mentions her extended family, her marriage and her children. It is interesting to note in this extract how centrally Pauline is positioned within this paragraph. In consideration of the ‘rhetorical speech acts’ (Boxer,2003) she states it is ‘my’ home it is where I had ‘my’ babies. Langenhove and Harré (1998) point out that by assuming a discursive position a person will almost always position others. Here Jack seems peripheral to the story, they have been married for over thirty years and lived together in this house for 28 of them yet it is ‘hers’, the babies were ‘hers’. In this early part of her narrative Pauline
seems to be discursively positioning herself not only within the domestic, private realm but central to it. She is the ‘homemaker’ and ‘the mother’. Feminist literature draws attention to the ‘the housewife and mother (being) primarily located within the private sphere of the family, and the man is wage-earner and breadwinner and primarily located in the public world of paid work’ (Beechey, 1985:99 in Abbott and Wallace, 1997).

Looking back across her life course Pauline does not initially emplot her position within the domestic sphere as a ‘powerful’ one. Langenhove and Harré (1998) remind us that the ‘act of positioning …refers to the assignment of fluid ‘parts’ or ‘roles’ to speakers in the discursive production of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts’ (Langenhove and Harré, 1998:17). Drawing on this notion of roles and determination of social acts it is interesting to consider how Pauline narrated the story of her early married life:

‘It just happened ‘cos I got pregnant before I got married and it was sort of a big shock to everybody and my parents said, ‘oh you don’t have to get married,’ but Jack’s parents said we had to get married. But we’d been together a long time anyway and we lived at Mum and Dad’s.’

Pauline’s opening statement of ‘it just happened’ seems to allow her to take a position of being passive within her story, Jack’s parents said they had to marry, interestingly Pauline narrates this as overriding her own parents’ expectations. That Pauline and Jack were expected to marry is indicative of their historical time. As Lewis (2001) points out; although the separation of sex and marriage is
Negotiating the ‘separate spheres’

a dominant theme in the C21st, in the 1970’s the majority of births occurred inside marriage. Indeed ‘...the institution of marriage (was)... viewed as the basic unit and bedrock of society imposing rational bonds on irrational sexual urges.’(Lewis, 2001:6). Pauline does not position herself as having been in opposition to Jack’s parents’ insistence that they had to marry, indeed she does not emplot this event as one in which she was for, or against, marriage she constructs herself as passive within the storyline. In this extract Pauline does not take the position of a victim of a forced marriage, rather she has complied with the social order of the time. The assumption that children should be born within marriage was a powerful discourse when she became pregnant. Pauline’s construction of events seems to reflect Gavey’s (2002) suggestion of the ‘pull’ of discourse whilst possibly ‘pulling against it’. She may have ‘pulled’ and resisted the ‘inevitable marriage’ indeed she positions her own parents as compliant with this resistance, therefore ‘other’ to Jack’s parents who did not. There is further interesting insight into the social time of Pauline and Jack’s marriage she says:

‘Jack was in the Police and had to get... have permission to get married in those days. You couldn’t just go off and get married and, you know, do it’.

By needing permission to marry, Jack is positioned here with little power in his situation. It seems that the discursive pull to ‘legitimise’ a birth by marriage was reinforced by the need for Jack to be ‘respected’ within the community he policed. As Pauline narrates these events through the lens of her midlife self she is discursively positioned as complying with the social expectations of not only family but also the community, and wider society. Jack and Pauline are
constructed as ‘becoming respectable’ within the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the community, yet they are positioned as almost powerless within the process.

Pauline may not construct a position of power for herself within the domestic sphere of her early marriage yet it seems this was to change. The centrality of her home to her story and her attachment to her home as somewhere she ‘loves’, enables Pauline to invest her identity within this domestic realm, the ‘private sphere’. By taking this position within her domestic domain Pauline appears to position the ‘outside world’ or that which is not home as ‘other’ to who she is.

In Chapter 2, the triple helix notion of the life course was introduced (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1975), it is worth reconsidering an adapted version of this to conceptualise Pauline’s individual time and her social time as forming a double helix. In her individual time of her early twenties the intersection of her social time was that of wife and mother. She narrated her storyline at this intersection of the helix when her children were small within the private sphere of her home. Married to a policeman working irregular hours, she constructs her home as a ‘safe place’:

‘I’m just very comfortable here and when you’re in a house on your own a lot, which I was when the children were little, when Jack was working, I think it’s important to feel really comfortable and this house did’.
Yet her own position within the private sphere appears to have strengthened over her individual time as she aged by 30 years, and her social time, as she has made the transition from ‘mother to ‘grandmother’.

She goes on to demonstrate her relationship to her home in her immediate social time and how she sometimes resents the invasion of her ‘sphere’ now Jack has retired:

‘Jack used to do sort of four evenings at work and then he’d have three evenings at home and then I’d get home from work at five and the house would normally be lovely and quiet and peaceful and then you walk through the door and you think, oh, I’d forgotten you were here’.

In this extract perhaps Pauline is revealing the extent to which her midlife identity is invested in her role in the private sphere. She is acknowledging the change in her social and domestic situation brought about by Jack’s retirement. The domestic private space is no longer singularly her domain. Moreover as her children have left home perhaps she is tacitly acknowledging that her own identity invested in mothering is now if not challenged then at least subject to revision.

**The domestic goddess?**

It seems Pauline adopts the position of centrality to the domestic sphere; however she has worked at least part time for most of her married life. Her training as a nursery nurse and therefore her understanding of child care is highlighted in her story of first moving into this house with two infants. On reflecting upon this time in her life Pauline says ‘looking back at some of the
photographs for that, I was just so, so young’. It is worth remembering that, as discussed in Chapter 1, Pauline was not an unusually young mother within her historical location and social class (Anderson, 1985). That she would be considered so in contemporary society perhaps influences the position from which she narrated this encounter with a health visitor.

The house they moved into when Amy was three weeks old had been unoccupied and was in need of repair:

‘I had no floor in the kitchen and a baby gate and the health visitor came and I just thought, my God, she could take my children away because (laughs) it’s just so unsuitable. Cooked on a Baby Belling for six months. But you just manage and we just… we had no heating. We sh… there was a gas fire in the other room, we just used to all sleep on the floor when it was really cold’

Pauline constructs her time as a young mother by taking up the position of coping in the face of difficulty. In this story she was not only coping but she was sensible enough to use a stair gate, skilled enough to cook in difficult circumstances, and had the professional knowledge to be aware that a health visitor might challenge her mothering skills. Through the lens of her present day self, she narrates being amused by the thought anyone might have taken her children away. Her retelling of this memory seems crucial to Pauline’s present day identity. By her emplottment of her own developing skills as a young mother she is possibly laying the foundations for her position of power within the ‘private sphere’ of her present day domain. To be acknowledged as ‘matriarch’ within a family one perhaps has to ‘earn’ the position by demonstrating the skill
and experience to be such. However I must also acknowledge that I myself trained as a health visitor, and worked as such in a nearby village. Although I have no knowledge that Pauline knew this, or would have remembered, it is possible that her position of being a ‘capable if young’ mother was inter-subjectively produced.

As Pauline’s story is located within the private sphere she might have taken the position of subjugated housewife. There has been much critical review of the gendered division of labour highlighting the disproportionate burden of domestic chores borne by women (Oakley, 1981, 1985). Friedan (1963) introduced the notion of the ‘feminine mystique’, and the role of women has been satirised in such fiction as ‘The Stepford Wives’ (Levin, 1972). Pauline makes several references to the parties that she and Jack have held in their house she says:

‘I love to have dinner parties and have people round and entertain, I can always sort of throw something together and people will, you know, people seem to enjoy it anyway’.

However Pauline rejects the possible C21st construction of the feminine mystique by adding that: ‘I am not a domestic goddess. I love to cook but I don’t clean and Jack’s just done the housework now for me’. This is a very interesting insight into Pauline’s position within her own domestic sphere. She clearly enjoys entertaining and constructs herself as a cook yet she seems to reject the ‘feminine mystique’, the cook and cleaner par excellence. However she maintains her position as dominant in the domestic sphere by acknowledging Jack ‘did the cleaning for her’. Her storyline may after all position her as a
'domestic goddess’ not necessarily undertaking the household chores herself, but possibly presiding over them.

Further Pauline here constructs herself as ‘hostess’ which allows room for her to take positions of both ‘nurturing’ and ‘fun loving’. Her investment in enjoying life means she can construct her contemporary identity as ‘not yet outgrown fun’ and therefore young enough to be enjoying life. Indeed one of the pictures Pauline showed me was her and Jack dancing at a wedding, she says’... I think my daughter must have, took the, picture. It’s just sort of ‘we’re 50 and we can still do it’ (laughs)’. Here Pauline is acknowledging the social discourse of ‘ageing’ meaning ‘deterioration’, yet she is ‘pulling’ against it by resisting the position. She and Jack are constructed as ‘active and fun loving’ therefore can reject the position of ‘grumpy’ and possibly ‘past it’. This seems an important insight into Pauline’s midlife identity. She acknowledges the inevitable or ‘real’ physical ageing process yet resists a discourse of ‘downhill slide’, she may be 50 but she is not ‘old’.

The ‘good old days’

Pauline locates her life within an extended family and their geographical proximity, she talked of child care when her children were small and how they were cared for with the help of this extended family: ‘My Mum used to look after them and my auntie did and Jack’s Mum was in (the next village) so everybody was sort of close’. In Pauline’s story, constructing the supporting child care as coming from the extended family is evidence of the investment she has in the ‘home and family’ support network. She acknowledges that this notion is perhaps no longer available:
‘and my auntie lives down the road and my Mum lives down the road so in a way it’s quite an old-fashioned upbringing for the children because they had all that extended family which families nowadays just don’t seem to have at all and I think that’s quite sad really’.

Pauline implies that this construction of an ‘old fashioned’ notion of family life is ideal and an alternative perhaps, ‘modern’, construction is not ideal and perhaps unacceptable for her own family. She continues by strengthening this position saying:

‘I suppose that’s what I want now for my children and I think that’s what Matthew’s got, and Amy’s … not a million miles away but we have Alf every Saturday and I have Wednesday mornings off work and I look after him and that’s really nice’.

Here Pauline is reflecting on her social time as a grandmother and expressing her desire to continue the support of the extended family. Pauline seemingly laments the decline of extended family support and by constructing it this way ‘old fashioned’ is good therefore not ‘old fashioned’ and presumably lack of the support of a close knit extended family is therefore ‘not good’.

It is interesting to note that populations characterised by stability, large families, apparently close functional relationships within a wider kin and a dominant matriarch ‘Mum’, were perhaps a transient phase of social history. Indeed some have gone as far as to suggest they were ‘discovered’ by sociologists in the 1950s see for example Young and Wilmott, (1980) and were already in decline (Anderson, 1994; Hareven, 1994). However perhaps it is important to Pauline’s storyline to construct this version of ‘the good old days’ when families
would live in close proximity in a supportive community, whether or not they ever really existed. Since leaving the police Jack has begun a new career as youth worker within the local community Pauline explains: ‘and now he can sort of relate to the children ‘cos he’s seen them around here since they were little. He’s perhaps arrested their parents’. This emplotment firmly locates Jack, and the family, within the local community. By including a reference to more than one generation she underpins the ongoing story of intergenerational connection. She says ‘Amy’s not a million miles away’ but perhaps from a social time of a ‘hands on grandmother’ the geographic distance between herself and her daughter is an impediment to her future identity.

At the time of the interview an adapted double helix model (Rapoport and Rapoport 1975) of individual and social time would situate Pauline at the intersection of ‘being 50’ and being a ‘hands on grandmother’. It is possible that Pauline’s midlife identity is deeply invested in her social time as a grandmother and a dispersal of the ‘good old days’ of the tight knit family community would challenge this. It might be understood that at the present ‘being 50’ for Pauline intersects with a pivotal social time in family support. If she can no longer fulfil her role as grandmother, her social time will perhaps ‘twist past her individual time’ and a transition onto a new trajectory will occur. Pauline’s investment in the good old days might then be considered as a way of maintaining a social role she narrates as fulfilling.

However, maintaining this social time as grandmother may even be in contention with Jack’s wishes. Pauline tells of looking after Alfie:
‘we have him every Saturday ‘cos they both work and that’s quite…
Jack found that hard ‘cos it does take up a lot of time. It’s easier now
‘cos you can take him out for longer and stuff and you just throw him
in the car and go but sometimes I think Jack finds that quite hard’.

Pauline narrates enjoying doing things’ with Alfie and taking pleasure in him. In
Pauline’s story however it seems Jack may feel the commitment to child care is
not always welcome. However she is seemingly able to override Jack’s
concerns. It appears that the strength of Pauline’s identity investment in being
‘matriarch’, and thereby dominant with in the private sphere, is narrated as more
important than her relationship with Jack. In contrast to previous definitions of
‘private’ sphere, where women were disempowered by their position within the
domestic realm (Abbott and Wallace, 1997), Pauline’s construction of her
midlife self draws on a discourse of power within this sphere. It seems that
Pauline having invested her identity as ‘good mother’ resists the position of
‘drudge’. Interestingly in her story Jack is doing housework for her, and she
looks after Alfie at the weekend despite ‘Jack finding it hard’. It seems that
despite the centrality of this ‘domestic idyll’ to her story, Pauline does not
position herself as a ‘Stepford wife’ (Levin, 1972) complying with her husband’s
wishes without question, rather it appears that she narrates herself as ‘powerful’
and perhaps a C21st construction of ‘matriarch’ central to and powerful within
the private sphere.

It seems Pauline invests in the notion of an ‘old fashioned’ and possibly a
mythical notion of family life and in particular a matriarchal household. Perhaps
to support this and to indicate that Jack does not resent his role as carer, one of
the pictures Pauline shows me is of Jack and Alfie ‘gardening’ in a vegetable
plot. The picture in itself depicts a demonstration of intergenerational support and perhaps an illustration of her ‘old fashioned’ ‘good old days’ values. It is interesting to explore why Pauline seems to contradict her support of ‘old fashioned’ practices when she reflects back to a time when she had her first child.

Pauline made the transition from schoolgirl to wife and mother whilst her best friend from school, Amanda, was still at university. In the first holidays after Matthew’s birth Pauline took him to Amanda’s house to visit her friend:

‘Yeah, but then Amanda’s Mum was very, very old-fashioned and when I took Matthew round after I’d had him as a baby, ‘cos Amanda’s was at Uni, her Mum wouldn’t come up and see us. She stayed down in the kitchen and she has got that… very sort of… she is definitely… that 50 generation that just completely grew old overnight which was such a shame, I think, really’.

It seems Pauline stories the reluctance of Amanda’s mother to come up from the kitchen to see Matthew, and positions her as being old fashioned, by constructing her as ‘stigmatising the single mother’. In this extract Pauline is acknowledging that pregnancy before marriage might have been ‘stigmatised’ at the time but only if one was ‘old fashioned’ like Amanda’s mother. However as Langenhove and Harré (1998) remind us there is a distinction between first order positioning and performative and accountive positioning. First order positioning is when ‘people position themselves and others within an ongoing storyline’ (Langenhove and Harré, 1998, 21). Performative or accountive positioning occurs when a story is retold in a different setting. Here Amanda’s
mother is positioned as ‘old fashioned’ and ‘old’ therefore unable to accept a child conceived outside marriage. Positioning Amanda’s mother as ‘old fashioned makes available the position of ‘not old fashioned to Pauline. It seems Pauline can resist the notion of shame and stigma and instead offers one of fashion. In telling the story this way, in her social time as a grandmother and in the historical time of the C21st it is possible for Pauline to make available the position of being ‘not old fashioned’ in relation to her own grandson, whose parents are not married.

Moreover, it appears that although Pauline might be a grandmother and 50 years old she is resisting the storyline of having ‘grown old over night’. It seems Pauline’s understanding of herself at midlife is of an active ‘hands on’ grandmother who is confident in her position within the family and has successfully negotiated the changing social expectations concerning the timing of marriage and family. As one of the ‘telescopic’ cohort, Pauline appears to construct having ‘time’ to be a modern day encapsulation of old fashioned family values.

**Just like my Mum?**

Across her life course Pauline has maintained a storyline of being deeply centred in her family. From being a 9 year old playing ‘down the road from her Auntie’ to a grandmother firmly located within her own domestic sphere. During her life course the social position of women has changed and over the historical time fashion and interpretation of social morals have altered. In concluding Pauline’s story it is interesting to consider the position she adopts in relation to her own mother:
‘My Mum was 20 when she had me so I don’t think there was that much of a difference between my Mum and me. But I think between our generation, my Mum’s generation and her Mum there was a massive difference, ‘cos she was one of six children and big age gaps, and she was next to the youngest. So I think Granny was always very, very old, whereas I’ve got a grandson and he’s 18 months old and he is just... And we do so much with him. And people sometimes think he’s mine, which is quite flattering (laughs). So we just do... We do a lot together as a family and I think family is very, very important’

Pauline uses the phrases ‘old fashioned’ and ‘quite modern’ several times. By adopting the position of ‘young mother’ then ‘young grandmother’ Pauline is constructing this as ‘good’. Her Granny was very, very old but as a grandmother herself she is not. This possibly serves to confirm that even if her pregnancy at 19 was unexpected and a ‘shock to everyone’ it was not a tragedy, it was a good thing. Moreover she acknowledges that the intersection of her individual time at 19 of being pregnant, and her social time of becoming a mother in her life course ‘helix’ is different than that of her daughters: ‘I mean, Amy’s twenty-eight now and she hasn’t got any children and I look at her and think, well, Matthew was eight when you were... at the age you are now’.

Pauline seems to resist any notion of ‘being old’ however she acknowledges a developing ‘telescopic’ spread of generations (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999). She has compared her life course with her mother’s with regards to timing of life events (Neugarten, 1973), although her granny was ‘very, very old’ as a grandmother herself she is not old, indeed might be mistaken for Alfie’s Mum. In
many ways Pauline constructs her life story narrative as the ‘happy ending’ alluded to in every picture strip romance story in ‘Jackie’ magazine. The engagement ring did ‘pop out of the pocket’ and she ‘lived happily ever after’ (McRobbie, 2005). However it is important to consider how Pauline has constructed negotiating the changing social expectations into her contemporary understanding of her midlife ‘self’. Her life story narrative has identified the ‘pulling and pushing’ of dominant discourses across her life course from ‘having to get married’ to being 50 and ‘still got it’.

Perhaps most interesting in Pauline’s story, located as it is within the domestic sphere, is how it compares with the conceptualisation of ‘the feminine mystique’ of nearly 50 years earlier (Friedan, 1963) or the fictional representation of ‘The Stepford Wives’ (Levin, 1972). Pauline does not seem to construct her location within the domestic sphere as an obligation. Nor does she position herself as subjugated or oppressed. Rather it seems that as she narrates her life story, and explores the transitions across her life course, she incorporates a story of ‘choice’ within the discursive ‘push and pull’ (Gavey, 2003). Perhaps ‘deciding’ to get married although her parents said ‘they didn’t have to’, and looking after Alfie although ‘Jack finds it hard’ indicates that where Friedan (1963) suggested women were confined by the ‘problem that had no name’ Pauline has embraced the domestic sphere, perhaps on her own terms as ‘domestic goddess in charge of’ rather than ‘doing’ the housework.

However the suggestion of ‘choosing’ this position might be further explored when considering how Pauline narrates her own mother’s experience of ‘being 50’. Pauline identified with her mother with regard to the timing of her life events; making the social time transitions to becoming a wife, mother and
grandmother at a similar individual time. However she does not construct her mother as central to her own domestic sphere:

‘One of the scary things about me being 50 now is that my parents split up when they were 50 and I was 30, and that sort of devastated everybody in the family because I look at me now and I look how my Mum was and it just changed her life totally’.

It seems clear from this extract that Pauline does not narrate the change in her mother’s life at 50 as a good thing. She does not draw on ‘liberation from an unhappy marriage’, or ‘fresh start’ or indeed something that concerned only her parents. Pauline constructs her parents’ separation as a family concern, not a personal one, indeed the change in the family as almost catastrophic. Mindful of the Gestalt’ of Pauline’s narrative, indicating the scale of importance to the story teller, it is interesting that she talks of ‘everybody’s devastation’ at the divorce, before she talks about the death of her sister in law at the age of 40.

‘And I think to get…to have that happen to you at 50 is such a shock, cos they’d been together such a long time as me and Jack have and you sort of take stock and think gosh, I’m the same age now as Mum and Dad were when they split up. Neither of them are any happier, but anyway that’s another story’ (Laughs)

That her parents’ separation is something that ‘happened’ to her mother is an interesting construction. We are reminded that third order positioning occurs when someone who is outside of the relationship being described engages in positioning (Boxer, 1993:261). Pauline is positioning her mother as passive in the process of separation. This might be construed as making her father ‘active’
in the separation therefore positioned as ‘blameworthy’ or indeed her mother positioned as ‘not active enough’ to prevent the split. Furthermore Pauline finishes her story by saying the separation has not made either parent any happier, by doing so enables a construction of ‘blame’ for her parents for failing to remain married therefore ‘happy’. Throughout this story Pauline is drawing on a discursive assumption of ‘happy families’ and positioning her parents as challenging this discourse by separating. In this extract Pauline compares herself, a 50 year old married woman to her mother and she finds it ‘scary’ that they were the age she is when they split up. The fact that the separation ‘changed her mother’s life totally’ is narrated as problematical not liberating. Interestingly, Pauline includes the extended family in sharing the ‘devastating’ impact of her parents’ separation. Her brother she suggests has ‘never got over it’ and it was a ‘big thing to tell your children Granny and Grandad are not going to be together anymore’.

Perhaps the effect of her parents’ divorce and her emplotment that neither of them are any happier as a consequence of it has had the greatest impact on Pauline’s subjective understanding of midlife. She invests heavily in her story as ‘exciting’ she is having lots of fun and she spends time and effort keeping her family together:

‘We do a lot together as a family and I think family is very, very important. I think after what happened to Mum and Dad I think we do make a big effort to do big family things, and the children still come on holiday with us. Not all the time but we’ll take them away somewhere’
Moreover she looks after her grandson and is ‘in charge’ of her nieces now her brother is widowed. It seems of vital importance to Pauline’s position at midlife that her family remain close and she is central to it, moreover by constructing this matriarchal position within the family, she repositions her mother almost ‘peripheral’ to the process. It seems this peripheral location might be a position that Pauline has a great investment in avoiding, moreover she has much personal investment in maintaining an ‘old fashioned’ family support network of ‘the good old days’ despite the changing historical times.

Amanda: building a career

I contacted Amanda through the email address that Pauline had given me. I met her in her own home in London. She was initially more reticent to talk than Pauline had been and after asking the prepared question it was useful that I had prepared for asking her to ‘tell me more’ about some of the issues she raised during sub session 1 rather than wait for sub session 2 to reflect back comments as narrative pointed questions (Wengraf, 2001). In accordance with the planned method I heeded the ‘Gestalt’ and did not invite Amanda to answer my questions, rather to expand on her comments, for example ‘tell me more about that’ or ‘what happened next?’ Following the process used in the analysis of Pauline’s interview material I identified that the overall theme of Amanda’s story might be encapsulated as ‘negotiating the public sphere’. As she narrated her life it seemed that being one of very few women in her profession featured heavily in her story, as did her sporting interests. I identified themes of ‘Little Mis-fit’, ‘Confronting patriarchy’ and ‘Just a girl’ from her narrative.
‘Little Mis-fit’

Amanda is an architect, she started her narrative at the point she left school. Whereas Pauline began by talking of her marriage and children, Amanda said:

‘Well I took the normal route. I just did A-levels and then went to Uni, studied a male-dominated course which probably had a huge impact on the way I am cos there were only… out of forty-six of us there were only four girls on the course and I was the only one who finished’

In this opening extract Amanda narrates her career path as being ‘the normal route’. However in her historical time this was in many ways far from the ‘normal’, especially for a girl. As discussed in Chapter 1, only a small percentage of young women progressed to higher education. Indeed in this cohort 60% of young women left school aged 16, and only 11% of all women born in 1958 cohort went on to graduate at degree level (Makepeace, 2003). Moreover although at 13%, more men than women went to university altogether, this differential is not so great that there would be an expectation that it was ‘normal’ to be in such a minority of women in a chosen subject. By constructing her transition from school to university as the ‘normal’ route, it seems Amanda is reflecting on this transition through the lens of her present day understanding. The ‘normal route’ she draws on is perhaps ‘normal’ for an architect and not necessarily for a woman born in 1957. This seems to underpin the significance ‘being an architect’ has for her across her life course and importantly for her midlife identity. Perhaps as Jenkins (1996) points out an understanding of ‘self’ is socially constructed in the ‘ongoing process of social
interaction within which individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives’ (Jenkins, 1996:20). It seems Amanda’s notion of self at midlife is embedded within her ‘being and architect’ in relation to other architects and moreover as separate from those who ‘are not’ architects.

Where Pauline narrated the story of her midlife self located within the ‘private’ sphere of her home and family, it seems Amanda stories herself as located within the ‘public’ sphere of her profession. However she acknowledges that she was the only woman and constructs this as probably having a huge impact on who she is:

‘being a woman in architecture was very rare so it’s hardly significant now but, you know what I mean, there are some (laughs) whereas in my day there weren’t any at all.’

This is an interesting insight into Amanda’s subjective understanding of her social time. Here she now acknowledges that being a woman in architecture was rare, indeed in 1978 only 4.3% of architects were women (Wigfall, 1980), yet she resists the position of ‘female architect’ and by doing so can invest in being an ‘architect’ first and foremost and the fact she is a woman can thus be positioned as ‘not that important’ to her career path. This is perhaps surprising as women still represent only 13% of the profession (De Graft-Johnson, 2003). Yet seemingly by taking the position that gender is less of an issue than it was Amanda can be considered to be underpinning her investment in following a ‘normal’ route.

Amanda was the only participant in this research who went straight from school to university and moreover the only one who did not take a ‘girls job’. It is
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interesting to explore how Amanda relates the process of becoming an architect. As discussed in Chapter 1, many of the small minority of young women that expected to go to university in the 1970s tended to be from families of professionals (Weiner, 1985). Indeed Amanda’s story seems consistent with this:

‘the expectation from them was… I always felt was that I would go to Uni, that we would all go to Uni. My father is an academic and that is exceedingly hard to follow and my sister’s very academic so the pressure to do that was quite tough’

In this extract Amanda reflects on family expectation and her use of rhetorical speech acts (Boxer, 2003) indicate the extent to which she found her father’s academic standing as ‘being hard to follow’.

It seems that where Pauline’s progress from school to work, as a nursery nurse, was discursively positioned as ‘a good job for a girl’, it appears Amanda’s family drew on ‘the benefits of a good education’. Indeed when describing family holidays of her childhood Amanda related that ‘the summer holiday was kind of an educational thing and we’d be marched at length round historic sites ’til our feet hurt’. Amanda constructs these holidays as ‘forced education’ and by doing so strengthens her assertion that continuing this education at university was the route she was expected to take. Yet it seems that by positioning her sister and father as ‘academic’ it makes available a position of ‘not academic’ or perhaps ‘less than academic’ for herself:

‘and I think architecture let me out of that in that I was doing something that was practical as well as… and artistic that was… had
an academic edge to it so, yeah, I could compete on my own. I wasn’t competing against them. cos my whole life was a competition, you see, it’s to do with sport, and so I wasn’t competing with them’.

In narrating her application to study architecture she constructs a position of having negotiated a role for herself within this expectation of higher education. However it is interesting to consider why Amanda draws on a discourse of ‘competition’. Once again Amanda may be reflecting on her progress to university through the lens of her contemporary historical and social time. Having worked in the ‘public’ sphere of the male dominated professions of architecture and building, she is perhaps drawing on her contemporary discursive understanding of competition as underpinning the male world of work. However the rhetorical speech acts of emphasising the ‘competition’ might equally construct Amanda as ‘struggling’ with pressure to ‘be academic’ and therefore ‘equals’ of her father and sister. In keeping with the notions of pulling and being pulled by discourse (Gavey, 2006) it seems within the discourse of ‘getting a good education’ Amanda was not in a position to resist the progress to university expected of her. However she ‘pulled’ against the academic route of her father and sister, and by doing so can position herself as having had a degree of agency or ‘choice’. It would appear that just as Pauline complied with the strong discursive pull to marry, Amanda too was constrained by the familial and social expectations of what was ‘suitable’ for a girl in her social and historical location to do.

The discourse of competition Amanda mobilises offers another interesting insight is her ‘competition’ with her sister. In the discourses of teenage
femininity as explored in ‘Jackie’ magazine, competitiveness was not highly valued (McRobbie, 1991). Indeed ‘compliance’ rather than ‘confrontation’ was the discursive expectation for girls in the ‘telescopic’ cohort. Yet Amanda stated that ‘cos my whole life was a competition, you see’. Interestingly Amanda emplots identifying more with boys than girls when she was a child:

‘we used to go play with everybody from the street and we had various dens in various trees and I was always in the boys’ den, not because I wanted to go out with the boys but just because I wanted to be a boy, I think, (laughs) and they did far more fun things in the boy den than they did in the girlie den where they were busy sweeping and tidying up and in the boy den you got to play with pen knives and light fires and burn insects with a magnifying glass and things (laughs)”

Amanda takes the position of challenging gender roles even as a child. Through the lens of her midlife self she does not draw on a contemporary discourse of child safety, or dwell on children playing unsupervised in woodland and handling matches and knives. Nor does she draw on a discourse of being a ‘tom boy’, rather she takes the position of ‘not a girly girl’, nonetheless still a ‘girl’. It appears she identifies with the ‘freedom’ and adventure’ offered by the boy’s games in contrast with the limitations of the girls’. Chapman (2004) reminds us of the notion of ‘separate spheres’ with women occupying the domestic or private sphere and men the public sphere. Amanda constructs her childhood as a time when she recognised the potential of the male domain and identifying with her father’s career pattern she perhaps laid the foundations of her own professional identity within the ‘public sphere’.
Alongside ‘competition’ Amanda incorporated many narratives of sport in her story as a child and a young woman. Throughout her interview Amanda talked about her enthusiasm for keeping fit and playing sport and said:

‘cos I always do stuff but that’s just who I am, I think. I did it at school. In fact, just chose… all my University choices were based on what sports facilities they had’

At Amanda’s individual time of 18 at the intersection on her double helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) this sporting interest may have been counter to the discursive assumptions of the historical time. My analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine offered no indication of the expectation that girls would be ‘sporty’. The ‘fitness’ or ‘diet regimes’ which were offered appeared on the ‘beauty’ or fashion pages, underpinning a discursive assumption that girls were to be ‘looked at’ and therefore should maintain a beautiful body for the ‘male’ gaze.

Amanda narrates a continued interest in all sporting activities in her current individual time:

you know, I don’t know, I swim and I run and I go to the gym and I do yoga and I do… I do a lot. If I actually analyse it I do do a lot which is… which surprised me. Yeah, I like keeping fit. Yeah, I do enjoy it, yeah’

Amanda clearly maintains her story of activity and fitness, yet interestingly she does not mobilise a contemporary discourse of ‘body beautiful’ or ‘the tyranny of slenderness’ (Chernin, 1983) to underpin her investment in ‘being sporty’. The literature has revealed that body dissatisfaction is very common among women (Cash et al., 2004; Kostanski, 1998; Tiggerman and Slater, 2004, Tiggerman,
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1992; Tiggemann and Stevens, 1999, Willinge, 2006) yet Amanda does not draw on this, instead she invests in the continuity of this ‘sporty’ identity across her life course. It is perhaps most illustrative of Amanda’s midlife identity that she does not construct her interest in sport as that of ‘spectator’ but as that of ‘competitor’, nor indeed as a team player, the sports she participates in are individual. Once again it seems Amanda’s story incorporates the competitive values imbued in the male world of the ‘public’ sphere. Perhaps her competition as a female is that of ‘single’ player in the male dominated field of her career.

Amanda narrates the continuing place of sport in her life story from her childhood in the ‘boys den’ to her present day individual and social time as a mother who says: ‘they used to call us the fit family. I am Little Miss Fit’. Amanda draws on a children’s cartoon series of ‘Mr Men’ (Hargreaves, 1976-2005) to illustrate her investment in being fit, from childhood to present day. However she also reveals her intention to continue to participate in sport in the future:

‘I would like to think that I was still running and still, you know, if I was physically able I don’t see why I would stop. My mum says things to me – you can’t keep running, pounding the streets forever (laughs). Why not? It’s the 80-year olds who run the marathon why would you not if you feel able to do it why... whereas that mentality that you have to stop because you’ve reached...’

This is an interesting insight to the ‘pulls and pulling’ of discursive positioning Amanda constructs of her ageing self. If her life course is considered on a double helix model (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) her individual time might be
considered too old to maintain the intersection with her social line of sports ‘woman’. Here she acknowledges that there is an apparent ‘age appropriate behaviour’ discourse that might position her as ‘eccentric’ or ‘behaving inappropriately’ in relation to previous generations. However just as she resisted the ‘girly den’ with sweeping in favour of the ‘boy den’ where they had more ‘fun’, Amanda positions herself as ready to challenge being ‘too old to compete’. However she does acknowledge the ‘realist’ assumption that her ageing body might prevent her even if her mental resolve remains.

**Confronting patriarchy**

Training for architecture is a lengthy process beginning with a 3 year degree course followed by work experience, a diploma and a probationary work placement. Having been as a woman, very much in the minority at university Amanda proceeded to work experience where she says:

‘Well, the first things they had me doing *(laughs)* were fetching the sandwiches and making the tea which was actually a disaster cos I managed to fetch ham sandwiches for the Jewish man in the office without realizing it *(laughs)*’

Amanda does not make it clear whether a male trainee would have been expected to fetch sandwiches and therefore adopt a ‘nurturing role’ towards the men in the office. Interestingly neither does she draw on a discourse of ‘appropriate’ gender roles. In the historical location of the early C21st Amanda might have mobilised a discourse of causing racial offence by providing inappropriate food, however in keeping with her subjective investment in her professional role, in this story she appears to position herself at this time as
being ‘not nurturing’ and rejecting a feminine caring role, thus making available an alternative of ‘career woman’.

Reflecting back across her life course it seems Amanda’s tells her story of being a woman in a man’s world as one of ‘coping’ not ‘victimisation’, or indeed ‘trailblazing’. She says this of a point in her training:

‘I did six months in an office …with a very chauvinistic boss. He thought it was quite a novelty to have a girl in their offices. He used to chase you around the filing cabinets, you know. Very, very archetypal 1970s sort’

Reflecting on this, Amanda acknowledges the historical time of the narrative and draws on a ‘male sex drive’ discourse (Hollway, 1984), which dominated popular culture at that time. For example in 1960s and 70s popular television programmes such as ‘Benny Hill’, (1969-1989) ‘Man About the House’ (1973-76) and films such as the ‘Carry On’ series (1958-1978) were almost entirely based on plots of men chasing women, often in the work place. In her contemporary historical time at midlife Amanda might draw on a sexual harassment discourse to construct this story, however by locating her experiences within the discourses of the historical time, Amanda forestalls a suggestion that it was being a female architect that positioned her. Instead she constructs her experience of being ‘chased round the filing cabinets’ as occurring because she was female. She appears to invest in a sorority of women’s experience, which might have occurred whatever her professional status, thus her identity investment in being an ‘architect’ can be considered separately from her gender and perhaps protected.
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As an architect Amanda was usually the only woman on a building project. Her story revealed that she felt constant pressure to prove her worth, in being not only an architect but a capable one:

‘I have to make sure that everything I do is one hundred percent correct so that the person can’t turn around… it’s like reverse parking a car, you know. Oh, it must be a woman who’s reverse parking it because they’d made a mess of it. Oh, it’s a bloke, that’s all right then’.

In this paragraph Amanda encapsulates her ‘difference’ within her professional role. She seemed to find humour in her construction of herself as a woman being ‘chased round a filing cabinet’ by locating the incident within the dominant ‘male sex drive’ discourse of the time the event occurred. However, in this extract she is acknowledging entrenched gender positioning, whereby females are assumed to be stereotypically less competent than males, and despite her identity investment in being an ‘architect’, she is positioned by her colleagues as a ‘female architect’ and therefore less than a ‘male architect’ due to an assumed essential inferiority.

The ‘male sex drive’ discourse is recurrent in Amanda’s story. Not only is Amanda’s profession male dominated but her work mainly involves builders who are also predominately male, and she is aware of changes across her working life:

‘Not so much now but when I started, of course, the site hut had page three models pinned all over the wall and they’re not allowed to do that either anymore and they have to… have to deal with me
differently than they would when I first started’. They could be quite sexist when I first started and there was nothing we could do whereas now they’d be hauled up before the Site Manager.’

By narrating this change in her working environment Amanda is constructing a ‘safe’ and ‘normal’ professional situation in her contemporary historical time. It seems she is resisting any suggestion that being a woman in a man’s world is inappropriate, or threatening. Amanda does not take the position here of ‘victim’ nor ‘feminist crusader’ in the ‘man’s world’ she works in. Yet she does construct her working life as confrontational, ‘there were battles to be… subtle battles that you worked your way through to achieve things’. It seems despite investing in having taken ‘the normal route’ and trained as an architect Amanda has been discursively positioned as ‘female’ and constructs her experience through the lens of the being female in a male world. Perhaps despite investing in her gender as being ‘unremarkable’ it could be considered that the discourse of ‘male supremacy’ has imbued her education and professional life and impacted on her experience. This was illustrated when she said:

‘it’s a lack of confidence on my part as well, …where you think, they’re blokes, they must know what they’re (laughs) talking about, they must have it right, but …the detail was wrong, he’d drawn it wrong but I didn’t have the confidence at that point… I didn’t have the confidence to say, what the hell have you drawn here, this isn’t right.

Chapman (2002) points out that the separate spheres of the ‘public’ breadwinner males and the ‘private’ domestic females were underpinned by patriarchy which is deep rooted in Western ideology. Indeed it seems that
patriarchal ideology informs social structures in which men dominate, control and exploit women (Bennett, 2006; Walby, 1990). Moreover ‘patriarchal ideology has had a very significant impact ...and continues to impact upon cultural understandings of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ (Chapman, 2002:36).

It is perhaps significant when exploring Amanda’s story to consider to what extent discourses of patriarchy and consequential discourses of appropriate gender behaviour have impacted across her life course. During her training she spent 6 months working in America:

‘I was twenty-five and I was going to have gone travelling via Hawaii and somehow I was manoeuvred by my dad on that trip and my mum to not go travelling. So not encouraged to do the gap year thing and go traipsing round the world as a woman on your own’.

In contemporary society the ‘gap year’ is a recognised phenomenon where young people travel or volunteer for a period prior to, or indeed after, taking their first job. By framing her intended gap year as ‘traipsing round the world as a woman alone’ Amanda constructs a position of powerlessness to resist her parents ‘manoeuvring’: ‘traipsing’ constructs her as behaving inappropriately within an ideal discourse of femininity for a young woman of her social and historical location, disapproved of by her parents, and probably wider society. By constructing the story from this point of view, Amanda can be seen as unable to ‘pull against’ the discursive force of patriarchy. Indeed this patriarchal discourse, literally the ‘power of the father’ (Burr, 1998), seems to underpin Amanda’s emplotment of her time at university as the only girl in her class:
‘but they kind of all took me under their wing really. I was kind of one of them. They were very protective as a group. They used to come and hoik me off the dance floor if I was with somebody inappropriate.

It was like having my dad with me. *(Laughs)* Forty six dads’.

Amanda does not narrate this as ‘intrusion’ or an inappropriate interference but neither does her construction of these events indicate that she was in fact ‘one of them’. Within this story line Amanda is positioned as ‘in need of male protection’ and thereby necessarily ‘weaker’ or perhaps ‘more vulnerable’ and potentially exploitable than her male colleagues, moreover that this discursive construction of gender roles is so natural that she does not question the interference at the time. However reflecting on this from her midlife self she says ‘yeah, I just became a kind of pretend bloke really probably’. It seems that in order to negotiate her position within the male dominated university course, Amanda constructs ‘denying’ her femininity and becoming a ‘pretend bloke’ to even the power balance. In contrast to the ‘boys den’ over the ‘girlie’ one where Amanda’s story drew on the freedom the boys appeared to have, as an adult woman, as she narrates her career it is the ‘power’ and therefore the freedom that that affords the men which Amanda acknowledges.

If ‘being a pretend bloke’ amongst her fellow students allowed her to claim gender neutrality it seems that the patriarchal hierarchy within her profession was concerned about her femininity. Whilst being interviewed for a job she was asked if she intended to have any more children:

‘There was a panel of men and, you know, this is my institute, my professional institute, and I said, you can’t ask me that. Why not?’
Why can’t I possibly ask you that? And I explained, well, you know, it’s not really relevant. ‘I’d ask a man, I’d ask a man’. I thought I don’t think you would actually.’ (Laughs)

Amanda here constructs this interview as a time when she resisted the position of subjugation and challenged the patriarchal attitude of her fellow professionals. Drawing on a liberal feminist discourse (Walby, 1990) Amanda constructs her working life as more ‘comfortable’ due to changes in law. Yet as Walby (1990) points out law change alone does not address deep rooted gender inequalities, perhaps this underpins Amanda’s rhetorical emphasis of ‘my’ institute and ‘my’ professional body. She seems to be negotiating a rebalance of power by staking her ‘right’ to belong in this patriarchal institute.

Still just a girl

Amanda acknowledges that despite law change some attitudes remain entrenched. She says ‘I’m working with builders, remember, they don’t think I know anything by default when I arrive’. She constructs her career path as one of gaining confidence and expertise as an architect. When responsible for a large project building an office block she was faced with a problem: some of the marble the builders used was incorrect:

‘(when) it arrived, it was the wrong model and I rejected it and they’d had it specially shipped all the way over from Italy and I had to stand there in front of the builder and say, it’s not right, and they’d shipped it all the way, you know, and I had to stick to my guns and say, no, I’m sorry, it’s not right, you’ve got to replace it and it’s your fault, your expense and they did it in the end’.
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Through the lens of her midlife individual time Amanda mobilises a ‘combat discourse’ to emplot this episode as a time of personal strength and achievement. Her professional identity as an architect is confirmed and her gender has not prevented her from standing her ground in a man’s world. However, interestingly as this story continues she does not construct her colleagues in the building trade as being ‘gender blind’. She says ‘they actually made me a pair of earrings out of the rejected part’. Amanda appears to narrate this story line as successfully negotiating a satisfactory outcome to a difficult situation in her professional life as an architect. Following the assumption based on Boxer (2003) of the discursive positioning of the ‘self’ and ‘others’ it is interesting to consider the notion of ‘strategic positioning’ (Harré, 2003). Here it seems that ‘positioning one’s opponents in various disadvantaged ways can reduce the scope of their actions markedly’ (Harré, 2003:129). By giving Amanda a pair of earrings made out of the rejected marble ‘the scope of her actions’ as an architect might be seen as ‘reduced’ by the builders. The gift might be construed as a mark of her professional location as an architect, yet it is also very indicative of her gender as a woman. This could be interpreted as Amanda being ‘strategically positioned’ by the builders with a clear reminder that architect she may be, but she is first and foremost ‘only a girl’. Jenkins (1996) points out that individual identities are constructed in and through embodied interaction with others. Amanda may be interacting on a professional level as an architect but as an embodied woman her colleagues may ultimately see her as ‘first woman, then architect.

When Amanda became a mother, the transition to this social time impacted on her professional life and initiated a change of hours and different career
trajectory. Amanda resigned from her role as senior partner in a large company and worked part time, firstly self employed and at home and when her youngest son was three she rejoined a small company. She began to work part-time and combined her social roles of architect and mother. She stories her present working life from her contemporary historical location, in her social time of mother and architect and her individual time of ‘being 50’. Amanda’s story incorporates the prejudice she still faces as a woman in architecture. Yet how Amanda deals with this in her contemporary social time is an interesting insight into her subjective experience of her current social and historical location. She says:

‘but now, I don’t necessarily want to fight the battle. I’ll just go to my boss …and I just, can you come to this meeting with me? and I just… I just don’t fight the battle and have somebody else come with me to deal with it if I feel that is appropriate. If I think having a man there will make the difference then I go, oh fine, I’ll take the man, he can come sort it out, whereas previously I would have got on my high horse and fought the battle to prove the point’.

The times Amanda would have ‘got on her high horse’ and fought the battle were in her working life before she had her children. In her current social and historical time she no longer positions herself as being ‘super woman’ in order to prove her professional identity. Indeed it seems she has discursively ‘laid down her arms’. It is possible that in this narrative she takes the position of ‘managing’ the situation. This enables her to position the (male) builders separately from her professional colleagues who are also male but are her ‘equals’. In her story she ‘takes’ the man to the meeting and thus makes
available the position for herself as in control of her professional life. This however seems a rather simplistic interpretation of Amanda’s present day understanding of her identity as a professional architect. Throughout her narrative she appears to have invested a great deal of her self understanding as a ‘professional’ in the public sphere, and in her own ‘strength’ in overcoming prejudice and sexual harassment. Without overtly constructing herself as ‘feminist’ she has claimed her right to practice within the male domain of building and architecture. Yet after over 20 years of experience she emplots ‘no longer fighting the battle’, possibly positioning herself as ‘defeated’. Perhaps as Gavey (2002) puts it she has spent so long ‘pulling against’ the ‘discursive pull’ of the appropriate behaviour of ‘girl’ and ‘woman’ and therefore not ‘male’ or ‘professional architect’, now she has opted for the simpler solution of not pulling against the strong tide of the discursive pull. Yet by constructing it as asking a man to accompany her as being her decision she leaves room for a degree of agency and choice.

Amanda’s subjective understanding of her midlife self seems to be located within her social time as a ‘professional architect’ and yet she is also a ‘mother’ and adapted her professional working life to accommodate this. There seemed an interesting insight into how Amanda has maintained her position in the ‘public’ sphere of work yet has incorporated the ‘private’ sphere of domesticity within this. When I asked Amanda if she wanted to show me any pictures, she explained that having considered this she thought it best to let ‘the house speak for itself’. She showed me how her home has been modernised and extended to her own architectural designs, she had designed attic and basement conversions to accommodate her growing sons. She has utilised her skill in the
public sphere to enhance the family private sphere. Amanda had worked on large and prestigious national and international projects, including the landmark building that was the site of the ‘wrong marble. Yet it was her home she showed me, not pictures of the large industrial projects. This perhaps encapsulates her investment in both public and private spheres.

‘I am not my (her) mother’

In this chapter I have considered the stories of Pauline and Amanda. These women appear to lead very different lives yet they remain ‘connected’ and best friends. It seems appropriate and useful to conclude this chapter with how Pauline and Amanda both seem to reject the notion of ‘having to get old’ or conform to certain social discourses due to the evolving intersection of their individual or social time helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980). Indeed it is interesting to note that both women included Amanda’s mother in their stories and positioned themselves as ‘not like her’.

In Amanda’s narration of her transition to motherhood she incorporated her own mother into her story

‘my mum was a teacher but only for a couple of years and while she… in that she always says, you know, in her day, once you got married then you basically resigned but she stayed on until she was pregnant with my sister and then she was asked to leave the teaching profession but if you speak to other people, there are… you meet people who didn’t do that’

In this narrative Amanda is positioning her mother as ‘not a career person’ and moreover she is challenging the historical validity of her mother’s claim to have
followed the ‘normal’ career path for her historical time. In her next comment Amanda questions the discourse of the ‘caring stay at home mother’ her parents may have drawn on saying ‘and you think, well, how much of that was my parents feeling that the right thing to do was for her to be at home’. Despite her mother’s report of being asked to leave teaching Amanda constructs her mother as having had a choice to either remain in teaching or become a stay at home mother. Furthermore she is challenging the ‘normative mothering role’ of her mother’s historical time.

Chapman (2002) reminds us that although many women had been drawn into the work force during the Second World War, the 1950’s and 1960’s saw a closure of government sponsored child care facilities and a policy of gendered categorisation of ‘bread-winner man and homemaker woman’ (Chapman, 2002:86). Furthermore academic publications such as Bowlby (1955) were interpreted as underpinning the assumption that children need ‘stay at home’ mothers. In her own social time Amanda’s mother seems to have followed a pattern of social expectation, by challenging this Amanda is supporting her own investment in her position as ‘career woman’. However she continues her story by narrating how she negotiated her own transition to motherhood, and in her story incorporated a degree of agency for herself in this transition. Amanda has two sons, when she first became pregnant she was a partner with a large successful practice in central London. She explained that she left this company and began work for herself and says this was:

‘easier to do as an architect. Well, not easier, but, you know, I could do that if I’d wanted to if I could set it up’.
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Here Amanda takes responsibility for initiating a change in her career moreover underpins her investment in having a career. However the decision had not been easy:

‘So I did a load of pros and cons which included going back to work and being at home with the baby, the traditional role, yeah *(laughs)*, my mum’s role and decided that I would need to be at work but I didn’t want to travel into town every day’

It seems that although Amanda changed her working life when she became pregnant, she constructs having engineered the process herself, unlike her mother who was reportedly ‘asked to leave’. Arguably where Amanda’s mother drew on a discourse of the ‘feminine mystique’ *(Friedan, 1963)* of motherhood, Amanda has drawn on the discourse of ‘having it all’ *(Haussegger, 2005)*. In plotting her story Amanda claims ‘choice’ and rejects her mother’s position of ‘coercion’ yet she, like her mother, changed her working pattern on becoming a mother. We are reminded that although the practice of caring is ‘complex and culturally loaded’ in Western societies it is generally accepted in cultural terms that women invest more time in caring for family than men’ *(Chapman, 2004:27)*. Amanda did not leave work yet she accepted a role of caring mother. Within her social time of becoming a mother Amanda has positioned herself as being ‘different from her mother, yet within her own social time she is perhaps still ‘constrained and limited’ by the discourse ‘of good mothering’ prevalent in her own historical time. She may have storied agency in her decision yet it seems this was possibly dictated by the pull and push of discursive assumptions *(Gavey: 2003)*.
Negotiating the ‘separate spheres’

Pauline and Amanda have been considered as apparently leading quite different lives with Pauline investing her midlife identity in the private sphere and Amanda as negotiating a compromise between the public and private. However they have both invested in ‘not being old’ or indeed the ‘over the hill’, ‘unattractive’ and ‘sexually irrelevant’ construction of middle aged woman emerging from the literature (Ussher, 2006; Greer, 1991; Helibrun, 1988) indeed the description of the unfulfilled, unwanted, moody and melancholic woman at midlife (Ussher, 1992) does not seem relevant to either Pauline as a young ‘grandmother’ or Amanda as a serious sportswoman. In concluding the exploration of these two women it is interesting to reflect on their ‘inter-connected’ lives and how they both invest in constructing themselves as ‘different’ from previous generations. This is perhaps best illustrated by the story that both women told about Amanda’s mother. Amanda said:

‘my mum had waist-length dark, black, jet-black hair that she’d always had tied up in like a beehive and she turned 50 and old ladies didn’t have long hair and she cut it all off and had it short and I just think, for me, that summed up the difference in the two because it would never occur to anybody in our generation to do anything because we felt we ought to for our age’.

Pauline also related the story to me and added that Amanda’s mother had:

‘become old over night’ Whereas me and (Amanda) have got a very young outlook, ‘cos they say 50’s the new 30 or the new 40 or (laughs) whatever it is’.
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In relating this tale Pauline and Amanda both take the position of rejection the constraining social expectations of age appropriate behaviour. However they both relate the story through the lens of their contemporary historical, social, and individual time. Pauline identifies with having a ‘young outlook’ and Amanda that her ‘generation would never do anything because they ought to for their age’. Neither woman challenges her own investment in conforming to ‘expected behaviour for their individual time in their social roles in contemporary historical location.'
Chapter 8: Constructing duties of care

This chapter explores the lives of Diane and Lesley. On leaving school they both trained as nurses and have remained within the profession in a variety of positions throughout their working lives. Within the parameters of the ‘telescopic’ cohort, like Pauline and Amanda, Lesley married at the ‘young’ end of the spectrum and Diane at the ‘older’ end. This seems to agree with Anderson’s (1985) observation of class, marriage and child bearing, Lesley was born in a city centre and was brought up in council housing, Diane says she was born into a ‘nice middle class area’. Both women have grown up children living at home and both have been carers for elderly parents.

The previous chapter exploring the lives of Pauline and Amanda drew on the notion of ‘separate spheres’ and how Pauline and Amanda negotiate their ‘domestic’ or private and ‘working’ or public roles. This chapter is concerned with the lives of two women who trained as nurses, became mothers and subsequently spent time caring for elderly parents. Whilst exploring their narratives it seems relevant to consider the notion of ‘caring’ and how each woman constructs her own caring role and the discursive positioning this entails. Moreover ‘those midlife adults who raise dependent children and simultaneously care for frail elderly parents have been encapsulated as ‘the sandwich generation’” (Grundy and Henretta, 2006: 707). It seems negotiating this intergenerational support is likely to impact on the experience of this ‘telescopic’ cohort and contribute to an understanding of midlife identity.

In her classic work Chodorow (1978) drew on the ‘separate spheres’ to explore the ‘reproduction of mothering’ and theorised how women become carers not
due to biology but in relation to the primary relationship they have with their own mothers, within a specific form of western society. That Chodorow (1978) suggests this is not inherent due to physiology is perhaps challenged by her use of psycho-dynamic theory which assumes a degree of biological essentialism. However it is an interesting starting point to consider how the discursive positioning of women as ‘carers’ has impacted on the trajectories of Lesley’s and Diane’s life course and thus their subjective understanding of their ‘midlife’ selves.

**Lesley: a working ‘Mum’**

After carefully reading the transcript of Lesley’s interview it was evident that she constructed her story within the sphere of her family. Where Pauline had talked of her house and her home and Amanda of her work, Lesley talked of parents, children and family life. Following careful scrutiny of the transcript it seemed that the overarching theme of Lesley’s story was her family, yet throughout her story she weaves the thread of her career as a nurse. It seems relevant to an exploration of Lesley’s subjective experience of her present historical, social and personal time to consider story within the broad theme of ‘working Mum’. Several other important themes emerged that I have defined as ‘a job for a girl’, ‘life-long learning’ and ‘negotiating the sandwich generation’.

**‘A job for a girl’**

Lesley said she was going to start her story ‘at the beginning’ and related how she had been born near the city centre where her parents lived with her grandfather. When she was 6 years old her grandfather went into a ‘geriatric’ or elderly care hospital and she moved with her parents and brother to a suburb of
the city. This opening paragraph, in agreement with notions of Gestalt, set the scene for Lesley’s story. She began by saying:

‘I was born in ...in quite a like very old-fashioned cobbled street. We lived there ‘till I was six and we lived... there was myself, my parents and my brother and my Grandad, who was bedridden, in a two up two down house. So until I was six I slept in a bedroom with my parents and my brother. So I had to sleep in a cot until I was nearly six because there wasn’t enough room’.

Lesley was born into ‘post war’ Britain where housing was in short supply and like many young couples Lesley’s parents began married life living with their parents (Hall, 2000). Lesley does not draw on a discourse of poverty and deprivation nor question the apparent restrictions of living accommodation, neither does her story locate her family as ‘needy’ she says:

‘My mum and dad were... they didn’t have a lot, you know, but my mum stayed at home and it was like very traditional. She looked after us all, she was always baking and she made all our clothes’.

By constructing her childhood within a ‘poor but happy’ discursive framework Lesley claims ‘contentment’ for herself and her family. Moreover she does mobilise a discourse of ‘feminine mystique’ to narrate her mother’s life (Friedan, 1963). She does not position her mother as a subjugated housewife or a drudge. Rather she emplots the value of her mother’s contribution by narrating her as ‘always baking’ and making clothes within a discourse of domestic contentment. Moreover is seems she is tacitly acknowledging the separate spheres and the sexual division of labour. Lesley stories her family’s situation
within the historical location of post war Britain. Housing in large cities was scarce in the 1950’s and many areas were overcrowded and facilities restricted. Smith (2003) reminds us that social housing development, renewal of bombed out inner cities and the creation of new towns and estates in city suburbs flourished in the 1950s and 60s. As Chapman (2002) informs us the design of much post war housing was based on the gendered assumptions of the domestic division of labour. Moreover, he points out that rather than being resented by all women as Friedan (1963) would imply, the modern functional homes in the suburbs were welcomed by many women as an improvement on their old housing. Perhaps a useful insight into Lesley’s midlife understanding is that she narrates her childhood as happy within this ‘traditional’ family structure. Lesley does not position her family within the ‘cereal box’ affluence of the advertisements (Chapman, 2002) nor as deprived ‘we didn’t have a lot as I say but we had a really happy time. We always had a holiday at the seaside – that sort of stuff’. My own local knowledge of the city and suburb that Lesley grew up in suggests that her family moved from a relatively deprived and run down city centre location to a modern social housing development in the suburbs. Moreover, that moving home offered a social mobility that may have impacted on Lesley’s life course trajectories. When Lesley’s family relocated the suburb she moved to was within the wider curtilage, and therefore school system, of one of the most affluent parts of the North of England.

Lesley positions her mother as a ‘traditional’ homemaker role, and says when she was a teenager:
‘my mum started like doing a little part-time job’. But, as I say, nothing…I mean she was always there when you left in the morning: she was always there when you came home at night.’

It is interesting to explore Lesley’s subjective understanding of her own historical and social time in relation to how she constructs her mother’s. As Polkinghorne (1995, drawing on Ricoeur, 1984) puts it: ‘in narration events and actions are drawn together into an organised whole by means of a plot’. Further that a ‘plot is a type of conceptual scheme by which the contextual meanings of individual events can be displayed (Polkinghorne, 1995:85). Lesley plots her mother’s part-time job within the realm of her domestic sphere. Her mother is therefore constructed as working but not to the detriment of her ‘proper’ role as home maker. Lesley invests in the normative discourse of the gendered division of labour for her mother’s social time yet by doing so throughout her own social time makes available for herself the position of different from and therefore not undertaking this traditional role.

Lesley left school aged 17 to become a nurse. As discussed in Chapter 1, in 1974 this was not unusual; 60% of young women left school before ‘A’ levels. Moreover nursing was very much a ‘girl’s job’ with over 90% of trained nurses being women (Walby and Greenwell, 1994). She says:

‘I’d always wanted to be a nurse for as long as I could remember from being like, you know, a little girl …but I’d always, that was what I’d always wanted to do apart from being a Tiller Girl, I think, at the London Palladium (laughs)’.
Lesley reflects on wanting to be a nurse and draws on a gendered discourse of ‘girls jobs’, albeit humorously with regard to being a ‘Tiller girl’. As she would have had to be 18 to begin general training Lesley initially trained as an ophthalmic nurse. Lesley could have storied leaving school and starting work within a discourse of financial constraints. However despite constructing her childhood within a domestic idyll Lesley commented ‘but I used to always think I wish I could have a dress from a shop, you know, instead of having homemade. Or a cardigan that hadn’t been knitted’. My analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine in Chapter 5 revealed an expectation that young women would be interested in fashion and as (McRobbie, 1978), points out there was growing consumer market aimed at young women. However pertinently from her contemporary social time, still involved with nursing, she does not construct her decision to train firstly in ophthalmics as being motivated by wanting to leave school, earn money or even care for patients, instead she emplots ‘career planning’. Lesley had two older cousins who were nurses and they advised her:

‘there was two ways you could get in earlier:... (my) cousins advised me not to do the cadet nursing. They said go and do one of the others ‘cos it’s a proper qualification’

The analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine in Chapter 5 revealed that job adverts aimed at the young women of this ‘telescopic’ cohort drew on a discourse of ‘jobs for girls’ not ‘careers’. However within those ‘girls jobs’ there was still an expectation that some study leading to certificates would be valuable whether it be in nursing, banking or secretarial work. Lesley constructs a ‘cadet’ nurse as being of lesser value than the ophthalmic nursing route she took. This enables Lesley to invest in her professional status as qualified nurse and moreover
makes room for her to have ‘chosen’ this route. Lesley follows this theme of ‘proper’ qualifications but suggesting that she had planned to proceed with her general training at a prestigious London teaching hospital. She continued her narrative by reflecting that she met her future husband, revised this plan and stayed in her home city. By plotting these two events: together choice of training location and her relationship, Lesley makes available the position of having ‘compromised’ her career choice to follow a ‘traditional’ gendered role. However she does not construct this decision as detrimental, or explore how this decision might have affected her life. It is perhaps more significant that she constructs this as ‘a decision’. Following the notion of the ‘pull of discourse’ whilst at the same time ‘pulling’ against it (Gavey, 2002), it seems that within the discourse of ‘suitable job for a girl’ in the historical and social time of Lesley’s teenage years, she was discursively pulled towards a female dominated nursing career, yet in turn Lesley constructs some agency in which route she took.

It is important to recognise that Lesley narrates her early career through the lens of her contemporary subjective understanding. Moreover that the past is reconstructed for the present situation and audience

‘Narrative structuring operates dialectically with memory to re-create past occurrences in light of the emplotting task to produce coherence and closure’ (Polkinghorne, 1995: 88)

The discourse Lesley draws on to emplot ‘staying in the north’ was one of romance. That she had ‘fallen in love’ with her husband, provides coherence to her investment in her present individual and social time of recently celebrating her 30th wedding anniversary. However this discourse of ‘romantic love’ perhaps
subsumes the prevalent discourse of the 1970’s that young women ‘should’ marry, and stay near home. As noted with Amanda the notion of ‘a gap year’, or extended periods of travel was relatively unknown in the 1970s and early 80s. At the point of her life course double helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980), when Lesley’s age as a teenager intersected with her social time of beginning her career, there was no expectation of ‘emergent adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000) for travel or independent living. Young people like Lesley and her boyfriend were expected to form households and ‘settle down’ (Hall, 2000).

Three years after she married, Lesley had her first baby, in keeping with the discourse of a ‘traditional’ role that Lesley ascribes to her own mother she says:

‘So I gave up nursing then. I gave up... I was going to be this earth mother baking my own bread, doing all this, and after six months I thought, oh, I’m a bit bored with this really (laughs). So then I did a bit of like bank nursing’.

Reflecting on her social time of becoming a mother Lesley appears to construct herself as different from an earth mother, yet she does not claim a position of ‘career woman’ either. In the historical time of Lesley becoming a mother there was a strong discursive expectation that women would have a ‘fragmented’ or two phase career; pre and post child rearing (Grint, 2005, 1998). Neither does Lesley draw on a discourse of ‘need’. She stories her family as financially secure enough for her to stay at home if she wished:

‘I mean I was lucky then probably ‘cos well you didn’t have the sort of expenses you have now. But I didn’t have to go to work: we could
manage on just that one wage. But I wanted something extra, just
than, just being like a mum'.

It seems here that Lesley is constructing the tension between the discursive expectation of being a ‘stay at home’ or ‘earth mother’ and her own wishes. In this paragraph Lesley seems to be defensive about her decision to return to work because it provided herself with something ‘extra’. Moreover, as she has denied that this was financially motivated she is challenging her own earlier construction of ‘good mothering’. In accordance with Boxer’s model (2003) (see Figure 15) the interaction of Lesley’s storyline of dissatisfaction with being ‘just’ at home, from the position of ‘young mum’ it seems Lesley is positioning herself as ‘more’ than a housewife which in turn positions her mother as ‘just’ a housewife. It appears that Lesley has positioned her own mother within a traditional discourse of homemaker and carer, and does not draw on a notion of ‘feminine mystique’ to challenge her mother’s domestic position. However, reflecting on her own time as a young mother Lesley acknowledges her own need for ‘something more’ than ‘just being a mum’.

Lesley returned to nursing and took a job on night duty working 2 nights per week for over ten years. Within this narrative she draws on a similar discourse to the one in which she constructed for her mother, she had ‘a little part time job’ ‘But it was like I had the best of both worlds ‘cos I was like a mum, stay at home; I was there all week really’. Once again Lesley does not draw on a discourse of personal sacrifice or hardship. She claims a position of ‘best of both’ thus denying a construction of ‘overwork’ or, as a night nurse, ‘sleep deprived’. Perhaps Lesley does not claim sacrifice to forestall a discourse of ‘bad mother’ who rejected her ‘traditional role’. However it is also possible that
just as ‘patriarchy’ was so embedded in Amanda’s understanding she did not question the interference of ‘forty six dads’, for Lesley the discursive assumption that women will be the full time carers of their children is so entrenched that it is ‘natural’ and therefore unremarkable.

Lesley was educated at a time when the school system in England was undergoing change from a tripartite to comprehensive model (Makepeace, 2003). She attended a girls’ school and joined a female dominated profession both of which underpinned the normative gendered expectations of the social time. Narrating her school years and early working life from the perspective of her contemporary social and historical time Lesley does not position herself as actively resisting gendered stereo-typical roles. However by constructing her working life when her daughters were young as resisting a ‘stay at home earth mother’ role it appears she claims the simultaneous positions of ‘good mother’ and professional nurse. It seems an important insight to her subjective understanding of her midlife self how she negotiates the coherence of her dual roles in the private sphere of home and the public sphere of work.

Reflecting on Lesley’s construction of her childhood and early working life, it is interesting to consider how she positions her mother within this. It seems that by investing her in own social time as being homemaker and nurse this positions her mother as ‘only’ a home maker and therefore different and perhaps even ‘less than’. Where Pauline constructed her mother as having ‘let divorce happen to her’ and Amanda constructed her mother as ‘giving up on her career’, Lesley seems to construct hers as ‘contented within a domestic idyll’. It is perhaps significant to an understanding of this ‘telescopic’ cohort of women that the
social and historical changes across their life course have impacted on their own life trajectories in a way that has positioned them as ‘not like their mothers’.

**Life-long learning**

To enter nurse training in the mid to late 1970s applicants were required to have 5 GCE ‘O’ levels. Lesley attended a local authority girls’ grammar school, in keeping with other similar schools she would have studied between 7 and 9 subjects to GCE (or equivalent). Reflecting on her school days initially she positions herself as studious and a ‘teacher’s pet’ however:

‘and then I don’t know I just sort of rebelled a bit and I used to get in trouble. I’d be talking in class or... I was just sort of a bit of a naughty girl I suppose. Never did anything really bad but I used to get caught smoking in the toilets and things like that. So I used to do like, you know, not wear the right uniform and be, you know, dragged into the office ‘cos I’d got the wrong jumper on or the wrong shoes or whatever.’

Considered within a contemporary notion of ‘rebellious teenager’, other than perhaps smoking indoors, Lesley does not seem to have behaved as a ‘bad girl’. However it is perhaps her reflection on her examination results that is of most interest:

‘doing your mock GC... well they’re not GCSEs – O’ Levels, weren’t they? And I failed a load of them and I had this really big shock ‘cos I hadn’t done any work. And I thought oh my God, I won’t be able to go to do my nursing if I don’t... I’ve got to get 5 O’ Levels. So I
suddenly stopped it all and knuckled down and managed to pass everything’.

Perhaps this emplotment of herself as a ‘rebel’ serves to justify why she, who had been ‘studious’ and a ‘teacher’s pet’, risked failing to pass enough ‘O’ levels to become a nurse’. As discussed in Chapter 1 many girls who were able to achieve academic success failed to do so because academic success was contrary to ‘normative’ gender expectations of the day (Weiner, 1985). Moreover as she had a ‘traditional stay at home mum’ there may have been no encouragement from her parents for Lesley to achieve academic success. Indeed as Sharpe (1976) suggests Lesley may even have ‘feared success’ because that would challenge her social expectations. Indeed just as Amanda seems positioned as powerless to pull against the ‘value of a good education’ discourse her family drew on, Lesley may have but equally restrained by her family’s investment in ‘suitable girl’s jobs’, or indeed possibly in northern parlance ‘not getting above herself’. Furthermore, at this intersection of her individual and social time on a double helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) Lesley attended a grammar school in an affluent suburb, and it is probable that most of her peer group were from the ‘middle class’ homes with similar expectations to Amanda’s. Lesley’s performance of ‘rebel’ in the social time of her school days may have created ‘space’ for her to negotiate the tension between the dominant discourse within her school of ‘good education’ and her family’s expectation of ‘traditional homemaker’. In narrating herself as a rebellious teenager, Lesley not only justifies her limited academic success at school, but she resists positioning herself as either incapable of achieving academic success or as suppressed by the social structures of her historical
location. Moreover she makes available a position of ‘late starter’ academically, which led to her achieving academic success at a different point on her life course helix, and has impacted on her midlife identity as a professional nurse.

Over her career Lesley added to her general nurse training with further qualifications, then in her mid 40s she graduated as a Bachelor of Nursing. Lesley initially emplots the decision to undertake further study as almost accidental, she does not claim a position of actively seeking to further her career. It seems reflecting on the social time of her graduation she continues to resist the position of ‘career woman’ and maintains her investment in the position of ‘working mum’ with ‘a little job’. However as she continues with her story Lesley reflects on a decision to change her career path:

‘I had a like a bit of a – well a disappointment at work in the way I’d gone for a promotion, didn’t get it, got passed over for someone else. And it just sort of like unsettled me’.

It is interesting that Lesley emplots this part of her narrative as a ‘disappointment’, perhaps drawing on a discourse of having a ‘little job’ rather than career. However as she further explored this time in her life, she narrates this as suffering injustice:

‘And when I look back now on like what was like this massive disappointment and I thought, you know, I’d been shafted and everything, ‘cos I’d acted up and done this job for them and then they gave it to somebody else after twelve months.’
This seems to be a crucial insight into Lesley’s contemporary subjective understanding. Looking back across her life course she appears to acknowledge a juxtaposition of her role of ‘mum with a little job’ with her understanding of herself as ‘career woman’. Up until this point of her narrative Lesley does not draw on a construction of confrontation or facing down challenge. Rather she draws on ‘coping’. She emplots her story as one of achieving balance between work and motherhood, and by doing so has resisted conflict in either. However within her social time of believing she deserved a job, she changes her emotional reaction from ‘disappointed’ to ‘shafted’. It seems at this point of her story Lesley rejects the position of compliance or subjugation by social structures, instead constructs a position of grievance. It is worth considering the notion of ‘jointly produced story lines’ (Davies, 2001:264), Lesley told this story to me, knowing that I was a nurse and had trained at the same hospital. It may have been the interview situation that provoked Lesley narrate this story in this way, for an audience of an ex nurse who was interviewing her in a possibly perceived position of power. By constructing this incident as one causing her anger she can claim victimisation and make available a storyline of agency allowing her to take control of her career, perhaps ‘pulling against’ the discursive positioning of having a ‘little job’:

‘And then I saw this, a job in research going and I thought, do you know what, that could be it. So I went and had a look round …and I thought right, I’m going for that. So I went for that and it seemed to like, it was a turning point in my career’.

Through the lens of her contemporary identity and social time Lesley constructs her career as a nurse as evolving from a having ‘a little bit more than being a
mum’ through various stages of training to her present position of senior manager in charge of a team of 16. She does not begin by constructing this process as being a conscious pre-planned career path, by adopting this position she seems able to position herself as ‘good mother’ for her historical location, and fulfil wider social obligations. However as her story progressed she adopts the simultaneous positions of ‘mum’ and ‘career nurse’. Perhaps the changing social position of women in the work place over her life course, and the contemporary normative expectation that women will work, has allowed Lesley to claim for herself the position of ‘career woman’. Interestingly this is reflected in the pictures Lesley brought to the interview, four were of her family but the fifth was her graduation photograph.

**Negotiating the ‘sandwich generation’**

Throughout her narrative Lesley locates her identity within her extended family. Lesley began her story with her childhood living with a grandfather, and her cousins who advised her on her early career. When she returned to work as a nurse with three small children her mother was ‘very helpful and looked after the children’. As discussed in Chapter 1 women of around 50 years of age in contemporary society have been encapsulated as the ‘telescopic’ generation (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999). It seems in Lesley’s current social location she epitomises this notion. Her children have grown up and she has time to develop her career and pursue interests outside of the home. However she might also be conceptualised as located centrally to the ‘sandwich generation’ (Grundy and Henretta, 2006). The term ‘sandwich’ generation derives from the dual responsibilities familiar to many women of caring for their children and
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their parents. Lesley stories her negotiation of her career and family and emplots the conflicting interests of these dual responsibilities.

The degree course that Lesley took was part-time and she narrates negotiating time to study as difficult:

‘You know, when I was doing my dissertation for my degree it was like you got a year ‘cos I was doing it part-time so you got a year to do your dissertation. So they started it off in the September. You have like a few sessions, don’t you, with your supervisor, had my idea of what I was going to do. Right, so I was collecting a bit of literature and then I thought right, after Christmas I’ll start like really knuckling down, start doing some work’

Difficulty of time management is not unusual for many students (Burns and Sinfield, 2008), but pertinent in Lesley’s story is how she constructs the obstacles she faced. She narrates the first hurdle as coping with the illness and death of a close friend:

‘And then we went away for the New Year with some friends of ours. And then we came back and about three weeks later our friend, the chap of the couple, was taken ill it was just horrendous… and he was in like intensive care for three and a half months and eventually died, So because of that – these were our very best friends – were just really... I never even thought about it, put everything... I was just supporting my friend’
In this emplotment the two issues of support of a friend and her own need to study give coherence to her investment in her position of ‘caring’. As Lesley stories her role in supporting her friend she constructs herself as ‘nurse therefore professional expert’ thus able to help negotiate the mechanics of hospital treatment, yet by doing so she increases her subjective investment in a caring ‘motherly’ role over her ‘academic’ role.

Lesley claims agency in ‘choosing’ to put her own studies aside in favour of supporting her friend, by doing so she rejects a ‘non caring’, ‘career minded’ role. However this also forestalls any notion that she may have felt pressurised into maintaining a normative female role for her social time, over a career role. This conflict is repeated as Lesley constructs attempting to resume her study:

‘we’d had this lovely holiday – and I remember saying when we get back I’ve got to really knuckle down ‘cos I’ve not got long to do it now. And I remember saying I’m going to do a couple of hours, maybe three times a week and an evening or, you know, just do a bit each time and that way I’ll get through it. …so we came home from the holiday on the Friday and on the Sunday my mum had a stroke. So it was like that was it again. So I was then... she was in hospital, then I was nursing her when she came home’.

In this emplotment Lesley is contextualising her career investment in further study within the discursive pull of being a ‘good caring daughter’, she suggests that having systematically planned how to cope with her dissertation she abandons this to care for her mother. She once again invests in a ‘caring’ role, moreover that of a ‘good daughter’ who accepted her responsibility, once again
complying with a normative gender expectation. Just as her mother had cared for her father, Lesley constructs this as a natural assumption. It is perhaps significant that when Lesley finally finished her dissertation, on time, she says ‘I ended up like taking some holiday from work and sitting for like two weeks trying to, you know, get it all in’. Lesley stories this episode as a time when rather than compromise the care of her mother she takes time out of her career. However in doing so she also makes available the position of ‘career progress’ over ‘career stagnation’. By not suggesting she might postpone or abandon her degree, she is perhaps discursively positioning herself as having more than just a ‘little job’. It seems she is tacitly acknowledging her subjective investment in her career. Indeed she says:

‘I was really proud that I managed to do it and pass it. And I might have got a better mark if I’d had more time but I got, you know, 55%, and I was like over the moon because I just thought I don’t care if I just scrape through’

In reflecting on her pride in her dissertation mark, Lesley also acknowledges that she felt she could have done better. By assuming this position she is possibly constructing herself as affected by external sources but moreover capable of more than she achieved, perhaps paving the way for future study.

Lesley brought 5 pictures to the interview, her wedding, her graduation, herself her husband and her daughters when they were children, her daughter’s wedding and the ‘scan’ of her first grandchild due later this year. Other than her graduation her subjective investment in her role of mother and wife is perhaps exemplified by these choices. Of particular significance is the picture of her,
unborn, first grandchild. It seems that in this emplotment it is with her family rather than her career that Lesley is constructing. At this point on her life course helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) the intersection of her individual time could intersect with a change in career or spending more time with her new grandchild. It seems at this point she is anticipating her future as ‘grandmother’ and with responsibility for care:

‘So that’s our first grandchild due in September so it’s really, really exciting. And I feel like, to me this now is like... I feel like we’re moving into the next, a new phase of our life to be grandparents. And it feels like really exciting’.

Throughout her interview Lesley has maintained coherence between her family, her career and the obligations and commitments whilst constructing her narrative. Yet with the expectation of a grandchild she seems to reconstruct the relationship between work and family roles. She constructs the prospect of being a grandmother as ‘exciting’ and ‘a new phase’ yet she continues with:

‘So that’s that. And I’m going to go to four days a week when she has the baby so that I can have a day to spend with her…and when she goes back to work I’ll be minding the baby for a day’

Thus it seems Lesley is about to curtail her own career to look after her grandchild. We are reminded that grandparenthood has always been considered a basic human experience and moreover that ‘Grandmothers have always played a supportive role in the family’ (Kulik, 2007:134). It seems that despite investing her midlife identity, in part, with her role as nurse manager, Lesely has been unable to ‘pull against’ the discursive positioning of woman
therefore ‘carer’. It seems at this point in her personal and social time she is fulfilling a normative expectation and continuing the intergenerational caring of within the discursive construction of ‘the sandwich generation’. However, it is worth recalling how consistently throughout her life course she has narrated negotiating and renegotiating her family and working roles to accommodate changing circumstances. Whilst it seems Lesley’s subjective understanding of herself ‘being 50’ might construct her future as one of retirement and a return to family roles, it remains to be seen if this will be maintained or revised in the future.

**Diane: negotiating change**

When initially exploring Diane’s transcript I found several interesting similarities and differences between this interview and the others. Diane raised similar issues in relation to work and family and changes over historical time yet there were some noteworthy differences in emphasis and understanding. Pauline and Lesley spoke of homes and families, Amanda of colleagues and family, yet Diane said very little about a wider social sphere. Diane’s parents are both now dead. Her daughter and son have both graduated from university and her daughter is living back a home working locally, her son is travelling. Diane is in the process of divorcing her husband, but a present they continue to live in the same house. Diane did not show me any pictures.

Like Lesley, Diane talked about her social location as a mother and as a daughter she also drew on ageing and ‘midlife’. It did not seem from the transcript of Diane’s interview that one overarching theme emerged. I have
therefore themed the analysis under the headings of ‘dangers and opportunities’, ‘challenging constructions of careing’ and ‘performing ‘good girl?’’

‘Dangers and opportunities’

Following the ‘Gestalt’ of the interview (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) it is very interesting to note that where all the other participants, including the pilot interviewee, began their story in their past Diane began her narrative in the present. In her opening sentence Diane says: ‘I’m married with two children, shortly to get divorced hopefully, and I don’t feel 50’. I asked all the interviewees the same question and it was only Diane that immediately responded to the notion ‘of being 50’ as something noteworthy. She went on to say:

‘I feel I’m still the same person as I was and the age I would like to be is probably in my early twenties. What else, what else? I don’t like the fact that I’m getting old. I am normally a fit and healthy person and I realise I’m suffering from a bit of a bad back which I think is age-related so I’m thinking perhaps I need to go on HRT for that. Mentally, I haven’t changed at all and I still want the same things, do the same things as I was when I was younger’

As explored in Chapter 1, in popular discourse ‘midlife’ is often constructed as a time of crisis (Wethington, 2000), moreover that women at midlife are adversely affected by the menopause (Sherwin, 2008, Stewart and Ostrove, 1998, Wegesin and Stern, 2004). In this paragraph Diane draws on discourses of mental ageing and physical ageing. By investing in constructing herself as ‘normally fit and healthy’ the loss of physical strength becomes ‘abnormal’ for her, this ‘abnormality might be construed as a ‘crisis’ of sorts. Further she raises
the question that her back problems may be age related and immediately offers a solution by way of HRT (hormone replacement therapy) to resist this complication of the ageing process. These two appear to contradict her initial assertion that she ‘does not feel 50’, she counters her opening statement not only by suggesting her back ache is due to her age but also that it might be helped by HRT, which is used primarily in treating the menopausal symptoms of women around 50 years of age (Gannon, 1999, Rossi, 2004, Wernicke et al., 1986). She continues with:

‘I still want to do everything that I ever used to want to do. I do not feel, oh God, I’m too old to do that, whereas I’ve noticed in my… some of my peer groups, they’re complaining of achy hips and slightly getting slightly old which I find disturbing ‘cos I think they’re too young to be thinking of any of that’.

It seems Diane’s subjective understanding of her contemporary individual time is deeply invested in maintaining her ‘usual’ physical capabilities. Although she seems to resist the discourse of midlife crisis, Diane appears to challenge her own use of the notion of midlife as a time of potential physical deterioration or potential crisis by raising the issue and prescribing a means of overcoming the problem. Moreover she constructs herself as seeking out and exploring new challenges:

‘Other friends, similar sort of age, seem to perhaps think they’re getting a bit older and it’s about mental attitude, I think, and about constantly changing and learning new things that excite you. Well, not excite you, but you feel interested in… I enjoy doing new things.
I enjoy challenges. I’m putting PowerPoint presentations together. All things that I could see other people doing, I’m gradually taking that on and thinking, oh, actually, I can do that. It’s quite good. I wouldn’t think… there isn’t something I couldn’t do because I’m too old.’

However despite Diane’s assertion that age is no barrier to her embracing challenge and change she does acknowledge that despite this there are times when she is disappointed:

‘what I absolutely hate is your body not functioning as well as it does do. Memory is going. I used to have a very good memory and now I find it really... and I’ve just discussed this with my friends, I really have to write things done and I’ll just forget things. I just can’t remember simple words, you know. Have to repeat it ten times. But you overcome that, you know, you just have to work harder at it. The other thing is your eyesight. Oh, God, what a pain having to wear glasses. You know, I used to have such good eyesight and you can read anything and now you can’t. It’s things like that and getting back ache. It’s just a pain in the neck’.

Life course theory explores the interaction of individual time, a person’s age, social time: what they are doing at that time, and historical time; the cultural and social understandings at a given time (Hareven and Adams, 1982; Runyan, 1982). Diane’s frustration with her physical ageing echoes Greer (1991) who writes that ‘…there are some aspects of being a 50 year old woman that cannot be cured and must be endured’ (Greer, 1991:7). The employment of embracing
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new challenges with her deteriorating physical capabilities underlines the notion that despite changing historical and social times, at Diane’s individual time there is an inevitable physical ageing process that must be negotiated.

It is perhaps important to note that Diane’s opening paragraph concerns not only a challenge to notions of age ‘norms’ but also the information that she is about to get divorced. As Andrews (2008) points out positioning is not static but evolves over the course of our lives, moreover the discourse a person draws on may be dependent on a particular contemporary understanding. Diane says:

‘Do I like my life at the moment? Do I like my life at the moment? It could be a lot better. Is that because I’m 50? I’m not sure.’

In this extract that Diane is narrating her story from the position of her current ‘contentment’ or lack of it. The rhetorical emphasis of questioning if ‘she likes it’ underlines her questioning and perhaps challenging the notion that ‘being 50’ should be problematical for any reason. By doing this it appears that Diane resists the position of being ‘middle aged’ and states that she still feels the same person as she was in her early twenties, before she married the man from whom she is about to divorce. In other words by refusing to be positioned within a discourse of ‘decline to midlife’, she makes available an alternative construction. At this point on her life helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) Diane appears to challenge the construct of midlife decline and/or crisis. Instead she implies any dissatisfaction in her life is not due to a ‘general’ midlife crisis but a personal one, possibly her divorce. Perhaps Diane’s resistance to an assumption of inevitable decline, or crisis of sorts, at midlife is best echoed by the notion that in a Chinese language ‘crisis’ is symbolised by the characters of

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‘danger’ and ‘opportunity’ (Caspi and Moffitt, 1993). Diane is perhaps investing in a position of midlife as a time of opportunity, yet inevitably there are some pitfalls or dangers.

**Challenging constructions of ‘caring’**

The next subject Diane raised was financial with: ‘I worry about money for the future. I would say it’s important to continue having a good job and paying towards a pension’. Following the Gestalt of the interview it would appear that Diane is concerned about her financial position, again this might be due to her impending divorce and the separation of her household. This is perhaps not surprising when we are informed by Sterns (2001) that women are likely to face a decline in economic status after divorce. However it is her construction of the responsibilities of parenthood that may also reveal her subjective position. She went on to talk about her children:

‘my son is just coming out of University with a degree but he hasn’t got a job and I don’t know what the prospects are for him. My daughter got a degree last year. She’s still been in the same job, just a temporary fill-in job for the last job so I don’t know where she’s going’.

In this passage Diane is expressing concern for her children’s financial stability and future work prospects, yet she continues by saying:

‘I feel that we’re having to be constantly responsible for everybody all the time when in fact they’re now adults and should be taking responsibility for themselves’.
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Here Diane forestalls any construction of herself in a role of continuing responsibility for her children, and rejects the stereotypical construction of ‘middle aged’ women as ‘miserable empty nesters’ (McQuaide, 1998, see Chapter 1). Pauline drew on a discourse of ‘happy families’ and invested her midlife identity in maintaining family cohesion and contact with her adult children and grandchildren, and Lesley constructed her midlife self as central to the caring across three generations. Both of these women appeared to be unwilling, or unable, to resist the normative discursive positioning of women as carers and therefore ‘responsible’ for the welfare of each generation. Diane however constructs challenge to this discursive assumption. She underpins her investment in being free of responsibility for her children by comparing her own experience:

‘I left home at eighteen and most of… my husband did and most people’s… people of my age did. Your parents were not responsible for you’.

It seems that on their life course double helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980), when their individual time of ‘young adult’ intersects with the social time of ‘first job’ Diane narrates some intergenerational differences. In Diane’s historical time she narrates herself as ‘independent’, where as in her son’s historical location of the early C21st he is ‘not independent’. It seems this highlights the difference in their respective individual life course helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980). Diane it seems can position herself as having been responsible and perhaps ‘fully adult’ in her social time intersecting with the individual time her son s now at. This enables her to position her own children as ‘not fully responsible’ and moreover it seems that this is unacceptable to her:
‘Now they seem to be children for such a long time even though they want to be treated like adults and you feel responsible for them still. My daughter’s still living at home being sort of… not financed by us but she’s not fully launched, living away from home, leading her own life…And my son, he’s worried because he’s going to come back from University without a de… without a job. He’s got a degree but so have countless others. He’s got a good degree. And he’s twenty-one. You know, he is a man’.

Diane stories her concern that her children are not financially secure nor it seems on a set career path. Yet she constructs her son as a ‘man’ and therefore ‘adult’ and responsible for his own welfare. It is not unusual in a contemporary historical location for young people to study for a degree before starting a career and often living with their parents, indeed this has been defined as ‘emergent adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000). Diane however does not invest her midlife identity as family ‘matriarch’, central to the lives of her children, or anxious about an impending ‘empty nest’ (McQuaide, 1998). Indeed conversely it seems she is actively anticipating ‘reconstructing’ her midlife identity as free from maternal responsibility.

Like many young women of her cohort Diane trained as a nurse. Whereas Lesley constructed her decision to become a nurse as ‘something she always wanted to do’ Diane narrates this as a more pragmatic decision:

‘I could have gone to University but I couldn’t bear the thought of having to come home every summer. I couldn’t bear the thought of my parents having to fund me and have to sort of live under their
rules for the next three years so I thought, right, nursing quite appeals. I thought, oh, I'll be a nurse, so I could leave home, have somewhere to live, get a profession, do something I quite liked doing and get paid. So that was why I became a nurse.’

As discussed in Chapter 1, social constraints in the 1970’s channelled many young women into ‘girl’s jobs’. Nursing was a very female dominated profession and as such a popular career path (Walby and Greenwell, 1994). Underpinning Lesley’s claim that she had ‘always wanted to be a nurse’ is a strong social discourse of females as carers. By rejecting a construction of herself as a carer Diane makes available a position of taking a ‘life style choice’. Perhaps as Gavey (2002) would put it she has constructed ‘pulling’ against this discursive constraint therefore making a degree of agency available to her. It is possible that Lesley and Diane would draw on different discourses over their life courses to explain their reasons for training as nurses. By emplotting her decision as based on finances and availability at her contemporary individual and social time it seems Diane reinforces her position that young adults can, and probably should, be financially and emotionally independent.

This expectation is apparently against the trend in Diane’s contemporary historical and social location. It seems there is a growing culture of adult children living in the family home, or leaving and returning (Mitchell and Gee, 1996, Sharon et al., 2008). Indeed it seems that the familial tensions that this entails has led to raft of ‘self help’ literature for the families of ‘Boomerang kids’ and informative websites (see for example: www.BoomerangKidsHelp.com, AdultChildrenLivingAtHome.com). Diane might be investing her midlife identity
in newfound freedom but it seems that the social structures of C21st education and career prospects for young people may be thwarting this.

It is possible that this subjective positioning is Diane’s defence against a prevailing social construction of women as family carers, for every generation and for ever. By drawing on her own experience she constructs her children’s dependence as being ‘other’ than she expected and makes available a position of rejecting responsibility for them as they are ‘adults’. However Diane and her estranged husband were still living in the same house, they intended to separate into different homes very soon. Diane may be constructing social pressure to continue her mothering responsibilities even though her children are adults, and hopes to forestall this by investing her claim they should be independent of her.

It seems that although Lesley and Diane construct their entry into nursing and their relationship with their adult offspring in different ways, there is an underlying acceptance from both women that they are inevitably cast as ‘the carers’ by dominant social discourse and to resist this makes them ‘other’ within their own contemporary historical time. It seems both women are discursively positioned as ‘carers’ whether or not they would choose this and must negotiate their own understandings. Lesley narrates the prospect of caring for her first grandchild as exciting, despite the potential conflict this might have to her career development. Diane however seems to raise a challenge with ‘why is it my responsibility’? Perhaps some understanding can be gained by returning to the ‘Gestalt’ of the opening paragraphs of the transcripts. Diane was concerned with her present social time and her impending divorce, the tensions between
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her financial responsibilities, her individual time and her social time may have been highlighted for her as she negotiates this life change. Lesley has perhaps had less reason to consider the implications of her financial position and future prospects.

Performing the ‘good girl’

Diane spoke less of other people than the other interviewees although she constructs herself as sociable, yet she also spoke of underlying tensions:

‘I liked being part of a group. I liked being part of a family but not my own. (Laughs) I have issues there. I only come from a very small family. (I had) a very domineering mother who I couldn’t wait to get away from’.

Diane had already emplotted her decision to be a nurse as very much influenced by her decision to leave home, she then went on to talk about her family and her difficult relationship with her mother:

‘I was the much wanted little girl and I was all sweet and good and she wanted me to conform to a certain little girl pattern which I did do. I wouldn’t have said boo to a goose up until the age of about thirteen, then I started to question and you weren’t allowed to question so I just sort of kept it all inwardly and I just developed this… this conflict within which I never told her about ‘cos you weren’t allowed to answer back so you just carry on thinking, oh I’ll get out of this (laughs)’
As Burr (1998) reminds us gender appropriate behaviour is an expectation, moreover that it changes across some societies, cultures and historical timing. Constructing this story from the position of ‘being 50’ Diane rhetorically draws on a metaphor of ‘girls and should be sweet and good’, perhaps typified by the nursery rhyme ‘sugar and spice and all things nice’ that girls growing up in the in 1960’s would know. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 5 social expectation in Diane’s childhood and adolescence was that girls would grow up to conform to a man’s world and would behave appropriately. Diane stories her mother as reinforcing this expectation. Reflecting on her childhood from her contemporary individual and social time Diane’s emplotment seems to position her as rebellious for ‘getting out’ of the dominant relationship. This may reflect her current social time on the brink of ‘getting out’ of another relationship. It is interesting that Diane constructs a position of power for herself in negotiating the difficult home situation, she had inwardly decided to ‘get out’ and did not challenge the conflict:

‘...I just didn’t particularly like her. (Laughs) She was very overpowering, dominant. I was a bit rebellious at age thirteen, no more so than anybody else. I wasn’t a wild child or anything. I passed my exams, went to the Grammar School, I didn’t take drugs, I did my homework, I got good marks. You know, she was just very, very strict and I suppose I rebelled against that because you could never have a discussion with her, you could never have an argument with her. She was always right, you didn’t answer back.’

Like Lesley, Diane suggests she questioned some parts of school life. Where Lesley invested in a position of conforming again in order to enter a job she
always wanted to do, Diane positions herself as having passed her exams, and not challenging her mother, in order to leave home. Interestingly although both women draw on a degree of rebellion to construct their social time as a young girl, Diane with home life Lesley with school, neither suggest it was the wider social expectation that girls would conform to a social ideal of their historical time that they resisted and eventually conformed with.

Diane is now on the brink of leaving home again and she narrates the breakdown in her marriage as an inevitable part of social change and individual ageing:

‘You know, the children are the glue. We’re all living much longer and healthier lives than we used to. Previous years, you had your children and then you probably died when you were sixty or seventy and now we’re all living quality lives, we hope, for the next twenty years, and what do you do with it?

Diane seems to invest in the prospect of a more interesting future with opportunities for challenges and changes, indeed the literature agrees with her assessment of the extended life course (Anderson, 1985; Social Trends 38). Moreover she is acknowledging the ‘telescopic’ spread of generations, by considering what she will do with the next twenty years.

‘We have more opportunities .The old-fashioned the wife stayed at home and looked after the husband who was the bread-winner doesn’t fit any more’.
Diane seems to be positioning herself as different from the stay at home wife: by doing so she is rejecting the ‘feminine mystique’ ideal of the previous generations that women would be contented with a home and husband to care for. She positions the stay at home wife as ‘old fashioned. Yet perhaps she has not resisted entirely conforming to this ‘old fashioned’ discursive positioning of previous generations, she says ‘We’ve all become selfish, me particularly’. Despite Diane’s investment in acknowledging the changing social world and an expansion of individual time, an acknowledgement of the ‘telescopie society’ (Goldstein and Schlag, 1999), she constructs herself as ‘selfish’. Perhaps the discursive pull for women to care for others and conform to ‘good behaviour’, remain married and located within the domestic sphere, is still so powerful it has become impossible for Diane to pull against it. Moreover she perhaps could not pull against it without taking a position of ‘not good’ and possibly therefore ‘bad’ and being ‘selfish’ over ‘selfless’ in her attitude to intergenerational caring.

It seems, in common with Pauline, Amanda and Lesley, Diane too invests her midlife identity in ‘not becoming her mother’. Diane constructs resentment for her mother’s controlling and restrictive dominance. By doing so she emplots ‘setting her children free’ seemingly against their wishes. It is perhaps interesting to consider how Diane narrates the relationship between her own parents:

‘I think she was unhappy with my dad from time to time. I think she had a few mental problems as well and I think she was quite unhappy a lot of the time and used to look to me for comfort’
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By emplotting her mother’s apparent unhappiness with her ‘looking to Diane for comfort’ it seems she gives coherence to her position that she is not ‘responsible’ for another’s emotional well being. It is interesting to note that Diane draws on a discourse of ‘mental health issues’ this might be informed by her social identity as a nurse, however the literature in the 1970’s revealed that there was a high incidence of clinical depression among women at home with young children (Brown and Harris, 1978). By constructing her mother as mentally ill, Diane can exclude other interpretations for her mother’s behaviour:

‘I’ve got this vision of her staring into the stew crying so it makes me sound very hard, doesn’t it? But you can only feel what you can feel. I used to be sca… I used to be scared of her actually. She used to shout a lot and crash the pots and pans around. She wasn’t a gentle person but she wasn’t a horr… she wasn’t a bad mother. It was just the way she coped. She had problems with my dad because he was very uncommunicative to her’.

In this extract it is possible that although Diane has drawn on a discourse of mental illness, she is perhaps doing so to forestall a suggestion that her mother might have been angry and frustrated by her social isolation, or her resentment at being confined to the domestic sphere, perhaps enduring the ‘problem with no name’ (Friedan, 1963). By constructing her mother as mentally ill Diane does not allow for the suggestion that her mother was frustrated by her inability to resist the discursive pull to remain a ‘good stay at home wife and mother’ at the expense of her happiness. Moreover, by drawing on a discourse of mental illness rather than ‘unhappiness’, Diane makes available a position of ‘unable to help’ for herself. It appears she constructs her mother as needing medicine and
not Diane’s continuing presence. Within a discourse of caring, ‘a good girl’
might be expected to remain with her ‘lonely’ mother, yet within a discourse of
mental illness, Diane is powerless to help her mother so her leaving would be
immaterial. However it is also interesting to note that whilst narrating ‘being 50’
Diane seems once again to emplot ‘leaving home’ this time by ending her
marriage because it was not working. Perhaps Diane’s midlife identity is
invested in embracing new challenges, perhaps by ‘pulling against’ a discursive
expectation of growing old in contentment. Moreover she explicitly negates the
notion that she might ‘look to her daughter for comfort’.

It seems that in her contemporary social location Diane is on the brink of a life
change which influences her subjective understanding. Despite being one of a
‘telescopic generation’ she does not feel free of responsibility for her adult
children, and she has positioned herself as ‘selfish’ for being dissatisfied with
the ‘old fashioned’ wife and mother role she was brought up to respect. Perhaps
despite the advent of feminist thought and literature beginning in the 1960’s, the
midlife years of women in contemporary society is still deeply influenced by an
ongoing social discourse that women will care for every generation, no matter
what personal goals they may have.

**Lesley and Diane: ‘keeping mum’**

Chodorow (1978) suggested that girls grow up identifying with their mothers as
carers, and by doing so assume the largest portion of intergenerational caring.
Lesley began her narrative interview by talking of her childhood and her
bedridden grandfather and implicitly acknowledged that her mother was caring
for him. It seems that by not explicitly positioning her mother as a ‘carer’ she
underpins the discursive assumption that women will care for elderly parents. In Lesley’s contemporary social and historical location it seems she continues to draw on this discursive assumption of intergenerational caring:

‘at the moment now we’ve got my mum and my father-in-law are both still alive but both got like quite... health problems. But both live like very close to us in like sheltered accommodation. So we do a lot with them as well so it’s sort of like, you know, calling round, doing the shopping, taking them out … that sort of thing. So we have that to do as well but you don't mind do you …they looked after us’.

Here Lesley once again underpins her subjective investment in a ‘caring’ role. The emplotment of this narrative could have drawn on a discourse of ‘multi-tasking’ or ‘time management’ between career and home responsibilities. However she constructs this caring role as being an expectation, embedded in a discursive assumption of continuity of duty. It is also interesting to note in her current social location Lesley includes her husband within the construction of care. It is ‘we’ who do a lot with them, yet it is unclear whether this would have included Phil having taken time out of work or compromised career boosting study to care for his father.

When her mother became ill it seems Lesley did not challenge the discursive assumption that women care for elderly relatives, however Diane constructs her own mother’s illness quite differently: ‘when my dad died, she was awful. She couldn’t cope at all so I used to go down and did my duty’. Diane positions herself within a discourse of ‘duty’ rather than ‘care’. By doing so it seems Diane ‘pulls against’ the normative discursive positioning of women as carers and
constructs agency in her choice of doing her ‘duty’. Moreover within the discourse of ‘duty’ Diane can perhaps be seen to be constructing a detached ‘professional nursing’ role of care rather than an emotional attachment to family. However she does narrate an ongoing responsibility, if not of caring then of ‘managing’:

‘basically and then she fell and she... I had to move her from one home to another nursing home, blah, blah, blah, so I just took on the, you know... I thought, for God’s sake, Diane, you’re a nurse, can’t you do this for your mum. I just... you know, I did what I needed to do and at the end it was okay, it was okay’.

Lesley and Diane have made different constructions of care, it is perhaps interesting to return to Chodorow (1978) and the suggestion that girls identify with their mothers in their notions of care. Lesley and Diane constructed their relationship with their mothers in different ways which may indeed have influenced their respective constructions of their ‘caring’ roles.

Within the discourse of ‘caring’ it is interesting to note how Diane emplotted a future for herself

‘Just to remain interested and interesting and always a willingness to learn, I think. Whatever it is, just keep it new and fresh. I’d hope for good health and then just have a massive heart attack and nobody resuscitate you’.

Diane narrates interest in learning within a context of assuming there will be things to learn. Diane seems to position herself as hopeful and able to rise to
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the challenge. An interesting insight is how Diane’s stories an ideal conclusion to her life story. As a nurse it is perhaps not surprising she draws on a medical discourse of heart attack and resuscitation, yet it is the claim to a ‘quick and final’ end to her life that perhaps reflects her life course experience. Having positioned herself as capable, dutiful, if possibly unwilling, carer for her mother, Diane seems to construct a future where she will not be dependent on her own daughter.

This chapter has considered the narratives of Lesley and Diane and explored their subjective understandings of their ‘midlife’ selves. On leaving school both women trained as nurses, and seemed to have been discursively positioned within a ‘girl’s job’ yet they construct their transitions into nursing in very different ways. It seems at midlife, like Pauline, Lesley is anticipating becoming a ‘hands-on’ grandmother, yet Diane is anticipating ‘being free’ of her children. Yet it seems they have both conformed to the discursive expectation that they would assume intergenerational responsibility, whether it constructed as ‘care’ or ‘duty’.
Chapter 9: Daughter, wife, mother: just getting on with it

The previous two chapters have analysed the narrative interviews of Pauline and Amanda, and Lesley and Diane. This chapter concerns the narrative of Mattie. Like Diane and Lesley, Mattie trained as a nurse, and like Lesley she studied for a degree in nursing as a mature student. She married and became a mother in her later 20’s as did Amanda and Diane, and as with all the participants she has two children, in common with Diane her parents are both dead. Diane anticipated being divorced in the near future Mattie had been divorced for a few years. Major differences in Mattie’s ‘lived life’ include the type of school she attended, and that she has spent many years travelling the world, firstly as a child accompanying her family, and secondly as the wife of an army doctor. All the other participants were educated within the state system in girls’ grammar schools Mattie attended a private boarding school for her secondary education. Purvis (1991) drawing on Bladford (1977) points out that in the 1970’s the majority of the girls’ boarding schools were primarily concerned with teaching social and educational skills that would make pupils into ‘young ladies’ with emphasis on becoming ‘a ladylike homemaker a dominant ideal for middle class girls’ (Purvis, 1991:127). This distinction seems to place Mattie at the upper end of the social class parameter for the ‘telescopic’ cohort. However her progression to a ‘girl’s job’ and the timing of her marriage and child bearing indicate that, although her school type was different, the dominant social discourse of young womanhood to become wife, mother and supporter of men in a man’s world was similar.
Mattie seemed eager to tell me her story and needed little prompting. She began her story with her childhood:

‘Well, very interesting child… well, interesting childhood. Born in Iraq to a father who was a Professor of Engineering who was building a drain on the River Euphrates so I had an interesting start to life. Travelled a huge amount because my father had itchy feet. So lived in Holland, lived in the States as a child and eventually was sent to Boarding School because I’d had seven junior schools so I… it was a bit… that was a bit… a little bit traumatic’

In accordance with the Gestalt of the interview this opening paragraph encapsulates some significant and recurring themes in Mattie’s story. After a careful reading of the transcript it seemed that the overall emergent themes included ‘Malory (ivory)Towers’, ‘doing one’s duty, and ‘moving on’.

‘Malory (ivory) Towers’

Recurrent in Mattie’s story is moving home and relocating across the world beginning from when she was a child. Mattie said:

‘we’d moved so much, I was a very shy, introverted, quiet child and we were always moving on and so I can remember clearly, I think, where were we living. Had we just moved to Sheffield from Norwich or we’d come back from Holland, thinking, well, where are we going next year? It was the norm for me and the reason I was… the boarding school I went to was on the coast’.
As discussed in Chapter 1 the education system has undergone significant change with the phasing out of the selective system of grammar schools and secondary modern in most areas and the introduction of comprehensive schooling. Mattie attended another kind of school that has also declined in popularity. ‘Boarding school’ in contemporary UK is associated with ‘public school’, privilege and an expensive elitist education. However in the 1960’s boarding schools were more plentiful, and although relatively expensive, often served the needs of families who lived and worked out of the UK. (Bladford, 1977). It is not therefore surprising that Mattie’s parents chose this type of schooling. However Mattie narrates this as a difficult transition:

‘(I would lie in bed) listening to this furore of, ‘hey, how were your holidays?’ You know, typical Malory Tower stuff, Enid Blyton, and there was I, just didn’t talk to a soul’.

As discussed in Chapter 5 ‘Jackie’ magazine was widely read by the women of this ‘telescopic’ cohort. McRobbie (1991) reminds us that before she read ‘Jackie’ many of these women would be very familiar with ‘the boarding school’ story books, such as for example Malory Towers (Blyton, 1963d, 1963c, 1963b, 1963a, 1967) or Chalet School (Brent-Dyer, 1951, 1957, 1962b, 1962a, 1969). Just as Harry Potter (see for example Rowling, 1999b, 1997, 1999a) has inspired the children of the early C21st to read about boarding school life, albeit ‘wizarding school’, so previous generations read the ‘boarding school’ genre (Frith, 1987, McRobbie, 1991). Indeed the Malory Towers books were so widely read that they are recalled by many to illustrate their childhood or to make a social comment (see for example Ronson, 2007; Wilson, 2007). We are reminded that these books were and are ‘disapproved of by librarians’ for their
Daughter, wife, mother: just getting on with it

middle class themes yet were read ‘repetitively and addictively’ by school girls between 10 and 12 (McRobbie, 1991:205). Indeed Frith (1987) points out that the popularity of this genre transcended social class and race. It seems these books were enjoyed by girls for whom the reality of their school and home life was far removed from the ‘jolly hockey sticks’ sorority of fictional school life. However Mattie does not narrate her experience of boarding school life as the one of ‘adventure’ and ‘midnight feasts’ that the readership might have imagined:

‘I can just remember starting at this school, being left in this dormitory all by myself for the first night, no-one around, the House Mistress-and that was it, frightening…. It was frightening’.

It seems important to note that despite the popularity of the ‘boarding school’ book genre among Mattie’s cohort, the reality of this education system seems to remain vivid to Mattie today. Constructing the time as ‘lonely’ and ‘frightening’ challenges the expectation of the ‘jolly adventure’ associated with ‘Malory Towers’. It is suggested that that the fictional ‘boarding schools with their dormitories of girls, legitimates the reader’s desire to imagine a hypothetical space where difficulties and dilemmas of everyday life are magically resolved’ (McRobbie, 1991: 207). When difficulties arose at home or school it seems many readers would wish themselves in the fictional world of the boarding school. However Mattie does not draw on ‘peaceful’ hypothetical space, it seems she draws on a more Dickensian concept of boarding school life as one of child abandonment, for example (Dickens, 1841, 1891).
‘I was suddenly thrown into boarding school without even a by your leave, just left on the portico steps while they drove off which was… yes, I had… I think that was traumatic…and I was twelve so I’d missed the beginning of the High School year. Everyone had started the year beforehand and I had… I wasn’t aware that I was going and I can remember this immense sense of isolation and just being left and… and… and lost’

There is evidence that boarding school can have a lasting impact, as Schaverien (2004) points out boarding schools are ultimately a means of enforcing the separation of a child from her parents. Indeed she considers ‘boarding schools to be a particularly British form of child abuse’ (Schaverien, 2004: 683). Mattie’s use of rhetoric as she narrated recollection of her school days seems to agree with this ‘I can remember some terrible times, yeah; terrible times where you were just so lonely and so homesick but you had to bottle everything up’. Moreover her construction of abandonment is underpinned with her reflection that:

‘(on open) days when parents would come and… my parents didn’t so I found that upsetting. I think they only ever came to my school in the four years I was there…twice’

It is interesting to note that that for Schaverien (2004) the psychological impact of boarding school has a lasting effect on sense of self often stemming from the ‘banishment’ at a young age. With reference to the ‘Gestalt’ of Mattie’s story it would seem that her experience of boarding school does continue to have an
impact on her self understanding. Mattie’s storyline positions her as powerless when feeling abandoned:

‘because there was nothing you could do about it so it made you strong. Probably strong before your years... but there was no choice, there was no choice’.

Here Mattie emplots this boarding school education intended to have ‘done her good’ by making her strong, even if she was unhappy. This is perhaps drawing on the discursive assumption of a British ‘stiff upper lip’, which despite being a 12 year old girl she was expected to display within the regime of this education. By constructing herself as an isolated and lonely school child, Mattie introduces the suggestion that the regime of boarding school life whilst offering a ‘hypothetical space’ to a reader, in reality conversely suppressed the individual attending the school into conforming to the expected behaviour. Moreover conforming to the ‘ladylike homemaker a dominant ideal for middle class girls’ (Purvis, 1991:127).

Mattie is the eldest of three children, when she went to boarding school her younger siblings remained at home and attended the local school. She says:

‘it went on for years ‘cos I really resented them sending me away and it would go on... it was going on even at my father’s seventieth birthday, you sent me away, you sent me away, and my brother and sister got tired of me saying it’

From the perspective of her contemporary historical, social and individual time Mattie reconstructs the rejection she felt, and does not story being enriched by
the ‘Malory Towers’ experience. Schaverien (2004) points out the ‘double bind’ of boarding school education. It is deemed a privilege and it is expensive and the child knows that it is supposed to be ‘good’ for them. She goes on to propose that by being unhappy or resentful of this ‘good’ education the child internalises that this means they are ‘bad’. By emplotting that her brother and sister ‘got tired’ of her complaining alongside her voicing her distress, her siblings are not positioned as ‘sympathetic’ to her abandonment, but as irritated by her continued display of grievance. This seems to allow for Mattie to be discursively positioned as ‘bad’ for complaining. Moreover the impact this seems to have for Mattie’s subsequent life course trajectories is that at this social time of her school days, she is discursively positioned as ‘outside’ of her family. In Mattie’s story she went to school for a term at a time and they did not visit on the open days, yet her siblings remained at home and attended the local school whilst living with their parents.

Indeed it seems Mattie constructs her experience as an ‘outsider’, both at school and when she returned home. It is also interesting to note how she narrates her mother’s response to her grievance of being sent away to school:

‘but it was only when my mum said… so we’re talking years down the line, well, what else would you have done. You’d had so many schools, what would you have done, ‘cos I’d had so many schools and if I hadn’t gone to (boarding school) I’d have had another three schools and it was only when she put that into perspective that I realised, okay, there was a reason behind it but it took years for that to come out, years and years and years’
Daughter, wife, mother: just getting on with it

Mattie’s emplotment of challenging her mother’s decision to ‘send her away’ seems to give coherence to her position as ‘outside of’ her family and perhaps ‘a bad person’ for her ingratitude for her expensive education. By reconstructing her mother’s position on the reason for her boarding school education it seems that, like Amanda’s family, Mattie’s family drew on a discourse of ‘the benefit of a good education. Within this discourse a ‘good parent’ educates their child even if it means ‘banishment’, and a ‘bad parent’ would keep a child at home at the expense of this ‘good’ education. Moreover Mattie’s mother is constructed as challenging Mattie not to ‘pull against’ or question her investment in the ‘good education discourse’. Mattie however left her boarding school at the age of 16:

‘four years at boarding school where I learnt, as my father said in the years later, to stand on my own two feet, which is probably what I needed to do’

This seems an interesting observation from Mattie that she ‘learnt to stand on her own two feet’ and by implication be independent and agentic in her own decision making. Her narrative seems to suggest her progress immediately after this time was not at all agentic or a path chosen for herself:

‘Some people were staying on at Sixth Form. My parents didn’t have the money but they knew I wasn’t particularly academic… I did one year at (the local grammar school), wasn’t an academic at all, did one year of A’ levels studying, realised I was hopeless’

Mattie does not construct her school change at 16 to have been in anyway her own decision. By emplotting her parents’ financial commitment together with the
notion that she was ‘not very academic’ she seems to narrate a degree of inevitability about leaving the boarding school. However Purvis (1991) reminds us that a function of any schooling is the transference of cultural capital, and drawing on Bladford (1977) notes that girl’s boarding schools were less concerned with academic achievement than ensuring ‘ladylike’ skills and qualities. Perhaps prophetically for Mattie, she continues by suggesting that girls’ boarding schools in particular seemed aimed at producing ‘nice wives for army officers’ (St John-Brooks, 1988 cited by Purvis, 1991:127). Reflecting through the lens of her midlife self Mattie constructs herself as ‘not academic’ however it is possible that the education she had at the boarding school whilst deemed ‘good’, was in fact ‘good’ for girls who ‘would value success through marriage rather than through academic achievement’ (Bladford, 1977, cited by Purvis, 1991). Perhaps within the discourse of a ‘good education’, raises the question of ‘good for whom’? Perhaps the boarding school education Mattie experienced was not intended to be ‘academic’, but to develop ‘ladylike skills’, an education for a wife and homemaker.

The emplotment of financial constraints alongside ‘not being academic’ might also reflect a discourse of ‘not wasting money educating girls’. Okely (1983) points out that:

‘scholarly achievements and higher education in …boarding school were reserved only for a few girls, possibly marked as vocational spinsters (Purvis, 1991:127).

If Mattie was destined to be a ‘good wife’ and value success through marriage spending money on her education would be wasteful. Perhaps just as academic
success may have challenged Lesley’s anticipated future as a housewife, academic success might have challenged ‘ladylike’ good wife expectations for Mattie.

Chapter 1 explored the social expectation that girls of this ‘telescopic’ cohort would be the wives mothers and carers of industrial Britain. It seems that both Lesley and Mattie, from seemingly different social backgrounds, were both discursively positioned firmly within this ideal. They both left school with ‘O’ levels and entered the ‘girl’s job’ of nursing, yet as their career progressed both women graduated with honours degrees. It would appear it was not intellectual capability that restricted their access to ‘A’ levels or higher education, rather perhaps it was the social expectation discursively locating them as ‘girls’ therefore ‘wives, carers and supporters’.

Mattie does not appear to emplot her parents as drawing on the benefits of ‘continuity of education’ to underpin their decision to send her to boarding school. Nor does Mattie suggest it was her ‘interrupted education’ that explained her ‘hopelessness’ academically, nor indeed of the social implications of leaving a girl’s boarding school and going to a mixed local school: of leaving ‘Malory Towers’ and going to ‘Grange Hill’ perhaps (BBC 1978-93). However the legacy of Mattie’s enforced separation from home for boarding school and her continually interrupted schooling seems to have had a considerable impact on Mattie’s life course trajectories.

Mindful of the Gestalt of Mattie’s narrative it seems that a constant theme in Mattie’s story is one of moving home. She said that:
'Every time we moved, every time when I was a child I moved, you were leaving familiarity, leaving the school you knew, your friends you knew, the house you knew, the environment. It was all change constantly'.

Yet her travelling lifestyle continued after she married ‘so he joined… got in the Army so (I) then became the army army wife and I was used to being fairly peripatetic as a child’. Although Mattie reflects she was ‘used to’ the mobility, from her contemporary perspective she narrates the time when she returned to the UK by saying:

‘So he’d been in (the army) for about 13 years. We’d had eight moves in 13 years [laughs] and it wasn’t too bad compared to some but he decided that he’d… as I say, to leave the Army… And decided to set up his own practice (in the Far East) …and by that stage the girls were eight and three and I needed to have a house’.

It is interesting to note how Mattie rhetorically emphasises her story: ‘he decided to leave’, ‘he decided to’ set up his own practice, yet it was she who ‘needed a house’. Having attended a boarding school which she attributes to her father’s ‘itchy feet’ and travelled extensively due to her husband’s career, it appears Mattie narrates agency for herself as ‘needing to have a house’. Just as Pauline positioned herself as central to her home Mattie invests in the house being for ‘her’.

An interesting interpretation of why Mattie narrated this need for a house is that it was not ‘her need’ but that of her daughters: ‘so I needed a village or a place near where my parents were but with a good school’. It is interesting to consider
how Mattie emplots needing a stable home base and a ‘good school’ for her
daughters. It remains common for children of army personnel to be educated at
boarding school to maintain continuity in their education, however by
constructing her own school years as difficult Mattie seems to validate ‘having
to have a house’ therefore a means to prevent her own daughters from having
the same experience or perhaps exposed to ‘the British form of child abuse’
(Schaverien, 2004: 683). It is however an interesting consideration in Mattie’s
story that her mother herself had been ‘sent to boarding school’ during the
Second World War:

‘to a convent in North Wales where her mother was from so it was
going… it was safe. It made her a… turned her into a complete
atheist. She never went into a church…after that’

Mattie narrates challenging her mother for abandoning her, and emplots her
mother supporting boarding school despite having been ‘turned into an atheist’
herself. However it is important to remember that this is Mattie’s narrative and it
is she who is constructing her mother’s ‘atheism’ as being a result of her
experience of boarding school, rather than the war or some other factor. It is
also possible that Mattie’s mother had little influence on the decision to send her
daughter to boarding school. Perhaps within the discursive pull to ‘obey’ the
discursive assumptions of education was too strong for Mattie’s mother to ‘pull
against. This perhaps highlights a changing notion of ‘good mother’, where
Mattie’s narrates her mother as drawing on being a ‘good mother’ by giving her
daughter a boarding school education, Mattie seems to be drawing on an
assumption that being a good mother means not sending her daughters to
boarding school. In common with Amanda whose story seemed to challenge
her mother’s assertion that she ‘had’ to leave work, Mattie’s story also challenges her mother’s claim to have been doing the ‘right thing’. It is also worth considering that the mother’s of Amanda and Mattie are narrated as drawing on the discursive assumption of ‘what was right’ for their children in their own social and historical time, just as Amanda and Mattie narrate doing in theirs.

Another consideration in Mattie’s emplottment of her ‘need to have a house’ is not only within discourses of mothering but also of the conflict between two different discursive expectations: those of wife and mother. Mattie’s story perhaps reveals the tension between the discursive assumption of a ‘good wife’ staying with her husband throughout his foreign postings and that of ‘good mother’ protecting her daughters. Perhaps an insight into Mattie’s subjective understanding of her midlife self can be gleaned by exploring why Mattie might have assembled ‘the facts that way. For whom was this story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose?’ (Reissman and Quinney, 2005:393). It appears that by constructing her experience of boarding school as difficult Mattie offers an alternative to being a ‘typical Malory Towers girl’, this in turn later in her life course seems to offer space for an alternative construction to ‘typical army wife’. By rejecting ‘Malory Towers’ for her daughters, Mattie may have negotiated a means of rejecting the ‘army wife’ role for herself, without recourse to positioning herself either as an ‘abandoned wife’ or moreover as ‘husband deserter’.

She narrates her time at school as one of making her strong:
‘you had to survive, through the bad times you had to be strong and boarding schools have changed so much now. I wasn’t allowed to phone home so you just… you had to get on with it. You had to’.

In her contemporary individual time she can construct her strength as having come from her experience of school, but utilised to resist the expectation that she would continue to follow her husband around the world. Perhaps for a woman used to conforming to the social expectation of obedience to regime, protecting one’s daughters may be a valid means of justifying living apart from a husband. Moreover just as Pauline perhaps seemed to privilege her role as a ‘hands on grandmother’ over her role as a wife, Mattie can be seen as perhaps privileging protecting her daughters over living with her husband.

It seems that Mattie invests in her ‘strength’ and her ability to ‘just get on with it’ and by doing such she seems to acknowledge that by ‘needing a house’ she used this strength to resist conforming to a life style, that would cause her own daughters to be abandoned to the fate of boarding school. Yet also it seems she has storied negotiating, and pulling within, the changing and sometimes conflicting discursive pulls of ‘good daughter, good wife, and good mother’.

**Doing one’s duty**

Like Lesley and Diane, Mattie trained as a nurse. Where Lesley narrated that she ‘always wanted to be a nurse’ and Diane that it was an ‘acceptable way to leave home’, Mattie told a different story:

‘I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t very bright, didn’t know what to do. and in those days, you could get into nursing with five GCEs so I had
seven GCEs and Mum said, ‘if you’re going into nursing’, she’d been a nurse, ‘you’re going to London’.

Within a discursive pull of ‘suitable jobs’ for girls both Lesley and Diane storied a degree of agency in their career, yet once again Mattie constructs this life transition as being someone else’s decision. By narrating her move to London and choice of training hospital as her mother’s decision, Mattie makes room available to justify her early lack of success as a nurse and her own seeming inadequacy:

‘I was yelled at by my first Ward Sister. She basically dragged me into the office one day and said, I don’t think you’re made for nursing. I felt like saying, I think you’re quite right [laughs]. Passed my finals first time though. There were 45 in my set and 20 failed on the first sitting so I was quite chuffed that I’d passed’…I was dead chuffed, dead chuffed, because my parents had always been a bit, ‘she’s not very academic’, so I was dead chuffed about that’.

This seems a very interesting insight into Mattie’s subjective understanding of herself in her contemporary individual time. It appears once again she is investing in her inner strength of ‘just getting on with it’ moreover proving her own worth in spite of other’s expectations. Having narrated her progress from school, and ‘not very academic’, to nursing that she ‘wasn’t really made for’, she then plots triumph at her success in her finals when nearly half of her contemporaries failed. This may be a tacit acknowledgment that she may not have chosen to become a nurse but she made a success of it. Moreover within the wider setting of this interview she may be suggesting that she may not have
expected to be an army wife or indeed a divorced single parent over her life course, yet whatever has or can happen she can cope. Perhaps she also makes available a position that even if others have not valued her she can value herself.

As discussed in Chapter 4, and revealed by the exploration of ‘Jackie’ in Chapter 5 the expectation for many young women born in the mid 1950s was that they would have a ‘girl’s job’, marry, have children and ‘settle down. Mattie narrated pressure from her family to conform to this ideal:

‘I suppose I’d known him for six and a half years and my father kept saying, you’re going to be left on the shelf’

It might seem incongruous in the historical location of the early C21st that a young woman of 26 might be ‘on the shelf’ yet it is worth remembering that girls married on average at a younger age in the 1970’s and 1980’s than at any other period of history (Anderson, 1985). Indeed Lesley and Pauline were both married by the time they were 21. When she became engaged to Paul it is interesting to consider how she emplots her wedding:

‘(we arranged) to get married in the October and we’d only picked that date because all my uncles were University Professors and my father had said, you’ve got to do it before the term starts if you’re going to get married, get married so that people can come’

It seems Mattie once again constructs compliance with her family’s expectations, firstly to marry before she was ‘too old’ and moreover to do it at a time convenient to them. However it is perhaps interesting when exploring
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Mattie’s subjective understanding to consider her story about her wedding dress. To position this narrative within its historical location it is necessary to recall the media frenzy surrounding the marriage of the Prince of Wales in 1981. Shortly before Mattie’s own wedding ‘the white wedding of the Prince and Princess of Wales was watched by an estimated crowd of 600,000 people who had lined the streets of London, and a worldwide TV audience of 750 million’ (BBC News). Much has been written elsewhere about the ‘Diana phenomena’ and her impact on social culture (for example: Summerfield, 1998; Aron and Livingston, 1997). Looking back through the lens of thirty years social change, it is perhaps difficult not to underestimate the degree of media interest in this event. However the media frenzy of romance and ‘the fairytale princess’ was such that, a national newspaper commissioned a replica of Diana’s wedding dress to be displayed in their office and subsequently donated it to the nurses in the hospital where Mattie worked.

Mattie narrated the story of her wedding as arranged to suit her father, ‘lest she get left on the shelf’ and uncles so that it ‘fitted in’ with their academic timetable and then ‘dressed’ on the instigation of her boss who entered Mattie’s name in a competition to win the replica dress. ‘I was away on holiday in Greece with my sister and my Nursing Officer, unbeknownst to me, had put my name forward and I won it’. This emplotment seems to suggest that, as with her schooling and her nurse training, Mattie was passive within the process and merely complied with expectations. However perhaps the most notable part of Mattie’s wedding story for an understanding of her midlife self is how she narrates taking possession of ‘the dress’:
Daughter, wife, mother: just getting on with it

Well, I came back from this holiday I’d been on with my sister and I… someone had just said, oh, Mattie, you’ve got the dress, and I said, yeah, sure, yeah, whatever. So the dress came to the Nursing Home and I was informed that it was there and the Principal Nursing Officers wanted to put it on show and I don’t… that’s when I probably started to become stroppy. I said, no, that’s my wedding dress. You can have it on show after I’m married but I want it clean for my day. Well, they were horrified that I spoke up against them. But I won, I won’.

Mattie constructs this decision to refuse permission for her dress to be used as the first time she had spoken out against authority. Her rhetorical emphasis that it was her dress, she wanted it clean and she won seems to underpin her emplotment of agency. It seems from her contemporary individual and social location she is investing in having broken out of her ‘Malory Towers’ ‘conformist’ conditioning and challenged her own compliance. Mattie makes available an alternative to having ‘just got on with it’ and invests in taking a position of power against expected compliance. However she also offers the alternative position of ‘doing it her way’, she might be seen to be constructing her opposition as a means of taking control over her life. It appears she offers the possibility that although she married at the time her father wanted, in the ‘fairy-tale’ dress that was won for her, the decision to wear it and how she went about it was entirely hers. Once again within the strong discursive pulls of female compliance Mattie has narrated a degree of agency in ‘pulling against’ some expectations, yet ultimately still conforming.
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Mattie says she may have begun ‘to get stroppy’ about the time of her marriage, by opposing the wishes of her Nursing Officer. After they married Paul continued with his medical training, Mattie’s narration continued with:

‘I worked. I supported him. He wasn’t earning, he was still a student. I supported him for the first year working as a Staff Midwife… We were living on five thousand pounds a year and I was paying all the bills and buying all the food’…

By emplotting this time of her life in this way Mattie is positioning herself as the financial mainstay of the marriage, by doing so she constructs herself as ‘valuable’ and as an independent, worthy, career person. Moreover having left the ‘ivory tower’ of boarding school where she was perhaps educated to be a ‘lady like home maker’ Mattie may have constructed her progress from school to nursing as out of her control, but within this narrative Mattie is investing in taking control of her financial capability and valuing her own contribution. This is an interesting comparison with Lesley’s story who narrated that they could ‘manage on one wage’, and she worked because she ‘wanted more’. Lesley constructs ‘pulling against’ the discursive expectation of housewife when she returned to work. Mattie also seems to ‘pull against’ her educational expectation of being a ‘ladylike home maker’ by not working because she ‘wanted extra’ but being the mainstay of the household finances.

Mattie also constructs her continued career as in opposition to the discursive expectations of ‘army wife’:

‘I was quite unusual because I’d always worked and still worked. I worked full-time ‘cos I hadn’t had children and I was a District
Midwife at this stage and none of the other wives worked, ‘oh, we’re Army Officers’ wives, we don’t work’, so I was frowned upon, frowned upon’

Having positioned herself as a school girl and student nurse as dictated to by social structures Mattie narrates her subjective understanding of herself as independent, perhaps even rebellious:

‘it was almost expected as soon as you had your first child, you didn’t work… Because you had functions to attend to and this, that and the other but I always worked. I continued working right until I’d had Isobel. Isobel was born just before Christmas in 1985 and after that I decided that I would quit because I’d reckoned I’d worked long enough, I was 30 when I had her and I’d done enough. I wanted to enjoy her as a baby and we were being posted to Germany anyway’.

Here Mattie seems to be investing in her own position of strength and agency. Moreover her rhetorical emphasis on ‘I’ underlines her agentic claim of making ‘choices’. Mattie constructs taking control of her decision making, by positioning herself as working because she wanted to and leaving when she chose. This may be a reflection of her investment in her decision later on to stay with her marriage when she did, but end it when she was ready:

‘Paul went back to (the Far East) to set up a medical practice and that was it really. We became more and more protracted as time went by. We’d go out in the summer and he’d come back at Easter and all that and it gradually became more and more and more protracted and very difficult, uncomfortable, and he didn’t particularly
want to get divorced because… but nothing was changing in his life,

thank you very much, thank you very much, and I’d brought up the

kids and he was doing his own thing’.

It appears that Mattie’s decision to end her marriage is constructed as hers. It

seems she is investing in being independent and strong enough to challenge

his ‘doing his own thing’ and values her own contribution to the childcare. This

is perhaps in agreement with Diane’s story when she narrated that the ‘old

fashioned stay at wife no longer fitted’. It seems that Mattie also constructs
‘growing out of’ her marriage. She narrated that ‘nothing had changed’ in her

husband’s life, by positioning him as ‘static’ she makes available a position for
herself of ‘moving on’.

It appears that having constructed her ‘strength’ in overcoming the loneliness of
boarding school, and ‘just getting on with it’ despite the problems in her early
nursing career, it seems when narrating ‘being 50’ Mattie constructs agency for
herself to ‘no longer put up with it’. Perhaps in her contemporary social location
Mattie has constructed value in her ability to cope with anything, moreover has
pulled against the discursive expectation of her education and family situation to
be a ‘nice wife for an army officer’ (St John-Brooks, 1988 cited by Purvis, 1991:127). Moreover having emplotted compliance to the authority of her father
in her schooling and marriage, and ‘doing as she was told’ within the hospital
regime which Walby and Greenwell (1994) point out is patriarchal in structure:
Mattie narrates a progressive awareness and challenge to patriarchal
expectations. This is perhaps exemplified as she stories her husband’s position
in the Far East as ‘the great white demi-god…and the only white doctor’ . It
seems important to Mattie’s midlife identity that having been educated to be ‘a
good wife for an army officer’, she constructs pulling against the patriarchal expectations of her schooling and the army. Moreover that although nothing may have changed in her husband’s life, it has in hers.

**Moving on**

When Mattie returned to the UK after many years abroad she started to rebuild her career as a nurse. In keeping with many other professions nursing has undergone a change in training process and procedure since Mattie, Diane and Lesley began their training. Where GCE’s were a minimum requirement in the 1970’s qualifications are now through diploma or degree level courses. Consequently it is not surprising that Mattie’s story includes the necessity to undertake some further study. Despite recent shortage of midwives (rcm.org, 2010) it seems in the historical location when Mattie returned from abroad this was not the case, she narrates being told:

‘we don’t need midwives, terribly sorry, we’ve got more than enough and we don’t want to retrain… you can try off your own back if you want to’. So I wrote two different places but they didn’t… weren’t interested…somebody said, you’re not going to get anywhere…unless you do further study. So it was Hobson’s choice.

I went to (uni) and I was accepted to do a Diploma in nursing.

It seems that in this storyline of returning to the UK after being abroad, Mattie once again emplots lack of choice about her future. Having been unsuccessful in returning to midwifery, it was ‘Hobson’s choice’. Mattie narrated her parents’ construction of her as ‘not very bright’ school leaver and ‘not at all academic’ thus it is interesting juxtaposition in her emplottment of her later career when
she says: ‘No, Mattie’, they said at Uni ‘you must do the Degree. Brilliant student, you must do the Degree’. It seems that despite narrating her entry to higher education as almost ‘out of her hands’ once there she positions herself as not only capable of being there but as a ‘brilliant student’. It is an interesting consideration that Mattie does not construct taking responsibility for claiming her ‘brilliance’ but attributes this to an anonymous ‘they at Uni’. I am once again reminded of the co-construction of the narrative and that it was ‘told to me’. Mattie knew I had trained as a nurse, moreover that I had since earned a degree and, in this interview she was participating in my PhD research. It is possible that by telling this story in this way Mattie was staking her claim as my intellectual peer. However it is equally possible that having been constructed as ‘not academic’ within her family and her school it was too ingrained within Mattie for her to challenge this and to claim academic success, let alone brilliance, for herself.

Mattie completed her degree and qualified as an Occupational Health nurse and as she narrated her career to date said: ‘so I’ve set up in ... a prison, Occupational Health from scratch, which has been quite an achievement ‘cos it’s quite a difficult environment to work in’. She seems to construct pride in this achievement yet she also reflects that it is perhaps time for a change:

‘I’m fed up being a nurse. I’m fed up kowtowing and... people just open up. They know you’re a nurse and they just start to bleat, don’t they’.

Having left school and undertaken a nursing career that she narrated as ‘her mother’s idea’, yet continued to work apparently against the norm for an ‘army
Daughter, wife, mother: just getting on with it

wife’ it is interesting to consider why Mattie considers leaving a career she has constructed as taking pride in, at this point on her life course helix (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980). Mattie emplots resenting the ‘kowtowing’ and the emotional strain of people ‘bleating’ which seems to position her as ‘fed up’ with nursing therefore looking for a change. However it is also interesting to consider that Mattie has storied her life as one of travel and change, mainly at the instigation of her father and husband. Yet she has lived in her present house for fourteen years, the entire length of her daughters schooling. Mattie went on to relate that she has a friend in South Africa who has offered her a job:

‘maybe this time next year when Poppy finished, finished college, I might think, yeah. I won’t know a soul. I’ve got a reasonable group of friends here but I might give it a go’.

It seems that although the life course transitions of Lesley and Pauline have set them on a trajectory toward ‘grand-motherhood’ and their midlife identity is located within their families, Mattie like Diane is anticipating her ‘postmaternity’ (Sheriff and Weatherall,2009) and an ‘empty nest’. Moreover Mattie constructs her future after her daughter leave home as a time of potential adventure. Unlike the ‘loneliness’ Mattie narrated in her individual and social time of schoolchild at boarding school, in her midlife, anticipating travel, Mattie stories being prepared ‘have a go’. Mattie narrates a future travelling away from her friends, and once again risking the loneliness of her childhood, yet this time at her ‘choice’. Similarly to Diane it appears that rather than ‘a miserable empty nester’ (McQuaide,1998) Mattie constructs anticipation of the renewed freedom.
Yet it seems Mattie stories awareness the ‘reality’ of ageing:

‘You know, everybody’s youthful, everybody… and the world’s at their feet. They’re leaving home so you’ve trudged all these years, you’ve plodded on all these years and suddenly the world’s their oyster, you’ve done your bit, where do you turn?’

It seems that although Mattie had constructed looking forward to travelling and potential adventure, in this narrative she is reflecting on her position on her life course helix at an individual time of ‘midlife’ as she travels. This is in contrast with the ‘youth’ who have the world at their feet. Mattie’s construction in this story line positions her as not ‘having the world’ at her feet. Moreover within this emplotment Mattie has rhetorically referred to the work ‘the trudging on’ and the commitment of ‘plodding on,’ she has invested in being a mother. There seems a tacit understanding by Mattie of her midlife and possibly her future: the world was her ‘oyster’ once but in her contemporary social location she is narrating a more restricted opportunity.

Mattie story continued to explore her ageing self:

‘And you suddenly realise, you’ve sort of passed your sell-by date and you can’t compete any more in this high flying, high speed, high technology world and it... even if you’re ageing gracefully. You can’t... you can’t keep up all the time’

It is interesting that Mattie should locate ‘being past her sell by date’ within the discursive construction of a ‘Hi tech’ world. It seems from the emplotment of her career Mattie has constructed pride in her ability to move with changing
assumptions about nursing. She narrated success in developing a new nursing service and has invested in her personal ability to ‘get on with it’. Yet when she stories her ageing self she draws an example from the public sphere of work to illustrate her claim. Perhaps insight into Mattie’s understanding of her midlife self is the notion that one might ‘age gracefully’. If one is positioned as ‘ageing gracefully’ this is might be in opposition to ageing ‘disgracefully’ perhaps as illustrated by the poem Warning (Joseph, 1992 see page 211). However, ‘ageing gracefully’ might be a more usual discursive assumption about an older ‘ladylike homemaker’, the future expectation for many who shared Mattie’s education. Perhaps Mattie is constructing her midlife self through the lens of her ‘Malory Towers’ education, and her emplotment of ageing is perhaps also a reflection on how her life ‘may have been’.

Perhaps some insight into the understanding Mattie has of her midlife self when she says:

‘Marriages break up sometimes at this stage, men just suddenly think, kids moving on, don’t want to be with her, find younger partners’

Within this storyline Mattie seems to construct a future of loneliness with ‘kids moving on’ and husbands ‘finding someone else’. Perhaps Mattie is reflecting on her status as a single woman in ‘postmaternity’ (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009) and by drawing on a discursive assumption that men prefer younger women, underpinned by media stereotypes (Chrisler, 2007) positions herself as ‘not young’ and by implication not desirable. It is interesting to consider that at this point on her life course, Mattie seems to be emplotting her future
trajectories within the discourse of abandonment that she mobilised to narrate her school days. Moreover she seems to construct a position of ‘outside’ of a family with no husband and no children. Yet this is not necessarily her own future she is emplotting. Mattie did not narrate her own marriage as breaking up ‘at this stage’. In her story Mattie seemed to narrate agency for herself in getting divorced even although ‘he didn’t really want to’. Rather than her own future Mattie might be acknowledging the general ‘reality’ of ageing. Perhaps Mattie does not emplot this to story her husband leaving but that of an inevitable ageing process that might be considered detrimental to women.

It seems that a midlife women are under represented in the media (Gerike,1990; Vernon et al., 1991) and moreover have lead to the assertion that they are ‘invisible’ (McQuaide,1998; Greer,1991; Piercy,2006). Moreover perhaps “there comes a point in a woman’s life when no matter how healthy, well groomed or nicely attired she is she is unnoticed by men or younger women (Chrisler,2007: 6). Mattie incorporated her own story of ‘invisibility:

‘I was in Barcelona last weekend because I took both of my girls there for Poppy’s eighteenth….and there’s no doubt that the heads just turn wherever they go. The heads just turn to follow them, both of them, and I just had to go, right, okay, well, that’s life. It might be different if I’d had sons. I don’t know’.

It seems in this narrative that Mattie is positioning herself as ‘not young’ and by implication not a ‘head turner’. Her emplottment reflects the literature and discursive assumption of beauty as youth. What is interesting to consider is why Mattie might wonder if it would be different if she has sons. It seems she is
Daughter, wife, mother: just getting on with it

drawing on a notion that the youthful beauty may or may not only belong to women. Arguably she might also be acknowledging that she her ageing appearance is highlighted when in the company of young women who may resemble her younger self. A son may not reflect her own appearance to the same extent.

It appears Mattie’s narration of ‘being 50’ has incorporated many aspects shared by the ‘telescopic’ cohort. She was educated in a girl’s school, took a girl’s job, married and had children in her twenties and now in her fifties is contemplating the prospect of many years ‘postmaternity’ to consider new ventures such as changing her career or travelling. It seems like Pauline, Amanda, Lesley and Diane at midlife she has negotiated her life course as she was pulled into positions by discursive assumptions and has challenged some discourses by ‘pulling against them. However as her concluding narrative suggests like the other participants it seems no matter what the pull and push of discourse there is a ‘reality’ of an ageing body.
Chapter 10: Summary and conclusion

This research has considered the lives of the specific cohort of women I have metaphorically called the ‘telescopic’ cohort. Underpinning the definition of this cohort was the assumption that women at midlife in the early C21st have an extended period of time of ‘postmaternity’ (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009) possibly extending to more than thirty years (Fodor and Franks, 1990). Moreover that due to the ‘massive societal changes’ of the last four decades (Muhlbauer and Chrisler, 2007:1) the opportunities presented for this cohort are likely to differ widely from those available to previous cohorts. This chapter evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the life course approach adopted in this research and considers the contribution the triple helix model (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) and the trajectory model (Runyan, 1982) made to my understanding. The methods used to collect and analyse the data are reviewed and evaluated as is their efficacy in addressing the research aims and consideration is given to how these might be used or adapted in future research.

This chapter then concludes the research by exploring some of the common themes emerging from the narratives of the participants and how these can contribute to an understanding of the experience of ‘being 50’ for a woman in contemporary UK society. In conclusion the limitations of this research are examined and consideration given to how this research might be built upon and carried forward.
Chapter 10

**Telling Stories over the life course**

The research aims presented some challenges for the research design, specifically in devising a framework to explore the experiences of women within the changing historical time. It was important not to lose focus on how women reflected on their lives by over emphasising the ‘history’ of the period, yet the significance of historical change seemed pivotal to understanding their lives.

**Re-modelling the life course**

A life course approach did indeed prove to be a successful framework, although none of the models explored in Chapter 1 met the specific challenge. Runyan (1982) offered a very useful means of envisaging the impact the dynamic interaction of an individual in a social setting resulting in a behaviour trajectory. Yet within this research it was difficult to encapsulate the interaction of the individual, social and historical time of the participants in Runyan’s (1982) model. Moreover it seemed the notion of a ‘behaviour’ trajectory was not wholly appropriate when considering notions of self and self identity. The triple helix of Rapoport and Rapoport (1980) proved very helpful in considering the intersection of social time, individual time, and historical time when the telescopic cohort was in their teenage years. The model contributed to an understanding of the analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine because the cohort at that point in their life courses shared the intersections of individual, social and historical timings. Yet when considering the life courses of the participating women the difference in a few years in their social times made a common model of the triple helix difficult to employ. For example in Pauline’s social time she became a mother nearly ten years before Diane, consequently Diane had an established career and a more substantial income when she reduced her
working hours to accommodate her children. However Diane’s experience of ‘being 50’ seemed to include more financial responsibility for her children, perhaps due to the introduction of tuition fees for example, in the historical timing of these events. Thus the triple helix model (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1980) whilst a useful model across the cohort was less useful in comparing individual lives. The notion of a ‘double helix’ however was a useful means of encapsulating the intersections between social and individual timing. Perhaps a three dimensional model of the ‘double helix intersections’ dynamically propelled by the impact of resultant trajectories would be useful to consider, but too complicated to capture in the two dimensional medium of print.

The overarching aim of this research was to explore how women experience of ‘being 50’ and how they subjectively understand ‘themselves’ at this stage of their life course. Lacking from the models of both Runyan (1982) and Rapoport and Rapoport (1980) was a means of encapsulating how life course trajectories contribute to self identity. Runyan (1982) modelled behaviour and Rapoport and Rapoport (1980) experience. This research explored narrative data from the participants for an ‘on going story of self’. The analysis was of ‘stories’, thus it seems a conceptualisation of the on going story of self within the individual, social and historical timings of the life course would be a useful model.

Figure 16 shows a model devised to encapsulate the production of ‘stories of self’ from a life course perspective. This model depicts how the interaction of individual, social and historical time dynamically produces a ‘position’ from which an individual narrates their story, moreover how this impacts on a current understanding of ‘self’. Further that as the result of this dynamic interaction this ‘new’ position impacts on, and leads to revision of past stories and shapes
future ones. The ongoing ‘story of self’ can be seen to be constantly revised as one is constantly positioned and repositioned by the dynamic interaction of individual, social and historical time of the life course.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 16: Capturing stories from a life course perspective**

This model is based on Boxer (2003) as discussed in Chapter 6. This is the working model used in the analysis of the narrative interviews. It seems however that an adapted model might be more useful to encapsulate narrative positioning across the life course.

Figure 17 is a model devised to demonstrate how an understanding of ‘being 50’ can be explored. The individual time of ‘being 50’ or perhaps ‘midlife’ is dynamically interacting with the individual social times of worker, carer, grandmother lover for example. These in turn interact with the historical time of ‘body beautiful’, ‘youth culture’, pension plans, recession or global warming for example.
Figure 17: Revised model of life course
Figure 17 demonstrates how the interaction of individual, historical and social time dynamically results in a ‘position’ from which a story of one’s self might be told. However, in telling ‘to-day’s story it seems that previously understood stories of self might be revised, and future ones impacted upon. Moreover it seems that the notion of ‘discursive pull and pulling against (Gavey, 2002) can perhaps be better understood. Within a historical time of pension shortfall and financial recession, the social times of carer and worker might be in tension with each other. A woman’s story of ‘being 50’ may have to include a narrative of ‘choice’, perhaps storying a ‘decision’ to reduce working hours to care for grandchildren or ageing parents. This may in turn cause a revision of a previous storyline of ‘career’ woman and even perhaps a future one of ‘middlescent gap year traveller’.

A place for the ‘Jackie’ girls

The adoption of a life course perspective did highlight the necessity to explore ‘lives in context’ which led me to ‘Jackie’ magazine. The major problem with this data source was to keep as objective a distance from the content as possible. It was difficult not to write my own ‘memoir’ rather than critically appraise the magazine. The content analysis proved helpful to rationalise what actually was in ‘Jackie’ rather than what I thought was in ‘Jackie’. Undertaking a discourse analysis contributed to my understanding of what was available to the readership and how it was offered. Yet it was necessary to be mindful that this was a source of ‘fiction’ and ‘Jackie’ was not a ‘real’ teenage girl with a life course of her own. ‘Jackie’ was not being recruited for the jobs, nor writing to
Summary and conclusion

‘Cathy and Claire’. Rather the ‘Jackie’ magazine offered a window to the lived lives of the cohort, and my analysis was through the lens of nearly forty years of history with the social and cultural changes this has brought.

The number of women interviewed for the narrative analysis was small due to the restrictions of this PhD, yet the material the interviews generated proved to be as Wengraf (2006) predicted, rich and deep in content. I found asking one narrative pointed question, backed up by narrative prompts an extremely effective interview method. Moreover the notion of ‘Gestalt’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2001; Wengraf, 2000) proved enlightening. However I did not consider that the important material of a narrative was only contained in the opening and closing of the stories as Wengraf (2001) had claimed. In practice there was a great deal of insightful information throughout the narratives of all the participants.

Looking back through the telescope

One of the central aims of the research was to consider the social and economic changes that have impinged on almost every aspect of British life over the life course of the ‘telescopic’ cohort (Wadsworth, 2003) and to explore what these might have meant for the women. The analysis of narrative interviews produced a rich vein of material to explore the lived experience of this cohort and reach an understanding of ‘being 50’.

Just like girls

Four out of the five participants took ‘girl’s jobs’ when they left school, that three were nurses was mainly an effect of the snowball and purposeful sampling. This does seem to reflect the gender bias in education that the literature revealed
and my analysis of ‘Jackie’ magazine underpinned (Chapter 5). Indeed the participants seemed to narrate the natural acceptance that there were certain career expectations for girls. For example Mattie said ‘we were all teachers, nurses or secretaries’ and as Pauline put it ‘you either became a teacher or a nurse or a nursery nurse’. Moreover she added: ‘Amanda became an architect, which was very hard… just amazing ‘cos her Dad was a doctor so she perhaps would have been a nurse’. Pauline did not question her own assumption as she reflected on her career path or indeed as she reflected on Amanda’s career. Indeed Pauline’s comments seemed to concur with Clune (2005) who pointed out that ‘Jackie’ magazine would encourage girls to ‘be the vet nurse not be the vet’ (see Chapter 5). Given this apparent acceptance of the jobs ‘suitable’ for girls, it is perhaps not surprising the extent to which being a successful architect is important to Amanda’s story.

Of the five participants only Amanda went to university from school, however all four of the others have undertaken further study, two graduating with degrees in nursing, one retrained for a different career and one pursuing an alternative form of therapy alongside nursing. This seems to agree with Grint (2005, 1998) that women would have ‘a two stage career’. However it is interesting to consider that all the women have continued to work without a prolonged career break. Rather than ‘something to fall back on’ it seems these women have pursued careers either through choice or financial necessity. It was interesting to explore how they ‘see themselves as women’ now, through the lens of the changes over their life course.

Although Amanda’s midlife identity seemed more closely aligned with her professional life this is perhaps a reflection of the ‘battles she has fought’ to be
accepted as a professional in ‘a man’s world’. The three women who trained as nurses are still working as nurses but in very different roles. Perhaps they did not seem to invest so much of their respective stories in their professional domain because there are fewer ‘battles’ to fight to maintain their professional standing. Moreover perhaps the expectation that women work and continue to work after they become mothers is so widely practiced within contemporary society, working itself is unremarkable. It is possible Amanda’s career is still ‘unusual’ for a woman, yet having a career at all is not.

It is also notable that when Amanda and Pauline raised issues of sexism or discrimination they both drew on a discourse of ‘legality’ to explain why this may be changing. Pauline narrating her time in the family car business said:

‘we did take on a woman mechanic at my insistence. It wasn’t a big success. It just didn’t work. She couldn’t cope with the banter… I suppose this was probably about fifteen years ago whereas now there’s legislation in place to stop that sort of thing’.

Amanda also storied sexual harassment and a change in attitude: ‘not so much now but when I started, of course…they could be quite sexist when I first started and there was nothing we could do whereas now they’d be hauled up before the Site Manager’. It seems important to note that as Walby (1990) pointed out: changing the law does not stamp out deep rooted inequalities. It is interesting to consider that by narrating any change there may be in the work place as they are ‘not allowed’ to do that anymore and there are ‘laws in place’ to prevent sexual harassment, is perhaps not saying that attitudes have actually changed. Indeed it was Amanda that included ‘taking a man along to meetings’, to
accommodate the prejudice of clients. If changing the law, for example the Sex Discrimination Act (HMSO, 1975) had actually changed attitudes in the workplace it is unlikely that Amanda or Pauline would have drawn on ‘illegality’ to narrate why this may not be so prevalent. It is perhaps significant that this cohort of women educated for ‘girl’s jobs, began their working lives more than thirty years ago, around the time the Sex Discrimination Act (HMSO, 1975) was implemented. Yet it seems they still refer to this law. Perhaps the law has changed but possibly the sexist discourse of patriarchy in the workplace is still evident, and only held at bay by law, not attitude.

However, my use of popular culture sources to illustrate historical context across the life course might actually challenge the statement that attitudes have not changed. When researching the dates and producers of ‘Benny Hill’ (1969-89) or ‘Man About the House’ (1973-76), I found myself faced with memories of programmes I had forgotten. Through the lens of the C21st it seemed to me that the inherent sexism, racism and ageism in many ‘staple family comedies’ was not far short of shocking. Perhaps attitudes have indeed changed but they still have a way to go. However, McRobbie (2009) has explored contemporary ‘post-feminist’ romantic comedy in which she considers the ‘process by which feminist gains of the 1970’s and 1980’s are relentlessly undermined (McRobbie, A., 2009:11). It would be interesting to consider if the material from the early 1970’s is in fact more provocatively sexist than contemporary programmes or if as McRobbie (2009) claims in the early C21st ‘feminism is undone’ by popular culture.
Summary and conclusion

Change and (dis)appearance

The literature review revealed that a large portion of the corpus of work regarding women at ‘midlife’ was specifically concerned with ‘the menopause’ or ‘body image’. However none of the participants in this research, including June, the ‘pilot’ interviewee, mentioned the menopause except for one scant reference to HRT (hormone replacement therapy). Indeed this reference was related to backache, not a specific menopausal symptom. This was interesting on two counts: both as insight into the meaning menopause may or may not have, and further as a critique of the method used to elicit the narratives during the interview. Firstly it must be considered that perhaps the menopause is unremarkable and barely noticed by many women (Rossi, 2004). Moreover that this locates the menopause within a ‘biomedical’ discourse and offers the possibility that much of the ‘medical’ literature is written to encourage the marketing of HRT medication (Dan, 2003; Greer, 1991). However the absence of narratives about menopause in this research might also be attributed to the menopause being ‘shrouded with shame (with) many women silent about their experiences’ (Ussher, 2006:143).

These two reasons for the ‘silence’ seem in tension with each other: either the event is/was ‘un’ remarkable or, so very ‘remarkable’ it could not be mentioned. It seems necessary to evaluate the method of narrative interviewing adopted to explore this in depth. An important argument for employing a narrative interview method is to generate the participants’ ‘own story’. By adapting the method detailed by Wengraf (2001) it was my intention to access as far as possible what ‘being 50’ meant to the individual women, not what I thought it should mean. Had I designed a ‘semi-structured’ interview schedule I would have
incorporated questions that arose from a search of the existing literature. Based on my literature review it would have been very tempting to include questions about the menopause, however as the women themselves did not raise the subject this would have been ‘my’ interpretation of what ‘being 50’ might mean not theirs. This was exactly the kind of power imbalance the narrative pointed questions were designed to reduce.

However I must also recognise that by not actively asking the participants to talk about the menopause I myself might have contributed to the ‘shroud of silence’. Yet the interviewing techniques I employed were designed to help the participants feel comfortable and facilitate their narratives, indeed they all spoke at great length about many different and sometimes very personal subjects. Reflecting on the breadth and depth of material raised and explored by all the participants I feel that had the menopause been of great significance to them, at this point in their life course, any one of the participants might have raised the subject. Perhaps despite the apparent plethora of information both in the medical literature and in the media, the menopause for the participants in this research was fairly unremarkable. Yet indeed since the average age of menopause is 51 years (Rossi, 2004) for these participants the menopause may be unremarkable because it has not yet occurred to them. In this event it would be interesting to continue this research longitudinally to revisit the participants at a later point of their life course.

All of the participants raised some issues about their ‘ageing body’ or appearance. Amanda, who storied much of her leisure and family time around her sporting interests, only paid scant attention to the ageing process and then in terms of restrictions to her physical strength and therefore competitiveness.
Interestingly Pauline made the most reference to the effect of her ageing physical appearance when narrating her experience within the family motor business. Perhaps with reference to the claim that women ‘trade on their appearance (Greer, 1991) Pauline remarked that she was no longer the ‘sexy blonde’ in the office who got ‘discount from the reps’. Of course ‘the nurses’: Mattie, Lesley and Diane all work in a female dominated environment, and are not employed in jobs that require them to negotiate ‘discount’. Perhaps most pertinent to the literature review was the notion of ‘invisibility. Mattie related ‘no longer being looked at’ yet she and three of the others incorporated changes of ‘beauty routines’ into their narratives in the context of an ageing appearance, but in each narrative it was a theme of acceptance and coping that emerged.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of ‘invisibility’ to emerge was the frustration narrated by a lack of respect, or ‘not being taken seriously’. In Amanda’s professional role she emplotted ‘taking a man along’ to deflect a battle, she also narrated frustration at a car dealer who would not respond to her requests to mend the family car but had immediately responded when her husband approached him. Diane highlighted her impatience with a kitchen company that ‘want your husband there or your partner or somebody else even though you’re paying for it and you’re a wage earner in your own right and you have total freedom with the budget’. This seemed an interesting notion of ‘invisibility’: rather than a physical manifestation of beauty, it seemed Diane and Amanda narrated an invisibility of ‘power’. Even although Diane was paying, and Amanda’s car clearly did need fixing, their insistence on being served was narrated as a challenge to being ignored. It is possible that this is an indication of how women’s own confidence and perceived ‘strength’ has developed. From
not questioning her time as a young woman being ‘hoiked off a dance floor by forty six dads’ apparently located within a discourse of patriarchal power, Amanda at midlife is insightful to the inequality of power in gender roles. Across their life course women now at midlife have lived through a change in women’s earning power and financial independence. The ‘Jackie’ adverts recruiting girls to work in banks were located in a historical time when those ‘clerkesses’ and cashiers, despite being bank employees were not permitted to have certain accounts at the bank ‘because they were girls’. Often neither were their salaries considered for mortgage purposes. From this position it seems that women have gained much ground in gender equality of access to some financial independence. Yet the entrenched assumption that women are not in a position to authorise large purchases or insist that faulty goods are attended to, remain to be challenged. It would be interesting to delve further into the impact of gender in situations such as those described by Amanda and Diane, and explore the ‘visibility’ of relative negotiating power.

**Crisis, what crisis?**

The title of this research often provoked a response of ‘oh midlife crisis and all that?’ from my family, friends, colleagues and indeed almost anyone who asked what I was researching. It is not surprising therefore that the literature review revealed that the term although ‘frequently debunked has remained a media staple’ (Wethington, 2000:85). Yet, reflecting on the narrative interview material of the participants it seems that all the women incorporated stories of change, be it change of career, change of family situation, change of martial status or change of physical capability. By some measures these changes might be encapsulated as losses but equally they were gains. For example Pauline
narrated ‘loss’ that her daughter lived some distance away and Pauline would be unable to be such a ‘hands on’ grandmother if her daughter were to have children. Diane however emplotted anticipating ‘gain’ when her children were completely independent. It seems that the notion of midlife as time of ‘danger and opportunity’ would encapsulate the tensions between the gains and losses narrated by the participants. Thus there may be an argument to support a ‘crisis’ of sorts at midlife, but not necessarily an essentialist psycho-dynamic resolution (Jaques, 1965; Erikson, 1953, 1968). It seems there is support for the notion that ‘a midlife crisis’ is indeed a good concept trivialised by popular culture (Mc Adams, 1993:195) or indeed the notion of ‘crisis’ might be interpreted as meaning both ‘opportunity and danger’ (Caspi and Moffit, 1993).

Taking a life course approach to explore the lives of this cohort of women has been interesting and insightful. In many ways it has revealed the extent of the social changes over the last few decades and how these have affected the experiences and expectations of this cohort. It seems that the metaphor of a ‘telescope’ could be employed: looking back through a telescope the world perhaps does seem smaller. The horizons offered to the ‘Jackie’ reader did seem to be narrower than the lived experience of the cohort has experienced. It appears that during the teenage years and young adulthood of this cohort of women there were perhaps more constraints to be negotiated. Yet it must be considered that some of the discursive pulls may have only changed in focus not ‘gone away’.
‘Not my mother’

Perhaps one of the most consistent themes to emerge from the interviews was how the women positioned themselves within their families and more specifically in relation to their mothers. At some point during their interview all five women drew a comparison between their own lives and their mothers’: moreover, it seemed that all the participants actively resisted ‘turning into’ their mothers. In the 1960’s the author of ‘The Feminine Mystique wrote:

‘When we were growing up, many of us could not see ourselves beyond the age of twenty one. We had no image of our own future, of ourselves as woman (Friedan, 1963:61)

Perhaps it was the lack of role models of futures outside the ‘marriage as a career’ discursive assumption that led to Friedan’s (1963) comments. For the teenagers reading Jackie as McRobbie (2005) put it the ‘future’ seemed to stop with the engagement ring and the clinch, their other anticipated future may have to ‘be like my mother’.

‘Like her like her not?’

Amanda and Lesley both compared themselves as ‘career women’ with their ‘homemaker’ mothers. Interestingly it appeared that although narrating their stories from their own perspective both women seem to question how ‘being only a homemaker’ would have been fulfilling. Lesley ‘wanted a bit more than just’ staying at home and implicitly seemed to explore why that was enough for her mother. Amanda however seemed to overtly challenge her mother’s claim that she was ‘asked to leave’ teaching when she became pregnant. There are of course financial implications of being a ‘homemaker’ or ‘career woman’, it is
possible that by questioning her mother not working Amanda is also questioning how that was financially an option. Moreover, the implications for Amanda and Lesley at midlife are also possibly financial, they will have made National Insurance contributions which have implications for a state pension and may have personal pension plans irrespective of their husbands. This may not make Amanda or Lesley financially independent but has perhaps endowed an element of ‘choice’ unavailable to their mothers who had no personal earning power.

Diane’s storied a difficult relationship with her mother and emplotted how this impacted on her early career trajectory. Moreover the theme of ‘neediness’ ran through Diane’s story as she expressed anticipation at ‘fully launching’ her children. Like Lesley, Diane’s story included ultimately taking responsibility for her mother’s care. Where Lesley narrated this as an expectation, for Diane her story was of ‘duty. Perhaps the implication for Diane at midlife is that she does not want to be ‘needy’ like her own mother and therefore ‘dependent’ on her own daughter. This seems to have very interesting implications for the future for many of the ‘telescopic cohort. This group of women now at midlife have all continued to work to a greater or lesser extent outside of their homes and they have a certain degree of financial autonomy perhaps unavailable to their mother’s generation. It seems that as they age they may have more ‘choice’ about their futures. Having careers, experience in working and a role outside of their homes may equip them for later in life, in an extended period of ‘postmaternity (Weatherall and Sheriff,2009). Ultimately however the ‘reality’ of an ageing body may lead them to need ‘care’. It seems the question is will the ‘care’ they require be the same as that of the previous generation? Or perhaps
the experience of ‘being more’ than a home maker will equip the ‘telescopic’ cohort with life skills and financial resources not to be ‘needy’ of their daughters.

Yet at this point in their life course these woman of the telescopic cohort, like their mothers, have adopted caring roles for parents, children and grandchildren moreover have not questioned the assumption that they would make some adjustment to their lives in order to accommodate these caring roles. It seems perhaps that despite the ‘50 years of social change’ and the changing role of women at work there are still some discourses of ‘women’s roles’, ‘women’s work’, or indeed a ‘woman’s place’ that might be pulled against, but are ultimately strong enough to pull.

So, are we younger?

This research was introduced by my subjective assessment that ‘my cohort’ are younger than our mother’s. It seems that question must now be addressed. In general terms the ‘telescopic’ cohort are fitter and healthier than many previous cohorts (Wadsworth, 2003). Moreover, there is no doubt that the participants all expressed the view that their bodies were certainly ageing, yet they discussed the ‘anti ageing weapons’ they might deploy such as exercise, life style choices, cosmetics and even surgery that they do, could, and might mobilise to maintain their ‘youth’ for as long as possible. However the discursive assumption that ‘youth’ was to be desired seemed unchallenged. Perhaps the telescopic cohort might claim to be ‘younger than our mothers’ because we have the resources to disguise our ageing appearance.

Yet it seems ‘appearance’ may not be the only factor on which to base an opinion of being ‘younger’. It is interesting to note that Amanda and Pauline
both incorporated themes of ‘how could my mother let that happen to her? Amanda did so in terms of her mother getting ‘old over night’ and Pauline suggested that her mother had divorce ‘happen to her’. Mattie seemed to question her mother’s role, or lack of it in the decision to send Mattie to boarding school and emplotted taking responsibility for her own daughter’s education. Diane emplotted her mother’s unhappiness as possibly being due to an unhappy marriage, Diane herself narrated changing her married role because it ‘no longer fitted. Perhaps for the ‘telescopic’ generation the notion that we are ‘younger’ is from a perception of agency within our own lives. By narrating ‘not letting’ oneself get old, or working at ‘staying married’ or leaving a marriage if it was no longer a ‘good fit’, or giving up nursing because ‘kowtowing’ to the medical system and ‘bleating patients’ have become tiresome, might be seen as emplotting control over lives in comparison with previous cohorts. This control or strength might therefore seem to allow a position of ‘power’ in the world, unavailable to previous cohorts of women. It is perhaps this perception of agency that engenders an assumption that the ‘telescopic’ cohort is ‘younger’ than our mothers and perhaps in a position to take more control over our present and future than past generations or indeed other cohorts within ‘our’ generation. However this agency may be an illusion and a product of ‘pulling against’ the discursive pull of expectation. Perhaps the ‘real world’ of ageing minds and bodies and the social structures of family commitments and financial responsibility will ultimately render the ‘telescopic’ cohort to be ‘much older’ than our daughters’. Perhaps continuing this study longitudinally over the life course of this cohort might explore this.
Looking towards the future

In concluding this summary it seems appropriate to consider some of the limitations of the research and how these might be addressed in future study, and to give some thought about the future of the ‘telescopic’ cohort. The subject of this research is a very specific cohort of women. I have already staked an interest in belonging to the ‘telescopic cohort’ which initiated this research. It seems this is a group of ‘ordinary women’, who are able bodied, not socially deprived or ethnically ‘other’, and not ‘medically challenged’ and have hitherto been absent in the literature except in terms of their ‘menopause’ or empty nest. The aim of this research was to explore the lived experience of this cohort of women hitherto under represented in ‘normal’ developmental psychological literature.

As women are the subject of this research inevitably the boys referred to in Newsom (1963) as (the other) ‘half our future’ are ignored. It seems obvious that the men who ‘expected’ their wives and the mothers of their children to be mainly employed in girls jobs and become ‘motherly and compliant, might have their own stories to tell, moreover have the ‘male eye view’ of the late C20th to relate. Yet this research was not intended to explore the lives of fathers and brothers, but the ‘girls who grew up reading ‘Jackie’ who were educated to be ‘wives and mothers’ before the world changed. The experience of men could be addressed in further research. It is also evident that this research is not a comprehensive insight into the experience of every woman ‘being 50’ in contemporary UK society. The parameters of the cohort were specific to a group of women who enjoyed a degree of affluence in their childhood and who attended schools where they were educated for a certain level of employment. It
is evident that the research has not considered the lives of women without children or non heterosexual women, this is a direct result of the snowball sampling method. These women may have had a different story to tell about the heterosexual imperative discourse or indeed the notion that girls would have ‘jobs’ not careers and would need a two phase working life to accommodate mothering. It is also notable that compared to the demography of contemporary society, there is a complete absence of non-white participants. Non-white women born in the mid 1950s undoubtedly have very rich narratives to explore and an experience of ‘being 50’ that deserves to be heard. This would be a very interesting future research, in particular in reference to the influence of popular culture on the racism and sexism that may have been experienced.

The ‘telescopic’ cohort of women have reached 50 years of age, and the participants of this research have narrated stories of living within changing social and economic times, and having opportunities unavailable to previous generations. As the ‘telescopic’ cohort approach sixty, seventy, eighty and beyond it will be interesting to explore their ongoing stories. However it would seem that although the world has changed: children still need mothering and parents need caring for, the ways and means of many things may have altered but some discourses remain unchallenged.
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Summary and conclusion


www.adultchildrenlivingathome.com Accessed 11/03/2010

www.boomerangkidshelp.com Accessed 11/03/2010


Appendix

Appendix 1: The Picture Strip Story

IT'S ALL IN THE STARS

WISH ME LUCK, SARA. I'VE JUST GOT TO GET A JOB TODAY, OR IT'S HENRY FOR PACKING UP AND CRAWLING BACK TO THE FAMILY.

LET'S CHECK YOUR LUCK, THEN. SEE WHAT YOU STARS SAY ABOUT THINGS.

COME ON, YOU'RE JUXT THINKING THAT BUMBER, EH?

BUT IT'S NOT...

2 O'CLOCK ALREADY. HAVEN'T HAD A MOUTHFUL OF MONEY YET. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ME? A BERTしないの雇われるのを待つのがえらいイヤーだ。'

I'LL TAKE YOU TO THE STARS, BERT. I'LL TAKE YOU TO THE BEST CITY IN THE WORLD.

YOU'VE CHANGED, BERT. LOOKING FOR A CHANCE. THAT'S BETTER. THINK THE WAY YOU'RE THINKING. HOW'S THE FEELING?

I'M NOT RIGHT.

IF I WOULDN'T YANK YOU OUT OF HERE I'D BE也只是影子里的影子。I'D JUST BE RIGHT.

COME ON, I'M RIGHT.

WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?

YOU'RE THE FUGITIVE.

IF YOU NERVE TO COME ANYWHERE NEAR ME I'M GOING TO PULL THIS CAPON OUT AND PUNCH YOU RIGHT OUT OF YOUR FACES.

COME ON, CAPON. I'M GOING TO...'
Appendix 2: The Cathy and Claire Page

DEAR CATHY & CLAIRE—There's a lot I like about you and I don't ask you out but I can't become your family and I have some problems.

Anyway, I have been seeing you more since then, just sort of casually, and I thought we were getting up to kid stuff, but you were just being friendly. We're just looking for a bit, and the idea is to make things better.

I'm just saying that you're not being honest with me, and I am all the time and calling you a liar.

Claire and I have been friends for a few years, and I don't think our relationship is really changeable. It's very good for us to be friends, but I don't think you'll find anyone who's really honest with us.

The thing is, I don't know if you're being honest with me, and I am all the time and calling you a liar.

DEAR CATHY & CLAIRE—We have a problem. Our friendship is in trouble. We started it, but now we're going through other things.

DEAR CATHY & CLAIRE—We have a problem. Our friendship is in trouble. We started it, but now we're going through other things.

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DEAR CATHY & CLAIRE—We have a problem. Our friendship is in trouble. We started it, but now we're going through other things.
Appendix 3: Information for participants

Participant invitation letter

Room E5 Richmond Building,
University of Bradford,
BD71DP

(Date)
(Participant's Address)

Dear

I am a PhD student studying in the Centre for Psychology Studies at the University of Bradford. My research is entitled ‘Being 50- the contemporary experience of women at midlife’. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. I understand that you are around 50 years of age and showed interest in this work.

The research will be subject to ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society. This means that if you decide to participate you will remain anonymous. You will have the right not to answer specific questions and to withdraw from the study at any stage, without having to provide a reason.

I have enclosed an information sheet for you to read which provides more detail about the research. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me Fiona Anderson 01274 232323 f.e.anderson@bradford.ac.uk or my research supervisor Dr Christine Horrocks 01274 236762 c.horrocks@bradford.ac.uk

Yours sincerely

Fiona Anderson
Consent form

Name of Researcher: Fiona Anderson

Title of Thesis: ‘Being 50; the contemporary experience of women at midlife’

Thank you for considering being interviewed as part of the research. I would be grateful if you would read through the following questions and indicate your response to each of them. The purpose of this is to ensure that you are fully aware of the purpose of the research and that you are willing to take part.

1. I have been informed about the purpose of the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions about it if I wished       YES/NO

2. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage, without giving a reason and that my data will not be included in the research    YES/NO

3. I understand that I am free to choose not to answer a question without giving a reason why          YES/NO

4. I have been informed that the interview will be recorded and I give my consent for this recording to be made.     YES/NO

5. I understand that extracts from the recording might be used in the research report and that this may be read by others or published later.     YES/NO

6. I understand that if extracts from the recording are used any identifying information about myself and my organisation will be removed and that every attempt will be made to ensure my anonymity.     YES/NO

I give my consent to take part in the research.

Participant
Signed .................................................................
NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS ...................................................
Date ..............................................................................

Researcher
Signed .................................................................
NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS ...................................................
Date ..............................................................................
Information sheet for Participants

Researchers Name: Fiona Anderson PhD student

Title of the project: ‘Being 50; the contemporary experience of women at midlife’

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of a cohort of women who are around 50 years of age at the present time. There has been very little recent research regarding women of this age and it seems overdue that this is addressed. There have been many social changes over the lives of those who are now 50 and it is of great interest to this research to explore how a specific group of women reflect on their present life and make sense of this changed social world. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

If you agree to take part in the research, the researcher, Fiona Anderson will ask you if you will agree to be interviewed. The interview will last between one and two hours. I will ask you to talk about the ‘story’ of your life to date. I may ask you to bring a photograph or two to illustrate your journey to ‘Being 50’ You can talk about anything that is important to you during the interview. I may prompt you with some questions, there is of course no right or wrong answers, it is your understanding of your life that interests me.

All the information that is collected from you during this research will be kept secure and any identifying material, such as names and addresses will be removed in order to ensure your anonymity. The research forms part of my PhD dissertation and it is anticipated that the research will be written up into a thesis which will be assessed. However, your anonymity will be ensured and all the information I have collected about you will continue to be kept secure.

If you decide to withdraw your data from the study after participation you can contact the researcher by phone or by email. Please note that you can do this until July 2009 after which the researcher will have already written up the thesis. If you require any further information about the research please contact the researcher, Fiona Anderson 01274 232323 f.e.anderson@bradford.ac.uk. Thank you for reading this information sheet and taking part in this research.