THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF LEISURE FOR WOMEN IN LATER LIFE

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DECLARATION

I declare that this work has not been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

I further declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated (a bibliography is appended).

Finally, I give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be made available for photocopying, for interlibrary loan, and for the title and abstract to be made available to outside organisations.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in the number of men living beyond the age of fifty, the sex ratio (the number of men to the number of women) is still 85 men per 100 women in the UK. Indeed at the age of 85 and over, the sex ratio is only 40 men per 100 women, clearly indicating that older women outnumber men, particularly at the ‘oldest-old’ phase of life. In this context, it is surprising that little research exists within the field of leisure studies on the significance and meaning of leisure for this group. This thesis therefore, attempts to provide an in depth exploration of the role leisure plays in the lives of women aged 75 and over.

The thesis begins by examining demographic trends in the UK, placing particular emphasis on the growth in the number of older women. Consideration is then given to examining the increasing number of initiatives, from both international and national agencies, to ensure that the lives of older people are fulfilled and that they are able to participate fully in society. In particular, emphasis is placed on examining the ‘active ageing’ agenda of both UK national and regional government. The optimistic approaches to later life adopted by the active ageing initiatives is then contrasted with the negative, ageist societal understandings and expectations of old age.

Approaches to later life which both the fields of gerontology and leisure studies have adopted are also analysed. In doing so, similarities in the way both fields have treated older people are highlighted, particularly the often negative and pessimistic portrayals of older people’s lives within these fields. In doing so, the need for more critical approaches to the study of later life is highlighted. The contribution which postmodern and feminist research can make to more in-depth and optimistic assessments of older women’s lives is also considered.

In recognising the need for more critical research on older women aged 75 and over, particularly research which listens to the voices of older women themselves, rather than treating them as ‘objects’ of research, this thesis used both semi-structured and biographical interviews to examine the leisure of this under researched group. The
findings contradict many stereotyped perceptions of older women as passive, under active participants in leisure but instead present a picture of this group of women as leading busy, fulfilled lives, engaged in much purposeful and highly satisfying leisure activity. In doing so, this alternative research approach provides an insight into older women’s leisure which challenges society’s often ageist and negative portrayals of older women’s lives. The research findings also indicate the extent to which these older women’s distinct interpretations and meanings of leisure have emerged as a result of shared structural and historical events as well as individual personal experiences. Thus, whilst the semi-structured interviews allowed for an insight into the women’s current leisure activities, at a snap shot in time, the biographical interviews allowed for an exploration of the historical social, cultural and political contexts through which they have lived and which have influenced their life chances, opportunities and experiences as well as their current perceptions of leisure.
DEDICATION

To my family.
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Firstly, I would like to thank all of the women who agreed to be included within this work. I appreciated the time they gave, their honesty and openness in telling their enriching stories that made this work possible.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DWP: Department for Work and Pensions
EU: European Union
OFNS: Office for National Statistics
PIU: Performance and Innovation Unit
UK: United Kingdom
UN: United Nations
WAG: Welsh Assembly Government
WHO: World Health Organisation
CHAPTER 1

OLDER PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

1.1. Introduction
1.2. Study rationale
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CHAPTER 1: OLDER PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

1.1. Introduction

As an introduction to the rest of this thesis, this chapter aims to outline the demographic changes that have occurred in the last decade in the developed world and specifically in the United Kingdom (UK), in relation to the growth in the number of older people. Emphasis is placed on the growth in the number of older women, particularly those aged over 75 years. Government policy, in relation to the resource challenges that increased numbers of older people represent is considered, but priority is given to highlighting recent public policies, which aim to ensure that the lives and leisure opportunities of older people are maximised. The positive aspects of these Government policies are contrasted with society’s often negative and ageist treatment and attitudes towards older people. The impact of such attitudes on research studies of older people is also considered, particularly the pathological, pessimistic nature of much of the research findings. The quantitative nature of much of this research is also examined as is its failure to capture, in any depth, the subjective meanings of leisure for subgroups of older people, specifically women in the oldest-old phase.

Against this background, the chapter presents a case for more qualitative research studies of older people, particularly women in the oldest-old category, who have been neglected within gerontology, leisure and even feminist studies. It attempts to capture, at first hand, the subjective nature and meaning of their leisure and thereby allows space for some of the negative assumptions around older people’s leisure to be challenged. In particular, biographical research is identified as an approach which brings increased insight, allowing historical, cultural and personal events to emerge and their impact on people’s lives to be unveiled. The aim, along with the objectives of the work, is presented in the latter part of this chapter. An insight into some of my own personal reasons for undertaking this research is also presented within this chapter. Finally an overview of the content and layout of each chapter within the thesis is also presented in the concluding section of this introduction.
1.2. Study rationale

The demographic transformation in relation to the growth of older age cohorts in many regions of the world is dramatic. This is particularly the case in the developed world where improvements in medicine, diet and lifestyle are contributing to an increase in life expectancy. The United Nations (UN) (2002:1), for example, estimates that the number of older people in the developed world will quadruple over the next fifty years. In the UK in 2002, there were 19.8 million people aged 50 and over, a 24% increase since 1961 (Office of National Statistics - OFNS 1999).

Interestingly, the fastest growing group of older people are those in the ‘oldest-old’ category, that is, those aged 80 years or more (UN 2002:6). In the UK, the proportion of people aged 85 and over increased from 0.7% in 1961 to 1.9% in 2002 (OFNS 2005). Projections suggest a more rapid ageing of the population over the next thirty years, as by 2031 people aged over 85 will comprise 9.1% of the population (OFNS 2005). Whereas in England and Wales in 1961 there were fewer than 600 centenarians, by 1991 this had risen to around 4,400 people (OFNS 1999). It is estimated that in thirty years the number of centenarians in the UK will have quadrupled to 34,000 (Mintel 2000). By 2055, the figure will be even higher (Figure 1.1) (Department for Work and Pensions 2005).

**Figure 1.1. Projected number of people aged 100 and over, 2005-2050, UK**
Within this group of ‘oldest-old’, the majority are women who are still more likely to survive to each successive age than men. For example, there are 18% more women than men aged over 50 and in 2002 there were 2.6 women for every man aged 85 and over (OFNS 2005), a process described by Arber and Ginn (1991:1) as the ‘feminization’ of later life.

This ‘age quake’ or ‘longevity revolution’ as it has been referred to by some commentators (www.ilcuk.org.uk), has given rise to concern over the financial costs associated with such a huge demographic shift, particularly the costs of supporting increased numbers of pensions and healthcare at a time when there will be increased dependency ratios between older and younger people of working age. Projections suggest that the working age population will start declining in almost all European Union countries by 2015, by which time the population aged 55-64 will have risen to 22% of the total compared to just 16% now (Performance and Innovation Unit - PIU 2000).

However, whilst much of the debate around the demographic changes has related to the financial costs associated with this ‘apocalyptic demography’ as described by Arber and Ginn (2004), more recently there have been calls for a refocusing of attention towards policies which focus on the positive aspects of these changes. For example, Arber and Ginn (2004:2) maintain that increased numbers of older people should be celebrated:

This should be a cause for celebration that advances in public and preventive health measures and medical care, as well as the socio economic well being of the population have led to this extension of life.

We have therefore seen the emergence of public policies which do not just consider the ‘problems’ of increased numbers of older people but also recognise that older people can participate fully in society. Thus, there have been increasing attempts to challenge the association of old age with illness and decline and to create positive images of older people. For example, organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UN have been working hard to formulate policies, which promote a new, more positive attitude towards older people. The UN in particular, has been keen to stress that there has been an over concentration on the
economic costs of an ageing population and that older ‘persons are disproportionately portrayed as a drain on the economy, with their escalating need for health and support services.’ The result of this, argues the UN, is that ‘public focus on the scale and cost of health care, pensions and other services have sometimes fostered a negative image of ageing’ (UN 2002:38).

In this context, increased emphasis is being placed on active, participatory and inclusive ageing by policy makers, and hence on removing barriers that prevent older people from participating fully in society and challenging the negative connotations associated with old age. The UN International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002), for example, was developed to assist policy makers identify the key issues associated with population ageing. It identified as one of its priority areas, the need for ‘Provision of opportunities for individual development, self – fulfilment and well being throughout life as well as in life’ (2002:7). The report recognised that in order to achieve this, older people must be able to participate in ‘social economic, cultural, sporting, recreational and volunteer activities as these contribute to the growth and maintenance of personal well being’ (UN 2002:9).

The EU has also been active in trying to promote a more positive approach to ageing, in its document, ‘A New Paradigm in Ageing Policy’ (1999), where it emphasises the importance of the need to promote and encourage ‘active ageing’, and the need to adjust ‘our life practises to the fact that we live longer and are more resourceful and in better health than ever before. In practise it means adopting healthy lifestyles, working longer, retiring later and being active after retirement.’

At a national level, the UK Government has also started to promote ‘active ageing’ to ensure the lives of older people are fulfilled through discussions like ‘The Debate of the Age’ and initiatives such as the ‘Better Government for Older People (BGOP) ‘to improve public services for older people by better meeting their needs, listening to their views, and encouraging and recognising their contribution’ (BGOP 2000:3). In addition, we have also seen a number of government sponsored statistical reports about older people such as the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) ‘Growing Older programme’, which focuses ‘attention on the role of older people as citizens rather than as dependents.’ In 2000, the UK Government published its report ‘Winning the Generation Game’ in which it outlined its desire to help
everyone remain active in later life not just in relation to work but also in relation to leisure or community participation, whether at age 50, 70 or 90. In 2005, the Government also produced ‘Opportunity Age’ (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2005) a strategy aimed at improving life for older people over the next 10-15 years so that older people can meet their aspirations.

In Wales, where the primary data collection process for this study has been undertaken, the first UK Strategy for Older People (2003) has been formulated by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) to confront problems of ageism and discrimination against older people, to promote positive images of ageing and give older people a greater voice in decision making. In addition, WAG intends to appoint a Commissioner for Older People to ensure that their interests are taken into account both by it, its sponsored bodies and by Welsh local authorities. In many ways, the Commissioner for Older People will replicate what the Commissioner for Children and Young People does in ensuring that their rights are protected. That such an initiative has been pioneered in Wales is perhaps not surprising as it currently has the oldest population in the UK; between now and 2031 the number of very old people (aged 85 and over) in Wales is expected to increase to 4.3% of the population (DWP 2005).

Thus, it is clear that in light of the growing numbers of older people, there is a desire on the part of many international and UK Governmental agencies to ensure that the lives of older people are fulfilled and their rights safeguarded. Indeed, the ‘active ageing’ element of many of these policies would seem to signify a new regard for older people and a shift away from a problem-oriented focus towards an approach that highlights the opportunities later life can offer.

On a personal level, not only has the recent focus on changing demographics and the emphasis within Government policy on older people centred my own attention on the subject of older people, but so too has my own ageing and the ageing of family and friends around me. For example, my ageing parents, now approaching their eighties, my mother-in-law’s recent eightieth birthday, my father-in-law’s death two years ago, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law’s approach towards their own retirement in the next two years, have all caused me to think more about what getting older means not only for my life but also for those around me. Perhaps because of the entry
into so called ‘old age’ of many of those around me, I have also become increasingly aware of society’s often dismissive and patronising attitude towards older people, particularly of its potentially hurtful impact but also of the fact that the lives of the ‘old’ people around me do not reflect these negative portrayals. My own parents, for example, are still highly active, socially engaged and far removed from the stereotyped media images of those in their seventies and eighties that we are so frequently exposed to. My own grandmother’s death last year at the age of 104 also caused me to reflect on the realities of later life, especially as, up until the last two years of her life, she was still interested in the lives of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, still interested in clothes, makeup, jewellery and still enjoyed her regular visits to the shopping malls which she had always indulged in and enjoyed.

However, despite the positive role models around me and despite the new emphasis in public policy to redefine the lives of older people in a more positive way, the rhetoric is often not matched by society’s representations of, and attitudes towards, older people. As Scrutton (1990:12) states:

*The popularly held view of old age today is of very old people, usually women, living alone, socially isolated, managing on inadequate incomes, poorly housed, suffering ill health, dependent on young carers, yet isolated from their families. Unhappy, withdrawn, but at the same time not interested in making new friends, they have lost their energy, enthusiasm and drive...*

Indeed, ageist portrayals of older people pervade our society and are evident in the media, advertising and the patronising, everyday terms used to describe older people. To illustrate this, a recent survey conducted by Age Concern (the UK’s largest charity working with and for older people) into age related prejudice, ‘How Ageist is Britain?’ (2005), found that more people had suffered age discrimination than any other form of discrimination. It stated that 30% of people believed that there is more prejudice against the old than five years ago and that one in three people in the UK now regard the old as incompetent and incapable.

Unfortunately, such ageist and negative portrayals of older people are often reflected in analyses of leisure in later life. Research findings, for example, often
highlight disengagement with leisure and decreases in active involvement, as Tokarski (1991:79) observes:

only in a few cases are other tendencies mentioned, for example, tendencies for increases or even changes in leisure lifestyles... if we trust these findings, people seem to look for stable leisure structures during the life course with a certain tendency to reduce these structures and show a rather ‘poor’ leisure life if they grow older.

Thus, emphasis is often placed on the obstacles and barriers that older people face in their leisure and this is both pessimistic and problem-oriented in focus. Constraints like poor health, low incomes and lack of mobility are often cited. Such research not only supports the negative stereotyping of older people in our society but also generalises about their leisure behaviour, frequently characterising all older people in the same way and failing to recognise the diversity of experience within their lives.

One reason why research on older people’s leisure fails to recognise the heterogeneity of experience is its tendency to define older people as all those aged over sixty years of age, grouping people with as many as forty years between them into the same category of ‘old.’ Such research, based on large samples of all those aged over sixty not only homogenises their leisure experiences but also fails to explore, in any depth, the subjective and personal aspects of their leisure (King 2002), making analysis of specific subgroups of the older population, such as women in the ‘oldest-old’ phase problematic. In this scenario, it is therefore hardly surprising that despite the growing numbers and the prevalence of women in the ‘oldest-old’ phase of life, there has been little research which has examined their attitudes, motivations and, reasons for choice of leisure activities in any depth. Indeed little has changed since Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998), described older women in leisure studies as a ‘silent’ and ‘marginalised’ group and called for more research to make the lives of older women more visible, almost ten years ago.

Even feminists have been accused of neglecting older women within their research, concentrating instead on issues affecting middle-aged women and young girls. Calsanti and Slevin (2006:1), for example, state that:
An inadvertent but pernicious ageism burdens much of feminist scholarship and activism... Some feminists mention age-based oppression but treat it as a given – an et cetera on a list of oppressions... As a result, feminist work suffers, and we engage in our own oppression.

Twigg (2004:2) observes that when feminists have considered later life, they have failed to consider ‘deep old age’, focussing on women between fifty and seventy years of age. Calsanti and Slevin (2006:3) identify another weakness of feminist research on older women as its failure to consider women on their own terms: ‘feminists have not talked to old women to explore their daily experiences’ or, even questioned the stigma affixed to old age. Thus, there remains an absence of work within leisure studies that attempts to explore, in any rich or detailed way, the leisure of older women, particularly women in the oldest-old phase of life, from their own perspective and which challenges many of the negative connotations of later life.

1.3. Study aims

The previous section has identified four key justifications for this study. Firstly, changing demographics in which older people, particularly women in the ‘oldest-old’ phase, are increasing in numbers, and yet are often absent within the field of leisure and feminist research. Secondly, increasing Government focus on active, participatory ageing and initiatives to tackle ageism also add impetus to the need for such a study, particularly as few researchers within leisure studies have recognised or even acknowledged the role of leisure within this agenda. Thirdly, despite Government initiatives to tackle ageism, ageist attitudes, as documented by agencies such as Age Concern, are still rife within society and often contribute to the bleak findings of much research into the lives of older people, including their leisure. Finally, the absence of research focussed on specific subgroups of the older population, such as women aged seventy-five and over also makes this study a timely and useful one.

Against this background, this work attempts to provide an in-depth insight into the leisure of older women, aged seventy-five and over. In doing so, consideration is given to the negative, socially constructed meanings of ‘old age’ and later life. Theories of later life within gerontology and leisure studies, such as functionalism, are
also critiqued, particularly the role they play in perpetuating pessimistic, generalised insights into later life. In attempting to critically analyse and compare theories and approaches to older people in both gerontology and leisure studies, the work is also mindful of Gibson’s (2006) and Harahousou’s (2006) pleas for a greater integration of the gerontology and geriatrics literature into leisure research.

To arrive at a more complete understanding of leisure in later life, researchers should not segregate leisure research from a much larger and more comprehensive body of literature about the elderly. Leisure scholars must integrate the basic gerontology and geriatrics literature (Harahousou 2006:232).

As well as critically analysing and comparing theories of later life in both gerontology and leisure studies, the thesis also examines how both gerontology and leisure studies have tended to research older people using positivist and quantitative methodologies and methods, which have regarded them as the ‘objects’ of research, about whom, objective facts and models of behaviour can be formulated. In doing so, the lack of research on older people, which involves and consults with them in the research process, allowing their voices to be heard is highlighted. In particular, the emphasis on the biological aspects of ageing is cited as one of the reasons for the one dimensional, distanced analyses of older people’s lives and, in turn the focus on the decline and the disabling aspects of ageing. This work therefore examines and emphasises the need for greater critical research in gerontology, leisure and feminist studies that challenges the decline models of ageing, allows for more rounded sociological insights into older women’s lives by giving them a voice in the research process and provides scope to confront the negative assumptions around the medical, pathological models of ageing.

In achieving this and making the lives of older women more visible, the work adopts a constructionist, phenomenological approach to explore older women’s experiences and understandings of leisure. The work also adopts a feminist approach to ensure that the social, cultural and patriarchal structures affecting women’s lives are considered. However, in focusing on older women in the oldest phase of life, aged seventy-five and over, the work attempts to overcome some of the criticisms levied at many feminist researchers for neglecting this age group. In adopting a
phenomenological and feminist approach, the study used both qualitative semi-structured and biographical interviews involving a small sample of women aged over seventy-five in Cardiff, South Wales, to ensure the women’s subjective perspectives of the meanings and significance of leisure for them were captured. The twelve women, all living alone (due to divorce or widowhood) in their own homes in the largely working-class area of Roath in Cardiff, were encouraged to speak openly from their own perspective on their experiences and perceptions of leisure. Their insights proved to be far removed from the depressing representations of leisure in later life so commonly portrayed and, in this sense, the research has also proved to be emancipatory.

The overall aim and objectives of the research are presented below.

**Aim:**

To gain insight into the meanings and significance of leisure for women aged over seventy-five.

**Objectives:**

- To examine the social and cultural understandings and representations of later life within society;
- To analyse the theories and assumptions surrounding the study of older people within gerontology and how these have impacted on understandings and approaches to research on older people, particularly older women;
- To critique leisure studies research on older people, highlighting how older people and specifically older women have been treated and researched within the field;
- To highlight the need for more critical research within both gerontology and leisure studies, particularly that which challenges the negative stereotypes surrounding the study of older people and which gives older people a voice in the research process;
- To explore with older women, over seventy-five, their subjective experiences and perspectives on their current leisure and to explore the historical, social, cultural and personal influences which have shaped this;
To examine the role that biographical research can play in revealing historical, social and cultural, as well as personal factors pertinent to older women’s perceptions and understandings of leisure.

1.4. Overview of the thesis

Chapter one has provided an insight into the reasons for this study and outlined the aim and objectives of the work as well as the research approach. Chapter two moves on to consider the current position of older people within western society by analysing the socially constructed meanings of later life. Emphasis is placed on how these understandings often denigrate and patronise older people. The chapter also considers the attempts of postmodernists to challenge the negative stereotypes surrounding later life by highlighting the fluidity and lack of predictability, around all life stages and emphasising, in particular, the possibilities in later life for challenging these assumptions. The chapter concludes with a critique of postmodernism’s contribution towards an understanding of later life as well as its influence on the methodology and choice of methods within this thesis.

Chapter three considers the theoretical basis of much of the research that has been undertaken on later life within gerontology. Consideration is given to functionalist approaches to understanding later life, particularly disengagement, activity and continuity theories. Feminist and political economy approaches to understanding later life are also analysed. An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these theoretical approaches is asserted. The concluding section outlines how consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these theoretical approaches has influenced this study and the approach taken to understanding the lives of older women.

Whilst chapter three presents a critical overview of the theories of later life which have dominated gerontology, chapter four considers the theories of leisure which have dominated the leisure field since the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, functionalist, structuralist, individualist, feminist and postmodern theories of leisure are examined and critically evaluated. The impact that each of these theories has had on the position both of women and of older people within leisure studies is considered. The chapter also attempts to draw parallels between the theoretical approaches taken for older people in gerontology, outlined in chapter three, and those taken in leisure.
studies, arguing that they have had similar implications for the way in which the two fields have treated and regarded older people. The chapter concludes by outlining how my study has drawn upon aspects of the theories of leisure outlined and how these have influenced the approach taken to the understanding of older women’s leisure in this research.

Chapter five analyses the emergence of gerontology and leisure studies as academic disciplines. At the same time as highlighting similarities in the way both gerontology and leisure studies have evolved, the chapter also considers similarities in the way both fields have undertaken research, especially on older women. In particular, the positivist, quantitative nature of research is highlighted which has tended to result in research findings which posit universal models of later life and leisure behaviour and which emphasise the negative aspects of older people’s lives. Consideration is given within the chapter for evaluating the impact of calls for more critical, qualitative research in both gerontology and leisure studies and the implications of such approaches for the way older people are researched and their lives presented.

Chapter six outlines the theoretical stance developed within this work. In adopting a relativist approach which recognises that ‘knowledge’ is ‘positioned’ according to our location in time and place (Gray 2003), I also include a reflexive statement in this chapter on how my own background, political beliefs and experiences might have influenced the work. The focus of this chapter is also on the ethical issues that I considered before undertaking this work. Detail of the methods used to collect the primary material on the lives of the women within the study is included within this chapter as well as information on the group of women involved in the study, the process of contacting them and the undertaking of the semi-structured and biographical interviews is outlined. Justification is provided for the choice of methods by outlining the advantages of semi-structured and biographical interviews. An explanation of how the interviews were analysed and the themes emerging from the interviews identified is also presented.

Chapter seven presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews in which six themes were identified: entry into retirement; replacing paid work; friendship groups; participative leisure; survival and leisure; and satisfaction in leisure. The findings challenge the view that older women, particularly those aged seventy-five
years and over, are inactive and disengaged but instead present a picture of the
women's lives as fulfilled, and participating in a range of leisure activities from which
they gain immense satisfaction. In many cases, the women are more actively involved
in leisure than at any other time of their lives.

The findings of the biographical interviews with Alice, Mary and Mrs Ansell are
presented in chapter eight. Each of the women's lives and narratives are analysed
individually, focussing on how structural forces and personal events have impacted on
the women's perceptions and experiences of leisure both in the past and,
subsequently, today. The chapter concludes with an analysis, identifying the
similarities within aspects of their lives, particularly the impact of structural and
historical events, as well as the distinctive features of their personal circumstances and
how these have influenced their understanding of leisure.

Chapter nine concludes the work by reflecting on what the women's lives and stories
tell us about leisure in later life and how these findings compare with other research
findings and assumptions within both gerontology and leisure studies on the subject.
The value of the work in challenging the stereotyped assumptions around the later life
of women in this age group is highlighted. The growing importance of understanding
leisure in later life for women and also for men, who are living longer and longer, is
also stressed. Reflections on how the subject of leisure and later life might be taken
forward in future research are presented together with an exploration of how the
research might inform policy development and practice. The value of biographical
methods in understanding the leisure of older people is emphasised as well its
potential value in understanding and contextualising the leisure of all age groups. The
conclusion also emphasises the need within leisure studies to ensure that critical and
potentially emancipatory research on older people continues together with work on
other often silent, marginalised, ignored and 'ordinary' groups within society. Such
work, it is postulated should ensure that deeper, richer theoretical insights emerge by
allowing participants' voices to come to the fore thus giving them an equal part and
say in the research process as co-researchers rather than merely participants.
CHAPTER 2

DEFINING OLD AGE

2.1. Introduction
2.2. Social and cultural understandings of ‘old age’
2.3. Critiquing postmodern perspectives on later life
2.4. Summary
CHAPTER 2: DEFINING OLD AGE

2.1. Introduction

In any study on older people, one of the great difficulties is in trying to identify who ‘older people’ are, and what the term ‘old age’ actually means. This chapter will therefore analyse the biologically constructed meanings of ‘old age.’ However, greater focus will be placed on analysing the socially constructed meanings and values attached to later life, in particular the subjective assumptions around chronological age and life stages. In doing so, the chapter will highlight the ageist, stereotyped assumptions around current definitions and perceptions of ‘old age’, focussing on how these manifest themselves in relation to the media, advertising, occupational and bodily representations of older people. Finally, the chapter considers postmodernist attempts to present later life in less predictable and more positive terms and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

2.2. Social and cultural understandings of ‘old age’

‘Although age appears to be an objective measuring of years and physiological change, the meanings that it carries are always socially constructed’ (Gardner 2002:19). Gardner’s observations lead us to question the meaning of ‘old age’ and the perceptions about what old age is. Although age appears to be a statement of fact, the concept is socially constructed rather than dependent on the physiological or biological process involved in ageing. The term ‘old age’ is highly subjective, usually dependent on cultural and historical location. There are many examples in the literature where this idea is explored in a variety of ways. The subjective and historical determinacy of old age, for example, is clearly illustrated in Gail Wilson’s (2000) example of pre-industrialisation, when she argues older people were held in great esteem for the economic resources, such as property which they controlled. Hockey and James (1993) indicate how the meaning of old age is culturally determined by referring to the Venda speaking people of southern Africa, who celebrate the signs of old age, greying hair and the arrival of grandchildren, as an indication of death’s proximity and entry into the ‘real’ world of the spirits. Pilcher (1995) similarly argues that the meaning of old age is culturally determined, referring to the example of Afghanistan where, with a life expectancy in the mid thirties, the
Afghans' experiences and expectations of 'old age' are markedly different from those in Britain, which has a life expectancy in the mid seventies. Vincent (2003:4) cites examples of cultures where old age and age itself is not even considered relevant, concluding that 'The same constructions of old age are not to be found universally, but rather that there is a wide diversity of experience of old age across the world.'

If western society alone is considered, 'old age' is usually defined by reference to an individual's chronological age which, in itself, carries many subjective assumptions that are often used to determine many aspects of older people's lives: retirement; when they can claim a pension; whether they can obtain a driving license and even eligibility for a free bus pass. Chronological age is also used as a basis for making value judgements about older people, very often allocating those aged 60 and over, into the category of 'old' or 'past it' (Vincent 2003:9).

Western society also uses the idea of 'life stages' to characterise older people. Bernice Neugarten (1974), for example, divided older people into the 'young old' (55-74) and 'old-old' (over seventy-five). In the late 1980s Laslett (1989:4) identified four stages of ageing:

\[
\text{First comes an era of dependence, socialization, immaturity and education; second an age of independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and saving; third an era of personal fulfilment; and fourth an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death.}
\]

Life stages or lifecycles have also been used within leisure studies to predict individuals' leisure patterns over their lifetimes. One of the first attempts to do this was that of the Rapoports in their book Leisure and the family life cycle (1975) which devised a theoretical framework using a number of key stages in people's lives, ranging from young adulthood through to later life. Outlined within the book are the 'normal' patterns of behaviour and the times when this behaviour is likely to occur.

Thus, in the same way that chronological age has been used to determine the developmental stages which people go through or 'should' go through, so have life stages. However, to make value judgements about the lives of older people based on their chronological age or stage in their life cycle is fundamentally flawed.
It is not possible to specify inevitable sequences; life is too random and dependent on many variables such as class, gender, social, historical and cultural location, all of which determine how individuals age. As Bernard and Meade (1993:8) state, chronological age and life bands fail to acknowledge "the ebb and flow of life, and hinder our understanding of the different paths that individual development might take."

To rely on both constructs of chronological age and life stages to understand older people’s lives is particularly concerning when the socially constructed influences of old age in Western society, on which these constructs are based, is negative, pejorative and characterised by dependency, frailty, decline, loneliness and social isolation. The way society often refers to older people in derogatory terms such as ‘past it’, ‘over the hill’, ‘one foot in the grave’, ‘old fogy’, ‘old biddy’ or ‘old bat’ is indicative of the outcomes of these influences (Pilcher 1995). Victor (2005) identifies five common stereotypes of older people used in our society to illustrate society’s negative attitudes towards later life: all older people are lonely; older people cannot learn; older people are in poor health; old people are a dependent group incapable of exercising self-determination and finally that older people have a common set of needs. Such stereotypes are inaccurate and fail to take into account the diverse nature of the lives of older people, as Vincent (2003:29) asserts:

*Simple associations between chronological age and physical and social dependency need to be challenged... the variety of ways of being ‘old’ are as different as the ways of being in one’s ‘prime.’*

Unfortunately, however, such negative stereotypes are rife within society and give rise to ageism where older people are systematically discriminated against. Age Concern’s research project ‘How ageist is Britain? (2004) found that one in three people regard the over 70s as incompetent and incapable. It is clear that in our society, old age and older people are devalued, ageism is a feature of the society in which we live and, unfortunately, as Estes et al. (2003:33) observe, this negative regard for older people has become:
A way of seeing that shapes what is seen... accepted by formal communities, professions and policy makers and the collection of evidence and the formal classification of what is normal and what is deviant follows.

Old age remains a basis and justification for unequal forms of social organisation, power and control. What is especially concerning is that such ageism touches the lives of everyone and, in this respect, is very different from racism, classism, disablism and sexism. As Scrutton (1990:14) makes clear:

*Older people do not form an exclusive group, but one which every individual will eventually become a member. The white racist will never be black; the male sexist will never be female; but the young ageist will grow old.*

The negative way in which society regards older people manifests itself in a variety of ways. For example, the media consistently use negative stereotyped images of older people which diminish their status. To illustrate, society can often caricature older people as ‘moaning’ and ‘interfering’ and this is exemplified by the British comedy television character Victor Meldrew in the series ‘One Foot in the Grave’ (Figure 2.1). Research recently undertaken by researchers at Brigham Young University in Utah in 2007, even found Disney’s media portrayals of older people ageist. In the research, researchers looked at 93 Disney characters who appeared to be aged 55 and over and found that a significant number of these older characters were portrayed as unintelligent, nasty, bad tempered or useless (Figure 2.2), clearly fostering negative images of elderly people within the young from a young age.
Figure 2.1. Victor Meldrew from the British television series ‘One Foot in the Grave’

Figure 2.2. Examples of ageist portrayals of older people in Disney cartoons

From the left, Smee, the comic buffoon and menace to Captain Hook in Peter Pan, the menacing character of Cruella de Vil from One Hundred and One Dalmatians and the wild, manic character of Madame Mim from The Sword in the Stone.
As well as film and television media, advertising also tends to portray older people in ways which diminish their status within society. A prime example of this is the Irish gambling company, PaddyPower’s 2005 advertisement that encouraged people to anticipate the likelihood of a four-wheel drive vehicle hitting infirm older women (Figure 2.3). Such advertisements and the attitude which they convey exacerbate the problems of ageism by trivialising older people’s value and worth.

**Figure 2.3. PaddyPower advertisement**

![PaddyPower advertisement](image)

Within the workplace and despite recent UK Governmental legislation to remove the retirement age, older workers are still the victims of ageism, particularly in relation to job tenure, recruitment and promotional opportunities. Even when older people leave work they face increased attempts to reduce and even remove their pension entitlements. Older people in retirement and outside paid employment are increasingly regarded as a ‘burden’ which, in turn, further devalues them within society (Scrutton 1990).

Even the medical profession is accused of perpetuating ageism within society through its tendency to regard ‘normal’ old age as one associated with pain, sickness, immobility and disease. As Scrutton (1990:20) states:

*Comments made by some doctors to older people nurture and encourage the view that pain, illness and disease are an unavoidable feature of normal ageism.*
Not surprisingly many sociologists have contested this biological understanding of ageing, emphasising the need to recognise that later life is largely shaped by the impact of social and cultural constructs and expectations of ageing. As Hepworth (2003:90) states:

*Sociologists do not deny that ageing is a process of biological change; rather they wish to draw attention to the social and personal implications of the ways in which the meanings of biological change as ‘decline’ are culturally constructed and interpreted through discourse.*

In this scenario, it is no wonder that Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) refer to the ‘mask of ageing’ in which people’s sense of youthfulness is masked by an ageing body and face, and which society interprets in negative ways and hides the essential identity of those beneath it.

As a result of such treatment, Hepworth (2003:91) observes that much work within gerontology represents a:

*struggle between biological and socially constructed models of ageing where the former defines ageing negatively as decline and the latter holds out the promise of creating positive discourses of ageing which celebrate and promote the ideology of a positive diversity of human identities in later life.*

However, despite the attempts of sociologists to redefine society’s understandings of later life, the emphasis on the biomedical model of ageing and its associations with physical decline and debilitation as ‘natural’ objective phenomena, remains. In turn, this leads to a desire within society to resist ageing and, instead, to emphasise youth and its equation with beauty. This link between youth and beauty then leads to an even greater cultural denigration of later life as the ageing body comes to represent a ‘problem’ and reflects the current value attached to older people within society (Schilling 2003). This attitude manifests itself through an increasing emphasis within society on maintaining a youthful presentation of the body and resisting the physical changes which occur as people age. What Schilling (1993:5) describes as the ‘body project’ emerges, where individuals work towards the youthful, societal
expectations of what the body should look and behave like, ‘*a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s self-esteem.*’

Holstein (2006:322) observes how the media and advertisers exploit the ‘body project’ by constantly encouraging older people to stay looking young, admonishing:

*Why look old when a new cream, facial peel, surgical procedure or Botox injection can restore us to our former appearance and thus to our youthful selves?*

Anti-ageing, argues McHugh, (2003:171) has become ‘the ultimate restoration project.’ This emphasis on remaining young also manifests itself in the way marketers either sequester from public attention (Schilling 2003) or, alternatively, present to the public ‘idealised’ images of ‘youthful’ older people and later life (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995). For example, the way in which tour operators promote images of ‘successful’ older people, as the ‘young’ old with youthful lifestyles is indicative of this consumer-led presentation of older people. Such images of older people are seen in the advertising of the most recent 07/08 Wintersun brochures of Thomas Cook’s ‘Prime Time’ and Cosmos’s ‘Golden Times’ branding aimed at the over 50s (Figure 2.4 and Figure 2.5)
Figure 2.4. Thomas Cook 07/08 Wintersun brochure promoting its ‘Prime Time’ brand

Figure 2.5. Cosmos 07/08 Winter Holidays brochure promoting ‘Golden Times’ brand
Agencies like tour operators and even the advertising media more generally, consistently confront older people with a range of identities which they can replicate using their disposable income, as Rustin (2000:33) points out:

*Society exposes individuals to bombardments of information, alternative versions of how life might be lived, and requires of individuals that they construct an 'authentic' version of themselves, making use of the numerous identity-props which consumer-society makes available.*

Katz, (1995:70) argues that these can be one-dimensional portrayals of later life and can mean that:

*The chances of experiencing the ageing of the body in a meaningfully temporal, open and unalienated way are slim. Thus the postmodern life course engenders a simulated life-span, one that promises to enhance living by stretching middle-age into a timelessness...*

Positive portrayals of older people and later life are to be welcomed, but these lifestyle choices are inevitably not open to everyone. McHugh (2003:170) observes that such images might be concerning because they imply that ‘unsuccessful’ ageing is ‘perhaps a frail older housebound woman living in a deteriorating neighbourhood’ and thus part of the ‘negative scripts of later life.’ McHugh (2003:179) argues that this situation is a form of ‘bipolar’ ageism which serves to repress and hide the oldest old. Scrutton (1990:20) also observes how the emphasis in society on remaining youthful amounts to another form of ageism arguing:

*the link that is assumed between beauty and youth implies a link between old age and ugliness, and is detrimental to older people. It supports the belief that ageing makes people unattractive, and no longer physically or sexually interesting.*

Scrutton (1990:20) argues that these understandings of later life place greater pressure on women than men to resist the ageing process and remain young, particularly as
'dominant sexist ideas have created the belief that being attractive is more important for women.'

Despite concerns about the emphasis on youthfulness and how it denigrates older people, the media continue to embrace the ‘staying young’ agenda, frequently focussing on those older people who are said to have ‘triumphed’ over the inevitable decline and decay of later life. These people are celebrated, regarded as unusually heroic and exceptions to the rule ‘Their performances... are often described in those tones of awe and wonder that only serve to reinforce the commonsensical belief that decline is ‘normal” (Hepworth 2003). The extensive recent publicity surrounding the emergence of the British rock band the Zimmers (Figure 2.6), whose lead singer is 90 and the oldest member 100, is evidence of this.

**Figure 2.6. The Zimmers**

George Bush Senior’s parachute jump (Figure 2.7) on his eightieth birthday also received an extensive amount of media coverage exemplifying society’s bemusement and curiosity around older people who behave ‘out of the ordinary’ and outside of the expected typecast.
Against this backdrop it is perhaps not surprising that the stereotyping of older people and the emphasis on youth within society influences, not only how society regards older people, but also the way in which older people see themselves. The stereotyping, which presents the old as inferior, and old age as undesirable, leads to a situation where many older people absorb these ideas. As Wearing (1995:265) states:

*The aged themselves internalise these ‘truths’ and respond with subjectivities which incorporate and perpetuate powerlessness, docile bodies and increasing dependence. Self-fulfilling prophesies emerge.*

In light of the negative biological, social and cultural constructs of later life it is not surprising that many gerontologists and sociologists have called for a new dialogue around later life which is not problem-based but which also considers positive aspects of ageing, as Hagestad (1986:8) asks:

*When are we going to look at the positive sides? When are we going to discuss the old as societal and interpersonal resources... When are we going to recognise that dependence and neediness and requiring time, attention and resources are found in all age categories? When will...*
we recognise that many discussions of 'problems of the elderly' could substitute the word 'young' for the word 'old' in the text, and still make good sense?

The next section considers the attempts of postmodernists to do just this, by redefining society’s understandings and expectations of later life.

2.3. Critiquing postmodern perspectives on later life

Whilst the negative images and predetermined assumptions surrounding later life cannot be denied, their validity is being increasingly questioned by postmodernists who argue that the concept of ‘old age’ is becoming redundant. Postmodernists argue that older people’s lives have become less predictable, less fixed and far more individualised and diverse, and that it is no longer possible to assume what the characteristics of their lives are. Older people, like the rest of the population, are being exposed to a range of identities and visions of how to lead their lives and consequently make diverse life choices, which are impossible to predict and stereotype. Even the concept of retirement, ‘The single most important transition that is seen to mark entry into old age’ is no longer fixed at sixty-five (Vincent 2003:9).

Walker and Maltby (1997:13) agree observing that retirement, as marking entry into old age, is an 'increasingly anachronistic' term, since people leave work in a variety of ways: early retirement, partial retirement, redundancy, unemployment, disability and so on.

Not only do people have more choices around the institutionalised aspects of their lives, but also in relation to their physical appearance. The body itself is said to be the ‘carrier’ of these alternative selves with, as stated in the previous section, youth and beauty being aspired to (Featherstone 1995). Body maintenance, cosmetic surgery, (such as face-lifts), anti-ageing creams, hair dyes and ‘uni’-age fashion styles all allow people to challenge the predictabilities of old age, particularly those associated with bodily decline, and societal withdrawal.

Ageing has ceased to be understandable in terms of any common or totalising experience. It is no longer the fixed and homogenous process of personal and physiological decay by which it has been understood for
much of recorded history. Ageing has become more complex, differentiated and ill defined, experienced from a variety of perspectives...

(Gilleard and Higgs 2000:1).

Thus, according to postmodernists, the meaning of old age has become less coherent and less stable as people now have choices around pensions, employment practices, their appearance and lifestyle. The certainties about life have gone. Life is no longer a predetermined series of stages and chronological age no longer signifies inevitable age norms and lifestyles. Identity around age, including old age, like gender and class, is fluid:

The stages or hurdles which are placed in front of people and the barriers through which they have to pass (age specific transitions) can be shifted around and even discarded

(Featherstone and Hepworth 1995a:37).

The positive discourse on later life that postmodernism represents is to be welcomed because it challenges the view that later life should be regarded in terms of biological change and decline and allows understandings of later life to emerge which recognise that the stereotypes and negative portrayals of later life are culturally constructed. Postmodernism has allowed a variety of identities, very often positive, around later life to emerge. In addition, by focussing on the individual, postmodernism has generated research which explores individual identity, narrative and agency, which, rather than trying to homogenise people, allows for diversity and difference. In doing so, postmodernism has led to a greater emphasis within research on culture rather than purely structural determinacy in influencing people’s lives and life choices (Gilleard and Higgs 2000).

However, many of the claims of postmodernism about later life may be exaggerated and the structural inequalities and contextual factors like gender, class, race, people’s biographies and the lifelong inequalities which, without doubt, have restricted the life choices of many individuals, are ignored. For example, at the centre of the arguments about postmodernism, is the idea that people’s identities, particularly their ‘age resisting’ identities, are made possible through their patterns of consumption. Unfortunately, such flexible, individualistic lifestyles are out of the reach
of many older people; it is a 'bourgeoisie option, unavailable to those who have low incomes and poor health' (Ginn and Arber 1995:8). Bernard and Meade (1993:6) argue that this is particularly the case for many older women who are often faced with economic, social and cultural barriers restricting their choices in life.

Holstein and Minkler (2003:792) concur, maintaining that a weakness of postmodernism is its failure to consider the economic circumstances which can restrict people's life chances. They state that postmodernism:

doesn't ask if the 80 year old skier had country club privileges and a winter home in Colorado, or the 80 year old in the wheelchair had cleaned houses for a living while holding down a second job as a nurses' aide on the graveyard shift in a nursing home.

Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998:119) support Holstein and Minkler's (2003) proposition that postmodernism lacks consideration for the structural obstacles facing people in their lives, saying that 'its predilection for novelty, restlessness and choice of lifestyle push the elderly to the margins of social analysis and research.'

Holstein (2006:317) observes that another danger of postmodernism is that its emphasis on individual achievement and the resistance of age related changes as part of 'successful' ageing can lead to the more disabled and frail in society feeling like failures, the implication being that if the older person had tried harder they might be fitter. Holstein and Minkler (2003:793) characterise this aspect of postmodernism as a 'cultural denial of disability, dependency and ultimately death.' Vincent (2002:167) also argues that the emphasis on individual achievement and identity within postmodernism increases the possibility of people being blamed for their failure to sustain fit and active lifestyles and thus age 'properly'. Holstein (2006:316) in her work 'On Being an Ageing Woman' makes clear how societal expectations around 'ageing successfully' and resisting bodily deterioration have a particularly negative impact on older women. She observes that:
If we older women fail to care for our bodies so that we can meet normative expectations to age 'successfully,' we may be viewed askance – at the simplest level for 'letting ourselves go' when 'control' is putatively within our grasp.

Holstein (2006:317) goes as far as to suggest that societal expectations of older people, particularly women, to maintain control over their bodies is a form of oppression which escalates the more disabled one becomes and further pushes older people to the margins of society. She asks 'Without public attention that instils respect for these age-related markers, how are we to respect them ourselves?' (Holstein 2006:322). Thus, there is the risk that postmodernism, built on the concept of successful ageing which emphasises the maintenance of a youthful appearance can burden rather than liberate older people, especially older women, and in turn lead to a 'new ageism' associated with feelings of personal failure, low morale and marginalisation (Holstein and Minkler 2003:794).

Indeed, irrespective of postmodernisms’ influence on understandings of later life, its claims about the irrelevance of age and the fragmentation of life stages may be naive and unrealistic. Much evidence has been presented here to show that, in western society, old age remains a clearly defined and highlighted life stage associated with many negative connotations. Gillear and Higgs (2000:4) themselves accept postmodernists’ claims about the disappearance of old age may have been exaggerated. Old age, and all it is supposed to represent, is still resisted: ‘no organisations or institutions seek to portray old age to the individual as either an aspirational commodity to choose or a socially valued process to join.’ Old age is still associated with personal failure and the emphasis within society on age-resisting practices is testament to this (Gillear and Higgs 2000:83). The negative stereotypes surrounding later life seem to be entrenched. Calsanti and Slevin (2006) agree, maintaining that constructions of old age remain negative: ‘Fear of and disgust with growing old are widespread; people stigmatize it and associate it with personal failure, with letting yourself go.’

Despite its limitations, the influence of postmodernism is however to be welcomed for alerting society to the alternative, more positive possibilities of later life. Many of the ideas and sentiments of postmodernism have influenced the way this thesis attempts to highlight the possibilities of later life. The emphasis within
postmodernism on culture and the individual have also influenced the choice of methodology and methods used within this research, which have attempted to place emphasis on individual narrative and also to understand the impact that culture, as well as structure, have had on older women’s lives. The impact of postmodernism, particularly on leisure studies, is returned to later in this work.

2.4. Summary

The socially constructed understandings of ‘old age’ are clear. Whether they are based on assumptions around chronological age or ‘life stages,’ they tend to be based on negative, patronising, generalised assumptions about older people and ‘old age.’ Such stereotyped images are then perpetuated by the media, language, advertising, humour and even the medical profession and are often internalised by older people themselves. As Vincent (2003:169) states, ‘Old age could be a valued time of life but we have problems thinking about it like that.’ Wearing (1995) agrees, stating that ‘the underlying assumption has been that ageing means deficiency and a necessary curtailment of physical activities and social involvement.’ Such negativity and stereotyping of later life ignores the fact that the experience of ageing and older people themselves within contemporary society is richly diverse and older people are as heterogeneous and socially differentiated as the population as a whole (Victor 2005).

Of course, in undertaking a study such as this, one could be accused of ageism for the way in which the work treats older people as a separate and distinct group. Indeed by focussing on the age of 75 and over one could argue that I am perpetuating the myths about the importance of people’s chronological age. Indeed, Bytheway (1990:17) alludes to such a dilemma, pointing out that ‘gerontologists are dangerously inclined to live a double life in which they simultaneously deplore ageism and build their careers upon the study of elderly people’. However, Bytheway acknowledges, if one approaches such work with the intention of critically analysing how the conceptual construction of ‘old age’ is maintained, and does not take for granted the ‘existence’ and ‘equivalence’ of old age then the age-based stereotypes of later life can be challenged through such work. The process of compartmentalising, if undertaken critically, can still lead to a liberating understanding of the process of ageing.
In this scenario, this chapter has considered the role postmodernism has played in challenging the traditional assumptions around later life and in formulating more positive, individualised, less predictable discourses around age. Therefore, in many respects, postmodernist approaches to the study of later life are to be welcomed for their individualised emphasis, attempts to promote alternative, positive images of later life and promoting multiple possibilities in later life (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995a). In this respect, the ideas of postmodernism have clearly influenced the individualised, positive approach taken to understanding the lives of the older women studied in this research as well as the emphasis on exploring the impact of social and cultural norms and expectations on older women’s lives. However, at the same time, the claims of postmodernists should not be exaggerated. Society’s general understandings and assumptions of later life and older people are dominated by negative constructs of ‘old age.’ Hence the need, also identified within this work, to explore the daily lives of older people and to explore how such social constructs impact on their acceptance and resistances to them. As Calsanti and Slevin (2006:10) recognise, theorizing of old age and a greater understanding of how power relations around later life manifest themselves in society, needs far greater exploration ‘just as gender, race, class, and sexuality serve as organizing principles of power, so too does age.’

The next chapter further explores how older people have been regarded within society by focussing on the theoretical approaches to the study of older people which have been formulated within gerontology and the extent to which they support, explain and challenge the negative portrayals and treatment of older people.
CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL APPROACHES
TO THE STUDY OF OLDER
PEOPLE

3.1. Introduction
3.2. Disengagement theory
3.3. Activity theory
3.4. Continuity theory
3.5. Political economy perspective
3.6. Feminist theory
3.7. Summary
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF OLDER PEOPLE

3.1. Introduction

Functionalist theories have dominated the study of older people since the 1950s, maintaining that both society and the individual are interdependent, always trying to maintain a condition of equilibrium between the two. Under functionalism ‘it is assumed that there is an agreed set of values within society that determine the goals and norms through which social order is maintained’ (Victor 2005:19). Thus, society is said to be maintained through consensus around social norms and accepted social roles, such as ‘normal’ old age. Disengagement, activity, and continuity theory are all part of the functionalist perspective on later life and, as such, have had a huge influence on the way in which older people have been studied (Victor 2005). This chapter will therefore consider the contribution of these theories to the understanding of and research on later life. Countering the functional perspectives on later life are feminist and political economy approaches which have also made important contributions to understanding later life. The contribution of these approaches will also be considered within this chapter. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how I have used aspects of these theories to inform the multi-disciplinary approach taken within this work in order to develop a more sophisticated and broader analysis of older women’s lives.

3.2. Disengagement theory

Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961, Friedmann and Havighurst 1954), which emerged in the 1950s, is part of the functionalist perspective on older people. Within disengagement theory, emphasis is placed on the perceived low levels of activity and social interaction of older people to argue that, in retirement, older people become naturally distanced from the rest of society. Cumming and Henry (1961) who developed the theory of disengagement, based their findings on data collected from 279 white adults between the ages of 50 and 80 years living in Kansas City, USA. They came to the conclusion that disengagement is inevitable, evidenced by declining interaction with others as the older person sees fewer kinds of people, less often,
and for decreasing periods of time. In addition to decreased social interaction Cumming and Henry (1961:51) also argued that the nature of the individual interactions of older people change as they become less concerned with the approval of those around them, more introspective and thus increasingly disengaged from social expectations around relationships:

Ageing is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement resulting in decreased interaction between the ageing and others in the social system to which he belongs... his withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself.

Cumming and Henry (1961) interpreted this withdrawal as evidence that older people gradually distance themselves from society in order to prepare for death and ‘make room’ for younger people. Such an arrangement they argued was mutually satisfying for both the individual and society, allowing for a smooth transfer of power from the old to the young, as well as creating employment opportunities for the young. Thus under disengagement theory, ‘normal’ and ‘successful’ ageing requires individuals to withdraw from previous activities and roles and to ‘disengage’ from society. This process of withdrawal from previous activities is regarded as a natural and desirable outcome of ageing and necessary in order to achieve psychological well being (Estes and Binney 1989). Society, as well as the individual, is said to benefit from this withdrawal.

Understandably, disengagement theories, although highly influential to studies of later life, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, have increasingly come under attack. For example, in presenting the disengagement of older people as a universal, ‘natural’ phenomenon, disengagement theory has been used to justify arguments about the problematic aspects of an ageing population and for ‘legitimating a form of social redundancy among the old’ (Fennell et al. 1994:47). The disengagement perspective on later life has been described by Hughes (1990:46) as a ‘rocking chair’ view of old age which perceives:

Successful ageing as the acceptance and adaptation to a quality of life in which the need for purposeful activity and social interaction was lower than that for younger people.
Hughes (1990) not surprisingly accuses disengagement theory of reinforcing the social constructs and research agendas around older people which are based on decline and which chart their biological, psychological and medical degeneration, thus reinforcing the narrow stereotypes of later life referred to in chapter two. In concentrating on the medical model of ageing, the approach also fails to take into consideration social and economic structures which may also shape the lives of older people.

In concentrating on the decline model of ageing, disengagement theory also denies the reality of positive or active ageing. Townsend (1981) reasons that, in this respect, the promotion of disengagement represents ‘acquiescent functionalism’ which limits the possibilities of later life. In doing so, the approach interprets quality of life for old people as different from that of the rest of the population (Hughes 1990) whereas in reality, Hughes (1990:47) points out ‘the factors and criteria which define a good quality of life for older people are exactly those which apply, in general terms, to people of all ages.’

In addition, the ‘natural’, age-specific roles presented within disengagement theory have also been criticised for attempting to present a universal model of later life that fails to take into account the disparate ways in which people experience later life (Victor 2005). The inevitability of social withdrawal under this approach is thus regarded as naïve, failing to recognise that many older people take on new roles and embrace new experiences as they age.

Unfortunately, within both gerontology and leisure studies, the disengagement view of later life has deep roots and has shaped the ways in which researchers in these fields have studied and conceptualised ageing. For example, Midwinter (1992:9), one of the great spokespeople for older people and even, at one time, Chairman of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, concludes his report, Leisure: new opportunities in the third age by arguing that older people have:
somewhat bland activities, with scarcely a whisper of new interests, new studies, new hobbies, new volunteering, new imaginative ventures... no sign of explosive relish for an ambitious, adventurous cultural life... a systematic waste of human talent and capacity.

Midwinter’s (1992:9) report highlights the ‘aimlessness’ and ‘decreased motivation’ of ‘older people to develop themselves creatively and socially.’ He refers to ‘the waste syndrome which leaves millions dying without having fulfilled that capacity’ (Midwinter 1992:16).

Abram’s (1995:82) work on leisure amongst ‘the elderly’ similarly contends that all older people decrease their leisure participation in later life maintaining that:

*In spite of, or because of, their heavy consumption of sleeping tablets, tranquillisers and ‘night caps’, elderly people spend a large slice of the daily 24 hours in bed or dozing in a chair.*

More recently Roberts (2006:152) in his work *Leisure in Contemporary Society* also adopts a disengagement view of later life, arguing that older people’s leisure ‘bears little resemblance to the engagement perspective. As people grow older, the general tendency is for them to reduce their leisure activities.’

Such approaches to the study of leisure in later life fail to recognise the diversity of leisure experience in later life and that disengagement is not inevitable. Many older people, freed from the burdens of work, family and financial commitments actually increase their leisure activities, in spite of increasing physical constraints. Even those older people, who do disengage from certain leisure activities may, as McPherson (1991) observes, become more deeply engaged in a few select leisure pursuits. In addition, even if it was true that many older people disengage with leisure as they age, this would not only be true of older people, but also many teenagers and young adults who disengage from certain leisure activities. In these circumstances, disengagement theory is not necessarily simply a theory of ‘old age’ (McPherson 1991).
3.3. Activity theory

Like disengagement theory, activity theory (Havinghurst 1963, Laslett 1989, Bytheway 1995) is also part of the functionalist school of thought. However, unlike disengagement theory, activity theory emerged as an attempt to present a more positive image of older people, arguing that it is possible to maintain self-esteem and morale in later life by continued participation in activities and society in general. The theory places particular emphasis on individuals maintaining their ‘roles’ and social relationships in later life and the activities of middle-age.

Rowe and Kahn (1998) in their famous study Successful Ageing proselytise this approach to later life promoting an activity rich old age. Activity theory presents itself as less pessimistic in outlook than disengagement theory through the emphasis of the potential that later life offers for discovering and engaging in new activities. Not surprisingly, the approach has been extensively adopted and promoted by Governments, leisure companies and those involved in the retirement industry who have exploited the desirability of active ageing, often for profit. Indeed, the concept of active ageing has become a key concept in current policy and research on ageing as evidenced in the introduction of this thesis. Agencies ranging from the EU, the UN and the WAG have all promulgated policies in which active ageing is a central theme.

Calsanti and Slevin (2006:4) suggest that ‘active ageing’ has become so entrenched within society that many older people have become subject to a ‘discipline’ of activity. McHugh (2003:166) agrees and argues that the concept’s influence has become all-pervasive and even part of ‘controlled consumption’ in which companies have exploited the concept, selling the benefits of active ageing in order to generate profits. People have questioned why the theory focuses on promoting activity exclusively in older people (Walker 2006).

There is also concern about the degree of emphasis within society on active ageing from those who feel that older people who cannot participate in this agenda will come to be regarded as problems. Calsanti and Slevin (2006:4) reason that there is the potential within this theory for older people with any form of disability or inability to engage in active ageing to become ostracised and labelled as failures. ‘Those who remain ‘active’ are ‘not old’; those who are less active are ‘old’ and thus less
valuable.’ McHugh (2003:180) agrees, arguing that by assuming that physical activity and exercise ensure good health, good health becomes an individual responsibility thus allowing those with poor health to be blamed for their failure to maintain an active lifestyle:

*Embedded in the ideal of successful ageing is a deep-seated fear of our decline and erasure, projected outward in the form of disdain and disgust for ‘old’ people who do not ‘measure up’ and who tumble down the spiral of ‘bad’ old age.* (McHugh 2003:181)

Thus, the approach ignores the impact which genetics can have on people’s health in later life and focuses on environmental and social factors. McHugh (2003:181) maintains that activity theory amounts to ‘rampant’ ageism which ‘adulates youth and productive adulthood.’ By denying old age and encouraging people to strive to remain ‘young’, older people are confronted with, effectively, only one lifestyle choice in later life, whereas Calsanti and Slevin (2006:14) reason that ‘old people should have the freedom to choose lifestyles and ways of being old that are suited to them.’

The approach has also been criticised by those who regard many of the aspirations of active ageing as middle-class, only available to those with disposable income, usually men who, due to more stable working lives have greater entitlement to pension and more time, than lone women. As Calsanti and Slevin (2006:4) maintain:

*We see advertising images of old people playing golf or tennis, travelling, sipping wine in front of sunsets, and strolling (or jogging) on the beaches of upscale resorts. Such pursuits, and the consumption depicted in ads for posh retirement communities, assume a sort of active lifestyle available only to a select group: men, whose gender and class make them most likely to be able to afford it, and their spouses.*

In addition to the ageism and middle class values of active ageing, the theory has also been criticised, in the same way as disengagement theory, for its prescriptiveness, which assumes that all older people will gain the same benefits from activity in later life and that all those who maintain pre-retirement activity levels will be most satisfied with life (Victor 2005). Thus the universality of activity theory
has been criticised for making generalised assumptions about the lives of older people and about what ‘normal’ ageing is, which fail to recognise the diverse ways in which older people find satisfaction in life. Wearing (1995: 268), for example, states that activity theory fails to take into account ‘individual potentiality’ and variation in the way people achieve this. Victor (2005:24) noted that there is much evidence to suggest that it is possible for people to have declining or low levels of activity in later life and yet still maintain high levels of satisfaction with life: ‘one may question the value judgments inherent in the theory that interaction and activity in old age is a ‘good thing.’”

Although there are benefits associated with the positive representation of later life under activity theory it has been widely criticised for its emphasis on a biologically based decline model of later life, which persuades older people ‘to construct identities and images of the body in line with the truth of biological decline’ (Wearing 1995:268). In this approach, older people themselves are ‘the problem’; it is their responsibility to fight against the inevitable. In this respect, as McGuire, Boyd and Tedrick (1999) state, the assumption behind activity theory that later life is associated with role loss means the theory resembles disengagement theory. Like disengagement theory, activity theory also fails to take into account how social structures can affect people’s lives.

Despite the criticism of activity theory, it has been widely used by gerontologists studying older people’s leisure. For example, Gibson (2006:397) observes that whilst leisure studies researchers often regard leisure as more than activity:

*Gerontologists consistently study the relationship between activity and later life well-being. They generally find that meaningful activity is beneficial in later life and thus reconfirm the tenets of activity theory thereby not moving the body of knowledge further than we did in the 1970s.*

Despite Gibson’s (2006) assumption that leisure researchers resist this tendency, we shall see in the following chapter that this is not always the case and that there is much evidence within leisure studies of researchers interpreting leisure as activity.
3.4. Continuity theory

Advocates of continuity theory (Atchley 1993, Kelly 1993), also a functionalist theory, contend that older people maintain the leisure roles and activity patterns of pre-retirement and thus consistency in leisure participation is evident in retirement. Indeed, continuity theory argues that people’s ways of dealing, not only with leisure, but also with all domains of life, remain generally consistent throughout the life-course. Thus at the heart of people is a ‘core self’, an identity that is built up throughout the life course, manifesting itself through various internal and external continuities. Kelly (1993:8) contends that internal continuity is dependent on experiences, skills, disposition, attitudes, values, beliefs and worldviews which individuals want to maintain:

*Individuals have strong motivation toward internal continuity. Continuity of ideas, especially about the self and identity, acts as an important foundation for everyday decision making* (Kelly 1993:8).

In the same way, Atchley (1993) maintains that external continuities, dependent on factors such as physical and social environments, and role relationships also influence who people are and lead to a desire amongst individuals for continuity such as being in familiar environments and interacting with familiar people.

The desire for continuity in later life, and the desire to preserve and maintain existing psychological and social patterns is said to have a great impact on people’s leisure choices in later life, particularly the way in which they use leisure to apply familiar knowledge, competences and strategies. Atchley (1993:5) maintains that:

*Applied to activities, continuity theory maintains that adults gradually develop stable patterns of activity and that, in adapting to ageing, adults engage in thought and take action designed to preserve and maintain these patterns.*

Consequently, if active patterns of activity and leisure do not exist before retirement, a satisfying retirement is unlikely. As Long (1989:56) states:
If people’s leisure lives are not well developed prior to retirement it is likely that in only a minority of cases will they suddenly blossom afterwards. Quite simply, a long standing diversity of interests heightens the chances that satisfying roles will continue into retirement.

Similarly Atchley (1993:14), one of the main proponents of continuity theory, argues that leisure in later life tends to reflect people’s leisure patterns in earlier life stating that ‘Our past and current activities are what have gotten us to where we are now; and to most people in later life, they seem to be the best bets for the future too.’

Kelly (1993:119) agrees, reasoning that the context of later life is one of continuity:

In the earlier years of retirement, most men and women go on doing pretty much what they did before... most ‘age in place’ and demonstrate more continuity than change.

Indeed in Roberts’ (2006:156) recent work Leisure in Contemporary Society he stresses the strong continuities in older people’s leisure stating that:

The best predictor of any individual’s future uses of leisure is that same person’s past behaviour... In our leisure most of us are basically conservative and become more so as we grown older... once youth has been left behind, very little leisure behaviour is experimental.

Continuity theory has been criticised in the same way as disengagement and activity theory for being highly prescriptive, in this case claiming that older people must have active lives and many interests before retirement in order to manage later life successfully. Similarly, the theory has been criticised for its lack of critical perspective, because it ignores the economic and structural factors that constrain the lives of many older people (Bond and Coleman 1993). The theory assumes that all older people will have had the same opportunities to develop leisure in earlier life and ignores the fact that certain groups in society, such as women, may not have been able to develop or focus on their own leisure because of the responsibilities of paid work and the home. For some individuals, particularly women, who may not have had well-
developed patterns of leisure before retirement, later life can represent an opportunity to engage in leisure in ways not previously possible.

Despite the criticisms of continuity theory, it has been widely used within leisure studies to illustrate stability in leisure participation across the life course (Janke et al. 2006). Illustrating the extent of the use of continuity theory, it is possible to identify similarities across a broad range of work. For example in Lee’s (2005:26) recent work on retirement in Korea he states that:

*Continuity rather than disengagement or taking up new activities or increasing involvement in existing ones, had been the dominant pattern of leisure adaptation following retirement.*

Similarly, the work by Janke et al. (2006) on modelling change in older adults’ leisure activities is based on the premise that *individuals rarely make dramatic changes in their leisure behaviour during later life.* Roberts (2006) also reasons that continuity is stronger in leisure in later life compared to that of younger life stages and that the best indicator of an individual’s future leisure is their past behaviour.

In its favour, continuity theory does challenge the ideas of disengagement by allowing for variation in the way older people live and experience later life, thus as Kelly (1993:2) recognises:

*Age and retirement do not transform able selves into an image of the incompetent old. The arenas of effective action are infinitely varied – caregiving and teaching, sport and the arts, gardening and volunteering, organizations and writing, rebuilding cars and designing quilts, environmental activism and creative grandparenting. Identities of ability and worth do not suddenly dissipate when one no longer has to be at work five mornings a week.*

Continuity theory thus recognises the skills of adaptation that older people have developed over their lives which often allow them to manage and enjoy later life, in contrast to disengagement theory. Continuity theory demands a consideration of people’s past lives in understanding their activities in
later life (if maybe in an overly prescriptive way) and, in this respect, is more subject-oriented or individually-oriented than either disengagement or activity theory. By recognising that people’s leisure in later life is influenced by a multitude of factors over their life course, it necessitates an exploration of people’s pasts. However, despite this recognition, people’s pasts remain largely absent from leisure research.

3.5. Political economy perspective

Functionalist approaches to the study of later life have been criticised for their lack of emancipatory, critical spirit and failure to consider the impact that social structures have on people’s lives. However, the political economy perspective, which emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, provides a more structurally-oriented perspective on old age as an alternative to the conservatism of functionalism (Townsend 1981, 1986, Walker 1981, 1987, 1990, Phillipson 1991, 1994, Estes 1979, 1982, 1991 and Guillemard 1986). This approach argues that the experiences of old age are socially constructed and the result of oppressive economic and political systems, rather than the ‘fault’ of the individual and of inevitable biological decline. Estes (1991:21), is one of the main proponents of the political economy approach to ageing and she maintains that the problems of ageing are the ‘product of social structural forces rather than natural or inevitable individual biological and psychological processes.’

Influenced by Marxist perspectives, the political economy approach maintains that, in order to understand the experiences of later life, the economic, social and political features of society must be taken into account. It presents capitalism as the reason that older people are forced out of the labour market through ageist employment practices and into retirement on low pensions. Thus capitalism is seen as ‘a productive and social system irreconcilable with meeting the needs of elderly people’ (Phillipson 1982:3).

In contrast with functionalist approaches, which stress social cohesion, the political economy approach is far more critical in its approach, regarding society as being in conflict over unequal access to economic resources and seeking to challenge the status quo. Minkler (1996:470) thus welcomes the shift in emphasis that the political economy approach has brought to the study of ageing, observing that it has:
Provided a much needed supplement to the study of the biological and psychological aspects of ageing which, for all their contributions, reveal little about the social construction of ageing in a broader socio-political context.

Whilst the strengths of the political economy approach to ageing are many, particularly its recognition that the lives of older people are dependent in many ways on structural factors and that social change is necessary to improve their lives, the political economy approach does have weaknesses. Firstly, in arguing that all older people are socially excluded and powerless, the approach presents a picture of older people as a homogenous group, in a similar way to functionalist theories (Higgs 1997). By placing emphasis on structural factors alone the approach does not take enough account of cultural processes within society, such as the media and consumerism, which often determine and perpetuate society's ageist and negative views of older people. Jamieson and Victor (1997:181), for example, accuse structured dependency approaches for failing to recognise the 'shift in focus away from production and non-productivity towards patterns of consumption as a crucial factor in the construction of later life.' They go on to suggest that consumerism, a big part of the capitalist system, allows for increasing freedom from traditional constraints and thus enable people to have greater diversity and choice in life and should therefore be taken into account when understanding people's lives. Jamieson and Victor (1997:182) even go as far as to argue that a 'focus on consumption may help to dispel some of the traditional ageist assumptions surrounding older members of our societies.'

By focussing only on structural disadvantage, political economy approaches fail to consider the extent to which individual agency allows older people to overcome problems associated with poverty and low status, assuming that only mass social benefits will improve the lot of older people (Higgs 1997). Bury (1995) goes as far as to suggest that in ignoring the levels of control, social support systems and friendship groups in the lives of older people, the political economy approach sees older people merely as victims and thus reinforces negative views of ageing. Bury (1995) identifies the irony in the approach that set out to challenge the negative images of older people, put forward by functionalists, for its emphasis on oppressive, structural
factors has ultimately reinforced the stereotypes of older people as victims. They have produced another dependency theory.

3.6. Feminist theory

Many feminists, like political economists, recognise the significance of structural features in determining the inferior position of older women in society. The characteristics of many women’s lives, which impact on later life, such as restricted job opportunities, discrimination in the workplace, and lack of pension entitlement are, they believe, the consequence of economic and political structures (Bernard et al. 1995, Arber and Ginn 1991). However, patriarchal power relations in society are also regarded as responsible for the subordinate position of older women for the way in which they reproduce economic and power relations that disadvantage older women. It is the patriarchal system, for example, which values women for their home-making skills, reproductive abilities, youthfulness, and sexual attractiveness. As such roles diminish in later life women become socially devalued, ‘Women are seen as ‘over the hill’ or ‘past their sell by date’ which leads to a double standard of ageing’ (Ginn and Arber 1998:144).

Hence, older women are frequently at the blunt end of ageist and stereotyped attitudes, often characterised as slow, stupid, unattractive (Arber and Ginn 1991, Bernard and Meade 1993). Not surprisingly, the UN’s (2002) research into ageing concluded that:

> Older women are particularly affected by misleading and negative stereotypes: instead of being portrayed in ways that reflect their contributions, strengths, resourcefulness and humanity, they are often depicted as weak and dependent.
> (UN 2002:38)

Unfortunately, the extent to which feminists have analysed older women’s position in society is limited. McMullin (1995) for example comments on the invisibility of older women in much feminist research: ‘feminist scholars, generally do not consider age relations and ageing theorists tend not to focus on gender relations’ (1995:30). Ray (2006) agrees, observing that feminist perspectives on later life have failed to
penetrate many women’s studies programmes. For example, she observes that despite recognising multiple forms of diversity such as race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, geographic location and religion, women’s studies have ignored later life which has unfortunately meant that these ‘unacknowledged age biases have been unwittingly passed down to subsequent generations of feminists.’ (Ray 2006:41).

Bernard and Mead (1993:15) suggest a reason for feminists’ failure to include older women in their research is that in the early days of feminism, feminists themselves were young and therefore interested in the issues important to them such as childcare, reproduction and inequalities in the labour market. Consequently, there is a lack of focus on older women’s issues. Phillipson (1982:63) agrees, arguing that ‘The assumption was that the key problems facing women were principally those affecting women in their twenties and thirties.’

The negative stereotyping of older women has also been cited as a possible reason for feminists’ reluctance to study later life. Women have, like others in society, been socialised in an ‘ageing-phobic’ culture (Chambers 2005). Arber and Ginn (1991: 28) observe:

*The subject may seem too depressing to consider, even for feminists committed to redressing the balance of male oriented research. Feminists are above all seeking a sense of power, an escape from dependency, and old age may not seem a promising time for empowerment.*

The same is possibly true of gerontology and leisure studies which, until recently, have both ignored the lives of older women, particularly those in the ‘oldest old’ phase. Ginn and Arber (1995:2) observe that gender has been regarded as an ‘add on’ in the studies of ageing; ‘a variable’ rather than a *fundamental relationship of social organisation*. In this vein, Chambers (2005) refers to the ‘double jeopardy’ of later life – ageism and gender. As a result, much research on older people in gerontology and leisure studies has been androcentric by focussing on men’s retirement and their access to and experiences of leisure. In accounting for this situation, Arber and Ginn (1991:26) cite sociology’s preoccupation with waged work and class conflict, at the expense of life outside the formal economy:
Gender was invisible in sociology because women were invisible, hidden in the home or subsumed in male pronouns at work... In the same way, elderly people are treated as 'extras', irrelevant because they no longer, and for some elderly women never have been, engaged in formal production.

Although Arber and Ginn acknowledge the importance of age in their analysis of women, feminist studies in general have failed to understand fully the lives of older women. It is possible that, as feminists themselves age, the issues facing older women will become more of a priority in sociological and gerontological research (Bernard and Meade 1993). To date however there is little evidence of this.

3.7. Summary

This chapter initially considered the role of functionalist theory in understanding the lives of older people. It argued that whilst activity and continuity theory do offer a more positive perspective on later life than disengagement theory, all three approaches are uncritical of the current position of older people within society and fail to recognise the impact of social structures on people’s lives. The emphasis on disengagement, continuity and activity theory have led to polarised images of later life as influenced either by activity, health and vitality or, on the other hand, by sickness, societal withdrawal and dependency, all of which are imbued with ageism and fail to recognise the variety of ways of growing older (McHugh 2003).

The political economy theory of ageing has been identified as an approach to the study of ageing which does allow for a more critical analysis of the experiences of ageing, placing great emphasis on oppressive social structures in determining the quality of life for older people. However, the rigid over-emphasis on structure at the expense of the individual fails to recognise people’s ability to adapt to changing personal circumstances (Estes 2003). The lack of consideration for cultural processes in determining the nature of people’s lives has also been identified as a major shortcoming within this approach. Like functionalist approaches to later life, political economy approaches must also be criticised for their attempt to present universalistic theories on later life. At the same time, whilst feminist approaches to the study of later life have placed emphasis on economic and patriarchal social structures, their
influence has been restricted by the failure of feminist studies, gerontology and leisure studies to privilege the perspectives of older women.

In light of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the approaches mentioned above, this work will not rely on one theoretical approach in its analysis of leisure in the lives of older women. Instead, the work will draw upon elements of each of the theories mentioned above. For example, the optimistic possibilities of later life evident in activity and continuity theory will be acknowledged. The emphasis within continuity theory of people’s life histories in understanding their current lives will also be recognised. In drawing upon the political economy approach, the significance of structural features on people’s lives will be considered as well as the need to critically challenge society’s ageist treatment of older people. However, rather than purely considering the structural features of society in understanding older people’s lives, attempts will also be made to take account of culture (as recognised by postmodernism) and the part it plays in influencing older people’s lives.

Rather than presenting a universalistic model of later life, as functionalism and the political economy theory to later life have sought to do, this work will also attempt to emulate feminist studies of leisure (explored in the next two chapters) and be far more subjective, seeking to explore the individual, subjective, personal experiences of older women’s lives. In doing so, the work aims to capture the diversity in women’s experiences and interpretations of leisure. Indeed the next chapter returns to many of these themes and issues by focussing more specifically on how functionalist, structural and feminist theories have impacted on approaches to the study of leisure and, in turn older women. Parallels are drawn in the next chapter between the theoretical approaches taken towards older people in gerontology and leisure studies. The next chapter also reinforces how theoretical approaches to older people and women in leisure studies have further influenced this work and the approach taken towards the study of older women in this thesis.
CHAPTER 4

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF LEISURE

4.1. Introduction
4.2. Functionalist theory and leisure
4.3. Structuralist theory and leisure
4.4. Individualistic theory and leisure
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4.6. Postmodern theory and leisure
4.7. Summary
CHAPTER 4: APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF LEISURE

4.1. Introduction

This chapter considers the theories of leisure that have influenced the field of leisure studies to date. Functionalist, structuralist, individualistic, feminist and postmodern theories are considered as ways of understanding leisure in society. The chapter considers how the focus of each of these approaches has influenced the location of individuals, particularly older people and women, within leisure studies. In addition, the chapter attempts to reveal how the theories of leisure discussed below, share many of the characteristics and weaknesses of the theories of later life, discussed in the previous chapter. The chapter concludes by highlighting the similar impacts that both theories of leisure and of later life have had on the way older people’s leisure has been perceived.

4.2. Functionalist theory and leisure

Since the sociology of leisure emerged as a distinct area of study in the 1950s and 1960s, much emphasis has been placed on understanding leisure from a functionalist perspective, in which leisure is seen as a tool through which social integration and cooperation is achieved and maintained – a social systems approach. The functionalist approach, influenced by the work of sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-79) regards leisure as a social institution which can be used to maintain and reproduce the existing social order. As Cheek and Burch (1976:156) state, under functionalism, leisure activity serves ‘as an expression of social solidarity and norms to reaffirm the larger social order.’

Functionalist approaches to the study of leisure place great emphasis on paid work as a key contextual factor determining people’s leisure. Early works on leisure emerging in the 1960s and 1970s focussed largely on how people’s work patterns determined their leisure. For example Stanley Parker (1983), one of the main advocates of the work-oriented approach to the study of leisure, has even constructed a typology of work/leisure relationships – opposition, extension, and neutrality, in which the nature
of people's jobs determines their relationship with leisure. Roberts (1999:38) also places emphasis on paid work in determining leisure, arguing that paid work compartmentalises people's lives and influences their leisure time, 'opportunities to play, to do things purely for fun, for the intrinsic satisfaction, tend to be squeezed out of working life.' Under these approaches, leisure is regarded as something that happens outside the workplace, in the time left over from paid work.

One of the criticisms of functionalist approaches to the study of leisure is the way it privileges paid work in the organisation of people's lives and, in doing so, distances women from the analysis of leisure. In addition, the emphasis on paid work has also meant that older people's leisure outside paid employment has often been neglected. In cases where older people's leisure has been considered within leisure studies, it has tended be male oriented and focussed on the impact of retirement on older men's lives. The assumption has been that women's experiences of retirement are not relevant, as they have been engaged in unpaid domestic work As Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998:103) state:

A reliance on functional models concerned with (male) retirement has meant that elderly women do not 'fit' within dominant assumptions made about ageing, reflecting a general inability to acknowledge the fragmented work experiences of women whatever their age.

The emphasis on the benefits of paid work and the perception of leisure as a reward for paid work has also meant that where older people's leisure has been analysed, it is often presented in a pessimistic sense. Located outside paid employment, older people are frequently presented as being unable to gain the same satisfactions in leisure as the working population. Roberts (1999:77) for example, emphasises how work gives people 'something to do', provides social contact, goal setting, a sense of achievement as well as status and identity. Hence, without work 'Leisure activities are usually no substitutes, or extremely poor substitutes, in respect of all the functions of employment.'

The Centre for Policy on Ageing (Midwinter 1992) study, Leisure: New Opportunities in the Third Age also argues that the absence of paid work in later life is frequently an obstacle to fulfilled leisure, concluding 'that leisure cannot substitute
pragmatically or psychologically, for work’ (CPA 1992:15). Similarly, Walter and Maltby’s (1997:116) research into retirement maintained that retirement, withdrawing people from making ‘a positive contribution’ through their economic activity ‘disengages them from contacts made while in work... and reduces the opportunities for greater social inclusion.’ The work of Hadyn, Noaz and Taylor (1999:17) into the lives of older people, also emphasises the benefits of work as providing ‘companionship and sociability, a sense of worth and value to society, mental stimulation, involvement in the community, and an interesting occupation’ concluding that, without work, ‘few people had been able to put rewarding packages together of work and leisure’ (1999:31). Thus, withdrawal from paid employment is frequently associated with disengagement from leisure in later life, indeed ‘so resilient is the salience granted paid employment, its antithesis is viewed even with despair’ (CPA 1992:15). Older people, outside paid employment are believed to be incapable of pronounced leisure (Midwinter 1992).

Not surprisingly, functionalist approaches to the study of leisure have been criticised for their over-emphasis on social institutions like work, family and retirement, arguing that they exaggerate ‘the universality of the central value system’, and fail to give credence to individual freedom and creativity in resisting the influence of these institutions (Rojek 1989). Rojek (2005:12) argues that the nature of functionalist and policy driven approaches to leisure has resulted in a ‘sunny view of leisure as a melange of personally life affirming, wholesome relations that expand social harmony and order.’ Such approaches to leisure have failed to challenge the status quo by failing to critically consider the lack of equal access to leisure within society. In addition, functionalist approaches to leisure have failed to recognise diversity in the way that individuals engage in leisure.

4.3. Structuralist theory and leisure

The previous section outlined how functionalist approaches to the study of leisure place emphasis on social structures in determining people’s leisure in order to generate a system of consensus. Structuralist theory (Clarke and Critcher 1985) similarly focuses on the state as determining people’s leisure but, unlike functionalism, rejects the idea of social consensus. Instead, structuralist or Marxist approaches to leisure focus on the capitalist system and the inequality within it, to
analyse the nature and characteristics of leisure. Rather than consensus building, societal structures are regarded as a source of conflict and oppression in which one group in society (the middle and upper classes) exerts control and domination over others (the working classes).

In placing emphasis on state structures, structuralist theory in leisure studies has been criticised (in the same way as functionalist and political economy approaches in gerontology and functionalism in leisure studies), for emphasising socio-cultural structures at the expense of the individual. Thus, rather than attempting to identify and celebrate individual or group difference, the focus within structuralism is on collective and public policies (Coalter 1997). Also, Rojek (2005:39) argues that the danger of using a structural approach to understanding leisure is that it fails to recognise individual choice and behaviour and the autonomy of social actors. Coalter (1997:257), for example, argues that structuralist or society in leisure approaches to leisure, which focus on social and political systems and inequalities of power and opportunity, fail to consider individual meanings of leisure.

The individual freedoms and choices supposedly inherent in leisure are more often viewed in ideological and cultural than in psychological terms... leisure generally has not been regarded in terms of individual consumption, self-expression, and fulfilment. Rather, it is a site for the reproduction (or at least reflection) of wider economic, social and cultural inequalities.

A further criticism of structuralism is that its over-emphasis on economic systems and class to understand leisure means that the role of culture and embodiment in influencing leisure is neglected (Rojek 2005a). In a similar way to functionalism, structuralism also emphasises that paid employment means that the experiences of those outside the waged economy, such as women and older people, have often been absent under this approach. Feminists have also criticised structuralist approaches in leisure, in the same way that political economy approaches in gerontology have been criticised, for breeding a ‘victim mentality’ and for regarding individuals as puppets of the state and failing to recognise how women, in particular, resist structural constraints. Arber and Ginn (1995a:177), for example, although recognising that older women may have limited economic resources, argue that they have
'considerable social resources, particularly relating to their wider friendship networks and closer emotional relationships with others.' They point out that:

Their earlier lives may have equipped older women with a better ability than men to cope with many of the privations of later life... Ageing potentially liberates older women from the restrictions placed upon them by their family, conventional gender roles and their portrayal by others as sex objects.

4.4. Individualistic theory and leisure

Whilst both functionalist and structuralist approaches to the study of leisure have been criticised for ignoring the individual in their analyses of leisure, there have been socio-psychological attempts to understand the nature of leisure from an internal perspective and as 'a state of mind.' For example, Neulinger's (1974) and Csikszentmihalyi's work (1990) focuses on leisure as a state of mind and the potential levels of personal enrichment, freedom and self-determination that leisure can provide. In Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) work, for example, he identified leisure activities as those which give people an optimal experience or 'flow,' in which they feel a sense of achievement and high self esteem.

Such socio-psychological approaches to the study of leisure have thus been far more individualistic in their understanding of leisure than functionalist approaches, attempting to understand individual attitudes towards leisure. The Rapoports' (1975) book Leisure and the Family Life Cycle for example was one of the first works to shift the emphasis in leisure studies away from the public arena of paid employment and to consider the private, individual spheres of leisure within the home and family (Aitchison 2003). The work considered the psychological or personal meanings of leisure by focussing on the motivations, feelings and personal experiences of thirty individuals in their leisure.

The work of John Kelly (1983, 1987) represents another attempt to consider leisure as a subjective experience, a state of mind, or feeling, which cannot be measured. Kelly (1982:229) defined leisure not as an institution of social control but a freely chosen, voluntary activity in which the emphasis is on personal satisfaction:
Leisure is freely chosen because the activity or the companions or some combination of the two promise personal satisfaction. It is the personal and social orientation of the participant that makes activity leisure... leisure is defined as the use of time, not the time itself. It is distinguished by the meaning of the activity not its form.

Although socio-psychological approaches to leisure have taken account of the individual and their subjective understanding of leisure in a way that functionalist approaches have failed to do, they have been criticised for ignoring the impact of society, its power structures, gender, and class as well as the historical, social and cultural contexts of leisure. Thus, any understanding of leisure must not only take account of the psychological aspects of leisure but also the macro-processes that impact on people’s leisure. As Rojek (2005:32) states, people’s leisure choices are often determined by external factors:

Conceptually, leisure practice is the expression of individual choice made from patterns of behaviour and options of conduct laid down by factors of location and context. These patterns vary culturally...

4.5. Feminist theory and leisure

As mentioned earlier, both functionalist and structuralist approaches to leisure have faced criticism from feminists who argue that the emphasis on paid employment and residual time models of leisure have failed to take into consideration the caring and domestic responsibilities that many women have. Thus, whereas men’s time is often segmented with clear divides between work and non work, feminists have noted that women’s leisure can be intertwined and work and leisure co exist (Harahousou 2006). The freely chosen nature of leisure activities, so evident in the individualistic approaches to leisure studies, has also been regarded as problematic for feminists as:

A number of leisure activities, especially family activities, may not be freely chosen as they may be part of a woman’s, children’s, partner’s or the extended family’s leisure that requires facilitation by others

(Aitchison 2003:46).
Thus, leisure theories have been accused of being androcentric, dealing only with the theorising of men’s leisure (Aitchison 2003). Deem (1995:258), illustrates this clearly when she observes that ‘During the 1970s most mainstream leisure studies texts considered women either not at all or only in so far as they took into account institutions like the family.’ To further illustrate this, Deem (1995:258) makes reference to one of the functionalists’ seminal texts on leisure (Smith, Parker and Smith, 1973) in which significant mention of women is made in only two of its twenty-two chapters - one on the family and one on adult education. Similarly, Henderson (1994:123) observes that, despite the launch of the Journal of Leisure Research in 1969 and Leisure Sciences in 1978, only 24% of studies which used human subjects in these journals between 1969 and 1983 used sex or gender in their analyses concluding that:

*Leisure scholars seemed to assume that the male experience was universal, representative of humanity, and constituted a basis for generalizing about all human beings. Little or no consciousness existed that women required additional or further study or that any variance existed in the predominant male view.*

In an attempt to overcome the male bias in leisure theories, the 1980s saw the emergence of feminist works that attempted to define leisure from the perspective of women. These works explored the central role of patriarchal ideology in influencing women’s leisure, concentrating largely on the constraints on women’s leisure within their everyday lives such as lack of time, money, household obligations, family commitments and the ethic of care (Deem 1986, Wimbush and Talbot 1988). Such works argued that women are more constrained in leisure than men, largely due to women’s lack of a sense of entitlement to leisure due to patriarchal based power relations (Shaw 1994).

Shaw (1994) has also observed how much feminist research within leisure studies has indicated how leisure itself can be constraining for women, due to the types of activities which women are socialised into. This cultural feminist perspective on leisure argues that:
dominant ideologies, such as those associated with traditional views of ‘femininity’, ‘masculinity’ and ‘the family’ are reproduced through cultural practices, including leisure and participation.

(Shaw 1994:12)

Despite the achievements of feminists in raising the profile of women’s leisure and reducing gender inequities, Henderson and Shaw (2006) note how early feminist work, such as that described above, tended to over concentrate on structured power relations, emphasising unequal access to power and unequal opportunities for leisure for all women. In addition, many of these early feminist works neglected older women and even when they did actually consider later life, tended to reach pessimistic findings. For example, Deem’s famous study of women’s leisure in Milton Keynes, *All Work and No Play? The sociology of women and leisure*, hardly mentions older women and, when they are mentioned, she argues that:

> The later years of life for women may initially be quite full of activity, both inside and outside the home, but circumstances can change rapidly, and ill-health, loss of a partner and friends through death, and trying to live on a meagre pension can mean most leisure is spent at home and is seen as coping with boredom rather than a satisfying way to use leisure time.

Deem (1986: 132) concludes ‘ageing brings in its wake restricted leisure and perhaps an over-abundance of ‘spare time’’. Indeed the emphasis on structuralism within feminist leisure studies has often resulted in pessimistic and one-dimensional insights into the barriers which confront older women in leisure. The Carnegie Inquiry into the Third Age (1993:94) for example, claimed that poverty, due to broken work records and women’s caring responsibilities restrict many older women’s opportunities for leisure arguing that ‘Many women move from caring for children to caring for a parent or parent-in-law to caring for a spouse. For them the Third Age never happens.’ The work of Bernard (1984:10) also emphasised how older women’s participation in leisure has been hindered by a lack of appropriate skills:

> their mothers, schools or peers passed onto them domestic skills like knitting and sewing which has meant that they lack the appropriate skills to participate in institutionalised or informal recreation.
More recently however, many feminist works have emerged which challenge the view of older women, prevalent in the political economy approach, as victims of state structures and instead highlight the ability of women to overcome the structural disadvantages that they face in later life. Indeed Henderson and Shaw (2006:225) argue that feminists, heavily influenced by the ideas of postmodernism, have recognised the:

need to take into account unique situations and subjectivities of individuals as well as shared experiences among some women, which result from commonalities linked to race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, poverty, motherhood or caregiving responsibilities.

Indeed Shaw (1994:18) similarly observes that feminists have started to highlight the individual experiences, agency and subjectivities around women’s leisure. In doing so such scholars have begun to recognise women’s ability to overcome disadvantage and resist dominant relations of power. The role that leisure can play in empowering women by allowing them ‘to resist cultural pressures to conform to prescribed social roles and to traditional definitions of femininity’ has also more recently been recognised (Shaw 1994:18). Such work often presents an image of older women as strong and self-resourceful. For example, in Wray’s (2003:12) work she recognises the tendency in leisure studies to overemphasise the effects of structural disadvantages and to:

overlook the power of women to resist and transform social structures. This is not to deny the significance of income and women’s inferior economic position but rather to argue that the inadequacy of these does not always lead to women feeling they have little control in their lives.

In a similar way, Wearing (1998:37) has undertaken leisure research on older women which recognises the way they are ‘continually constructing survival strategies, struggling, negotiating, contesting and sometimes transforming power relationships at an individual and group level.’ Hen Co-op (1993:106), in her work on leisure in later life, has also identified it as a time of liberation for many women, ‘when our web of family and work obligations is shrinking, we can seize the opportunity
to actualise what we were only able to dream during years of self denial.’

Unfortunately however, such studies have often focussed on middle class women, ignoring the inequities between women from different social classes and different cultural and racial backgrounds (Henderson and Shaw 2006).

4.6. Postmodern theory and leisure

Whereas functionalist and structural theories of leisure and feminist theories to an extent, have been criticised for their ‘collectivist theorizing’ of leisure, and failure to take account of the role of individuals in resisting the state (Coalter 1997), postmodernism has focussed on individual identity, rather than on shared collective identities. Thus the postmodernists, such as Rojek (1995) and Urry (1995) have argued that it is no longer possible to make generalised assumptions about people’s lives and that individuals are no longer puppets of the state but are reflexive beings, able to control and formulate their own self-identity, often through their leisure rather than their work (Giddens 1991).

Thus whereas functionalist and structuralist definitions of leisure have tended to emphasise collectivities and shared identities and to compartmentalise people’s lives into work and leisure spheres, postmodernism has dismissed such accounts of leisure as no longer valid (Coalter 1997). Instead, postmodernists focus on the flexible, differentiated and individualised aspects of people’s lives. Post-industrial society, with new, more flexible working patterns, makes it impossible to define work and non-work areas of life. Many people have leisure-like experiences through work and work is often perceived less as an antidote to work but instead, undertaken for its intrinsic qualities. In addition, they argue that people’s patterns of consumption, rather than their job defines their identity and, as Coalter (1997:259) argues, people’s status in society:

*depends less on one’s place in production systems than on one’s accomplishments in the sphere of consumption, one’s access to – and manipulation of – cultural codes and signs. Consumption is seen as central to the construction of the wide variety of personal and social identities indicated...*
Thus, rather than social structures and social norms determining people’s behaviour, it is the ‘signs, codes and representations’ in the media, fashion and advertising, that influence people’s behaviour (Coalter 1997:259). As a consequence of this recognition, leisure studies has more recently begun to focus less on structural features in society in understanding leisure, but more on cultural forms, such as shopping, the media, TV, advertising and lifestyle (Urry 1995).

The ideas surrounding postmodernism have had many positive impacts on the way in which leisure studies regard older people. For example, postmodernism has emphasised that many older people have choices about how they experience and express old age and should not just be regarded in terms of state structures or the stereotypes of later life. Postmodernism has also challenged the generalised assumptions made about later life and older people, recognising the diversity in older people’s lives and the potential through culture and consumption to approach later life in diverse ways. As Gilleard and Higgs (2000:83) make clear, postmodernism has stressed that people have:

- more opportunities to practise third ageism;
- to practise strategies of staying young;
- to practise challenging and contradictory images about age and its signification. They also share a common resistance to old age and a belief that such resistance is possible and practical.

Despite the strengths of postmodernism, it been criticised by those who argue that it fails to take into account issues of inequality, disadvantage and gender (Scraton 1994). Scraton and Bramham (1995:34) make clear that the danger of postmodernism is its ‘focussing on pleasures, fantasies and pastiches’ which ‘neglects many people’s lives which remain influenced by their experiences of poverty, gender and racism.’ Coalter (1997:259) goes so far as to suggest that, in neglecting issues of equality, postmodernism has given rise to a crisis within leisure studies which ‘has undermined the ability of most leisure studies scholars to sustain their commitment to emancipatory politics.’ Mommaas (1997:252) agrees, arguing that, until the arrival of postmodernism, leisure research had been ‘unproblematically grounded in a collective interest in the participation of a nation’s population in public culture....’ On the other hand, Veal (2002:45) argues that the belief that a collective, coherent project ever existed in leisure is misplaced and is ‘a somewhat exaggerated view.’
The ideas of postmodernism have also been challenged by those such as Roberts (2006) who argues that the changes that have occurred within society, particularly in relation to the leisure behaviour of various age groups, are not as dramatic as postmodernists would have us believe and, nowhere near as dramatic as those that occurred in the transformation from traditional to modern society:

We are not living in an era of wholesale revolutionary upheaval comparable to the birth of modern society, when the population shifted from rural to urban areas, from agriculture into industry, and built new ways of life, which included modern leisure... Proceeding as if leisure and consumption were transcending former structures and as if culture were escaping from all its earlier moorings leads to grossly exaggerated claims, fears and hopes for leisure (Roberts 2006:223).

However, at the same time as rejecting the claims of postmodernists that modern social structures are being obliterated, Roberts (2006) does recognise that social change is occurring and that there is a need to understand the nature of this change. One area of social life that Roberts (2006:225) particularly identifies as needing further exploration are people’s more individualised life courses as opposed to predictable life sequences:

We need typologies of individualized biographies that will identify what are likely to be the diverse implications of life course destandardization for men and women in different social classes.

4.7. Summary

This chapter has illustrated how the subject of leisure studies has been influenced by a number of theoretical approaches, many of which have affected the way that older people have been regarded within the field. For example, the focus on paid work in the functionalist perspective has meant that older people’s and particularly women’s experiences of leisure outside paid employment and, consequently, their leisure has often been regarded as unrewarding and unsatisfying. Such perceptions have strengthened the stereotype of older people as disengaged and later life as a time of
withdrawal. In this respect, the functionalist approaches in leisure share similarities with the functionalist perspective of later life in gerontology, particularly disengagement theory.

The emphasis within structuralism on state structures and institutions in determining people’s lives and their leisure has, in common with the position held by political economy theory in gerontology, led to a ‘victim’ mentality and to pessimistic accounts of leisure which have failed to take into account people’s abilities to resist these structures.

Feminist approaches to leisure have highlighted the male-centredness of many of the functionalist and structuralist approaches to leisure, particularly their emphasis on paid work. In an attempt to expose the male-centredness of leisure studies, feminist leisure researchers have placed emphasis on exploring the structural and more recently the individual, subjective aspects of women’s leisure, often highlighting women’s ability to resist oppression and rejecting the notion of a ‘one size fits all’ approach to leisure (Henderson 1996). Unfortunately, however, feminists within leisure studies have often focussed on the experiences of younger women and mothers with young children, often neglecting the experiences of women in later life, as Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998:118) state ‘There has been a failure throughout much of the work in leisure studies to conceptualise gender in relation to the elderly.’

Postmodernism has helped to shift the concentration in leisure research away from purely state structures and onto the individual. In doing so, postmodernism is to be welcomed for the greater consideration it gives to agency and individual subjectivity in leisure research, often highlighting people’s abilities to resist social structures and institutions such as ‘old age.’ In many respects, postmodernism has allowed for the possibilities of old age to be highlighted. Postmodernism’s emphasis on the media, advertising and consumption in identity formation has also allowed greater credence to be given to the impact of culture, rather than just structures, on people’s lives and their leisure. This shift is welcomed by many, particularly Deem (1999) who in the past has accused leisure studies of being ‘ghettoized’, isolated from other social science research, arguing that the field needs to become more interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. She argues for example that in order to break out of the ghetto, leisure studies should begin to consider the impact of culture and tackle
'Head-on debates about whether leisure is now subsumed by culture' (Deem 1999:162).

Aitchison (2003:15) agrees, arguing that there has been an over-emphasis on social structures in understanding people's leisure and stating that:

The complex and changing interrelationships between leisure and culture have remained marginal to the leisure studies research agenda and the more complex social and cultural relations that both shape and are shaped by leisure relations remain under researched and under theorised within leisure studies.

In recognising the need for more work in leisure studies to be more inter and multidisciplinary, this thesis, (as evidenced in the following chapters), does not rely on one theory of leisure but attempts to draw on the strengths of theories of leisure discussed above. For example, the structuralist's emphasis on understanding the impact of state systems and structures on older people's position in society and their leisure has been recognised. Similarly, the need to understand and consider patriarchal structures, which feminist accounts of leisure highlight, has also been acknowledged. In addition, the work has also been influenced by those feminist approaches to leisure that emphasise the need for situated and individual meanings of leisure and that capture the resistances of older women in their leisure. Postmodernist thinking on the diverse, individual meanings of leisure and on individual identity and culture has also influenced my work and its consideration for older women's individual experiences of leisure. Hence, unlike the approaches to leisure discussed above, this thesis is not over-reliant on one theory of leisure, but draws on competing philosophical ideas, seeking to bridge some of the previously strong theoretical divisions and thereby recognising that leisure is a complex interrelationship of structure and agency.

The next chapter will explain further the impact of the above leisure theories, as well as the gerontological theories considered in the previous chapter, on the nature and characteristics of leisure and gerontological research on older people, especially older women. In doing so, the chapter makes an even stronger case for inter/multidisciplinary approaches to the study of older people's lives, particularly those which challenge the assumptions made about older people within
established leisure and gerontological theories. Chapter five also emphasises the need for research which considers the impact of both macro and micro structures on older people's lives.
CHAPTER 5

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH ON OLDER PEOPLE AND LEISURE

5.1. Introduction
5.2. The characteristics of research in gerontology
5.3. Critical research and gerontology
5.4. The characteristics of leisure research and its impact on research on older women
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5.6. Summary
CHAPTER 5: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH ON OLDER PEOPLE AND LEISURE

5.1. Introduction

Building on chapter two’s discussion of the social construction of old age and the two previous chapters’ reviews of theories of ageing in gerontology and leisure, this chapter aims to analyse in greater depth the impact that these understandings of later life and leisure have had on the nature of research within gerontology and leisure studies. In doing so, similarities in the way that both gerontology and leisure studies have evolved as academic fields is considered, as well as the impact that this development has had on research methodologies and methods in these fields. The impact of these research methodologies and methods on the way that both gerontology and leisure studies have treated older women is highlighted. Finally, the chapter concludes by considering the calls from within gerontology and leisure studies for more critical, inter/multidisciplinary research on older people.

5.2. The characteristics of research in gerontology

As a relatively new field, gerontology has been influenced by a range of academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, geography, social policy and social administration and, as a result, has become a multi-disciplinary field of study (Peace 1990:1). Fennell (1990:62) suggests that a consequence of the interdisciplinary nature of gerontology is that the field of gerontology has become:

"eclectic in its methods and data collection procedures, not dominated by a particular technique such as the experiment or the social survey [and has benefited as] ...multidisciplinary teams of researchers have been able to draw upon a range of quantitative and qualitative methods."

Achenbaum (1997) would disagree however, arguing that research on ageing has overwhelmingly tended to be narrow in its approach, more often than not adopting a ‘scientific’ approach to the study of older people. For Achenbaum (1997:16), the newness of the field of gerontology, compared to other sciences such as physics, has
caused researchers in the field to legitimise their area of study by emulating the hard sciences as ‘gerontology’s gatekeepers have been unabashedly scientistic as they tried to legitimise their area of expertise.’ Consequently, he argues that ‘gerontologists have been inclined for most of this century to endorse physicists’ esteem for positivist logic and quantifiable measurements’ (1997:16). This, he (1997:17), argues is a form of ‘physics envy’ which has resulted in gerontologists becoming ‘more wedded to positivism than physicists’ as they search for a grand theory on ageing.

Many writers share Achenbaum’s opinion about the positivist nature of much gerontological research. Walker (1987:238), for example, comments on the positivist scientific tradition in gerontology which, he argues, has resulted in older people being ‘distanced from the analysis and treated primarily as scientific objects’. Estes and Binney (1989) talk of the ‘biomedicalization of gerontology’ in which the emphasis has been on the biological and medical approaches to the study of ageing, focussing very often on the needs and care concerns, particularly of those in care homes. Such approaches are usually problem orientated, functionalist in focus and use large-scale social surveys to draw conclusions about the common, usually negative aspects of older people’s lives. Chambers (2005:52) argues that in relation to women, research has been particularly ‘problem-oriented’, located within grief and stress research – ‘Widowhood is often construed as pathology, from which a woman needs to recover.’ Hence, much of the data collection around women is framed around terms of grieving and coping, thus perpetuating the pathological model. Gilleard and Higgs (2000:194) agree and criticise such approaches for their one sidedness:

It is not that there are no poor old people, nor that retired people do not, in some cases, experience significant limitations in managing their daily lives ... Rather we are arguing that through emphasising the plight of the poor and disabled within the retired population, an academic and popular discourse has been perpetuated that makes these phenomena the very essence of ageing and ageing studies.

It is thus clear that the functionalist models and understandings of later life, discussed in chapters three, have heavily influenced gerontology. As a result, much of the research has been problem-oriented and unchallenging, acceptant of the subordinate,
ageist position of older people within society. As Walker (1987:239) states:

> Researchers within this dominant tradition have tended to adopt a passive role with regard to social policies and action to change the status of the elderly. Policy proposals tend to be minimalist and unthreatening to the prevailing structure of power, income and wealth.

Walker (1987) refers to this as 'acquiescent functionalism.' For Moody (1993:xvi) it is 'knowledge building without a critical spirit [which] serves to perpetuate structures of domination.'

Fennell et al. (1994) agree, arguing that a new approach to the study of older people is now needed which challenges the ageist definitions and understandings of later life. Thus, rather than accepting and reinforcing ageist definitions of older people, there is a need to 're-conceptualise' what old-age means and to explore new ways of thinking about older people (Fennel 1994). In other words, if the position of older people is to improve, researchers in the field of gerontology need to challenge the dominant values in society and social understandings of later life that are responsible for ageism.

### 5.3. Critical research and gerontology

In addressing many of the above criticisms of gerontology, more recent gerontological research has started to challenge society's negative attitudes towards older people, attempting to bring about change in the way society treats and perceives older people. Thus, rather than working within the existing political and social system and accepting the status quo (as functionalist theories of ageing have done), critical research is appearing in gerontology which seeks to challenge society's values, prejudices and understanding of older people. In many ways, critical research takes much from post-structuralism and the work of Foucault (1983) which, although arguing that dominant language and cultural discourses are perpetuated by those in power, recognises the possibility for individual resistance, change and challenges to these discourses.

According to Estes et al. (2003), critical gerontology arose as a direct response to the systematic stereotyping of older people and the dominance of the biomedical model of
ageing which associates growing old only with physical and mental deterioration. Moody (1993:xvii) agrees, stating that, in this respect, critical gerontology is attempting to distinguish itself from 'traditional' social theory:

*By its intention of locating actual 'openings' or spaces for potential emancipation within the social order... it demands a detailed empirical account of why structures of domination persist and what can be done to change those structures.*

Hence, whereas orthodox approaches to the study of ageing have tended to concentrate on and accept the subordinate position of older people in society, critical gerontology is moving beyond merely identifying the problems of disadvantage and inequality and, instead challenging these assumptions. Thus critical gerontology is allowing researchers to undertake research which liberates older people and leads to the creation of 'more equitable environments in which empowerment can take place' (Phillipson and Walker 1987:11). Such an approach, according to Bond and Coleman (1993:339) will mean that in the twenty-first century, gerontology will become 'a more truly liberating subject, less concerned with charting decline and predicting outcomes and more with outlining possibilities.' Beverly Hughes (1990) presents a similar argument, stating that critical gerontology will both challenge the assumptions in society about older people and ultimately influence social policy and the expectations and experiences of older people themselves.

One consequence of the shift towards critical theory in gerontology is the move away from 'scientific' methods and the suggestion that a comprehensive theory on ageing can be found. Jamieson and Victor (1997) observe that critical gerontologists have emerged more recently who are keen to challenge the view that the 'truth' about ageing can be measured 'objectively', and who recognise that it is not possible to find regularities in, or predict human behaviour. Hence, much gerontological research has moved away from positivism and empiricism and instead, is allowing a more human face to emerge by encouraging qualitative research methodologies that listen to the voices of older people themselves (Cole 1988, 1992, Achenbaum, 1987, Featherstone and Hepworth, 1993, Holstein, 1994, Moody, 1988, 1993).
Critical theory approaches to the study of old age have led to more innovative qualitative research techniques which aim to give older people a voice in the research process and allow them to understand older people in their own right ‘taking on their [older people’s] own perspectives as subjects rather than as objects of research’ (Ginn and Arber 1995:3). In doing so, many of the qualitative techniques now used in gerontology are ‘empowering’ respondents (Boaz, Haydn and Bernard 1999). This is unlike the majority of research on older people, which, up until the 1980s had ignored the views and everyday lives of older people themselves, and tended to canvass the opinions of ‘providers, employers, healthcare workers, families and carers’ rather than older people themselves, thus reinforcing the perception of older people as passive victims (Boaz et al. 1999:7).

Holstein and Minkler (2003:788) claim that the shift towards critical gerontology and qualitative techniques is to be welcomed for the way in which it has shifted the emphasis in gerontology away from the grand theories of ageing, evident in functionalist and political economy approaches to later life. Instead, the shift in focus onto individual, narrative gerontology is rendering ‘ageing visible from the inside’ and in doing so challenges the attempts in gerontological theory to homogenise older people’s lives and behaviour and establish universal theories about their behaviour (Holstein and Minkler 2003:788). As Holstein and Minkler (2003:788) continue, research focussed on the individual and their own subjective experiences allows diversity in older people’s lives to emerge, thus challenging the all-encompassing models of what older people are like:

’How it is for me’ opens narrative possibilities that trade the ability to generalize about old age for increased understanding and reduced risk of a false universality[Thus humbling]...positivistic ideas that we can know the true story of ageing.

According to Estes (2003:44), feminist research has been particularly influential in the development of critical approaches to later life because feminist work has always required ‘critical reflexivity in addition to feminist epistemology’. Harding (1996), also highlights the critical nature of feminist studies by maintaining that feminism has always attempted to challenge and dismantle accepted ‘knowledge’ by recognising that this knowledge is socially situated. The emphasis on women’s
individual experiences of life within more recent feminist research has also started to undermine the 'grand' theories of later life.

Postmodernism has also had a significant influence on the adoption of more critical approaches to the study of older people. Cole (1993:ix) argues that gerontology has been greatly influenced by postmodernism as it starts to recognise that in a postmodern era 'many of the goals and assumptions of modern culture are mistaken, obsolete, or morally problematic.' The possibilities of later life and challenges to 'grand narratives' which postmodernism has also posited, have begun to influence gerontology, and as Goodley, Lawthom, Clough and Moore (2004:99) point out, have resulted in 'a collection of alternative, and possibly more empowering narratives.' Thus, postmodernism has done much to allow researchers to challenge the traditional discourses and stereotypes about later life and the perceived norms of age-appropriate behaviour. In doing so, it focuses more on the possibilities of the individual rather than structural features alone when considering the potential of later life.

5.4. The characteristics of leisure research and its impact on research on older women

Like gerontology, leisure is also a relatively new field of study within social science, which has meant that leisure researchers, like gerontologists, have tended to be drawn from a variety of disciplines such as economics, geography, psychology, sociology, human geography, political science, social history, environmental studies, business studies and management studies. Rojek (2005:15) regards the interdisciplinary nature of leisure studies as its strength, maintaining that 'It is at its most intellectually robust and practically stimulating when it engages with the debates in these disciplines.'

For Bramham and Henry (1996:186) on the other hand, the interdisciplinary nature of leisure studies has meant that it has not been regarded as a subject in its own right and this has meant that the social science research community has relegated leisure 'to a residual category.' The immaturity and lack of recognition for leisure studies, as a field in its own right, has led Bramham and Henry (1996:190) to describe leisure research as 'apologetic' and to accuse leisure researchers of adopting the view that 'real research is conducted elsewhere in the mainstream of academia.'
As a way of justifying and giving greater credence to their research, leisure researchers, like gerontologists, have tried to legitimise their field by adopting scientific methods and by formulating models of leisure behaviour (Bramham and Henry 1996). As Veal (1997) observes, much of the early leisure research from the 1960s was concerned with discovering uniform leisure behaviour and models of certain cross-sections within society that could be used to predict patterns of participation within social groupings. Functionalist and structuralist approaches to leisure, as outlined in the previous chapter, have been particularly open to criticisms of trying to establish universal theories of leisure's role in society and failing to consider individualised interactions with leisure.

Further evidence that leisure researchers have, like gerontologists, tended to adopt scientific, empirical research, in order to gain acceptance for their field, might be the fact that much leisure research is quantitative in nature, concerned with collecting facts and figures in order to 'measure' the characteristics of leisure (Bramham and Henry 1996). Bramham and Henry (1996:190) refer to leisure researchers as traditionally 'defining themselves as detached scientists collecting and analysing objective information about leisure forms and practices.' They believe that this is particularly the case in Britain where leisure research amounts to 'a plethora of dispassionate data collection material and surveys, in which the subject is distanced from the analysis.' Roberts (1999:17) agrees with this and argues that statistics in leisure research have 'been collected routinely, usually at the behest of public and commercial leisure providers who want to establish the actual and potential sizes of their markets and audiences.' Coalter (1997:265) also makes the claim that much leisure research has been quantitative with an emphasis on 'scientificity' and correlation, reflecting, he maintains 'an understandable status anxiety of leisure sciences and the desire for academic legitimacy and professional relevance.'

Hemingway (1990) also proposes that leisure studies has a tradition of working within the framework of empiricist social inquiry, influenced by positivist philosophies which, he feels has led to 'shortcomings in both our investigation and understanding of leisure.'

Against this background, it is not surprising that quantitative research on older people in leisure studies predominates. Such research has usually focussed on the frequency of participation in various types of leisure activities, often adopting the
activity theory premise that high levels of activity can be interpreted positively. Unfortunately, such work in leisure studies has usually pointed to the diminution of physical and mental activities, especially in the ‘very’ old age and focussed on the constraints and passive nature of older people’s leisure in order to highlight inactivity.

The Social Focus on Older People report (ONS 2005) is typical of the quantitative survey often used by leisure researchers to draw conclusions about older people’s leisure as can be seen from Figure 5.1.

**Figure 5.1. Quantified participation of older people in leisure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in a sport, game or physical activity: by age, 2002</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Great Britain</strong></td>
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<td>Walking</td>
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<td>Snooker/pool/billiards</td>
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<td>Golf</td>
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<td>Weight training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Participating in the four weeks before interview.
2 Two miles or more for recreational purposes.

*Source: Focus on older People 2005, Office for National Statistics*

The chapter on ‘Lifestyles and Leisure Interests’ from which the above table is taken pessimistically concludes from the data that:

*People in older age groups generally spend time on more sedate activities compared with those aged under 65. The time spent on watching TV, reading and listening to music increased substantially with age. Conversely the amount of time dedicated to more active pursuits, such as gardening or cultural and entertainment activities, falls in the seventy-five and over age group... (ONS 2005:84).*
The report clearly emphasises the increased time that people aged 65 and over are said to engage in solitary, sedentary, passive leisure activities such as watching television and listening to the radio. Unfortunately, in reaching such conclusions the report has treated older people in this age group as a homogenous group. The report also fails because it does not allow the older people surveyed to clarify their responses by contextualising their leisure, for example, by describing what their leisure patterns were before retirement. In addition, the survey fails to take into account the social and cultural background of respondents, leading one to question the relevance to many respondents of many of the questions. Such studies are typical of research on older people’s leisure which as Mc Pherson (1991) has observed, has tended to aggregate data on all older people over 65 in order to reach generalised conclusions and failed to recognise the heterogeneity of older people’s leisure.

More recently, Lee’s (2005:24) work on pre- and post-retirement leisure in South Korea also uses quantitative techniques. In this case a large-scale questionnaire survey involving 387 older people over 55 starts from the basic premise that:

Among all the leisure activities that occupy retirees nowadays, the most important is probably watching TV. This has been the most popular leisure activity... for most retirees for many decades in developed countries.

The work unsurprisingly concludes by emphasising the sedentary, disengaged nature of older people’s leisure activities.

In Roberts’ (2006:126) most recent text Leisure in contemporary society he also draws upon the quantitative data contained in various statistical surveys, such as the UK 2000 Time Use Survey, and various ONS reports, in order to develop a generalised life-course model and illustrate how leisure changes with age. He posits that leisure trends in old age bear ‘little resemblance to the engagement perspective’ as leisure participation levels decline:
Young people are far more likely than their elders both to adopt new activities and to drop existing interests. Older people tend to have very fixed routines. It is tempting, but maybe unfair, to describe them as being stuck in ruts. (Roberts 2006:152)

Against this background, there have understandably been increasing calls for research on older people’s leisure that does not only consider the quantity of leisure involvement, but also the quality and meaning of that leisure (McPherson 1991). For example, Gibson (2006) and Harahousou (2006) both argued recently for a more comprehensive understanding of leisure in later life, pointing out that research on older people has got to move away from merely focussing on participation patterns, leisure needs, constraints and preferences in leisure activity. Older people’s leisure, like any other group, is more than a ‘shopping list of activities’ but a ‘state of mind’ (Kelly 1993:3). As Curtes and White (1984) have pointed out, leisure research which focuses on the range of people’s leisure, might fail to recognise that older people may be intensifying their involvement in fewer activities.

Indeed the work of Hawkins et al. (2004:11) on leisure and satisfaction in later life, found that satisfaction in leisure activities is more important than leisure participation levels, observing that ‘Maybe it is less important to be very busy in lots of activities and more important that the activities in which one is engaged bring a high level of satisfaction.’ Highly social or physical leisure activities may not suit all older people and, just like younger age groups, some individuals may prefer less active and more solitary leisure activities. McPherson (1991:429) points out ‘there is not a common recipe as to which leisure activities will enhance life satisfaction or well-being in the later years.’

Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998) suggest that the failure to consider individualised patterns of leisure has meant that the fragmented nature of older people’s leisure, especially older women’s leisure, has not been captured. In addition, they observe that large scale survey research fails to recognise or capture the satisfactions which can be gained from passive leisure, such as watching television, listening to the radio or reading books. They observe that older people’s passive leisure is also ‘about the joys and pleasures of memories, of nostalgia, of reminiscence and the qualitative experiences gained from reading the
national and local papers’ which large scale surveys often fail to capture (Scraton, Bramham and Watson 1998:109).

Indeed Scraton, Bramham and Watson’s research (1998) into the leisure of older women in cities surveyed 250 households but found that such a large-scale survey offered only generalised accounts of the women’s lives and generated only superficial data. They accepted that many of the questions in the initial survey were irrelevant to the older women and that the data provided little detail that could give a ‘rich’ understanding of the women. Not surprisingly, in their follow up in-depth interviews these researchers were determined to ‘get beneath the surface’ of the statistical survey material in order to understand the ‘complexities, diversities and collective experiences of women’s lives’ (Scratton, Bramham and Watson 1998:119) and hence, they decided to use a much smaller sample of ten women.

Other feminist writers reinforce the view that leisure is much more than time-based surveys imply and not necessarily associated with specific activities or times, but is combined with other parts of women’s lives, including their paid and unpaid work. Henderson (1994:5) for example, identifies leisure as a ‘vague and amorphous concept’ which, like any activity involves ‘enjoyment, pleasure, and the opportunity to ‘please oneself’ or even the chance just to ‘do nothing’’. Thus she argues that ‘the leisure of women cannot be universalized and that no one female or male voice exists’ (Henderson 1994:5). Leisure research therefore needs to illuminate the diversity of women’s leisure experiences whilst still remaining true to issues of justice and power:

Going beyond dualistic, totalizing, and essentializing views of leisure may help us understand meanings in more encompassing ways. One size may not fit all, but many sizes will enable leisure to become empowering for women and men in numerous ways (Henderson 1996:151).

Unfortunately however, quantitative studies have neglected the personal contexts of older people’s leisure so that ‘Respondents are mere numbers in representative samples’ (Kazmierrska 2004:189). Grant (2002:295) for example argues that the tendency in leisure studies to focus on scientific and quantifiable aspects of people’s lives has meant that the subjective body has been ignored and the ‘subtleties’ of people’s lives lost. Similarly Heuser (2005:45), in her study of older
women’s participation in lawn bowling, recognises that too much emphasis on the leisure of older people has concentrated on decreasing participation rather than ascertaining ‘the personal meaning and value derived from such leisure pursuits’. Thus, whilst it is clear that the desire for legitimacy in the field of leisure studies has led to much quantitative research within the field, this in turn has influenced the way older people’s leisure has been researched. It also emerges that the quantitative nature of much leisure research has meant that the voices of women and older people have been hidden.

In addition, the influence of structuralist theory on leisure research can also be said to have distanced older people from leisure research. In particular the belief that leisure policy can play an important role in alleviating social and economic inequality, has meant that much leisure research has focussed on the sociology of work, physical education, urban planning and countryside recreation and thus on leisure in relation to ‘activity’ and ‘sport’. Indeed, Aitchison (2002) cites the 1980s ‘Sport for All’ and the 1990s ‘Tourism for All’ and ‘Countryside for All’ campaigns as clear evidence of this. In doing so, she argues that leisure studies has ‘inevitably drawn upon, and developed further, the respective discourses of the employed body, the active body and the able body’ (Aitchison 2002:26). Unfortunately, in such analyses, disabled people and one might argue, older people, have been excluded.

5.5. Critical research and leisure studies: implications for the study of older women

It is clear that leisure research has often reached pessimistic conclusions about older people’s leisure because of its quantitative, activity theory bias and its failure to explore the subjective, personal experiences of leisure. Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998:103) state that:

A great deal of work has concentrated on measuring sports participation, many of which have taken the form of large scale surveys, and in this have often ignored or failed to explore in any depth, the personal experiences of participants.
In relation to older women they specifically argue that:

_Such statistical accounts of elderly women and leisure may highlight the frequency of certain activities but they fail to uncover variety or the meanings and conditions of passive leisure._


Thus lists of activities, which attempt to measure older people’s leisure frequency tell us little, particularly as many people’s leisure is less formal, often occurring in casual settings. ‘*The ordinary occasions of leisure may not be characterized by special activities, events, or places... [but are] experiences of everyday life, rather than specific activities*’ (Wilhite, Sheldon and Jekubovich-Fenton 1994:65).

In light of these criticisms and weaknesses, there have been calls for leisure research to recognise that older people are not a homogenous group and not necessarily disengaged from leisure. Instead leisure research needs to recognise the central importance of leisure within older people’s lives. For example, Harahousou (2006:233) advocates a move away from the ‘unidimensional’ approaches to the study of later life towards more critical, multidimensional approaches, arguing that leisure should no longer be viewed as a list of activities, a way to ‘kill time’ or an alternative to work, but, ‘*an important element of older people’s lives, which provides them with meaning and a sense of personal identity.*’

To achieve such an approach to older people’s leisure, it is argued that there is a need for more research that focuses on small samples of older people in order to explore ‘*not just what people did with their leisure time but why - what leisure meant to them*’ (Veal 1997:19). This is particularly important in relation to older people if the stereotypes surrounding later life are to be overcome, and the pessimistic accounts of their lives are to be challenged: what Wearing (1995) describes as the ‘under use syndrome.’ Thus, rather than research which uses large samples and which fails to recognise the diversity and possibly the passive elements of older people’s leisure, small scale research which explores the subjective meanings around leisure is required. As Scraton, Bramham and Walston (1998:118) request, qualitative research is needed which deconstructs and ‘gets beneath the surface’ of statistical survey material:
In order to understand the complexities, diversities and collective experiences of older women's lives... [and to] give us a 'rich' understanding of the lives of this marginalized and often 'silent' group.

Indeed, as early as 1975, the Rapaports were undertaking such qualitative research on older people which recognised that it was impossible to generalise about the lives of older people, because of the variation and complexity of their lives. Consequently, over thirty years ago they were calling for research on the social and personal phenomenology of ageing and old people which captured at first hand what their lives were like. They argued that:

Knowledge gained this way will supplement the picture of demographic and quantitative indicators of the ageing process. What we need now are studies of old people rather than studies on old age and its problems (1975:320).

In addition to calls for more subject centred research, there have also been calls for more critical research within leisure studies which is not only critical of the everyday discourses around older people but also critical of the research concepts and measurements that have been used on older people, in other words:

Pointing out inconsistencies between discourses, whether expressed in words or figures and uncovering implicit assumptions underlying arguments about ageing and older people. It also means constantly reviewing existing discourses and seeking new ways of conceptualizing ageing issues. (Jamieson and Victor 1997:180)

Rojek (2005:12) in particular, calls for more critical research within leisure studies in order to raise 'questions of inequality, injustice, domination, oppression and manipulation in leisure forms and practice' and to challenge the functionalist assumptions around the status quo in society. In doing so, he recognises the important contribution that Marxist, feminist and postmodern approaches to the study of leisure have made in presenting more critical insights into leisure.
Indeed it is perhaps feminist researchers who have recently shown the greatest commitment to critical research, particularly that which challenges the negative assumptions around older women’s leisure. Wearing’s (1995:263) work, for example, on older people’s leisure, has clearly set out to challenge the dominant, negative discourses on later life by highlighting how leisure can be used by older people to resist the ‘deficiency model of ageing’ by maintaining that leisure has ‘the potential to challenge ageism and the self fulfilling prophesy of under use of physical and mental abilities in old age’ (Wearing 1995: 263). Iso-Ahola, Jackson and Dunn (1994) have also produced work that has attempted to challenge the ‘under-use’ model of later life by highlighting the tendency amongst older people to seek new leisure experiences in later life. Parry and Shaw’s work (1999) has similarly attempted to illustrate how leisure becomes more important to women as they age and become less role-bound. Shaw’s (1994) work reinforces these ideas, arguing that leisure can often be a way in which women resist societally imposed constraints such as those associated with later life.

As well as feminists within leisure studies, postmodernist researchers have also been influential in challenging the ‘grand’ theories of functionalism and structuralism (Bramham and Henry 1996). Postmodernism has done much to challenge many of the ‘certainties’ around later life and leisure behaviour, as Mommaas (1997:252) observes:

The time that leisure research could unproblematically be grounded in a collective interest in the participation of a nation’s population in public culture seems to be over... the leisure studies field seems to be grappling with the claims of postmodernism...

Thus postmodernism, with its emphasis on individual identity and diversity, has done much to shift the emphasis in leisure studies away from collectivist, welfarist and policy-oriented analyses. In relation to older people, the emphasis on individual identity and, particularly on popular culture within postmodernism, has allowed new discourses around older people to emerge. These, rather than being focussed on need and assumed leisure behaviour, have allowed more individualised understandings of leisure to emerge that acknowledge difference, multiple leisure choices and ‘a plurality of voices’ (Scraton and Watson 1998:124).
Postmodernism has also done much in leisure studies to challenge the idea of the researcher as the ‘expert’, able to formulate ‘meta-narratives’ on society and individuals such as older people. In doing so, Bramham and Henry (1996:206) claim that postmodernism has led many to question the credibility of both research and the researcher in formulating models of leisure behaviour in the way that functionalism and structuralism have done:

There can be no one uncontested interpretation of a book, painting, or film and therefore the intellectual have no authority to speak ‘for the other,’ to present his/her analysis as the privileged account.

Despite the moves within leisure studies towards more critical, subject centred and individualised research, there are many who argue that the field needs to move even further. Aitchison (2002) argues that the field of leisure studies has failed to keep up with new theoretical perspectives in other disciplines, particularly the way in which they have embraced post-structuralism and feminism. Thus, she calls for greater synergy between leisure studies and other disciplines:

a concomitant call for greater accommodation of ‘new’ theoretical perspectives including post-structuralism, postcolonialism and feminism; a concern with issues of social, cultural and spatial inclusion; and a critical appraisal of the way in which knowledge is defined and ‘leisure studies’ is produced, legitimated and reproduced (Aitchison 2002:20)

Similarly Annette Pritchard (2006:374) also calls for more critical leisure research, observing that without a critical approach ‘Leisure voices too often remain marginal, poorly articulated and are rarely heard in fields such as gerontology studies.’ Rojek (2005:50), in arguing for more critical research in leisure studies has specifically called for an ‘action approach’ to leisure which is:

Committed to working with actors to understand leisure trajectories by exploring the interplay between location and context and formulating leisure policies designed to achieve distributive justice, empowerment and social inclusion
He recognises that leisure choice and practice is far more complex than functionalist and structuralist approaches to leisure have maintained. Rather than leisure merely reflecting political, economic and social priorities, Rojek (2005) believes that it also presents a space in which individuals can challenge these social systems and norms of behaviour.

5.6. Summary

This chapter has highlighted how research in both the fields of gerontology and leisure studies share many common features, particularly their newness and their attempts to legitimise their disciplines by adopting positivist, quantitative approaches. As a result, similar problems have arisen from the scientific work of gerontology and leisure studies in that they have both tended to generalise about the lives of older people, have distanced older people from the research process and have often been problem-oriented in their analysis of the lives of older people.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that there have been shifts in both gerontology and leisure research to overcome such failings. In gerontology, for example, we have seen calls for more critical research which challenges the assumptions and stereotypes of older people in society and which highlights the possibilities achievable in later life. There have also been calls to capture the subjective experiences of older people by adopting qualitative methodologies, which place older people themselves at the centre of the research process. In this, both feminist and postmodern research has been influential in shifting the focus of research onto the individual and for advancing research that is more critical in the way that it challenges the accepted assumptions around later life within the field of gerontology.

Similarly, in leisure studies there is an increasing amount of research emerging which aims to give more subjective insights into the meanings of leisure. Such a shift has been evident in more recent feminist research which has aimed to give voice to female research participants and privilege their visions of the world. Postmodernism has also done much to raise the profile of the individual in leisure research and thus highlight the heterogeneity of people’s lives and experiences. Postmodernism in leisure studies, as in gerontology, has also led to the challenge of the grand universal theories of
leisure such as functionalism and structuralism as well as the assumption that researchers can know anything with certainty. Postmodernism has thus succeeded in highlighting the need for research which examines:

multiple identities, the reflexive self, the breakdown of clear divisions between work and leisure and the ambiguous and contradictory aspects of postmodern existence (Henderson and Shaw 2006:225).

Finally, the calls for more critical research which have been heard in gerontology, have similarly been heard in leisure studies where many scholars recognise the need for research which challenges the status quo around class, gender and indeed age. Such a shift is to be welcomed for the scope it offers in challenging the dominant, negative, ageist discourses around older people’s leisure. As Henderson (2006:394) argues, more critical research in leisure studies means:

Leisure researchers have an opportunity to normalize diversity rather than problematize it and this challenge can be the strength of leisure studies and leisure sciences in the next twenty-five years and beyond.

The next chapter will now outline how the various weaknesses and strengths of gerontological and leisure research outlined above shaped the formulation of the theoretical stance of this thesis as well as the methods chosen.
CHAPTER 6

METHODOLOGY

6.1. Introduction
6.2. Theoretical position of the study
6.3. Post-structural - feminist approach
6.4. Reflexive statement
6.5. The sample group: Women over seventy-five years
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CHAPTER 6: METHODOLOGY

6.1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to make explicit the epistemological and ontological premises, which have informed the primary research, what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe as the ‘net’ or the framework around which the work has been built. In particular, emphasis within this chapter is placed on outlining how a feminist methodology has influenced the approach taken to the older women within this study. A reflexive statement is also included within the chapter to indicate how my own background has influenced this work. The chapter outlines how the theoretical positioning of this study has influenced the choice of methods and provides detail on the implementation of the semi structured and biographical interviews as well as the women involved. Finally, consideration is given in the latter part of this chapter to the ethical considerations surrounding the study.

6.2. Theoretical position of the study

The previous chapter highlighted similarities in the way in which both gerontology and leisure studies have researched older people. Emphasis was placed on highlighting how, within both fields, a great deal of research has used positivist, scientific techniques in order to explore the lives of older people. Such research has tended to take the form of reality-oriented inquiry which believes that a reality exists and a truth can be found about the world, which can be observed and predicted using logically deduced theory and empirical data (Patton 2002). Hence, quantitative techniques have been frequently used to formulate grand theories, models and predictabilities around older people’s leisure behaviour. Within such research, older people have often been regarded as objects of study with research being done ‘on’ them rather than ‘with’ them. Such research has also tended to work within the current belief system and has thus failed to challenge many of the assumptions, values and discourses around older people. Hence, the results have often produced pessimistic assessments of their lives.
However, reference was also made in the previous chapter to show how critical research, particularly within feminist studies, has often used qualitative techniques to provide more in-depth understanding of the subjective, individualised experiences of older people’s lives and rejected ideas of a universal truth about the world and leisure behaviour. Critical research using qualitative techniques has also produced far deeper understandings, which have challenged the assumptions around later life and highlighted its possibilities. In recognising these strengths, this study, unlike reality-oriented inquiry, is based on a belief that there is no ‘truth’ waiting to be discovered; instead, a world of multiple realities exists that is socially constructed (ontological relativity). The approach does not claim to be objective and neither does it accept the existence of a ‘single’ truth but instead recognises that knowledge is culturally and socially specific, that it undergoes change over time - it is not static (Aitchison 2003). As Bertaux (1981:40) recognises:

*Neither sociology nor economics, history or anthropology will ever become sciences like the natural sciences. Social life is made out of struggles whose outcomes are unpredictable. There are no ‘social laws’ like physical laws, that is: eternal, totally accurate, acting upon everything in the universe... what will happen? No law can predict it.\'*

He goes on to state that even though there might not be a social ‘science’ which formulates social laws, a social knowledge is possible that can lead to a greater understanding of society:

*The task of sociological thinking should not be to find ‘social laws’ but to help along the tendency towards a progressive elucidation of the historical movement of social relations. For this we need critical thinking, more than we do positive thinking.* (Bertaux 1981:430)

Recognising the weaknesses of research in the reality-oriented tradition, the epistemological stance of this thesis is constructivist, a term often used interchangeably, argues Patton (2002), with constructionism. Both constructivism and constructionism rest on ontological relativity; the belief that that the human world is very different from the natural world in that the social world is constructed by humans and thus culturally and socially specific. Hence, there is no ‘true’
interpretation but instead ‘useful interpretations’ of the world and that ‘constructivists study the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others’ (Patton 2002:96).

Hemingway (1990:303) agrees, arguing that even our understanding of leisure is relative and culturally specific:

We should not take any particular set of social conditions and institutions as in some way an unchanging brute reality. Indeed, that leisure itself has become an object of social inquiry is testimony to a particular set of historical developments, a particular set of largely western economic and social conditions.

In other words, the social world does not have an order and rationality that the natural world does and thus it is not possible to generalise about it, as Plummer (1983:68) states:

Life is more ambiguous, more problematic and more chaotic in reality... lives are often flooded with moments of indecision, turning points, confusions, contradictions and ironies [thus] questionnaires, experiments, attitude scales and even the perusal of existing social science literature and historical documents can often give a form and order to the world which it frequently does not have.

Thus, quantitative techniques such as questionnaires which, as discussed in the previous chapter, have been so commonly used within gerontology and leisure studies to formulate models about all older people’s lives and to predict behaviour are flawed. People embody agency, individualisation and reflexivity, thus social identity and behaviour, around characteristics such as age, is uncertain. Large scale surveys, indicative of social reductionism are inappropriate ways to study people, instead individual studies are needed (Rustin 2000).

Indeed in adopting a constructivist stance in the belief that there is no objective truth, only ‘situated knowledges’ (Gray 2003:183), the intention of this study was to place emphasis on individual narrative in order to reach what Gray describes as
a 'positioned truth' relative to our time, place and culture. In doing so, a unique insight into the leisure of older women was gained. Thus, rather than placing emphasis on ‘discovering truth’ using positivist, quantitative methods to generate data and test hypothetical theories, I adopted an interpretivist approach, using qualitative and naturalistic approaches to ‘get inside’ the minds of the older women within the study in order to ‘see the world from their point of view’ (Veal 1997:31). The nature of the interpretive social inquiry used, attempted to understand how the older women interpreted the world and their leisure, what Hemingway (1990) describes as ‘first order interpretations’ which ‘penetrate beneath the surface’ of how individuals interpret and constitute the world. This ability of in depth, interpretive research to ‘get beneath the surface,’ to understand the meanings people have of the world, is also recognised by Lazar (2001:22) who states:

*The interpretive tradition contends that the meaningfulness of the social world makes the application of scientific methods such as explanation by laws and causes inappropriate. Instead the social sciences should seek to grasp the meanings which individuals and social groups give to their actions and institutions.*

Such an approach is heavily influenced by phenomenology and the emphasis it places on the first hand, lived experiences of individuals, their subjective experiences, inner feelings, how they make sense of the world, perceive things, feel, judge and make sense of phenomena (Patton 2002). Aitchison (2003:16) observes that phenomenology is:

*More concerned with interpreting the world than with explaining it and attempts are made to interpret social processes by establishing what these processes mean for the individuals involved.*

The purpose of this thesis is not necessarily to explain or predict behaviour but to improve understanding. Sharing the sentiments of phenomenology, I did not set out to develop a universal theory about later life but instead, to gain insight into the multiple accounts of leisure and its meanings and significance in later life (Henderson 1994). In order to gain this insight into the reality and subjective experiences of older women and their leisure, I adopted in depth interviewing as my method, a
technique considered essential within phenomenology (Aitchison 2003). Thus, both in-depth semi-structured and biographical interviews were used to understand the leisure of the older women in this study. Each of these methods were regarded as the most appropriate way to get close to the older women in order to understand their world. Both methods are discussed in far greater detail later in the chapter.

6.3. Post-structural - feminist approach

Whilst a phenomenological approach was taken within this study in order to capture the detail of people’s lived experiences, the intention of the research was also to understand how social and cultural factors have influenced older women’s lives and their leisure. Class and gender are still key factors in shaping the experiences of life and particularly later life. Caring roles, domestic work constraints and financial hardships confront many older women, constraining their opportunities for an agenic third age (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). However, phenomenology, with its emphasis on human agency and individual interpretations of the world, has been accused of lacking the critical spirit so important to this research study and for ignoring the societal constraints within people’s lives (Crotty 1998, Aitchison 2003). Thus, in order to provide a critical perspective to my work and to ensure the political, social and economic structures that affected the lives and leisure opportunities of the older women were identified, I also adopted a post-structural feminist approach to examine how society has constructed, legitimated and reproduced gender relations (Aitchison 2003). In doing so, my intention was to challenge and reveal the cultural codes in society, which account for ageism, particularly in relation to older women and thus contribute to the destabilisation of the ‘truths’ around later life.

By interrogating the accepted ‘knowledge’ and grand narratives around older women, which, as we have seen in earlier chapters, marginalises and problematises them, I hope to make a contribution to the emergence of more empowering narratives (Foucault 1983). In doing so, I have placed the older women at the centre of the research, exploring both factors of structural disadvantage and patriarchy as articulated by the women themselves. In this, I draw on the ideas of Foucault (1977, 1983) who recognised how dominant discourses, such as the ageist discourses around later life, become part of accepted truth. Foucault recognised however that such ‘truths’ were not ‘real’ ‘truths but historically and culturally located ideas which,
although capable of affecting social practices, attitudes and behaviour, could be resisted and overturned.

Thus, as well as focusing on individual, subjective interpretations of the older women’s leisure, I was particularly sensitive to the women’s words in order to analyse how unspoken power relations and social structures affected their potential for and understanding of leisure. At the same time, emphasis was placed on highlighting how the older women resist and challenge these structures. Such an approach is very much in keeping with critical gerontology which, as Estes et al. (2003:3) state ‘requires a fusion of the study of structural inequalities in society and the personal experience of ageing.’ The semi-structured and biographical interviews used here thus capture both the older women’s subjective interpretations of their leisure as well as the structural and cultural contexts of their lives, which may have affected their leisure.

By incorporating post-structural feminist theory into the thesis, and recognising that individuals are reflexive beings, my intention was also ultimately to formulate research which may make some contribution to the improvement of older women’s lives, hence the research was intended to be done as much with and for them rather than merely on them. I therefore adopted a post-structuralist stance (Foucault, 1973, 1977, 1983) in the way that I rejected the idea of meta-narratives or grand narratives or the idea of one truth, recognising that such universal truths fail to acknowledge diversity and is thus capable of marginalizing minority groups such as women and older people.

6.4. Reflexive statement

The previous section outlined the reasoning behind the research approach taken within this work however, such insight is only part of the story, to fully understand my approach to the research and older women, it is necessary to provide some insight into my life, particularly the impact of culture and personal biography on my values and ‘take’ on the world. Thus, in drawing from both phenomenological and feminist theory and recognising that knowledge is not value free, it is important that some insight is given into the biography and personal life experience of the researcher, for these affect both the choice of study and values which she brings into the research. Indeed, in rejecting the idea that a ‘real’ truth can ever be found, only situated
knowledge, it is vital that the ‘constructor’ of knowledge, the researcher (Plummer 1983) reveals their ‘cognitive lenses’ and thus how these may have affected the researcher’s intellectual and emotional approach (Jaffe and Miller 1994). As Plummer (1983:104) states, it is unrealistic to think that researchers do not bring biases to their research, they are not robots, they have feelings, beliefs and ‘the task of the researcher, therefore, is not to nullify these variables, but to be aware of, describe publicly and suggest how these have assembled a specific ‘truth.’’ Patton (2002:65) emphasises this importance of reflexivity, arguing that it reminds ‘the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice’ for these affect the way individuals approach and undertake research. Unlike research adopting a realist approach in which the emphasis is on the neutrality of the researcher and which attempts to remove the ‘bias’ and the subjectivity of the researcher, qualitative research regards the subjectiveness of the researcher as part of the research process and allows for multiple voices (Flick 1999). Rather than researchers presenting themselves as, what Gray (2003:33) describes, ‘disembodied arbiters of truth and knowledge’ much qualitative research recognises the importance of reflexivity. This is particularly true of feminist research, which has, in the past, criticised the lack of reflexivity in research for producing work, which is male biased, and which fails to recognise how that knowledge is produced or the often patriarchal assumptions behind it. Indeed Fontana and Frey (2000:661) argue that many studies using unstructured interviews are not reflexive enough: ‘common platitudes proclaim that the data speak for themselves, that the researcher is neutral, unbiased, and ‘invisible’’ However they do acknowledge that increasingly researchers are recognising the need for reflexivity and the ‘tremendous, if unspoken, influence of the researcher.’

Reflexivity or, what Roberts (2002) also describes as ‘self-monitoring’ or ‘self-reflection,’ is particularly important when undertaking research on a group such as older people who have been so widely and negatively stereotyped within society. The extent to which these stereotypical discourses and ‘knowledge’ has ‘contaminated’ the researcher’s attitude towards older people needs consideration. As Kaufman (1994:126) states:
It behoves all researchers in the aging field to be as aware as possible of the notions we bring to the field. Regardless of our intentions to remain neutral researchers, our stereotypes and other presuppositions become part of our representations of elderly individuals and the ageing process and part of the ‘knowledge’ we produce about them.

Thus in an attempt to locate my role and position within the research, the following information aims to provide insight into my influences, and thus it is written in the first person.

I was born in 1961, into a working class family in north Manchester. We lived in the suburban neighbourhood of New Moston, an area dominated by families like ours, who had lived in this neighbourhood and in many cases the same house, for many years. Indeed, after almost fifty years, my parents still live in the same house. I went to the local girls' comprehensive school, where I was lucky enough to gain enough A-levels to allow me to go to University, the first member of my family to have such an opportunity. This educational opportunity is in stark contrast to that of my parents who both had to leave school at 14 and find work, my mother into one of the cotton mills in Oldham and my father as a printer's apprentice in Manchester.

At university, I studied history and politics and, during this time, I became particularly interested in both Labour party politics and feminism. My undergraduate dissertation was, in fact, on the position of women in UK politics. Shortly after graduating, I went travelling in south east Asia for twelve months, a journey which generated an interest in the leisure and tourism industries. On my return from this trip I decided to undertake a Masters in tourism and leisure at Birmingham University. The university department in Birmingham, the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) where I studied, had a reputation in the UK for its work on social exclusion in inner city areas, particularly those cities that had recently experienced inner city riots. Inevitably, the research interests of staff permeated many of the lectures, particularly those on the role of urban tourism and made me highly aware of the ‘underclasses’ within British society. The work of Judy White, also based in the department, on leisure and feminism proved to be a great influence and rekindled the interest in feminism that had started during my undergraduate studies.
After completing my Masters course, I successfully gained a lecturing post at Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies. Three years later I moved to Cardiff Institute of Higher Education, now the University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC), to a similar lecturing position. It was at UWIC, which was beginning to raise its research profile, that I became interested in minority groups and particularly under-represented groups in tourism and leisure activity, groups which at the time had received scant attention within academic texts in the field. Because of this interest, I became part of an Economic and Social Research Council bid to gain funding for a project on social tourism, aimed specifically at children in care homes. I later began research on gay and lesbian tourism and leisure, which proved to be some of the first published research on the topic.

More recently, perhaps because of ageing parents and in-laws, I became aware of the absence of work on older people within tourism and leisure. This seemed surprising, particularly in light of the active, full lives my parents, and the parents of my friends seemed to be leading in their 70s. Whilst much was being published by the government on older people’s lives, particularly in Wales where the WAG published the UK’s first strategy on older people, this group did not seem to be receiving the same attention from academics in the field of tourism and leisure. Moreover, the literature that did exist did not seem to capture the satisfactions and breadth of leisure and tourism involvement that those older people around me seemed to be experiencing.

In the light of this contextualising material, it is evident to see how my background has influenced not only the choice of my study but also the approach taken to the women studied. For example, the involvement of working class women in the study perhaps reflects my own familiarity with this socio-economic class. I am sure that the empathy and understanding that I have tried to show for the women in the study, reflects the insight I have had into the poor life and educational opportunities many in this age group have experienced. The positive recognition I have given to their life achievements, particularly their leisure in later life, also reflects an awareness of what little scope for leisure they and others from that class and generation had when growing up. I am also certain that being surrounded by such positive role models, such as my own parents, accounts largely for the positive manner and for the
recognition of the possibilities of later life that I have emphasised throughout this work.

My academic interest, as an undergraduate but also as a postgraduate, in feminism perhaps also accounts for the focus on women within the study as well as the attention I have given within the work to how structural and particularly patriarchal structures have affected the lives of the women involved in the study. At the same time, my interest in feminism has also meant an awareness of the potential of women for resisting and overcoming these obstacles. My interest in socially disadvantaged and minority groups, generated at Birmingham University and later pursued through research as a lecturer at UWIC, has also, I am sure, drawn me to the choice of women over seventy-five years of age in this research. It is not surprising that against this background, the work has intended to challenge the negative preconceptions about older people's lives and contribute to challenging ageism in society. As Plummer (1983:57) states, such a political and moral objective should be part of any research project anyway:

There must be a self-awareness by the sociologist of the ultimate moral and political role in moving towards a social structure in which there is less exploitation, oppression and injustice and more creativity, diversity and equality.

It is clear that the material in this study has inevitably been 'contaminated' by my own social background, political values, gender and those with whom I have come into contact. The knowledge which this work generates is, as Donna Haraway (1991) describes 'situated knowledge' embedded in my own culture, society and history and clearly informed the work but, as she recognises, we cannot speak from nowhere but only from socially, culturally and politically located positions. Roberts (2002:172) also asserts this view of 'knowledge' stating that:

As researchers we interpret our own lives as we interpret the lives of others and in research our own biographical experience and feelings are involved. This emotional contact should not be seen as merely a hindrance in research but as part of the research relationships which should be expanded as (inescapably) part of the research relationships which should be
expanded upon through the reflexive monitoring of our own self-involvement.

Thus, in the same way that the women in this study are a product of their own social, personal and historical location in time, so too am I. This is why it is important to confront and reveal these subjectivities, for these affect the research process and the interpretation of the stories told. We cannot, as Goodley et al. (2004:107) maintain, ‘erase our personal commitments from life story research, nor can we feign objectivity.’

Harris, Wilson and Ateljevic (2007) state that the reflexive process should be not just about the positionality of embodied researchers whose lives, experiences and world views affect one’s research but also about the ‘entanglements’. ‘Entanglements’ they argue, refer to the ideologies and legitimacies which govern and guide tourism research and the research accountability environment which decides what is ‘acceptable’. In this respect, being part of UWIC, which has a strong culture of critical, social and cultural tourism and leisure research rather than purely business oriented research, has meant that I have been immersed in an environment that has encouraged research on difference, identity, the body, gender and social inclusion.

Having worked for fifteen years alongside Professor Nigel Morgan, Dr Annette Pritchard and Professor David Botterill, who have worked hard to encourage and foster research concerned with social justice and equality both within UWIC and the academic community outside, has encouraged me to adopt a range of qualitative research methods which ‘confront the field’s dominant (post) positivist approaches; foreground the emotional dynamics of research relations and explore the personal, the political and the situated nature of research journeys.’ (Ateljevic, Morgan and Pritchard 2007:4). UWIC played a central role in the organisation and launch of the first Critical Tourism Studies Conference, ‘Embodying Tourism Research’, which was held in Dubrovnik in 2005 as well as the follow up ‘Critical Turn in Tourism Studies: Promoting An Academy Of Hope’ conference in Split in 2007, the purposes of which were to encourage more critical and interpretive forms of tourism and leisure research. Attending these conferences had a significant impact on me, particularly in relation to placing my own research into perspective and affirming the value and legitimacy of the subject of this research and the use of biographical methods, a topic and a method so under-utilised within leisure studies.
Whilst the previous sections outlined the theoretical and reflexive position of this study, this part of the chapter describes in detail how these have influenced the choice of methods used within this work. An explanation is provided of the rationale for the choice of methods but also the detail of their implementation. A description is presented of how both semi-structured and biographical interviews were used to explore the women's subjective perspectives, as well as the social and cultural structures surrounding their lives. Biographical research is a relatively new and underused method within leisure studies and thus particular emphasis is placed on outlining the nature and history of this method within the chapter. Background detail in this section is also provided on the women who participated in this study. The latter part of the chapter focuses on the ethical considerations involved in the choice of methodology and methods as well as the ethical issues involved in research, which involves older people.

6.5. The sample group: Women over seventy-five years

Both the semi-structured and biographical interviews have focussed on women in the 'oldest-old' category, that is those aged seventy-five and over, a group on which little, if any, leisure research exists. By concentrating on such a narrow age group, it was possible to identify and compare the unique structural, historical and cultural events to which the cohort had been exposed and which had affected their life chances, outlook on life, social roles as well as opportunities for economic success and social mobility (Elder1981). The advantage of studying specific cohorts to contextualise the lives of people first emerged in the work of Karl Mannheim (1952) who recognised that an individual's location in social and historical time results in distinct world-views and ways of thinking about the world. Thus, he recognised differences between age groups were not because of age processes but the influence of birth cohort or generational effect, such as experiencing the same historical events at the same point in the lifecycle.

Mannheim's ideas have been criticised by those who argue that the same cohort does not experience historical events in the same way, and factors like class, gender or ethnic origin might, for example, differentiate the way people experience events. Pilcher (1995), for instance, points out that individuals do not always maintain their collective consciousness and ideals across their lifetime. Bytheway (1995) points out
that a potential problem of using cohorts, in this case older women over seventy-five, leads to connotations of ‘otherness’ and separates older people from the rest of the population. However, whilst recognising these criticisms, the need to raise the profile of this almost invisible age group in leisure studies and also the desire to gain some insight into the shared social and historical events to which this cohort has been exposed, means that the benefits of this approach outweigh the disadvantages of using cohorts. In addition, the fact that all the individuals in this research were from similar working-class backgrounds increased the likelihood that they had experienced social and historical events in similar ways.

To identify potential individuals within the cohort, the researcher contacted the organiser of a local pensioners’ club, the ‘Thursday Class’ to arrange a presentation to the group of women who attended the class. At the presentation, the official identity of the researcher was made clear using official University identification. The purpose and nature of the research was explained along with the format of the initial semi-structured interviews to be undertaken. The women were also informed that whilst the narratives and the analyses of those agreeing to take part in the study could become part of a public document, their anonymity would be ensured using fictional names for both individuals and places, where appropriate. Following the presentation, twelve women aged seventy-five or over came forward, agreeing to participate in the research project and the initial phase of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Their telephone numbers and addresses were noted and times arranged when the researcher could visit the women in their own homes to undertake the research. By chance, all of the women lived alone, after having been widowed or divorced, all lived in their own homes in the same working class area of Cardiff and all were from similar social backgrounds, broadly working class. In choosing the women in this study from a weekly pensioners group who were known to be active, I might be accused of failing to gain a representative sample of older people and building bias into the work. However, identifying the women in this way meant that the work had some chance of countering the large amount of negative research on pathological ageing and structural disadvantage. From the outset of this work, the intention was to challenge the dominant negative discourses of leisure around older people, especially those in the ‘oldest old’ phase, and highlight their potential for leisure.
Details about the women’s profile are presented in Figure 6.1 below. Even though the names have been altered to retain anonymity, out of respect, the women’s initial preferences to be known either on first name terms or by their surname with title, have been retained throughout this work.

**Figure 6.1. Summary of participants’ key characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (when interviewed)</th>
<th>Retirement age</th>
<th>Last Job</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Long</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>F/T shop assistant</td>
<td>Bungalow</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>P/T landlady</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>F/T civil servant</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Wells</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>P/T shop assistant</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Mole</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>P/T shop assistant</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>P/T cleaner</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Giles</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>F/T civil servant</td>
<td>Sheltered apartment</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Case</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>F/T merchandiser</td>
<td>Sheltered apartment</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olwen</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>P/T secretary</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Crowe</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>P/T health worker</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Town</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>P/T home help</td>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Ansell</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>P/T shop assistant</td>
<td>detached house with daughter, son-in-law and grandson</td>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6.6. Semi-structured interviews

As little research exists on the leisure of older women over seventy-five years, the purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gain an initial insight into the patterns and characteristics of their current leisure patterns and how these had developed since retirement from work. Unlike a questionnaire and structured interview, where the agenda and questions are predefined (Boaz et al. 1999), the women were encouraged to speak openly about their leisure, from their own perspective and on their own terms. Jerrome (1994:7) stresses the benefits of such an approach in which participants have an active engagement with the interview process, stating that ‘The use of subjective accounts allows the ordinary person to ‘talk back’ to sociological writers and create a different kind of sociological discourse.’

I however did use an interview guide to ensure that all areas of the intended research were covered. However, the questions asked were open ended to encourage free conversation and to allow the women to define and describe leisure in their own way, thus ensuring that each interview was unique, as Kaufman (1994:125) states:
The interview guide is only that. The investigator refers to it to make sure all topics are covered during the interview sessions. The exact wording of specific questions, the order in which they are asked, and probed, forms details which are unique to each interview. 

Both before and during the interviews, following Patton’s (1990) recommendation, I did not define leisure for the women but was keen to establish how the women themselves defined and interpreted the concept. The majority of the semi-structured interviews lasted for one hour and although some others were much longer, none of the interviews took longer than three hours. The interviews were taped and later transcribed in order to ensure accuracy and to allow me to concentrate on the interview content (see Appendix A for a sample transcript). Establishing rapport and trust before the interview was regarded as particularly important and I took advantage of the proffered cups of tea on arrival at the women’s houses and used this time to chat with the women before the interview. Fontana and Frey (2000:658) point out that establishing a relationship with research participants is becoming an increasingly important part of interviewing, particularly in feminist research which should embed traits such as sensitivity and emotionality. They explain that:

the emphasis is shifting to allow the development of a closer relation between interviewer and respondent; researchers are attempting to minimize status differences and doing away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing. Interviewers can show their human side and answer questions and express feelings.

For Fontana and Frey (2000:668), it is vital that respondents are treated as individuals, as people rather than ‘unimportant, faceless individuals’ and that researchers put themselves in the position of the respondents being interviewed ‘rather than superimpose his or her world of academia and preconceptions on them.’

The small sample size of twelve women for phase one was seen as appropriate since the aim was to ensure that the interviews were in-depth and personal. As Fennell (1990:65) recognises ‘we may learn more from in-depth interviews with only a handful of older people carried out by a sensitive and well informed researcher.’ Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998:104) also agree arguing that small
scale in-depth research allows ‘rich, ‘thick’ descriptions to remain within the research without the need to generalise to a broader population.’ Thus, within this work, the intention was to avoid a large-scale empiricist approach but instead to focus on uncovering the nature of the individual experiences of leisure for a small number of older women. The emphasis within the work was not on fulfilling the criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity because as Denzin (1997) argues, the desire to present generalizations about the ‘normal’ population is flawed because it means that difference and marginal groups in society are often ignored. Thus as Denzin (1997) maintains that the term ‘validity’ is no longer appropriate within qualitative research, the only certainty in the world is uncertainty and so the results of research become one version of ‘reality’. Silverman (2000:823) similarly argues that interview material should be treated as stories or narratives ‘through which people describe their worlds.’ Thus narrative approaches he argues, differ from realist approaches to interviews in that they abandon:

the attempt to treat respondents’ accounts as potentially ‘true’ pictures of ‘reality’ we open up for analysis the culturally rich methods through which interviewers and interviewees, in concert, generate plausible accounts of the world.

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) also support such an approach and the use of small scale random samples. They argue that ‘narrative elasticity’ and ‘narrative options,’ as well as changing social and historical conditions, mean that no individual or even a group of any size, can ever be ‘representative’ of a section of society anyway. However, by listening carefully to the narrative of individuals, Gubrium and Holstein (2002:23) maintain that ‘we might find that an ostensibly single interview could actually be, in practice, an interview with several subjects, whose particular identities may only be partially clear.’ They suggest that large sample sizes are unnecessary as small groups or individuals can provide clearer, more in-depth insights into specific social and cultural contexts. Indeed this research was more concerned that the interviews represent the ‘reality’ of the women’s lives rather than whether they contained true or false statements (Silverman 2000).

The transcripts emerging from the interviews were analysed using content analysis to explore emergent themes and to identify key aspects of the women’s
leisure activities. However as a number of writers have observed, (Patton 2002, Finn, Elliot-White and Walton 2000) there is actually no agreement about what content analysis actually is and Patton (2002:453) suggests it is more generally a term used ‘to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings.’

Inductive analysis was used which involves discovering patterns, themes and categories in the interview transcripts rather than deductive analysis in which data is analysed according to an existing framework (Patton 2002). In adopting a phenomenological approach, the content analysis was particularly concerned with the women’s personalised inner world, as well as focussing on how personal and individual happenings had influenced the women’s perceptions and opportunities for leisure (Chamberlayne et al. 2000:17). The impact of historical location, formal structures and cultures on this cohort’s leisure was also considered. The use of computer aided soft ware was considered and rejected for it often hinders flexibility in the analysis, as Gillham (2005:147) makes clear, such packages can be ‘biased towards a code and retrieve style of organisation which can lead to fragmentation of the data and the loss of those elements which make for contextual meaning.’ Silverman (2000:823) agrees arguing that the use of computer technology such as NUD*IST lends itself more to the realist approach and the use of coded responses and correlation.

6.7. Biographical interviews

Despite recognising the value of the semi-structured interviews in terms of identifying and describing the current leisure activities of the participants and their value in terms of providing insight into the impact of both agency and structure on their lives, the semi-structured interviews only provided a superficial understanding of why each of the respondents had developed the patterns of leisure described. The decision was therefore taken to supplement the semi-structured interviews with biographical interviews in phase two of the research. Indeed, it was felt that the emphasis within biographical interviews on the whole life course would reveal how individual subjectivities as well as social, political and economic structures had emerged and influenced the women’s life choices, lifestyles and ultimately the meaning and significance which they attached to their leisure in much greater depth.
Before deciding to use biographical interviews, the life history method was considered as an alternative method, concerned as it is with people’s biographies and their past. However, the method was rejected for its over emphasis on the objective facts surrounding people’s lives, such as exact dates and locations, which are often checked with reference to supporting documentary materials. The technique was also rejected because of its applicability to large samples; Ladkin’s (2002) use of the technique with hotel managers in Australia for example used a sample of 180 respondents. The tendency when using this technique to aggregate the data in order to find patterns in the research material (Ladkin 2004) and formulate generalised assumptions also meant the approach was rejected. In addition, life history research, whilst it can involve interviews, also tends to use questionnaires with specific questions around biography which are shaped and determined by the researcher in order to prompt accurate memories. In my research, I was more interested in the individual and less on making generalizations; I was also keen to ensure that the women’s own agendas and voices came to the fore and thus wanted to avoid the use of predetermined questions.

Memory-work, as a feminist technique to explore in greater depth the women’s experiences of leisure over their lifetime, was also strongly considered. The method is perhaps most associated with the work of Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton (1992) and Jennie Small (1999, 2003, 2004) who has even used the technique with older women to explore their holiday memories. Memory-work has a number of advantages. Firstly, memory-work treats participants as ‘co-researchers’ and thus attempts to break down the barriers between the subject and the object of research (Small 2004). Another appealing aspect of memory-work is that the technique has been used by women researching other women. It thus offers the potential for empowerment since, within this technique, the women themselves are involved in the interpretation and theorization of their own memories, allowing liberation.

Whilst recognizing the many advantages of memory work, I was concerned about the requirement for a collective construction of memories. I believed that this would be problematic because the women had tightly structured leisure engagements and this would make their availability problematic. In phase 2 of this work, I was also less concerned with collective but more with individual experiences and details
of personal biography, which memory-work tends to avoid (Small 2004). Also, I felt that the expectation at the first stage of memory-work to write down a memory might be intimidating for the older women I was involved with, since they had all left school at 14 and I was not sure of their writing abilities. Finally, as Jennie Small (2004) acknowledges, another difficulty with memory-work is that, by undertaking a PhD, I am required to take ownership of the research and this might work against the spirit of the method.

The decision to adopt a biographical approach was taken not only in recognition of this technique’s ability to provide an in-depth, first-hand, possibly emancipatory insight into older women’s lives but also because of my belief that it is not possible to study or understand the lives of any group at a snapshot of time, in particular women aged seventy-five and over. As Bernard and Meade (1993:168) state, ‘It is folly to take a segment of a woman’s life and examine it with no appreciation of the potentially profound effect of previous events.’ Thus, in order to understand and explore the lives of the older women, it was considered essential to explore what had ‘gone before;’ the social, environmental and cultural contexts through which they had lived. Their biographies were explored to reveal how both personal circumstances and society had structured their lives, particularly the gendered aspects such as caring responsibilities, access to financial resources and relationships. Biographical interviews were thus regarded as the most appropriate way of exploring the whole of the older women’s life development, rather than isolated moments, acknowledging as Wilson (2000:12) states, that:

Men and Women are not just ‘old’. They are ageing people with pasts and futures. Their pasts may be personal and include all sorts of experiences that made them what they are, or stopped them living as they would have liked.

In providing an insight into the contextual features of a person’s life (gender, race, socio-economic factors or genetics) that have shaped and even restricted life choices, Holstein and Minkler (2003:794) argue that biographical methods also offer the potential for challenging the biases and negativities around later life, revealing how older people have coped with such challenges and their acts of resistance. Bornat (2002:117) also observes that biographical interviews can ultimately prove to be both
emancipatory and empowering to older people in the way that they allow older people to challenge negative stereotyped images:

*It may throw light on forgotten or hidden aspects of past experience, bringing to the foreground lives which have been marginalized, disregarded and downgraded. It may challenge existing assumptions and dominant narratives with subversive evidence.*

Perhaps most rewarding of all Bornat (2002:117) argues, is the capacity of biographical research:

*to change and challenge attitudes and understandings of the perspective of the research subject and to make links between past lives and present experience as well as hopes for the future.*

Bernard and Meade (1993:17) argue that the emancipatory potential of biographical research is particularly important when researching older women for, too frequently they have been the ‘objects’ or ‘subjects’ of research which has marginalised and silenced them and thus failed to capture their resistance and spirit. The advantage of biographical research is that, in capturing the detail of women’s lives, it can allow new discourses about them to emerge. As Holstein and Minkler (2003:794) state, biographical research can allow older women to:

*Move beyond the circumscribed narrative conventions that tell them what their stories ought to be about... Women, through these stories, can redefine problems, elevate new problems, or include previously excluded forms of knowing.*

Another advantage of biographical research is that the insider’s or ‘emic’ perspective which emerges from placing the subject at the centre of the research process, rather than the researchers, allows the subject to highlight issues and agendas which are of significance to them (Thompson 1981). In doing so, biographical interviews reduce the risk of researchers applying their own values and understandings to the lives of older people. Indeed, all too often:
As middle class professionals working at a particular historical moment, we are too easily led to generalize from our own experience and to take for granted that it was shared in other social groups or at other periods. (Thompson 1981:253)

Thus by giving voice to the older women through biographical interviews, and listening to their own stories, I attempted to address the potential difficulties of a middle class female academic researching and attempting to interpret the lives of women 30-40 years older than I.

6.8. Defining biographical research

The term biographical interview is used within this research, however its exact meaning is open to interpretation, particularly as many other terms are often used to describe similar approaches to research, namely: oral history, personal narrative, biography, life history or life story. Denzin (1989:27) observes that a whole range of terms is often used:

- method, life, self, experience, epiphany, case, autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography, biography, ethnography story, discourse, narrative, narrator, fiction, history, personal history, oral history, case history, case study, writing presence, difference, life history, life story, self story, and personal experience story.

Bertaux (1981:7) argues that the range of terms, often used interchangeably to describe a whole range of biographical approaches, indicates ‘terminological confusion’ within the research community. Bornatt (2002:118) on the other hand disputes this, observing that all these approaches have much in common, particularly the way in which they ‘focus on the recording and interpretation, by some means or other, on the life experience of individuals.’ There are similarities in these approaches but there are also many distinctions. Life histories, suggests Kazmierski (2004), are more of an objective account of the events a person has lived through. Life stories, on the other hand, are more subjective and subject-centred, aiming to focus on the past as a way of understanding people’s individual lives, their identity and development. Chamberlayne (2004) similarly suggests that life stories are a more interpreted form
of subject-centred research than oral and life histories. Thompson (2000) also makes the distinction between life stories and life histories observing that, in the latter, the emphasis is on recording detail about how the past was lived both individually and communally. Hence in life histories, interviews are often supplemented with historical, public and private documents or even interviews with other people to support the statements of individuals (Thompson 2000).

In this research, the aim of the biographical interview was to focus on the individual and their own subjective life story in order to gain an insight into their perceptions and understandings of leisure. No other documentary evidence such as personal documents, letters, diaries, were used to supplement the stories told. The terms biographical research, biographical interviews and biographical stories are used interchangeably here to describe the approach that has utilised the personal life stories of the older women.

6.9. The development of biographical research

I have already noted above how, as early as 1975 the Rapoport’s study of leisure and the family life cycle highlighted the need to move away from large scale quantitative studies on older people towards detailed, in-depth studies. In doing so, these two scholars advocated the need for ‘systematic life histories of different kinds of old people’ (1975:320). More recently Janke, Davey and Kleiber (2006:285) have argued that as involvement in leisure activities is life-long ‘investigations should take a lifespan perspective on the changes that occur in individuals’ leisure behaviour patterns.’ Despite such calls, biographical techniques have hardly been used in the fields of leisure and tourism. An exception is Ladkin’s work (1999) which used the technique to some extent, in a study of hotel general managers in the UK, but this was more a ‘work history’. Lindsay King (2002) used the technique of life history rather than life story in her work on sports participation whilst Heather Gibson (2002) has also used a life course perspective in her research on leisure travel patterns and meanings in later life. More recently, Janke et al. (2006) have attempted to adopt a lifespan perspective to understand changing leisure participation in later life. However, their study adopted a quantitative approach by interviewing 1911 respondents on their leisure in order to model change in older people’s involvement in leisure activities over time.
Despite the minimal use of biographical methods in leisure studies, the technique has been widely used in fields such as sociology and history where the deep insight that the technique offers into individual lives has been acknowledged. Biographical research has also been used widely in historical and anthropological research as a way of gaining insight into non-literate societies, where there is an absence of written documentation, and also to provide a more in-depth and rich insight into the lives of marginal groups or individuals who would not necessarily have had a voice in the research process. In addition to historians, professionals working within the field of gerontology such as social workers, care assistants and occupational therapists as well as those in the sociology of medicine and health workers, have also recognised the benefits of biographical research in eliciting older people's attitudes. It has specifically been used in relation to work on residential care, understanding family relationships, exploring relationships between carers and the older person and as a way of learning how people coped with past difficulties and hardships (Gearing and Dant 1990:151).

The biographical approach to research first appeared in the nineteen twenties and thirties when Thomas and Znaniecki (1919) used it in their study of 'The Polish Peasant in Europe and America.' The approach was also used later in the nineteen forties in Chicago, as part of a number of studies looking at juvenile delinquency, crime and drug addiction. In all of these studies, the emphasis was on the 'underdog' or the 'marginal' in order to understand individual behaviour and to provide both an objective and subjective analyses of a situation. The premise behind the studies was that 'the cause of a social or individual phenomenon is never another social or individual phenomenon alone, but always a combination of a social and an individual phenomenon' (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958:44).

In many ways, these early biographical studies challenged the functionalist approach to understanding society by recognising individuality and rejecting the idea of societally ascribed individuals. Indeed, they represented a shift in social science away from structural determinism towards 'symbolic interactionism', which engaged with the individual and gave value to people's subjective experiences in order to understand how people interpret and give meaning to the world around them (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000, Kohli 1981). Such an
emphasis on the individual, rather than structural forms, to explain the nature of society and behaviour, had first emerged in the work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) who argued that people develop and change in response to their social experiences, arguing that humans are capable of actively creating their social environment, of challenging and questioning dominant discourses around them: ‘The self is something which has a development: it is not here at birth but arises in the context of social experience and activity.’ (Mead 1934). Symbolic interactionism thus challenged the structural functionalist view, developed by Emile Durheim (1858-1917) and later refined by Talcott Parsons (1902-79), which argued that social structures (work, the state and the family) determine human behaviour, assuming individuals have little control over their lives. The interactionist or subjectivist approaches aimed to shift the focus to individual meaning and choice and to challenge functionalist accounts of social life that were being justly criticised as consensual, and forming a solely societal view of the individual. Plummer (1983:61) also observes how these early biographical studies indicated a rejection of a grand narrative; a whole truth about a situation. Sympathy with the subjects was also made explicit unlike much positivist research at the time (Chambers 2005).

Unfortunately, emphasis on issues regarding reliability, subjectivity and representativeness at that time meant that the technique became unpopular: ‘Its collapse was as sudden and radical as had been its success and prestige during the twenties’ (Bertaux 1981). Roberts (2002) suggests that these concerns about the reliability and validity of the method arose because the method did not fit into the dominant ‘scientific’ model under which hypotheses had to be tested and proven. Roberts (2002) identifies that such concerns still exist as the credibility of the approach continues to be questioned and assessed from traditional, positivistic perspectives.

Whilst the approach fell out of favour before World War II, feminist researchers later recognised the value of biographical methods. In wanting to challenge cold, positivist, objective insights into women’s lives and to ensure women’s previously silenced voices were heard, feminists are said to have played a part in the renaissance of biographical methods during the 1970s. In doing so, they were eager to ensure that the subjective lives of women, as well as the structural contexts around them were captured. Consequently they:
Resisted the idea that life histories and other personal narratives were primarily useful for gathering information about historical events, cultural change, or the impact of social structures on individual’s lives (Chase 2005:655).

Indeed feminist researchers, argues Chase (2005:655), are still keen to use life story research to explore ‘women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that women assigned to events and conditions in their lives.’ Today, the use of the biographical technique continues to draw on interactionism and phenomenology, in its concern with subjectively defined reality and focus on how individuals interpret the world in order to understand individual behaviour (Plummer 1983).

### 6.10. Sample size: biographical interviews

Three of the twelve women who had participated in the semi-structured interviews of phase one agreed to participate in the biographical interviews of phase two, namely: Mary, Alice and Mrs Ansell. Whilst a sample size of three might seem quite small, particularly when compared to the sample sizes used in quantitative research, small sample sizes are normal within biographical research. In biographical research, the aim is not to formulate ‘grand narratives’ which can be applied to large cross sections of the population, but to focus on the individual in order to capture in depth detail about their lives. As Goodley et al. (2004:184) state, in quantitative research:

> Lives and difficulties are disinfected and presented ‘steam-cleaned’, and though creased and worn - they are offered up to the reader in a relatively painless way. These are lives served up with the appropriate dosage of painkiller to make things easier on the reader.

In contrast, the small sample sizes and focus on the individual in biographical research, means that people’s lives can be explored in their own words, ‘warts and all’, to reveal the difficulties and struggles within their lives. The ethnographic nature of biographical research, which involves spending long periods with participants, and results in many hours of tape-recorded material, also means that sample sizes are
normally small (Gearing and Dant 1990). Wengraf (2000) asserts that even a single case study is acceptable as it can shed light and knowledge on other cases. The famous examples of biographical research, such as the life of Stanley in ‘The Jack Roller’ (Shaw 1930) and Wladek in the ‘Polish Peasant’ (Thomas and Znaniecki 1919), placed great emphasis on a single life story, arguing that these lives were representative of many other lives.

Some sociologists do dispute this, saying that by using one life story, this does not provide an insight into the wider culture and society because the sample is not large enough to allow for comparability and representativeness (Roberts 2002). However, contemporary narrative researchers reject the idea that respondents should be, or in fact ever can be, representative (Chase 2005). The intention in much research that uses biographical material, and indeed in this research, was not to find regularities in behaviour or to generate theory but to provide fresh, in-depth critical insight which reveals the intricacies of how lives are led and the influences that have shaped them, as Chase (2005:667) states, ‘any narrative is significant because it embodies – and gives us insight into what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context.’ By focussing on individuals, this work also reflected the ideas of postmodernism, which emphasises unique, individual identity and agency rather than structural determinacy in determining how people lead their lives (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). However, at the same time the work was also sensitive to the impact of structural factors such as class and gender.

6.11. The process of undertaking the biographical interviews

Goodley et al. (2004) observe that whilst much may have been written by various authors attempting to justify the narrative turn in the social sciences and the role of biographical research within that (e.g. Bertaux 1981, Plummer 1983) few works have actually focussed on how ‘to do’ life story research. Cornwell and Gearing’s (1989) and Gearing and Dant’s (1990) work are two notable exceptions and provide useful guidance on how to undertake biographical interviews in terms of rapport, location, frequency of meeting and interview structure.
Perhaps it is not surprising that one of Cornwall and Gearing’s (1989) first recommendations when conducting biographical interviews is to establish a rapport with respondents during the research process for the biographical approach is very much dependent on the nature of the relationship established with the research participants. Indeed this can be difficult but in this case the fact that I had already met Mary, Alice and Mrs Ansell in their own homes before undertaking the semi-structured interviews, meant that a certain level of familiarity already existed.

Cornwell and Gearing (1989:37) advise that, in conducting biographical interviews it is essential to:

*Establish a style of interaction which is more that of a conversation than an interview, and a relationship in which the other person feels comfortable and relatively uninhibited about talking about themselves in the past and present.*

Thus by setting the interviews in the comfort and security of the respondents’ own homes, and with the minimal number of predetermined questions in the biographical interviews, I ensured that the atmosphere surrounding the interviews was informal and ‘more of a conversation’ between equals and in many respects a very different power relationship than that within other research techniques.

As recommended by Gearing and Dant (1990), many questions asked during the ‘interview’ related to the major stages of the women’s lives - childhood upbringing, school, work, married life, retirement and, if appropriate, widowhood and the role of leisure at each of these stages. The conversations with the women were taped and usually lasted between one and a half hours and two hours, usually ending with a shared pot of tea and biscuits. Multiple conversations with each of the women took place over several months. During the interviews, much positive encouragement was given to the women to reassure them that the information being shared was useful and relevant. This is in keeping with Chambers’ (2005:95) advice on positive reinforcement for ‘their expert role in the telling of their story.’

A surprising aspect of the interviews was the extent to which Mary, Alice and Mrs Ansell seemed to enjoy the meetings. Thompson, Itzin and Abernstein (1990) in their work, refer to the therapeutic benefits of biographical interviews, involving as they do, reminiscence, which can provide older people with an opportunity to
revisit past events and memories. Cornwell and Gearing (1989:37) also comment on the satisfactions which are often gained by respondents when participating in biographical interviews, observing:

The pleasure of thinking back over the past; for others from having company for half a day; for others from the sense of forming a new relationship and for others from being able to talk – sometimes for the very first time - about something of significance in their past.

In these biographical interviews the women seemed to find the experience of reflecting on their lives with somebody who was interested and keen to listen rewarding, particularly when I was able to revisit the women with the pen portraits of their lives which I had put together. Mary asked for a copy of her pen portrait so that she could give it to her daughter to read and keep. However, at times the experience of telling and the listening to the women’s stories proved to be an emotional one both for the women and myself, particularly when they described some of the losses and hardships they had experienced. The women seemed to find the opportunity I gave them to comment on my interpretation of their life events particularly emotional. Both Mary and Alice cried when I read out their pen portraits, moved by the reminders of personal events and moved to hear their life stories, for the first time, presented to them in this way.

The insight gained into their lives from listening to their life stories and the shared emotional experiences described above as well as the long periods of time spent with the women also meant that the researcher gained an insight not only into the lives of the women but also established friendships in the process. Goodley et al. (2004:58) point out that this is typical of ethnographic research in which long periods are spent with respondents and as such ‘digresses markedly from the classic view of the dispassionate, distanced, objective scientific observer.’ Kazmierska (2004:181) also observes that in biographical research:

The time required by a narrator to tell their life story is greater than in ‘classical’ interviewing, and this factor helps to strengthen the relationship between researcher and informant.
6.12. Reliability of biographical research

Reliability is frequently a contentious aspect of qualitative research, dealing as it does with people’s views, opinions and recollections. Indeed despite the clear advantages of the biographical research method in giving voice and getting close to respondents, it is also open to questions of reliability and subjectivity. Fischer (1983:31), for example, argues that reliance on people’s memories within the biographical approach is problematic for as:

*People fail to remember, they choose (consciously or not) to lie, or they recall or present only partially true information. To the extent that life histories rely on retrospective information, it is difficult to measure the distortions.*

Berger (1963:56-57) also questions the reliability of biographical interviews maintaining that:

*As we remember the past, we reconstruct it in accordance with our present ideas of what is important and what is not... at least in our consciousness, the past is malleable and flexible, constantly changing as our recollection reinterprets and explains what has happened.*

Cornwell and Gearing (1990:43) similarly observe that ‘*the past that is constructed orally can never be fixed; it will change to the degree that the present changes.*’

However, as Veal (1997) quite rightly observes, questionnaires and other forms of quantitative data have similar problems of reliability. What subjects say in questionnaires is as dependent on their powers of recall, their honesty as well as the format of the questions, as it is in biographical interviews. Thus, information presented in numerical form and based on large numbers does not represent ‘immutable ‘truth’ and, as Veal (1997:145) states, ‘*There has been very little research on the validity or accuracy of questionnaire data in leisure and tourism studies.*’ Indeed one could argue that the lengthy considerations of reliability that qualitative researchers are subject to, produces more robust research precisely because of the degree of reflection required of them.
Plummer (1983:68) also casts doubt on attempts in the social sciences about ‘generalisability’ and validity arguing that people are not rational beings whose behaviour can be predicted. Instead life is often ambiguous and chaotic:

Questionnaires, experiments, attitude scales and even the perusal of existing social science literature and historical documents can often give a form and order to the world which it frequently does not have.

Hence biographical research is no less ‘reliable’ than other forms of research methods and indeed arguably the emphasis on the subjects’ own voices and experiences makes it more difficult for the researcher to misrepresent respondents’ views, experiences and recollections.

In any case, the biographical researcher places less emphasis on issues of validity and reliability as measures of ‘quality’ since part of their purpose is to gain subjective insights into people’s lives as seen through their own memories and experiences. In doing so, the approach rejects the idea of one objective reality but regards reality as something constructed in multiple ways by individuals. Hence, the subjective experiences and stories emerging from biographical research are central to the approach; individuals are regarded as the experts on their own lives. As Holloway and Jefferson (2000:169) state, respondents are regarded as ‘knowledgeable agents, willing and able to ‘tell it like it is’; subjects who are always somehow closer to the truth of their self-hood.’ Sankar and Gubrium (1994:ix) agree, observing that the approach takes ‘bottom-up rather than top-down views... In seeking to understand meaning, the focus is on the taken-for-granted and commonsense understandings that people have about their lives.’ Jaffe and Miller (1994:57) further argue that, in order to create knowledge which is as true as possible to the view of subjects, a first step is to transform the objects of one’s research ‘into thinking and feeling subjects’ as this research has done.

6.13. Analysis of biographical interviews

There is little consensus around the analysis of biographical research, particularly in relation to levels of analysis, whether any analysis of biographical interviews is needed at all, whose voice is heard in the analysis and whether the focus of analysis...
should be on the aspects of structure or agency in people's life stories. Fischer (1983:38) for example maintains that methods of collecting life stories are better developed than methods of analysing them, suggesting that 'the application of life history to sociology is, at present, more of an 'art' than a 'science.' Plummer (1983:116) agrees but argues that the lack of rigid guidelines for analysing biographical interviews is unproblematic and understandable when dealing with the ambiguity and unpredictability of people's lives:

Curiously, very few researchers have ever written about the 'doing' of life histories – probably because to do so is to give an order and a protocol to work that is thoroughly disorderly.

Perhaps because of the lack of clear guidance on analysing biographical interviews, traditional methodological procedures have often been used to interpret biographical interviews (Roberts 2002). Denzin (1989) describes such analysis as the objective, natural history approach with its emphasis on validity, truth, hypotheses testing and the triangulation of results in order to highlight contradictions, irregularities and discontinuities. Such approaches have resorted to developing theoretical generalizations by using multiple subjects and looking for comparisons between subjects, 'Grounded theory seems to be the goal' states Denzin (1989:57). Thus eventually:

The preoccupation with theory elevate the researcher's interpretations above the subject's. It makes the project basically a theory driven endeavour. Even though this 'new' approach parts company with the classic school, in the end it returns to a commitment to the objective view of life histories and life stories (Denzin 1989:58).

This tendency in the analysis of biographical research is surprising because it seems so at odds with the spirit of the method which seeks to privilege the subjective voice of the individual, rather than relying on objectivity, and traditional researcher/researched power roles. In order to avoid the objective approach to analysis described above, the interpretive/constructionist approach to the analysis of results was adopted in this research, thus rejecting the idea that biographical research can provide insight into reality or empirical truth (Denzin 1989). Instead the
interpretive approach was chosen which recognises that neither the subjects’ nor the researcher’s interpretation are neutral and that they do not represent an ‘objective reality.’ Different interpretations are possible (Roberts 2002) and the aim of the biographical analysis is not to formulate generalisations or theories about later life or to verify the words of the older women by turning to external sources for verification.

In placing emphasis on the women’s own words as the sole source of evidence in this way, the extent to which the researcher ‘contaminates’ the narrative with their own voice needed consideration. Indeed, as Chase (2005) observes, all narrative researchers need to consider the issue of whose voice is heard within the analysis – the researcher’s or those being researched. In dealing with this issue, Plummer (1983) (see Figure 6.2) offers five alternatives for the position of the researcher in biographical interview analysis in his ‘Continuum of Contamination.’ These alternatives range from analysis independent of the subject, through to no editorial changes and no analysis of the subject’s words.

**Figure 6.2. Plummer’s Continuum of Contamination (Adapted from Plummer 1983:113)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Continuum of ‘Contamination’</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The subjects’ pure account (raw) e.g. Original diaries, unsolicited letters, autobiographies, self-written books, sociologists’ own experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Edited personal documents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Systematic thematic analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Verification by anecdote (example)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. The Sociologists’ ‘Pure Account’ e.g. Sociological theories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, Booth and Booth (1994) argue that no analysis of a person’s life story should occur because this can destroy the subjective realities of individuals by making the individual a subject of abstract social theory. Mitroff and Kilman (1978) share this stance, maintaining that analysis of a life story can take ownership from the teller and place it in the hands of the theorist. Indeed, the personal, subjective nature of biographical interviews has led many to argue that any analysis of people’s life stories is unnecessary as, in the telling of a life story, the analysis and interpretation has already occurred.
Whilst recognising the difficulties inherent in analysing people’s life stories, the decision was taken within this research to undertake analysis of the transcripts in order to emphasise and explore the themes within people’s stories, particularly the role of both structure and agency and in order to fulfil the emancipatory intentions of this thesis. In doing so, I considered that such analysis can serve to ‘offer a helping hand in guiding readers to the theoretical significances of a narrative’ (Goodley et al. 2004:149) and oppose conservative or unsympathetic readings of a life story. Without analysis there is no application to any theory and the reader can interpret the story in any way they wish. Chase (2005:664) agrees, arguing that although analysis means researchers become open to criticisms of privileging the researcher’s voice, analysis is necessary to make ‘visible and audible taken-for-granted practises, processes, and structural and cultural features of our everyday social worlds.’ Thus analysis is not regarded as problematic if it is undertaken with respect for the narrator and also if it highlights and challenges accepted ways of seeing such as ageist stereotypes of older people.

Thematic analysis was undertaken using Goodley et al’s (2004:118) model, which involves four readings of the narrative (see Appendix B for a sample transcript of one of the biographical interviews). Firstly, reading for plot and the researchers’ own response to the narrative – questions like what are the stories, the characters, the sub-plots, recurrent images and words. In doing so, the researcher is also encouraged to think about their own reactions to the story and to use reflexivity to think about how their own social location might be affecting their interpretations and assumptions of a life story. The second stage involves the researcher standing back before imposing her own interpretations on the life story to read the transcripts for ‘I’ in order to gain insight into how the person regards themselves and their experiences. Thirdly the narrative should be read for understanding of the subject’s relationships with other people, their social networks and their autonomy and dependence. Finally the narratives should be read in order to place people within cultural contexts and social structures and to understand how these have affected a person’s life and viewpoints. Plummer (1983) describes such an approach as a dual ‘humanistic’ sociology, in which the active, thinking individual is acknowledged as well as the social history of his or her life-span, such as wars, political and religious changes, employment and unemployment situations.
Thus, using Goodley et al's (2004) model of thematic analysis and what Plummer (1983) terms a dual humanistic approach, the analysis of the narratives provided by Mary, Alice, and Mrs. Ansell involved formulating themes around both their personal and social histories in order to understand how these had influenced their past and current attitudes towards leisure. In doing so, I was mindful of the aim of the research to challenge and dismantle the dominant negative, pessimistic and traditional discourses around older people and to create a more ‘critical’ approach to both gerontology and leisure studies. Thus, the analysis also drew from both post-structuralism (Foucault 1973, 1977, 1983) and feminism in aiming to challenge the socially constructed, negative connotations around older women. As Goodley et al. (2004:101) observe, post-structuralists ‘aim to excavate the power and knowledge that are used to construct versions of humanity.’ Post-structuralists thus aim to get beneath power relations, the nature of knowledge and ‘truth’ within society, recognising that these are constructed and normalised by those in power whilst at the same time reworking and challenging the dominant beliefs in society. From a feminist perspective, the analysis was also looking for evidence of how the women have been disadvantaged by patriarchal systems, values and norms and thus how their choices in life and their leisure may have been limited. However, at the same time evidence of their powers of resistance to these structures was also sought.

6.14. Ethics

Whilst the ethics of working with older people were considered at the outset of this research, after meeting with the women, their age did not seem to warrant specific ethical considerations. All the women were leading autonomous, independent lives and, after the presentation at the ‘Thursday class,’ they seemed to understand fully the nature of the research. As Gilhooly (2002:211) observes:

In one sense there is nothing special about researching later life, or research with older people. Most older people live independent lives, are self determining, and are competent to decide whether or not to take part in research. Thus, they should be treated in the same way that one would treat any other adult asked to take part in research, and the ethical issues that arise are no different when conducting research with older people than they are
when conducting research with younger adults.

On the other hand, the ethnographic nature of this research and the closeness to respondents did mean that ethical issues around the research process needed to be considered carefully. In particular, the biographical element of this research and the likelihood that upsetting memories could be touched upon, meant that these issues needed to be dealt with sensitively. Thus, in order to undertake the research in an ethical manner and to ensure that the women in the interviews were treated with sensitivity, Gilhooly’s (2002) work provided useful guidance, particularly the four overriding principles of ethical research which he cites - do no harm, do positive good, show respect for people’s autonomy and treat people fairly. In adopting a feminist research approach within this work, his suggestion to do positive good was hopefully inherent anyway, since an aim of feminist research is to produce emancipatory research which respects women. Having respect for a subject’s words, which feminist research also requires, meant that fair treatment of the women was inherent. Indeed Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1983:17), make clear that feminist research is that which is ‘on, by and for women’, which works for the good of women, and produces a transformation in the conditions of their lives. Chambers (2005:71) also makes clear that feminist research is:

*Interested in exploring women’s perceptions, experiences and feelings and has attempted to make women visible. The emphasis has been on equality and mutuality in the research relationship; interaction and collaboration have been seen as essential.*

Lincoln and Denzin (2005:1118) also stress that feminist, and indeed interpretive, qualitative research ‘mandate a stance that is democratic, reciprocal, and reciprocating rather than objective and objectifying.’ Thus, in taking a feminist approach to this work, Gilhooly’s (2002) requirements for ethical research were addressed. The nature of the semi-structured and biographical interviews, in which the women respondents were invited to talk freely about the issues they felt to be relevant to their leisure, also ensured that the women were equal participants in the research process. This is quite unlike questionnaires with closed questions where the topics of discussion are predetermined by the researcher. In this respect, Chambers (2005:85)
cites biographical research as being particularly ethical when working with older women:

*In that the older woman has the choice of selection, what to say and what not to say. Further, the older woman is the expert on her own life and so the power relationship is potentially more balanced than in other types of research.*

Involving the older women in the formulation of their pen portraits also ensured that the women were treated fairly and felt that they were equal participants in the research process.

Although steps were taken to ensure that ethical considerations in this work were paramount, there were still some areas of concern. Firstly, although the women were informed that their identity would be protected using fictional names and places, the unique and personal details around their lives that emerged from the biographical interviews in particular, meant that there would always be a danger that their identity could be established. Plummer (1983:92) recognises that the personal details revealed in life story research mean that ‘It will not be too difficult for anybody dedicated to finding out who the subject is, to actually do so.’ The second area of concern was that, although the women were informed that their stories could become part of public documents such as book chapters, journal articles and conference papers, their lack of access to educational opportunity meant that the scope of the work and the audiences to which their words would be exposed may not have been fully grasped.

6.15. Summary

This chapter has presented the theoretical position of the author, what Chamberlayne (2000:17), terms the ‘conceptual armoury’ that has informed the methodology and the methods chosen. In rejecting realism for its belief in an objective reality of knowledge, the chapter has presented the case for a constructionist approach, recognising that knowledge is politicised, structured, culturised and socialised (Goodley et al. 2004). Individuals are not biological or natural creations but the product of the cultures in which they exist. Accepting that there are different versions of reality, the chapter has outlined how a phenomenological approach has been taken
in order to explore the older women’s own perceptions of their lived experiences in order to gain insight into their realities of leisure. However, the chapter has also outlined how a feminist approach has been taken to ensure that the social and cultural characteristics of the women’s lives and patriarchal structures have also been taken into consideration when attempting to understand the meaning and significance of their leisure.

In recognising that there is no single version of reality, but multiple interpretations, the chapter has also considered how the author’s own social, political and cultural location may have influenced her interpretations of the women’s lives. Thus, a reflexive statement has been presented to outline how the author’s own background and values may have influenced the approach taken to this work.

This chapter has also outlined how both semi-structured and biographical interviews have been chosen and utilised within this study, in order to provide an in-depth insight into how both structure and personal experience have impacted on the older women’s lives and their leisure. Explanation has been given as to how this macro- and micro-level of analysis explores issues of self-identity and structure, accepting that people are both the ‘products and producers of their history’ (Elder 1981:78). In doing so, the utilisation of the methods overcomes the criticism aimed at functionalism and structuralism, which have often tended to provide only a downward view of individuals. Instead, the work adopts a dualistic approach by recognising that agency as well as structure impact on people’s lives.

In recognising that it is not possible to understand the women’s leisure merely by focussing on a snapshot in time, the chapter also outlines how and why biographical interviews have been used in order to gain an insight into how the women’s previous life experiences have impacted on their current leisure patterns and perceptions of leisure. In addition, detail has been presented on how the biographical interviews provide insight into historical events and cultural change, through which the women have lived and which have impacted on their opportunities and experiences of leisure, both now and in the past.

By exploring the role of agency as well as structure on the women’s leisure, the chapter has also outlined how the semi-structured and biographical
Interviews have ensured that the research process has given voice to the women and explored the women’s leisure behaviour from their own perspective. In doing so, the intention was that the dialogue that emerged would challenge the negative perceptions of older women and their leisure as well as highlighting their ability to resist oppression. By focussing on individuals through semi-structured and biographical interviews, the chapter has outlined how the methods chosen allow for recognition that the women embody reflexivity, agency, and individuality. In this, the chapter also made clear how the methods chosen have also been heavily influenced by postmodernism’s rejection of grand theories of later life and its focus on individuals and self-identity.

The phenomenological and feminist approach underpinning this work, which necessitates researchers getting close to respondents, also required me to consider the ethical consideration involved in doing this type of research within this chapter. The age of the women within the study required ethical consideration, however, the feminist approach taken to the work ensured that many of the ethical considerations recommended in research guidelines, particularly respect towards respondents, were inherent within the work. The fact that the older women within this work were also leading full, independent lives, living in their own homes also meant that the ethical considerations were no different from those when working with other age groups. The following chapter presents the findings of the twelve semi structured interviews from phase one, followed by chapter eight which presents and discusses the biographical interviews.
CHAPTER 7

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OLDER WOMEN’S LEISURE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

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CHAPTER 7: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OLDER WOMEN’S LEISURE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

7.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the themes to have emerged from the analysis of the twelve semi-structured interviews from phase one. The focus of the chapter is on providing an insight into the women’s current leisure activities and the significance and meaning of these leisure activities to the women. So that the voices of the respondents were not lost in the analysis and to ensure that their views on leisure were privileged, priority was given to using the respondent’s own words as much as possible. The chapter contains an assessment of each of the themes to have emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews, namely the relationships between work and retirement, the significance of friendship groups, participative leisure, leisure and survival and leisure satisfaction.

7.2. Entry into retirement

The interview questions began by attempting to contextualise the women’s entry into retirement by exploring their work history. Interestingly, whilst contemporary society often regards this generation of women as ‘stay at home’ housewives or mothers, conforming to ‘The social norm of the male breadwinner with a wife engaged in homemaking’ (Arber and Ginn 1995:69), the majority of these women had worked since leaving school at the age of fourteen. The jobs ranged from full- or part-time and, overall, were unskilled such as cleaning, serving school dinners, secretarial work, and being employed as shop assistants. Two of the women had run their own shops with their husbands. The women’s work histories indicated that, at times, their paid employment has been intermittent in order to fit in around childcare responsibilities. Despite this, for many of the women, it was clear from their comments that there had been little choice about undertaking paid work. In the absence of social security, paid work was required either to support themselves, supplement their husband’s income or, in many cases, to support their children in the absence of a partner. There was often no alternative source of income or support for them. The following comments clearly illustrate how important work was for the women and the crucial role that it
played in supporting their families:

Mrs Giles on the necessity of going to work said:

*I'd brought up my children by myself since I was thirty so I had always been to work. Well, we had to go to work in those days, they didn’t give you anything. I never had a choice.*

Mrs Town stated:

*I worked all my life really; my husband was in the Air Force so my Mum used to look after the boy while I went to work. We had to when the war was on.*

May similarly stressed the financial imperative of work:

*I never used to be a penny above a beggar. I wouldn’t have a penny to start the Monday off with, cos he (husband) never kept the children… Oh yes, I worked hard, I brought my children up on my own, all eight of them. I had eight in twelve years.*

Despite long working lives, and the financial necessity of work, many of the women expressed regret at having to finish work and the consequent loss of camaraderie and fun. Relationships with other women were particularly valued and their loss was keenly felt, in some cases leading to feelings of isolation and loss around wider social networks. Thus Mrs Ansell on the subject of work commented:

*Well, I wanted to work. I found it better. It was nice to get out and, well, yes, of course, the money those days would have helped anyway. I’ve worked mostly all my life. I used to work in the schools when the children were young so they were over there and I could keep an eye on them anyway. Company, I also liked the company at work, the talking with the girls. Then we’d go out, maybe one night for a meal and all that, I liked all that. You also get to know many customers, all different. I liked that.*

Olwen similarly stressed the importance of social contacts in work:
I enjoyed working; I worked in the Students' Union. A nice crowd of women working with us, the company, the money, the social life.

Mary attached particular importance to work; it was her social life, the only place where she could experience the company of others, as time outside work was committed to caring for her elderly mother. In fact the prospect of retirement filled her with dread, as she explained:

\textit{I wanted to carry on (with work) because living with my mother here, work was my social life. There was no other option. It would have suited me to carry on working... I was dreading it [retirement] because of my mother and missing out being with other people and somebody different to talk to. It keeps you going.}

Mrs Case whilst she initially enjoyed her retirement after six months she remembered being keen to return to work:

\textit{I would have liked to have gone on working once I'd had the break of 6 months. I would have liked to have been going somewhere... I could have worked 'til seventy-five cos I was fine in those days.}

So strong was many of the women’s attachment to work, it was clear that they would have continued working if they had not been forced to retire because of their partner’s retirement or partner’s ill health (rarely their own ill health) or to care for elderly parents or siblings. This attachment to work challenges the view that men have a stronger occupational attachment to work as the male breadwinner. Indeed such assumptions have often led to research on retirement being focussed on men’s, rather than women’s transition to retirement (see Long and Scraton 2002). As Victor (2005:253) suggests:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Retirement was regarded as non-problematic for women because it was presumed that women derived their primary source of identity from their roles as wives and mothers and hence the topic of women and retirement was deemed unworthy of research.}
\end{quote}
The experiences of the women in my study challenges this view and supports the findings of Barnes and Parry (2004) who found that in men and women’s adjustment to retirement they have equally strong occupational identities.

7.3. Replacing paid work

After working since the age of fourteen, as most of the women in this research had done, work had been a big part of their lives for over sixty years, and understandably, there was apprehension about the prospect of retirement and not working. However, despite this, many of the women seemed to have adjusted well, enjoying the freedom from the commitment of work, the lack of work related worries as well as the greater opportunities for self determination. May, for example commented on the benefits as a ‘Lack of worry about your job and this and that, free from worry, there’s nothing to worry about now.’ Likewise Mrs Long spoke of how she now enjoyed the freedom of ‘being at home and going out when I want to and not having to go out in the morning which is nice. The choice is nice.’

Others in the group, after enforced retirement, realised that they still wanted some sense of structure, order, routine and sense of worth and realising that they still had much to give had chosen to replace paid employment on retirement with either voluntary work or caring responsibilities. In this, family roles involving care proved to be particularly strong. Mrs Crowe, for example, agreed to care for her grandchildren after she retired from the health service and later, at the age of eighty, to care for her great-grandchildren on a full time basis, even to the extent of moving in with the family from Monday to Friday:

*I said to my Son, if you want, I’ll come up Monday to Friday, look after the baby and that’s what I did. I was 62 then. So I stayed there for years and years. I'd come back at weekends, but then go back to baby-sit. I was very busy. I used to pick up my other grandson from Roath Park nursery, bring her home, then the mother and father would come. They then had another child... so I was busy again... Then my granddaughter had a little child so I minded that until she was pregnant with another one and then she had a job in British Telecom, so I minded little David as well. I was eighty when I took on David,*
I’m 88 now. I took him to nursery and collected him, four times a day, then I’d take him into town so he could meet his mother and I could come home, I’ve always been very busy. I now just do it on the Inset days [teacher training].

At the age of 88, Mrs Crowe is still undertaking a childcare role, playing a crucial role in enabling the child’s parents to continue working. Mrs Ansell, who lives with her daughter and son-in-law, described how she also takes on caring roles within the family, cooking and often cleaning for the family:

I look after myself, cook myself and do all my cleaning and sometimes for the rest of the family because my daughter works and so does her husband.

Mrs Wells explained how she prioritises caring for the family above her own activities, often looking after grandchildren whatever short notice is given. In this context Mrs Wells illustrates how the ethic of care, referred to by many feminists, impacts on women’s sense of entitlement to leisure (Deem 1986, Shaw 1994:11). She explains:

If my daughter rings up the night before and asks could I have the children, I’ll say yes. We’ve agreed we’ll do what the children want.

Wilhite et al. (1994:66) also found a similar attitude and ‘sense of duty’ to caring amongst the older women they interviewed, stating that their leisure is often ‘other-centred rather than self-centred.’ Indeed, this level of sacrifice for children and grandchildren was not unique to the women interviewed here. Research conducted by Age Concern England, recently found that one in four grandparents care for their grandchildren on a regular basis (www.ageconcern.org.uk/ageconcern/staying). In UK Social Trends 34 (2004), the contribution of older people providing unpaid informal care to family members is clear, with the proportion providing care over 50 hours per week increasing with age and reaching 44% among carers aged 75-84. Wearing’s (1996:16) work on grandmotherhood also found similar levels of attachment to the ‘ethic of care,’ finding that grandmotherhood, in particular, gives women much pleasure and, in this respect, reflects the characteristics of leisure:
The caring aspect of grandmotherhood has the potential for the
development of relationships with grandchildren that women perceive as
valuable, enjoyable and self enhancing.

The contribution that these women make to their family’s lives contrasts with the
common perception in society of older people as the receivers of care. This despite
research such as Claire Wenger’s (1989), which came to the conclusion that there are
more elderly people providing help of one sort or another than receiving help, and that
in many families, the flow of help is often from older people towards the rest of their
family. Tinker (1985:13) in her research also found that older people are often the
givers of help, particularly emotional help, to others and especially grandchildren
concluding:

The stability in life that a parent and grandparent can give is I suggest
in calculable. One great advantage that elderly people often have is time.
Time to listen and time to be an audience.

Indeed Kim and Kim (2003), in their research on quality of life among older Koreans,
found higher levels of life satisfaction among older people who give and receive
support than those who only receive support. Similarly, Corder, McGuire and Voelkl
(2004) comment on reciprocity as a crucial aspect of later life satisfaction.

Perhaps in this situation, it is not surprising that Arber and Ginn (2004:2) have called
for more research on inter-generational transfers of care from the older to the younger
generation stating 'Much data are collected on care flows to older people, but little
on care flows from them.' Wilhite et al. (1994) have also argued that women’s
socialization into family roles and particularly care-giving is so strong that in order to
understand older women’s leisure, these roles cannot be ignored. Long and Scraton
(2002) raise the possibility that gendered role expectations have become so
internalised that women do not look upon these caring roles as an obligation. Indeed,
many writers have stressed how the ethic of care, linked to their role as primary
caregivers in the family, constrains women’s time (Green et al. 1992, Henderson and
Bialeschki 1991). Such attachment to an ethic of care, which at times constrains and
impacts on women’s sense of entitlement to leisure, can also be clearly found within
this study.
For some of the women there was little choice associated with the caring roles they had adopted. For example, a number of the women on retirement had to care for sick husbands and elderly parents. As many of the women were from large families, this also meant having to care for elderly siblings. May, for example, was one of thirteen children. Olwen, as the middle child of ten children, speaks of having to care for both younger siblings in early life and, for much older ones in later life as well:

I was one of ten children, there were five older children, married and everything and then my mother had another five children and it was nothing for me to go up twice a week, because one of my sisters could have been my mother and she was in a home and I went up there to Hopkinstown, outside Pontypridd. That was a long journey. Then I had another sister who had no children and I went up there a lot.

Interestingly, Wearing (1996:19) raises the question of whether, over time, changing gender power relationships within society will mean that increasing numbers of older women will begin to question the taken-for-granted (by the state and also relatives), caring roles of older women particularly as through leisure, many older women ‘are reaching beyond the traditional feminine stereotype of knowing how to give not to take.’ This may be the case for, as Gillette and Higgs (2000:49) recognise, older women’s nurturing roles can inhibit their opportunities to engage in that ‘culture of narcissism’ that some might consider to be represented in ‘third age’ lifestyles.’ If such a shift within the psyche of women does occur it would have significant financial implications for both the state and many families.

In contrast, for many of the women in this research, there was no sense of resentment towards the caring and voluntary roles they had adopted since retiring. Mary, for example, described her voluntary work in a local charity shop and museum in positive terms, as a way of reproducing the benefits she had gained from paid work and providing opportunities for her to be out of the house and meeting people. As she explained:
Well the voluntary work gets me up in the morning. Otherwise I'd stay there all day. It also means I can walk down Albany Road and say hello to a lot more people. It's also little chats with the other customers in the shop.

Mary's approach to volunteering reflects Bishop and Hoggett's (1986) finding that the emphasis in volunteering amongst older people was on personal pleasure rather than the philanthropic aspects. Barnes, Parry and Lakey (2002) in their research into volunteering in retirement also found that many older people participate as a way to keep physically fit, mentally active and for the sense of purpose it provides rather than philanthropic reasons.

7.4. Friendship groups

As well as the caring and volunteering roles which the women perform, the many other social activities that the women are involved in also seem to provide them with the company, social networks, satisfaction and purpose that they had experienced in their paid work. In this respect, attending a variety of retirement clubs, friendship clubs and Mothers' Union meetings (to participate in games of bingo, sing-a-longs, dancing, skittles, to drink tea amongst friends and to chat) is an important part of their week. Although many of these social activities often revolve around the Methodist or Baptist church, or the Christian based Mothers Union, when asked why they attended the social clubs, the women placed emphasis on the sense of engagement with others, sense of purpose and a feeling of independence that attendance at the clubs represented, rather than any religious aspect. Wray (2003:519) similarly observes in her research with older women that:

*pragmatism often informed the women's approach to religious activities, which created feelings of social inclusion, empowerment and autonomy. A sense of collective agency was generated and this transferred into their everyday lives.*

Mrs Mole for example emphasised the sociability of the clubs:
Chatting, changing ideas. I go the Mothers’ Union Tuesday afternoon and we have a speaker in the afternoon, we have a service before, then we have a speaker, a cup of tea and that and everyone knows everyone else. I quite like it.

Others in the group similarly emphasised their enjoyment in the social clubs as deriving from the friendly atmosphere, the companionship and the opportunity they offered to ‘Have a little natter’ (Mrs Case).

The women’s comments seem to challenge the assumptions behind activity theory, indicating that the older women in this research place greater emphasis on the quality of social ties rather than activity participation. In this respect the work supports Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra’s (2006:237) research findings on activity and wellbeing in later life which concluded that it is not the ‘activity per se that is responsible for the well being outcome, but rather the quality of the social relationships that accompany activity, particularly informal activities.’

The opportunity for social contact and identification with one’s peers, which these social gatherings offer, clearly comes through in the responses above but particularly in the words of Mrs Ansell below, who described how the social clubs give her the chance to be with people of her own age, with whom she feels comfortable and has an affinity with due to commonalities of experiences, (a theme I will return to in the analysis of the biographical interviews in chapter eight):

It’s nice at the clubs though. To get together because we have got so much in common, we’re the same age... I’ve got more in common with my age group than I have with the young cos they’re entirely different. Not that I mind. I can talk to them and I like them and they seem quite happy to talk to me. There’s quite a few young girls on this road and they talk to me. For instance, I was going out Sunday morning and I bumped into one of the young women from down the road and was chatting but then we seemed to dry up. I hadn’t anything more in common to talk with her about. With my own age group we talk about times that’s gone by, the way people behave, the discipline that’s gone, oh, we have a lot to talk about. We talk how we were brought up. This is what we talk about. We think how disciplined we were and took
notice and respected things which a lot of the young today don’t respect and
that’s a shame isn’t it?

In a similar way, Olwen referred to her connectedness with her own generation and
how the social clubs provide the opportunity for interaction with her peers:

*The youngsters have got different ideas, I notice it with daughters. My
daughters want me to have bright colours but I like autumn colours. It’s a
different atmosphere with your own age group.*

Jerrome (1993:97) in her research on friendship groups in later life, also found a
similar emphasis on peer friendships in the social lives of many older women,
particularly pensioner groups which provide ‘a safe base where a common language
is spoken’, a place where the women can share and explore their historical
experiences and shared values can be expressed openly. Being part of this particular
age cohort of seventy-five and over, born during the 1920s and 1930s, obviously
means the women have many shared social and cultural experiences which have
affected the way they view life and their values. It is not surprising that the women
gain much satisfaction from these meetings with peers and the opportunity they
provide to talk about past events, moral values and how their own codes of behaviour
compare with other age cohorts. This aspect of the women’s social lives to some
extent supports Atchley’s (1993) and Kelly’s (1993) ideas on continuity in later life
which proposes that older adults prefer activities in environments and with people
they are familiar with:

*Inner continuity leads to decisions that favour activity continuity and activity
continuity produces inner experiences that reinforce inner continuity,
especially continuity of identity and self esteem.* (Kelly 1993:15)

However, at the same time as gaining a great sense of enjoyment and satisfaction from
being with their own age groups, the women in this research also seem to enjoy and
participate in activities which bring them into contact with a variety of age groups
such as Slimming World, Tai Chi, voluntary part time work or family events. It is
apparent that these inter-generational social activities provide the women with a sense
of social inclusion and opportunity to share their own experiences and
knowledge. However, clearly the women are also stimulated by, and willing to learn from, those in younger cohorts. Indeed such exchanges illustrate how older women often make complex movements between social activities with people in different age groups (Hepworth 2003) thus perhaps challenging ideas of continuity and emphasising the dangers of trying to find over arching theories about older people’s leisure.

Comments from several of the women clearly illustrate a keenness to be with other age groups other than their own. For example Mary outlined how her volunteering work provides welcomed opportunities to be with younger cohorts:

_The voluntary work at the museum is good because I go and have coffee with the full time girls. That’s nice ‘cos you tell them things ‘cos they’re so young. You learn things from them too... I don’t mind a mix. I just want interaction with people._

Likewise Mrs Crowe explains how family events allow her to be with other generations:

_I’ve got three sons and daughters-in-law, six grandchildren and so when we have anything on, I’m always there. This week they brought me a photograph of the Ruby Wedding I went to with them. When there’s anything on, I’m always included, even the little children’s parties. I don’t always stay to the end but always go._

Another of the women, Mrs Heal’s, enthusiasm for mixing with younger people was clear when she stated:

_Oh my Tuesday night is my favourite night. The Thursday club are all old pensioners whereas Tuesday, they’re younger ones and the mixed age group makes a difference._
7.5. Participative leisure

Noticeably very few of the women are passive participants at the social clubs and activities they attend but, instead, they play a crucial role in both the administration and the organisation of them. These roles vary from selling raffle tickets and serving tea (as in the case of Mrs Well’s - ‘I bring the raffle out and tea out for them, I don’t like sitting around. I’ve got to do something’), to more formal organisational roles within the social clubs. Thus Mrs Long is the secretary of her skittles club, Mrs Heal Treasurer of the pensioners’ club and Mary is Treasurer of the Retired Civil Service Fellowship. Alice had enjoyed the company of the women she had met at slimming club so much that she even decided to form her own club called Tuesday Night Tarts (TNT’s), which has now been meeting on a weekly basis for the last ten years at a local scouts’ hall. The women are obviously motivated and appreciative of the strong sense of purpose and self worth to be gained from carrying out these tasks. The sense of wanting to feel useful and be useful seemed to characterise many aspects of their lives, providing them with a great sense of empowerment and high self-esteem.

Activities with an emphasis on health and personal well being also seem to provide the women with similar feelings of self esteem. Wearing (1996) has also observed how the social or relationship aspect of leisure is as important to older women as the actual activity. This attitude is also clearly evident in this research where many of the women, for example, attend slimming clubs, do Tai Chi and ‘Extend’ (a type of keep fit class). In these physical, sports related activities, the emphasis was not on the competitiveness of the activities but their social and communal nature. Mrs Heal commented:

\[ I \text{ forgot to tell you I also go to Tai Chi on Monday morning... it's a wonderful thing for anyone that wants to get involved in a little exercise. It's very good. The people there are very nice. It's mixed ages, men and women together.} \]

Heuser’s (2005:58) research into older women bowlers found a similar attitude towards their sport, commenting that:
The opportunity to be involved in a community of women who shared similar interests and who displayed genuine concern for one another seemed to be the overriding motivation... bowls became the vehicle through which they built community.

Activities to broaden the mind and gain new skills were also in evidence for example, ‘Computers for the Terrified’, photography classes and studies in herbal medicine, whilst one woman had done a course at the University of the Third Age. Significantly, since leaving school at the age of fourteen and before retirement, none of the women had any access to formal education. Engaging with these activities in later life thus was regarded as both a major opportunity and challenge. It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that there are estimated to be more than 600,000 learners aged over sixty-five in England alone (Parkinson 2004). This finding is clearly at odds with the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of older people in much of today’s socio-cultural apparatus. The women’s enthusiasm for new, educational opportunities also challenges the ideas of continuity proposed by Atchley (1993) and Kelly (1993) and discussed in chapter three.

Thus, it is clear that these women are far from the passive participants in leisure which many quantitative based surveys appear to suggest, but are embracing opportunities for both traditional and new leisure experiences. Rather than disengaging with leisure, many are embracing it in a way they have not been able or inclined to do previously. Many of the women mentioned that before retirement and, usually whilst their husbands were alive, they had never considered participating in the leisure activities they are now involved in, instead their lives were much more constrained. As Mary stated:

*I sell the raffle tickets there (the pensioners’ club) and if the chairman and his wife are away, I call bingo so it is a mixture of activities. Before retirement I didn’t do any of this, I used to go from work to home and from home to work and that was it.*

For most of the women, visiting social clubs, educational courses or participation in group activities, particularly with other women, had previously not played a part in their lives. Indeed some of the women referred to the fact that they had
never had a female ‘best friend’ until later life. However, the death of partners and friends had very often left a void in their lives that they needed to fill. Hence, involvement in social groups and shared activities had enabled them to extend their social relationships in new ways. Indeed widowhood, as tragic as the women found it, was often the catalyst for establishing new friendships and discovering new leisure activities. Mrs Wells outlined how widowhood had forced her to look for new friendships:

We [she and her husband] were always together. I think that’s why I missed him more because I never bothered with female friends when he was alive… Yes I like company but when you’ve lost your partner and haven’t bothered with girls you wish you had a personal friend so I’ve pulled up with Olive and we get on well together.

Similarly, Mrs Crowe described how she had only recently formed a close friendship with Evelyn, despite having been neighbours for sixty-five years:

Evelyn, over the road, my neighbour, we’ve been living opposite each other for 65 years, but it’s only recently we’ve started to become really friendly. Because she’s got two boys the same age as my boys, we’ve always been friendly, but no visiting or anything, but now we have a cup of coffee together before the Priest comes over on a Thursday morning to give us our communion together.

In Jerrome’s (1982) study into friendship groups of women in later life, she found that whilst women might be friendly with one or two neighbours, generally they were not the most important source of friendships. In some cases, like Mrs Crowe, they find that neighbours who had been there for years and were never friends, often became friends in later life:

The intensification of neighbour relationships involving the unilateral provision of help provides a purpose in life, an identity, status within the peer group, a structure for the day and week, and close and satisfying contact with people who are on the whole friendly and concerned (Jerrome 1982:182).
Thus there is obviously a clear identification amongst these respondents with their peer group for friendship, particularly after the death of close relatives. This identification has also been noted in Dorothy Jerome’s (1986:348-9) work who interprets this peer group identification as a possible ‘response to liminality (the experience of being marginal and between two statuses), the need for solidarity in a state of relative deprivation and low status, and for guidelines for behaviour in socially uncharted waters.’

7.6. Survival and leisure

The ability to cope and adapt to changing circumstances was a key feature of the women’s lives, many of whom had experienced the death of husbands they had been married to for many years, or even their children or relatives who had often been the focus of their previous leisure activities. Olwen, for example, described how she had lost her son when he was only nineteen. Mary spoke of how her sister had died in her thirties, leaving two young children of four and eighteen months. Another spoke of the death of her son-in-law after only six months of marriage to her daughter. For Mrs Town, the death of her husband was particularly difficult as, never having been able to read or write she had relied on him heavily throughout their marriage:

*When my husband went, he took my eyes.*

Whilst one cannot underestimate the traumatic nature of their loss, Chambers (2005) notes that widowhood is often compensated for by women’s ability to adapt to other roles and relationships. As stated earlier Jerome’s (1993:97) research highlights the capacity of older women to adapt to major change in their lives by establishing new friendships and new social lives, commenting that women’s social networks develop as they go through life:

*if only because the earlier years are characterised by relatively narrow concerns and later years see a removal of some of the constraints on social activities. The end of active parenthood, widowhood and the death of a dependent elderly relative may all release the potential for sociability.*
As well as the death of close relatives, many of the women have also had to adapt to the death of friends, very often companions, with whom they had attended the social clubs or participated in other leisure activities. The social clubs themselves seem transient because of this, the death of the organiser or the death of the members themselves can often jeopardise the feasibility of the clubs, as Mrs Ansell explained:

*I come back and then I go to my other meeting at St Bridget's, which actually, at the moment, has only got five members because people have died, you know, over the years. It's a Friendship Club and we have tea and bingo, but there's only five of us now. Wednesday, I go to Ty Celyn, which is a retirement club for ladies. A lot more people in that one and we have various things. We have whist once a week. We used to do dancing which was lovely. I thoroughly enjoyed that, but the people have died, or aged and they can't do it now.*

Thus despite experiencing the deaths of close ones, the women have found inner resources to cope and deal with their losses, working hard to establish friendships and leisure activities that fill these voids in their lives. This capacity to adapt to changed circumstances and determination to continue with their lives in the face of adversity is particularly evident in the way in which they cope and adapt to emerging health problems such as hip and knee replacements, failing eyesight or arthritis, as Mrs Heal stated:

*I will not give in. I had a hip operation, I feel now I could stay sitting down and not bother, but I'm not going to give in. In fact, my daughter now tells me she has to make an appointment to see me... If you want to sit in your chair you can but I'm not going to give in.*

Mrs Long describes how, because of emphysema and arthritis, her leisure activities have been curtailed to some extent, but she forces herself to continue with some social activities:

*I can't hold the ball properly or bend. I thought I should give skittles up but then thought no, if I give that up, I don't do anything, so I've got to do it... I haven't been able to go out properly for a while cos of my*
breathing. I get panic attacks about driving but I’ve got to do it. Like I’m going to the hairdressers today and know I’ve got to do it and will do it. I’m determined otherwise I’m just stuck in.

This is similar to Heuser’s (2005:58) work where she found that women bowlers, even when confronted with physical difficulties and when unable to play, were extremely reluctant to surrender their contact with the activity and community of women and thus tended to find alternative forms of involvement:

Not having to relinquish their social ties once their playing days were over meant that they could continue their involvement in club life where relationships, not athletic prowess counted most.

Similarly in Victor, Scambler, Bond and Bowling’s (2005:26) work on loneliness in later life, they found a determination amongst the older people they interviewed to adapt and make the best of things, with respondents stressing the need for optimism whilst accepting at times the need for ‘downward adjustment of expectations’.

For many of the women in this study, a symbol that they were still coping with life, despite the physical obstacles, was performing housework. The sense of autonomy gained by undertaking household tasks was clearly evident, for example, in the words of Mrs Long who, despite struggling physically, was determined to do housework. She recognised that it symbolises her independence, her ability to manage, as well as providing physical activity to punctuate her day. She explained:

I don’t just sit I’ve got to be doing something even though with my breathing problems it takes my breath away. My nurse thinks I should have someone in the house to help me but if you have someone in I won’t be doing it and I’ve got to keep myself going otherwise it’s a long day.

Such responses seem to contradict the work of Abrams (1995:82) who argued that, ‘it would be inept’ to describe housework as a leisure activity:
Making beds, cooking, shopping, washing up, hoovering the floors, should certainly be described more accurately as 'unpaid work', and for elderly people, slow and exhausting work.

Instead, the experiences of the women I interviewed confirms the findings of Glyptis and Chambers (1982:249) who observed:

'Leisure' is no simple label to apply. Each essential activity that is undertaken in the home, such as eating, sleeping, conversing and personal hygiene, has a potential leisure counterpart determined by experience and attitude. Hence, leisure is not merely an activity, but an experience and perception...

Wilhite, Sheldon and Jekubovich's (1994:70) research into older widows' leisure similarly found that leisure was often not separated from other aspects of their lives but 'interwoven with everyday routines – blended into daily tasks, perceived responsibilities, and time frames.' Clearly these women in Cardiff illustrate how older women's leisure can be intertwined with work and thus coexist (Harahousou 2006). Thus this thesis has revealed the 'utilitarian' useful nature of older women's leisure activities and the potential within these essential tasks for feelings of satisfaction.

7.7. Satisfaction in leisure

Despite the difficulties that face the women in developing leisure activities, most have been extremely successful and are very proud of how they have overcome obstacles to develop their leisure activities. They have been so successful that some like Mrs Ansell implied that the only negative aspect to her life is the prospect of things ending:

I don’t like the idea that it’s going to end cos you know you are at an age when it can... at any time to be honest. You don’t expect it when you are younger but you do now, but on the whole I think it’s fine and, I mean, we have got many opportunities
Mary expressed similar levels of satisfaction, implying that life has never been so good:

*In every respect I’m happier than I’ve ever been.*

Indeed the women’s commitment to and also extent of their leisure activities was clear in the following comments:

*Some days I don’t know where the hours go because the children said they wanted to give me a mobile to keep track of me.*

(Mrs Mole)

*If you look at my calendar you’ll see last month how full it was, I don’t know from day to day, it’s so fully booked up.*

(Mrs Wells)

*Funnily enough if anyone wants me, my daughter says you’ll be lucky to find her in she’s never home.*

(Mrs Ansell)

These comments clearly contradict findings like those in the Government’s 2005 quantitative study ‘Focus on Older People’ (2005:84) report which states that:

*People in older age groups generally spend time on more sedate activities compared with those aged under 65. The time spent on watching TV, reading, and listening to music increased substantially with age... A significant proportion of their leisure time is therefore spent on activities in and around the home. People in older age groups spend more time resting at home during the day.*

Perhaps this survey failed to ask the women the sufficiently revealing questions because this picture of leisure is not one that the women in this study would recognise. Instead the women studied here showed a determination to keep busy and spend as much time as possible out of the house. Olwen’s words sum up such an approach to life:
You’ve got to keep your brain working. Just to sit in the house is a terrible waste of time. I don’t put the television on until the news comes on at 6.00pm. To me, to sit there and watch television in the daytime I think is a terrible waste of time.

However, the newly discovered freedom for many of the women is curtailed by a fear of going out at night, a fear expressed in the words of Mrs Heal:

I won’t go out at night. I do go to skittles at night but I walk back with two others, I don’t believe in walking home late at night.

Mrs Wells made a similar comment on evening activities:

Well there’s so much mugging going on. No, I like to be in at night come six o’clock, lock up, television, sandwich ready and that’s it.

This fear of crime expressed by the women also emerged in Walker and Walker’s (2005) research into the quality of life of older people, which found that, even though older people are less likely to become victims of crime than younger people, crime is of major concern to them, particularly older women. Possible reasons cited for this fear are the disproportionate impact a physical attack could have on their health, the time it may take for recovery and their inability to run away from young attackers. Walker and Walker (2005) conclude that this sense of insecurity restricts older people’s ability to participate in social activities, particularly those older people without a car who regard public transport as unsafe at night. Similarly, the work of Scharf, Phillipson, Kingston and Smith (2000) on social exclusion and older people describes older people’s concerns about crime as a form of spatial segregation, which results in a limitation in ‘mental space’ that can lead to older people becoming housebound. Scharf et al. (2000) also suggest that this spatial segregation can manifest itself in ‘narratives of space’ in which older people articulate shared concerns about personal safety.

Whilst such ‘narratives of space’ in relation to going out in the evening were evident in the women’s comments, this was not the case in relation to daytime.
activities. All of the women commented on the importance of leaving the house on a daily basis to maintain a sense of contact with people and to remain active. Shopping tended to provide them with a legitimate excuse to be out of the house and it was clear that, as many of the women had lived and even worked in the same locality all their lives, shopping provided great opportunities for sociability.

For instance Mrs Mole said of the sociability of shopping:

*Friday is my day for going shopping and I meet all my friends up the road and if I go into town it's surprising the number of people I meet.*

Mrs Wells also commented on the social aspects of shopping:

*Well, I go out shopping every day. Doesn't matter if it's only for a pint of milk or the Echo and I can guarantee, if I walk down the road, I'll meet somebody, have a chat, I just browse around... I've been here 50 odd years, so I bump into people and, having been a shop assistant, you know people.*

The social relationships obtained in participating in these shopping trips are obviously important to the women, allowing them to integrate on an informal basis with friends and neighbours. This finding would seem to contradict Scharf et al's (2000) research, which found many of the older people they interviewed were marginalised within their communities because of changes in the population structure and composition. This had led to feelings of social exclusion and a loss of identification with the local community. In the research reported here, the women have strong networks of families, friends, and neighbours, having lived in the locality for the majority of their lives and it was evident that this gives them a significant sense of embeddedness in their communities. Informal social relationships, like stopping and chatting to people in the street are, like Gabriel and Bowling (2004) found, an important part of older people's' social lives and quality of life.

Whilst many of the women's shopping and other leisure activities are local and are, as observed by Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips and Ogg (2001:244) within 'a tightly defined social as well as geographical circle' there are also many examples of how the women travel outside the boundaries of their neighbourhood. In doing
so, all stress the importance of their free bus passes in giving them the ability and freedom to travel outside their locality to both familiar and unfamiliar places. In this scenario, it is perhaps not surprising that the UK National Statistics Omnibus Survey in 2001 found a positive correlation between access to transport and the frequency with which older people take part in social activities. The women’s reliance on buses is not surprising as they are from a generation of women who have little expectation of owning or being able to drive a car (Scraton, Bramham and Watson 1998). Social Trends 2004 states that women are more likely than men to lack access to a car, only 42% of women aged 75-84 have access to a car compared with 66% of men, largely because they have never had a driving licence. Against this scenario, the WAG decision to allow free bus travel throughout Wales for those over sixty is welcomed. The importance of the bus pass came through strongly in the women’s comments.

On the opportunities for social activity that the bus passes offer, Mrs Wells said:

> I’ve got my bus pass to go wherever I want to go, wherever we want to go on day trips. It’s a laugh going out, do a bit of shopping, it’s something different, there’s loads of places we haven’t been with our bus passes.

Mrs Ansell highlighted the importance of her free bus pass:

> My bus pass is worn out actually cos I take a bus about four times a day, if I’m down and back to Albany road shopping... Well you can do what you like, you can go where you like, you can choose yourself and you have the opportunity of bus travel free you can go anywhere and that’s great. We can go anywhere with that.

Mrs Wells described how she and a friend meet in town each week and then whatever bus comes along we jump on... Well we went on the new closed up bus to the airport, another time we were going to Cowbridge and we ended up in Barry!

There is a sense of spontaneity around many of these trips; a sense of adventure, fun and freedom is evident in the women’s comments. The women are keen to take risks, try out new experiences, once again challenging the public perception of older women as feeble and set in their ways.
In being able to pursue their social and leisure activities, many of the women commented on their relative affluence today, describing their current financial position as favourable to that in earlier years when they had children and husbands to support and mortgages to pay. The sense of freedom from financial worries was noticeable in Mary’s words:

Your house is paid for, you struggle and you pay for that. I didn’t take holidays until the house was paid for, I couldn’t go on holiday and worry am I going to get the sack in six months and think I should have kept that money. It’s how you’re brought up. So financially I’m now ok. If I wanted to have a lot done to the house I could but, as I say, the money’s mine now... the house it has had its innings.

Similarly, May commented on how she now has the money to spend on herself, unlike previous years where feelings of financial vulnerability and insecurity dominated her life choices:

I’ve now got a couple of bob, money makes the world go round and I can go out and spend. I haven’t got to be watching every penny.

Such feelings of comparative financial security are surprising when one considers the often-published indices of inequalities of income for older women. In the UK Government’s 2005 Focus on Older People, married female pensioners are referred to as having an average income in their own right of £77 a week, compared with married male pensioners who have an average income (in their own right) of £212 per week. However, as we have seen here and, as Vincent (2003) observes, the women’s current financial position compares favourably to the older people they knew as they grew into adulthood and with their own previous financial positions. For example all the women interviewed in this research owned their own homes and had access to state pensions experiencing, in this respect, better material conditions than their parents. In this scenario it is not surprising that the quality of life research commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council in 2002 found that quality of life can depend heavily on factors other than income. Instead they found the main building blocks to quality of life for older people were standards of comparison and
expectations, a positive attitude, good health, good social networks and sense of support, living in a neighbourhood with good facilities and feeling safe. Gabriel and Bowling’s (2004) research into quality of life in old age found that financial circumstances were important but so too were social relationships. Similarly Scharf, Phillipson, Smith (2004) in their work on poverty and social exclusion found that although exclusion from material resources and basic services were two important dimensions of social inclusion, exclusion from social relations, civic activities and neighbourhood exclusion were equally important indicators of social exclusion.

Indeed comments from the women seem to suggest that having lived through the 1930s depression and the Second World War, they do not have the mentality, which allows for high spending patterns or conspicuous consumption. Instead, they seem to have a cautious and considered approach to shopping, spending money on essentials or items that are ‘really needed.’ These sentiments were particularly evident in the words of Olwen:

*I wasn’t brought up to spend money like water. I hope my children will never want. If they buy something they wear it straight away, I keep it. If they want anything they have it, to me it’s not a bargain, if they see something in the sale, whether they want it or not, it’s in the sale, but to me it’s if you really need it, they say well it’s half price. I’m more careful, I’m careful, I’ve never been in debt in all my life, I have never had ought, we were on small money, you learn you know, my daughter buys me clothes but I can’t use all the clothes they buy me. I don’t see any sense in it, I say why do I want it; I’ve never had so many clothes in all my life. Years ago you didn’t have it, you were more careful.*

Such comments raise the question of whether younger generations entering retirement, having experienced much greater affluence and wider choices in leisure, will be able to find the same satisfaction in leisure as these women who regard their current position, in terms of time, access to leisure and financial support in the form of pensions, as a novel experience which they clearly relish and are making the most of.
7.8. Summary

The semi-structured interviews of phase one revealed that these older women do not conform to the stereotypes of older women as sedentary, passive or inactive. Indeed, the interviews leave the impression that these women lead busy, enjoyable, fulfilled lives and are engaged in much purposeful activity. This is unlike the findings of Abram's (1995:87) research that described older people as:

A population in which nearly 40% of all elderly people live alone and are acutely aware of loneliness had clearly not yet found how, through their leisure activities, to add re-engagement to retirement on any significant scale – except for a small minority with large incomes and with some experience of further or higher education.

Instead, the experiences of the working class women here clearly show their zest for life, keenness to be engaged in and often to be at the centre of things happening around them. They are not women to be pitied and indeed do not want pity. They refuse to dwell on the health problems or the tragedies that have faced them in recent years; instead, their emphasis is on the positive aspects of their lives. Perhaps, more importantly, the research has found that the leisure activities of these women seem to represent for them an engagement with life so strong, that disengagement with these activities would signify disengagement with life itself. In this respect, leisure for these women is not only more fulfilling and less restricted but more significant than at any other time of their lives.

What comes through most clearly in the interviews is a determination to adapt to altered personal circumstances such as ill health and bereavement. In this, the majority have been successful by rebuilding or readjusting their lives to create independent, autonomous, meaningful identities, often through their leisure. Hence, the women seem to have many sources of enjoyment and satisfaction within their lives ranging from the voluntary roles they play in their communities and families through to the social activities in which they engage. The emphasis within the lives of these women is indeed on activity rather than passivity and, in this, the role of leisure in their lives is crucial, providing opportunities to meet people, spend time with peers and to take on roles of responsibility with a sense of purpose.
Overall, a high degree of control and agency is evident in the lives of these women. A great enthusiasm for life exists, contrasting hugely with the negative stereotypes of older people, and particularly older women referred to in earlier chapters of this thesis, particularly under the disengagement and political economy theories of old age. The evidence of these semi-structured interviews would seem to support the findings of Wray’s (2003:519) research who found that older women had the potential to transform and resist social and economic constraints:

*Although women do face problems as they age it is not always the case that this inevitably leads to a poor quality of life. Many women through practices of resistance and negotiation maintain a quality of life that is not simply dependent on access to material resources.*

Moreover, the urge to stay positive and in control of their lives enabled them to overcome many of the barriers of participation and is a testament to these women’s vitality and resilience. In this respect, the findings also support the work of Shaw (1994) who identified women’s leisure as a potential site for empowerment and a location for women to resist stereotypes and prescribed social roles. The research presented here likewise provides numerous examples of positive, life affirming engagement with both work and leisure that exemplify themes of power, independence and empowerment.

Thus the work in phase one of the fieldwork provides much evidence that this group of women in the ‘oldest-old’ phase, who have been so neglected and marginalised within leisure studies, are pursuing lives with a high degree of engagement in leisure. In many ways, the significance of this engagement in leisure is more significant than at any other time of their lives and perhaps more significant than it is for many other age groups. In this scenario, it is surprising and even shameful that leisure studies have failed to recognise this group’s lives and their leisure. Much more work needs to be done on understanding older women’s and indeed men’s leisure in this later phase of life. After all, many of these women are experts in leisure, having been actively engaged with it for up to twenty-five years since retirement.
These interviews also established that the older women derive great satisfaction from informal social relationships, particularly those that occur within their daily routines such as shopping, when they can stop and chat to acquaintances. The high importance of such social interactions within the lives of older people means that, as Gabriel and Bowling (2004:105) suggest, urban planning and regeneration programmes should consider altering the physical environment to allow for the creation of public and private spaces that foster and encourage this sort of informal social relationship.

"Housing schemes with pleasant and secure public spaces, shopping areas that provide places to sit, and community centres are important in this context." Thus there is obviously a need for Local Authorities to work, not only on trying to maintain older people's social activities and engagement in social roles through good town planning and design but also to maintain access to affordable local transport, allowing older people to keep their independence and continue their social activities and social relationships.

The following chapter will explore three of the women's lives in much greater depth, by presenting the results of phase two of the research, the biographical interviews. Many of the themes to have emerged in this chapter are thus returned to in chapter eight.
CHAPTER 8

BIOGRAPHICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE MEANING AND PERSPECTIVES OF OLDER WOMEN’S LEISURE

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CHAPTER 8: BIOGRAPHICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE MEANING AND PERSPECTIVES OF OLDER WOMEN’S LEISURE

8.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the three biographical interviews with Mary, Alice and Mrs Ansell. As recommended by Wengraf (2000), the material from each of the biographical interviews is introduced by a pen portrait representing the ‘lived life’ and containing ‘factual’, ‘objective’ biographical, information on each of the women, in chronological order. The pen portraits are followed by the analysis of the biographical material presented under various themed headings. The difficulties in comparing material from biographical interviews and the desire to ensure that each life was treated in a unique way, meant that each of the biographical interviews has been presented separately, what Patton (2002) describes as ‘unique case orientation.’ A concluding section to this chapter does however attempt to draw out themes, which cut across the individual experiences and lives of each of the women.

8.2. Pen portrait of eighty-six year old Alice

Alice was born in 1921 in Newcastle and was raised by her mother and grandmother, after her father left the family home when Alice was a young age. To support the family, Alice’s mother left Newcastle to find work as a nurse at a London hospital, leaving Mary and her brother in the care of their grandmother. At the age of eleven, after Alice’s mother had saved enough money to buy a house in Shepherds Bush, Alice and her brother went down to London to join their mother.

At the age of fourteen, Alice left school and got a job at a radio factory. After two years at the radio factory, Alice applied for a job at the Hoover factory where her mother now also worked. At Hoover, Alice was able to maintain her interest in tap and ballroom dancing through the company’s regular dance nights and annual cabaret shows. It was also whilst working at Hoover that Alice met her future husband. During courtship the two would go to Saturday morning matinees and on some Sundays, the London Palladium. Sometimes Alice’s partner would
hire a punt and punt to Eel Pie Island where they would have a picnic. In 1939, the couple got married and continued to live in London.

On the outbreak of war, Alice’s brother joined the army and was sent to the Far East, her husband, a key worker, training men on munitions, was sent to various sites around Wales, Machynlleth, Merthyr Tydfil, north Wales and eventually Llandaff in Cardiff. It was in Merthyr, at the age of nineteen, that Alice had her first child, a daughter, followed by a son two years later.

When the war ended, Alice’s brother returned to Britain but never recovered from the injuries and treatment he experienced as a prisoner in a Japanese Prisoner of war camp. He died shortly after his return from the war. Alice and her husband decided to stay in south Wales and bought a grocer’s shop in Cardiff. The family lived above the shop, working long hours from 9-8 in the evening except for half day closing on Wednesdays and all day on Sundays.

In any spare time they had, they would occasionally take the children to the cinema or on birthdays and anniversaries to a restaurant. Once a year the family would have a week’s holiday in Ogmore, ten miles outside Cardiff, where they would stay in single-decker buses converted into holiday accommodation. At home the children were encouraged to do their homework and concentrate on schoolwork.

After eighteen years in the shop, Alice’s husband’s health declined and the business was beginning to suffer from supermarket competition. The couple decided to close the shop but to continue living above it. In order to make ends meet, Alice began taking in lodgers from a local college, providing meals, cleaning and laundry services.

For Alice, the evenings were quiet times to relax watching television, once a week, however, she would visit the local Conservative club for a game of bingo and a dance. During the week Alice’s husband would go out to play skittles or visit one of his three allotments where he grew vegetables for the freezer. When Alice’s husband’s health deteriorated further and he was told he did not have long to live, they sold the shop premises and moved to a much smaller terraced house, round the corner from the shop, and the house, which Alice still lives in today. In the last months of
Alice’s husband’s life, he was bedridden and she became a full time carer. Two months after her husband’s death, Alice also lost her son and, with that, contact with her son’s two children, her two grandchildren.

After her husband and son’s death, Alice described how she struggled and still does struggle to cope with these unhappy experiences. However, despite these sad memories, she has coped and worked hard to put a new life together for herself, developing new interests. Her week is full, for example Tai Chi on Mondays, keep fit on Tuesday morning and ‘Tuesday Night Tarts’ club in the evening (a group she has formed with some women who became friendly at Slimmer’s World). On Wednesdays, a friend calls and Alice has her hair done at the hairdressers. Thursday afternoon is the pensioners’ meeting, Thursday night skittles. Friday is a stay at home day. On weekends, she spends time shopping with her daughter.

8.3. Leisure in the context of constraints

A theme running throughout Alice’s life relates to the constraints surrounding her leisure, the most significant of which has been limited access to money. The setting for Alice’s early life was the 1920s and 1930s, a time of national shortage and depression. Money and job opportunities were limited and there was no Governmental social security provision. In addition, the disappearance of Alice’s father and the subsequent dependence on one income to support Alice and her brother as well as her grandmother made the family more vulnerable. Alice is only too conscious of this, particularly of the sacrifices and efforts her mother had to endure to ensure the family survived; she frequently refers to how her mother ‘worked hard to keep us’ describing also how her mother ‘worked hard to buy a house’ for them. However, she recognises that, despite her mother’s efforts, life and opportunities for leisure were limited ‘We had no money, so that was a good start!’ She comments on how ‘I didn’t have the pleasures children have today.’

Alice’s move to London did open up the opportunity for her to discover dancing, a love of which has stayed with her throughout life, but again access to this did not come easily, Alice had to earn the money to pay for the tap dancing lessons. She recollects ‘I loved my dancing... Dancing was my aim’ but explains how she would
have to clean the bathroom every Saturday to earn the sixpence to pay for the tap
dancing.

On moving to London, Alice recognises how her mother’s work left her with little
time to spend with her and her brother and thus constrained where and what she was
allowed to do:

\[\text{Of course my mother was working and we were two young children. We were}
\text{twelve, fourteen, she went to work and we were told, you stay away from this}
\text{and that, so that we weren’t running the streets.}\]

In adult married life, although ownership of the grocer’s shop supported the family
and also served as the family home as the children were growing up, in the 1970s
competition from supermarkets began to impact on the business’ viability. To make
ends meet, Alice and her husband closed the shop and began to take in students from
the local technical college, providing breakfast and evening meals, as well as doing
their laundry. It was hard work and ‘Really only covered costs.’ At this time, Alice’s
husband’s health began to fail, placing the family under further financial pressures.

The legacy of these experiences since childhood has left Alice with a careful approach
to money. She talks of how:

\[\text{These experiences still stick. I’m still careful with money and I think I brought}
\text{my daughter up to be the same. She's the same, she’ll think twice before she}
\text{spends her money. You had to be.}\]

It is these financial hardships in Alice’s life that perhaps explain why her leisure, in
many respects, has always been measured, planned carefully, budgeted for and often
lacked a sense of spontaneity about it. She talks of how trips to the London Palladium
with her husband were on a Sunday but ‘not every Sunday because we couldn’t afford
it’, how the annual holiday to Ogmore, only ten miles from Cardiff, was carefully
budgeted for throughout the year, allowing for a level of extravagance and spontaneity
that was impossible throughout the remainder of the year:
We had to save up for it, we had to pay for the bus and when we got there, we didn’t think twice, if you wanted to buy ice-cream you could, you could have ice cream because you were on holiday.

Trips to the cinema or meals out with the children during the rest of the year were only on special occasions, and were relatively low budget affairs, she describes how meals out:

... were not like meals out today. It would be a restaurant, but the restaurants then weren’t like they are today. Today you could go in, spend £15-20 on a meal, and think nothing of it. If you spent £5 then, it was a lot of money.

Another constraint on Alice’s leisure throughout her life apart from money was a lack of time. Working full time from the age of fourteen left little space for leisure, indeed, the attraction of working at the Hoover factory was that it allowed her to pursue her interest in dancing through the regular dance night and annual cabaret show. Marriage at eighteen followed by two children shortly afterwards placed large demands on her time. The time commitments of the grocer’s shop, working from 9-8, coupled with the domestic responsibilities of home and being a mother also eroded any time for leisure. When the shop closed and Alice began to take in the lodgers, large amounts of her time were still taken up with domestic responsibilities including cooking, cleaning and washing for the lodgers, as well as looking after her own children. These responsibilities not only left her with little time for leisure but also little energy:

When I had the shop and the lodgers, by the time you’d finished the evening meal, washing dishes and cleaning up, you wouldn’t want to go out anyway.

The lack of time and energy and the realisation that home based leisure was the most practical form of leisure open to her eventually proved the incentive for buying a television. Once the shop had been sold and the lodgers had gone, there were new demands made upon her time such as caring for her, by then bed-ridden husband in the house that she still lives in today.

Many of the time constraints, which have faced Alice, have been very much related to being a woman and in particular the traditional expectations of women
throughout much of her life. This is particularly evident in married life when Alice bore the burden of household responsibilities, in addition to working full time. One gets the sense in Alice’s comments that the domestic tasks were a duty that, despite lack of free time, had to be fulfilled. She describes how, on Sundays, the one-day of the week when the shop closed, ‘I would not work on a Sunday. That was when my work got done, housework, washing, ironing and so forth.’ The unpaid nature of this work is not recognised as work by Alice but as a duty that a free day allows her to fulfil.

Alice also refers to the fact that in married life many of her and her husband’s leisure activities were single sex social activities that they did separately. Alice also indicates how being a woman meant that she was excluded from various activities, particularly those which her husband was able to freely participate in such as the working men’s club and skittles team. ‘He played skittles... but I didn’t then, it was just the men.’ Indeed, the clear, traditional gender divisions around leisure are obvious in the demarcation in activities. Alice’s husband would garden and grow vegetables ‘Gardening was his thing, he had three allotments. He did love his garden... Now and again I might go with him, but I wasn’t a gardener.’ On the other hand, Alice’s life mainly revolved around domestic duties including freezing the vegetables, which her husband grew and which, as she states, was ‘more work again.’

8.4. The socio-cultural context of Alice’s leisure

It is clear to see how historical events and cultural norms during Alice’s lifetime have impacted upon her life and consequently her attitudes towards leisure. Living through the 1930s depression and wartime, for example, has affected many aspects of her life including the loss of a brother, her approach to money, her opportunities for leisure and even her move to Wales with her husband, a key worker on munitions. Reaching the age of fourteen in 1935 meant having to leave school, severely curtailing her educational opportunities and perhaps even her life chances. It wasn’t until 1936 that the school leaving age was raised to 15.

The cultural expectations of women as wives and mothers throughout Alice’s lifetime have also had a major impact on her time, her ability to access leisure and her choice of leisure activities. Alice herself is only too aware of how both historical events and
cultural norms have impacted on her life in a way that was unique to those periods in time. For example, she frequently prefixes sentences with ‘in those days...’ and talks of how ‘things were different then.’ She observes that her marriage at the age of eighteen was young by today’s standards but how it was the norm then and how having to give up full time work upon marriage and follow her husband to Wales was expected of women then. ‘Of course, being married in those days was different to today. You went with him... in those days a woman’s place was in the home.’ Indeed Langhamer (2000:8) in her study of women’s leisure in England 1920-1960, observes how, on marriage many women’s lives became focused on home and family ‘rooted in notions of duty and service to others.”

The limited choice of leisure activities that Alice frequently refers to in the telling of her life story was also typical of those times. For example, in childhood Alice would visit Church, Sunday School and Girl Guides not out of any religious conviction, but out of expediency, since the church was the main focus of social activity, ‘I only went for my own entertainment.’ She describes how marbles and hoop and a stick were ‘the only things we had to play with.’ In early married-life, Alice describes how they would have to entertain themselves with games of crib or games of whist with friends and neighbours. With the children, she played games of tiddlywinks and snakes and ladders:

There was nothing like there is today. Nothing whatsoever. Any entertainment you wanted, you made yourself. Your own entertainment.

Again this reflects the findings of Langhamer (2000) who found that on marriage women’s leisure became focussed towards home-based, family leisure. Whilst Alice does refer to working men’s clubs as one important source of social activities outside the home, ‘there was always the bingo and a dance’, she cannot remember any other sort of club: ‘it was nearly all labour and conservative clubs that I can think of. I can’t remember any other clubs, not that I can think of.’

The annual family holiday, only 10 miles from home, was also typical of the time. Lacking disposable income, the family had to save all year round for the annual holiday which was very much looked forward to. Not having access to a car and, with rail travel considered relatively expensive, holidays in close proximity to
home were not considered unusual or, any less exciting than longer haul trips.

8.5. **Lack of continuity in leisure in later life**

Leisure in later life for Alice, particularly since her husband’s death, is anything but a continuum of earlier patterns of leisure. Her leisure activities are now wider than ever before as she experiences and participates in a whole range of new leisure pursuits from Tai Chi to keep fit to pensioners’ meetings and skittles. Time and money are no longer constraining factors and it even seems that gender constraints are no longer a barrier (she is now part of the all women skittles club, an activity seen as a male preserve in the past and open only to her husband in married life). As Wilson (2000:113) has observed, it is often the case that in later life, women are able to challenge the gender biases that have played a part in their earlier lives:

_Ageing into advanced old age allows a reworking or re-evaluation of gender roles in a range of different directions... stereotypical gender roles are altered and reduced._

Leisure in Alice’s later life not only comes more easily, freed as she is from many of the earlier constraints, but also has a more important and significant role than at any other period of her life. Engagement with leisure enables her to cope with the hardest things in life, which Alice has had to deal with, such as the death of her husband, followed shortly afterwards by the death of a son and subsequent loss of contact with grandchildren:

_I didn’t have such a social life when he (husband) died that I’ve got now. I think the reason I am forcing myself now is because I know in the back of my mind that if I give in that will be it. So what I’m doing now is I’m keeping going... the thing is, if I didn’t go to these clubs, I could sit in this chair and mope and get worse and I’m not going to do it._

Engagement with leisure is thus enabling her to cope with extremely difficult life experiences and, as such, is preventing her devaluation. Iwasaki and Smale (1998) observe how leisure is frequently used as a ‘stress buffer’ to help people cope in the face of stressful circumstances. However, engagement with leisure does not come
easily to Alice and she has to work at it in a way that she did not have to when younger. 'Leisure just comes when you’re younger, now I’ve got to think I’ve got to do it.' However, perhaps this great resilience that Alice has shown in managing her current leisure is the legacy of a lifetime of coping with all life has thrown at her. It has obviously given her the ability to use and exploit leisure opportunities in later life to the full. Leisure is a source of friendship networks, an opportunity to socialise, a buffer from sad memories and even ensures a full engagement with life.
8.6. Pen portrait of seventy-eight year old Mary

Mary was born in Cardiff in 1927 and lived with her mother after her father left the family home and moved to Liverpool where he was to remarry. When Mary was five, her mother also remarried and went on to have two more children. Although Mary’s stepfather was a full time civil servant, he did not earn a lot of money, hence the family lived in ‘rooms’ and had few material possessions. During the war, the family lost what few possessions they had when their house was ‘bombed out.’ After being rehoused by the council, the family found new accommodation on the other side of Cardiff meaning that Mary, to her dismay, had to spend the last year of her schooling in a new school, catching a tram across Cardiff each day.

At 14 Mary left school and found work as a live-in, trainee commis waitress in one of the big hotels in the centre of Cardiff. Here she would do two shifts a day, 10 until 3 and then 5 until 10. Her free time was limited, but occasionally she would go to the cinema or sometimes a dance, the Kardoma or one of the other Italian owned coffee shops in Cardiff. On her free day, she would go home to visit her mother.

However, as the war took hold and blackouts became a necessity, most of Mary’s activities with her friends had to cease. She also found that, as a result of wartime food rationing, that the hotel could no longer obtain the food or wine it needed to function and had to make Mary redundant.

After the war Mary, in order to resume her training as a commis waitress, moved to Cornwall to seek live-in employment in a hotel. It was in Cornwall that Mary married her husband, a lorry driver, whose job was to deliver fish to Billingsgate market in London. The couple managed to buy a house but struggled to cover costs due to the seasonal nature of both of their jobs. To help the couple’s finances Mary began to offer Bed and Breakfast accommodation during the season and to take on a part time job in a baker’s shop as well as continuing to work in the hotel.

Mary divorced in her 40s and moved back to Cardiff, a place where she now knew very few people. She knew only her mother, stepfather and one step sister (the other stepsister had died whilst Mary was living in Cornwall). She managed to find full time
work at the Department of Health and Social Security and set about trying to buy a house. Despite having £1100 from the house sale in Cornwall, she was unable to find a bank that would give her, a single woman, a mortgage for the remaining £1500. Eventually Mary got a mortgage from Cardiff Council to buy the house that she still lives in today.

Shortly after Mary's return to Cardiff, both her stepfather and mother became ill and Mary had to take on responsibility for their care outside her working hours. When her stepfather died, Mary's mother moved into Mary's own home for more closely monitored care.

The pattern of full time work and, in the evenings, caring for her mother continued until Mary retired at the age of 63. Only 2 weeks later her mother died.

Her mother's death left Mary bereft. She had few friends, no purpose, no hobbies, no social life. However, six months after her mother's death, Mary decided to 'take herself in hand'.

Today, Mary is a woman who has joined the University of the Third Age, undertaken a course in photography, another in herbal medicine, has been to Strasbourg to see the European parliament, a Saga trip to Arizona, does 2 half-days voluntary work in a local charity shop and another day at the museum archiving material. She plays skittles one evening a week with a group of women and attends a local pensioners' club on Thursdays. She knows many people and has many friends. She feels liberated from many of the caring and financial worries she has always faced. I'm free as a bird, freer than I've ever been in my life.

8.7. Financial insecurity

A constant and dominant theme in Mary's life story is financial hardship. As a child, Mary describes great hardship after her father left the family. Although there was relief when her mother remarried and the family had access to a regular wage, it was not a large amount of money, particularly as there were two new children in the household, as well as Mary to support. The importance of her stepfather's salary was therefore crucial to the family, especially in the absence of social support systems.
‘There was nothing like there is today. You now go to the office [Social Security] and get your money, that wasn’t available.’ Mary describes the family’s situation in the following way ‘We weren’t poverty stricken. We were poor but we weren’t needy or poverty stricken.’

When Mary left school at the age of fourteen, she left the cushion of her stepfather’s ‘regular’ salary by training as a live-in commis waitress at a Cardiff hotel. From this date she was expected to be financially independent of the family, Mary outlines her mother’s words to her as: ‘I’m not going to take any money off you, you have to do for yourself now. Save. Don’t think you’ve got all this money.’ Whilst initially this was a stable job, the onset of war made Mary’s position at the hotel extremely insecure. Eventually, she was made redundant and had to move back to the family home and take up a number of shop jobs.

At the time of her marriage she had moved down to Cornwall and once again gained employment in a hotel. Here, also, there was financial insecurity that was a consequence of the seasonal nature of the tourism trade (‘I worked eight months in the hotel, then I got four months when I’ve got no money coming in’), of the lower wages in Cornwall and of her husband’s lack of job security as a lorry driver delivering fish to Billingsgate in London. To supplement their income Mary offered bed and breakfast in addition to working in the hotel during the summer months.

After divorce, leaving Cornwall and returning to Cardiff, Mary’s financial insecurities increased. Despite finding a job with the DHSS and having £1100 in the bank (her half share of the sale of the house in Cornwall), her single woman status meant that she was unable to get a mortgage from any bank to buy another house. Mary still expresses her dismay at this situation ‘I said why not to the bank, you’ll have £1100 of my money, you can’t go wrong, but they wouldn’t.’ The bank did not see it this way and Mary was forced to return to the family home and live with her parents. Eventually, Cardiff City Council, ‘one of the few councils that gave mortgages to unmarried women’ states Mary, lent her the £1500 to buy a terraced house near her parents.
With her parents’ declining health came the further financial pressure and uncertainty of not knowing if she would have to give up work to care fulltime for her parents:

*I never knew when I’d have to give up work to look after the parents... If I'd had to give up work, I wouldn’t have got dole for six weeks and we were still paying the mortgage. I had money but couldn’t use it. It was always at the back of my mind because there was many a day when I went to work and my mother was not well... it’s not like today where you can get supplementary benefit. Work was the most important thing because you want to have a roof over your head.*

These worries were to dominate Mary’s life for many years, until retirement.

8.8. Difficulties accessing leisure

The lack of money and financial pressures that faced Mary throughout her life clearly had an impact on her ability to engage with leisure. As a child, she describes the simple leisure activities of hopscotch, marbles, whip and top and rat-a-tat-ginger in the street. The purchase of a ‘wireless,’ an exciting and important part of the family’s leisure, was only feasible after Mary’s grandfather sold the family piano. The church, visited every Sunday until she was sixteen, was one of the few ways in which Mary could really extend her leisure opportunities. In particular, Mary talks of how she loved the Whitsun treat, which the church would organise once a year, ‘They’d hire a field somewhere, and you’d have a day out with races and lemonade and buns.’

As a child, Mary never experienced holidays. Day trips to local seaside resorts accessible by bus or train and no more than 20 miles from home, such as Barry or Porthcawl, were the nearest she got to a holiday but, even these were rare events and, as Mary observes:

*You couldn’t class that as a holiday, as you call holidays today but holidays were such before the war. It wasn’t a done thing. Only those that were up on that higher social scale.*
On starting work in Cardiff, Mary explains how money continued to be limited. She was unable to afford, for example, trips to the cinema. She describes how she would occasionally have a coffee in the Kardoma or one of the other Italian owned cafes in Cardiff or, alternatively, 'us young girls would all go out in a crowd and you’d perhaps walk up and down Queen Street in a crowd and then go home.' She explains how, once a week, she might go to a dance but only 'if you could afford it or if you had somebody that would take you at the weekends. You wouldn’t go in the week.'

When Mary was in her teenage years, the family eventually managed to afford a holiday to an aunt’s house in Bournemouth. However, paying for the train fare and accommodation was difficult, hence:

_We’d sleep in the garage, my father would go in with his sister, you’d split up always. My mother used to save, there would be coupons in Kardov flour and Brooke Bond Tea, a little stamp, and you had five shillings if you filled the card and five shillings for a hundred coupons. That was towards the train fare to get to Bournemouth. You did all sorts of things because you couldn’t do it out of your normal amount of money._

During married life, leisure still did not come easily for Mary. She talks of being able to afford a dance perhaps once a week or occasionally a whist drive. However, generally nights were spent in the house playing cards:

_When we were married, you’d have to stay in... money was tight, you couldn’t throw it about... we occupied ourselves, mostly with doing nothing I suppose._

Despite the lack of money severely curtailing Mary’s leisure opportunities throughout her life, perhaps one of the biggest constraints on Mary’s leisure, especially after she left Cornwall and returned to Cardiff, were the caring responsibilities she had for her parents. Mary describes how she would finish work and have to visit her mother and stepfather to check on them. ‘You’d go round there every night after you finished work to make sure they were both alright.’ Having done that, there was no time for any sort of leisure. ‘By the time I’d been round there and come back here and you start cooking, the night is gone.’ The only respite Mary had during this period was a week’s holiday to Barry with her niece.
When Mary’s stepfather died, her mother moved into Mary’s house and the caring responsibilities became even more intense. ‘You know if you’ve got somebody here on their own, unwell, you can’t go out and leave them at night as well.’ In addition to the caring responsibilities, the fact that Mary had been away from Cardiff for many years meant that friendships, through which she might have been able to pursue leisure, were also difficult to form. ‘After being away for twenty years, you’ve lost contact with everybody and you just can’t fit in again and, in any case, I just didn’t have the time.’

The importance of this caring responsibility at the expense of any life or leisure of her own, perhaps explains why she was overcome with such a sense of loss and emptiness when Mary’s mother died just two weeks after Mary’s retirement. ‘It was traumatic… work was gone, my mother’s gone, so what do I do, I’m lost.’ After a lifetime of work and caring, Mary was confronted by the emptiness in her life:

I’d get up in the morning, have a cup of tea, go on the settee and go to sleep, perhaps go to the library and get a book, come back for lunch and fall asleep, wake up and get my dinner.

8.9. The socio-cultural context of Mary’s leisure

The social and cultural environment that she lived through has affected much of Mary’s life. For example, perhaps Mary’s lifelong financial struggles and cautious approach to spending are a result of her 1930s upbringing. She observes how in the 1930s:

Before the war, the two most important things you did with your money was you paid your rent and you paid your insurance for your husband in case anything happened to him. So all those things are stuck with you.

She remembers how, just before the Second World War, in 1937:

Things were just coming back to normal after the First World War, there was work coming in, things were coming along nicely. Those who hadn’t worked
for years were finding jobs, so they were coming out of poverty.

Then war arrived again and, with it came unemployment and renewed hardship. The arrival of the Second World War was to have a significant impact on Mary’s life, from the loss of the family home after it was bombed, through to the family’s relocation by the council to another part of Cardiff and subsequent placement in a new school. The wartime food shortages also led to Mary’s redundancy from her first job at the hotel. Mary also witnessed the closure and internment of the Italian café owners who had owned the cafes where she had enjoyed a weekly coffee with her friends from the hotel.

The struggles of her 1930s upbringing and wartime experiences affected Mary’s access to, and lifelong attitudes towards money, but Mary’s experiences of living through a period in history when there was no social security safety net also had a profound influence on her. Mary refers to this characteristic of her life on a number of occasions. She was keen to contrast people’s experiences of state support today with her early experiences:

It’s not like today where you always do this or always do that. You always had to look out for yourself. It was up to you to see that you didn’t get into difficulties. So, although you had the money, you couldn’t spend it... When I had a bit of money coming in, it had to last. So, it was a way of life. You never spent what you had, you always kept some back for emergencies.

The expectations and constraints placed upon Mary during her life are influenced strongly by her gender. For example, she describes how she was allowed to go into cafés as a young girl, but not pubs, even though she was working full time. ‘You wouldn’t go to pubs. No, you didn’t drink. Well, you weren’t supposed to drink.’ Mary also comments on the gender based responsibilities and expectations that came with marriage:

When you were married, different cup of tea altogether. You’d go home and do a bit of housework and get tea ready for when his lord and master came home before you went out to work at the hotel again.
Mary’s struggles trying to gain a mortgage as a single woman in the 1960’s were also a function of her gender and were typical of society’s treatment of women during that period. The 1960’s was a time when the women’s liberation movement was only just emerging in order to seek social and economic equality and to put women on equal footing with men. However, it was not until the 1970’s that the Government introduced a range of equality laws to address gender inequality for example, in 1970 the Equal Pay Act and in 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act, to combat the type of discrimination that Mary had experienced.

8.10. Rediscovering leisure

After the trauma of losing her mother and the sense of emptiness she experienced, it is remarkable how, after six weeks, Mary came to recognise how empty her life was and found the strength of resolve to change things. ‘I thought, this is ridiculous, I can’t carry on like this, I’ve got to find something.’ Thus, Mary began a whole range of new activities from photography, to herbal medicine. She joined the University of the Third Age, took a trip to the European Parliament and began voluntary work at both the museum and charity shop. On my last meeting with Mary, she had just returned from a Saga holiday to Arizona.

There has been no continuity in leisure for Mary in later life. With a history of minimal engagement with leisure, a lack of money and time, later life has freed her from these earlier constraints. The mortgage has been paid off, she is no longer living with the prospect of having to give up work to care full time for her parents. ‘All these worries have gone.’ Later life has meant a new beginning for Mary and a break with her earlier life and the once minimal opportunities to engage in leisure. Mary herself is very aware of this transformation in her life. She explains how:

*I’ve done more since then (retirement) than I’ve done in the thirty years before... It’s been the best part of my life the retirement.*

In retirement, Mary shows a new resolve to make up for lost time, a determination that nothing should stand in her way. ‘I could do the house up, but what for? I’ve got no children to take it off me so, as long as I’ve got a cooker and a bed, that’s all I want.’ For the first time in her life, she has financial security. ‘I’ve got more money
today than I had when I was working. It seems wrong somehow. It doesn’t seem right.’ The constant budgeting and saving for a rainy day ‘is a way of life which is gone now... retirement has been an open door for me. It really, really has.’

Mary’s achievements in leisure in later life illustrates a clear challenge to the continuity theory which, Atchley (1993:11), one of its main advocates propounds, maintaining that development of leisure activity in later life:

    Is not usually de nouveau; instead development is most likely to occur in activities that are already preferred and in which the individual already has some knowledge and competence.

In Mary’s case, having been denied previous opportunities to develop any sort of leisure patterns due to her full time work combined with caring responsibilities, this model of leisure in later life does not apply and clearly underestimates the ability of older women to reinvent themselves and discover leisure in later life.
8.11. Pen portrait of eighty-two year old Mrs Ansell

Mrs Ansell was born in 1924, in the Roath area of Cardiff. She had one brother. The family were working class, although less vulnerable than other working class families at the time because of her father’s secure job as a Water Board inspector. Mrs Ansell’s early life revolved around the church, with church on Sunday mornings and Sunday school in the afternoon, as well as activities organised by the church during the week. Mrs Ansell was also involved in weekly ballet and tap lessons. She would also regularly play out in the street with local friends. Each Saturday, the family would go into Cardiff and visit Woolworth’s for something to eat. In the afternoon, Mrs Ansell’s father would leave the family in town to shop whilst he watched a football match. On some Saturdays, Mrs Ansell and her brother would visit the local cinema for the ‘two penny rush’ to watch a film.

At the age of fourteen, Mrs Ansell left school and went to work in an office job. However, disliking office work, she left the job after 12 months and went to work in Woolworth’s and, from there, various shops around Cardiff.

In 1939 when Mrs Ansell was aged 15 the war started. During this period, Mrs Ansell remembers going to dances, meeting soldiers from all over the world and dancing to the dance bands that regularly visited Cardiff such as Joe Loss. She also remembers the dance lessons organised by visiting dance masters to Cardiff such as Victor Sylvester.

At the age of eighteen she met her future husband, a Norwegian sailor who, due to the German occupation of Norway, was living in Cardiff and working on the oil tankers, delivering and collecting oil from all over the world. In 1944, Mrs Ansell married. Her parents consented to the marriage not only because they knew how serious the relationship was, but also because the government wanted to send Mrs Ansell to one of the munitions towns such as Birmingham and Coventry to help with the war effort. Mrs Ansell’s mother did not like the thought of her daughter moving away and so agreed to the marriage. After 12 months of marriage, Mrs Ansell had her first daughter.
In 1945, six months after the war ended, Mr Ansell was repatriated back to Norway by the Norwegian government. The couple returned to her husband’s family house in Arundel, a small town in the south of Norway. The size of the town and the fact that Norway was recovering from the war meant there were very few organised leisure activities, however, Mr Ansell did enjoy skiing.

Although Mrs Ansell liked Norway, she missed her family. Indeed, after two years, when her father became ill, the couple moved back to Cardiff. They found accommodation in ‘rooms’ on the same road as her parents. After the old woman, who rented the house and sublet the rooms to Mrs Ansell, and her husband died, the landlord of the house decided to sell and Mrs Ansell and her husband bought the house. She was to remain in this house for 56 years. It was in this house, thirteen years after their first daughter’s birth, that Mrs Ansell had a second daughter.

On returning to Cardiff, Mr Ansell initially found work on the tugboats but, as the steel and coal industries started to decline, he was made redundant. He found alternative employment as a lorry driver. After a number of years, Mr Ansell was made redundant again and found it difficult to find further employment, despite regularly visiting the employment exchange. Eventually Mr Ansell set up his own business with a friend undertaking decorating, carpentry and building work. After six years, the company became bankrupt and Mr Ansell never worked again. In 1977, Mr Ansell died at the age of 58 due to a brain haemorrhage. The couple had been married for over 30 years. By this time, their daughters were in their twenties and early thirties.

Despite her sadness, Mrs Ansell continued to work part time in local shops and to socialise with friends, particularly with Dorothy, whom she had known since 1945. At the age of sixty, she retired from her part-time job as a shop assistant in a wine shop.

In 2003, the house she had lived in for 56 years became too big and she sold it. She shared the proceeds from the house between her two daughters, the youngest of whom used the money to buy a brand new house that Mrs Ansell could also share with her daughter, son-in-law and grandson.
In retirement, she began to embark on a wide range of social activities and regular holiday-taking with her best friend Dorothy. When her friend died, she began to hear about other social activities and clubs through other friends, clubs that at the age of 82, she still attends.

8.12. Life-long leisure engagement

It is clear that throughout her life, Mrs Ansell has always enjoyed participating in leisure activities. In childhood, for example, she described playing out on the street with friends with enthusiasm. She mentions visiting St Peter’s Catholic church, not because of any religious conviction (she was brought up a Baptist) but because they organised regular activities for the local children. However, perhaps one of the most important leisure pursuits throughout Mrs Ansell’s life, was dancing, ‘I loved dancing when I was growing up.’ From an early age, she was having ballet and tap lessons with Madame Granfield.

Mrs Ansell remembers clearly the leisure activities she shared with her family whilst growing up. She remembers the theatre, the pantomime every Christmas, shopping trips into town every Saturday with her parents, the cinema and the twopenny rush. She describes:

*The theatre, the pantomime, you religiously went to the pantomime every year at the New Theatre... Plenty of cinemas, mind, in town, Empire, Olympia, Queens. Ohhh. Lovely memories when I think of it. Great.*

Visits to the cinema played an important part in Mrs Ansell’s leisure time when growing up. She remembers these cinema visits with great clarity and humour:

*Oh yes we always went to the cinema. We went to the two-penny rush. Can you believe that? Two pence to go to the cinema. The Globe cinema, because I used to live just by there. Saturday morning would be two-penny rush, you paid your tuppence and you went into it. You had to be quiet because the usher always made sure you would be. You know she’d shout at you. At Christmas, they would give you an apple and an orange and some sweets and some coins and that would be the Christmas treat for all the kids at that Saturday. They*
would have that just before Christmas every year, lovely, we always went there.

Mrs Ansell also remembers the annual family holiday down to Devon. The memory of these holidays is recounted with affection; their simplicity and perfection emphasised, even the sun always shone:

We’d go to Devon ‘cos we had relatives there. Exeter, Teignmouth and all round by there and we loved it. It was so simple in those days. It wasn’t hard to please anybody and you could always rely on the weather, that was usually good.

As she grew into a teenager, Mrs Ansell continued to enjoy various leisure activities, including parading up and down Albany Road (a local shopping street) in her best clothes with friends:

It seems so silly when I think of it now... We always had new things for Easter, so I used to go out with my friends up and down Albany Road. I think we used to go looking for boys or looking at boys.

In her teenage years, Mrs Ansell continued with the dancing but, by now she had moved away from ballet and tap and into ballroom dancing. ‘The tango, the waltz, the fox trot, the Polly glide, it was mostly old ballroom dancing.’ She remembers clearly dancing to the three-piece orchestra at the Carlton restaurant and the ‘beautiful’ Embassy rooms at the City Hall. She also remembers attending the touring master dance classes of Victor Sylvester with a genuine affection.

Oh yes, I used to love the dancing and I used to like Victor Sylvester. You’ve probably never heard of him. Oh, he used to run dance classes... You’d see the posters up ‘Victor Sylvester is here.’ Oh it was lovely.

When Mrs Ansell reached the age of fifteen, the war started and she remembers Joe Loss and his band visiting Cardiff during the war years. In particular, she recounts the excitement of dancing with all the foreign soldiers in Cardiff during this period:
It was lovely to dance with the foreign soldiers. They were Czechoslovakian, American, Polish, oh, many kinds.

In early-married life in wartime, Mrs Ansell continued to enjoy her leisure. She describes how they would use her husband’s various ports of call around the UK as opportunities to visit new places. She describes how he would arrive in different ports such as Liverpool, Avonmouth, Swansea and, even at times, in Scotland. When recounting these trips she remembers, ‘I liked that, that was nice.’

When she moved to Norway after the war, opportunities for leisure were lessened and life became harder. The country was still recovering from the war but Mrs Ansell continued to make the most of things by knitting, walking, socialising each weekend with friends, skiing and skating. She describes:

They were just getting back into their way of life because they’d been so restricted with the Germans, doing this, that and the other but, they had skiing in the winter, skating, it was lovely. In the summer, my husband used to play football... there were also walks, lovely walks around the mountains.

She returned to Cardiff after two years in Norway and Mrs Ansell and her husband continued to share various leisure activities such as regular visits to the cinema, going for walks around the local lake and occasionally, taking out a boat. Mr Ansell eventually bought a car and they were able to go out on camping trips, particularly to Cornwall ‘because he loved Cornwall and I do, I think it’s lovely.’ These trips are remembered fondly. As in her childhood holidays, the sun always shone, as Mrs Ansell recounts:

We’d go camping, always went camping. We enjoyed that and the weather was usually very good. We had a car then, he started to drive so we were ok.

Four years before Mr Ansell died, the couple bought a camper van and began to take more frequent holidays. They would visit family in Norway and would use the camper van to tour around the south of the country.
When Mr Ansell died, Mrs Ansell became much closer to her old friend Dorothy ... whom she had known for over thirty years. The two would take short breaks by coach to places like York, the Isle of Wight, Paris and Holland. They would also take regular trips up to Sheffield to stay with Dorothy’s daughter where they would catch buses to local National Trust properties like Chatsworth. After retiring, they took a five-month trip to Australia in order to visit another of Dorothy’s daughters. In 1978, they both joined a local Friendship club, Ty Celyn, which had regular speakers and tea dances in the afternoon. Today, nearly thirty years later, Mrs Ansell is still a member of that club, and of many more.

8.13. Controlled leisure

Although Mrs Ansell’s early life clearly involved a range of leisure activities, these were often tightly controlled. For example, until her late ‘teens her parents would determine where she went, with whom and for how long. Mrs Ansell’s childhood attendance at church every week was one example of this:

*My mother made sure I went to Sunday school every Sunday. Well they did in those days. They don’t bother today.*

Even at the ages of fourteen and fifteen when Mrs Ansell was going out to work and earning money, her parents were still able to dictate the terms of her leisure activities. She was not allowed to go into town in the evenings unless her mother approved of the activity. Mrs Ansell explains that:

*I was allowed to go to town but it would only be the afternoon. She wouldn’t allow me to go in the night unless there was a nice picture and one she agreed to. Then she would let me go but, I had to get on the tram there and on the tram back to make quite sure I was alright.*

In her teens, she describes being able to go to dances but having to be back home by 10.30pm at the latest and the threat of serious consequences if she was not:

*I would have been fourteen or fifteen but then again, I had a time to come in regardless of what happened... I was never later than 10 o clock or 10.30. Oh,*
there would be big trouble if I was coming in at 10.30. She’d want to know where I was and what happened.

In Langhamer’s (2000:50) work she similarly observes strict parental control over girls between 1920 and 1960 which ‘could prove a major barrier to the enjoyment of freedom and independence in leisure’.

Despite these controls, it is difficult to detect any sense of resentment towards her parents. Mrs Ansell recognises that such controls were typical of the time saying:

We were very strict. In those days things were strict and you had to behave yourself and come in at a reasonable time and it wouldn’t be like it is today.

Mrs Ansell appreciates and recognises the value of the boundaries placed around her own behaviour and that of other young people, even hinting that it provided the discipline needed that is missing from today’s younger generation:

To be honest, in those days, every family was the same. There wasn’t a lot of difference. They made sure you did what they said and you obeyed them because that was how we were brought up and the discipline was there but today it’s gone by the board. It’s gone completely. It’s very different today. Wouldn’t like to be a teenager today, to be perfectly honest, I would not.

Perhaps the normality of such parental control, and the recognition that such controls were necessary, ensured that Mrs Ansell complied with her parent’s wishes and tried to behave and do as she was told. Mrs Ansell explains how she always made sure her mother knew where she was:

I always made a point of telling her where we had been. I never went anywhere without telling her because I was brought up that way.

It is interesting to note that the careful monitoring of Mrs Ansell’s behaviour by her parents was greater than that for her brother. For example, whilst her brother was allowed to visit pubs, she, as a young woman, was not allowed. She explains:
Women rarely went into a pub. I rarely go now. I’m not one to sit in a pub. I’m not so comfortable as the girls are today who can easily go in and have a drink. It’s not my way.

The different standards of behaviour for girls and boys are also evident in that whilst, at the age of seventeen, home times of nine and ten thirty were still being imposed on Mrs Ansell, her brother, at the same age, was allowed to join the navy and go off to sea. Mrs Ansell on the other hand was encouraged to have an office-based job in Cardiff because it was regarded as a safe and appropriate place of work for a girl. Her father even went to the length of finding her first job as an office worker, as she describes:

*I went to Albany Road School and I finished there at fourteen and then I went into an office... My father got me the job because he thought it would be nice for me to have office work. You know what parents are like.*

The protectiveness of Mrs Ansell’s parents was perhaps most clearly illustrated when they helped to stop their only daughter from being moved to a munitions factory in England in order to help with the war effort. They gave their permission for her to marry, despite feeling that she was too young. This exempted her from military service:

*They [the Government] wanted to move me you see, like they did with most young girls at that age, to a munitions town where you would have to work for the government. She [mother] didn’t want me to move. Well actually, she spoilt me really, because I was the only girl and that is why she gave her consent, to be honest, to be married at nineteen to save me going up to Birmingham or Coventry or those places. She thought that would be terrible but there, that was then. I married at nineteen.*

On marriage, parental discipline was replaced with that of her husband, who, like her parents, was able to control his wife’s behaviour and constrain her leisure participation. She talks of the expectation on marriage that the visits to dance halls, which she had always enjoyed, would stop, particularly when her husband was away at sea. She remembers an occasion when her husband was away at sea
when she decided to go to a dance with friends. ‘I thought I wouldn’t tell him, he wouldn’t mind.’ However, on his return, a friend’s mother informed her husband of the dance visit. ‘He wasn’t too happy about that, I can tell you.’

In marriage, Mrs Ansell also describes the lack of consultation involved in her move to Norway when her husband was repatriated. Despite never having travelled overseas before and despite being reluctant to leave the family, she had no say in the decision:

*I didn’t want to leave my parents but we had different thoughts then to what they are today so, if my husband was to go, I was to go too and that’s it. We had no say in it to be honest.*

Against this background it is perhaps not surprising that Langhamer (2000:130) argues that the period between leaving school and marriage was, for many girls at the time a ‘golden age: a period in the life cycle when the pursuit of personal pleasure was felt to be both legitimate and possible’ on marriage ‘duty and service replaced freedom and independence’

**8.14. Skilled at leisure**

Mrs Ansell describes a life full of leisure opportunities, many of which, by today’s standards, may be described as simple, but which were typical of the time. However, it is perhaps her early exposure to and positive experiences of leisure that has allowed her to maintain and even expand her leisure in later life. Her week is full, involved as she is in a range of activities, some of which she has been involved with for over twenty years. Typically, each Monday she attends Tai Chi in the morning and bingo in the evening with a friend. On Tuesday morning she attends a slimming club and a Friendship Club at St Bridget’s Church in the afternoon, for ‘bingo or a game of whist, you have a chat or have a speaker, all that type of thing, all interesting.’ On Wednesdays she is at home in the morning and goes to her Friendship meeting at Ty Celyn, which she has been attending for over twenty years, in the afternoon. On Thursday, she has her hair done in the morning and in the afternoon goes to another social club. On Friday she attends the ‘Extend’ exercise class, whilst on Saturday she does her ‘own thing’ explaining that ‘I may go to town on my own, I don’t go with any friends on that day.’ On Sunday, she goes out with a friend for lunch:
I’ve got a friend who is starting Alzheimer’s unfortunately. We go out to lunch every Sunday. I take her with me to lunch. We go anywhere round here, but very often we go to town. We’ve been to Barry, we’ve been to Penarth, we go to Porthcawl, on the bus and it’s all free cos we’ve got our card [bus pass].

There is clearly a ritualistic element to Mrs Ansell’s weekly leisure activities and this appears to be common and is similar to that of other older people. Scraton, Bramham and Watson (1998:113-114) also found that routines and performing activities and housework on particular days of the week was a characteristic of the at-home and out-of-home activities of the older women they interviewed. ‘Most of the women suggest they have certain days for certain activities and thus it is possible to describe the day to day living of elderly women as ritualistic.’ They go on to state, ‘These rituals give the women a sense of stability and organisation in their lives and a continuity with the past and a security for the future.’

Mrs Ansell’s week is obviously full and, although at times, she thinks about missing one of the meetings, she reconsiders, recognising the value of this social contact and the enjoyment she gets from attending. She explains that:

_Sometimes I think maybe I can’t be bothered to go today then I think no because I like to and it’s interesting and you’re speaking to other people, not sat at home and not talking. I mean television is alright for a while but it can be boring, to me it can, you know what I mean and I love talking to people, you know, in that way to friends and they’re interested. It’s lovely._

Her recognition of the value of leisure and the scope many of her leisure activities offer for sociability, was in part how she coped with the early death of her husband when he was only 58 after over thirty years of marriage:

_Oh well, I was one to always go out, so I kept going out, you know. It was a horrible thing; we were married 33 years. That’s quite a while. I had friends, and we’d go to the cinema perhaps or go on an outing or a trip._
Mrs Ansell was able to replace the companionship of her husband with that of her friend Dorothy. When Dorothy also died, Mrs Ansell's confidence in leisure allowed her to join other friends at various social clubs. As she explained:

My friend and I, she died mind, so of course that made it different again, but that friend, I used to go a lot with and we went to Australia for a holiday and we enjoyed that. We always went on holiday in the summer, my friend and I, mostly to her daughters' in Sheffield, then we would go to various trips around, that was then. After she died, I met up with other friends.

One aspect of attending the clubs that Mrs Ansell particularly enjoys is being able to reminisce about her earlier life. At the social clubs, she is surrounded by people from the same generation with comparable experiences and outlook and with whom she can speak openly about the past. In particular, she compares morals and standards of behaviour in her childhood with today.

We respected people and we had discipline, that's what most families had but today it's all altered.

In particular, she compares the values of young people from her generation with today's youth,

Cheeky children, they do what they like, they couldn't care less about another person. I'm not saying all children mind, but some of them have got to have their own way, do what they want regardless. We were never brought up like that, we had respect.

Such values and ideas about contemporary society can be openly expressed at the social clubs. Vincent (2003:121) describes the advantages of such kinship in the following way:

Cohort experience, common, lived-through history, can provide authentication of identity. A generation can make a claim to be a group, and a claim to recognition and autonomy by reference to the particular lived common experiences of that generation.
Jerrome (1993) also suggests that part of the attractiveness of the social clubs that older people attend is that they tend to be made up of people of a similar age who share the same morals, values and allegiances. In this environment, older people feel secure, knowing that they can share a sense of personal location, identity and values:

‘Clan and fellowship meetings are vehicles through which elderly members affirm their belief in tradition, their solidarity with one another, and their adherence to shared standards of behaviour’ (Jerrome 1989:163).

8.15. Contentment with life

The relish and enthusiasm with which Mrs Ansell describes both her current and her earlier experiences of leisure reflects her contented, positive attitude to life. At no point in our conversations did she express self-pity for her earlier life or for her life now. Instead, she looks back on life with no sense of regret, no sense of having lacked or missed out on anything. Even when comparing her own life with those of today’s more privileged young people, she still feels no sense of resentment. Instead, her story is told with joy and a great sense of appreciation for all she has had and experienced. For example when describing her childhood, she recognises that although they were not well off when compared to other families, they were fortunate:

No, my father was in a reasonably good job compared to others, relative to my friends. There was a lot of poverty, because of the mines. Money was short in those days but my father was a water inspector so he had a job which kept going all the time. He had a lot to do with plumbers, so we were all right like. Working class, but obviously it wasn’t so hard for us as it was for others. We were okay.

Even when recounting the move to Norway with her husband after the war, when she had to leave the sheltered, protective surroundings of her family and the place she had always lived, she emphasises again that she was more fortunate than others:

I was very fortunate, because when I went to Norway I had a house to go to, so I went straight into one, whereas lots of people here had to go into rooms once they had married, in the war years.
Even though she recognises that on arriving in Norway, the Germans had destroyed much of the country and the Norwegian way of life and that the country was a difficult place in which to live, once again she relates this in the context of its impact on others rather than herself:

*I settled there very well - a beautiful country. It was lovely but of course the Germans had spoilt it and had made it very difficult for them to live because they couldn’t get this, that and the other so it was hard at the time.*

Despite experiencing a fuller engagement with leisure than ever before, Mrs Ansell is also conscious that her way of life and the visibility of social clubs that she attends are threatened by the death and illnesses of friends. Mrs Ansell’s close friend Dorothy, with whom she pursued a number of leisure activities, died six years ago and her current close friend, whom she meets on Sundays, is showing the early signs of Alzheimer’s disease. Due to death and illnesses such as these, the numbers who attend the clubs she attends is gradually diminishing.

*Every year friends of mine have died and it’s starting to go down because there’s not that many people.*

Another reason that the social clubs, in particular, are under threat is, she argues, that younger retirees do not seem interested in the clubs, *'They don’t want to know.*' This clearly represents a threat to Mrs Ansell’s future leisure opportunities.

Activities at the social clubs which do remain are being further curtailed due to the age of the organisers. For example, Mrs Ansell describes how the Thursday afternoon social club that she has attended for ten years, no longer organises holidays for members because the organisers themselves are getting older, with some members as old as 92 and until recently 100 years old. As Mrs Ansell explains:

*We used to go on holiday for the week but like everything else it’s got too much for the Chairlady and Chairman and, there’s not enough people to go. But once it was really full, it was lovely.*
Matthews' (1986) research on friendship identifies three types of friendships in later life. 'Independent' refers to women who have known their friends for a short period of time whom are likely to be from the same age cohort and satisfy the immediate need for someone to pursue activities with. 'Discerning' friendships are with people known for a long period of time and with whom there is biographical continuity. Finally, there are 'Acquisitive' friendships of both lifelong and new friends. However, for Mrs Ansell and for many women of her age, independent relationships dominate largely because of the deaths of friends.

Despite the threats facing her leisure activities, Mrs Ansell remains positive about life and the future. Her words towards the end of one of our conversations perhaps most aptly encapsulate her positive reflections on her life:

Yes, yes oh I've loved my life very happy with it.

Describing her life today she continued:

I've nothing to grumble about... I think it's fuller than it's ever been to be perfectly honest. You know there's such a lot going on and of course they cater for us, they help us, all these various organisations... To be honest, nobody needs to be lonely today, there's so much going on, if they only knew, but a lot of people don't want to be bothered to join it and it's a pity.

Despite a life full of leisure opportunities Mrs Ansell still gains great satisfaction from her current leisure activity, recognising that it is perhaps more varied and expansive than ever before. She looks forward to the future with enthusiasm and to the scope for discovering new leisure opportunities and interests.

8.16. Summary

There are clearly common traits running through the biographical accounts of Alice, Mary and Mrs Ansell, which, when one considers that they all are from the same age cohort, is not surprising. Being part of the same cohort has meant that they have shared many of the same historical and cultural events. In particular, the 1930s depression and the Second World War, both of which had a huge impact
on their lives, particularly in relation to their prosperity, direction in life, as well as life chances. Leaving school at the age of fourteen to work full time, as was the norm in the 1930s, must have affected their careers and life chances in similar ways. All are highly conscious that they spent their formative years growing up in a society with no welfare state, and the huge financial insecurities that this brought with it for themselves and for others.

The central role that the Church played in their childhood leisure experiences is also a common characteristic of the women’s lives in these biographical interviews. The importance of dance and the cinema, both as children, but continuing into their adult years, is also common to many people of this generation (Langhamer 2000). In addition, as young women in the 1940s and 1950s, all the women in these biographical interviews experienced restrictions on aspects of their lives, particularly their leisure, as a result of society’s expectations and attitudes towards women at the time. This is particularly true of the nature of their leisure activities and relates to their sense of duty to their husbands. It is also possible to identify the shared common values of the women within the biographical interviews that affected their approach to life. For example, their attitudes towards money, spending, discipline, and respect for others are clearly evident.

Thus, structural features in relation to social, cultural and economic processes have affected each of the women’s lives in similar ways. However, despite these similarities there are also great variations in the way each of the women have experienced and dealt with life and leisure. This perhaps is not surprising for, as Henderson (1996) maintains, although there may be common elements in women’s lives, there are also great variations because of women’s diverse life opportunities and social contexts. Thus, she argues, it is not possible to generalise and assume a ‘one size fits all’ model of leisure behaviour:

*The leisure of women cannot be universalised and no one female or male voice exists. The broad assumptions about conducting research on women in general, is being replaced with a focus on the different experiences that women and men as gendered subjects have in leisure* (Henderson 1994:3).
In the case of Alice, Mary and Mrs Ansell, whilst there are similarities, there are also great variations. For example, in the case of Alice and Mary, their earlier lives can be characterised by minimal opportunities for leisure, meaning that in later life, they have had to work hard to discover new opportunities and capacities for leisure within themselves. Thus, deprived of previous leisure opportunities due to financial, family and time constraints, there is a clear lack of continuity to their leisure in later life. In this, the lives of Mary and Alice clearly contradict the findings of researchers like Harrison (1983) and Evers (1984) who have supported the continuity model of later life, arguing that the more a woman has conformed to the conventional, 'homemaking' and family centred model in earlier life, the more unlikely it is for them to develop a positive, independent, self identity in later life. Indeed Lee’s (2005) recent study on older Koreans also highlighted continuity in leisure arguing that retirement has little effect on people’s customary leisure activities. In the case of Alice and Mary this is clearly not the case.

The lives of Alice and Mary also challenge Roberts’ (2006:156) premise that ‘we tend to stick to familiar routines and do tried, tested and trusted things... once youth has been left behind, very little leisure behaviour is experimental.’ If this was the case, then Alice and Mary would have minimal engagement with leisure, but this is clearly not so. Instead, they have used later life and leisure to establish new friendships and to discover new and exciting educational and fitness opportunities. Their lives and leisure have not been static but have undergone momentous change, particularly in relation to leisure discoveries. Both have used leisure to bring about both a shift in their expectations of life and as a way of opening up new possibilities, clearly illustrating the potential of human creativity and willingness to adapt. Thus, whilst their lives have been restricted by both personal and structural factors, they have managed to manoeuvre out of these, to negotiate individual identities, proving identities and leisure patterns need not be static. Their lives clearly contradict the continuity theory of later life but equally deny disengagement and political economy theories of later life, which tend to present pessimistic images of later life.

Whilst it was possible to find commonalities in the lack of exposure to leisure experienced by both Alice and Mary, this was not the case for Mrs Ansell who, since childhood, had been exposed to a range of leisure opportunities. Whereas the continuity theory of leisure did not apply to Alice and Mary, in the case of
Mrs Ansell, the theory has some resonance. Indeed, it would appear that Mrs Ansell’s engagement with leisure throughout her life has given her the skills and confidence with which to continue embracing and even expanding leisure and friendship opportunities in later life.

Despite these dissimilarities in the way the women have engaged with leisure over their lifetimes, in later life there is a great deal of commonality regarding the role that leisure plays in their current lives. Their later lives can all be characterised by huge satisfaction levels around their current leisure. In this, the lives of these women challenge the negative, stereotyped assumptions about this period in the lifecycle and alternatively exhibit a resourcefulness and determination to resist dominant assumptions about later life (Scraton, Bramham and Watson 1998:118). They are living proof of the possibilities of later life that Wearing (1995:272) refers to in her work:

For old people, in the contradiction between the dominant degenerative discourse on ageing and the ‘freedom to be’ aspect of the dominant leisure discourse, there is space for resisting ageism and the consequent ‘underuse’ syndrome.

As well as challenging the negative discourses around later life Alice, Mary and Mrs Ansell’s stories also illustrate that, whilst people’s social and cultural background can affect their lives, often in negative and constraining ways, personal identity need not be fixed throughout the life course. This research has shown how these older women, have been able to overcome the constraints placed on aspects of their earlier lives. Whereas Roberts (2006:161) maintains that older people’s leisure is limited because of poverty and lack of opportunity when they were younger, in his words, ‘the reasons why so many older people’s leisure is so limited include the narrow stocks of leisure capital they built up when young and the loss of some of this capital during the adulthood squeeze’, this is not the case with these women. Instead, all have shown similar levels of courage, imagination and determination in using leisure to extend and improve their lives. This is particularly the case for Mary, whose full time work and caring responsibilities severely restricted her life and leisure chances. Leisure for her is now a time of self-indulgence and discovery. Even Mrs Ansell, who has always participated in leisure, has found the energy and enthusiasm to continue
engaging with leisure in new and exciting ways in later life. At times, the women’s
determined and extensive engagement with leisure has even been a response to
changing and difficult life circumstances, like the death of loved ones. For Alice,
leisure served as an escape from difficult memories, provided a purpose in life and
symbolised an engagement with life itself.

Thus, whilst by today’s standards, Alice, Mary’s and Mrs Ansell’s leisure activities in
later life might appear unremarkable, when considered against the backdrop of their
earlier life and leisure constraints, they are remarkable. Whilst Arber and Ginn
(1991:49) look forward to a day in the future when feminists have aged and are setting
a role model for younger women ‘in which physical appearance is not the measure of
their worth, and in which ageing can be an asset... by asserting themselves as
competent, strong and resourceful, women can begin to reclaim their right to age
without stigma.’ Alice, Mary and Mrs Ansell are examples of ‘ordinary’ older women
already setting this example, against the most difficult of odds. Instead these women
fulfil the potential that Bernard et al. (1993:189) refer to when saying:

*Older women bear the impact of an ageist and sexist society that forces
many of them into poverty and dependence, yet conversely many live
relatively satisfying lives and are far from passive victims. Women share
similar life experience and have much in common, but there are many
differences between them and the strengths they bring to old age.*

In this respect, Whilhite et al. (1994) and Myllykangas, Gosselink, Foose and Gaede’s
(2002) premise that, when making judgement about older people’s leisure, we must
not judge it by the activity, or activity levels, but by the satisfactions gained, is only
too true. Unfortunately, too many leisure surveys have used activity levels as an
indicator of older people’s lack of satisfaction with leisure. This is inadequate.
People’s leisure activities need contextualising against earlier life experiences and
exposure to leisure opportunities and the individual emotions around these must be
examined before making premature conclusions.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

9.1. Introduction
9.2. Overview of the thesis
9.3. The study’s contribution
9.4. Policy implications
9.5. Future research
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CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

9.1. Introduction

The final chapter aims to provide an overview of the thesis including a reaffirmation of what the work set out to do in its initial aim. The conclusion then moves on to consider the wider contribution of the thesis in relation to findings, theory and method. The potential policy implications of the work are also considered as well as an outline of how the work may be taken forward in the future in terms of both research methods and further research with older people. The conclusion ends with my reflections on the research process itself, including its impact on the lives of the women participants and the researcher herself.

9.2. Overview of the thesis

Despite the large growth in the number of older women, particularly in the ‘oldest-old’ phase of life (over seventy-five years of age) and, despite various agency initiatives to improve the quality of life and life opportunities for older people, little research has been undertaken to understand the lives of this group of women and their leisure. Hence, the aim of this work was ‘to explore the meanings and significance of leisure for women aged over 75.’

A number of possible explanations for the lack of work on older women have been presented within the thesis. For example, the negative connotations surrounding old age in our society has meant that researchers, including feminists, have perceived later life as an unattractive and unimportant area of study. The assumption that older people, especially in the ‘oldest old’ phase disengage from leisure in later life has also deterred researchers from engaging with the topic. In relation to older women specifically, the early preoccupation of many feminists with the concerns of younger women also explains the lack of research in this area.

A large amount of the research that does exist, as this work has shown, has taken the form of large scale, quantitative surveys that fail to capture the detailed subjective and individualised meanings of older people’s leisure. Such research has also tended to be pessimistic in its approach, being influenced by functionalist, political economy or
structuralist approaches, which have viewed older people as either victims of structures or incapable and undeserving of leisure and unable to resist the pressure of social structures. Such research has also failed to highlight differences between older people and the heterogeneity of their lives and experiences.

Against this backdrop, this work has attempted to present a more individualised and less deterministic view of later life. It has been influenced by the ideas of postmodernism, which has attempted to present less universal, collective understandings of people’s lives, emphasising instead the importance of agency, individual identity and the differentiated aspects of people’s lives. The work’s focus on cultural as well as structural forces within the women’s lives also draws on the ideas of postmodernism. The work has also been heavily influenced by feminist thought. It has explored women’s experiences of leisure and how these might have been affected by patriarchal structures but also, at the same time, resisted. The work’s emphasis, particularly within the biographical interviews has also been influenced by more recent feminist research which has aimed to capture the individual and subjective experiences of women’s leisure from their own perspective; indeed as Roberts (2002:28) observes:

Feminist research has had a very significant impact on biographical study across the range of social science disciplines. The emphasis on giving a voice, consciousness raising, empowerment, collaboration and attention to meaning and experience have had widespread influence while also being subject to much debate within qualitative methods and much further afield.

As well as being influenced by feminist research, this thesis has also responded to calls within gerontology and leisure studies for critical research which challenges the accepted concepts, discourses and measurements surrounding research on older people in order to address questions of inequality, injustice and oppression. In doing so, the work has shown that, although the experience of life can be affected by structural factors such as class and gender relations that can lead to a lack of opportunity, older women have the potential to challenge, reject and not surrender to these obstacles. The work has also recognised the hardships that face many older women, particularly those born during the 1920s and 1930s. It has further
presented a picture of their lifestyles today that emphasises how they have overcome these hardships and managed to establish lives for themselves which, in many ways, are more fulfilled and satisfying than ever before.

In order to achieve insight into the women’s lives, emphasis was placed on trying to capture the ‘reality’ of their lives by exploring their personalised experiences. Thus, to gain insight into ‘the situated nature of leisure meanings’ (Coalter 1997:261) and to achieve a more personalised understanding of leisure, older people themselves have been consulted and their voices privileged within the research. As Grant (2002:295) argues:

*Given that older people themselves are the authentic experts on their lives and impute meanings about what is happening in their respective worlds, we should at least attempt to get ‘inside’ ageing as it is experienced and let it be expressed by those living it. Such knowledge seems to be fundamental if we are to more fully realise the meaning and subtleties of ageing, leisure and a physically active older lifestyle.*

In order to capture the subjective, personalised worlds of the older women’s lives and leisure perceptions, semi-structured interviews were used to capture the strong engagement the women in this study have with a whole range of leisure activities, as well as the immense satisfaction gained from participating in them. These insights were enriched by the potential that the biographical interviews with Alice, Mary and Mrs Ansell offered in providing more in-depth insights into how social structures and individual experiences throughout life have influenced the meaning and significance of their current leisure. For example, by providing the backdrop of a life-course perspective, the biographical interviews allowed for comparisons to be made between their current leisure and previous leisure experiences and thus highlighting the significance of their current leisure. In doing so, the individualised and contextualised insights emerging from the interviews captured the women’s strength and resistance in developing their leisure against often difficult life experiences, making their current achievements and experiences of leisure appear even more remarkable. The biographical interviews revealed how much of their lives have been characterised by similar levels of economic struggle, limited educational opportunity, caring and domestic responsibilities and, at times, difficult personal experiences and
how, despite these, they have still managed to develop satisfying lives around their leisure, accessing and exploiting many opportunities previously unavailable.

9.3. The study’s contribution

This section will discuss the contribution to theory, method and practice for, as Walker (2004:0) states ‘Too often research seems to be conducted for its own sake’ rather than serving a purpose. Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (2005:13) maintain that the primary purpose of qualitative research should be to advance social justice: ‘We want a social science that is committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, non-violence, peace, and universal human rights.’ In this vein, this work has made a contribution to a rethinking of later life and older women’s lives by providing a less pessimistic view of later life and by highlighting the possibilities and positive reality of many older women’s lives. Thus, as Chase (2005:671) advocates, it has helped to break the stranglehold of oppressive meta-narratives around older women. Bernard (1984:8) has argued that if we are to re-orientate society’s perspective on older people and ‘better serve their needs’, we must focus on the positive aspects of older people’s lives, particularly their leisure potential, in the way that this work has done.

In achieving a new perspective on the lives of older people, the work has tried not to generalise about later life or uncover ‘absolute truths’, but instead to provide insight into older women’s lives which contributes to the ‘multiple theories’ about their lives (Henderson 1994). As McGuire et al. (1999) observe there is no ‘typical’ older person. This work presents an alternative perspective to the dominant disengaged and depressing picture of older women’s lives showing that later life can be a time for personal growth, opportunity, happiness and satisfaction for women in their 70s, 80s and 90s. In attempting to provide this alternative perspective, some might criticise this work for using a ‘biased’ ‘non representative’ sample of older women who already attended an organised social group (i.e. the ‘Thursday class’), however, the intention of the work was to make a contribution to the creation of multiple insights into older people’s lives, and thus challenge common constructions of older people’s lives as one of disengagement with leisure. In using this sample of active women the intention was not to deny the degenerative aspects of ageing or to deny that there are older people struggling with life and loneliness whose lives are impoverished, but to show that another reality of later life can also be one of happiness, contentment and
engagement, in some case more so than at any other time of life. By failing to engage with the many older people who do lead fulfilled, active lives, researchers reinforce the inequalities and negative stereotypes of later life and perpetuate the common misconceptions around it. As Gillear and Higgs (2000:197) argue, 'ageing studies need to be released from their social welfare straightjacket.'

As well as challenging the social constructions around later life which are often taken for granted by society and older people themselves, this work has also revealed the potential of biographical interviews for exposing the complex relationships of structure and agency within people’s lives as well as the potential within people for challenging the biases and prejudices around them by capturing their spirit of resistance. Given the strengths of biographical research, it is perhaps surprising that the technique has been almost absent from the field of leisure studies.

As well as providing insight into the potential of biographical research in exploring people’s whole-life development and the reality and intricacies of people’s everyday lives, this research has also done much to bridge some of the theoretical divisions and also highlight similarities between leisure studies and gerontology. In uniting the two fields in this way, the work has addressed many of the criticisms levied at leisure studies for its ‘ghettoization’ and insularity. Indeed in drawing on a number of theories within these disciplines, such as functionalism, political economy, structuralism, feminism and post modernism, the work has also shown the value of using a variety of theories when studying older people.

However, at the same time as acknowledging and drawing on the strengths of aspects of leisure and gerontological theories, the work has also revealed many of the weaknesses within these theories. For example, the work has highlighted problems inherent within functionalist, political economy and structuralist theories of gerontology and leisure studies, specifically their lack of critical spirit, their failure to focus on the individual and cultural influences, as well as their bias towards men through their emphasis on paid work structures. Such approaches have often failed to recognise the role of individual agency and women’s ability to resist and challenge existing structures. Indeed in rejecting elements of these theories, this work represents an attempt to liberate gerontology and leisure studies from their focus on biological decline, male oriented and negatively constructed understandings of later
life. Thus whilst recognising that the social and cultural constructs of later life can have a negative impact on the lives of older women, the work at the same time has provided space for a more optimistic and positive discourse on ageing through considering the role of agency in ageing. In this respect, the work has shown that there does not need to be an ‘escape route’ from later life (through perhaps hiding the physical signs of ageing using make up and cosmetic surgery). Instead, the lives of these women represent a real achievement for the way in which they have not denied their losses and limitations in later life but have coped and adapted to these changes. As Holstein (2006:318) states, one of the greatest achievements in later life is ‘learning to live fully and well – and proudly – despite such limitations.’

The women’s lives have also shown that ‘being old’ and the experiences of later life are complex, involving physical decline and loss but also providing opportunities for growth, new experiences and new social interactions. In particular, the work has challenged the generalisations and negative assumptions about the third/fourth age dialectic and shown the irrelevance of such divisions. Thus, I have argued that it is not appropriate to judge later life by merely considering chronological age and looking at the physical condition and appearance of older people, but instead one needs to look at their whole lives and how they often manage to negotiate around and learn to accommodate physical change, thus challenging the inevitability of decline and dependency models of ageing. In other words, this study has managed to incorporate loss into an understanding of these older women’s lives whilst at the same time recognising more positive aspects. As McGuire et al. (1999:3) observes, and this is the case for many of the women in this work, a ‘Ulyssian life is possible not only in the later years but may be easier to achieve during that period than at any other point in life.’

9.4. Policy implications

The findings of this research have many potential policy implications. For example, it is clear that community organisations (often run for and by older people) play an important role within the older women’s lives, meaning that there is much scope within policymaking to recognise this and give older people greater autonomy to facilitate, maintain and even to extend these networks at a local level. Indeed, this work has presented a clear insight into the confidence, leadership and organisational
skills of these older women, many of whom are establishing, already running or have adopted organisational roles within clubs. To achieve this, local authorities need to ensure that older people have a voice within local authority decision making in terms of the services they want delivered. Thus, local authorities need to recognise that older people need not be the passive recipients of services. The Government’s initiative ‘Better Government for Older People’ and the Welsh Assembly Government’s ‘Strategy for Older People’ is about ensuring greater consultation through developing partnerships with older people. By consulting with older people, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report ‘Older People Shaping Policy and Practice’ (2004) found that the supports and networks valued by older people are often simply those that help them negotiate ordinary things in life such as transport, learning, relationships, contact and feeling secure.

Whilst the women’s lives in this research have, to some extent supported the premises of continuity theory, referred to earlier in the thesis, in that the women enjoy being with their peer groups and in social spaces which are familiar to them, there is also much evidence within the research that the women are keen to embrace new experiences and take on new challenges, sometimes radically removed from prior experience. Thus whilst many of the women’s married lives were characterised by their sense of duty to husbands, children and family which severely curtailed their own opportunities to engage and develop their leisure, later life represents a time when they are free of these demands and in a position to develop and experience new leisure experiences, very often for the first time. Thus it is important that providers of leisure facilities recognise this and avoid providing leisure programmes for older people based totally on the hypothesis of continuity theory. Instead, there is much evidence within this research that older people, whilst having stable and continuous lifestyle patterns, are also eager to have new experiences and opportunities. It is also important that policy makers understand that the meanings of leisure for older people are varied and also dependent on social and personal contexts. Consequently, a one-size-fits-all model of leisure provision for older people will not work. Instead, individual meanings of leisure need to be understood, to provide appropriate variation in leisure provision. Policymakers need to consult with older people to establish their preferences, needs and wants around leisure.
In ensuring that policymakers understand older people’s leisure there also needs to be a shift away from the quantitative studies of older people’s leisure, which catalogue their engagement in, or exclusion from, predefined ‘active’ leisure pursuits. Often these surveys do not reflect the leisure priorities of older women but instead reflect inaccurate predetermined assumptions of what their leisure is or should be. Instead, policymakers need to recognise that understanding older women’s leisure is more complex. For example, the informal nature of aspects of older women’s leisure, which often overlaps with ‘work’ type activities and other everyday aspects of their lives, often means that the nature of their leisure is ambiguous and thus often impossible to make generalised assumptions about. Policymakers, in trying to understand the leisure of older women, also need to understand the social and historical context of their leisure; their everyday lived experiences and the fluid changing nature and meaning of their leisure.

Whilst the work has acknowledged and welcomed the attempts of Government agencies to shift the emphasis within Government policy away from the ‘problems’ of later life and the financial costs associated with increased numbers of older people, by instead focussing on positive, active ageing agendas, it has at the same time raised concerns around the ‘active ageing’ element of many of these Government policies. In emphasizing ‘active’ ageing, many of these policies are in danger of prescribing a universal, one dimensional view of ‘successful’ ageing. There is also the danger within many of these policies that Governments promote a narrow view of leisure as activity. It is imperative therefore, that policy makers recognise the diverse ways in which people grow older and interpret leisure and that whilst many older people, like many of the women within this study, may increase their leisure and activity rates, there are also those who prefer to participate in fewer activities. By consistently placing emphasis on the amount and number of ‘active’ leisure activities which older people are engaged in, the Government is in danger of encouraging a culture around later life in which the older people unable or unwilling to engage with this agenda are labelled failures.

9.5. Future research

Understanding the lives of older people is crucial as, by 2051 people aged over 65 could represent a quarter of the UK population and those aged over 85 will represent
12% by the mid-century. This is compared to just 2% of the population aged over 85 at the present time (DWP 2005:5). It is thus hoped that there will be increased attempts by researchers to question the dominant discourses around older people and that critical and emancipatory research with older people continues. Let us hope then that Victor (2005:328) is correct when predicting that ‘it seems unlikely that, by the mid 2050s, we will be using the same definition and construction of old age...’

The importance of understanding and improving the lives of older women in particular will be a necessity in future research as women continue to live longer lives. Whilst the remaining life expectancy at age 85 for women born in 1851 in England and Wales was 4.1 years, it is projected to increase to 8.5 years for women born in 1950. In addition, we will see an increase in the number of women who are centenarians. Of 100 women born in 1851, even if they survived to age 85, only one reached her 100th birthday. Of 100 women born in 1951 and surviving to age 85, at least 13 may expect to reach age 100. In 1911 there were only 100 centenarians in England and Wales whilst in 2001 there were 8600 (Social Focus on Older People 2005). Although the study of women’s lives and leisure in the ‘oldest-old’ phase of life is likely to become more relevant with time, the leisure of much older men should also become more relevant as men’s life expectancy is currently increasing at a higher rate than that of women, and the gap in life expectancies between men and women is narrowing (DWP 2005). In 2003, there were only 40 men per 100 women aged 85 and over and yet by 2031 it is estimated there will be 65 men per 100 women aged over 85 (Social Focus on Older People 2005).

The women in this study were from a suburban part of Cardiff, with a lively shopping centre, regular bus services, and churches and community centres on their doorstep. The women also lived in a community in which they had lived for many years, where they knew many people, and this led to lots of opportunities for informal social relations. Their access to leisure is therefore easier than that for older women living in rural areas or on large inner city housing estates with few amenities and minimal opportunities to meet people and engage in leisure. Future research with such groups would lead to interesting comparisons with the lives of the women in this study.

The issue of ethnicity has hardly been touched upon in this work. However, the ageing of migrants who moved to Britain after the war will also mean that
studies on later life will also have to pay far more attention to later life and ethnic diversity (Victor 2005). Indeed Wray (2003:516) has observed that much of the research in gerontology is ‘culturally oblivious’. Hence, more research needs to undertaken like that of the ESRC sponsored, Growing Older Programme which explored the experiences of older women from different ethnic groups including British Muslim, African-Caribbean, Dominican, Pakistani, British Polish, Indian and Bangladeshi. In this respect, Lee’s (2005) recent work on pre- and post-retirement leisure in South Korea is also valuable, as is Sharma’s (2002) work on leisure and later life in India. As well as ethnicity, more work is also needed in gerontology and leisure studies on understanding the ageing experiences of gays and lesbians in order to balance the predominant focus on older heterosexual white men and women. Against this background, studies like that of Kathleen Slevin (2006) on how older lesbians contest and resist ageism in their daily lives, is to be welcomed. The application of individualised, biographically based work would be a valuable way of taking forward such work.

In providing an insight into leisure in the ‘oldest-old’ phase of life, this work has also shown how the biographical technique in particular might be applied usefully to a range of age groups in order to understand leisure in the context of personal history and structure rather than at a snapshot in time. For example, the next generation coming into ‘old age’ will have different attitudes to leisure and it will be interesting to analyse and compare the leisure of both earlier and later social cohorts. For example, younger generations, brought up in a world dominated by service industries, media, advertising and a strong consumer culture will inevitably have different expectations and experiences of leisure from the women in this research who originate from a generation where manufacturing industries dominated and the potential for engaging with a consumer leisure lifestyle was remote. Also worthy of future research is the impact that society’s idealization of youth will have, particularly on women, who are the main target of pressurised messages. Will the next generations of older people be like the women in this study, who have found happiness and fulfilling leisure despite limited access to material resources? Will they have the same abilities to access social resources, including family and friends, subsidised transport, and community embeddedness? Will older women in the future, who will have had far greater opportunities to be successful in education and the workplace than the women in this study, find even greater opportunities open to them in later life? To
what extent will they be able to further challenge the cultural constraints of ageism? Perhaps sections of the next generation of older people will be financially poorer than their counterparts today, as the erosion of both public and private pensions increases income inequalities between the retired and working population. The continuous curtailing of state subsidised care for older people might also severely impact on the finances of older people as well as the caring responsibilities of younger family members, particularly women.

Perhaps these important questions, relevant to increasing numbers of older people within society, will ensure that later life in future leisure research is not merely regarded as an ‘add on’ but is an essential consideration when studying and understanding people’s lives. In the future, this work argues that more individualised leisure and gerontological research will be required, as increasingly complex social, economic and political structures impact on the experience and perceptions of ageing. In this scenario, biographical research could prove to be valuable in understanding the more disparate experiences of ageing and age resistance.

9.6. Personal reflections

After completing this work, I am left with an overall level of satisfaction that the initial aim and objectives of this work have been met. The lives and stories of the women here have provided a rich insight into the meanings and significance of leisure for those women in the ‘oldest old’ phase where none existed before. Despite this, it was never the intention of this work to formulate a universal or representative model of the role of leisure in the lives of older women for, as the lives of the women here have shown, life and leisure are too complex, dependent on a multiple of historical, cultural and individual factors for any researcher to be able formulate ‘testable propositions’. However, what the work has shown is the value of individual case studies in gaining insight into human behaviour. As Rustin (2000:49) argues, it is “through single cases that self reflection, decision and action in human lives can best be explored and represented.” By attempting to use a large sample size, the diversity and detail of this marginalised group’s leisure participation would have been lost. In addition, using a small sample of women, known to be already involved in leisure activity, by their sheer presence at the ‘Thursday class’, allowed greater scope for me to challenge the dominant discourses of degeneration and disengagement which
Although many of the women involved with this research found the experience empowering, particularly the interest shown by the researcher in their lives, with hindsight there was perhaps more scope to make their participation an even more empowering experience. Rojek (2005a), for example, in highlighting the importance of empowerment argues that the research process should give respondents the knowledge and power to change society by making political change. Having completed the work I now feel there was greater scope and value than I had realised originally in involving the women in formulating suggestions on how the government and local authorities could make their leisure lives more rewarding and leisure opportunities more accessible. For example, it would have been appropriate and valuable to have involved the women in a discussion of the policy implications of the work and thus include their views in the section of the thesis which considers future public sector strategies aimed at improving leisure provision for older people.

With hindsight, I also feel that there was greater scope within this work to involve the women in the analysis of their own interviews particularly, the formulation of key themes around their lives. Although the women were involved in the formulation of their pen portraits, by involving them in the formulation of the key themes their sense of self, embodiment and subjectivity would have been more fully encapsulated. From a phenomenological perspective such an approach would have provided even greater insight into how the women interpret and perceive their culture and thus their lives. By formulating the themes myself, the results were perhaps overly ‘contaminated’ by my social and cultural position. Perhaps my notion that the women were too immersed in their own culture to provide a critical analysis of their lives ‘held me back’ from engaging with such an approach. However, in any future research I would have greater confidence, as well as the experience, to recognise the value of respondent involvement in analysis. To facilitate this participation I would also consider inviting the participants to use photographs and situational documentary evidence as ‘props’ to explain and analyse their lives. In using supplementary documentary material in this way, the intention would not be to assess the accuracy of the women’s statements, but to allow them the opportunity to embellish certain themes. This would not detract from the emphasis placed on exploring people’s memories, which, even though these are not always accurate or ‘reliable’
and may change in the context of the ‘present’, are valuable subjective insights into people’s lives and how they define themselves.

Despite the above misgivings, the importance of reflexivity in the research process has been recognised and highlighted throughout this thesis. Thus, unlike work which adopts a realist approach and emphasises the neutrality of the researcher, this work has emphasised and recognised the role of the researcher in the research process and the inevitability of subjectivity. In this vein, the work ends with an appraisal of the personal impact the research has had on me.

From a personal perspective, developing more positive perspectives of later life has given me increased self-knowledge and intellectual capacity to confront my own fears and biases around later life and also those of other people around me. In doing so, I have developed a heightened sensitivity to ageism, particularly in relation to the language and humour used by those around me, the media and advertising. The learning process that has been integral to this work has also given me confidence to challenge ageism, whether that is in a social or professional context. Some of the material within this thesis has already entered the public arena in form of conference presentations, papers and refereed articles in an attempt to explore and challenge the negative conceptions of later life. In this respect, the work has attempted to make its own contribution to social change, albeit in a small way. It can be argued that this should be a key aspect of critical research and, in particular, feminist research. As Ray (2006:43) states ‘feminist age researchers study gender and age relations, not just to satisfy intellectual need and curiosity or to advance knowledge for its own sake, but also to promote social justice in the material world.’ This work has proved to be emancipatory for me and, moreover, the repercussions of their involvement in this study might leave its own imprint on the lives of the participants. The women involved in this study seemed proud and flattered that someone was taking an interest in their life stories and recognising that their lives were of significance to the wider world. On being shown the pen portraits on paper, the women were noticeably moved by the presentation of their achievements and life stories.

The insight gained through undertaking this research into the varied backgrounds of this generation of women has left me with a heightened regard for the way in which they have overcome personal hardship and dealt with the momentous
social events and change they have experienced. Their stories have also made me far more aware of how privileged I have been, particularly in terms of the educational opportunities which I have had. Their often heroic responses in the face of poverty, hardship and the local impact of global events such as World War Two have been told with great humility but are an example of a remarkable resilience which should serve to inspire all generations.
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APPENDIX A: EXAMPLE OF A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT (Mrs Ansell 4th October 2004)

When did you retire?

Sixty because I was doing part time work in Albany Road and I had worked there for some time. It’s now Threshers, it sold wines, cigarettes.

Did you work there for financial reasons?

No, well I wanted to work, I found it better, it was nice to get out and well yes, of course, the money those days would have helped anyway. I’ve worked mostly all my life. I used to work in the schools when the children were young, so they were over there and I could keep an eye on them anyway.

What else did you get from going to work?

Company, I liked the company, the talking with the girls, then we’d go out maybe one night for a meal and all that, I liked all that.
You also get to know many customers, all different, I liked that.

What made you retire?

Well it got too much, in fact they changed and didn’t need so many staff and my age was about sixty, so I was glad to retire in a way.

Were you looking forward to retirement?

Urm, not really because I liked going out to meet people and of course I lived just behind the shop so I had no distance to travel so it was quite easy, quite simple for me.
What did you plan to do when you retired?

I thought at the time I’ll just take it easy, then I got tired of that of course, then I joined some clubs, you know retirement clubs.

What did you mean when you said you ‘would take it easy’ when you retired?

Well I had friends and one special friend, we used to go out every Friday, all day, just to town, then away, then we’d go on holidays. It became much easier when I retired because there were no ties.

But then what made you feel that you wanted to join some societies and clubs?

Well my friends were in clubs and they said, ‘why don’t you come and try it and see if you like it?’ so I decided I would do that and that’s how it all started.

What is your week like now?

I’m home on a Monday; I go to bingo on Monday night to St Peters Hall.

How do you get there?

Bus, and I have a taxi back. My bus pass is worn out actually cos I take a bus about four times a day, if I’m down and back. Anyway on Tuesday I go to a slimming club in the morning. I have a lift there with my friend, she picks me up and I go down there. I come back and then I go to my other meeting, which actually at the moment has only got five members because people have died, you know over the years.

Which meeting is that?

St Bridget’s.

Is it a church?
Yes it is.

It's a Friendship Club and we have tea and bingo, that's all mind cos there's only five of us now. It's in St Bridget's in Llanishen.

It's just like a retirement club, well it's a get together you know.

Wednesday I go to Ty Celyn which is in the Cardiff High School, at the side, which is a retirement club for ladies, a lot more people in that one and we have various things. We have whist once a week. We used to do dancing which was lovely, I thoroughly enjoyed that but the people have died, or aged and they can't do it now. We have a lecturer, we have a talk on various things and we have quizzes so that's that.

Wednesday afternoon, the morning I'm free. Thursday I go to another club which you visited and then Friday I go out, possibly town or wherever and Saturday I meet my friend and we go down to Albany Road, a bit of shopping, some lunch and Sunday we do the same thing and that's my week.

**Sunday you meet your friend again? The same friend?**

Same friend but we go to town then or further afield. If it's a nice day we'll go to Penarth or Barry or Porthcawl or Bridgend, Newport.

**Do you go on the bus?**

Always on the bus. We've both got passes, so it's so easy see.

**Do you plan the trips beforehand?**

Sometimes if it's a very nice day, I'll phone her and say shall we go to so and so tomorrow? Yes that will be fine, so then it's planned but if the weather is undecided we just go into town, have some lunch, the Bay. We often go down to the bay; it's quite nice down there.

**What made you join all the clubs?**
Well I think I like the idea of meeting people, I like the idea of doing various things, I could never stay at home and just do nothing, that’s not my scene you know. Years ago I used to knit and sew and everything like that for the children, days were full then, but now I can choose where we go, we can go on holiday. We’ve just come back from Turkey and Tinsel in Torquay and I went up to Scotland in spring this year.

Is that through the clubs or with your friend?

No this is with my friend. We have been with our clubs and you know the Thursday club you came to but, it got too much responsibility for the organisers. It was alright for a while, but they were getting older as well, so they stopped it, but we enjoyed that. We used to go Isle of Wight, Cornwall and all that, really enjoyable but then we carried on with it, I’ve got two other friends who I used to go with but they are getting older and a bit tired and don’t do it so much.

Who do you book with?

Majestic usually and we’ve booked with Leisure Time, all the big coach companies, Wallace Arnold all those and Diamond. I went only a year or two ago; four of us went to Paris with Diamond, so that was lovely.

Back to the clubs, you like going there because it’s being with people?

Yes talking, having an opinion of what they like, chatting about them and what they are doing, everything like that and we have a little Bring and Buy so that’s quite nice.

You mentioned shopping – what do you tend to go for?

Well I’ve always shopped in Albany Road because I lived there for sixty five years. I’ve always lived mostly in that area so when I used to go there it was so simple. Now it’s a bit harder because I’ve got to get a bus and I can only get a bus every half an hour and if I miss that one then I’ve got to wait.
So I do shop in Tesco’s but I always shop in Sainsbury’s and my friend shops in Tesco and Iceland, all those shops.

**Do you shop every day?**

No sometimes I get enough in for about a few days.

**Do you food shop for the family or just yourself**

No just myself. I look after myself, cook myself and do all my cleaning and sometimes for the rest of the family because my daughter works and so does her husband.

**Do you ever go shopping and treat yourself to non food things?**

Yes Marks and Spencer’s, I buy a lot of my clothes, British Home Stores. We were in town on Sunday looking for something but I didn’t see anything I fancied. Yes I buy quite a few clothes, too many probably.

**Are you a member of a church?**

No it’s just where the clubs are and I went on the invitation of my friends, they come with us and they don’t want to finish the club, even though there are only five of us because it is a get together, even if there was no bingo we would just have a chat for an hour or two and leave.

**Do you socialise with neighbours?**

Well all the neighbours are very nice, oh yes. My daughter went on holiday to Ibiza with her family and they were always knocking my door and saying are you alright, I’d say fine thank you. I was very pleased about that and I felt better about it, because I wasn’t on my own but I don’t mind being on my own but its very nice to find that they are interested enough to knock or to phone me and they all left me their phone numbers and said if anything goes wrong phone us. I was very pleased.
But in terms of your social activities they are not part of it?

No not me.

Do you see any of your old neighbours?

Well actually to be honest there’s not many of them now, most of them have died unfortunately, but I do see one old neighbour, the lady who runs the Thursday club is a very old neighbour of mine, for a long time and I see her every week down the slimming club so we have a little chat.

Is the slimming club Slimming World?

Oh yes, it’s Slimming World

Has it become a small social event?

No, I’ve been going years and my friend, but no it’s a proper Slimming World and Kathy is the instructor and we have a lot of people there.

Are you weighed?

Oh yes, weighed every time and they know me now, I’ve been going so long I don’t think that they worry too much about me. I’m alright well I should lose a bit more, but still.

It sounds as though most of your activities are in the day?

Yes, I very rarely go out at night to be honest and that is because there are so many stories today, it’s a big worry. If I go out I will take a bus down but will always come back by taxi wherever I’ve gone.

Are there more things that you would like to do but aren’t able to because of transport or limited fiancés or the activities just aren’t available?
No I’m alright; I’m fine as I am now because if there’s a show that comes up we will go to see it.

So, do you feel quite satisfied with your week?

Oh yes, what I do, I am.

You feel that you are doing enough activities?

Yes.

Is there anything that, apart from fear of going out at night, is there anything that puts you off or inhibits you?

No not financial, I’m all right financially. Transport I’m ok because I’ve got a taxi firm I use a lot, so they know me and that’s safe for me, rather than hailing a taxi outside, because I think that is a bit dangerous, it can be, to me anyway, I know it shouldn’t be but I’m a bit wary to be honest, once they know my name the office then I know I’m more or less safe.

Has retirement always been as full as this?

I was always out, I was never in to be honest, there was always something going on, you know with everything. I worked part time as you know and then I would keep in touch by phone with friends and then if there was something going on we would go to it, you know what I mean, it might be regular but on the other hand a couple of months each time, to just go out in the evening for a show or something.

But did it take a while to join the clubs?

Not really, as soon as the Thursday one came along they sent leaflets all round, I didn’t join straight away then, I left it a year then I decided. A friend of mine joined so I decided to join as well so that’s how I joined and mostly it’s by heresy with other people you know. A friend of mine, she has died now unfortunately, she lived in Crystal Glen up by Llanishen, she started to go and she said they had
dancing once a month, well I used to like that so she said come along and we’ll go, she started and then said it’s lovely so I went and that’s how I went to most of my clubs and I’ve gone ever since. I’ve not stopped at all because I like doing that.

What do you like about going?

I like the atmosphere, the companionship, I like the cup of tea with a biscuit, I like that. I like what they do. I really do like a talk. For instance they had a talk the other day on Egypt. That is interesting to me, just to hear it and a talk on care and protection and police will come and give you a talk which is another good thing and all types of things like that, so it’s really interesting.

And do you like the meeting people and the chatting?

Yes I do, I’m a bit quiet on my own, but soon open up when people talk to me.

Do you ever take holidays?

Yes, always go on holiday, every year, mostly coach, my friends like the coach. Years ago I used to go by ship to Norway because my husband was Norwegian and we often travelled there, I’m not terribly keen on the ships to be honest because I don’t like sailing but to get there we had to more or less. I’ve flown a lot to Australia and Malta quite a bit. I had a full life really. Funnilly enough if anyone wants me, my daughter says you’ll be lucky to find her in she’s never home.

It’s nice at the clubs though, to get together because we have got so much in common, we’re the same age so we can do that.

Do you prefer to do activities with your own age group?

Oh yes, I think so. Well I’ve got more in common with my age group than I have with the young cos they’re entirely different, not that I mind, I can talk to them and I like them and they seem quite happy to talk to me, there’s quite a few young girls on this road and they talk to me. I was going out Sunday morning and I bumped into one of them and called her the wrong name, but she was chatting but then we
seemed to dry up, I hadn’t anything more in common to talk with her about.

So what do you tend to talk about with your friends of your age group?

Oh times that’s gone by, the way people behave, the discipline that’s gone, oh we have a lot to talk about. When you think we talk how we were brought up, this is what we talk about, we think how disciplined we were and took notice and respected things which a lot of the young today don’t respect and that’s a shame, isn’t it?

On the whole, what would you say are the most positive things about being retired?

Well you can do what you like, you can go where you like, you can choose yourself and you have the opportunity of bus travel free you can go anywhere and that’s great, we can go anywhere with that. I don’t like the idea that it’s going to end cos you know you are at an age when it can any time to be honest, you don’t expect it when you are younger but you do now. But on the whole I think its fine and I mean we have got many opportunities, they may not say this but the pension isn’t bad.

What are the negative parts of retirement?

Getting older yourself, you can’t do the things you would like to do that you could years ago, I mean I may look alright but I am eighty so if I hoover now, I find that I have to stop more than when I was younger. I don’t like that because to be perfectly honest I’ve never been in hospital and I very rarely visit the doctor, I am quite healthy hopefully and that’s it and that stopping and that easing down, I’m not too keen on that but it has to be and I accept that.

Generally though do you find life quite positive?

I have yes. I mean a lot of people I have spoken to, they don’t do anything, they don’t go out, I couldn’t live like that, you have to make something yourself, you have to do something yourself.

Do you find you look for things to make sure you are busy?
Well they usually seem to fall in place, I've got a routine then you know and I follow that, it's busy for me.

**Neighbours do you socialise with them?**

Yes over the road. I've got a lovely neighbour over the road, Josie and Mel. They'd be willing to do anything.

**On the whole has retirement been a good thing?**

Oh yes.
APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF ONE OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS
(Mary)

So, first of all if you start off with where you were born

My father was from Leeds and my mother was from Farsleigh, which is just outside Leeds. My father came down here for work or something and my mother came with him but she didn’t settle – she wasn’t all that happy about it, different way of life up North from when she came to Wales. The first thing she did, there used to be a place in town called The Carlton, which was a big huge restaurant. It’s hard to explain, it had a basement, it had a ground floor and it also had a balcony and it was a huge place and you used to have tea dances. The main part where you first came in they used to sell bread and cakes and allsorts so the first thing my mother did was fall into the bandstand when she was 8 months pregnant with me. You might say that was my first … Before I was born she went to Liverpool because she wanted me to be born up North and it was too far to go to Leeds and I came back when I was about a month old or two months old.

To Cardiff?

In Cardiff, yes. So we were in digs till was about 5 and then we moved and when I was about 8 my parents split up. My mother remarried, my father didn’t but my mother did so I had a stepfather but he was wonderful – he really, really was. I can’t complain. Then we had, my mother had two more children but I was 9 before my first sister was born and she was 7 when the other one was born so there was a great big space. We weren’t company for each other, we didn’t grow up together as you might say. What was I like as a child? I was a terrible child. I was obedient but I was always ripping my clothes, I was always falling down and had stuff on my knees and in those days you didn’t get plasters and I used to get them always on the bend of the knee here where you couldn’t keep your bandages on because they always came down. I always had bandaged knees and ripped clothes, I was that sort of child. Then
we come to the next big episode. A week after my 14th birthday, we got bombed out. We were living in Brook Street and we got bombed out and they took us to Gladstone Road school. We had to sleep there for three or four nights, we used to have to sleep on the floor and used to have to pick up all your bedding so that the children could come to school.

And where did you sleep the rest of the week?

After about 3 nights, the council gave you a place in Howard Gardens. It was all split up. At that time there were four of us, my first sister and then, we didn’t have the ground floor, Mrs Smith was on the ground floor, it would be Mr Smith, Mrs Smith, Harry Smith, it would be five and his elder brother and sister, it would be five on the ground floor. We were four on the next floor and there were three floors in Howard Gardens and then there was another couple from our street with a baby, they had the other floor. All you had was four knives and forks, four cups and saucers, four blankets, just bare and you stayed there for two weeks and in that two weeks you have to try and find yourself somewhere else to live because they wanted that for the next lot of people that were going to be bombed out. So we moved then from Riverside to Newport Road, we got a flat there, which is where we stayed, well my parents stayed until they came here to live with me.

In the same house?

Yes. My mother at that time wasn’t well, my father wasn’t well and in the flat, because Newport Road they’re big rooms and with my mother not well and being in bed it meant my father. We had a coal cellar, which I believe they’ve turned into a flat now, because there were four rooms downstairs in the cellar. He had to do that to keep the fire going in the bedroom because we had the ground floor flat plus he had to go out and get paraffin because the fire wasn’t enough to heat the bedroom – they’re so big those rooms, you need two lots of heat. The next big upheaval was then I went down to Cornwall to work and I eventually got married and lived down there in Looe.

Tell me about your school in Cardiff.
I didn’t like that. I used to go to Wood Street School which is not there any more. You know where the new cinema is in Wood Street, right across from there used to be Wood Street school, a girl’s school, a boy’s school, and next door to it used to be St Dyfrig’s Church and when you come out of the station where all the bays are now, used to be houses but they were very, very old and also where the Echo offices are now, those used to be little streets as well but they were slum areas and of course the first thing you saw when you came out of the station was these slum areas. So in about 1937, they built all these houses in Ely, Ely was first built to take all these people from Wood Street. There was about three or four streets between our school and St Mary Street and another two or three the other side, there used to be shops there as well. So they raised it. When they did that they stopped the infant school, both the boy’s and the girl’s school and it was just the top, 5, 6 and 7 that’s all you had, two teachers for three classes and one of those was the headmistress. When they stopped I went to Court Road school which was okay because some of the girls from round about. Do you know Brooks Street?

No.

Well, going back to Wood Street, going to Tudor Road but before you’ve got there you’ve got Fitzhammon Embankment. You go right to the top of there and turn into Dispenser Street and just cut through and then Brook Street was there. There were girls going to Court Road School from the other side of Tudor Road, so you knew. When we got bombed out and we moved to Newport Road, they had a school in Stacey Road but they wouldn’t take me because I was 14 and I’d only be there till July because they broke up, and they wouldn’t take me and they wouldn’t let me go back to Court Road School, they made me go to Severn Road school but those days we had trams and the distance to Court Road and Severn Road was about the same except that Severn Road you went direct, but the distance was the same. They should have let me stay in Court Road for the 2 months, anyway I didn’t like it.

Did you leave school at 14?

Yes. I left school at 14 and went to work in the Park Hotel which is now the Thistle. You could live in or out for the same money, 9s & 6d, a week. So I lived in and my
mother said, “Don’t think you can do what you like, because the head waiter is going
tell me if you misbehave.” It put the fear of God into me!

What did you do there?

A commis waitress. So she said, “I’m not going to take any money off you, but you
have to do for yourself now. Save, don’t think you’ve got all this money.” Then I left
the Park Hotel when I was 16 or just over 16 because they’d run out of wines, they’d
run out of this, they couldn’t teach you any more because you would coming to the
stage where you were being taught what to serve with what and of course you didn’t
know what food you were going to get to serve the next day anyway and all the wines
were depleting. So I left, you should do it for four years, but I did it for two, I had
loads of jobs after that – I did everything.

Did you move back home then?

Yes, I moved back.

Who was here then? Was your stepdad?

Not here, in Newport Road. When Val was born ’43, so I must have been home then
because I can remember my mother taking me into the front room, and she said “I
expect your wondering why I’ve got a pin in my skirt. I’m pregnant.” I was 16 and I
hadn’t even noticed. Then I got a job in the Coop. You know High Street. You
know the beginning of St Mary Street is High Street and then you come to the traffic
lights and there’s the cake shop on the corner, between there and the market used to
be the Coop. So I got a job there as a cashier. Before that I went to Bournemouth for
2 seasons, I came back. Nobody wanted to hire you if you’d been away for a season
because they wondered if you were going to stay for the following year. But I got a
job in the Coop in their Christmas Bazaar selling tickets to go round, then I got a job
in The Grand. Why did I leave there? Because the second year I went back to the
Coop, I got the job again selling tickets. Can’t think why I left The Grand. It might
have been because the head waiter said to me one day, “You look a funny colour, I
think you should go home, or go to the doctors.” So I went to the doctor’s and I’d got
yellow jaundice, Christmas time. Can’t eat any fats, only fruits. It was
terrible. The second year I went back to the Coop and I got the job. Somebody else had the job that I had but they moved her and gave the job back again and then after Christmas when I thought I was going to finish the manager of the furnishing asked me if I'd like to go into a permanent job and I said yes. They had a huge office and they had a little office off that which they called The Lanson Room, which they'd seen it somewhere where the money comes off in a thing. All the money was taken up there. The other part of the office was done with all the other business. So I was there for about two or three years because we were right up the top and we could see everybody in St John's Square walking past. I thought, "I've had enough of this, I'm off." So I went to Looe in Cornwall for the first year and the second year.

**Did you live down there?**

I lived in. I got a job as a waitress and I lived in. I got fed up of taking money. I lived in, came back home for the winter and got a job in Jack Holding's in Penarth Road. The second year I went back, 1949/50/51/52, in '54 I met my future husband and I came home and went back in January and stayed with Olivia and I stayed with her for two years before I was married.

**Who's Olivia?**

She worked in the same hotel. She was married, with a family but they made room for me and I lodged with them until I got married.

**Was your husband down there?**

He lived across the road from Olivia. So I was there for 17 years, I was there till 1970.

**So you got married down there, did you?**

Yes.

**Did you carry on working at the hotel all that time?**
Mostly and then I got a job in a baker’s shop which was permanent because I was married and the wages down there are not the same as you get up her. You needed it. Basically because the property was always sold as a business rather than as ....because it was a summer resort, everybody done bed and breakfast, you paid for that in the price. You had to work to get a place and then the marriage broke up and I came home in 1971, back to my parents and I stayed there for 12 months because you can’t come home and find yourself a place. When I first came home in 1971 property was very reasonable. We’d sold the one in Looe and I’d had my half and he’d had his half and I could have got a property for about £800 but during the 12 months that I’d stayed with my mother it had shot up. When I came home I had £1100 in the bank, that was my share of the house, when I went to buy and I asked the bank for a loan for a house, it was for £1500 and they wouldn’t give it. I said “Why not, I’ve got £1100 of my money, you can’t go wrong, whatever happens, you’ve got the biggest part.” But they wouldn’t so I was lucky I got a mortgage from Cardiff City Council, they were one of the few councils that gave them to unmarried women, that gave a mortgage. So I was here again for about 2 and a half years on my own and then things were not good with my mother and father as I said. My father had a lot to do. I said, “You can come and live with me but you might get claustrophobic because you’ll have to leave 39 years living in great big rooms.” But the one thing about these, high ceilings. They’re not so claustrophobic but we’ll all have to live together in the yellow submarine. You can have one room and I’ll have one room. It’s altogether and we did. Grampy died in 1978 so they must have come to me in 1974/5 and then Grampy died in 1978 and that left my mother and I, and then she died in ’88. So from the time I came home until my mother died, I didn’t have any spare time. You know if you’ve got somebody here on their own, not well, you can’t go out and leave them at night as well.

Because you were working as well. Did you get a job when you came back to Cardiff?

Yes. I got a job with the DHSS and first of all I was working at Central office just passed the flyover there and then I asked if I could be moved nearer into town so it would be easier for me. Before they moved in I had to go every night there before I came home and then my father was in hospital because he’d had two or three heart attacks prior to this and they wouldn’t let him come out of hospital

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because I was working and my mother wasn’t well. They had to have meals on wheels and they had to have a cleaner and when she came, I didn’t see her, but they forgot about the cleaner, they stuck to the meals on wheels. I asked for a transfer then to the office at the top of City Road so that I could come home lunchtime, to see how they were. Because when you’ve got two people not very well one gets on the other one’s nerves and you’ve got to come home and break it up. That’s where I stayed until I retired.

The DHSS?

DHSS in City Road. Then my mother died in ’88 and I’d just retired a fortnight.

How old were you when you retired?

I was 63. I’d just retired on the Friday, we had the builders coming in to do the back yard, to do the roof, to do the ceiling at the top of the stairs and they’d been in a week and she died on the Saturday which was a bit of a shock. It was very sudden. She always got up in the morning, she always got me up for work, I let her. She used to come and make herself a cup of tea as long as she used the very small saucepan, she wasn’t to use the kettle because you can’t take everything away, you’ve have to let them. So by getting me up for work she had to keep going because I must admit I’m not the best for getting up in the morning. That gave her something to live for, she had to get me up for work, that’s what I think anyway. As I say a fortnight after I retired. My sister had been very ill, she’d had a big operation and she’d just gone to Israel for a holiday, the first one since the operation, my niece was in University at the time but she was working in Howells on Thursday, their late night and Saturday. My mother came into my bedroom and she said to me, “I think I’m going mad,” and I said, “Why? I’ll wake up to go and spend a penny and I’ll come in,” because she had the front room and I spent a penny and got dressed, one minute perhaps, when I got there, speech had gone, quick as that. So I had to send for the doctor, he’ll come when he can, he comes about 10 o’clock and he said I’ll come back about 12 and we’ll see how she is then. Really she was really gone. Rang up Howells and asked my niece to come home, which she did. You’re waiting, you can’t do anything, you’re afraid to leave her in case she comes to. You’ve got to spend a penny, you’ve got to do this, somebody’s got to be here to be with her. My niece came.
The doctor came and sent for an ambulance, didn’t come till 4 or 5 o’clock. They took her to the hospital, my nice and I stayed there to give them all the details and they put her to bed, there’s still no movement and the staff nurse said to me, “Have you eaten?” and I said, “No.” I’d been living on cups of coffee and cigarettes. She said, “Go home have something to eat and come back again.” I said, “Alright.” My niece was staying with her then fiancé and his family, so she rang up her mother-in-law to be as they thought and she came to pick Linda up and she said, “You come back with us”, and I said, “No, I’ll go home, because they’ve got the number now and I’d miss it.” I came home and I’m just getting ready to go back again and the phone rang to say she was gone. Back we go again, I tried to get my sister in Israel and she was out and we had to leave a message.

**Did you have two sisters?**

One died. The other one died. She died in 1970. She was married the same year as I was but she was married in the January, I was married in the October, Joan. Married 10 years without children and then when she died she left a little girl of 4 and a boy of 18 months.

**Tragic. Had you kept in touch with her when you were in Cornwall?**

Yes, I used to come home anyway.

**What about your other sister?**

That’s the one that was in Israel has been very ill, that’s Val, that’s the youngest one.

**When you were in Cornwall, had you kept in touch with her?**

Because they used to come down with me anyway. They used to come down and stay.

**Did she have children?**
Yes, she’s got three. The niece that came to me when my mother died, Linda, and then she’s got...now Linda is now 38, 37, again she’s like my mother, had a big spell, 11 years between, Ben is 26 and Linda’s 37. She was 11 when Ben was born and then she had another little girl, and Hannah is 24. So 24, 26 and 37.

Have you been close to them? Do you see them?

Yes, I see my sister every Saturday when available. My sister, I must tell you, married out. She married a Jewish boy, so there are certain times I don’t see her because of that. So I didn’t see her for two weeks because of Passover, so I saw her Saturday. Tuesday she’s going to Portugal, so I won’t see her for another two weeks.

What religion are you? Were you brought up with religion?

No. Well, I used to go to Sunday School, it makes no difference to me, they’re good. My bother-in-law’s very good. Before, I said to my mother, would she like to come on holiday and she said, because she’s never flown before, she was 80 and on about this holiday that I was ready for a break with working and coming home and my mother used to go up my sister’s and she used to have a wonderful time there because my sister used to take her breakfast in bed, because the children were small and with my mother in the way, it was easier to take a tray up, plus the fact my mother would get her in the car if she was going to the library, she would take my mother in the car, whereas my mother never went out with me. I don’t drive. My brother-in-law always used to say to her, you don’t have to go home if you don’t want to, if you want to stay longer. He’s marvellous, Len. I was saying about the holiday, so I said to my mother, “if I take you on a holiday, will you let me go on a holiday on my own?” I said, because I had to ask my sister because it’s her mother as well, you can’t just rush along. So I said to my sister, “Would you mind if I took Mam on holidays?” “better you than me!” she used to say because those two were very alike, very, very alike. They got on well but they had times they’d argue.

Anyway, we went to Italy for ten days, went to L........ and it was quite nice because it was flat, she couldn’t do a lot but it’s a change from four walls. So the next year she said to me, “Do you think you could have your holiday first...because otherwise I’ve got nothing to look forward to except going up Val’s?” I thought

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you’re having a whale of a time up there but I suppose so I said okay. We went in the June to Italy and I went in the September to Crete but the next year I went to Crete in the June and then in the September it came to my mother, “where would you like to go?”, so she said., “I’d like to go on a cruise.” I’ve had a holiday, where am I going to get money for a cruise from, I’ve got a mortgage.

Can I stop you and turn the tape over? (Interview continued for another hour)