



“EMBRACING THE MIDDLE YEARS”

How do female executives aged 45 and over describe their experience of midlife and how does this experience influence their career decisions?

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ABSTRACT

‘Embracing the Middle Years’

The purpose of this research project is to explore how professional women aged 45+ experience their midlife and how this experience impacts on their career decisions.

Across academic and organisational literature, echoed by the media and anecdotally, women’s middle age has traditionally been regarded as one of decline, exacerbated by menopause and empty nest syndrome. Many studies exploring this age group focus on the problems endured by women at midlife, depicting a narrative of frailty spanning the physiological experience, cognitive degeneration and emotional uncertainty, with such assumptions positioning mid-life women poorly in terms of organisational status. In contrast, alternative research directs attention to the notions of freedom and liberation, with older women supposedly absconding from their full-time careers as their children ‘flee the nest’. All of the above remains true for some women, yet the findings demonstrate further complex, and interesting, narratives contributing a more nuanced perspective than the existing binary descriptions.

Here, in order to illuminate the experience of midlife women from this more nuanced angle, I draw upon the theoretical lens of Abjection (or disgust and fascination) to understand the position of the older female body at work. Contributing to debate in the arena of bodies in the organisation, I develop and present the theoretical proposition of ‘*Abjection as Normal*’. This theory suggests that older professional women are not only systemically excluded within organisations on three counts – they are not young; not male and (still) not following a linear career path, but also that this exclusion is normalised. This means, exclusionary language and practices are so deeply embedded within the organisational setting they are invisible and ignored. The findings further highlight that multifarious loss at midlife can project professional middle-aged women into a transition period, theorised as a ‘*fragile threshold*’, as they ‘stare death in the face’. In emerging from this stage, data demonstrates a desire for progress and achievement, with some 70% of participants intending to step up within, and outside of, their organisation. From a theoretical position of ‘*Not Me/Female Revolt*’, many of the women in this study did not want to be associated with decline, or to leave their organisations, seeking a flexible way to navigate the significant caring issues surrounding their lives at this age while still actively pursuing career advancement. There is a strong sense that as these women attain power, they are driving through a new organisational agenda where there is a more considered approach towards gender, age and flexibility.

At a time when women over 45 are increasingly moving into positions of authority, albeit slowly, this research makes a particular and timely contribution to debate surrounding the combination of gender and age, and the impact of midlife on career decisions.

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PREFACE

“To at once critique and possibly begin to transform a patriarchal capitalist system that denigrates older working women, we need to first hear from those women and learn from their experience” (Trethewey, 2001, p.185)

In October 2016 my sister and I attended the Cheltenham Literary Festival. The topic was ‘How to Beat the Midlife Meltdown’, headed up by two renowned journalists, Miranda Sawyer and Christa D’Souza, both of whom had published recent books on midlife and menopause. We were both curious – it is rare to hear the topic you are researching discussed on a sold out public platform to a 1200 strong (principally white, middle aged, female) audience.

In the following hour, every part of the female body was available for exhaustive negative dissection. In case the audience were not aware, the authors stated that at midlife the following will happen: your hair thins; your beard starts; your eyelids droop (so don't bother with makeup); knees sag; give up jogging – you're too fat, and don't bother dressing up, no one is going to notice you. Sex is “*grotesque...impossible*” (D’Souza, 2016) and the menopause “*horrible... awful*” (Sawyer, 2016). A message of ‘acceptance’ was proffered to the audience as being the sole positive route forwards. The audience was advised to accept that their sex life “*will be going downhill and will stop very soon*”, to acknowledge their invisibility as their looks had already gone (and it will get worse) and to recognise the menopause will “*ruin your life*”, with recovery unlikely. Most disturbing of all, the audience laughed. At the end of the talk, my sister asked a question to the panel: “*I’m curious by everything I’m hearing here. I’m 55 and having the time of my life. Am I alone in this?*”. Far from being well received, the audience erupted into booing, as the woman in front of us turned around, loudly asserting ‘Yes!’. Whilst my sister received a few handshakes on departure, most of the audience were unable to look at us, many shaking their heads with disappointment at her intervention or passing by us silently.

This ‘moment in time’ anecdote offers a glimpse at the complex relationship women have with their ageing body and ageing selves. It is possible to argue that the response from the audience to the presenters was a release from the societal need for the ageing woman to keep her older body ‘in check’, maintaining a youthful presence. Or a frustration at the challenging of their midlife and menopausal experience by my sister, being potentially whitewashed into a positive miasma? It is also conceivable that the ability to reproduce a ‘problem focused’ narrative so swiftly is inevitable for the older woman given three distinct factors: a cultural predisposition to view age through a lens of negative decline (explored further in Chapter Two); a long history of medicalising women that has cast a pervasive shadow (explored in Chapter Three) and a certain inevitability that women will recognise themselves and others through their embodied and reproductive status (Chapter Four).

Yet as I experience my own midlife, I find myself surrounded by vibrant, energetic women who are discussing new phases of their lives, despite significant issues such as caring, seemingly at odds with this audience reaction. It is precisely these kinds of contradictions, complexities and ambivalences this thesis is attempting to address, providing the motivation and inspiration for this study. As a feminist, I am interested in how women experience their bodies as a result of these contemporary social and cultural discourses. As an executive coach, I am interested in working with middle aged professional women, whilst recognising that their experience of midlife is anything but homogenous. Neither does this experience appear to be calamitous nor whimsical, but a messy, individual, intriguing age, worthy of understanding further. As a white, middle class, middle aged professional woman, I recognise my own identity is shaped by the same conversations that are etched through the experiences of my participants’ responses.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“There could scarcely be a topic of more intellectual, social and economic importance in the early twenty first century that the way in which women experience the process of ageing in British society. Older people are of increasing importance to the vitality, stability and development of this society. Women are crucial to this.”
(Finch, 2000, p. xv)

Despite an increasing number of academic texts addressing the lives of mid-life women, still comparatively little is known about how women experience their middle years (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Gordon, et al., 2002; Arber & Ginn, 2003; Lachman, 2004; Phillipson, 2004; Hodges, 2012). Although there is a small body of research highlighting the extent of the exclusion, marginalisation or invisibility of older women within organisations, arguably even less is known about how professional women experience ageing in this context (Trethewey, 2001; Hodges, 2012; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017). Scholars propose that to affect a system in any meaningful way, the experience must be understood first (Trethewey, 2001) and therefore the purpose of this study is to find a way to further theorise the experience of being middle aged for female executives and the subsequent impact on their career decisions. In doing so, it is anticipated the study will explore the challenges middle-aged women face to achieve positions of influence, to challenge the prevailing myths surrounding their experience of middle age and consider the subsequent impact of the intersection of gender and age on career decisions.

The Organisational Perspective: What is the Problem?

That the organisation can act as a place of marginalisation for women, rendering their position within the male normative paradigm as problematic, has been explored in both organisational and gender studies (e.g. Acker, 2006; Bilimoria & Piderit, 2007; Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Gatrell, 2011b, 2013; Kenny & Donnelly, 2019). Indeed, particularly in the last decade, considerable effort has

been taken by some academics to direct attention towards political and practitioner action, aimed at addressing gender disparity and inequality (Perrons, 2016; Hampton-Alexander Review, 2018; Vinnicombe et al., 2018). Exclusionary practices have been extensively researched from multiple perspectives including the male paradigmatic organisation (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Pompper, 2011; Gatrell & Peyton, 2019); the positive and negative levers for female advancement (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004; Gatrell & Cooper, 2007; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Hodges, 2012); the problematic ‘returning to work’ agenda leading to the ‘leaky pipeline’ of leadership (Stone, 2007; Cabrera, 2009; Stone & Hernandez, 2013) and the costs of caring (Phillips, et al. 2002; Evandrou & Glaser, 2003; Vickerstaff, et al., 2007). It is also a contemporary topic, with the #metoo, #timesup, #gameover and #timeto gender campaigns gaining ground in the last two years, and the pay gap review creating a shift in government policy in 2017, with mandatory organisational gender pay gap reporting.

And yet, despite the significant increase in the interest of career development of women, little attention is directed towards that of the older professional woman (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Trethewey, 2001; Whiston, et al., 2015), nor how discriminatory practices gain significant ground once age is considered (Gullette, 2004, 2011; Fineman, 2011; Twigg, 2004, 2013). This is despite research directing attention to how socially constructed notions of age are as much a force for social divisions and key decisions in the workplace as gender. The so-called ‘invisible structure’ of age (Fineman, 2011) not only dictates many of the entry, promotion and exit points within an organisation, but also predicates perceptions as to a person’s competence and credibility (Gersick & Kram, 2002; Krekula, 2007; Fineman, 2011; Peters, et al., 2013). Furthermore, with scholars recognising that ageism rarely operates in isolation, instead intersecting with other discriminatory practices, the combination of ageism and sexism can be especially corrosive for women and their advancement within an organisation (Trethewey, 2001; Fineman, 2011; Jack, et al., 2014; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017).

Given an apparent political will towards gender equality, the demographic shifts of the workforce (with 50% of the workforce expected to be over 50 by 2020) and a meaningful increase of professional middle-aged women into senior managerial positions, it is not unreasonable to expect significant interest in this population. Yet the percentage of organisations who have reviewed the needs of their midlife population appears insignificant (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Irving, 2018), with little effort directed towards the retention, value and promotion of the professional middle-aged woman. It is perhaps unsurprising there is a call for broader, more enriched theoretical frameworks that are inclusive of this intersected gender and age group (Perrons, 2016).

Research alludes to a number of reasons as to why organisations have been slow to react and respond to this situation. A substantial overview of 25 years of gender studies presents the possibility that, as far as the media and the younger generation are concerned, the gender ‘problem’ has been solved. Or, at least, an issue for the older generation (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011). And this perspective is perhaps replicated by some organisations, who point to the considerable success in increasing the diversity of UK Boards since the publication of Lord Davies Review on the gender balance of FTSE 100 Boards (2011). The achievement of a current all-time high of 29% female representation on FTSE 100 Boards demonstrates continued progress towards the target of 33% set by the follow up Hampton-Alexander Review (2018). And yet perhaps less remarked on is additional research that highlights a plateauing number of full-time senior female executives at 9.7%, with, in the last year of available reporting, female executive directorships dropping by nearly two percentage points in a year to 6.4% and all male boards increasing to ten (Vinnicombe, et al., 2018).

These statistics are important given the profile of women interviewed for this study. That is, high achieving professional women aged 45 plus, likely to be in – or working towards – the equivalent of a senior executive or Board position. Most women company directors are reportedly in the 50-60 year age group (Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; Vinnicombe, et al., 2018), the average Board Director (male and female) is

between 51 and 70 years of age (Kang, Cheng & Gray, 2007) and data from a study of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in the United States (Martelli & Abels, 2010) shows that 76% of all CEOs in these companies are in the 50-64 year age bracket. The average age of directors continues to rise slowly but steadily, with female directors, on average, two years younger than their male counterparts (UK Board Index, 2017).

As well as the above, prevailing biases surround the experience of this female age group. A women's middle age has traditionally been regarded as one of decline, exacerbated by menopause and the empty nest syndrome (Gullette, 2004; Hodges, 2012; Brewis, et al., 2017) and this narrative proves remarkably pervasive. This is perhaps unsurprising when research exploring this age group can focus on the problems endured by women at midlife (Trethewey, 2001; Mulhbauer, 2007; Wray, 2007), with many studies on older women thus depicting middle age and menopause as problematic (e.g. Wright, 2005; Griffiths, et al, 2006; Krekula, 2007; Irni, 2009; Wroolie & Holcomb, 2010; de Araújo Moraes et al. 2012; Xu, et al., 2012; Griffiths & Hunter, 2014).

A narrative of frailty spans the physiological experience (Martin, 1992; Young, 2005), cognitive degeneration (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Krekula, 2007) and emotional uncertainty associated with midlife and menopausal transition (Maguire, 2008). Discussions surrounding the menopause can focus on the "economic burden" (Jack, 2016, p. 91) and the societal cost of absence due to menopausal symptoms (Brewis, et al., 2017), with relief offered through Hormone Replacement Therapy. Some studies identify a negative relationship between menopausal symptoms and general performance at work (Woods & Mitchell, 2005; Griffiths, MacLennan & Hassard, 2013; Geukes, et al., 2019), with this age group viewed through a prism of vulnerability and looming risk (Strack, et al, 2008; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). At the same time, children leaving home is an Empty Nest Syndrome (Adelmann, et al, 1989; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009), whilst older motherhood is presented as a medical, social and economic burden (Jolly, et al., 2000; Bewley, et al., 2005; Smajdor, 2009). All of this can position mid-life women poorly in terms of organisational status (Gullette, 2004; Young, 2005).

In contrast, with this stage of a woman's career described as one of reincarnation (Pringle & Dixon, 2003), or reinvention (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), many of the notions of female midlife revival are predicated on the notions of freedom and autonomy gained through children leaving home (Muhlbauer & Chrisler, 2012). Arguably, such approaches fail to acknowledge the practical realities of this stage of life, including the increasing trends for delayed childbearing. In the past two decades, especially among highly qualified women in professional roles, the likelihood of women starting families in their late thirties and forties has grown rapidly, facilitated in some instances by new reproductive technologies (Friese, et al., 2008; Gatrell, 2018; Hourvitz, et al. 2009; O'Brien, et al., 2017; Pierce & Mocanu, 2018). As a consequence, far from being 'empty nesters' and regardless of whether they are experiencing menopausal symptoms, some employed, professional, women are raising young and dependent children during their forties and fifties (Gatrell, 2008). Moreover, research depicts a 'sandwich generation' experiencing extensive juggling, with women still taking on caring roles for ageing parents, teenage children, partners in ill-health and/or grandchildren (Almeida & Horn, 2005; Ackerman & Banks, 2007; Coleman & Rowthorn, 2011; Ben-Galim & Salim, 2013; Jarvie, et al., 2015).

Further evidence indicates that the body of organisational knowledge surrounding the experience and career decisions of women at midlife is premised largely on their male contemporaries (Karp, 1987; Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Gersick & Kram, 2002). Much of the literature published on motivation at midlife is grounded on the (male) notions of generativity, 'down-sizing' and the requirements of an executive when reaching the end of his linear career path (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). The life span literature suggests a predictability of the life course that is at odds with the more discontinuous, intermittent and 'zig-zag' careers experienced by many professional women (Gersick & Kram, 2002; O'Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018).

Lastly, an argument is made by researchers who question the compelling need for those in positions of power to consider the experience, let alone the retention and promotion, of the middle-aged woman (Trethewey, 2001; Höpfl & Matilal, 2007;

Evans, 2017). As they propose, those who are maintained by the current system have no reason to take responsibility to address, or redress, the current challenges, thus enabling the existing male paradigmatic status quo to remain largely unchecked and unchanged. Revealed in the 2018 Hampton-Alexander Review – an independent review body designed to increase female representation on FTSE 350 Boards to 33% - were the top ten reasons previously given for not promoting women onto Boards. These included discriminatory assumptions such as: ‘they don’t fit in’; ‘it’s too complex for them’; ‘they don’t want the hassle’ and ‘all the good ones have already gone’ - biases that have plagued women’s progression in organisations for years. What this might suggest is a set of convenient social myths that only serve to maintain the male-dominated organisation, particularly at time when women are in a position to progress in a significant way (Evans, 2017)?

The Aims of this Study

The primary aim of this study is to explore the narratives of midlife that surround the professional woman, through capturing the subjective feel of ‘middle-age’ and how this experience is lived through the setting of an organisation. Through gaining this appreciation, the aim is to further understand the impact of such an experience on career decisions, enabling the identification of recurring patterns of experience. The intention is to shine a contemporary light on this stage of life for professional women, with an emphasis on the potential for heterogeneous stories, perceived realities and alternative perspectives to the phenomena under discussion from the respondents.

Turning to the perspective of organisational theory, my desire is to expand on the work from scholars who are calling for a reframing of what success could (and often does) look like for female professionals, positing an alternative narrative to that of the decline narrative (Trethewey, 2001; Höpfl & Matilal, 2007). I do this through developing the lens of abjection further within the field of organisational studies (Fotaki, 2013; Rizq, 2013; Gatrell, 2017), enabling a more nuanced exploration of midlife that includes the notions of exclusion, loss and female revolt against the status quo. In terms of organisational practice, my intention is to add to the organisational

conversation that surrounds diversity, and specifically that of the retention, inclusion and promotion of older women. For this is, I believe, a subject that deserves merit more than just further consideration, it deserves attention and momentum.

In the light of the four aims of this study stated above, being (a) to capture the subjective feel of ‘middle-age’ for professional women (b) to understand how this experience is ‘lived’ through the setting of an organisation, (c) to detail the impact of such an experience on career decisions, and (d) to identify recurring patterns of experience, this thesis considers the following research question: *How do female executives aged 45 and over describe their experience of midlife and how does this experience influence their career decisions?* Supported by twenty research questions and explicated further in Chapter Seven, the following five questions provide a broad summary of the approach:

- What is your experience of middle age?
- What is your experience of menopause?
- How do you experience ageing within your organisation?
- What influence has this experience had on your career decisions?
- What else might be important for you to discuss with regards to middle age, menopause, caring responsibilities or your organisation?

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative research methodology since the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the subject under investigation. Leedy et al. (2019) describe qualitative research as useful in answering questions about any phenomena that aim to describe and understand the phenomena from the participants point of view. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews with thirty professional women, the majority (70%) of whom were employed within a public or private organisation. These included corporate, not-for-profit organisations and academic institutions, with a geographical spread across the UK. All participants were employed at a senior manager level or above, with management responsibilities for others. In order to

understand the reasons for leaving paid employment and potential ways retention could have been achieved, 30% of the participants had either left, or were about to leave, their organisation.

The sample of participants was balanced between those with children and women without children, so as to understand the caring challenges of middle age, particularly when the children were still dependent – either because of their age (under 18), being students (and full or part time living at home) or facing health challenges that necessitated care. Potential caring challenges were further explored by means of understanding parental care, as at least 50% of the participants had parents (or parents in law) alive. All participants were aged 45+. With ‘midlife’ defined as beginning at 45 (Brim, et al., 2005; Billett et al., 2011); with the average age of senior female executives being 57 years, and slightly younger for Executive Directors at 51 years, (UK Board Index, 2017; Vinnicombe, et al. 2018, p. 21) and the average age for entering menopause being 52, this was an appropriate, encompassing starting age. I prescribed no upper age limit and as such, the oldest participant was 69 years old. Chapter Seven provides a further breakdown of participant data.

This broad, exploratory topic of the experience of older women within organisations can, and has been, investigated from multiple theoretical perspectives. Epistemologically, the study was approached from a social constructionist perspective with data analysed using thematic analysis. Social constructionism is concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or account for the world in which they live (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). It has its roots in post-modern and post-structuralist learning and emerged in reaction to the notion of absolute truth and an objective reality (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2015). As such, social constructionists argue that knowledge, truth and reality are contextual, with different views of reality and truth allowed. Twenty years of experience as an executive coach and corporate consultant have shaped and embedded values and behaviours that I hold dear. Yet, as I only returned to academic study aged 40, it took me many years to articulate both my concerns and kinships with the coaching profession; the impact of my alignment

to feminism and the development of an interpretative approach. So, as well as aligning with my own beliefs in relation to my work with clients, it is also an appropriate paradigm for this study and the phenomena under investigation. Any one of the phenomena explored, for example, midlife, middle age or menopause, can be constructed and understood in multiple ways with every participant believing in the value of their individual experience. Social constructionism gives me the freedom to acknowledge differing perspectives and as such, the findings are not presented as absolute truth, but as one of the multiple ways in which the investigated can be construed.

Julia Kristeva's notion of Abjection was used as the theoretical lens through which to understand the data and develop theory, providing a perspective on all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and bodily experience. My initial apprehension towards the notion of Abjection as the potential framework for this thesis was grounded in the negative language of disgust, repulsion and abhorrence resonant in Kristeva's essay, *Powers of Horror* (1982). It took a broad reading of her literature, articles and interviews to understand the power of her metaphorical writing to provide perspective on the breadth of topics discussed in this thesis including exclusion, rejection, self-love and loathing, loss and mortality, joy and revolt. It is this lens that freed the data from being explanatory ('this is what the respondents said'), and enabled an analytical approach, shining a light on different theoretical possibilities ('this is what it could mean').

Navigating the Thesis

Having outlined the research problem, the context and rationale for this study and the research questions in Chapter One, the thesis is presented in four parts.

Part One – The Literature Review

The subsequent chapters of the Literature Review consider, in turn, the midlife narratives and embodied status of older women; the historical context; the menopause and organisational attitudes towards ageing women. These four chapters form the

backdrop to the research study, before the theoretical lens of Abjection is outlined and explored in Chapter Six. Taking these chapters in turn, in Chapter Two the Review begins by understanding how midlife is conceptualized in academic and organisational literature, as well as the extent to which a female's executive status is linked to their embodied status. Different midlife perspectives are considered, including the decline and the progress narratives. The prevalence of the decline narrative of the ageing body is investigated and the association some scholars have made between a perceived declining physical capability and organisational invisibility. In Chapter Three, the historical perspective of the medicalisation of the female body provides useful context for understanding the experience of the older female, particularly when the menopause is considered. Subsequently, in Chapter Four the menopause literature is considered, shining a light on the level of inconsistency surrounding the research and media reporting. Turning towards the environment within which the study is set, Chapter Five further explores organisational attitudes towards ageing, accepted models of lifespans and the nature of midlife motivation and career decisions. The Literature Review concludes in Chapter Six with a broad exploration of Julia Kristeva's writing, with particular reference to her theory of Abjection and how scholars have related her theories to the organisational environment.

Part Two - Research Design and Methodology

Part Two considers the research design both in terms of its design and execution. Chapter Seven considers the research question in the light of the epistemological framework of social constructionism. Subsequently, the methodological concerns are detailed, as well as the choices made at each stage. This includes how participants were sampled, the attempts made for representation and decisions surrounding potential saturation. The issues and benefits of qualitative interviewing are considered alongside the thematic analysis of the data. This chapter concludes with a reflexive consideration of the perspective of Coach as Researcher and where 'life imitated art'.

Chapter Eight considers the Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of Abjection and how this relates to the data structure. A summary of the data structure is presented.

Part Three – Research Findings and Discussion

The research findings are organised thematically in Part Three over three chapters, each focusing on a key theme being 'Abjection as Normal' (Chapter Nine); the 'Fragile Threshold' of Midlife (Chapter Ten) and 'Not Me: Female Revolt' (Chapter Eleven). Within each chapter, the literature outlined in Part One of this study is considered, with support and counterpoints offered, drawing in the relevance of the theoretical approach.

Part Four – Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

This thesis concludes in Part Four. In Chapter Twelve the discussion draws on the Introduction and reconsiders the biases and assumptions surrounding the experience of the female professional at midlife in the light of the findings. How the findings enable us to think differently about theory is further considered in this chapter. In the concluding Chapter Thirteen, the theoretical considerations are summarised, with recommendations for organisational policy and practice presented together with a discussion about the limitations of my research and the potential for future areas of research.

PART ONE - LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER TWO

The Narratives of Midlife

“As a society, we should be opposed to discrimination against any individuals. But the lack of older women in public life is not just about individuals. More generally there appears to be a pervasive sense in society that women are not valued when they age - and that is wrong” (Labour Policy Review: Commission on Older Women, 2013, p. 30)

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature surrounding the construction of the stage of life known as ‘midlife’ or ‘middle age’ and the narratives that surround this age group, with specific reference to the professional woman aged 45 and over. It will further consider the impact of these narratives and assumptions and provide perspective on the exclusion, or invisibility, of professional middle-aged women within some organisations from the perspective of their embodied status.

Theorising Midlife

Defined as ‘the third quarter of the average lifespan of a human being’ and being between 45 and 60 years (OED, 2018), the age range offered across literature for ‘midlife’ or the ‘middle years’ is broad, reflecting the fact that the middle years is likely to be the longest segment of people’s lives (Brim, et al. 2005). The median age for adults in the UK is 40 years and anticipated to rise to 43 years by 2050 (Billett, et al., 2011). In the largest study yet of people enjoying midlife in the US (n=7,189), MIDUS, midlife is defined as being 30-70 years old, with 40-60 years at its core (Brim, et al. 2005). Organisational psychologists define midlife as being between 35-65 years (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008) and in academic literature, the ‘older worker’ is defined as either 50+ years (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2012) or 45+ years (Billett, et al., 2011). Although sociologists may claim midlife as a more recent categorization, albeit understudied (Gullette, 2011), four ages – childhood, youth, middle age and old

age – were evident in the Middle Ages (Fineman, 2011). Indeed, constructing the lifespan into distinct ‘ages’, or broad categories, can be traced back to Solon, an Athenian statesman of some influence around 638-558BC (Covey, 1989; Fineman, 2011). Perhaps demonstrating how little our constructions of age have changed in the ensuing centuries, social sciences have construed age and ageing in similar ways through the twentieth century, typically bound up as life cycles, life spans or life courses and mainly based on Jung’s and Erikson’s theories (Lachman & James, 1997; Lachman, 2004). The impact of these life span constructions on the assumptions of midlife motivation and career decisions will be considered further in Chapter Five.

Beyond these social constructions, remarkably little is known about this socially constructed and diverse life period. It has been theorised in a number of ways, predominantly focusing on four key areas (Wray, 2007). The first of these relates to the theorisation of midlife as a period of decline, with midlife typically linked with the word ‘crisis’, or degeneration, also reflected in the media (Menon, 2001; Gullette, 2011). Despite little evidence supporting the ‘midlife crisis’, this concept holds a remarkably dominant place in the imagination of adults, persisting in the light of alternative perspectives (for example, Clausen, 1995; Wethington, et al. 2005; Vaillant, 2012). And yet, building on Easterlin’s happiness research (2003), well-being scholars Blanchflower & Oswald presented a happiness ‘U-Curve’ (2008), demonstrating a decline with age in life satisfaction for the first two decades of adulthood, steady at approximately 50 years of age and then increasing, until the very last years, often reaching a higher level than young adulthood. Whilst not ubiquitous, they found a relationship between age and happiness in 80 countries, and in all but nine of those, satisfaction bottomed out between the ages of 39 and 57 (2004; 2008), with midlife the nadir of the life course and ‘midlifers’ experiencing a “constant drizzle of disappointment” (Rauch, 2015).

A second important strand is proposed by scholars, who question the nature of decline, with midlife described as an opportunity for psychological renewal, for feeling “on top of the world and in control of our lives” (Rossi, 2005, p. 581) or a time when

“material and emotional dreams are fulfilled” (Wethington, et al. 2005, p. 611). The focus is on self-fulfilment and the realisation of new opportunities (Hepworth & Featherstone, 1982). A third area for consideration is the embodied experience of midlife, which for women is often associated with the menopause, and changes to the appearance of the body (Holland, 2004; Wray, 2007; Maguire, 2008). A final area focuses on the cross-cultural representations of midlife (Schweder, 1998). The first three of these theories are explored further in this chapter with regards to the professional middle-aged woman, with the fourth considered in Chapter Four in relation to menopause. Such approaches to midlife are in direct contrast to those researchers who believe that midlife has been ignored in much of the academic literature surrounding ageing, lifespans and adult development. For such scholars exploring theories of ageing, midlife is described as the “last uncharted territory” of the life course (Brim, et al. 2005, p.1), with Gullette urging for the “degradation of midlife... and the unprecedented damage to the life course” to become the biggest story of our time (2011, p.4).

Midlife in the Workplace

Whilst the perspective of how midlife is experienced in the workplace will be considered in depth in Chapter Five, it is an important narrative to be briefly introduced in this chapter, considering the connection with the embodied status of the older female executive. There is little evidence of the affirmative ageing perspective within the organisational practitioner literature, with the ageing population often described in apocalyptic language. The issue of talent management in the era of the ageing workforce is described as a “perfect demographic storm” (Calo, 2008, p. 404), with the ageing workforce, or the “silver tsunami” (Irving, 2018, p. 5) persistently viewed through a negative lens. Scholars warn of the “looming challenge” of an increasing plus-50-year-old workforce that offers both capacity and productivity risks, presenting health and inertia issues (Strack, et al., 2008, p. 120). As Irving states in his article in the Harvard Business Review, “The prospect of a massive population of

sick, disengaged, lonely, needy and cognitively impaired people is a dark one indeed” (2018, p. 6).

Challenges to this entrenched view of the ageing worker appear limited, with older personnel viewed through a prism of vulnerability and of pathology, presenting only problems to the organisation (Scales & Scase, 2000; Billett, et al. 2011; Irving, 2018). In the last decade, the progression of female executives to the most senior level within organisations has been debated by organisational researchers (Darnell & Gadiesh, 2013; Devillard et al., 2013), highlighting female under-representation within executive ranks, the so-called ‘leaky pipeline’ and the implementation of diversity initiatives (Desvaux, et al., 2017; Vinnicombe, et al., 2018). Positive progress has been made towards gender parity with resources being directed towards understanding female advancement, and yet, in consideration of the problematic advancement of female executives, few studies have examined the employment experiences and choices of women over 45 (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Phillipson, 2004; Moore, 2007; Hodges, 2012). As some scholars suggest, age remains the missing narrative. Limited attention is paid to the possibility for the systemic marginalisation of the ageing professional woman, nor the broader caring issues faced by this age group, highlighted in this study. It is, as scholars suggest, as if the social invisibility middle aged women relate, is echoed in research (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Hodges, 2012).

However, redressing this issue is far from straightforward because it also requires confronting a paradox. As Billett suggests, “many of the employers and managers who are in need of their service hold negative views about the work performance and adaptability of older employees and will only employ and support their ongoing development as a last resort” (2011, p. 1249). Yet it is a viewpoint that is worthy of challenge. Life expectancy in the West is around 80 and continues to remain steady. This means that at 53, the median age of people in baby boom generation (those born between 1946 and 1964), will live another 30 years. Since few people enter the workforce until they have completed their education, this so-called ‘boomer’ has as

many years of productivity ahead of her as she has behind her (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that in their article reviewing the careers of executives at midlife, organisational psychologists Strenger and Ruttenberg suggest, “our conceptions of age are hopelessly out of date with reality” (2008, p.84). Concurring, a meta-analysis examining age-leadership research illustrates that the “respective studies have produced diverse and sometimes contradictory findings. The existing literature lacks a strong and consistent theoretical fundament and has paid limited attention to key mediators and boundary conditions for the role of leaders' age” (Walter & Scheibe, 2013, p. 897).

So, the question remains as to why some current research has reached the conclusion that senior female executives at midlife within organisations continue to be overlooked (Devillard, et al. 2012), despite their desire to reach the boardroom and their potential for positive contribution (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014). Women themselves describe this sensation of being overlooked in such corporeal ways, whether it is the notion of ‘invisibility’ (Furman, 1997; Arber & Ginn, 1991; Maguire, 2008), of ‘vanishing’ (Shilling, 2012), of being ‘muted’ (Darnell & Gadiesh, 2013), of ‘picking up skeletons’ (Pompper, 2011) or just ‘fading away’ (Gergen, 1990; Maguire, 2008). There is a suggestion here, albeit implicit, that the female middle-age body is somehow unacceptable in the workplace, potentially offensive, lacking in power and not useful. It could even be, as Hurd Clarke, suggests, “objectionable and downright risky” (2011, p. 497), as society becomes increasingly obsessed with appearance and the pursuit of youthfulness and the female ageing body gains the potential “to illuminate, if not explode, societal assumptions” (ibid, p. 5). What this might mean is that, alongside the sensible recommendations for advancing female executives, including the need for role models, extensive networking, confidence coaching, political skills and endurance training (i.e. Gallagher, 2000; Coleman, 2011; Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2013), an examination of the female executive’s status and progression at work (or lack thereof) is inextricably linked with their embodied status (Gatrell, 2008). Such an exploration must consider the dual perspectives of women’s relationship with their own ageing body and the perception of others. Particularly if,

as Shildrick and Price claim, women's bodies are makers of who they are, what they are and what resources they can attract (1998).

The Embodied Status of the Middle-Aged Woman

Scholars are in agreement that the social meanings of age are both cultured and gendered (Arber & Ginn, 1995; Gullette, 2004; Wray, 2007; Maguire, 2008), with the suggestion that age, at the intersection of gender and sexuality is a clear dividing line in the workplace (Dixon, 2012). In 1983 Rich described the world as one where “with few exceptions, usually our romanticizing of a grandmother or our fantasizing of a Wise Old Women, - our literature, our music, our visual images, our political analyses and organising, tell us less about older women and more how thoroughly we younger women have absorbed male society's avoidance of our aging selves” (Macdonald & Rich, 1983, p. 54). The situation does not appear to have shifted a great deal in the last thirty-five years. A women's middle age has traditionally been regarded as one of loss and decline, with the literature exploring this age group dedicated to the problems endured by women at midlife (Trethewey, 2001; Mulhauer, 2007; Wray, 2007). Studies on older women stress this period of life as problematic (Krekula, 2007), with a narrative of decline and loss spanning the physiological experience (Martin, 1992), the cognitive degeneration (Yerkes, 2010) and emotional uncertainty (Maguire, 2008).

Cultural messages collectively treat women as ‘other’, with women seen as obscure, mysterious, dangerous, even unpredictable. As scholars suggest, “in an implied contrast with men, who are seen as normal and rational, women are understood to be ‘naturally’ more closely tied to their biology” (Ragins, et al. 1998, p. 54). Attitudes towards the body may also be gendered, suggesting that “the ways in which women's and men's bodies are perceived, categorized and valued are undoubtedly important in legitimizing and reproducing social inequalities in the [accounting] profession” (Haynes, 2008, p. 345). In other words, although ageing is a bodily process, it only becomes meaningful in the context of culture, with culture shaping the way that people interpret the changes in their bodies (McKinley, 2006; Twigg, 2013). Whilst middle ageism is described as a unisex problem (Trethewey, 2001), there is clear

acknowledgement amongst researchers that negative messages are read onto the female ageing body in a way that belies that of the ageing male body. Our still androcentric culture insists that women must present an attractive appearance if they are to be deemed acceptable and achieve social status (Furman, 1997; Haynes, 2012). With the social construction of the successful body at work being youthful, fit and male, disparaging the older, female body, this leaves the professional woman at midlife entering difficult terrain. So much so that Furman suggests “inhabiting an older body – *being* an older body – robs a woman of respect and visibility”. (1997, p. 197).

Clearly the need to maintain a youthful appearance at work is not exclusive to women. Although both genders experience the effects of ageing, and there are an increasing number of men with body dissatisfaction (Grogan, 1999; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000), the standards of our culture seem to create more problems for women as they move through their middle and later years. For men, particularly middle-class men, signs of age such as greying temples and lines can enhance their standing, pointing to sources of power and status associated with age (Saucier, 2011; Twigg; 2013). This is as apparent on-screen as it is in our Boardrooms, with male actors being employed to play ‘love interest’ roles past the age of 60 years, and older women seen infrequently and usually portraying asexual, unattractive characters (Grogan, 1999). In the same vein, the ageing male voice appears to carry more credibility and authority, with the ‘shrill’ female voice being ignored or subverted, particularly as she ages (Taylor, et al., 1995; Kleinerman, 2008; Haynes, 2012). This is compounded by evidence submitted to the Commission on Older Women, which suggests that older women with experience are subject to negative physical judgement, valued by the way they look and sound, rather than being experts on a subject (Labour Party Forum, 2015). During her lecture at the London Review of Books, Professor Mary Beard urges those interested in the ‘relative muteness’ of women in the public sphere to concentrate on how we have learned to hear the contributions of women, and the fundamental prejudices and processes that accompany the female leader *not* being listened to or being viewed as authoritative (Beard, 2014).

So, in contrast to the confident, ‘seen and heard’ older man, visible signs of age can erode a woman’s status with women under pressure to maintain a youthful appearance, managing and disciplining their bodies into an ‘appropriate’ shape and paying continuous and unfailing attention to the body as an instrument of self-presentation (Furman, 1997; Hurd Clarke, 2011). As well as the importance of appearance and voice to status, no culture leaves the body unadorned, so that “clothes are one of the means whereby bodies are made social, given identity and meaning” (Entwhistle, 2000, p. 11). In other words, how we look is linked to how we will be judged (Kenny & Donnelly, 2019). For older women the struggle, as already mentioned, is to be seen at all and clothing for the older woman can lend weight to this lack of visibility, with “dull, drab, dark, self-effacing, don’t-look-at-me styles associated with age that express marginalization, withdrawal and secondary status” (Twigg, 2013, p. 8). From the perspective of mainstream fashion, uninterested in older people, age is simply not attractive or sexy, with colours ‘toning down’, and cuts designed to hide the body. As Twigg further notes, “older women are regarded as beyond the erotic, indeed, beyond sex itself” (2013, p. 11).

Pertinent to the intended executive status of the woman in this research project, studies lend weight to this implication that older women are penalized for their appearance and lack of sexuality, presenting a ‘spoiled identity’ in the workplace (Goffman, 1976; Trethewey, 2011; Hodges, 2012). That is, their older bodies come to stigmatise them, labelling them as socially undesirable and professionally unacceptable, no longer useful for fulfilling reproductive or child rearing functions, nor suitable for the purposes of sexual attraction or flirtation. However, some female leaders in qualitative studies have suggested this perceived lack of sexuality is a positive bonus, decreasing signs of harassment and enabling a greater focus at work (Maguire, 2008; Pompper, 2011). In contrast, scholars suggest it is an ongoing and insidious situation that beauty confers status, privileges and influence, yet that beauty and age are considered exclusive domains (Webster & Driskell, 1983). Economist Catherine Hakim further explored this notion of ‘erotic capital’ in her book, *Honey Money* (2011). Raising feminist ire, she suggested that the seven elements of beauty; sexual attractiveness; liveliness; fertility; sexual competence; social skills and social presentation are the

means by which power relations are reaffirmed. She argues such elements are present both in the workplace and in society at large, urging women to develop and exploit their 'erotic capital' due to the apparent 'male sex deficit'. It is interesting to note that in the considerable academic critiques of her book, scholars cited irritation with her poor conceptual analysis and her lack of empirical evidence (i.e. Green, 2012; Warhurst, 2012; Schmitz & Blossfeld, 2013). Conceptual analysis aside, scant mention is made of the potentially negative effect on the status of female executives at midlife when such elements are perceived to disappear. As Kathy Woodward (1999) comments, the older female body is both invisible – in that it is no longer seen – and hypervisible – in that it is all that is seen.

The Menopausal Middle-Aged Woman

O'Beirne has argued that if western societies represent 'women' as "young, white, thin, physically and sexually attractive, and fertile", then the fit between "corporeality, representation and subjectivity define older women's bodies as 'failed' or defective when compared to the hegemonic model of women" (1999, p. 294). Menopause is a thread that runs through this thesis, being the sole marker separating the middle-aged male from female biological and embodied experience. As well as this, whereas a man's old age has traditionally been understood as a social process that begins with retirement, a woman's has been firmly tied to a biological process, her menopause (Foxcroft, 2009). If the so-called 'maternal body' is such a problem at work, with its potential for reproduction and its unreliable, disorderly, 'messiness' (Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2000; Gatrell, 2008), then the advent of the post-menopausal woman should be one of joyous welcome to the workplace. No babies, no problem! Yet far from welcomed, the so-called 'non-maternal body' (Gullette, 2004) is greeted with silence – a silence echoed by women, workplace policies and research. Scholars agree that insufficient attention is paid to the biological experience of women at midlife, with few studies exploring the experience of menopausal women, let alone the relevance to the workplace (Martin, 1987; Deeks & McCabe, 2001; Wray, 2007; Brewis, et al., 2017). This may well be because, "the female reproductive body is always constituted

as a problem” even when it is no longer reproductive (Halford, Savage, & Witz, 1997, p 213), or that this is an issue some women are actively discouraged to air.

Women’s ageing bodies are medicalised and often portrayed as deficient, notably the ‘cultural grammar’ surrounding the menopause, which is shrouded in terms of atrophy and failure, viewed as problematic (Martin, 1992). Whilst research evidences cultures where the menopause is considered celebratory, with hot flushes (called ‘flashes’ in the United States) proof of “strength, inner harmony and balance” (Martin, 1992, p. 167), or simply not marked or noticed in other cultures (Wray, 2007), it is rare to find evidence of western society positively celebrating the menopause, viewing it instead as a cessation, an end of something, a loss, leaving women with nothing (Martin, 1992). Indeed, it is described more in terms of embarrassment with flushes causing women confusion, awkwardness and shame. In terms of health and strength, post-menopausal women have long been described as increasingly delicate with spectres of cancer, osteoporosis and arthritis looming (Lips & Hasting, 2012) and concomitant suggestions of delicacy, weakness and frailty (Velkoff & Kinsella, 1998). This has led to the positioning of HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) being offered as a solution to women's distress and bodily changes at midlife (considered further in Chapter Four), serving to reinforce the notion of the menopausal body as inherently deficient, necessitating medical intervention (Perz & Ussher, 2008; SIRC, 2002). Such notions of decline are compounded by the dominant popular image of the post-menopausal woman in our youth-oriented consumer society. Women’s magazine and pharmaceutical companies warn women that menopause brings depression, hot flushes, volatile emotions, brittle bones, facial hair, loss of sexual desire and, generally, the end of womanly life (Young, 2005; Perz & Ussher, 2008).

Feminists and public health specialists have suggested that this negative menopause discourse and hormone replacement ‘therapy’ are more dangerous for women than any ‘symptoms’ (Hunter, 1996; Gullette, 2004) and some menopausal studies concur with this, suggesting that body esteem is correlated with positive menopausal attitudes (McKinley & Lyon, 1996, Martin, 1992). Furthermore, researchers report that the vast majority of women they interviewed found going through the menopause ‘no big

deal', being happy to have menstrual annoyances behind them (Martin, 1992; Hvas, 2001). On the whole, women reported their postmenstrual energy, ambition, sexual desire and approach to the world as some of the most positive of their lives (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996), expressing relief that the 'blood years' were behind them and that the menopause was not as bad as expected (Perz & Ussher, 2008). Indeed, an air of ambivalence towards the menopause surrounds some of the literature (Chrisler, 2007).

Perhaps this is the case and that the menopause is as uninteresting to the lives of female executives as some literature suggests. Yet some scholars urge caution before the menopause text is swiftly re-written, enabling, what is a deeply unfashionable subject, to again be ignored. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her denunciation of 'attitudinal' approaches to illness promoted in the United States, rejects the 'smile or die' approach to female health issues (2009). A study of leaders at peri menopausal age (broadly defined as 35-60 years, although typically experienced between 45-55 years) found organisational life characterized by "distraction, disruption, discomfort and distress" (Gavranich, 2011, p. 166). Disrupted sleep, increased anxiety and mood swings took their toll on leaders, with many women describing either the total, or impaired, ability to function at work (Simon & Reape, 2009). As Gavranich states, "it is unfortunate that the period of peri-menopause, when symptoms may be at their most severe, so often coincides with the time in a female leader's life when she is striving to maintain and perhaps advance her career" (Gavranich, 2011, p. 177). This is further borne out by a research study in 2010, which revealed that 'the change' is still something working women prefer to keep to themselves, out of embarrassment and fear of being seen as less competent (Griffiths, MacLennan & Wong, 2010). The study showed that nearly half of women going through the menopause have difficulty coping with symptoms at work; yet two thirds say they would not dream of disclosing their menopausal status to their bosses, male or female. In a similar vein, a poll of 1,009 women aged 50 to 60 carried out for Radio 4's Woman's Hour in 2018 found that nearly half of respondents said the menopause had affected their mental health, while a quarter said it made them want to stay at home. 70% of women did not make their employer aware they were experiencing symptoms and a third had not visited their

GP, remaining silent (www.bbc.co.uk: January, 2018).

However, it is as if centuries of medicalising women and their reproductive (or non-reproductive) bodies has cast a long shadow. For example, at the inaugural menopause conference in 2018, NAPO, the professional association representing Family Court and Probation Staff unveiled their recent menopause workplace recommendations. The leaflet, to be distributed to all staff, is headed 'Menopause is a Workplace Health and Safety Issue'. And the Chartered Institute of Professional Development's (CIPD) 2019 menopause report, 'Let's Talk Menopause', describes the menopause transition as a "long term health condition" (p. 19), raising the possibility of the legal classification of a "disability" (p. 10).

Towards an Empowering Narrative

In contrast to the view that the middle-aged woman is a victim to the ageing process, scholars propose that women are culturally astute (Haynes, 2012), consciously working their bodies to support the ongoing need for authority and credibility. They recognise cultural expectations and step into this terrain with their eyes open, recognising that it is in their self-interest to slow down the ageing process (Furman, 1997; Hurd Clarke, 2011). As the gerontologist Lesnoff-Caravaglia (1984) puts it, the determination of a woman of age to appear young is not born of vanity, but of the knowledge that power lies in youth. And considering that women are old as soon as they are no longer very young, it makes very good sense that women would, in their own self-interest, attempt to slow down the appearance of age. Whilst one might describe such actions as acceptance, rather than evidence of a 'progressive' narrative, it does portray the middle-aged woman gaining command over her destiny (or her appearance). In theorising empowerment for women over 50, Denmark and Klara describe it as "learning to redefine who we are and what we can do, to speak in our own voice, and to change the way we perceive our relationships to institutionalized power" (2007, p. 182). The same scholars refute the pessimistic nature of midlife, where change is characterized by deterioration, replacing it with a midlife narrative of

productivity and happiness, increased competence and a greater sense of identity (Denmark, et al., 2005; Denmark & Klara, 2007).

They are not alone in this depiction of the professional woman at midlife. In the last decade the midlife discourse has shifted towards a suggestion that women's midlife can be one of positive psychological transformation, with Gibbs (2005) finding that women, more specifically, middle and upper middle class and professional women, from 50's on, often experience the most fruitful and satisfying period of life. Far from being in decline, in one of the few academic books dedicated to women over 50, it is suggested, "midlife women stand at the forefront of a great transformation of cultural perceptions and attitudes. They are rejecting stereotypes, embracing new opportunities, and forming 'a new collective middle-aged identity'" (Chrisler & Muhlbauer, 2007, p.1). Challenging the notion that midlife for women should be defined by decay or "static rigidity" (Gullette, 2004, p. 23), negative views on ageing are now being questioned (Vaillant, 2012) with researchers finding evidence of increased creativity, cognitive, ethical and psychological development in older women (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Describing midlife as a stable time when new opportunities emerge (Wray, 2007), there is an increasing urgency to replace such a negative narrative with one of progress – or at least a *different* narrative that recognises heterogeneity and of different experiences (Trethewey, 2001; Gullette, 2004).

At the same time, scholars are questioning the usefulness of theories that presume "older women and men are left with little option but to identify with and simultaneously resist the ageing process" (Biggs, 2003, p. 55), whilst the centrality of appearance in the psychic make-up of the middle-aged woman is as much questioned. In a number of studies, women at midlife report an ease, a comfort and a confidence in their looks (Deeks & McCabe, 2001; Burns & Leonard, 2005; Chrisler, 2007; Perz & Ussher, 2008), although some research suggests this freedom from negative self-evaluation is only achieved after the age of 75 years (Oberg & Thornstam, 1999). Furthermore, scholars report that, far from regretting their (perceived) loss of looks or midlife invisibility, women attain a freedom in midlife from the gendered and sexual selves they have spent much of their life constructing (Greer, 1991) and a liberty from

shedding the “unattainable ideals, constant surveillance and body work” (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013, p. 26). Taking this one step further, Isopahkala-Bouret’s research on middle aged female executives reported that the increase in noticeable signs of ageing, coupled with the decrease in perceived sexuality, enabled the qualifications and competence of the older woman to be more visible. That is, she concludes, professional authority and credibility can increase as a result of looking older (2017). This is in contrast to Trethewey’s research with professional middle-aged women. Although her respondents talk about experience and respect accruing with the passing of time, “what was less common was to hear women speak of midlife in terms of power” (2001, p. 211).

Whilst celebrating the shifting perspective for the woman at midlife, some scholars urge caution in believing that the constraints which have historically restricted the professional middle age woman from positions of power have been extinguished (Trethewey, 2001; Muhlbauer, 2007; Evans, 2017). For example, a word that is used throughout a number of studies exploring the positive aspects of midlife is that of ‘freedom’. Well-being at this third stage of life appears to be associated with ‘freedom’ from children, a ‘freer lifestyle’ for women in their 50’s and the “diminishing role of mothering” (Muhlbauer, 2007, p. 97). This stage of a women’s career has also been described as one of orderliness and stability (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), with professional women at midlife entering a stage of confidence and agentic independence, looking forward to “new freedoms and to a new level of autonomy with an increased focus on self rather than on primarily giving service to others” (Pringle & Dixon, 2003, p. 297). In contrast, recent research indicates that the female leaders, if they have children at all, have them late in their careers (Coleman, 2011), whilst at the same time potentially juggling the care of parents, partners and siblings (Almeida & Horn, 2005; Ackerman & Banks, 2007; Jarvie, et al., 2015). In such cases, freedom is not necessarily a word the contemporary professional older woman might identify with. These themes of caring and middle-aged motherhood, and their impact on career decisions at midlife, will be explored further in Chapter Five.

The Imprint of the Midlife Narratives

Looking towards the experience of midlife for the professional middle-aged woman, the influence of the existing narratives is significant. Firstly, scholars contend that the decline perspective enables the system to remain unchanged, with the woman responsible (or at fault) for her own issues within an organisation (Trethewey, 2001; Hodges, 2012). That is, the so-called “burden of change” rests on the individual, not the system (Ragins, et al. 1998, p. 36). When reasons for the persistent stubbornness in women breaking through to the top positions are examined, systemic inequalities are addressed in some research, including an inhospitable culture for women, a lack of sponsorship and mentoring or ineffective networks for female executives (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004; Acker, 2006; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Perrons, 2016). Under this culture perspective, the problem does not necessarily lie with the individual woman, but with attitudes and subtle barriers in the organisation, which foster an uncongenial corporate climate, relying on the woman to change her style to ‘fit’ the normative male one (Ragins, et al., 1998; Terjesen, et al. 2009). However, it is as common for policy and practitioner recommendations to focus on individual employees, encouraging women to sell themselves, build their confidence, address their self-esteem, manage their networks and ‘lean in’. Whilst this approach helpfully aids women to understand how to ‘play the promotion game’ (Singh, et al, 2002), it can also focus on women’s supply characteristics, which are assumed to be deficient, rather than a thorough questioning of the prevailing elite and masculine employment culture (Sandberg, 2012; Darnell & Gadiesh, 2013; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Perrons, 2016; Evans, 2017).

Furthermore, for the ageing professional woman, this approach towards ‘individual entrepreneurialism’ can of course mean that she takes her career into her own hands and finds an individualized solution – that is, she exits the ‘system’ (Trethewey, 2001; Gordon et al., 2002; Terjesen, 2005; Hodges, 2012). Little attention is paid to the career decisions of those at midlife, with diversity initiatives and mentoring opportunities directed towards younger women within the leadership pipeline,

explored further in Chapter Five. With terms such as what Gergen calls ‘The Disappearance Act’ (2007, p. vi), Trethewey, “The Corporate Flight” (2001, p. 192) or even “gender asbestos” (Maitland & Wittenberg-Cox, 2009, in Hodges, 2012, p. 189), scholars are characterising how the ‘invisible’ middle aged woman is exiting corporate life. But is the lack of acknowledgement of such a trend perpetuating high costs for both the organisation and the individual involved?

For example, many respondents in Hodges’ study of 100 female executives, aged between 46-60, who had moved from a corporate career into self-employment, were keen to emphasise their growth in “competence, self-esteem and confidence” (2012, p. 193). Such a move enabled opportunities for autonomy and to be authentic in their lives (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Carradus, 2014). This might, of course, give legitimacy to the developing, positive trajectory in research, yet there is a more fundamental debate to be had here as to why the women exited the employed workplace. Respondents cited one of the reasons for their dissatisfaction and disenchantment with their workplaces as “being penalised because of their appearance and sexuality... the issue was that they felt they were no longer acceptable to the organisation” (p. 192). Such experiences echo scholarly findings emphasising how the ageing, non-reproductive body is both unacceptable and problematic in the workplace (e.g. Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2000; Gatrell, 2011b, 2013, 2014).

It is also worth considering how free women were to make this choice. Research suggests otherwise, describing the transition to self-employment as a ‘constrained choice’, restricted by gender biased organisational structures, policies and procedures, as well as stereotypical views of gender roles (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Pompper, 2011). Whilst the phrase ‘opting out’ might be a way to blame women for leaving their organisation (Stone, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013), the collective effect of such ‘opting-out’ of organisations is likely to be a loss of women’s representation in powerful professional positions, and a perpetuation and entrenchment of current gender inequalities and occupation segregation (Eickhof, 2012; Centre for Women in Democracy, 2014). And so, a more complex picture is emerging from the research for this age group, with the remarkably slow pace of progress for senior female executives

within an organisation contrasting with the exponential increase in women at midlife transitioning to self-employment and female entrepreneurship (Terjesen, 2005; Hodges, 2012).

Finally, it is argued in the literature that the ageist/sexist unequal relationship is so embedded in our society, it structures the consciousness of older women, who might create a self-fulfilling prophecy as to their own weakened embodied status (Furman, 1997; Young, 2005). In qualitative studies, midlife women describe their bodies as ‘unattractive’, ‘asexual’, ‘yuck’ and ‘lazy’, (Deeks & McCabe, 2001; Maguire, 2008) dwelling on the indignity of the middle-aged body and its lamentable divergence from the youthful norm. As women are so used to be ‘watched’ by others, with every part of their bodies objectified, found fault with and then ‘fixed’ with solutions (Furman, 1997; Twigg, 2013), it can be perhaps expected that women report equal distress at midlife with their hair, their clothes, their bodily parts, their faces. Similarly, in her interviews with older women, fifty years plus, Twigg recalls being struck by the sense of sadness and regret that permeated their stories, with interviewees describing a “cultural exile from femininity” (2013, p. 62).

Reflecting on the considerable levels of self-dislike, Twigg indicates a widespread sense that older bodies are unattractive and best kept covered up, with the possibility that, if the ageing body is held to be inadequate, so too, by extension, might professional women at midlife hold themselves to be inadequate (Furman, 1997; Twigg, 2013). Levy (2009) proposed a ‘stereotype embodiment theory’ that outlined the ways individuals assimilate stereotypes of aging from the surrounding culture, which leads to self-definitions that influence functioning and health. Following this theory, an older woman in this culture is likely to have internalized the expectation that her bones are weak, her joints painful, her muscles failing, her stamina increasingly limited. According to Levy (2009), internalized expectancies become self-fulfilling prophecies that lead individuals to circumscribe their activities and, perhaps, contribute to the very loss of physical capacity contained in the expectations. Young implies the same in her essay, ‘Throwing Like a Girl’: “I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we frequently have about our cognitive or

leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body's capacity" (2005, p. 45), further suggesting that the young girl who has learned to actively hamper her movements, to not get hurt, dirty or take risks, develops into an older woman with body timidity (Young, 2005).

Closing Remarks to Chapter Two

Although the emphasis on the 'new' identities of middle aged women celebrates this life stage, several organisational constraints remain intact, with the common conceptions of the experience of women over 45 years remaining unchallenged and continuing to be seen through a masculine lens (Muhlbauer, 2007). With women's ageing bodies portrayed throughout history as inherently weak and deficient (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011), research has long posited that it is in the interests of the continuation of the patriarchy that this continues (Höpfl, 2000; Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Evans, 2017). Levine-Clark suggested the framework for gendered employment legislation started here, with the female body believed to be biologically unstable, women could not be treated in the same way as their able-bodied men (2004). Ehrenreich and English suggest, "It was a world view, which proceeded from the Market, from the realm of the economic, or 'public life'. It was by its nature external to women, capable of seeing them only as 'others' or aliens" (2005, p. 526).

And so, from this starting point of the literature review into the research surrounding the experience of middle aged women in organisations from the perspective of their embodied status, it is worth exploring more fully the notion mentioned above of the potential for embedded resistance to women in power. In Chapter Three, the history of the medicalisation of women's bodies is investigated – particularly the ageing body – highlighting the literature surrounding on the entrenched doctrines of female inferiority and the contemporary reverberations with regards to the executive status of the older female executive.

CHAPTER THREE

Who Makes Women Sick? The historical medicalisation of the older woman and contemporary reverberations

“It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, etcetera, if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right”
(Suffragist Lucy Stone in 1855, quoted in Wolf, p.11, 1991)

Introduction

In Doyal’s book, ‘What makes Women Sick?’ (1995), she reports on a number of different factors that cause ill-health for women, including marriage, domestic violence, sex, reproduction and waged work. A further, and concurrent question, pertinent to this chapter, might be ‘*Who* makes Women Sick?’ for in reading the literature surrounding the medicalisation of the female reproductive body from the Ancient Greeks through to the current day, it is not hard to reach the conclusion that throughout history, the female body has been pathologised for political gain, profit and social control (Martin, 1989; Wolf, 1991; Levine Clark, 2004; Ehrenreich & English, 2005; Gatrell, 2008; Annandale, 2009). Therefore, this chapter looks backwards first, in order to look forwards and better understand present attitudes towards older female executives. It explores how history has cast a long attitudinal shadow, particularly towards middle-class women, who were most at risk of challenging the patriarchal status quo.

A brief history of Female Anatomy and ‘Inferiority’

Whilst much of the feminist literature regarding the medicalisation of women’s bodies considers the early Victorian days as the turning point for the male domination of female health (e.g. Gallagher & Lacquer, 1987; Russett, 1989), women have been stigmatised as biologically inferior since the Ancient Greeks (e.g. Bullough, 1973; O’Faolain & Martines, 1973; Maclean, 1980). The writings of Aristotle and Galen formed the basis of ‘scientific’ discussion on women’s bodies from the fourth century

B.C. through to the eighteenth century with their theories focusing around the concept of heat, which was of primary importance to the Hippocratic school of thought. Because men's reproductive organs were outside of their body, they were considered warmer and superior. As women's organs were considered to be a reversal of the male organs, yet located inside their bodies, they were considered cooler animals, with only those embryos with sufficient heat being able to develop into fully human form – the male form. The rest became female, otherwise known as 'monstrosities', considered less than fully formed and literally half-baked (Martin, 1992; Weitz, 2003). From this ancient starting point, the male body was considered the norm and the female an inferior version of it (Nettleton, 2006).

The inverted female organs were re-drawn by Da Vinci in the 15th century and repeated by Vesalius in the 16th century – widely regarded as the founder of modern anatomy. Despite rejecting the ancient view that sex differences pervade the body, Vesalius accepted that the female reproductive organs were “imperfect, inverted and internal” and therefore inferior (Schiebinger, p. 42, 1987). Whilst there were stirrings of a challenge to women's supposed inferiority by mid 17th century, with some scientists arguing that women might be considered “completely human”, this movement was small and overwhelmed by the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century (Schiebinger, 1987, p. 46; Smith 1976; Merchant 1980). A scholar of 18th century anatomy, Schiebinger argues that it was in the context of the attempt to define the subordinate position of women in European society that the first skeletons appeared in European science, with the depiction of the smaller female skull used to prove that women's intellectual capabilities were inferior to that of men. She continues, “this scientific measure of women's lesser ‘natural reason’ was used to buttress arguments against women's participation in the public spheres of government and commerce, science and scholarship. The larger female pelvis was used in parallel fashion to prove that women were naturally destined for motherhood, the confined sphere of hearth and home” (1987, p. 43). Indeed, as Martin argues, the structures and functioning of the anatomy are often understood in ways that mirror ideas about the wider society and economy (1992). And certainly, from the 18th century the physical became increasingly tied to the moral, which penetrated social theory. Or, as Fausto-

Sterling intimates three centuries later, “this continuous interplay between the biological and the social means that components of our political, social and moral struggles become, quite literally, embodied, and incorporated into our very physiological being” (2000, p.5).

Such ‘proven’ anatomical facts of difference, used to prescribe different roles for men and women in the social hierarchy, stepped up a gear in the Victorian era as women became strongly associated with their irrational, unstable bodies and men with their rational, stable minds (Haller & Haller, 1974; Rosenburg, 1975; Annandale, 2009). Influential philosophers joined with anatomists in strengthening the growing association of masculinity with reason and science, and femininity with feeling and the moral sphere of the home (Schiebinger, 1987). With the ascent of science, the professionalization of medicine and the exclusion of the female midwives from their traditional birthing role, women were firmly placed out of reach of status, power and control (Wolf, 1991; Ehrenreich & English, 2005). By 1842, legislation prevented much industrial labour for women and girls, justified on the grounds of public health. Scholar Levine-Clark suggests the framework for gendered employment legislation started here, with the female body believed to be biologically unstable, women could not be treated in the same way as their able-bodied men (Levine Clark, 2004). Ehrenreich and English suggest, “It was a world view, which proceeded from the Market, from the realm of the economic, or ‘public life’. It was by its nature external to women, capable of seeing them only as ‘others’ or aliens” (2005, p. 526).

Feminist scholars argue that such “obsessive concern on women as organs of reproduction” is no coincidence during this historical period (Showalter, 1987, p. 18). From the 1850’s, this was a time of intense feminist agitation and the ‘woman question’ an ongoing social crisis. Showalter notes that during the decades from 1870 to 1910, middle class women were beginning to organize on behalf of higher education, entrance to the professions and political rights. Simultaneously, claims regarding the female nervous disorders of anorexia nervosa, hysteria, and neurasthenia became epidemic; and the Darwinian ‘nerve specialist’ arose to dictate “proper

feminine behaviour outside the asylum as well as in... and to oppose women's effort to change the condition of their lives" (1987, p. 18). But the feminist challenge was sweeping, embracing education and occupation and challenging their legal, political and social status. With the passing of the Married Women's Property Act (1882), the opening of higher education and the creation of the nationwide suffrage movement, women were steadily contradicting the 'cult' of true womanhood. The idealised image of 'The Angel in the House' based on Coventry Patmore's poem (1854-62) - that is, the Victorian notion of the devoted, submissive, self-sacrificing woman (Russett, 1989; Oakley, 1985; Gatrell, 2008) – was slowly being overturned.

Proving the Gender Difference

Scientists responded to this unrest with a detailed and sustained examination of the differences between men and women that justified their differing social roles. Through anatomy and physiology, evolutionary biology, physical anthropology, psychology and sociology, scientists evolved comprehensive theories of sexual difference. Centuries old evidence regarding the conservation of energy, sexual selection, physiological differences and the frailty of the female reproductive body was reworked - theories to ensure women remained 'sick', inferior and subservient to the natural order (Laquer, 1990; Russett, 1989; Ehrenreich & English, 2005; Nettleton, 2006). As the 20th century dawned, neurologists entered into this debate. Not only was Dr. Charles L. Dana anxious "that the upper half of the female spinal cord was a little on the light side for politics" (Dana, 1915, quoted in Fine, 2010, p.20), but brain scientists infamously proposed that women's intellectual inferiority stemmed from their smaller and lighter brains, becoming known as 'the missing five ounces of the female brain' (Russett, 1989; Fine, 2010). As Russett notes, "The doctrine of female inferiority wore the habiliments of long familiarity: it was consonant with everything that scientists, like other men, learned about women from childhood. It was preached from the pulpits and explained and justified the existing disparities of the sex role. Men's lives would be immensely complicated by any abdication of women from the sanctuary of the home. Moreover, the stability of the established social order appeared

at risk. Hence women's derogation of duty was not just personal but societal" (1989, p. 203).

Morally, however, women had been transformed from the early religious tracts of being 'morally sick' to being morally superior. Upheld as "sexually perfect" (Schiebinger, 1989, p. 53), Darwin equally lauded women's "greater tenderness and less selfishness" as opposed to men's "ambition which passes too easily into selfishness" (Darwin, 1900, p. 586). Women's distinctive moral qualities, those of feeling and instinct, permitted men to 'benevolently' enable women to fulfil their natural destiny as mothers and conservators of custom in the confined sphere of home (Schiebinger, 1989; Wolf, 1991). Nothing was as important as motherhood, or as President Roosevelt told a gathering of women: "The good mother, the wise mother... is more important to the community than even the ablest man, her career is worthier of honor and is more useful to the community than the career of any man, no matter how successful". Authoritatively, he urged women to do their duty as wife and mother, earning "the right to our contempt" should she shirk such moral duty (Roosevelt, 1908).

Despite the granting of suffrage after the first world war (in some but not all countries) and the growth of women's international activism post the first world war, many historians are in agreement that there was a highly conservative reaction against feminist goals in the interwar years (Noakes, 2007; Sharp & Stibbe, 2017). Thrust back into work during the second world war, with over 7 million women involved in war work at its peak, women had their horizons limited as the war ended (Noakes, 2010). With the dawn of the postwar era and men demobilized, western economies faced a crisis with both the US and British governments needing to counter fears that soldiers would return to an employment market saturated by women (Oakley, 1985; Friedan, 1982; Wolf, 1991, Ehrenreich & English, 2005). Women's 'moral duty' was again called to the fore, urging women back into the home and prompting them towards marriage, childrearing and homemaking. Whether reflecting or determining the 'zeitgeist', women's magazines can be viewed as a powerful agent for changing women's roles manipulating housewives into becoming insecure consumers of

household products (Oakley, 1985; Winship, 1987; Wilson & Taylor, 1989). “A transfer of guilt must be achieved,” read marketing reports of this period (Wolf, 1991, p. 64).

Medicalising the Older Woman

Turning towards the age group under investigation in this study, scholar Watkins hailed the 1950's as beginning of a new age, where medical views and cultural circumstances converged to create a climate in which female ageing became the target of treatment. The menopause was the obvious target. Full-page advertising campaigns for oestrogen (named Estrogen in the United States) products ran repeatedly in the pages of medical journals often depicting menopausal women as “mercurial and capricious” (Watkins, 2007, p. 58). A woman's self-esteem, marriage, and familial relationships were all considered to be vulnerable during menopause. Abbott, a pharmaceutical company, ran an advertisement for its Estrone that showed a drawing of an older woman weeping over a sketch of herself at a younger age, ‘the girl *she* left behind’ (Watkins, 2007, p. 59). Postwar advertisements continued to assert the centrality of the physician in managing the menopause and the message was clear – menopause was a deficiency disease and older women were vulnerable, distressed, incapable of dealing with their jobs and family – and in need of medical help. The imagery used in the advertisements appears significant too, with older women portrayed as physically unattractive, as well as tense, anxious and irritable. As important, women are shown to be a negative drain on their husbands (Watkins, 2007). (Ironically, the advertisement shown below appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association as late as 1975, the very same year designated by the United Nations as International Women's Year).



(Retrieved from www.naturopathica.com.au. 23.1.19)

Although the oestrogen manufacturers vied for their share of the menopause marketplace, the real competition in the 1950's and 1960's came from manufacturers of sedatives, who began to advertise their drugs for the relief of menopausal symptoms, promising to relieve depression, anxiety and restore self-esteem (Smith, 1991; Healey, 1997; Speaker, 1997). Although the most popular, Librium and Valium turned out to be habit forming, they were hailed as 'miracle drugs' for the stresses of the menopause. Quick to ensure their marketplace lasted, drug companies recognised that post-menopause could be defined as a chronic state of deficiency, and of course, medical management. As Watkins states, "because post-menopause lasted for the rest of a woman's life, the medical, cultural and economic implications of this premise were enormous" (p. 67, 2005).

By the end of the 1970's, women's independence gathered momentum and half of all women were working (although at much lower wages than men). As Ehrenreich states, "for the first time in history women could imagine that if they left home – or were cast out – they would survive and even thrive" (2005, p. 342). Subject to feminist interrogation, women's natural inclinations, moral duties and submission to medical experts were challenged (e.g. Frankfort, 1972; Weisstein, 1971; Dreifus, 1978; Ehrenreich, 1978).

Given this history, it is unsurprising that the Woman's movement has been dubbed "the only successful revolution of the twentieth century" (Denby, 1996, p. 392) with some scholars suggesting that complete gender equality is on the cusp of being achieved (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Jackson, 2006). They suggest that with a number of potent social and economic forces pushing inevitably in this direction, gender inequality is "fated to end" (Rudman & Glick, 2008, p. 286). With women being educated about their bodies and attitudes changing, it is little wonder scholars suggest the "gender script is finally being splintered" (Annandale, 2009, p. 111).

Yet in contrast, scholars suggest that centuries of medicalising women and women's reproductive bodies have enabled pervasive gender schema and stereotypes to flourish. Rudman and Glick suggest that such categorisations, "act like an invisible force field that shapes people's own behaviours as well as their interpretations of others behaviour, in myriad ways. Like a cultural virus, stereotypes pressure people to act in ways that perpetuate the disease...the result is a slow pace of change" (p. 294, 2008). So much so, that rather than 'splintering the script', there is evidence from the biological, physical, neurological and social fields, that such scripts are in danger of being repeated (Evans, 2017).

Fast forwarding to the twenty-first century, scholars argue that the reproductive body remains a problem, even when past its reproductive cycle, with women's 'unreliable' pregnant bodies presented in contrast to the stable, bounded, male 'norm' (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Evans, 2002; Gatrell, 2011b). Gatrell's challenge to the belief that pregnant women are prone to take sick leave (2011b) chimes with similar challenges to inherent beliefs that older people take more sick leave and menopausal women are emotionally unstable and unable to control themselves (e.g. Annandale & Clark, 1996; Ehrenreich & English, 2005; Fineman, 2011). The female body, whether pregnant, not pregnant or menopausal, is still regarded as 'deficient' and 'associated with illness', extending beyond the actual assessment of physical health, leading to negative evaluations of women's all-round functioning and intellect (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000; Evans, 2002; Gatrell, 2011). If there is a desire to erase the maternal body

from the workplace (Gatrell, 2011a; 2011b), this has been given additional credence with the much publicised ‘benefit’ by large corporates to their female employees for egg freezing – or, as Yvonne Roberts writes in *The Observer*, “motherhood to suit the marketplace” (2015). As scholars suggest, “a facet of western assumptions about the body is the view that women, unlike men, cannot emancipate themselves from the passions, desires and needs of the body” (Evans, 2002, p.9).

Female Stereotyping and Leadership

In a throwback to the Victorian days, women also remain bounded to the association with intuitive, rather than reasoned action. Centuries of associating the female body with eroticism, frailty, passivity and softness, and the male body with power, manliness, struggle and dynamism have enabled men to represent rationality, with women representing the losing of control, or the losing of rationality (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000). Cross-cultural studies reveal the pervasiveness and permanence of such character traits, indicating that people across the globe associate men with agency, power and dominance and women with nurturance, succorance and deference. Across nations, men are still associated with power and status and women with ‘likeability’ – that is, people like women, but have greater respect for men (Williams & Best, 1990; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Wojciszke, 2005; Rudman & Glick, 2008).

Social role theory suggests that such stereotypes are to be expected, serving an ideological purpose for the continuation of traditional gender roles (Rudman & Glick, 2008; Fine, 2010), ergo with women’s link to child rearing, people associate women with communal traits (e.g. helpful, nurturing and kind). Similarly, social role theory attributes stereotypes of men as more assertive, competitive and aggressive to their nondomestic work roles. The so-called “proper places” for men and women, that support the ideals of a modern family system, also support an economic system and social formation (Annandale, 2009, p. 110). Like other forms of knowledge, stereotypes are part of each individual’s ‘cultural heritage’, learned early in life, before

people have the cognitive maturity to reject them (Devine, 1989; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Nosek, Banaji & Greenwald, 2002). Because they are so well learned, so early, people are quick to categorise others and also make rapid, automatic and involuntary stereotypical judgement (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995; Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Rudman, Greenwald & McGhee, 2001; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). Critical to the context of female executives is the nature of ‘backlash’ that happens when the stereotypical rules are flouted (Faludi, 1991; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), hence the strong resistance to working women, conceived as ‘bad mothers’ (Gatrell, 2011a; Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2004;).

This is, of course, heightened when age is added to gender. Whilst research demonstrates that men are equal victims of backlash, unfairly teased or ostracized for supposed effeminate behaviour or ‘weaknesses’ that undermine their male status (Berdahl, 2007a), evidence suggests backlash is most lethal when older women flout the gender ‘rules’ by exercising power, inciting discomfort and derision (Lips, 1991; Klein, 2005; Remnick, 2005). Take, for example, Hilary Clinton as she began to wield power in her husband’s administration, depicted on the cover of *Spy* magazine with her skirt billowing up, a la Marilyn Monroe, but revealing a large penis. In 2015, M&S executive Wade-Gery prompted disapproval and warnings across the press for having a baby at 50. As prompted in *The Guardian*, “In becoming a mother at 50, Wade-Gery is flouting the speculation, pressure and judgment that are brought down on any woman who dares act outside the prescribed template” (Bidisha, 2015).

The continuation of female stereotyping, particularly when age is considered, merits further consideration for it goes some way to explaining the lack of female executive dominance in the leadership field (Heilman, 1993, 2001; Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). As the communal traits assigned to women are considered low-status traits, agentic traits assigned to men are high-status traits (Ridgeway, 2001; Fiske et al., 2002) and there is an ongoing call for women to act ‘more like men’ in order to break the glass ceiling (Karpf, 2006; Carney, et al. 2015). However, “disconfirming female stereotypes is necessary but not sufficient to

clear the hurdle, because when women present themselves as self-confident, assertive and competitive to be viewed as qualified for leadership roles, they risk backlash for having violated prescriptive stereotypes of feminine niceness” (Rudman & Glick, 2008, p. 161).

Reports in the popular press and academic literature point to the potential existence of a female leadership advantage, with the demand in modern business for a less autocratic, more participative style of leadership favourable to women (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Appelbaum, et al., 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2003, 2007; Paustian-Underdahl, et al., 2014). The rise of so-called ‘transformational leadership’ has led some scholars to see a natural fit for women in such a leadership role, as Hoyt summarises: “the transformational leadership can be a particularly effective style for women as it is not a distinctly masculine style, it encompasses traditionally feminine behaviors such as being considerate and supportive, and it is associated with leadership effectiveness” (p. 485, 2010). Yet other scholars are wary of such a direction, seeing problems with further gender stereotyping taking shape in the modern leadership world by placing pressure on people to ‘do gender’ by associating with different traits (Stead & Elliott, 2009). Moreover, if women remain associated with sensitivity, modesty and warmth, this ‘niceness prescription’ potentially handicaps women as they compete with men in the workplace, exercise authority in a directive fashion or criticise subordinates without paying the high price of backlash (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2008). Such benevolent sexism remains a barrier to gender equality, particularly as it is associated with ‘nice’, positive traits (Judge et al. 2011; King, et al. 2012; Biernat, et al. 2012). With practical advice handed out to women to “combine communal qualities such as warmth and friendliness with agentic qualities including exceptional competence and assertive” (Hoyt, p. 487, 2010), it can be argued the ‘medicalisation’ script is merely being replayed here, just as “the feminization of feeling and the masculinization of reason was produced and reproduced by specific divisions of labour and power in European society” (Schiebinger, p. 72, 1989). As Stead argues, “women’s sharing of power... is likely to be interpreted as the behaviour of a ‘selfless giver’ who ‘likes helping’ –

behaviour which is likely to be conflated not only with femininity but also with selfless giving and motherhood” (Stead & Elliott, p. 28, 2009).

Adding to the character style and trait arguments, the Victorian script is being replayed by contemporary neurologists and psychologists who argue for the essential differences in the brain mapping of men and women (Fine, 2010). Scholars contend the female brains propensity for understanding other’s thoughts and feelings suits them for occupations that professionalise women’s traditional caring roles, with the gender gap having neurological and hormonal roots (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Brizendine, 2007; Pinker, 2008). Hardwired differently from men, Pinker challenges the assumed desire of women for equality in the workplace, asserting their preference for family over career (2008).

Interestingly, this continuation of masculine and feminine leadership traits, or empathy vs. systemization, comes at a time when research is demonstrating little difference between male and female leadership styles (Schaffer, 2008; Zenger & Folkman, 2012; Paustian-Underdahl, et al. 2014). A meta-analysis summarising gender differences in perceptions of leadership effectiveness across 99 independent samples from 95 studies showed that, when all leadership contexts are considered, men and women do not differ in perceived leadership effectiveness (Paustian-Underdahl, et al. 2014). Additionally, it was found that as the percent of female raters increased, female leaders were seen as more effective than men - perhaps confirming social dominance theory that predicts because men gain the most material benefits by maintaining the status quo, they will hold more highly prescriptive gender attitudes than women (Rudman & Glick, 2008). Consultants Zenger & Folkman analysed 7,280 360-degree studies to find women rated more highly than men at all management levels and on 12 of their identified 16 leadership traits, including those traditionally associated with male leadership such as drive and initiative (2012). Equally, research demonstrates that majority of women do not claim to have a predominantly empathizing focus, with the female empathic advantage becoming smaller as it becomes less obvious that it is something to do with empathy that is being assessed (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Schaffer, 2008).

Closing Remarks to Chapter Three

In summary, it is perhaps unsurprising that researchers continue to warn about congratulating ourselves on diversity and losing sight of the ‘body battles’ that are still being fought today (Evans, 2002, 2017; Nettleton, 2006). The ongoing medicalisation of the reproductive, and non-reproductive, body enables the identification of female executives with vulnerability, and places women squarely back in the patriarchy. The labelling as ‘feminine’ the skills and behaviours drawn on to execute household tasks and rear children as transferable to leadership, potentially renders older female executives in a deferential position. We might be wise to heed the subtler, or ‘second generation’ gender biases that persist in organisations and in society and disrupt the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader (Ibarra & Petrigleri, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ely & Rhode, 2010; Ely et al. 2011). The legacy of centuries of ‘making women sick’ has, researchers suggest, erected “powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage” (Ibarra, et al. 2013). Or as feminist campaigner Criado-Perez has asserted: “No one seems to notice that women are routinely silenced. It’s a very dishonest engagement” (Williams, 2015).

In exploring the embodied status of the older female executive and the historical medicalisation of their bodies, a continuous thread in this literature review so far is the menopause. As the single biological event that happens to all women (whether or not they recognise or notice it), it has been recognised for centuries as the organic signifier of middle age. As depicted in this chapter, the menopause has often been used for political or social gain and an instrument for controlling older women, specifically through the presentation of their bodies as irrational, vulnerable and emotionally suspect. This has resonance for middle aged female executives in today’s

organisational world. What remains worth exploring further in the next chapter are the myths and the facts surrounding this biological event, that appears to be shrouded in controversy and confusion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Menopause: ‘Facts’ and Frictions

“Clearly the menopause is disabling for some women, and inconvenient or minimally disruptive for others. We need high-quality information about our choices, and honesty about what we don’t know and aren’t sure of. The menopause has been made a disease and opened a marketing opportunity, and the resulting misinformation has served us all badly” (McCartney, 2015)

Introduction

Since the start of this study in 2014, the subject of the menopause has received an increase in academic attention (for example, Jack, et al., 2016; Hardy, et al. 2018b; Hardy, et al., 2019; Rees, et al., 2019; Geukes, et al., 2019), governmental consideration (Brewis et al., 2017); industry body recognition (CIPD, 2019) and media reporting (for example, Radio 4 Woman’s Hour, 2018). This noticeable growth of curiosity in the subject is concomitant with practitioner involvement and some organisations, such as Eon, PepsiCo and the Police Force designing menopause workplace policies (www.menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk). Yet academics still agree that the menopause remains a ‘taboo’ subject for much of the population (Hardy, et al., 2019; Rees, et al., 2019) with the suggestion that “the first years of the 21st century lead to menopause becoming an unmentionable subject with women’s concerns and symptoms not being heeded despite national and international guidelines” (Rees, et al., 2019). Yet considering the menopausal transition for the female executive is critical, particularly as related earlier when the male ageing process is understood within the social context, a woman’s is firmly tied to a biological process, her menopause (Foxcroft, 2009).

Studying the menopause poses a problem for a researcher since it is “neither uniformly described nor universally experienced and positive evidence of its actual occurrence is not immediately available for study” (Formanek, 1990, p. 216). Current debates on the menopause demonstrate this complex array of interested parties spanning physicians and pharmaceutical manufacturers, medical and nonmedical researchers,

feminist scholars, anthropologists, social scientists, industry bodies, the media and consumers (Goodman, 1990), all with their individual case to argue. As Formanek suggests, “each discipline has its own way of conceptualizing phenomena and its own approach to the creation of new knowledge. Thus no one discipline can claim that only knowledge produced by its methods has validity” (p.150, 1990; Kaufert, 1989). Yet, as researchers grapple with issues of ageing, of identity and of health, the study of the menopause is of critical value to the understanding of the experience of women at mid-life. It is as important for women to understand the workings of their bodies, to overcome stereotypes about middle aged women and, perhaps, as Goodman states, “to call attention to the dangers of treating menopause itself as a disease” (p. 2455, 1990).

Media reporting of the menopause is as important to consider in this chapter alongside academic research, commonly being the primary source of information for women and representing the frustrating levels of obfuscation that continue to surround the experience of menopause. An example is the extensive media publicity following the publication of two academic studies, from the US (Avis, et al. 2015) and the UK (Collaborative Group of Epidemiological Studies of Ovarian Cancer, 2015). The US study followed 1,449 pre- and post-menopausal women reporting frequent vasomotor (hot flushes and night sweats) symptoms, that is, more than six self-reported incidents in a week. The study found that, for these women, such symptoms lasted a maximum of 7.4 years, which, for no apparent reason, was extended to 12 to 14 years in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *Radio 2* and *The Telegraph*, (e.g. Donnelly, 2015), with consistent (and incorrect) reporting of long term ‘mood swings’. The UK Study was a detailed review of 52 previous studies involving 12,110 post-menopausal and demonstrated a statistically significant higher risk (43%) of ovarian cancer in current HRT users compared with HRT non-users, even in those with less than five years of HRT use. Reported again extensively in press and radio (e.g. Ward, 2015; BBC News, 2015) with ‘alerts’ for the ‘doubling of risk of ovarian cancer from HRT’ with scant mention of relative risk. This chapter will consider the menopause research, including the reporting of the research and consider the relevance of this to the experience of women at midlife in organisations.

It is proposed that this increased level of reporting of the menopause is to be expected with the so-called ‘demographic bulge’ of baby-boomers reaching menopause (Blake, 2006; Utz, 2011), leading one researcher to coin the phrase “meno-boomers” (p. 271, Barbre, 1990). On the one hand, this level of discussion is to be applauded. For too long, menopause has been shrouded in secrecy and shame (Barbre, 1990; Greer, 1991; McKinley, 2006) and public dialogue is welcome. On the other hand, for such a biological and lifecycle milestone, there is still an extraordinary lack of understanding of the menopause, with the inconsistency of ‘objective facts’ leaving some women in a position of disempowerment and confusion (Greer, 1991; Riessman, 2003). With the supposed ‘facts’ in the hands of medical practitioners and pharmaceutical companies, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a demand from feminist scholars “to alter the ownership, production and use of scientific knowledge” (Riessman, 2003, p. 60).

Defining the Menopause

As far as communicating what scientists agree on, this is limited it seems, to the definition of the menopause (Niland & Lyons, 2011). Menopause occurs when the ovary ceases to produce sufficient oestrogen to sustain the menstrual cycle, and, from this purely physiological perspective, all adult women are either premenopausal or postmenopausal. Premenopausal women menstruate regularly; with individual variations in cycle length and postmenopausal women no longer menstruate (Blake, 2006; Goodman, 1990). If a woman’s ovaries and uterus are surgically removed, menopause is immediate. Under natural circumstances, the decline in oestrogen levels with ageing eventually brings on the menopause, usually after a time of increasing menstrual irregularity. To differentiate this interim stage (either known as perimenopausal or, more recently, the menopause transition) from the true cessation of the menses, investigators, in agreement with the World Health Organisation, have agreed to a standard of 12 months of amenorrhea before applying the designation of natural menopause (WHO, 1986; 1991; Gold, 2000). This naturally occurs between

ages 45 and 55 when a woman reaches midlife (Natchgill & Heilman, 2000) with the mean age of inception of menopause being 47.5 years (Blake, 2006), and natural menopause being 51.3 years, as determined from prospective self-reporting by women. There does not appear to be any shift in the age of menopause transition and the only external factor identified that appears to accelerate the age of menopause is cigarette smoking (Kaufert, 1989; Blake, 2006; Hunter & Rendell, 2007). Whilst this sounds like a uniform biological experience, it actually occurs over a dynamic period of time, for the cessation of menses may be abrupt, brought about by surgery; it may be gradual, with the progressive extending of intervals between menses, and therefore only noted retrospectively months after the last period has occurred; or it may be imperceptible, simply no resumption of menstrual periods after a final pregnancy (Goodman, 1990; Blake, 2006).

From this point on, there is little commonality in the description, meaning or experience of the menopause, lending support to Greer's statement that "the enormous proliferation of menopause literature belies the utter lack of understanding of what is really going on" (1991, p. 5). Even the presumption that the menopause is regarded as an undeniable end of a woman's ability to procreate, has been challenged more recently by stem cell scientist Aubrey de Grey, who has said that rapid progress in stem cell and regenerative therapies means that current age limits on when women can conceive and give birth are likely to vanish (Grey, 2007). As the Chief Scientific Officer of the SENS (Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence) Foundation, it is fair to assume that credence is being given to de Grey's ideas. Even without stem cells, recognition is being given by scientists to the demand for new reproductive technologies, enabling older women to have children, with surrogacies and egg donations pushing age limits, challenging the assumed end of reproductive possibility (Friese, et al., 2008; Hourvitz, et al. 2009; O'Brien, et al., 2017; Pierce & Mocanu, 2018). Given that the age women are giving birth is steadily increasing each year (ONS, 2017), it is interesting to consider the effect on the workplace when the reproduction age is extended, and women are able to reproduce for a longer period of time and/or at a later age?

Symptoms and the Lived Experience

In the same vein, even a discussion about ‘symptoms’ or ‘treatment’ of the menopause gives rise to the argument that the very language medicalises a natural process (Bell, 1990; Riessman, 2003). In her paper discussing the ‘Menopausal Experience’, Cheryl Bowles explains this well: “Another problem in the study of menopause concerns the difference between the terms *experience* and *symptom*. A woman may have experiences she perceives as not being bothersome. Another woman may have similar experiences and perceive them as unpleasant and decide that they need medical intervention. The woman herself usually determines what experiences are defined as symptoms, although friends, family, lay and medical literature and the mass media, frequently help her. Yet menopause is part of the normal process of a woman’s life, not a disease, although symptoms of disease can arise and affect the normal menopause process” (p. 2909, 1990). Some academics within the medical field stress the positive aspects of the menopause (Hvas, 2001), emphasising that for the majority, symptoms of the menopause are only “moderately bothersome” with only 10-20% of women experiencing moderate to severe symptoms that are “problematic and negatively impact upon quality of life” (Hunter, et al. 2012, p. 41). In a number of qualitative studies, women respondents emphasise that the expectation is far worse than the reality (McKinley & Lyons, 1996; Deeks & McCabe, 2001), with post-menopausal women consistently across time viewing the experience more positively than premenopausal girls or adults (Neugarten, et al., 1963; Bowles, 1990; Greene, 1990).

Yet in an effort to gain an understanding of the experience of women at midlife, and specifically the efficacy of medical treatments, a discussion on symptoms feels like a necessary starting point. There is a typical constellation of symptoms that are reportedly associated with the menopause which include hot flushes and sweats (called Vasomotor symptoms), depressed mood, sleep disturbances, sexual concerns or problems, cognitive symptoms, vaginal dryness, urinary incontinence, loss of energy, dry skin and somatic or bodily pain hot flushes (i.e. Blake, 2006; Hunter &

Rendell, 2007; Studd, 2014; Brewis, et al., 2017). Described by some researchers as “universal phenomena” (Woods & Mitchell, 2005; Blake, 2006, p. 807), this is challenged by further anthropological and cross-cultural studies which demonstrate wide variations in the symptom perception and reporting in women from different ethnic origins living in different countries (Kowalcek, et al. 2004; Wray, 2007). For example, in a study of Mayan women, Beyene (1986) found a complete absence of the menopausal symptoms usually reported in Western Cultures. In Kaufert et al.’s (1992) work with women in Manitoba, some 40% of peri-menopausal women reported hot flushes and in a cross-sectional study of 1,746 Swedish women aged 40-66 randomly selected from a Census Register in Goteborg, the authors (Hagstad & Janson, 1986) noted that 40% of post-menopausal women reported that flushing was non-existent (Goodman, 1990). In Lock’s extensive work in Japan (1994), only 4% of Japanese women reported vasomotor symptoms, which, she suggests, is not surprising given the cultural norm of defining this stage of life by the term *konenki*. A holistic term, embodying a range of signs and symptoms, *konenki* “may be held responsible for various discomforts in a life passage, but it neither belongs exclusively to women, nor is it considered to be a medical problem” (Rapp, 1995, p.527). With the standard clinical studies assuming an incidence of symptoms of between 75% and 85% (Hunter, 1992; MacLennan, 2008; Bakour & Williamson, 2015) it demonstrates how precarious universal generalisations about menopausal events can be and how sensitive the collection of data is to the cultural context of the subjects studied.

Of these symptoms, considerable research argues that only the vasomotor disturbances (hot flushes and night sweats) are directly attributable to the menopause (Goodman, 1990; Hunter & Liao, 1995; Niland & Lyons, 2011; Hunter, et al. 2012). This is by no means to deny the breadth and depth of all other reported symptoms, except to relay the considerable (and complex) research that suggests all other indications conflate with age, lifestyle, emotional meaning, cause and effect of the vasomotor disturbance (i.e. sleep disruption), relationships or health history (Kittell et al. 1998; Morris & Symonds 2004; Blake, 2006; Mishra & Kuh, 2006; Hunter & Rendall 2007; Jack, et al. 2014; Griffiths & Hunter 2014). Given the extensive, and usually negative, media

reporting and anecdotal discussions surrounding the emotional experience of the menopause, and the effect on working women, this research is important. For example, feeling sad or depressed is a common reporting symptom for up to 30% of peri or post-menopausal women (Blake, 2006; Griffiths, et al., 2010; Studd, 2014). Yet additional research suggests limited biological evidence for the direct correlation between menopause and depression (i.e. Ballinger, 1987; Hunter, 1996; Gold, 2000), with research instead pointing to the history of depressive disorder, lifestyle stressors, attitude towards the menopause and ageing, and poor physical health being of more significance (Avis, et al. 1994; Guthrie, 2004; Blake, 2006; Ayers, 2010). The SWAN study (Gold, 2000), the Melbourne Study (Guthrie, 2004) and Avis' study all lend weight to the 'domino' theory, which suggests that depression and mood swings are likely to be a result of vasomotor symptoms, which result in sleep disturbance, leading to irritability and depression. This argument as to whether there is a direct causal link between the menopause and depression might appear semantic or even unhelpful. Yet as some scholars stress, defining the menopause as an oestrogen deficiency disease implies that the cause of depression lies in a woman's hormones, which has important implication for the way middle aged women's views and behaviours are perceived in the workplace (Hunter, 1996).

Even with vasomotor symptoms, the inextricable link between a biological function and the context within which it is experienced is clear, for there is marked variation in the duration, severity, and frequency of hot flushes and night sweats (Hunter & Rendell, 2007). Some research suggests that women of low socio-economic status and education and those who have higher BMI, who are cigarette-smokers and who have low levels of physical activity are more at risk of vasomotor symptoms (Hunter & Rendell, 2006; Blake, 2006; Utz, 2011). In a 2015 US study referenced at the start of this chapter (Avis, et al. 2015), the extended duration of the hot flushes and night sweats so widely reported, was specifically linked to low educational level and previously reported depressive symptoms and anxiety. Researchers meta-analysis of thirteen menopausal studies concluded that negative social attitudes and women's own negative attitudes towards menopause (particularly at the transition stage) appear to

affect symptom experience. Significantly, actual menopause experience appears to influence attitudes in a positive direction (Ayers, et al. 2010).

For working women, the correlation between stress and menopausal symptoms has been further explored. One study suggested that women who reported stressful jobs were those most likely to experience an earlier menopause (Cassou, et al., 2007) and another that women perceived stressed working conditions to be associated with a worsening of menopausal symptoms (Paul, 2003). A further study reported that levels of stress hormones in working postmenopausal women were lower if they were taking HRT (Deane, et al., 2002; SIRC, 2002). The picture is unclear if these women are in leadership positions or 'lower status' roles and whether this has an effect on the results. However, it has been suggested that women with further educational qualifications demonstrate more positive attitudes towards the menopause than those with fewer, and this may have implications for their psychological well-being through the transition period (Jennings, et al., 1984; Greer, 1991).

Several investigations, however, have indicated that it is broader life stressors at this stage of life that significantly increase the incidence and severity of psychological and physical symptoms, notably 'exit events', such as death or children leaving home (Greene & Cooke, 1980), with latter symptoms particularly acute for women whose roles focus solely on childbearing or childrearing (Datan, 1990). In contrast are those studies that suggest well-being is higher and depression lower in menopausal women whose children have left home than for those women living with young children (Bowles, 1990), with one author concluding that the "so-called crisis of the empty nest is more a collective myth than an experiential reality" (Greene, 1990, p. 1934). Adding to this picture and facing the reality of an increase in older mothers, Jarvie's recent study concludes: "It appears that for some women "renewal" of motherhood/mothering constituted a "renewal" of self in the face of impending menopause and diminution of mothering" (2015, p. 13).

This goes some way to understanding how and why the lived experience of the menopause gives rise to what Utz describes as 'idiosyncratic variations' for all

women. For not only does the experience depend on personal characteristics, but also on the social, cultural and historical contexts in which a woman is experiencing midlife (2011). It lends weight to the call by scholars to consider the menopause from a “bio-socio-psycho-cultural perspective” (Hunter & Rendall, 2007, p. 261), or simply put, more than just a medical challenge.

As described in the previous chapter, medicalisation of the female body is not new, and neither is it new with regards the menopause. Whilst the discovery of sex hormones in the 1920’s enabled physicians to understand, describe and explain menstruation and menopause (Formanek, 1990), until the end of the 17th century, amenorrhea, or ‘suppressed menstruation’ was viewed to be the chief cause of women’s illnesses (Rowland, 1981). By the 19th century, when women’s health was moving from the hands of women and midwives to those of male physicians, the menopause was already being viewed in two ways: potentially one of the most dangerous periods of a woman’s life (Burns, 1820), with treatment consisting of frequent bleedings and laxatives, to non-pathological by midwives (Playfair, 1880). What Formanek describes as the ‘social construction of the female invalid’ (p. 452, 1990) from the 19th century provides a precedent for medicalisation in the 20th century and indeed, a reminder of how the menopause is often viewed today: “the cult of motherhood overvalued women’s reproductive capacities. Menopause, representing sterility, was feared, and the woman who could no longer give birth was devalued” (p. 473, 1990). Influenced by the medical conceptualisation of the body as a ‘closed-energy’ system in which all vital organs competed for the limited amount of available blood (Formanek, 1990; Cimon, 2008), the irrevocable link was made between menopause and insanity, depression and mood swings (Barbre, 1990). Furthermore, the worse the menopause symptoms, the more scientists blamed the woman, with education, sexual passion, suffrage and a fashionable lifestyle all reportedly resulting in a disease-ridden menopause (Formanek, 1990; Cimon, 2008).

The role of Hormone Replacement Therapy

Medical intervention for relief of menopausal symptoms was manufactured as early as 1938 when a synthetic hormone, DES, was first formulated and approved for

marketing in 1941 (Bell, 1990). Within two years after its synthesis, there was “practically unanimous agreement” about the efficacy of DES (Novak, 1939, p. 594), but serious disagreement about its toxicity, with incidence reporting of nausea, vomiting and rashes ranging widely from 5% to 80% (Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry, 1939). Despite these side effects, oestrogen therapy was hailed as big a breakthrough as insulin was for diabetes, transforming the meaning of the menopause by defining it as a medical problem with a medical solution, a ‘deficiency disease’ (Bell, 1990). As Kaufert and McKinlay observed, “once menopause was defined as a deficiency condition, its treatment with estrogen was not only legitimate, but became an obligation” (1985, p.129).

The rationale for a pharmacological solution was strengthened in the 1960’s with the advent of radioimmunoassay technique, which enabled detailed study of hormone levels in women (Goodman, 1990). But the publication of Dr. Robert Wilson’s bestselling book, *Feminine Forever*, in 1966, appears to have had a far more pervasive influence on the decision making of women to seek out HRT. As he asserted, “Menopause is curable... menopause is completely preventable... instead of being condemned to witness the death of their own womanhood, women will remain fully feminine – physically and emotionally – for as long as they live” (1966, p. 15). Some researchers assert his guidance was directed by his strong association with the pharmaceutical company, Wyeth. As Randal writes, “Thanks largely to the book and to Wilson’s research foundation (also bankrolled by Wyeth), demand for the hormone treatment of older women soared. With that, oestrogen, which had been in modest use since the late 1930s (chiefly for women who had had a surgical menopause), was propelled onto the list of America’s best-selling prescription drugs and stayed there” (2002, p. 1119). By 1975 oestrogen was the fifth most frequently prescribed drug in the United States (Bell, 1990), and was sustained in popularity through the next two decades by leading menopause experts, including the ‘doyen of menopause experts’, Dr Wulf Utian (Greer, 1991). Indeed, it is Utian, consultant to many pharmaceutical companies, who as recently as 1990 urged women to consider seriously the looming crisis of the menopause: “We now know that menopausal symptoms must not be ignored. Even ‘asymptomatic menopause’ may initiate silent, progressive and

ultimately lethal sequelae” (1990, p.2).

The role of the pharmaceutical companies cannot be ignored here. In the case of menopause, the pharmaceutical industry appears to hold much of that power and has played an undeniable role in the social construction and redefinition of menopause. Or indeed, as suggested by one researcher, “the Menopause Industry is an example of another industry that has emerged in response to the baby boomers' unique spirit or alternatively, to capitalize on the profit-potential associated with this disproportionately large birth cohort” (Utz, 2011, p. 49).

At the beginning of the millennium, large studies, in particular the Women’s Health Initiative and the Million Women’s Study cast doubt, concern and controversy as to the use of HRT (Rossouw, et al. 2002; Beral, 2003). The studies suggested that whilst long-term therapy conveyed cardiovascular and fracture benefits, there was an increased risk of breast cancer and thromboembolism and, almost overnight, 80% of HRT users stopped their therapy (MacLennan, 2008; Bakour & Williamson, 2015). Advisory bodies issued strongly worded guidance to the effect that HRT should be used at the lowest dose for the shortest possible time and only in severely symptomatic women (MacLennan, 2008). More recent analyses from the WHI, from observational and animal studies, have now unified much of the HRT data and challenged the risk: benefit ratio for the women who commence HRT for symptom control around menopause. The analysis suggests that, “when HRT is initiated near menopause for symptom control and subsequent improved quality of life, there are likely to be additional bone, heart and possible cognitive benefits that outweigh the risks that are not significantly raised under the age of 60 years” (MacLennan, 2008, p. 16). So, whilst the media is still striking out with bad news headlines and the ‘misery of the 14-year menopause’ (Donnelly, 2015), the HRT pendulum has swung back again in academic and medical circles promoting ‘good news’ stories (Brown, 2012; Langer, et al. 2012; Bakour & Williamson, 2015). Indeed, medical consultants have gone further, suggesting that the continued negative attitude towards HRT is “not justified”, given that “Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is the most effective treatment for symptoms of estrogen deficiency. When HRT is individually tailored women gain

maximum advantages and the risks are minimised” (Bakour & Williamson, 2015, p. 4).

Of course, such perceived clarity is never the full story. Not only will medical science continue to advance and release data on studies that change the guidelines, but also what is less well publicized is the experience of post-menopausal women who discontinue their HRT treatment. In the UK’s largest study of 10,500 women aged 54-65, research indicates that on ceasing HRT, vasomotor symptoms return and become more frequent and problematic (Hunter, et al. 2012).

As indistinctive in medical academic papers is the positive outcome of cognitive behavioural interventions. Whilst evidence from randomized trials indicate limited or no benefit from so-called complementary therapies (Rees, 2009), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), including relaxation, has been found to reduce menopausal symptoms in well women (Hunter & Liao, 1995, Hunter, 2007; Hunter & Mann 2010; Ayers, et al., 2012). Furthermore, the results of an 18-month exploratory trial of group CBT, funded by Cancer Research UK, suggest it can also be effective with women who experience menopausal symptoms following breast cancer treatments (Hunter et al, 2012; Mann, et al. 2012). So, given that it is not only drugs that work, and women can control their own symptoms, this leaves open to question why a potentially effective, evidence based, alternative treatment receives so little attention as compared with reliance on a long term, potentially unsustainable, medical intervention?

Menopause and the Professional Woman

What is worth considering in this chapter is the relevance of the menopausal research to older women in executive positions. Despite studies, delineated earlier in this chapter, agreeing that only 10-20% of women will experience bothersome symptoms, if women perceive themselves as ‘ill’ or ‘diseased’ through the menopause, or indeed dread the *potential* of illness with debilitating symptoms, they run the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Levy & Langer, 1994; Evans, 2012). For example, despite

limited evidence of direct cognitive impairment at menopause (being instead, as discussed earlier, a potential outcome of sleep deprivation as experienced by many new mothers), anecdotally women still refer to themselves as having a ‘fuzzy head’ at this age. Indeed, in *Coaching at Work*, an award-winning article dedicated to coaching executive women through the menopause discusses helping female leaders with their ‘foggy memory syndrome’ (Price & Taylor, 2013). It is possible to argue that the propagation of such a route path is harmful for female leaders. As illustrated in the previous chapter, once a body is medicalised, and it is more usually women’s bodies that are at the receiving end of a ‘diagnosis’, the suggestion is that it is deficient and frail. If it is faulty, perhaps, as it was in the Victorian days, it is not worthy (or capable) of power (Bartky, 1990; Bell, 1990)? Perhaps too, the existence of a diagnostic category gives employers an ‘excuse’, albeit hidden, not to hire or promote such an ‘emotionally unreliable’ person?

Equally, there are many women experiencing menopausal symptoms that require attention, medical or otherwise. Yet, for a life stage as natural as childbirth that all women (without intervention) will experience, it is virtually ignored in most Human Resource organisational guidelines, leading to a virtual silence in the workplace with negative consequences (Griffiths, et al. 2010). In an article in *The Telegraph*, one senior leader described an open discussion on the menopause at work as ‘professional suicide’ opening up a fear of embarrassment and of seeming less than competent (Feinmann, 2011). This desire to present a healthy and youthful presence can lead women to seek a medical solution to demonstrate total wellness in the workplace, even if it has potentially negative health consequences (Gavranich, 2011). As briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) has started to redress this balance with their 2019 report, ‘Let’s Talk Menopause’. On the one hand, the report opens the way for helpful, open discussions in the workplace, with practical downloadable posters and handouts for staff and managers, offering clear information of the experience of the menopause. Conversely, the report further medicalises the menopausal experience, suggesting that some 60% of working women experience problems at work with their menopausal transition,

needing a risk assessment and bearing the likelihood of significant risk of depression. It is possible the guidance of placing the menopause firmly within the realm of Occupational Health is due to the legal necessity for taking the menopause seriously at work. Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have a duty not to discriminate and employees should be treated with respect in terms of their gender, and there have already been successful employment tribunal claims in relation to the menopause (CIPD, 2019). In 2012, the case of *Merchant vs. BT plc*, the tribunal upheld the employee's claim of direct sex discrimination when her employer failed to deal with her menopausal symptoms in the same way it would have dealt with other medical conditions (Pure Employment Law, 2012; CIPD, 2019). In 2018, as related in the CIPD report, an employee had substantial medical problems related to the onset of menopause. The tribunal found her employer had discriminated against her on the grounds of disability, failing to consider the impact of this on her conduct (Kenner, 2018; CIPD, 2019).

The Male Menopause?

Men are not excluded from this picture of youth and vigour as the paradigm for wellness at work (Trethewey, 2001) and indeed the academic, medical and popular media discourse surrounding the male menopause is familiar. Are men just experiencing a 'natural' set of bodily and experiential changes in midlife requiring little attention, intervention or treatment, or is this a pathological stage, with intervention and medication necessary if men are to "sustain the plateau of youthful vitality and well-being throughout the life course" (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1998, p. 276)? In a familiar manner, the pharmaceutical industry has a new solution. Offering 'Low T' (low testosterone pills) as a remedy for tiredness and lethargy, the adverts are selling a new disease to middle-aged men. Since 2001, prescriptions in the US have more than tripled, to an estimated 3% of men over 40 - 1.7 million men. In the UK, prescriptions roughly doubled over the same period, and the global market for the drugs has increased 12-fold. In 2011, it was valued at \$1.8bn (£1bn) (Kremner, 2014). In a disheartening mirroring of the HRT industry, one recent study concluded

that men doubled their risk of a heart attack 90 days after being prescribed testosterone with future studies urgently recommended (Finkle, et al. 2014). And so, perhaps the male menopause is following a similar path to that of the female menopause, having its origins in academic and medical discourse and discussed in the popular media at least since the 1970's (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1985, 1998)? Often dismissed and ridiculed, or pathologised as the 'midlife crisis', researchers claim "over the last two decades, the male menopause has attained greater legitimacy and social acceptability and can be understood as part of a set of terms drawn upon to diagnose midlife problems" (1998, p. 276).

So, what is the relevance of the male menopause to a study of older female executives? Whilst male menopause researchers can see that "the more it is accepted that women's problems in midlife can be attributed to social and cultural factors, the more likely it is that the male menopause will increase in credibility" (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1998, p. 289), it would be severely limiting if this was the only reason to study further. Gullette argues that the convergence of the male and female experience at midlife emphasises the shared difficulties caused by the ageing body, trapping both sexes in a discourse of decline (1997). Men at midlife are also prone to be victims of the pervading youthful climate in the workplace, and again, Gullette suggests this is forcing man at 50+ into the kind of retreat into the private sphere formally reserved for women (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1998; Gullette, 1997).

Concluding Remarks to Chapter Four

As much as the menopause transition is biological, evidence points to a heterogeneous experience with neither a 'one size fits all' menopausal experience nor a collective solution. The culture that is lived in affects the way women talk about, define, treat, accept or fight the bodily changes associated with menopause and no single narrative appears wholly effective in this discussion. In a welcoming trajectory towards open discussion in the workplace, enabling the menopause transition to become more visible, as well as socially and culturally acceptable, it does the older woman no

favours when the experience is pathologised. This, as the research suggests, can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, as much as organisational marginalisation. In the alternative social reconstruction of middle age and menopause as a singular positive, productive phase of life, there is the “ever present danger that consumer culture will reinforce the stigma of ageing in the stimulation of the desire to promote youthfulness” (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1998, p. 295). If both sexes are ‘controlling’ and ‘maintaining’ their bodies, holding back the years, middle age cannot be normalised.

CHAPTER FIVE

Putting Midlife to Work Organisational Attitudes to Ageing and Motivation at Midlife

“The over 50s account for one fifth of the UK population, own more than 80 per cent of the country’s asset wealth and are the group most likely to vote in general elections. This is now a remarkably powerful group but the social revolution, which has wrought huge changes in the meaning of age –just as the 60s transformed the role of women at work –, has gone largely unnoticed. Society’s expectations of what it means to be over 50 are decades out of date” (Will Hutton, Chief Executive, The Work Foundation, 2000)

Introduction

In the previous chapters of the literature review, the literature surrounding the social constructions of midlife, of ageing women and of the menopause have been considered. This chapter will turn specifically to the workplace and consider how the literature conceives organisational attitudes to their ageing workforce, including the professional middle-aged woman, and the subsequent career decisions at midlife. It will also examine how practical factors, such as caring for children, parents, siblings and partners, are presented and discussed and the debates surrounding the effect of caring on career decisions later in a female executive’s career span.

Despite the ageing population, the progress towards gender equality and the increase of professional middle-aged women into positions of influence, it is recognised by academics that little attention is paid to the motivation and careers desires of the middle-aged professional woman in the workplace (Trethewey, 2001; Fineman, 2011; Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Altmann, 2015; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017). And, as discussed throughout this literature review, what is ostensibly ‘known’ about the career decisions for this age group is often clouded by out of date assumptions and unhelpful myths, based on outdated models (Greller & Stroh, 2004; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Billet, et al. 2011; Peters, et al. 2013; Whiston, et al. 2015). Reflecting too on the apparent homogeneity of midlife as presented by other scholars, Phillipson suggests, “the shorthand of an age cohort, (50 years and older), can all too easily lead

us down the road of forgetting that, among those in this age bracket, we are talking about a number of different age generations, gender, ethnic origin, levels of income, health and domestic circumstances, never mind the differences in outlook and aspirations” (2007, p. 203).

Reflecting on such midlife homogeneity, scholars argue that the working world of the 21st century, “characterized by career interruptions, opt outs and temporary work assignments” (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018, p. 361) has produced contemporary models of careers that describe current flexible career patterns. These include the ‘protean’ career model, (Hall & Chandler, 2005), the Career Adaptability model (McMahon, et al. 2012; Whiston, 2015) or the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). However, whilst these models capture some of the complexity associate with 21st century working practices, scholars are in agreement that the critical variable of gender is largely ignored (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Furthermore, it is argued that the twentieth century theories of lifespans (e.g. Erikson, 1959; Sheehy, 1995; Levinson, 1979; Vaillant, 1997, 2012) still have a profound effect on the way corporations are organised: “Indeed, work drawing on these models... have substantially impacted popular thinking about the nature and meaning of work, particularly with regard to changes in motivation for work and learning during the midlife period” (Kanfer & Ackermann, 2004, p. 445; Fineman, 2011). For this reason, it is worth turning briefly to the lifespan literature to consider the influence of these scholars’ theories of midlife.

Life Spans and Life Stages

Erikson proposed an eight-stage cycle from infancy to senior with each stage presenting a psychosocial hurdle or crisis for the individual to surmount before enabling movement forwards to the next stage (Erikson, 1959). Vaillant found support for Erikson’s stage theory adding two additional sub stages for the long midlife period being ‘Career Consolidation’ and ‘Keepers of the Meaning’ representing the focus on transmission of values to society (Vaillant, 1977; 2012). Paralleling this cycle in many

respects, Levinson focused on adult (male) transitional stages and the demands of family and work (1979; Fineman, 2011). In contrast to Erikson, who viewed life after 50 as a path leading outwards, rather than a staircase leading downwards (Vaillant, 2012), Levinson viewed life after 60 as “an empty dry structure devoid of energy, interest or inner resources” (p55, 1979). Life space theory (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996) has been described as one of the few career theories that addresses older adults’ life span, espousing a perspective on careers as developing over the entire human life cycle (Whiston, et al. 2015). However, in a similar way to earlier models dismissing the older adult years, midlife (45-65 years) is described as one of ‘Maintenance’ with those of 65+ years, ‘disengaging’ from the life course (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). Whilst offering a tangible construction of the life course, scholars have suggested there are issues with such conceptualisations of our lifespans, being outdated models (Greller & Stroh, 2004; Fineman, 2011). Not only has Erikson dedicated just two of his eight stages to life beyond twenty years of age (see Table 1) but, given the irregularity and variability in midlife, it is unlikely that the regular sequences and patterns associated with stages can be useful for depicting the full midlife experience (Brim, et al., 2005; Karpf, 2014).

Table 1:

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Approximate Age	Psycho Social Crisis
Infant - 18 months	Trust vs. Mistrust
18 months - 3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt
3 - 5 years	Initiative vs. Guilt
5 - 13 years	Industry vs. Inferiority
13 - 21 years	Identity vs. Role Confusion
21 - 39 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation
40 - 65 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation
65 and older	Ego Integrity vs. Despair

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Erikson did revise his epigenetic table, later adding Basic Strengths (or virtues) to each strength (1963), which outlined the development of personal strengths through a well-balanced, positive experience of each stage. For the middle years, the corresponding basic strengths were those of Production and Care, suggesting a productivity at middle age not previously defined in his writing. However, a closer exploration of his work acknowledges that, whilst this stage might extend to other productive activities such as work and creativity, Erikson's analysis was strongly oriented to parenting and the extension of generativity from one's own children to future generations (1963).

Of equal relevance, and critical for this study is that these life stages, written for, and by, male scholars, using predominantly male quantitative and qualitative analyses, seem out of kilter and irrelevant to women today. Although twenty years after publishing his seminal work on male adult development, Levinson committed his

research towards the development of the female life course (1996), he concludes his research on the female life course at age 45 years. Gergen pointed out “the studies of Vaillant and Gould emphasise a male oriented, individualistic, rationalistic, egocentric orientation of life” suggesting that “to judge from the major studies of lifespan development at midlife, one would think that only men survive to the third decade” (1990, p. 475). This is supported by further research that noted whilst the principles of midlife study are universal, the examples, populations, samples and theorists have been limited to men (Stewart & Gold-Steinberg, 1990), with the result that “women’s different paths were either ignored or treated as deviant” (Gersick & Kram, 2002, p. 109). Furthermore, by suggesting that life is a relatively well-ordered sequential series of steps, academic argue that such studies ignore the ‘messiness’ of most people’s adult lives, male and female, and the supposed age-related changes to motivational variables (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004).

The assumption that people make incremental changes over the course of their careers, with marked changes occurring at more or less predictable ages, is still well entrenched within most organisations. Indeed, scholars suggest that human resource policies enable and promote the flourishing of age norms, assumptions and age prejudice (i.e. Acker, 1990; Scales & Scase, 2000; Loretto, et al, 2007; Fineman, 2011; Altman, 2014), with the suggestion that “age is one of the least well-researched forms of discrimination, despite the fact that it is the most prevalent of the common types (i.e. gender, ethnicity, race, disability and sexual orientation)” (Sweiry & Willitts, 2012, p. 15). Adding to this picture of age norming is the expectation, in some professions, of early retirement at approximately 50 years, an expectation that is proving remarkably hard to change despite policy efforts (Hutton, 2000; Fineman, 2011; Altman, 2014). Whilst some suggest this is a positive move forwards, even a necessity in the so-called ‘Information Age’ (Scales & Scase, 2000), others suggest it unnecessarily ages a workforce and discriminates against older workers, “as if they somehow matter less than young people” (Hutton, 2000).

Conceptualising Age Differences in the Workplace

Research into the differences between felt age, chronological age and performance age is a pertinent reminder here that, whilst an executive at midlife might be chronologically termed ‘older worker’, she feels anything but. Indeed, chronological age turns out to be a poor proxy for the existential features of age, or for functional abilities and lifestyles and the older we get, the more apparent this distinction is. In other words, the older we get, the younger we say we feel (Henrard, 1996; Barak, 2009). Research by the Pew Research Centre revealed how the gap between actual age and felt age widens with increasing age: between 50 and 64 respondents felt some ten years younger than their chronological age, whilst those between 65 and 74 reported feeling up to 20 years younger (Fineman, 2011; Taylor, et al. 2009). A report for the Department of Work and Pensions echoed these findings, demonstrating that people stopped feeling young at 41, and started feeling old at 59 (Sweiry & Willitts, 2012).

With the recognition that chronological age is at best a proxy measure (not a causal variable) for issues influencing work-related outcomes, different conceptualisations of age at work materialized, with generational categories gaining particular traction in the last decade (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). Birth cohorts are conceptualized as sharing social, political and economic events as a way of explaining generational identity and predicting relationships between such factors as the values, attitudes and beliefs of cohort members (Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge, 2010). From such conceptualisations, broad (and classed) labels are applied. For example, as seen in the table below, Generation 2020ers (born after 1997) appear “surgically attached to their smartphones” (Knight, 2014), whilst Generation Y (also referred to as Millennials, Digital Natives or Generation Me, born 1982+), are believed to hold “unrealistically high expectations” on entering the workforce (Twenge & Campbell, 2008, p. 862) and yet “most trusting on the safety of personal information” (Morey & Schoop, 2014). In contrast, the ‘Boomers’ (born 1943-1960) are charged with being “lucky, selfish,

conservative, risk adverse, blocking access to jobs for young people and in a privileged financial position” (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014, p. 1620). And as often as the Boomers are referred to as being lucky, so are the ‘Busters’ (also referred to as Generation X, or the Lost Generation, born 1961-1981) considered ‘unlucky’. Born in a period of economic uncertainty, a picture is painted of the Busters, as “problematic and thus unemployable. They are depicted as acting as though access to work does not have to be earned, displaying an inappropriate attitude to an employer and failing to demonstrate basic skills” (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014, p. 1615).

Table 2: Generational Labels and Boundaries

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Table 1. Generational Labels and Boundaries.

Label and birth years (Strauss and Howe, 1991)	Alternative labels	Alternative birth years
<i>Veterans</i> 1925–1942	<i>Silent Generation; Matures; Traditionalists;</i> <i>Greatest</i> (Sullivan et al., 2009); <i>Conservatives</i> (Dries et al., 2008)	1925–1945 (Cogin, 2012; Dries et al., 2008); 1922–1945 (Sullivan et al., 2009)
<i>Baby Boomers</i> 1943–1960	<i>Boom(er) Generation;</i> (Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010) <i>Me Generation</i> (Dries et al., 2008)	1946–1964 (Benson & Brown, 2011; Cogin, 2012; Dries et al., 2008; Meriac et al., 2010); 1946–1962 (Davis et al., 2006); 1946–1961 (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008)
<i>Generation X</i> 1961–1981	<i>Thirteenth; Baby Busters; Lost Generation;</i> <i>Xers</i> (Jovic, Wallace, & Lemaire, 2006)	1965–1976 (Benson & Brown, 2011) 1965–1980 (Cogin, 2012; Dries et al., 2008; Meriac et al., 2010); 1963–1981 (Davis et al., 2006); 1965–1983 (Sullivan et al., 2009); 1962–1979 (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008)
<i>Generation Y</i> 1982–	<i>Millennials; Nexters; Echo Boomers;</i> <i>Net Generation</i> (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008) <i>Digital Natives</i> (Smola & Sutton, 2002); <i>Generation Me</i> (Twenge & Campbell, 2008); <i>Generation Next</i> (Macky et al., 2008) <i>Millennium Generation</i> (Dries et al., 2008)	1981–1995 (Cogin, 2012); 1981–1999 (Meriac et al., 2010); 1984–2002 (Sullivan et al., 2009); 1981–2001 (Dries et al., 2008); 1980–2000 (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008) 1980–1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002)

Adapted and extended from Parry and Urwin (2011), original in italics.

Furthermore, such generalisations can lead to misleading generational differences. For example, “baby boomers are (in part) constructed as being responsible for the creation of the lost generation, responsibility which is extended to negative consequences, including potential unrest” (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014, p. 1620). Significantly, generational debates have prominence in practitioner literature (e.g. Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2008; Strack, et al. 2008; Institute of Leadership & Management and Ashridge Business School, 2011), with the differences between the generations commonly proposed as problematic, tension filled and cause for concern. Indeed, in the same way as the menopause is pathologised, so too are the intergenerational difficulties, perhaps – as the more cynical researchers surmise - presenting yet another opportunity for consultants to profit from a supposed problem, waiting for a ‘solution’ to be sold (Fineman, 2011; Pritchard & Whiting, 2014)?

So, whilst some scholars view the generational debate as a powerful means of understanding age and providing the means to articulate, define and make sense of issues of age at work, avoiding accusations of age discrimination (Schalk et al, 2010; Pritchard & Whiting, 2014), further scholars argue for the reverse. Seen as just another way to stereotype people, the fuelling of intergenerational prejudice, based largely on homogenous assumptions, is perceived as unhelpful and “confusing at best, contradictory at worst” (Deal et al., 2010, p. 191; Knight, 2014), with many researchers believing instead that “all generational cohorts have as much that divides as unites. Treating them as a homogenous entity is likely to fail—or worse—backfire” (Morey & Schoop, 2015). Furthermore, an important index of potential inequality and prejudice is the extent to which groups *share* common goals and values, and the extent to which they understand one another. Research on prejudice and discrimination often shows that stronger perceptions of group similarity, as well as friendships across group boundaries, help to address inaccurate stereotypes and improve inter-group relationships (Abrams et al., 2006; Sweary & Willitts, 2012).

What is as significant in this debate surrounding age stereotyping is the evidence to suggest that older workers are consistently perceived more negatively than their younger counterparts. This is despite most reviews and meta analyses making it clear there is no consistent effect of age on work performance, with older workers often being misunderstood, ignored and vulnerable to the effects of age related stereotyping (Griffiths, 2007; Phillipson, 2007; Griffiths, et al. 2009). Therefore, in the same way as Chapter Two of this literature review considered the imprint of the decline narrative on the embodied status of the older female executive, so this review will further consider the impact of the theories of life spans, age norming and age prejudice on the assumptions surrounding older professional woman and their career decisions.

Caring Issues at Midlife

Scholars are in broad agreement that the most obvious impact of age prejudice in the workplace is an assumption that youth is the superior age, with a stress on younger adults being the “productive and aesthetic icons of capitalisms projects” (Fineman, 2011, p. 58). Organisational recruitment and training development paths, as well as the coaching, mentoring and sponsorship opportunities, continue to demonstrate an emphasis on early career employees (Griffiths, 2007; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Billett, et al. 2011; Fineman, 2011). Such discriminatory practices extend to family-friendly policies or work-life balance policies directed towards new parents, with very few employers extending such policies to cover the full range of caring responsibilities beyond parenting (Phillips et al, 2002; Evandrou & Glaser, 2003; Vickerstaff et al. 2007). In 2004, the Workplace Employment Relations Survey asked managers for the first time whether carers of older adults had a specific entitlement to leave. Only 6% of workplace offered such leave (Kersley et al, 2006) and recent government reports suggest this has not changed in the last decade. For example, flexible working remains “discretionary” for older workers (Labour Policy Forum, 2015, p. 15) and there is general agreement in the Commission’s report that the caring responsibilities of older women (the population studied) are not taken as seriously as those with young children, who are given first priority in any working hours negotiation. Yet, there is

no doubt in the research that caring for parents is a critical issue facing adults at midlife, with as urgent a call for flexible working, as for new parents. In four reports published by, or for, the Government examining issues facing older women at work, the consistent need to juggle work and care is of foremost importance (Government Equalities Office, 2013; TUC, 2014; Altmann, 2015; Labour Policy Forum, 2015). Clearly, an important part of adult's middle age is now spent in relationship to parents who are still alive or who over time become ill and die. More men and women reach adulthood with both parents alive than was true early in the twentieth century and men and women from contemporary adult birth cohorts are likely to spend more years with one or more parents aged 65 and older than they are with children under age 18 (Marks, et al., 2005). Data from the MIDUS study demonstrates that by midlife, (age 40-59) only about one in nine adults report having both parents alive and both parents healthy, with one in three reporting having at least one unhealthy parent. Analysis from data revealed two interesting conclusions for this study. The first is that having unhealthy parents, particularly an unhealthy sole-surviving mother, can undermine the mental health and self-assessed physical health of midlife adults. This is coupled with the evidence that the negative effects of caring for unhealthy parents is greater for women than for men (Marks, et al., 2005).

Whether this still remains an issue facing women, or one relating to both genders is worthy of consideration. Polling by YouGov for the final Commission's report on Older Women suggested that half (48%) of older women with caring responsibilities have faced a challenge with balancing work and family commitments (Labour Policy Forum, 2015, p.6). Age/gender analysis of this data further demonstrated that fifty per cent more women than men over 55 give up work to care, and more than twice as many older women than older men have reduced their working hours to manage caring (2015, p. 14). Whilst all four reports noted above predominantly concentrate on the difficulties and barriers facing low skilled and low paid older women in the workforce, with caring responsibilities forcing them out of the workplace, this remains as much of an issue for executive women (Trethewey, 2011; Hodges, 2012; Lips & Hastings, 2012). For the gendered nature of caring remains pervasive and significant in the

patterning of social responsibility, with men still exceeding women in financial contributions and women exceeding men in caregiving and social emotional support to family and friends (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Rossi, 2005).

Joan Tronto's observation that the caregiving role remains that of 'fate', with women taking on this role due to societal norms, appears to remain remarkably persistent (Tronto, 1993; Rossi, 2005). Further credence is given to this idea by the recent London School of Economics (LSE) commission on Gender, Inequality and Power across the contextual domains of the economy, politics, law and the media. Amongst their conclusions was the recognition that: "There is now greater symmetry between women's and men's lives. This convergence, however, has been principally one sided: women have been assimilated into a largely unmodified, masculinised model of paid employment to a greater extent than men have been assimilated into a feminised world of domestic work and care. The upshot is a caring deficit that is resolved in different ways depending on the form of care, the social positioning of the user and the wider economic, social and cultural context. While nearly everyone gives and receives care at some stage over their life, universally across the globe women do the majority of caring and domestic work" (Perrons, 2016, p. 17).

Midlife and Motherhood

Whilst parents are the group most often cared for by older workers, children under 18 years are the next biggest age group, contradicting a widespread age assumption or 'norm' is that women (or indeed, parents) over 50 are 'child-free' (i.e. Harman, 2015; Scales & Scase, 2000). Whilst Harman rightly comments that, with regards to attitudes to ageing at work "public policy is firmly rooted in the past", she contributes to such child-free assumptions by stating that this new generation of women of between 50 and 60 years, "who are neither in their youthful child-rearing years, nor frail and elderly, needing support... have children who are now grown up" (2015, p. 3). This simplification of the experience of women at midlife is worthy of challenge and belies the complexity of presented reality. For example, academic literatures continue to cite

examples of people at midlife being framed in the context of their ‘empty nest’ (e.g. Adelman, et al, 1989; Putney & Bengston, 2001; Hodges, 2012) and a further government report, ‘Fit and Fifty’, prepared for the Economic and Social Research Council, suggests that the majority of those in their 50’s “no longer carry the burden of supporting children”, living a life that is “cash and time rich”, whilst being “free and autonomous” (Scales & Scase, 2000, p. 35). I would hypothesise this is not a life that many professional, female 50+-year old executives, juggling work and social commitments, children and parental responsibilities, health and ill health would recognise.

Research published by the Office of National Statistics suggest the picture is much less clear-cut. The age of mothers giving birth has risen steadily each year, and over half (51%) of all live births were to mothers aged 30 and over in 2013, 22% being over 35, with 5% over 40 years (ONS, 2017). In November 2015, the ONS reported that, for the first time since records began, more women over 40 are becoming pregnant than girls under 17 (ONS, 2015). The MIDUS study revealed that, of the 7,000 midlife adults studied in the US aged 40-59, 38.8% had children under 18 years, with only 7.4% of women and 9.6% of men from these birth cohorts not having any children (Marks, et al., 2005). YouGov polling carried out by the TUC for their report on Women over 50 in the UK, concurred with the MIDUS study, finding that more than one third of parents aged between 45 and 54 have school age children (TUC, 2014). Indeed, the last 10 years has seen an increase in fertility rates for women older than 35 years of age in the UK, with the highest percentage increase occurring in women 40 and over (Office for National Statistics, 2010; Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2009). The number of births to women aged 40 or more in England and Wales trebled from 1989 to 2009 (Sutcliffe, et al. 2012) and this trend to older motherhood is in evidence in almost all developed countries (Jarvie, et al., 2015). Concomitant with the statistics for delayed childbirth and decreasing numbers of children, is the increase in childlessness. 18% of women who reached age 45 years in 2017 (born in 1972) in England and Wales ended their childbearing years (estimated at 45 years by the ONS) childless, compared with just 10% of women born

in 1945 (ONS, 2017). Reasons offered for this statistical trend are a decline in the proportion of women married, changed in the perceived costs and benefits of child rearing versus work and leisure activities, greater social acceptability of a childfree lifestyle, and the postponement of decisions as to whether to have children until it may be biologically too late (ONS, 2017).

Adding to this picture are extraordinary changes in family demography taking place in the twenty first century. As family scholars suggest, not only has the time we spend being married shrunk, but also fewer adults remarry, leading to a higher proportion living in single person households (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Marks et al. 2005). Families continue to become more ‘vertical’ (i.e. more typically comprised of persons from three or more generations) and less ‘horizontal’ (i.e. fewer from the same generation), giving rise to more interdependency across the generations. As they indicate, “the dynamism of family change currently in process has considerably altered expectations for these family roles and family-role enactments” (p. 514, 2005). Whilst recent research from the field of positive psychology offers a persuasive argument that such a rich number of multiple roles can lead to a meaningful sense of self, enhancing well-being (Morgan Roberts & Dutton, 2009; Baltes, et al. 2010), it is also possible for female leaders to experience ‘role overload’, defined as having too many role demands and too little time to fulfill them (Barnett & Baruch, 1986; Coverman, 1989). Or as Auster suggests, “midcareer is a time when the organisational practices and life responsibilities collide” (2001, p. 742). Whilst researchers adopted the term of ‘role overload’ nearly 30 years ago, perhaps the change in family structures today gives it ever more resonance? Perhaps it is equally unsurprising that the demands for flexible working continue to increase (e.g. Anderson & Kelliher, 2009). Concurring is Economist journalist, Bagehot, who coined the phrase ‘Generation X-hausted’ to describe workers who are the ‘victims of colliding trends’, families arriving later, careers accelerating sooner and parents living longer. Thus 55 - an age when Bagehot suggests people were liberated from immediate family obligations to rediscover fun – may soon be the new 45. As he quips, “the sandwich generation is getting stale” (Bagehot, 2012).

Midlife researchers have added significant scholarly depth to the exploration of role overload, daily stressors and positive and negative affect through this period of life (Lachman, et al., 1997; Almeida & Horn, 2005; Wethington, et al., 2002; Brim et al. 2005). By assessing multiple dimensions of daily stressors, data revealed that midlife adults (40-60 years) encounter more frequent daily stressors than older adults and perceive their stressors as more severe. Compared with both young adulthood and later life, midlife is shown to be a time during which there are significant increases in the proportion of stressors posing financial risk and involving children, with women reporting more frequent overload, network and child-related stressors than did men (Almeida & Horn, 2005). In contrast to the research depicting midlife as one of freedom and autonomy, Mroczek hypothesised that perhaps careers, relationships and families dominate the lives of midlife adults more than for adults of other ages, with a greater investment in - or importance attached to - those activities that bring about stress (2005). Of note to this study, is the finding that educational level was significantly associated with less positive affect. In other words, better-educated people reported less positive emotion and higher levels of work and relationship stress, potentially due to the maintenance of a career throughout midlife. As Mroczek observed, “nothing about midlife itself created the inverse association between education and positive affect. A contextual shift that was based in midlife was responsible for this effect” (2005, p. 223).

Motivation at Midlife

As much as age norming and age prejudice give rise to an assumed superiority of youth and prioritization of youthful policies, so too are assumptions made about motivation at midlife, which scholars continue to argue is predicated on well-embedded life span theories (Gullette, 2004; Fineman, 2011; Walter & Scheibe, 2013). Emerging as important here is the academic argument that the ‘contextual shift’ at midlife has a powerful influence on executive behaviour, either in response to a ‘crisis’ or the desire for ‘generativity’ (Erickson, 1959, 1963; Sheehy, 1976; Levinson, 1979; Vaillant, 2012). Whilst the so-called ‘crisis’ is disputed as much as it is

romantically honoured, so much psychological literature has been based on the notion of midlife upheaval, it remains stubbornly in our consciousness and language. Yet further research suggests this supposed ‘crisis’ is neither unique to midlife, to both genders nor true for all. There is, for example, evidence to suggest that more emotionally significant events happen earlier rather than later in life, with 30 years of age being the most psychologically disruptive (Wethington, et al., 2005). And instead of the one-dimensional U-Curve, different scholars view midlife as a “unique period of peaks and valleys” giving rise to as much positive affect as negative affect (Almeida & Horn, 2005, p. 445; Mroczek, 2005).

Central to the life span theories is the proposal that the achievement motivation appears to decline with age (that is, the desire to demonstrate mastery and excellence as compared with others), as ‘growth’ motivation (the desire to realise one’s full potential, satisfying deeper psychological needs) increases (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Calo, 2011; Vaillant, 2012). For some academics, this decline of ambition is linked with the “looming demographic risk” (Strack, et al., p. 119) which gives rise to a capacity risk (the diminished ability to carry out one’s role effectively) and a productivity risk, with ageing executives becoming more ill and unable to cope with technology (Strack, et al. 2008). Additional research links the increase of a leaders age with a decreased capacity for innovation, risk and change oriented leadership (Barker & Mueller, 2002; Karami, et al., 2006; Yang, et al., 2011), a decline in cognitive control capacity (Charles, 2010; Labouvie-Vief, 2003) and diminished emotional recognition (Richter & Kunzmann, 2011; Ruffman, et al., 2008). So much so, academics surmise, the risk of this ageing workforce with their declining ambition and capacities, will eventually threaten companies’ viability (Strack, et al. 2008). Whilst these studies do not demarcate male from female older leaders, it is a pertinent reminder that ageism is gendered and “especially corrosive for women. Compared to men, women will experience age discrimination at a younger age and are seen (particularly by men) as older at an earlier age” (Fineman, 2011, p. 69).

Alongside the evidence suggesting a decline in achievement at midlife, equally

inherent to the literature surrounding this age group is increase of a ‘growth’ motivation, that is, that midlife is a time for recalibration, re-organisation, or ‘taking stock’, when people begin to evaluate how they have lived their lives so far and executives view their working lives less in terms of social competition and more in terms of social connectedness (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Phillipson, 2007; Carstensen, et al., 2011; Karpf, 2014). Kanfer and Ackermann offer four distinct patterns of development being loss, growth, reorganisation and exchange – that is, the loss and gain of different intellectual abilities; the dynamic reorganisation of our personalities and the growth of intrinsic motivators (2004; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). And organisational psychologists further argue that leaders are “lamentably ill prepared for this potential crisis of meaning” or even “existential necessity”, which can have major individual and organisational ramifications, including life upheavals; exiting an organisation or changing career tack (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008, p. 84; Terjesen, 2005; Hodges, 2012). Whilst this research challenges the myths that people end their productive lives at midlife, there remains the notion that corporate achievement and ambition are not the preserves of the older executive. Career decisions, it is suggested, revolve instead around finding vocational paths offering a different route for meaning and generativity (Strack et al., 2008; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008).

Therefore, of particular intrigue is the research that refutes the claim that achievement declines at middle age, being instead for some a peak period for competency and mastery, for career satisfaction and – particularly for women – a period of empowerment (Gersick & Kram, 2002; Almeida & Horn, 2005; Denmark & Klara, 2007; Hodges, 2012). Offering a gendered approach to motivation to midlife, Karp noticed a significant difference between the genders at approximately 50 years when interviewing midlife professionals, with men beginning to develop an “exiting consciousness”, whilst women were still striving to make their mark. He suggested, “for the most part, the women interviewed are being ‘turned on’ at the same age that their male counterparts are considering whether to ‘turn off’” (Karp, 1987, p. 218). This is supported by further research differentiating the motivation between women

and men at midlife, suggesting that the “unrecognized differences between midlife women and midlife men have contributed to a lack of organizational and societal support for an effective midcareer for women” (Gordon & Whelan, 1998, p. 10). Albeit twenty years old, this research remains resonant, highlighting important differences between the genders, with men confronting a personal psychological and life re-evaluation, whilst women faced a need for “continued achievement, accomplishment and perceived value to the organization, relishing the challenge of work and needing the intellectual stimulation” (ibid, p. 12).

In their study of high achieving women at midlife, Gersick and Kram note at the age of 50 years, women experience a transition, a “coming into one’s own... gaining confidence in one’s abilities, knowing what one wants and being able to go after it” (2002, p. 109). Additional research suggests that women gain in personal power, prestige and influence as they grow older, perceive themselves as intelligent, assertive and determined, with the balance of interpersonal power in the latter half of women’s lives increasing in favour of older women (Babledelis, 1999; Denmark & Klara, 2007). Midlife was deemed the age period during which (professional, middle class) women were most empowered, having accomplished a great deal in their lives and with the education and knowledge to advocate successfully for themselves and others. It is interesting to note for this study that the social status of a woman impacts on her power, with those women who achieve a higher social status who can expect to have a greater amount of perceived power in their middle and later years (Todd et al., 1990; Denmark & Klara, 2007).

The reason behind such contextual shifts at midlife for executives, be it towards decline, generativity or achievement, is underexplored in the research (Bridges, 2004, 2017; Kets de Vries, 2014). Researchers tend to look towards intrinsic and extrinsic theories to explain the apparent rebalancing and restructuring of life goals that appears inherent to executives at midlife. When professional women ‘opt out’ of their careers, intrinsic theorists argue that women choose not to take up power (Belkin, 2003); opt deliberately for self-employment (Cabrera, 2007; Stone, 2007) or perhaps lack the

essence of career motivation to reach for the highest levels (Fels, 2004; Paton, 2006). As is recognised, “under this analysis, women simply do not have what it takes – the uncompromising attitude, the stamina, the ‘grit’ – to succeed in these professions” (Peters, et al. 2013, p. 162). In contrast, extrinsic theorists look to the external barriers hindering progression, pointing to the restriction placed on women including gender biased organisational structures, policies and procedures, as well as stereotypical views of gender roles (Lewis & Simpson, 2010, Hodges, 2012; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Scholars suggest such issues lead professional women to question their ‘fit’ or their suitability for influential executive roles or “perceive themselves as incongruent with the occupational prototype” (Peters, et al., 2013, p. 173). Moreover, when professional women choose to exert greater influence or power at midlife, research often looks to the external drivers of freedom and autonomy, suggesting that “women over 50 are in a prime period of their lives... now that the children have grown up and left the house, women have more time to dedicate to efforts to enhance their lives and their societies. They also have more financial resources at their disposal and the means to set goals and attain them” (Denmark & Klara, 2007, p. 201).

These are important debates, although the conversation that remains missing here for midlife executives, according to organisational psychologist Kets de Vries, is that of the “stealth motivator”, that is, death anxiety or awareness of mortality (2014, p. 2). As he states, “traditional motivational theories do not acknowledge the influence of death anxiety on our behavior. Although they attempt to help us better understand employee motivation, they are not sufficiently inclusive” (2014, p. 2). Fundamentally, Kets de Vries is bringing Becker’s seminal 1973 work on ‘The Denial of Death’ into the organisational world, for as Becker stated: “the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition... it makes wonderfully clear and intelligible, human actions that we have buried under mountains of fact and obscured with endless arguments about ‘true’ human motives” (reprinted 2018, p. xviii). Whilst Kets de Vries does not demarcate the experience of middle age men from that of women, he suggests this motivation is particularly important in the debate surrounding the career decisions of executives at midlife who are more likely to experience loss, including the death of a

parent or the departure of children from the parental home, than executives at any other age.

Closing Remarks on Chapter Five

In summary, what is striking in reviewing the literature surrounding the concept of midlife in the workplace, is the similarity between the construction of menopause and that of middle age. Both phenomena are at the mercy of a proliferation of assumptions and the consequences of these assumptions are brought here into sharp focus. The historical construction of 'lifespans' within the organisation continues to reverberate today (as does that of the menopause), despite the dismantling of retirement age, leaving a wide gap in the perceived future life of the employee after approximately 50/60 years of age. Both phenomena have also been 'constructed' by men, and (for lifespans) in the image of the man at midlife, which gives rise to assumptions as to motivation, career decisions and future choices on behalf of middle aged women. For there is some evidence that women enter a period of special productivity later in their careers than their male counterparts, which implies that rising cohorts of older women executives may be disregarded just as they enter a period of vigour and readiness for new challenges. Such implications, evidence and questions will be opened up to further exploration in the findings.

CHAPTER SIX

Julia Kristeva and Abjection

“When the starry sky, a vista of open seas, or a stained-glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things I see, hear, or think” (Kristeva, Black Sun, 1989, p. 12)

Introduction

This chapter will explore the theoretical lens of abjection and the relevance of Julia Kristeva’s theories to this study, including critiques of her work. It will consider the existing research from scholars who have already applied her theories to organisational studies and explore how their work might be advanced within this study. To read Kristeva, and the many scholars who have written about her work, is to take a breathtaking journey into oral and written language, national and personal identity, politics, sexuality, culture and nature (McAfee, 2004). Kristeva casts a light over subjects critical to this study, those of exclusion and power; bodily revulsion and fascination; resistance and hope, whilst always situating her work within a social context (Covino, 2004; Tyler, 2013; Gatrell, 2014; 2017). The relevance of abjection to the study of people within organisations is powerful, for through her work, at both a literal and metaphorical level, one can explore the nature of abjection within the organisation and how it might be purposefully employed as an instrument of exclusion and marginalisation (Höpfl, 2000; Fotaki, 2013; Gatrell, 2017). She enables consideration of the ambiguous and ‘fragile threshold’ of identity – what is ‘me’ and ‘not me’, together with the potential acceptance or rejection of the ageing body (Covino, 2004). And still Kristeva’s work leaves space for the potential of ‘new beginnings’, of change and freedom and the heterogeneity of the individual female voice. As she stated in an interview, “What interests me is not all women, but each woman in her intimacy... The complexity of the feminine experience escapes cliché” (Midttun, 2004).

Much of this chapter will consider the relevance of abjection to the realm of the organisation and corporate practices. However, as abjection forms the theoretical spine for this thesis, it feels important to lay some foundation stones about Julia Kristeva, the nature of abjection and the criticisms towards her work, prior to turning the lens towards that of the organisation.

Julia Kristeva and Abjection

Kristeva is Bulgarian by birth and upbringing. She arrived in Paris aged twenty-five in 1965 and was at first committed to the communist cause and a supporter of Maoism, but later remained in Paris as an exile from Bulgarian-Soviet communism. She has a formidable intellect and in the subversive mood of Paris of the mid 1960's, Kristeva found a fertile site for her ideas (Oliver, 1993b; McAfee, 2004; Höpfl, 2007). Her writing is influenced by the concepts of post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and subjectivity and infused with ambiguity and complexity. Scholars suggest these are unsurprising themes, for Kristeva as a Bulgarian and exiled foreigner in France, also remained an outsider in the world of male French intellectuals (Höpfl, 2007). As Höpfl suggests, "It seems that in virtually every respect Kristeva was confronted by repressive structures, by alterity and by estrangement. Yet, it is precisely these experiences which provided the tensions from which her ideas spring" (2007, p. 126).

Abjection is one of the mainstays of Kristeva's theoretical concepts and can be understood as the process of separation, critical to our ability to form an identity (Tyler, 2013). In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kristeva identifies that we first experience abjection at the point of separation from the mother. As she states, "Abjection is the border of my condition as a living being" (1982, p3). The kernel of her ideas, distilled through literary criticism and psychoanalysis, is that abjection represents a necessary revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being, prior to entering the symbolic realm, or Lacan's so-called 'Law of the Father' (Sheridan, 1977). Naming humans as 'speaking beings', the realm of language is central to her thinking (1984), with 'signification' describing the

oscillation between the semiotic state of being (that of non-verbal, emotional, musical, of nature and without structure) and the symbolic state (verbal, of structure, law and order, of culture and black/white) in the formation of identity. Kristeva suggests we are both drawn to, and repelled by the abject, so that, as a concept, it describes all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and bodily experiences, and “expresses the subjects responses to all that stuff which threatens to overwhelm the body border and their attempts to turn and run away” (Tyler, 2013, p.27). Abjection is thus clearly linked to the construction of the speaking subject and their relationship to culture and language. It is a process whereby the individual’s sense of self and corporeal boundaries is established and positioned; where subject and object are distinguished; where toxicity and waste are rejected, and order installed (Rizq, 2013).

According to Kristeva, abjection is a necessary, and perhaps cathartic, function to rid ourselves of the unwanted and achieve the fantasy of a clean, whole and proper self (Covino, 2004; Tyler, 2009). This act of alienation is revealed in a different light by scholars who view such alienation from a social perspective. For a number of scholars, abjection is not a given, but instead is conferred (Butler, 1989). Moving away from the psychoanalytical perspective, they suggest abjection is discursively performed and linguistically constructed - that is, it can be understood within a social context (Butler, 1989; Tyler, 2013). In constructing her theory of ‘Social Abjection’ (2013), Imogen Tyler sought to move away from the individual, theorising abjection as a social and lived process, and to consider both those who abject, and those who find themselves abjected. That is, between representation of the powerful and the resistance of the oppressed. These perspectives on abjection are important for this study, and will be considered further in this chapter, shining a light on what it might mean to *feel* abject and to be *made* abject.

Considering the Criticism

To work within the framework of abjection, it is important to reflect on the considerable criticism towards Kristeva’s conceptualisation of the maternal as abject from feminist scholars, who warn against celebrating (or buying into) this account of

theoretical work (i.e. Butler, 1999; Tyler, 2009a; Tyler, 2013). Concern is expressed that everything that is filthy or disorderly or uncivilized is in the same 'place' as the left-behind mother with the child finding order, stability and a regulating influence in the shape of the Father (Grosz, 1994; Covino, 2004). The Cartesian Dualism of man/rational mind versus woman/messy body is restored "to the extent that women are equated with their bodies, they are put on the wrong end of the Cartesian map of human identity" (McAfee, 2004, p.81). This argument is important, as, for most of the history of western thought, the distinction has been made between mind and body. Put another way, a dichotomy has been created between culture and nature – culture being the way human beings have 'civilized' their ways through their learned minds (male), and nature being the world in its raw state, our naturalized 'bodies' (female). Taken to its ultimate conclusion, in this psychoanalytic 'origin story', matricide is the unconditional condition of life itself: "For man and for woman, the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine qua non condition of our individuation" (Kristeva, 1989: p.38). Not only do critics strongly argue against taking such violence at its word, but that by positioning this process as biological fact, renders the female body as permanently abject, powerless, forever subjugated in this negative and binary dynamic, "condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure" (Butler, 1993, p.3). As damning is the assertion that Kristeva has become apolitical. Indeed, many feminist scholars interpret her *Powers of Horror* and *Tales of Love* as blatant capitulations to the status quo, writings which buy into masculinist principles, endorse patriarchal structures and have lost any political edge (Caputi, 1993; Tyler, 2009).

Kristeva's defenders argue that, far from mapping sex and gender on to the semiotic/symbolic distinction, they operate quite differently. "The two are both moments, always present, in the discourse of speaking beings. Someone might try to stand here before you and speak as logically and methodically as possible, but the semiotic aspects of signification will have their way. Insofar as a speaking being is embodied and desiring, that is, alive, her attempts at purely logical discourse will always be disrupted. While the critics worry that any talk of biological processes is

essentialist, people's embodiedness will always have its say" (McAfee, 2004, p. 80). Kristeva argued that any reading of her work equating the semiotic with female 'essence' was reductive, "Both men and women, in different ways according to their psychic structures and their histories, combine these components to become different and universal, singular and compatible" (Guberman, 1996, p. 268). They are, she suggests, 'folded into one another', with the symbolic never triumphing and the two states operating interdependently. Further scholars argue that Kristeva values multiple interpretations of her work, urging a metaphorical lens be applied - enhancing rather than diminishing her concepts (Oliver, 1993a; Höpfl, 2000; McAfee, 2000). They suggest a broad reading of her work and an appreciation of her project as one that sheds light on how thought and sexuality are intertwined, how the subject is always operating in a social field and how we negotiate a network of relationships through our lives.

The Relevance of Abjection to Organisations

The relevance of the theoretical lens of abjection to the everyday organisation is not immediate, for Kristeva is a graphic writer, interested in aspects of humanity such as bodily waste, dung, corpses, vomit, matricide, and decay (McAfee, 2004), with "revulsion, aversion and disgust" commonplace themes (Tyler, p. 28, 2013). However, the significance of abjection as a theoretical lens is evident on consideration of the academic literature which highlights the various ways in which institutions come to silence, exclude or disavow feelings, practice, groups or discourses within the workplace (e.g. Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Fotaki, 2013; Rizq, 2013; Gatrell, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Gatrell, 2017). In this section, the different ways academics have theorised abjection, and the implications of this within the setting of the organisation are considered including Embodied Abjection (Fotaki, 2011; 2013), Ambiguity (e.g. Höpfl, 2007; Phillips & Rippin, 2010), the Silenced Body and Abjection as Practice (Gatrell, 2017).

Embodied Abjection

Reviewing the work from scholars who have explored abjection in relation to organisations, enables an interesting perspective on bodies and bodily fascination, a central theme within this study. Fotaki, for example, theorises the concept of ‘Embodied Abjection’ to convey the under-representation of women at a senior level within academe (2011, 2013), and considers the situated body “the difference that matters” in understanding gendered power relationships (2011, p. 43; Butler, 2004). Put differently, Fotaki demystifies the disconnection between mind and body, placing the body firmly at the heart of exclusionary practices within academic institutions. Drawing on the work of Kristeva (as well as the philosophers Irigaray and Cixous), Fotaki articulates how bodies are always engaged with, and immersed in, power structures. She highlights how the abject maternal, feminine body is always constituted as lesser than the male, positioned outside the symbolic order and language, with “multiple consequences for women in academia” (2013, p. 1264). Fotaki observes not only how acutely women must observe their embodied presence in order to succeed in the male world of academe, but also how the abjection of the (maternal and feminine) body makes their position “untenable in the knowledge creation process” (2011, p. 45). In other words, Kristeva’s concept of abjection renders language and the body mutually constituted, with language remaining the dominant discourse of the (symbolic) male and the body the dominant preserve of the (abject) female. This is, as far as Fotaki is concerned, the roots of discriminatory organisational attitudes and behaviours caused by the fact that women have no language of their own in male normative discourse (2013). As she states, “the abjection of the maternal/feminine is crucial for unravelling the roots of women’s exclusion from academe and their embeddedness in the dejection of the body she stands for” (2011, p. 48).

A further consequence of embodied abjection is, Fotaki concludes, the process of self-abjection. As she writes, “if the only language available for women to talk about themselves is negative about their own embodied self, then they are bound to express a negative, abject-self” (2013, p. 1265). That is, if they experience alienation or

marginalisation, this will be reproduced in their everyday practices. Whilst Grosz agrees and further suggests that abjection could be a “sickness at one’s own body” (Covino, 2004, p. 17), other scholars prefer to view abjection metaphorically as a process for maintaining the social body (Covino, 2004). That is, we reject those elements of our body that are unwanted or ‘unhygienic’, projecting a “clean, whole and proper self” to society (Tyler, 2013, p. 27). Taken to an extreme, Kristeva views the rejection of death and of the corpse as the ultimate abjection. As she states, “Death is the absolute in life that I recognize and turn away from simultaneously. The potential corpse resides within me at all times – it is me, but the rejection of that notion is what defines me as living” (1993, p. 3). At an individual level, scholars suggest individuals work to avoid abjection and engage in bodily transformations to meet expectations that their bodies are “controlled, ideally fit and not fat, and if not, then their bodies represent professional liability” (Mavin & Grandy, 2016, p. 69). At a societal level, it is suggested this is the misogynistic process of women needing to demonstrate an appropriate body for the gaze of others (Covino, 2004), ensuring they maintain, what Evans calls, “a ruthless self-examination in terms of various forms of social expectations” (2017, p. 59).

Ambiguity and Abjection

Ambiguity is at the heart of Kristeva’s writing, and she positions the importance of the concept to her theoretical stance at the start of *Powers of Horror*: “It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous...” (1982, p. 4). Kristeva suggests there is an ongoing tension of intrigue versus disgust with our bodies, with the female and feminine sexual body being a site for both fascination and disgust (Phillips & Rippin, 2010), and women permanently reminded of their “ambiguous, in-between or abject status” (Mavin & Grandy, 2016, p. 1099). What this means is abjection is at once a psychological, emotional and physical phenomenon, which involves a tension between the reality of a disruptive semiotic body and the desire for an orderly symbolic mind (Covino, 2004; Phillips & Rippin,

2010). In a different vein, Höpfl draws on Kristeva's description of the oscillation between the semiotic and symbolic body to illuminate the ambiguous role of women within organisations (2000, 2007). The author describes women's inconsistency and partial commitment to the organisation (by which we can understand the nature of the so-called 'zig-zag' career women often pursue due to the demands of motherhood), as causing uncertainty and disruption to the status quo. She states: "The female and the feminine are abject, and therefore threaten the intrusion of pollution, disorder, subversion, excess emotion and uncontrollable bodies into the rational and disembodied organization" (Höpfl, 2000, p. 101).

What we are offered with Kristeva's concept of abjection is a consistent notion of equivocality, thresholds and borders, as if we live our lives in a constant to-ing and fro-ing of what is 'me' and 'not me'. And in this way, there is something unruly in these descriptions of abjection and the abject body. That is, they appear infused with complexity and vulnerability, and in this way, it is not dissimilar to the narratives of midlife and the middle-aged body. And it is not just in the descriptions of the bodily self that Kristeva is interested in the notion of ambiguity, for metaphorical variation is woven into her writing. For example, in her essay 'Stranger to Ourselves', she likens the experience of being a foreigner to that of Bach's composition of Toccata and Fugue (in D Minor, c. 1704). Not only do the origins of the two words encompass descriptions such as "to touch, fleetingly...to run away... flight" (OED, 2018), resonant notions for Kristeva's ongoing themes of otherness and being a stranger, but the music is also the idiosyncratic choice for both horror films and Disney (and as I listen to the music, I can understand why!). In her essay, Kristeva suggests: "Bach's compositions evoke to my ears the meaning of an acknowledged and harrowing otherness that I should like to be contemporary... an otherness barely touched upon and that already moves away" (1991, p. 3). Why is this of interest or importance? It is as if, throughout her writing, Kristeva acknowledges uncertainty and equivocation, enabling space for different narratives to exist. In her consistent theme of 'otherness', she addresses the ambiguous notion of belonging existing alongside alienation, "always everywhere, the foreigner belongs nowhere" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 10). Whilst

at the same time, Kristeva positively embraces a metaphorical interpretation of her own work, as she urges: “do not rely solely on the appearance of image of a word and its meaning. Go further, go elsewhere, interpret. Interpretation as I understand it, is itself a revolt”. (Oliver, 2002, p. 414).

The Silenced Body

Kristeva is as interested in Abjection as a social phenomenon as much as an individual process and how the woman comes to be abjected in culture (Covino, 2004; McAfee, 2004). The theme of women being ‘out of place’, excluded or silenced within the organisational environment is a thread that runs through much of the literature that considers the relationship between abjection, being female and the woman’s place within an organisation (e.g. Puwar, 2004; Fotaki, 2013; Rizq, 2013; Gatrell, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Gatrell, 2017). For examples, Fotaki demarcates exclusionary practices, including that of social spaces and conferences (2013), where women hesitate, disavow or fear to have their voices heard. Being a foreigner, being silenced and being an abject entity are the melodies running through Kristeva’s haunting essay ‘Stranger to Ourselves’ (1991), where she draws on her experience as a foreigner to understand the nature of ‘otherness’. In this essay, Kristeva delineates the experience of ‘temporary homeostasis’ to understand the experience of not belonging, or “the state of not being at home” (Höpfl, 2007, p. 118). It is interesting to note this might be both a literal (not at home) and metaphorical (not feeling ‘at home’) state for the working mother? Pertinent to this study, Höpfl draws three parallels between Kristeva’s concepts of being made abject in a foreign place and the woman feeling like a stranger in the workplace (1992, 2000, 2007). In a similar vein to Fotaki, Höpfl suggests women are silenced within the organisation through an inability to relate to the (male) dominant language. But more than silence, “there is a reluctance to argue, to challenge the values, tastes, judgements of the native” (2007, p. 122). Furthermore, Höpfl (together with Matilal, 2007) extends this thinking further suggesting that the abject woman, who creates uncertainty, must be construed as powerless, with business remaining rational (and male). “Rather, it seems that women are perceived to lack

order, logic, direction and rationality. Consequently, unless they can be converted to reason, in other words, to become homologues of men, they are thought to lack the necessary leadership skills” (2007, p. 200). This means they will be permitted entry into leadership once no longer feminine.

Additionally, Höpfl advocates that men do not realise the extent that women live as strangers in their world, “what is normal and taken for granted is a world which is defined, constructed and maintained by male notions of order” (2007, p. 125). This latter consideration is of critical importance when examining the marginalisation of women in the workplace, but also when the notion of age is added to the argument for women’s exclusion. For what is not fully explored here is the consequence of being made abject when the dimension of age is added to that of the professional, feminine body (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011). For example, whilst Fotaki suggests the experience of Embodied Abjection is likely to intensify when gender intersects with other exclusionary practices, named as race, sexuality or social class (2013), no mention is made of age. It might just be that age is the invisible structure that is ignored or taken for granted in the consideration of the many discriminatory practices faced by women?

Abjection as Practice

One of Kristeva’s concerns is the abjection of women’s feminine maternal bodies, rendering them to a position of ‘lesser’. If Fotaki’s work can be read as abjection *in* practice, that is, how abjection manifests within a specific male-ordered environment, Gatrell considers the active process of hostile behaviour towards lactating, ‘leaky’ bodies, offering the contemporary theory of ‘abjection *as* practice’ (2017). Just as feminist philosopher Margaret Shildrick noted how women are socially and culturally defined “as reproducers” (1997, p.22), with the embodied leakage associated with the reproductive body causing cultural anxiety, so too does Kristeva define abjection as located in “social responses towards liquid bodily processes and functions, and in the feelings of disgust invoked by ‘leakage’ or the literal expulsion of such liquids from the body” (Gatrell, 2017, p. 5). As such, Gatrell builds on those scholar’s observations

as to the marginalisation and exclusion of women in the workplace from the perspective of the abjection of the maternal body (Trethewey, 1999; Fotaki, 2013). Turning to the relevance of Gatrell's theory of 'abjection as practice', the situated and contextual nature of abjection is emphasised, together with the 'out of place' nature of the breastfeeding mother within the workplace setting (2017). Building on Fotaki's work of implicit abjection in practice (2011, 2013), Gatrell indicates an explicit and purposeful practice of abjection towards those who dare not conform to the masculine norm of the organisation (Kenny, 2016; Gatrell, 2017). Or, put another way, fail to confine their leaky bodies within the borders of what might be considered acceptable organisational behaviour, where the body "must bear no trace of its debt to nature" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 102; Gatrell, 2017). Gatrell likens the treatment of the breastfeeding mother to that of an animal, "consigned to pump milk in insanitary spaces, and threatened with expulsion due to co-worker fears that breastfeeding might interrupt organizational routines" (2017, p. 12). As Kenny reflects, in relation to Kristeva's theory, organisational fears about the leaky maternal body can result in the suppression of the feminine, in order to elevate the idealised masculine identity (2016).

In the context of this study, what is of interest here are the conclusions reached regarding the consequences of *being made abject* (Tyler, 2013). That is, when abjection is actively or passively practiced, consciously or unconsciously embedded within the organisational setting. As related earlier, Fotaki describes the process of self-abjection (2013), and with the theory of 'Abject Appearance', researchers further advance the notion of intra-gender regulation of appearance, with female leaders monitoring their own and other women's appearance to avoid abjection and conform to the patriarchal norm (Tyler, 2011; Mavin, et al. 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). The suggestion is made that, through the practice of abjection, women are simultaneously reproducing and resisting the patriarchal norm (Fotaki, 2013), or, as Kenny (2010) argues, adopting roles and identities in order to avoid the shattering consequences of abjection. When this is not possible, scholars argue, the abject female might exit the

organisation or enable symbolic authority to rest with the male, thereby maintaining the ‘normal’ organisational environment (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Evans, 2017).

In her book, ‘Revolting Subjects’ (2013), Tyler ‘scales up’ the theory of abjection from that of the individual and considers states of exclusion from multiple perspectives – particularly those groups who are subject to the violent and stigmatising effects of abjection. Whilst her examples include asylum seekers, evictees and feminist protestors, her theorising of ‘Social Abjection’ offers concrete examples of abjection as practice, that can be usefully understood in the context of the workplace. For example, a central argument developed in her book is that social abjection functions through the generation of fear and anxiety towards the abjected population, that is, the “fuelling and orchestrating of a state of insecurity” (2013, p. 9). In the organisational literature highlighting the “looming challenge” (Strack, et al., 2008, p. 120) of the ageing population in the workplace, providing organisations with both capacity and productivity risks, it can be argued this state of insecurity is currently being generated towards older people (Irving, 2018). Tyler also describes the purposeful use of stereotyping as a “scapegoat of discriminatory practice” (ibid), relying on the repetition and accumulation of expressions and beliefs - perhaps a likely theme from respondents as they consider the homogenising of their middle age, their menopause and their motivation? And in the consideration of, what is termed the ‘Disgust Consensus’, Tyler emphasises that social agreements operate within disgust reactions. That is, “there is no disgust without an existing disgust consensus” (2013, p. 23), with expressions of disgust needing to include or draw others into the conversation, “enabling a strange kind of sociability” (Ngai, 2005, p. 336). It is through repeated citation, Tyler argues, that a consensus develops which shapes the perceptual field. As the menopause is considered further throughout this study, and in the light of the example in the Preface, Tyler perhaps sheds a useful perspective on the reasons behind the sociable, shared negative perceptions of the menopause transition?

The Organisational Gap

Abjection and the Ageing Body

On reading the relevant literature, it is clear that abjection is emerging as a useful concept to understand and theorise about the marginalisation and exclusion of women within organisations. However, what remains missing from the literature is any rich discussion about the intersection of age with the gender dynamic, particularly within the workplace. Whilst some scholars have considered the abject older body, particularly in the transition from ‘third age’ to ‘fourth age’ (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011), the potential for the dynamic of age to be a site for abjection appears to be limited. Of interest here are the concepts of agency and self-control, with the suggestion that older bodies are socially perceived as lacking in both, and thereby held as abject. Scholars note that “while abjection may not be the fate of women alone who have aged unsuccessfully, women may well be more likely to find themselves represented as abject others, as a result both of their ‘leaky bodies’ and their longer and more isolated later lives” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011, p. 139).

In the context of this study, adding the dimension of age to the theories summarised in this chapter give rise to a number of important questions. For example, if the maternal body is held to be abject in the workplace, what are the consequences of the ‘post-maternal’ body (Gullette, 2004), or indeed, the menopausal body? If, as is suggested, women practice self-abjection as an outcome of their ongoing ostracism or invisibility, how do women view their ‘abject’ ageing bodies? Perhaps as an object of disgust or horror, or as something that is ‘not me’? Moreover, if social abjection is practised, situationally and contextually, towards women who present as ‘outliers’ to the norm (i.e. breastfeeding mothers), to what extent will the ageing female body also be perceived as abject? Or worse, actively made abject? From the literature already outlined, it is not hard to extrapolate meaning for how the ageing, feminine body might be held abject on multiple accounts, and this will be an important avenue to investigate with the research.

Love, Hope and Abjection

On reading organisational studies framed around abjection, there is a virtual silence surrounding Kristeva's work on love and hope with little scope offered for affirmative agency on behalf of the individual. This is a different concept to "affirmative abjection" (Tyler, 2004, p. 94), that is, the feminist strategy of invoking powerful images of disgust for the maternal body and using these to challenge the misogyny which underlie these cultural inscriptions (Creed, 1993; Covino, 2004; Tyler, 2009). Kristeva is quite clear that abjection is as much about 'not me', turning points, change and small revolutions, as about disgust, rejection and exclusion, explored above in the literature with relation to the feminine body. On reflection this is unsurprising, for most of Kristeva's writings oscillate between an emphasis on separation and rejection (i.e. *Powers of Horror*, 1983; *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984a;) and that of identification and incorporation (i.e. *Tales of Love*, 1983b; *Black Sun*, 1989). In an interview with Rosalind Coward in 1984 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Kristeva claims that for this reason *Powers of Horror* and *Tales of Love* should be read together; each alone providing only half the story (Kristeva & Oliver, 2002). Even in *Powers of Horror*, she is keen to stress from the beginning that "the object is edged with the sublime" (1982, p2). Discussing the importance of both sides of the coin of abjection, she states, "I wanted in a sort of polemical way to stress this part of the human psyche, the idealization, love, the positive... I have already written another book called the *Powers of Horror* where the problem of negativity, rejection, hostility has been the dominant problem" (Kristeva, 2002, p. 346).

I believe Kristeva's writing on incorporation, love and revolution are as important a lens to view this study through as that of exclusion and disgust, particularly as scholars call for a reframing of success that is not just borne of absence and lack (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007). In particular her writings on "the sparkle of female genius" (Kristeva, 2002, p.403), notions of individual difference (2004) and revolution (Kristeva, 2002; 2014) are important – all of which she still frames under the theoretical concept of abjection. Whilst termed anti-feminist for her rejection of many first and second

generational definitions of feminism (Oliver, 1993b; McAfee, 2004), Kristeva is nevertheless clear in her refusal to idealise the notion of woman that is homogenous and does not allow for individual differences (Oliver, 1993b; Kristeva, 2002). Instead, she states her passionate attachment to the recognition of women in social, political and intellectual life, but only insofar as they bring a different attitude to power and meaning (Kristeva, 2002). Her call for ‘conflictual coexistence’ (2002, p. 449) is in contrast to what she defines as ‘peaceful co-existence’, which Kristeva believes is currently achieved through the silence of the ‘stranger’. Thereby she lays down a challenge to women to confront and recognise the normative patriarchal discourse.

Closing Remarks to Chapter Six

In summary, it has been argued within organisation studies that theories of abjection offer “rich prospects for future debate and research” (Rizq, 2013, p. 1277). A review through Kristeva’s literature, interviews and academic papers demonstrate her theories provide an interesting means to reflect on workplace exclusion and marginalisation for female workers and a new lens to view the historical silencing of women’s voices. There is consideration for both conscious and unconscious dynamics and processes within organisations that enable abjection to be practiced and, perhaps, embedded through behaviour and language (Fotaki, 2013; Rizq, 2013; Gatrell, 2017). Whilst the connection between age and abjection has been made by scholars (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011), there is considerable scope for extending this research into a further exploration of the stage of midlife and what this might mean within the culture of the organisation and individually. As highlighted above, there is richness in Kristeva’s writing on revolution and the rejection of the status quo. Not only is this resonant of scholars calling for a reframing and reconstruction of what success might look like for twenty first century organisations, borne out of more than deficiency and defiance (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007), but also a hopeful call to middle aged women to recognise their individual agency.

PART TWO - RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER SEVEN

Philosophy, Design and Methodology

Introduction

The methodology of this study is arranged over two chapters, with the first considering the philosophical building blocks for the research approach. As well as this, the first chapter clarifies the research process, including the practicalities and decisions made throughout the journey. It explains how thirty middle-aged, professional women were recruited into this study and how this sample was constructed to represent an appropriate sample of participants. The chapter then explains how the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2016 and June 2017, with data coded, planned and arranged to present a coherent data analysis. The chapter concludes with personal reflections from the study, including the learning of moving from an Executive Coach position to that of a Researcher, and the curiosity of conducting a study with professional women who shared so many similar life experiences. Chapter Eight provides a bridge between the design of the research, the theoretical foundations and the findings, providing a basis for the structure of the subsequent three findings chapters.

Background and Social Constructionism

*We shape our self to fit this world
and by the world are shaped again.
The visible and the invisible working
together in common cause,
to produce the miraculous.
I am thinking of the way the intangible
air passed at speed round a shaped wing
easily holds our weight.
So may we, in this life trust
to those elements we have yet to see or imagine,
and look for the true shape of our own self,*

*by forming it well to the great
intangibles about us.*
(David Whyte, 2012)

Twenty years of experience as an executive coach and corporate consultant have shaped and embedded values and behaviours that I hold dear. For a profession that is centred in enquiry and reflection (e.g. Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2004; O'Neill, 2007; Whitmore, 2009), coaching can often be intellectualized from a surprisingly realist approach, based on the assumption that it is possible to access truth (Jackson & Cox, 2009). Although philosophical training within the coaching profession is limited, it is not uncommon for coaches to be schooled in the principles of Socratic questioning, in the belief that the 'right' questions enables the client to reach a knowledge that enables them to predict and control their situation (Jackson & Cox, 2009). Indeed, scholars within the field of coaching have described the goal of coaching as the seeking of "the knowledge and truth of reality and values at an individual level" (Jackson & Cox, 2009, p. 82). Whilst Descartes' elevation of reason is often balanced by coaching scholars with Kant's reconciliation of reason and perception, (Howard, 2000; Jackson & Cox, 2009), the opinion can still remain within the profession that, with skill, reason will prevail and the 'right' answer will emerge (Baggini, 2016).

Before I knew of the term 'Social Constructionism', the significance of the coaching experience has always existed in gaining an in-depth understanding of client's stories and contexts, with the value of coaching existing in appreciating the meaning of these experiences. 'Truth' has always been a dynamic, fluid proposition for me, dependent on individual experience, perception and context. This means my role is often to help clients 'unpick' the many mental constructions of 'reality' that have evolved from their culture, with the understanding that a client's 'reality' may conflict with others and may change over time (Bruner, 1991, Stober & Parry, 2005; Steltner, 2007), I have always retained a scepticism towards solely using mechanistic means for explaining human behaviour within the organisational field, with data that is not subject to further interpretation, but established as fact. Instead, I am fascinated by

how meaning is presented, created, sustained and modified within the context of the organisation. This evolved into a preference for qualitative research when completing an MSc in 2009. Whilst numbers give some researchers certainty - words, stories and language speak to me of possibilities and potential.

With ontological theorists tending to fall into one of two mutually opposing and exclusive categories, relativists and realists, that lock horns, this can present the researcher with somewhat crude ontological decisions (Burr, 2003; Blaikie, 2007). Whilst relativism suggests that reality is nothing but a ‘dance of signs’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2006), with the world not existing independently from our perception or construction of it, realists will argue that the research endeavour is barely tenable without a recognition of reality (Miller, et al. 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Blaikie, 2007). As an ontological position, social constructionism offers a route through this ambiguity (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders, et al. 2018). Described as a broad and multi-faceted perspective, human experience, according to social constructionists, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Gergen, 2015). That is, what we perceive, and experience, is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions. Reality, or at least selected parts thereof, is therefore not something naturally given, or as Willig suggests, “This doesn’t mean we can never really know anything, just that there are ‘knowledges’, rather than ‘knowledge’” (2001 p. 7).

While several different approaches to social constructionism exist, most share an allegiance to three key assumptions (Burr, 2003; Young & Collin, 2004; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Gergen, 2015). First, language is critical and forms the notion of ‘reality’. That is, our sense of who we are, and our social relationships, organisations and cultures are “*reflected in and shaped by our language used*” (Burr, 2003, p. 650). Gergen goes further to suggest that “*for any state of affairs, a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations should be possible*” (2015, p. 5). Social constructionism is also concerned with relationships and cultural specificity. That is,

our understanding of the world is not static, or inevitable. It changes and develops across time and space and according to the culture, or group, we belong to. This means the language we use comes to function as ‘truth telling’ within the social convention of certain groups, with the possibility that different groups can arrive at different meanings of similar words. Therefore, what we take to be our reality depends on the social relationships of which we are a part (Cohen et al. 2004; Gergen, 2008). The third key assumption is that language is shaped not only by the past but can also “*fashion the future*” (Gergen, 2015, p. 10). Excitingly, social constructionism is relevant not only to maintaining social traditions and conventions but can enable innovation, generating new ways of meaning. Social constructionist scholars invite ‘generative discourse’, that is, ways of talking, writing and representing that challenge existing traditions of understanding and offer new possibilities for action (Burr 2003; Gergen, 2015).

So, language, culture, relationships and innovation are critical to the understanding of social constructionism and to this study (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). At the core of this study is the phenomena of middle age among professionally employed women, which may be subject to a range of social constructions, such as menopause, gender and ageing. For example, within this study the concept of ‘middle age’ is for one respondent “lucky” and “energizing”, whilst for another “a drag”. Equally, ‘menopause’ is a fascinating social construct, being a “disease” for one, yet “all in the mind” for another interviewee. Whilst the cessation of the menses is a biological fact for women of approximately aged 50, the existing dialogue surrounding the ‘menopause’ is affected by history, culture and the social utility of ‘truth-telling’. In other words, how menopause is perceived and constructed, can both hinder and benefit different people. As Gergen states in his discussion on ‘truth-telling’, “when the term leaps from its grounding in a specific tradition we confront the possibilities for constriction, conflict and oppression” (2015, p.11). Furthermore, one’s gender within an organisation is “of no consequence” to one respondent, whilst it is a state of marginalisation and exclusion for others. Shining a light on the perceptions of others,

female professionals over 50 are, from the perspective of one respondent, “on their way out”, or for another, “just on their way back in”.

Kristeva and Social Constructionism

In the same way that language, culture, relationships and innovation are important to understanding social constructionism, it can be argued that the same concepts underpin Kristeva’s work, offering an alignment between her work and social constructionism. Whilst in interviews she states an active resistance to such labelling (Sutherland, 2006), and the appropriation of her ideas into popular usage, her academic leaning towards both Process Philosophy and post structuralism remain embedded in her concepts (McAfee, 2000; 2004). Adherents to Process Philosophy, or that of ‘becoming’, believe that each occasion of experience is causally influenced by prior occasions of experiences, which in turn influences future occurrences (McAfee, 2000). Or, in other words, nothing is static and ‘being’ is a dynamic process influenced by many factors. For Kristeva the importance of this underpinning related to language, believing it should be viewed through the prism of history as well as of individual psychic and sexual experiences – almost the same words as Gergen states above. Kristeva also related this philosophy to the nature of gender, “masculinity and femininity are social and cultural constructions” (McAfee, 2004, p. 79) and, as related in the Literature Review, Kristeva has stated a passion for understanding how women have come to be socially and culturally placed in a secondary position in a patriarchal society.

There is an ambiguity about social constructionism that is attractive to me. Nothing is black and white but is dependent on many other factors. As discussed in the Literature Review, Chapter Six, ambiguity is a theme threaded through Kristeva’s writing, as she stated in an interview with John Sutherland in *The Guardian* in 2006: *"As you know, I belong to the tendency, or school, in French philosophy which developed in the 60s, in which conceptual work is deeply involved with the personal and in which notions, or ideas, are sutured by style. There is a lot of imagination, rhetorical figures,*

subjective expressions and so on that that often bother the so-called Anglo-Saxon reader because they consider this French 'stuff' - theory - to be somehow indigestible."

The Aims of the Study

Whilst these are related in the Introduction, it is worth briefly restating the aims of this study as this framed the entire process of data collection and analysis. In short, the aim of this study is to capture the subjective feel of 'middle-age' for professional women and how this experience is lived through the setting of an organisation. The study further aims to understand the impact of such an experience on career decisions, enabling the identification of recurring patterns of experience. With regards to the kind of knowledge the methodology aims to produce (Willig, 2001; Mason, 2002), there is an emphasis in this study on the potential for heterogeneous stories, alternative perspectives and perceived realities to the phenomena under discussion from the respondents. Crucial to the study is the role I have taken as a researcher, the relationship between me and the 'researched' and how this in turn, influenced the connection between 'facts' and 'values'. Alongside many scholars (Willig, 2001; Cassell & Symon, 2004; Gatrell, 2006), I believe it is impossible for the researcher to position themselves outside of the subject matter, because I have a relationship with, or am implicated in, the phenomenon under study. This is a well-established tradition for qualitative researchers, particularly within feminist research and the feminist ethic of commitment and egalitarianism, as opposed to the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation (Roberts, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Gatrell, 2006). I am aware the data I present is subjective and qualitative but hope that it engages the reader with the emotions and meanings behind the text - enriching, enhancing and infusing facts with new understandings.

My desire is to expand on the work of those scholars who are calling for a reframing of what success could (and often does) look like for female professionals (Höpfl & Matlal, 2007) as well as middle age (Trethewey, 2001), positing an alternative narrative to that of the decline narrative, particularly for those women at midlife.

Expanding the lens of abjection further within the field of organisational studies (Fotaki, 2013; Rizq, 2013; Gatrell, 2017), this study casts further light on the voices of older women within this field, whilst also being mindful of Tyler's (2013) call for researchers to consider the consequences of 'being made abject', expanded in Chapter Six, and a primary consideration within this research.

Data Generation

Sociologist John Lofland suggested there are four criteria for collecting qualitative data: First, to get close enough to the people and situation being studied to personally understand in depth the detail of what is going on, and secondly, to capture what actually takes place and what people actually say: the perceived facts. Third, to include a great deal of pure description of people, activities, interactions and settings and lastly, to include direct quotations from people, both what they speak and what they write down (1971). This, he advocated, constitutes "a significant commitment to represent the participants in their own terms". (1971, p. 4). As much as Denzin and Lincoln describe a "quiet revolution" happening within the qualitative field over the last four decades (2008, p. vii), Lofland's advice remains pertinent for an approach that aims to make the world visible through interpretive, material practices.

Compatible with my ontological position, qualitative interviewing is an effective means to achieve this, particularly as participants' perceived reality is important to me, together with their knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations and experience of the subjects at hand (Mason, 2002). Mason further urges the researcher to be self-critical in judging how effective the data can be from this method, given how reliant it is on people's capacity to "verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember" (2002, p. 64). Of course, this process is not only complicated by the capacity of the interviewee, but also the role of the researcher, with no qualitative interview being 'relationship-free' or 'bias-free' (Willig, 2001; Mason, 2002; Cassell & Symon, 2004). My intention is to embrace these complexities through reflexivity, understanding that it is unwise to try to separate the interview from the social interaction that takes place, or 'facts' from context. As Silverman suggests, accounts

should be treated “not as true or false but as socially constructed narratives” (2013, p. 47).

With such intricacies in mind, data was gathered through audiotaped, semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes each. Short enough to be respectful of the interviewees time, and long enough to enable the participant to tell their story in a relaxed, unhurried manner. Just to be on the safe side, two audiotapes ran at every interview (which was lucky, given that on seven occasions there were issues with one of the recorders!). Smith (and his colleagues) describes the qualitative research interview as a “conversation with a purpose” (2009, p. 57), asserting that this form of interview enables greater flexibility, allows the interviewer to go into novel areas and thus produce richer data. In addition, he suggests this form of interview allows the participant to be the expert in her own story, with the interviewee being a ‘participant’ in this process, not a distraction from it, actively shaping the course of the interview, rather than passively responding to my pre-set questions (Cassell & Symon, 2004). As such, the term ‘responsive interviewing’, rather than ‘in-depth interviewing’ describes the process I carried out more effectively (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 38). Responsive interviewing highlights the interactive nature of the interview process, emphasizing the mutuality of the relationship between the interview and interviewee as conversational partners. As they suggest: “Research design and questioning must remain flexible to accommodate new information, to adapt to actual experiences that people have had, and to adjust to unexpected situations. The researcher creates future questions based on what she has already heard, requiring the research to analyse interviews throughout the project, rather than just at the end” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 35).

As an experienced coach, I found the skills of active listening, paraphrasing and prompting invaluable in ensuring that each participant had the opportunity to relate her story openly, and in a manner that contributed to the exploration of the research topic. I am used to ‘thinking on my feet’, making on-the-spot decisions about the content and sequence of an interview as it progresses and keeping a business conversation running smoothly. However, I had to actively stop myself going into

'coach' mode with solution focused questions though, reminding myself this was a data generation exercise. I became more relaxed as the interviews continued and remained mindful that the interview interaction generated *relevant* data, which sometimes meant orchestrating the intellectual and social dynamics of the situation. As Mason suggests, "it is all too easy to orchestrate a pleasant social encounter whose content has little or no bearing on the intellectual puzzle which the research is designed to address" (2002, p. 67). That said, what counts as data was not necessarily self-evident. For example, much of (participant) Robin's transcription suggests she is in a "dark place" as she cares for her husband, works full time and has financial issues. As she discusses her physical response to her issues, she says: "*So my body is no longer a temple. I think I would call it, more like a cellar, it feels like most of it is down there on the floor and shut away in the dark.*" What is missing from these words is Robin's tremendous humour, with most sentences punctuated by laughter (albeit rueful sometimes). As scholars suggest, the transcription will always be partial because it is an inadequate record of non-verbal aspects of the interaction and because judgements will be made by the transcriber (Mason, 2002). As such, reflexive journal entries were made at each stage of the analysis (as detailed below), but also my field notebooks captured the immediacy of the moment, including feelings, reactions and impressions (Emerson, et al., 2007).

Developing the Interview Questions

In the light of the four aims of this study stated above, being (a) to capture the subjective feel of 'middle-age' for professional women (b) to understand how this experience is 'lived' through the setting of an organisation, (c) to detail the impact of such an experience on career decisions, and (d) to identify recurring patterns of experience, I developed a bank of research questions. Prior to the interviews, interviewees were provided with this outline interview schedule, setting out the proposed questions for the interview process, whilst not dictating the precise direction of the conversation (Smith, et al., 2009). It was important that the scope of the questions expressed the intellectual puzzle, were intellectually worthwhile and consistent, adding up to a sensible whole (Mason, 2002).

Lived Experience:

- What is your experience of ‘middle age’ – physically and emotionally?
- What is it like to inhabit a middle-aged body?
- What’s your experience of the menopause and has this affected you at work?
- What is liberating about being older at this stage of your career?
- What’s challenging about being your age at this stage of your career?
- When are you made aware of your age?
- What assumptions do others have about your age?
- At the moment, what influence is this experience likely to have on your future career decisions? (Or already has had on your future career decisions?)
- Are you given any ‘caring responsibilities’ at work?
- What are your caring responsibilities out of work?
- To what extent has your role as a ‘carer’ (children, parental, other) changed at this stage of life?
- How do you combine your multiple roles?

Organisational Attitudes:

- What is (or were) your organisation’s attitude to ageing?
- How does your organisation treat middle-aged women?
- What assumptions does your organisation or others within your organisation have towards midlife?
- How does your experience align with the organisational narrative about ageing?
- To what extent do you believe there is a gender difference in attitudes towards executives at middle age?
- To what extent are the organisational policies for the retention of women directed at older women?
- What keeps you at work? What will keep you there? What would have kept you there?

- What would an organisation need to do to retain you at this stage?
- What enables professional women to succeed in the latter part of their careers?

It was clear to me after three interviews I was asking too many questions. In my efforts to avoid coaching, to get the ‘right’ data and to ensure the process was ‘intellectually worthwhile’, I was preventing the natural flow of the conversation and not playing to my own strengths. Mason suggests the researcher considers whether she is asking an appropriate number of questions (2002), and after the first three interviews, I found it more useful to reduce the research questions in order to enable a conversation to flow more easily and allow more space and time to think and reflect during our time together. The five broad interview questions were:

1. What is your experience of middle age?
2. What is your experience of menopause?
3. How do you experience ageing within your organisation?
4. What influence has this experience had on your career decisions?
5. What else might be important for you to discuss with regards to middle age, menopause, caring responsibilities or your organisation?

The Participants

Choosing the Numbers

My original intention was to pose these questions to approximately 30 women, and indeed, this ended up being the precise number involved in the study. With regards to the sample size, the number of 30 participants is the mean recommended number of non-probability sample sizes for qualitative studies using interview techniques (Adler & Adler, 2012; Saunders & Townsend, 2016). In the meta studies reporting empirical evidence for numbers of research participants and offering insight into existing precedence, the conclusions suggest a lack of transparency and limited justification for sample size (Collins et al. 2007; Marshall, 2013; Saunders & Townsend, 2016). However, in the largest study of 248 interview studies in ten top and second tier

workplace and organisational journals for the period of 2003-2013, the norm for interview participants was 15-60 (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). So, I felt a degree of security that the number of participants chosen was broad enough to answer the research questions, to enable comparisons and to gain meaningful data (Mason, 2002; Saunders & Townsend, 2018).

It is more common for participant numbers to be justified based on data saturation, that is, the point at which no additional data are being found (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), or at which additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes (Given, 2016, p. 135). In the limited studies that offer detailed insight, saturation is suggested to be reached after 6-15 interviews (Marshall, 1996; Guest, et al., 2006; Francis et al., 2010). As this study takes an inductive, thematic approach, scholars suggest some useful guidelines, above and beyond the advice of just ‘gut-feel’ (Saunders, et al., 2018). For example, either “the codebook begins to stabilize” (Hennink, et al., 2017, p. 4), or that I would be able to talk about the data in more generalized terms and readily supply examples (Morse, 2015). However, I would agree with those scholars who believe that when gaining stories from human beings, there is always the potential for new insight to emerge, with no real end point (Nelson, 2016). Strauss and Corbin’s perspective are useful here, suggesting that saturation should be more concerned with reaching the point where further data collection becomes ‘counter-productive’ and where the ‘new’ does not necessarily add anything to the overall story or theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Saunders, et al. 2018). Mason (2002) makes a similar argument, talking of the point at which there are ‘diminishing returns’ from further data collection.

After broadening my sampling strategy (detailed below) after ten and then twenty interviews, I made a note in my journal that by the 24th interview little further insight was emerging. I continued with two further interviews to confirm this and then attempted to cancel the final four interviews. All four interviewees became emotional, and – in a surprising turn for me - it was clear that my desire to cease data collection was of less importance than the participant’s desire to have their stories heard and continued to complete all 30 interviews. It was a tacit reminder that this was not

research *on* people, but research *with* people, for as Patton suggests, “Qualitative inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human capacities – the capacity to learn from others” (1990, p. 7).

Choosing Who to Sample

Having decided the number of women to interview, I wanted to ensure the sample chosen would, as Mason suggests, “provide access to enough data, with the right focus to enable you to address your research questions” (2002, p. 134). Mindful that purposive sampling demands that one thinks critically about the parameters of the population the researcher is interested in and chooses the sample case carefully on this basis (Silverman, 2013), I set out with the following quota targets. As Denzin and Lincoln suggest, “A good qualitative researcher will seek out groups, settings and individuals where the processes being studied are most likely to occur” (2008, p. 202):

- The majority of participants (70%) to be employed within a public or private organisation, to include executives from corporate, not-for-profit organisations and academic institutions – with a geographical spread across the UK;
- A minority will have left their organisation, in order to understand the reasons for leaving paid employment and understand potential ways retention could have been achieved;
- Participants to be balanced between those with children and women without children in line with the national reproductive average. For women born in 1970, this figure is approximately 17% (ONS, 2017). This enables me to understand some of the caring challenges of middle age, particularly when the children are less than 18 years;
- At least 50% of participants with parents (birth parents or otherwise), or parents-in-law alive;
- All participants to be employed at a senior manager level or above, with management responsibilities for others, as this is the management/leadership

level within organisations where retention is particularly challenging (Vinnicombe, et al. 2015);

- All participants to be aged 45+ (no upper aged limit as long as they are in employment). With the average age of senior female leaders being 54, (UK Board Index, 2017; Vinnicombe, et al. 2018, p. 21) and the average age of the menopause being 52, I believed this as an appropriate, encompassing starting age.

Practical and Ethical Issues

The most pressing practical issue was that of time – finding time in busy women’s diaries, but all participants were extremely generous with their time, interviews rarely postponed and two-hour time-slots freely given. It was a sign this was a subject that was important to most of the respondents, and this was demonstrated in the availability of access. All interviews were undertaken in an environment chosen by the participants, to ensure their comfort and privacy, which took place at either their house or office; my office or a flexible workspace across the UK. Due to the potential sensitive nature of our conversation this felt important and became a critical factor in establishing rapport (Smith, et al. 2009). Geographically, I travelled some 8,000 miles, with interviews taking place in Scotland, the North and South of England, London and Wales.

There were a number of ethical issues to consider in the set-up of this study, including the interview practice and style, confidentiality, anonymity and power relations. As well as observing normal ethical standards of sound research, I retained a critical awareness of whose interests the research serves (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2013). As scholars suggest, “Researchers are privileged. We are responsible for the impact of our work and should not lose sight of our place in the social context in which the research takes place” (Davey & Liefoghe, 2004, p181).

Confidentiality was discussed with participants, and effort has been taken to provide anonymity. Pseudonyms have been given to each individual and care has been taken to ensure that identifiable information (particularly with regards to their organisation)

has been removed from the data. Ethically, it was important that participants were at ease with discussing their bodies, their age, their organisation and their menopausal experience. This was emphasized in the Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix 1 and 2), but I also decided to call every participant prior to each interview to confirm the time and location, and also to reconfirm the subject matter. There was a significant degree of disclosure, particularly around the menopause and caring issues, and I shared in return when this served to elicit confidence and open dialogue. Whilst Jacqui Aston asserts that personal disclosure is essential in that it increases the comfort levels of the participant and facilitates a degree of “trust and mutuality” (Rubin & Rubin, p. 147), most participants did not need my ‘story’ to participate.

However, it was important to be open about the outcomes and potential outputs of the study, particularly if this work is to be published (Mason, 2002). The data is rich and personal, and may be recognised by the individual participants, whether or not their name is attached to it. Informed (written) consent was therefore obtained, which including the following: asking for participation in the study; the right to use the data including non-verbal/body language; the right to interpret the data and make comparisons and the right to publish or reproduce the data (Silverman, 2015; Mason, 2002;).

Reciprocity and Power

By agreeing to take part in this project, by making time for the interview and by the pre-preparation many of the participants had done prior to us meeting (without being asked for), it was a clear indication the study had merit for the participant. It was my hope that, through her participation, the interviewee would gain a greater awareness of the issues being discussed that would ultimately prove interesting and useful. O’Leary discussed the need for researchers to “recognise the political nature of research and manage the position of power afforded the researcher” (2005, p. 43). This appeared to be the case, as in my journal I note that participants reflected on the interview as “*cathartic... therapeutic... fascinating... surprising... thought provoking*”. I anticipated the issue of power would be contained in this study; as the

participants are in senior manager roles themselves (and therefore in a position of authority), being interviewed by a woman of a similar age and status, who is keen to ensure a mutual relationship is established.

Reflexivity

The most critical ethical obligation of a researcher conducting qualitative research is to interpret the experiences of others in the most faithful way possible (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2010; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Reflexivity refers to the concept of acknowledging that the actions and decisions of the researcher will affect both the meaning and context of the participant's experience. In this regard, research is seen as a joint enterprise between researcher and participant (Charmaz, 2000; Willig, 2001; Mason, 2002; Smith, et al., 2009). The interpretive approach considers the researcher's conceptions to be integral to their ability to effectively interpret the participant's personal world (Smith, 2004; Silverman, 2015). Within this study and through the interview method selected, the conduct of the interview and the method used for data analysis, I have made best effort to provide an authentic representation of the lived experiences of the participants. With social constructionist scholars placing an emphasis on authenticity, trustworthiness, balanced viewpoints, reflexivity, rapport and reciprocity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), these are the values through which the research was be conducted.

Sampling Strategy

The study involved multi-stage sampling (Saunders & Townsend, 2016; Saunders, et al., 2018), with points of reflection and change at the sample size of ten and twenty participants. Initially I was unsure at the response I would get to the study and whether I would have to rely on snowball sampling, being the most practical and feasible strategy available to me (Mason, 2002; Morgan, 2008). However, having outlined the purpose and criteria of the study to a broad network and invited recommendations for appropriate participants, I had enough choice to be able to purposively sample

participants. I knew very few of the participants, as the sample arose from a network of contacts. After the first ten interviews, I deliberately broadened the sample group from the South East and London, to the North of England and wider outreaches of the UK. After twenty interviews, I was satisfied that I was sampling from a diverse enough number of organisations, both in terms of geography and industry sector; and a broad enough sample with regards to age, numbers of children and parental circumstances, to provide maximum variation and illuminate key themes (Brace-Govan, 2004; Saunders, et al. 2018). Yet I was aware that over half of participants had significant financial income and pensions, giving them meaningful choice as to their career futures. This was a privileged group of women, and I wanted to ensure the sample was representative of professional women from a broad stratum (Brace-Govan, 2004; Browne, 2005). I returned to my network and broadened the criteria to ensure participants with no (or limited) final salary pension; single parents; and/or from sectors including teaching, nursing and not for profit were included.

The Participants: In Detail

Summary of 30 Participants by Age:

- Mean Age 55
- Youngest participant 46
- Oldest participant 69

Summary of Participants by Occupation:

- 22/30 (73%) Working full time
- 14/30 (46%) Breadwinner or main earner
- 6/30 (20%) Self Employed

Table 3: Participants – Age, Sector and Work Situation

Name	Age	Sector	Work Situation
Eve	54	NHS Trust/Self Employed (SE)	FT/PT
Martha	50	NHS/GP	Full Time
Stephanie	64	Media	Full time
Carolyn	52	SE/Student	Part Time
Kathy	51	Financial Services	Full Time
Linda	54	Headhunting	Full Time
Donna	55	SE/NED (Non-Executive Director)	Part Time
Michelle	53	NHS Trust	Full Time
Kim	50	Financial Services	Full Time
Frances	56	Corporate Finance	Full Time
Lori	49	Credit Finance	Part Time
Brenda	60	Media	Full Time
Gaynor	57	Academic	Full Time
Angela	51	Accountancy	Full Time
Nancy	51	Accountancy	Full time
Chris	56	Media	Full Time
Tina	59	Media	Part Time
Kathleen	55	Accountancy	Full Time
Melissa	55	IT	Full Time
Robin	62	Charity	Full Time
Niamh	53	Teaching	Full Time
Dawn	55	Consumer Goods/Retired	Retired
Patricia	69	Academic	Full Time
Cyn	46	NHS	Full Time
Jude	48	Financial Services	Full Time
Paula	58	Scientist	Full Time
Jill	54	Retail	Full Time
Gail	61	NED	Part Time
Annette	62	NHS	Retired
Meg	57	Media/Actress	Full Time

Table 4: Participants and Dependents (children).

(Note: Dependent state is whether the children are living at home full time (FT) or part time (PT) and dependent on parent or living independently. Some children are working but remain living at home).

Summary of Participants and Children:

- 24/30 (80%) Have children
- 15/30 (50%) Have dependent children
- 8/30 (26%) Have 2+ dependent children
- 13/30 (43%) Have children under 18

Name	Age	No of Child	Age of Child	Dependent State
Cyn	46	5	22, 20, 10, 10, 6	3 FT dependent/2 @ home
Martha	50	2	7, 6	2 FT dependent
Lori	49	2	16, 16	2 FT dependent (one with mental health issues)
Angela	51	2	12, 11	2 FT dependent
Nancy	51	3	25, 16, 13	2 FT dependent
Tina	59	2	17, 17	2 FT dependent (one with mental health issues)
Niamh	53	2	19, 17	2 FT dependent
Eve	54	3	24, 20, 15	1 FT dependent/1 @ home
Stephanie	64	1	19	1 FT dependent
Donna	55	2	20, 17	1 FT dependent
Michelle	53	2	20,17	1 FT dependent
Gaynor	57	2	19, 15	1 FT dependent/1 PT student
Kathleen	55	2	20, 15	1 FT dependent/1 PT student
Melissa	55	1	17	1 FT dependent
Jill	54	2	22, 18	1 FT dependent/ 1 @ home
Jude	48	2	20, 18	1 PT student/1 @ home
Paula	58	2	22, 20	2 PT students
Gail	61	2	41, 39	Independent (but 7 grandchildren that cares for aged 4-21 years)
Annette	62	2	30/23	Independent
Meg	57	2	22/20	Independent
Linda	54	2	25, 22	Independent

Brenda	60	2	24, 23	Independent
Chris	56	2	24, 21	Independent
Robin	62	2	26, 24	Independent
Carolyn	52	0		
Kathy	51	0		
Kim	50	0		
Frances	56	0		
Dawn	55	0		
Patricia	69	0		

A summary of the Social Demographics of this study is provided in Appendix Three.

It is acknowledged here there are limitations within this sample. The considerable networking efforts to gain the sample, produced a group of participants whose ethnic and social characteristics were predominantly white, British and middle class. One participant self-identified as LGBTQ+, and as married to her lesbian partner. Two shared with me that they are medically disabled.

It has been a matter of concern to me, however, that the networking efforts within the design led to no recruitment of, or leads to, respondents who self-identified as from a black or minority ethnic group. Concerningly, the predominantly white composition of the sample is in keeping with Sir John Parker’s report into the ethnic diversity of UK Boards. This report reveals that UK citizens of colour make up only 2% of all Directors in FTSE boardrooms (2017), with the ‘Elitist Britain’ report (published by the Commission on Social Mobility) suggesting that of the 4,000 business leaders surveyed, there is a “dramatic over-representation” of middle class, private educated people at this level (2014, p. 2).

As the study progressed, I considered taking a different approach to finding my sample, by seeking specifically to recruit at least one or two women of colour on to this study. After much reflection, I felt uncomfortable with this approach, deciding it felt tokenistic, and, to my mind, unethical. Instead, (as I suggest in Chapter Thirteen), I believe there is a need and an opportunity for a further, important study, focused specifically on the needs and experiences of black and ethnic minority women as

participants, and paying careful and specific attention to issues of intersectionality and inclusion (see Puwar, 2004).

Data Analysis

Feminist Research?

Clearly such a research focus would suggest this is feminist research and as such would be analysed through a feminist lens. It *is* feminist research in that it privileges women's issues, voices and lived experiences and recognizes women's life stories as a valuable form of knowledge (Reinharz, 1992; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998; Hesse-Biber, 2013). It is also feminist research by validating emotions and values as a critical aspect of knowledge seeking. As a researcher, I believe it is unrealistic to assume that these will not affect the data, especially, as feminist scholar Alison Jaggar suggests, "emotions often motivate the researcher's selection of topics and questions as well as the methods by which those topics and questions are studied" (in Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 5).

Yet I find myself uneasy at labelling this research study as 'feminist research' per se. My aim for this study is that it has broad resonance across organisations and needs no standpoint methodological label to achieve this, which was agreed by the panel at the progress review sessions (Lancaster University, 2017; University of Liverpool, 2018). Influenced also by the critiques that suggest some feminist research runs the risk of unfairly collapsing all women's experience into a single experience, feminist scholars suggest it can neglect the diversity of women's lives and assume the research outcomes speak for a homogenous 'whole' (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2013). Equally, the claim that the focus of feminist research is "on confronting the social oppression of minority groups... with their goal of empowering oppressed groups" assumes a subjugated attitude on the part of those I research. Many of the participants in this study might not share this outlook or appreciate the label. As Ramazanoglu eloquently states: "feminist claims to knowledge of gendered lives carry dreams of resistance, agency and emancipation across social divisions and the

complexities of social existence. But emancipation also raises numerous problems about how change for the better is conceived, by whom, for whom and why” (2002, p. 139). I find comfort in Reinharz’s definition of feminist research methods as “those used in research projects by people who identify themselves as feminist or part of the women’s movement” (1992, p. 6). She therefore suggests that a researcher does not have to identify her research or research methods as ‘feminist research’, but rather just identify herself as a feminist doing research.

Thematic Analysis

Whilst this study shares similarities with Grounded Theory, being in essence an inductive, interpretive study with theory created from data collected, the method differed with the Literature Review coming towards the start of the study and the data analysis primarily happening towards the end of the interviews, rather than the application of a constant comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Cassell & Symon, 2004; Charmaz, 2006). Although the interview questions were refined, and my interview technique matured, in essence the interview themes remained broadly the same as the process unfolded. However, given that one of the main aims of the study is to identify recurring patterns of experience, both Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Thematic Analysis (TA) were appropriate as data analysis strategies and commensurate with social constructionism. Rooted in the same philosophical traditions as TA, the aim of IPA is to capture an experience and unravel its meanings (Willig, 2001; Smith, 2004). The benefit of IPA is that it provides the researcher with clear and systematic guidelines, allowing the researcher to identify and progressively integrate themes and master themes, capturing something of the phenomenon under investigation and accepting that the analysis produced is always an interpretation of the participant’s experience (Willig, 2001). As such it is similar to TA, however IPA scholars emphasize the ideographic approach to analysis, with a commitment to utilising a “small, purposively selected and carefully situated samples, and may often make very effective use of single case analyses” (Smith, 2009, p. 29). A maximum of ten data samples are recommended for IPA as a result of intensive and

detailed engagement with individual cases (Willig, 2001; Smith, 2009). In contrast, TA adopts a more flexible approach enabling data sets from 6-400+ depending on the scope and size of the project (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is important to consider when analysing 30 interviews, given each qualitative interview of 1.5/2 hour generated some 40 pages of transcribed data per respondent. TA also enables the interpretation of themes supported by data, allowing for categories to emerge through an inductive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, et al., 2012). Therefore, thematic analysis was adopted as the analytical process for all the interviews.

TA scholars place an emphasis on the importance of practical outcomes, enabling the researcher to 'make sense' of a large amount of data and articulate themes in a readable, constructive and meaningful way (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998). Clearly this very flexibility confers disadvantages, with TA criticised for potentially missing nuanced data, with the discovery and verification of codes meshing together and the prized flexibility making it difficult to concentrate on what aspect of the data to focus on (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, 2012). Although Thematic Analysis is one of the most common approaches to analysing qualitative data, it has been criticised for possessing no distinctive cluster of techniques and can carry limited kudos as an analytical technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97; Bryman & Bell, 2015). That said, TA does have solid historical links with organisational reporting (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998), is informed by the rich philosophical traditions of humanistic psychology, phenomenology and hermeneutics (Guest et al., 2012) and located, appropriately for this study, within the interpretivist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The role of the researcher is critical to data analysis, and TA is closely aligned with the traditions of the social constructionist approach, where the biases, values and judgements of the researcher are explicitly acknowledged, so they are taken into account in data presentation (Cresswell, 2007). In consideration of these benefits and limitations, and in order to make the process as thorough as possible, I used the six-phase process as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006) and coding as suggested by Gioia and colleagues (2012).

Phase 1: Familiarising myself with the data:

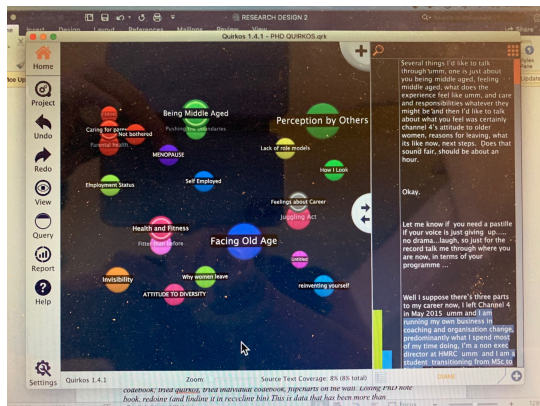
Getting as close to the data as possible was my aim in this first phase (Bazeley, 2013) and this was achieved in three ways via transcription, listening and continuous reading (and re-reading) of the data. “*Wander and ponder*” with your data is advice Bazeley gives (2013, p.6), and that is a good summary of how I continued to approach the data from the first interview in January 2017 and through the subsequent eighteen months where data was picked up, put down, returned to and re-remembered. Writing was also an integral part of the start of the analysis journey, with a consistent jotting down of ideas and thoughts both in memo format and a Reflective Journal (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Saldana, 2015). My aim was to transcribe all the interviews myself, but as I work full time this became unwieldy and a more efficient use of time was to read those transcriptions prepared for me. That said, I transcribed over half of the interviews and this exercise undoubtedly helped with familiarisation and became an interpretative act in itself (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Bird, 2005). Orthographic transcripts were produced, that is, a rigorous verbatim account of the interview with most non-verbal utterances (Poland, 2002), and the transcripts produced for me were checked against the original audio recordings (Bazeley, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In the Summer of 2017 I attended the AIDEA Capri Summer School, and advice in familiarisation with data was invaluable. I noted in my journal four specific guidelines: ‘Get the whole story out before you pull it apart’; ‘Note down what surprises you’; ‘What is interesting and what will interest the reader?’; ‘Understand the individual before you try to theme it’ and I used these informal guidelines for my initial foray into the data (Emma Bell, in discussion, 2017). I travel a considerable amount, and data was read and listened to over the next six months on every car, train and plane journey. The ‘what is surprising?’ list in my journal remained an important focus through writing up the findings, ensuring the initial thoughts were respected, which is represented in Appendix Four.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

The process of coding was, at times, a vexatious journey and a stark reminder that there are no quick wins in data analysis! It was clear that analysis was not going to be a linear process, neatly moving through six phases, but a recursive process, moving back and forth over time. As scholars advise, “it should not be rushed” (Braun & Clarke, p.17, 2013; Saldana, 2015). Three different methods of coding were attempted: capturing initial codes on flipcharts; via software and, ultimately, manually through word processing. Whilst flipcharts were visual (and remain hung in my office today), space became limited.

After coding six interviews in this way, I decided software might be a more appropriate (ergo, time efficient) means of coding thirty interviews (Bazeley, 2013). I chose Quirkos above NVivo for the visual ability to gain a ‘canvas view’ of themes, where the size of each bubble shows the amount of data coded to it, giving me a live birds eye overview of the data at all times (www.quirkos.com).



I took tutorials with Quirkos, but the organisation had ongoing issues with their software development that caused me to lose data three times. I also felt that software analysis was distancing me from the data. Although the process of coding a further six interviews was speedy, it felt reductive, almost leading to a quantified type of qualitative analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Reluctantly, I returned to manual

analysis, whilst at the same time recognising my preference for printing out and reading transcripts, enjoying the physicality of reading from paper, taking a fresh stock of the data and compiling a codebook (an excerpt from this is provided in Appendix Five). I took heart from Saldana's work on coding, who suggested "from my readings of various systematic methods for analysing data, I have yet to find a single satisfactory approach that rivals the tacit capabilities of human interpretation and reflection" (2015, p. 44). Gioia describes this type of analysis as "get in there and get your hands dirty" (2012, p.19), which is certainly how it felt! My frustration shows in this extract from my Reflective Journal at the time:

"Whilst I am struggling to find a way to code that suits me, I keep telling myself that it means is that I know my data very well. Having listened to it, read it through, manually coded it, created manual codebook; tried Quirkos, tried individual codebook, flipcharts on the wall. Losing PhD note book, redoing (and finding it in recycling bin). This is data that has been more than triangulated, it's been strangulated..."

After working through three further interviews, it was clear the codes needed to be organized into a system, which, for me, meant the creation of a hierarchical system of categories and sub-categories, creating order from disorder and bringing together coding work achieved under different system (Gioia, et al., 2012; Bazeley, 2013). As such, I created what became a 32-page Codebook with six categories (Organisational Attitudes; Caring Responsibilities; Career Decisions; Experience of Menopause; Experience of Middle Age and Miscellaneous) and some 74 first order themes (The section from 'Experience of Menopause' is detailed in Appendix Five). This became an invaluable system for expansion (growing the Codebook as needed), detection (finding my way around the codes more easily) and reflection (what's going on here?). As scholars advise (MacQueen, et al., 1998; Saldana, 2015), codes were a blend of emotional sensations, meanings, context and perspectives. For example, if the category of 'Experience of Middle Age' is considered, first order themes included:

- Feeling Grief
- Discussing Loss
- Feeling Fearful

- Positive /Challenging Age
- Abandoned Dreams
- Rejecting Labels
- Resilient Mindset
- Positive/negative feelings about body
- Feeling invisible
- Feeling liberated

The system was both atheoretical and inductive. Atheoretical in that there was no necessary relationship between the items grouped together in the same category, enabling connections across categories (Bazeley, 2013). Inductive, meaning the codes and categories being identified were strongly linked to the data themselves, privileging the voices of the respondent's interpretations and experiences (Patton, 1990; Gioia, et al., 2012).

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Themes did not just 'emerge' on their own but came from three sources of engagement - with patterns of meaning, explanations and interpretations within the codebook; with the theory and with personal memos and reflective notes. This was an absorbing stage for me of delicate reflective balance, that is, staying close to the interviewee's data and looking for connections, whilst exploring themes and theoretical abstracts (Gioia, et al., 2012). Looking back over my memos and journals, they move through notes about books I was reading and how these might relate to the respondent's thoughts; questions about how I'm coding the data and potential theoretical concepts.

Snapshots of Memos:

February 2017

Not sure coding reflecting the positivity that is being expressed about this age. Need to return to coding to capture this. Index it under Positive Strengths but no idea where this will end up...I notice I'm reluctant to code the problems women are having with their body. I don't want older women to be perceived as frail, or ill, so am in danger of ignoring it when they say their hips, ankles, etc. are weak.

March 2017

Re-reading Julia Twigg chapter on age and culture. Made me thoughtful about social capital, power and sexual capital. Does 'middle age' rid women of both according to the culture we live in?

April 2017

Re-reading C's interview. She talks a lot about the 'Male paradigm' – reminds me of Höpfl's article – the lady vanishes and the male paradigm. The organisation is set up to facilitate male advancement and women's part time career is not part of this linear programme. Yet another way women are excluded?

November 2017

I am curious about L. interview. She is in effect being moved out of the organisation (no promotion; end of the line; fear for her future) but talks about how valued she feels. I've just read more about positive identity growth (Kreiner & Sheep; growing pains and gains). The article discusses how people reframe possible identity threats in a generative, positive, forward thinking way. By doing so, they become more resilient, agentic and congruent. This can also happen when they experience an incongruence with their organisation.

December 2017:

Perhaps the theme around Caring is particularly pertinent at the moment because I coached two people in the last week who are really struggling. EG dad had heart attack in Crete, has dementia, mum struggling, she is going part time to help them. Delegate today has had to take 2 months off to care for mum who's got Alzheimer's. Has got ill herself as a result. She has no idea what to do about her career and is too tired to care about it. These are both very senior women. Directors who are too exhausted to think about it. Both are stepping out of careers. This is a dilemma for everyone – not easy for the organisation or for the women. But we handle maternity leave, so why not this age too? Does the org want to find a solution or is the org happy for the women to leave silently?

I was particularly thoughtful about trying to ensure I avoided sensationalizing the negative, searching across the codes for what Lather terms “nostalgia-provoking, emotionally-yanking” narratives (2001, p. 212) that give weight to the negative, whilst overlooking the ordinary, the everyday or the positive. This came into sharp focus in January 2018 when I was asked by BBC Radio Sheffield to talk about the menopause on their live link-up with Women's Hour.

January, 2018

I've just had my pre-interview and discussed how women want to break the silence, but equally want the menopause discussion normalised, not pathologised. The interviewer doesn't want this angle and wants to preface only those having a hard time and leaving work for good. I said this did happen but was only half the story, with other women experiencing no symptoms, and have since been 'relegated' to the BBC Radio Sheffield tea-time show!

Phase 4 & 5: Reviewing and Naming Themes

For clarity and coherence of data, scholars advise on the creation of a thematic map or underlying data structure (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003; Gioia, et al., 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Whilst some qualitative scholars urge the avoidance of the rigid application of rules which might encourage formulaic knowledge production (i.e. Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013), I found the creation of a framework helpful. Hammersley (2011) recognises three genres in social scientific research being 'methodology-as-technique', 'methodology-as-philosophy' and 'methodology-as-autobiography'. At times, these methodologies can be presented as independent, with some scholars prizing the latter 'messy, creative process' above so-called 'proceduralism' or technique (Bell, Kothiyal & Willmott, 2017). Instead, I valued the interdependence of the three methodologies, suggesting that it is *because* of the messy, creative, unfolding process of 'methodology-as-autobiography', that I needed structure and technique to pull together the narrative.

Whilst the creation of the theoretical dimensions came last in this data structure, commensurate with inductive reasoning (Mason, 2002), in practice theory was developed in a more recursive way alongside data analysis, so research was not undertaken in a theoretical vacuum. Instead, theory was created through many months of 'wandering and pondering' (Bazeley, 2013), with themes passively tumbling around in my brain for many months before naming. The final data structure and the three theoretical meta themes are summarised in Chapter Eight, providing a bridge between the methodology and the findings.

Phase 6: Producing a Trustworthy Report

Finally, what is important in qualitative research is the understanding that I have undertaken ethically sound, quality research. As well as the basic, ethical principles of beneficence, respect and justice, suggests that Constructivist researchers place an emphasis on authenticity, trustworthiness, fairness, reflexivity, rapport and reciprocity (i.e. Charmaz, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Respect for the participants was of critical importance to me. Firstly, I paid attention to the professional basics of confirming times and research intentions, ensuring the venue was comfortable and following up each interview with a 'thank you' email. Beyond this, as a feminist interviewing women, I wanted to conduct research in the spirit of egalitarianism and openness, as opposed to detachment or any power imbalance (Roberts, 1981; Acker, 2000). This was made easier by our age and status being broadly similar. However, in creating a trustworthy space for personal dialogue, I had to rein in my natural inclination to be open and honest in return and remember that their story was neither a reflection of my own, nor was the sharing of my story my role as a researcher. So, I reflected the spirit of fairness and reciprocity through listening and questioning, creating space for silence and reflection. The atmosphere was one of them having knowledge so terms like barriers, difficulties or problems were avoided, that is, not presupposing their experiences of middle age (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998).

Of primary consideration is how I have honoured my commitments about confidentiality and privacy and acted in the spirit of the informed consent I received (Mason, 2002). Although participants signed a consent form (Appendix 2), I also went to some lengths to ensure they understood the nature of the interview and the content of the questions. Participants knew we would be discussing their feelings about their body, their experience of menopause and the attitude of their organisation towards middle aged women. The content of this discussion was confirmed in a telephone conversation prior to each interview, at the start of each interview and participants knew they could stop the interview at any point (which did not happen). Finch (2007) discusses how interviewing promotes a high degree of trust among research subjects

which gives a special responsibility not to abuse that trust. The information offered to me in the interviews was frequently personal and identifiable, so, as well as pseudonyms, I have ensured in the verbatim quotations that the person and organisation is unlikely to be identified, even when this meant at times reducing quotations or jettisoning some of the data.

Smith (2004) states that qualitative approaches allow researchers to explore, describe and interpret participant's personal and social experiences. In particular, he suggests that qualitative approaches enable researchers to investigate particular phenomena in a way that is not restricted by predefined categories or narrow hypotheses. This very lack of restriction has given rise to the criticism that qualitative research fails to demonstrate methodological rigour, particularly with regards to validity and reliability (Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009; Smith, et al., 2009). Indeed, Patton suggests that validity in a qualitative project hinges "to a great extent on the skill, competence and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork" (1990, p. 14). More recently, scholars have urged qualitative research to be judged on different criteria more appropriate to its nature (Yardley (2000; Cassell & Symon, 2004, p. 5), arguing that the 'common-sense benchmarks' of positivist criteria do not 'fit' much qualitative research. Instead the employment of 'contingent criteriology' is recommended (Johnson, Buehring, Cassell & Symon, 2004), which Lincoln & Guba (1985) posit as:

- Credibility
- Dependability
- Confirmability
- Transferability

Credibility, sometimes referred to as Authenticity (Mertens, 2010), can be described as the fit between the constructed realities of the research participants and my reconstructions (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Throughout this study I have endeavoured to accurately identify and describe the female participants and reflect their first-hand experience through their quotes, which are ultimately reflected in the categories, themes and theory. I consistently looked for 'outliers' in the data, also named

'negative case analysis' (Henwood & Pigeon, 1992), which is reported in each findings chapter. Lincoln and Guba suggest a prolonged engagement with the data with persistent observation, which has been demonstrated over the last two years of reflection, reading, writing and analysis of my data. As achieving credibility is also about "substantial personal commitment to engage extensively and thoughtfully with participants or data" (Smith, 2008, p. 248), this received conscientious attention. I have every reason to believe the participant's accounts were authentic and honest. As well as creating a trustworthy space, providing anonymity and being candid about the purpose of the interview, rich anecdotes were offered in support of the participant's experiences.

Dependability has been demonstrated with a clear audit trail that tracks the methodological, analytical and theoretical decisions made throughout the study. A theoretical approach was chosen that fits the research question, the methods employed and the interpretation of the data, with a transparent clarity applied to all stages (Smith, 2008). Confirmability is achieved through grounding the conclusions in a demonstration of how the data was collected and how they were transformed into findings (Symon & Cassell, 2012), and I have paid attention to the coherence of the research, the logic behind the clustering and naming of themes and the way in which any ambiguities or contradictions are addressed (Willig, 2001).

Transferability is the extent to which the findings of this report can be transferred to a different population or, for the reader to be able to judge to which other contexts the findings are relevant (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Some scholars argue that 'transferability' is not possible within qualitative research, being fashioned by unique individuals operating within a unique situation, although others will argue that it is the sole purpose of good qualitative research to be able to generalize to theory, generating concepts or principles with relevance to some other domain (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Gioia, et al., 2012). I would argue that the concepts discussed in this thesis have transferability to organisations and individuals. Yardley suggests that whether the research is considered to tell the reader anything of interest, use or importance is the yardstick for real validity of the research (2000). From a personal perspective, I have

always intended this research to make an interesting contribution to the field of organisational research, given how little ‘airtime’ the interdependent subjects of middle age, menopause and professional female executives are given. I remain mindful of Silverman’s warning to avoid grandiose claims for any research study (2013), yet hopeful that the research will, at the very least, offer a perspective on professional middle-aged women and change understanding of how this age group can be effectively theorised.

A Further Note on Reflexivity

Previously in this chapter I have written on the nature of reflexivity and my epistemological stance, as well as my role in choosing the nature of the project; selecting participants; deciding on interview questions; influencing the interview process and ultimately the ‘active’ process of analysing and interpreting data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I want to add further autobiographical notes here, for, as Bazeley states, “our interpretation is coloured by our previous and current personal, social, and cultural experience” (2013, p. 4). It has been suggested that part-time, mature doctoral students should choose a research problem closely related to work (Phillips & Pugh, 2000) and, at times, I was unsure if ‘art was imitating life’ or vice versa. In the five years from choosing to study for a PhD and completing the research, I have experienced most aspects of life related by participants. After a difficult perimenopause, I have in the last two years experienced some of the post-menopausal zest described to me by participants. Interestingly, as some participants related their hot flushes in rich detail, I experienced them again in the moment. That’s empathy! Both my children started and graduated from university, leaving home for good in 2018 to set up their respective lives in London and Nottingham, with all the concurrent emotions of pride, concern, loss and joy. In this time period, my father died of dementia and alcoholism, my mother in law has sadly descended far into Alzheimer’s and my father in law more recently suffered delirium, a stroke and a broken hip. My partner and I have shared their care, travelling the country towards urgent caring calls. My 90-year old mother remains a vibrant source of joy and we share a desire to make the most of remaining time, travelling together. (As she has recently published her

first children's stories, she became a writing 'study buddy', and we stole away to Devon twice a year to write for four-day stretches). My partner and I moved to a new house in 2016 and bought a new office (we run our business together). Our business continues to thrive with both of us working full-time (or attempting to), although in 2018, I experienced some health problems necessitating six months off work.

I relate this, not only to remind myself of this passionate, bumpy journey, but also to reflect on the interdependent nature of studying a topic one is enmeshed within. Qualitative research is inescapably value-led, and this project is no different (Willig, 2001). I remain deeply committed to exploring (and exposing) assumptions and preconceptions towards middle aged professional women and take heart from those scholars who suggest that by its very nature "qualitative research seeks the truth by interacting with, as opposed to disengaging from, that which is being investigated" (Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009, p. 73). Of course, what this means is that I come to the research itself with my own biases and prejudices, however much I might attempt to place these at a non-judgmental distance. At a deeper autobiographical level, it became apparent over the course of five years that many of the research questions reflected my own personal age and stage of life as I grappled with the mid-life questions of middle-aged identity, care and ambition. There were countless times over the course of this study I got lost (commonly during data analysis!), stumbling to find my way back to the study, with my Supervisor providing a gentle, guiding hand.

I started this chapter with a quote from David Whyte, whose philosophical poems and writings sit at the end of my bath – my reflection place – and end this chapter with a reflective quote that reminded me to keep going.

"Eventually we realize that not knowing what to do is just as real and just as useful as knowing what to do. Not knowing stops us from taking false directions. Not knowing what to do, we start to pay real attention. Just as people lost in the wilderness, on a cliff face or in a blizzard pay attention with a kind of acuity that they would not have if they thought they knew where they were. Why? Because for those who are really lost, their life depends on paying real attention. If you think you know where you are, you stop looking" (Whyte, 2009, p. 88).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Theory and Data Structure

Introduction

As related above, structure brought order to the data and was in fact a creative and freeing process to discover pathways and links through the data that enabled the theoretical dimensions to emerge. There is of course a pressure to ensure that theoretical insight is practical, original and perceptive (Corley & Gioia, 2011), particularly as scholars stress how new theory “allows us to see profoundly, imaginatively, unconventionally into phenomena we thought we understood... theory is of no use unless it initially surprises—that is, changes perceptions” (Mintzberg, 2005, p. 361).

For me, there was no route for speeding up this process and the delineation of first order concepts, second order themes and the ultimate three theoretical dimensions was painstaking yet gratifying. In choosing the three meta themes, I had a desire for these to not only add to theory and make sense of the data in a faithful and interesting way, but also be grounded in language recognisable to the organisational world. The practical utility of theory is sometimes disconnected from the abstract, conceptual language and I took heart from Corley and Gioia’s writing who stated, “we should recognize that our specialized language tends to distance us from the issues that generated the theories about the phenomena we are trying to describe and explain in the first place” (2011, p. 21). Gioia’s construction of first order concepts, second order themes and, what he and his fellow scholars termed, the aggregate dimension (2012) is also commensurate with social constructionism. Indeed, as the scholars state: “We would argue that the single most profound recognition in social and organizational study is that much of the world with which we deal is essentially socially constructed” (Gioia, et al., 2012, p. 16). As stated above, from my created 32-page Codebook emerged 74 sub categories, or, First Order terms. These either reflected a literal phrase from a respondent (e.g. ‘The Backslappy Boys Club’) that was echoed by others or summarised a feeling or experience (e.g. ‘Collision of Priorities’). Second order

themes arose from the conceptualisation of themes that might help explain the phenomena the respondents were describing. Corley et al. describe the third phase of searching for the aggregate, or theoretical dimension as a “forced stepping-up in abstractness” (2012, p. 21) and for this stage, it was necessary for me to return to Kristeva’s writing and take a deep dive into her writing and the conceptual possibilities for this study

The Theoretical Dimension

The choice to situate this study within Kristeva’s theoretical paradigm of *abjection* was not without a degree of trepidation and awe. Whilst scholars are keen to state just how complex and defensive Kristeva’s writing is, with “*unnecessary critical complexities*” (Sutherland, 2006), rendering it impenetrable, it is clear (to me at least) that the student is richly rewarded with persistence. In the Literature Review, Chapter Six, the literature surrounding abjection is reviewed, including Kristeva’s writing, interviews and the relevance of her theories to women, and organisational studies.

Many scholars urge a broad reading of her work (Höpfl, 2000; McAfee, 2004; Ives, 2016) and an appreciation of her project as one that sheds light on how thought and sexuality are intertwined, how the subject is always operating in a social field and how we negotiate a network of relationships through our lives. It is this broader reading of abjection I am attracted to, and, considering further the relevance of Kristeva’s work to this study, there are three aspects of abjection that became of intrigue and which consequently form the backbone to the theoretical structure and findings in this study:

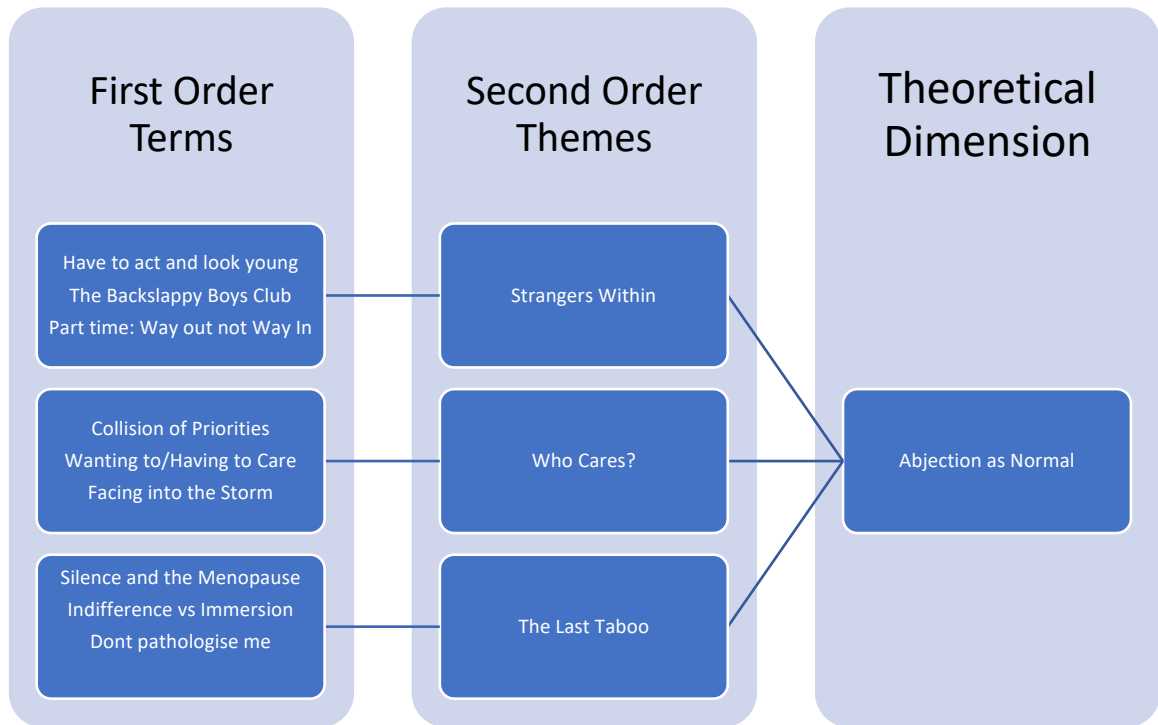
1. Abjection is situated and contextual and is about exclusion, that of being ‘cast off’ (or out)
2. Abjection is about thresholds and transitions. We are both drawn to, and repelled by, that we consider abject, giving us a ‘messy’ identity;
3. Abjection is as much about ‘not me’ as it is about ‘me’, offering a narrative for new beginnings and alternative realities.

Below is a brief explanation of why these three points are relevant for my theoretical reflections and how Kristeva's work will illuminate this study. The data structure is also summarised visually below, with the three meta themes of Abjection as Normal; The Fragile Threshold of Midlife and 'Not Me: Female Revolt' realised.

1. *Abjection is situated and contextual and is about exclusion, that of being 'cast off' (or out)*

The study of women as potentially abject subjects within an organisation is not new (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Fotaki, 2013; Gatrell, 2017), yet Kristeva's work offers a fresh approach to the issues of exclusion. She is as interested in abjection as a social phenomenon (as much as an individual experience) and how the woman has come to be excluded in within the organisational setting and certainly the theory of abjection enables us to look closer at the more unconscious, invisible barriers to progress that are happening. For centuries, women in power have been considered a threat to social and political order, with women and femininity representing to much of the public world, irrationality, chaos and the whims of nature (see Literature Review, Chapter Three). We can translate this into the modern organisation through understanding how women are 'permitted entry' into the realms of management and leadership, once they are no longer 'feminine' and obey the rules of being male, logical, ordered and always there (Höpfl, 2000). This study will argue that once we add the dimension of age to this dynamic of exclusion or 'deficiency', the professional woman is 'lesser' in yet another way.

Figure 1: Theorising ‘Abjection as Normal’ (Chapter Nine)

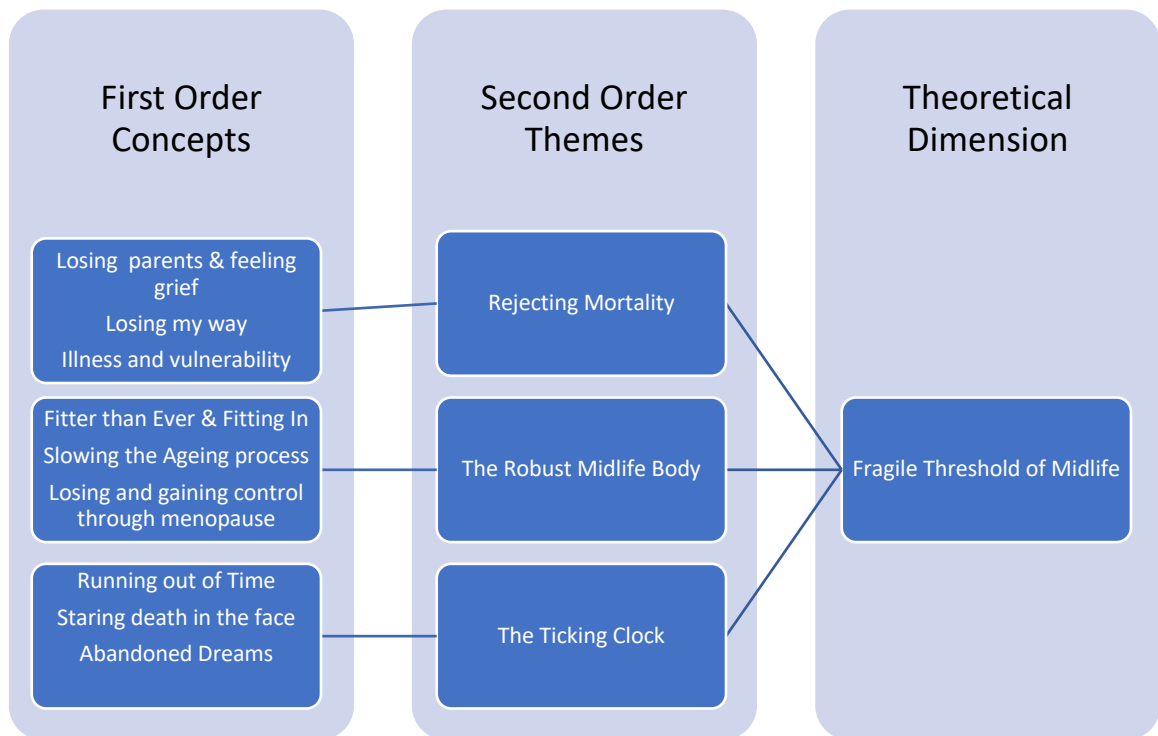


2. *Abjection is about thresholds and transitions. We are both drawn to, and repelled by, that we consider abject, giving us a ‘messy’ identity*

An extensive scan of the literature surrounding midlife (see Literature Review, Chapter Five) demonstrates the complexity and heterogeneous experience of this stage of life. Neither young nor old, it can be described as a transition stage and Kristeva’s writing on thresholds – and the fragility of such transitions – is an enlightening way to consider the issues of middle age. Abjection is at once a psychological, emotional and physical phenomenon, which involves the tension between the reality of an unruly semiotic body and the desire for an orderly symbolic mind. Described as an “*act of orientation*”, or even a “*before and after picture – who I am and who I would become*” (Covino, 2004) so Kristeva’s theory of abjection is concerned with figures that are in a state of transition or transformation, or, as Keltner suggests “*at a threshold, the common point at which all her major concepts converge*” (2011, p.6). For some women, the threshold is hopeful, a stepping up, an adventure. For others, it is

confusing, a stage where they are in need of support to understand and cross the threshold. This is also a time of life where the vulnerability of facing mortality is evident. As Kristeva asserted that the abjection of the corpse (or rejection of mortality) is the foremost, universal form of abjection (1989, p. 3), this shines a theoretical light on the experience and perception faced by respondents.

Figure 2: Theorising ‘The Fragile Threshold of Midlife’ (Chapter Ten)

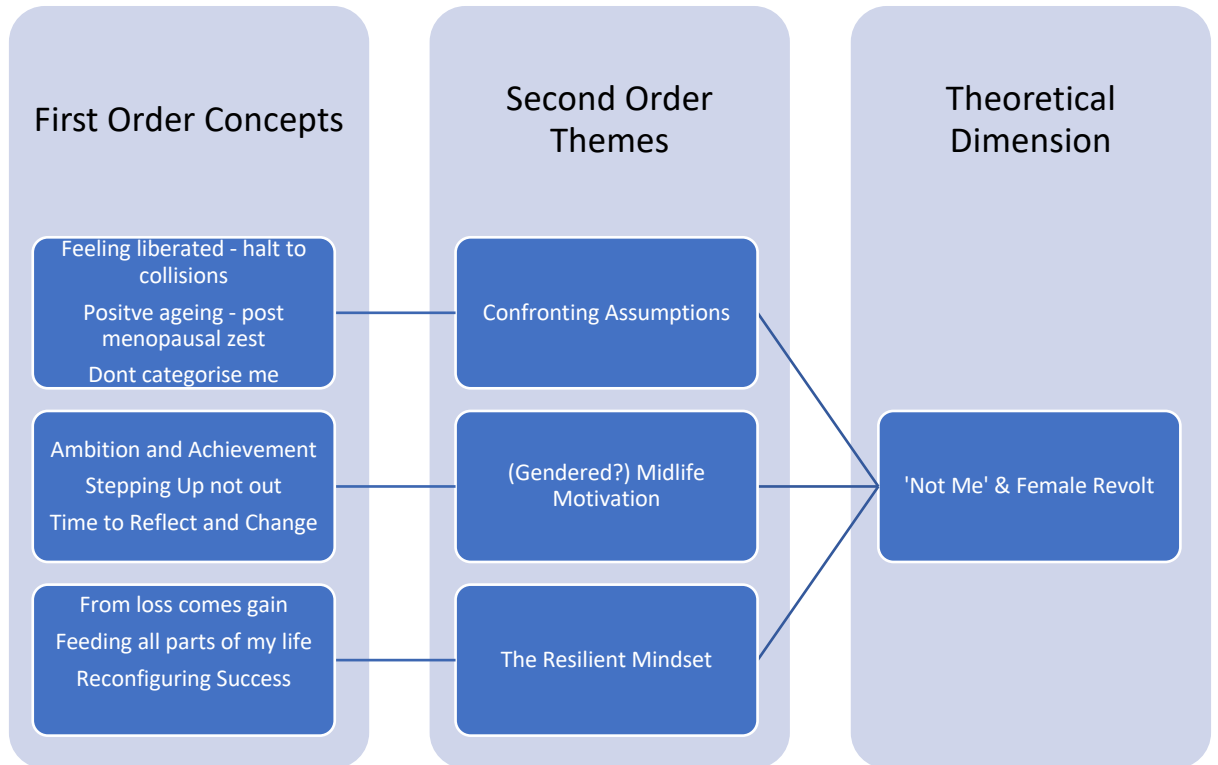


3. *Abjection is as much about ‘not me’ as it is about ‘me’, offering a narrative for new beginnings and alternative realities.*

As much as abjection is about rejection, exclusion and degradation, Kristeva is as keen to stress the narrative of possibility and of hope. Theoretically, this enables a lens to consider the positive potential for respondents as they face the second half of their lives. Within this study there is as much of a narrative of agentic self-determined growth, resilience and ambition, as there is uncertainty and messiness. In the rejection of the decline identity, the ‘*Not me*’ that Kristeva discusses, it offers the potential to

theorise as to how women construe success, within and without the corporate structure of power.

Figure 3: Theorising ‘Not Me: Female Revolt’ (Chapter Eleven)



PART THREE – FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

CHAPTER NINE

‘Abjection as Normal’

“Men do not realise the extent to which women live as strangers in their world. What is normal and taken for granted is a world which is defined, constructed and maintained by male notions of order” (Hopfl, 2007, p. 10)

Introduction

The three findings chapters will consider the experience of midlife for the respondents from both a personal and professional perspective. Chapter Nine will explore the contextual professional experience for many older women, theorising ‘abjection as normal’ as a practice within some organisations, and in Chapter Eleven, the opportunity for resilience and revolt, “*Not Me*” is presented. However, I contend in this thesis that there is a personal fragility and an oscillation present in the middle years that precedes, and sometimes prevents, such revolution and transformation, which is explored in Chapter Ten.

Therefore, in this first findings chapter, it will be argued there are three ways in which professional older women have come to be systemically excepted within many organisations, that is, they are not young, they are not male, and (perhaps due to flexible working) they are not always present. The outliers to this premise are also considered towards the end of this chapter. Kristeva’s concepts of abjection and exclusion frame this chapter, building on the emerging interest in applying Kristeva’s ideas of abjection to studying organisations (Höpfl, 2000; Fotaki, 2013; Gatrell, 2017). The suggestion here is that the multiple conscious and unconscious ways in which older women are excepted and marginalised enables what can be called ‘*abjection as normal*’ to exist. In other words, male normative behaviour is so well established within the organisation, the abjection of the professional older woman is barely noticed, remarked on or written about.

The notion of ‘abjection as normal’ allows a new opportunity to theorise, building on previous explorations of how certain bodies may be treated as abject within organisations. This interpretation of abjection is new because while, as Tyler suggests, abjection may be a social and lived process (2013), it is not always an ‘active performance’ of gender powered relationships (Fotaki, 2013). Nor is it necessarily a ‘deliberate attempt’ by co-workers to maintain ‘order’ within the organisation (see Gatrell, 2017 for an account of how ‘abjection as practice’ is used with intent as a means to marginalise breastfeeding women at work). The findings in this chapter will show abjection as normal, once age is considered, is considerably more passive and nuanced, embedded in everyday language and reinforced through practice, enabling current structures to persist.

Kristeva is as interested in abjection as a social phenomenon (as much as an individual experience) and how women have come to be excluded within the organisational setting (Puwar, 2004). Certainly, the theory of abjection enables us to look closer at the more unconscious, invisible barriers to progress that are happening. As related in the Literature Review, feminist theorists have observed how women in power have been considered a threat to social and political order, with women and femininity representing irrationality, chaos and the whims of nature to much of the public world (Levine Clark, 2004; Ehrenreich & English, 2005), with the suggestion that “the terrible and horribly effective energy of the resistance to the presence of women in power has manifested itself in various ways over the centuries and continues to find new forms as means of communication and locations of power change. It suggests a narrative of hatred for women and a fear of loss” (Evans, 2017). We can translate this into the modern organisation through understanding how problematic it is for many women to ‘gain entry’ into the realms of management and leadership. One argument is that once they are no longer ‘feminine’ and obey the rules of being male, logical, ordered and always there, entry is granted (Höpfl, 2000). On the other hand, it has been well researched that women who are perceived as too masculine or too ‘pushy’ can be condemned (Babcock & Laschever, 2009). This is a form of social abjection - a concept and theory developed by Imogen Tyler in her book *Revolting Subjects*

(2013) and expanded on in the Literature Review. In effect, Social Abjection ‘scales up’ how abjection can be understood at a broader level than just the individual, enabling states of exclusion to be considered from multiple perspectives and considered further in this chapter.

‘Strangers Within’

A review of some organisational literature, the achievement in 2015 of Lord Davies’ target of 25% female representation at Board level and the continuation through the Hampton-Alexander review (2017, 2018), could lead one to surmise that equality and diversity is successfully being realised across the organisational field - particularly when society can point to visible, powerful, female role models. In practice though, as discussed earlier in this study, older women at senior levels within many organisations remain in the minority, and many gender diverse Boards are achieved through the employment of part-time female non-executive directors, as opposed to full time directors (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Trethewey, 2001; Coffman, et al. 2010; Whiston, et al., 2015; Vinnicombe, et al. 2018).

As described in the Literature Review, Kristeva is particularly interested in the nature of exclusion and how the exercise of status and silence enables abjection to be normalised (Fotaki, 2013). That is, whilst older women are operating in a familiar context – their organisation – they remain excluded and isolated: ‘Strangers Within’. How the state of invisibility and isolation contributes to the perpetuation of ‘*abjection as normal*’ will be considered further here. In Chapter Two the physical absence and metaphorical sensation of invisibility for the older women within the organisation was discussed (e.g. Furman, 1997; Arber & Ginn, 1991; Maguire, 2008). What is clear in this study is that once gender is combined with age and status, exclusion often becomes actuality (with the ‘outliers’ to this situation explored further in this chapter). A majority of interviewees described either the scarcity of professional older women at the top of their companies, or their isolation as the *sole* representative of this age and gender within their organisation. Such non-existence has been extensively

researched and reported in the fashion and media industries (e.g. Furman, 1997; Covino, 2004; Twigg, 2013). This study echoes these findings, as Stephanie, a senior professional in media, suggests:

“I don’t know... but I hardly know anyone... there’s virtually nobody in this company who is my age. If anybody. I mean presumably somewhere there’s somebody my age but I’m not aware of them, so I can’t say there’s nobody of my age, but I don’t think I work with anybody who is nearly my age”.

So, as Gullette advocates, culture is critical, and the ageing body only becomes meaningful in the context of culture (2011), but the lack of visible older professional women in the organisational field is, by no means, exclusive to the media industry. Indeed, there was a distinct lack of senior middle aged female executives across many participant’s professions including the professional services, the NHS and financial services, suggesting that the abjection and exclusion of professional older women is not contained to a specific industry. Jude is a good example. An executive Board Director of a blue-chip insurance company, with some 3,000 employees in the UK, Jude could picture few professional women in the organisation at her age:

“I think about the people who sit round the table with me, there are no other ladies. Not one. And in the level below me there is probably 3 out of 40 or 50. It’s a really male environment... Most women are in the call centres, there are a few in HR and a couple in finance who do the accounts but at lower level roles. There is only me on Exco.”

Whilst Jude’s comment corroborates the research that older women are confined to lower status levels within organisations, genuine thought was given by interviewees to the numbers of higher status women over 45 years within their organisation. There was a characteristic struggle to recall numbers, as Angela (in professional services) said: *“but then I can’t think of anyone umm, maybe one...yeah I could find out how many we’ve got globally... but I can’t think of any?”*

Exploring such absence further, what is clear from the study is that women can be excluded from organisations in three specific ways: They are not male; they are not young, and they are (often) not always visible or full time. I would like to consider

each of these exclusionary practices in turn and then further explore the effect of these practices on the respondents and the resultant accords or discords with current literature, enabling an engagement with a different theoretical perspective.

The ‘Backslappy Boys Club’

This section will consider how the framing of many organisations on a male paradigm enables ‘abjection as normal’ to become accepted and embedded in everyday language and practice, particularly when ‘everyday sexism’ (Bates, 2013), is exacerbated when combined with ageism (Jack, et al., 2014). Kristeva is particularly interested in the historical silencing of women’s voices through the use of status and silence and certainly respondents discussed women of their age in lower positions of power, with men as ‘Heads’ and women as ‘Deputies’, as Niamh, a teaching professional discussed: *“for a profession that is massively dominated by females there are relatively few female heads and you know the old glass ceiling thing is true in schools and, umm, you get lots of female deputies”*.

The male paradigmatic organisation, with boardrooms, leadership channels and networking opportunities dominated by men is well evidenced (Chrisler, 2007; Gatrell, 2008; Fineman, 2011) and further echoed in this study. ‘Normality’ for many respondents was having a male boss, with 17 respondents having a male line manager, one respondent being the sole woman in her Boardroom, and 15 respondents being one of few (less than five) female senior leaders over 50 at this level in the organisation. Only three women have a female boss, with two women being the CEO – both of whom set up their organisations. Interestingly, within these five companies there is either gender parity or female dominance at executive level, which will be explored further in this chapter. The dominant male presence, voice and male metaphors were present in conversations (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Vinnicombe, et al., 2013) and the majority grip of patriarchal power showed little sign of release.

What is key to this study is the manifestation of this male paradigm. At one extreme were the stories offered of bullying, of which Eve's example was by no means the only example. Eve (who has since taken early retirement) was a Mental Health leader within the NHS and one of the few female leaders in a male dominant culture:

"If I go through all of the directors, percentage wise it is 80% male. Everybody will talk about it being macho, bullying and a really difficult place to work unless you are one of the boys so the language that is used is one of the boys... and I think organisationally the culture is very bullish, it is all kind of go down the pub, sort it out, we're all mates, we're all sorter outers. It's, you know, the women won't understand it. And that is interesting. That is what I get. I wouldn't understand it. And I do still say, that doesn't make sense."

Or examples of isolation, like Jude, of not having female 'mates' around the leadership table:

"It feels strange (being the only girl). Silly things like... last week when I got really emotional. Nobody would have even noticed; even if I had come in sobbing I don't think anyone would have noticed (laughs). Before (the new CEO) joined, the Exco was totally male, rude to women, is she blond? It was just awful ... but there is nobody there you could have a conversation with, do you know it's been a really tough day today because they don't have those conversations. It's a bit backslappy boys club sometimes, so it's an interesting environment but it'll be tough to get a lot of women, because there are no levels below with them, so they'll have to recruit them in."

Exploring further the notion of gendered ageism, no less concerning were the illustrations of casual language used in the workplace towards the participants, littered with sexist and ageist overtones. Amongst many examples, interviewees had either been called, or heard another older female called, "*blocker... also ran... older bird... old biddy... frigid old cow... older aunt... throwback... fuddy duddy*". For example, Lori describes an example of a recent interview process:

"We hired an HR director into one of our business lines and there was an internal candidate, who was a woman, who I thought would have been brilliant. She's 50 and the discussion was, 'well you know it's not that she would not be good at the job', everyone could see that she'd be good at the job, but 'she'll be a blocker' and 'this will be her last gig', and 'where's she

going to go next?’ and ‘we’re not kind of elevating the game through putting her in it’. So, we went outside, and we hired a guy who was one year younger, 49.”

Jill was concerned that her younger colleagues had recently called her a “*fuddy duddy who doesn't move her ways. I don't want to be seen as that but sometimes you can see stuff cos you are at this end and they are at that*”. And Kim describes a conversation with a fellow director, “*and he said you know for an older bird, they think you’re quite attractive and I was horrified, not about the ‘you know you’ve still got the sexual edge’ comments, that’s never bothered me, umm but being seen as an older woman in that category did bother me*”. In rebutting a sexual advance, Kim was also accused of being a “*frigid old cow, I didn't realise you bat for the other side*”.

I notice in my transcripts that much of this language was replayed back to me with a resigned shrug or a laugh (never fury or indignation) and suggest this response is the outcome of years of older women being abjected within organisations. So much so, that through the use of humour, or resignation, abjection is normalised within so many organisations, embedded in language and practice (Butler, 2004). Donna is a professional non-executive director with approximately seven different non-executive director roles and considerable experience of many board rooms. Although she now self-selects her roles onto Boards where she believes her voice will count, she notes a bias in many organisations against senior women and gives a rich example of ‘abjection as normal’ in practice at Board level:

“They weren’t bad guys, they were just very matey. It was boy’s locker room talk the whole time, it was football the whole time. They’d disappear half way through dinner to somebody’s room because a game was on, and it wasn’t that they were just thoughtless, they weren’t particularly welcoming, they’d never worked with a senior woman... the only women they knew were the daughters and their wives and they were just difficult to get to know and didn’t accept me as one of them. That type of attitude was also on display in the board room too because I would say something, and they would ignore me.”

The dynamics of abjection are often subtle (Rizq, 2013) enabling ‘abjection as normal’ to also be used as an exclusionary practice. At least five respondents discussed the

signals, sometimes nuanced and sometimes overt, that their ‘time was up’. Respondents discussed the sense of feeling ‘sidelined’, with projects quietly going elsewhere, and that, as the past, they could not be part of the organisational future. Stephanie articulated this powerfully:

“People felt very strongly round me that there was a new view in the organisation that older women didn’t have a place in this organisation and that I sort of stuck out like a sore thumb... and that really I should just fall on my sword. I should just... I should just move on you know, what was I still doing there?”

Given the dominance of the male body within the organisation, and the normality of the older male body at a senior level, this section is important in theorising about the position of older professional women within the organisational setting. As I re-read the transcripts again and further consider the normalisation of abjection, two further points of theory are striking. As discussed in Chapter Six, a number of scholars believe the roots of discriminatory organisational attitudes and behaviours are caused by the fact that women have no language of their own in male normative discourse (Hopfl & Matilal, 2007; Fotaki, 2013; Rizq, 2013). I would venture that through the combined use of ageist and sexist language, abjection towards the older woman is allowed to flourish, and indeed, normalised. In theorising about Embodied Abjection (2013), Fotaki opened up the potential for ‘self-abjection’ (described in Chapter Six of the Literature Review), as an explanation for women expressing themselves as a “negative abject-self” (ibid, p. 1265). Expanding on this theory further, I would suggest that the more abjection is normalised, that is, discriminatory language or practice is neither considered abhorrent by individuals or disabled by the organisation, the more it is accepted. And this acceptance can give rise to a surrender to the status quo, or, worse, relinquishing one’s role in the organisation. Both Robin and Carolyn offer somewhat despondent examples of this:

“I think sometimes people start to think, oh if you don't want to progress to the next level then you've finished. And you can start to pick up this kind of vibe that you're the ‘also ran’ and you think, what’s the point?” (Robin)

Or as Carolyn describes, after she left her Director role: *“there was a sense that as a 50-year-old woman you weren’t in the core demographic and that I felt a little bit past my sell by date in terms of the amount of time I’d been there and there was this subtle message always that you need to move on”*.

It is also possible that the isolation for professional older women, the lack of role models and the surprise they are still ‘in the game’ is one of the reasons that many of the respondents could not conceive of themselves in a senior position. Jill is one of many interviewees who intends to step up (discussed further in Chapter Eleven), but seems almost puzzled by the idea of taking a senior position, *“Someone did say would you go the next level? Interesting I have never thought of it, I have just written it off, I never thought I’d get this far again”*.

‘Feeding the Food Chain’

There is acknowledgement in the literature that the youth orientation of organisational life reflects the prejudice society holds against the ageing population (i.e. Woodward, 1999; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001), with, as discussed earlier, dire predictions offered up for the supposed arrival of the ‘grey tsunami’ (Karpf, 2014). Echoing the research, few organisations are as explicitly age discriminatory as the examples offered from the respondents working within professional services. For example, Angela – an HR leader - revealed statistics with some 80% of the workforce within her organisation being under 45, an average age of 27 in the firm and an ‘engagement agreement’ that ensures all partners (of both sexes) exit before they are 55 years of age, so as to *“offer partnership opportunities to our talent”*. The message to Angela is clear:

“I haven’t had a pay rise for a number of years and I get bonuses, but the base pay hasn’t changed. I’ve sort have had the message that you’re really well paid, you’re kind of not worth much more to us, your career isn’t going up... we have a food chain to feed of junior people”.

The stress on youth being the “productive and aesthetic icons of capitalisms projects” (Fineman, 2011, p. 58) was lent weight in this research with youth associated with

positive qualities, such as energy, creativity, fun and wellness despite many believing that the younger people within their organisations “*push forwards...and absorb the oxygen*” (Michelle) and did not deliver “ROI” (return on investment). The presumption that ‘talent’ equals ‘youth’ was confirmed in particular by the five Human Resource/People leaders interviewed. They discussed in multiple ways an “*obsession with youth*”, with bringing young people in through graduate and apprenticeship training schemes and “*feeding the food chain*” from the bottom up. Despite ‘The Equality Act’ of 2010 disallowing age discrimination, it is of significance that only one interviewee could recall a policy held by their organisation that positively benefits her generation, and she (Linda) was in a position to direct the policy. It is not that organisations are ignoring the gender or caring issue - for most interviewees were able to recall a litany of diversity, flexibility and training policies within their organisations to that end - but that such policies are geared towards attracting either a new generation of employees, improving a gender balance or helping women return to work after maternity leave. That there are so few diversity or training policies directed towards older executives (other than retirement ones), and that this is not perceived as discriminatory or unusual, offers a further example of the normalisation of abjection for older employees. One particularly insightful comment from Stephanie summarised the situation for many of the respondents: “*If you’re the past, you can’t be the present or the future*”.

Whether this was a problem for interviewees engendered a surprisingly emotional – and diverse – response. There was a strong challenge to the notion that an organisation should develop and support the careers of older generation. For example, Tina’s career has spanned the creative, media and academic sectors and she is outraged by the “*bloody outrageous bedblockers*” she has observed across all three sectors holding on to their roles whilst younger people wait in the wings. Equally, Kathy, a Director of People within the Financial Services sector, was forthright and unapologetic in her observations, “*from a business point of view if you were picking your dream team, how many of them would be in that older age category?*” She stresses a preference for employing and training younger people for being cheaper, less complacent,

‘experienced enough’ and ‘on point’. Arguably, Kathy is providing a further example of embedded abjection towards older people.

On the other hand, Angela described her company’s ageist policy as “*intolerable*” and being “*head in the sand*” and further explained her endeavours to persuade her company to sign up to an ageing workforce policy:

“I attend this ‘Age at Work’ forum, so as members we’ve obsessively signed up to this target to increase our ‘over-50’ workforce by 12%. I’ve done a paper on how we can do that and there’s a few of us sitting on it, but we can’t find the route in to our leadership to make this a priority for them”.

The notion that the ageing body is potentially unacceptable or problematic in the workplace has been considered by scholars and, as Kristeva suggests, a figure of abjection. But for Kristeva, as for other scholars (e.g. Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2000; Gatrell, 2008), such abjection is also profoundly gendered. As Kristeva defines the abject as any experience that disturbs identity, cultural constructs or social order, it can be argued that the female ageing body is outside the parameters of the youthful identity, the male cultural paradigm and the natural order of patriarchy (Kristeva, 1982). For abjection is not necessarily devoid of power, it has the capacity to destabilise the cultural order that authorises and regulates its exclusion (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010). The next section will consider such gender implications of the ageing body and the perceived need of many respondents to ‘act young’.

‘Acting Young’: Presenting the Ageing Body

One of the most surprising, and joyous, findings from this study was how the majority of women interviewed did not buy into the decline narrative as far as their ageing bodies were concerned. There was a message of energy, vitality and vigour presented, combined at times with a rueful, humorous, resignation to the ageing body. With only three interviewees expressing an active dislike of their ageing body, this is in stark contrast to much research and the decline message in the media (i.e. Trethewey, 2001; Wray, 2007; Mulhauer, 2007). What is equally clear is that part of the desire to be

fit and strong stems from a need to present a youthful body in the workplace. Once youth is equated to energy, creativity and wellness and ageing with cynicism, frailty and irrelevance, in an environment where maleness is the 'norm', the corporate expectation for the older woman is clear. Do not *look* old and do not *act* old.

"I do think the way you present yourself is very important. I think you have to look kind of fit and confident, so I think it does help if you look well, I think you have to look competent. I think you have to look like you are in control of your body, so the way you manage your body, I think that's very important" (Gaynor).

And the seriousness with which Gaynor believes age is equated with ineffectiveness has led to her presenting herself as seven years younger than she is. An HR error enabled this, and she has not corrected it, for, as she says: *"If age could be a barrier to that (her advancement in her career) then I care about my age. I think the image of you know a 60-year-old woman is like incompetent, past it..."*.

Admiration by women, about women, who managed to 'look young', was high. As Jill was one of few interviewees with a female boss, the discussion here is relevant. Jill admires her CEO, who is a clear advocate for older women, but without prompting, our discussion focused on age and looks. Jill has embraced the message that, despite reaching this position at her age, the embodied presentation of her boss was critical to being taken seriously as a woman in a powerful position:

"Our CEO is female and 67. She is very dynamic and that makes a big difference. She walks in a room and everybody knows... she is fantastic. So from that perspective, I think it is not acting old. I think that is part of the key. You can't make yourself look younger, but you can make yourself look good for your age, you make an effort, and I think that's important, so for me the way you look is important, it sends a message. I never say I'm tired at work, I never say it, the young people all do, but I keep things like that to myself. I am conscious of it, I don't appear old".

She suggests further:

"I travel with her (her CEO) and she's trotting along from the back with her trolley like this and I think from the back you would never know how old she

is. She's amazing. You would never classify her as old. She doesn't look old. She looks great. OK, she does look old 'cos she is, but she doesn't look her age. She dresses well and her attitude, she doesn't talk or act like an older person. I think that makes a difference”.

As this conversation expanded, with her boss' dress and bearing described in graphic detail and with such regard, it is a reminder of how abject the ageing body can appear to others, even when one is intending to celebrate its appearance. Jill's older boss is great, as long as she does not appear to be her age. Covino describes abjection as the study of desire and its discontents, a sort of 'before and after picture' (2004, p. 2), with the state of abjection characterized by alienation, ridding ourselves of our unwanted, ageing bodies and presenting a 'clean and proper body' to society and I would argue these examples demonstrate 'abjection as normal' in two specific ways. Firstly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, no respondent commented on their older male boss in the same way that Jill does on her female boss. Secondly, it is accepted by women that they will attend to their embodied presence in the workplace and, in the case of this study, be assiduous in their attention to looking younger.

This is evidenced in the manner respondents discussed their self-presentation in the workplace, with conversation ranging from hair, skin, make up, nails, clothes, shoes, diet, weight and exercise. As Kathy Woodward (1999) comments, the older female body is both invisible – in that it is no longer seen – and hypervisible – in that it is all that is seen. For example, Linda dyes her hair, has skin tightening, gel nails, a personal trainer, a rigorous diet and a daily weigh-in. Her interview was representative of the lengths many of the women are going to in order to discipline their body, often alongside their disciplined life:

“So today I saw my personal trainer, I then did emails, I then went and had a facial and then I came to see you and then I'm going in to work. Then I have lunch with my husband and then I'm going to go and chair a meeting of this company, one of my other jobs, and then I'm coming back to take a few calls and check my emails.”

The embodied presence of the older women in the workplace was more acute for those women surrounded by younger people in their environment – for example, media, fashion, schools and universities – where the desire (and need) to ‘fit in’ had a more anxious edge. As Chris, a senior figure in advertising, stated: “*Am I going to look old fashioned, do I look on brand? Actually, I just look like a middle-aged woman who’s trying to look as if she’s on brand... who am I kidding?*”.

The urge to avoid age stereotyping, and “*push against the boundaries of what is expected of a woman of my age*” was keenly expressed by Carolyn.

“I want to prove to myself, and probably to other people, that actually being in your 50s doesn’t define you ... so I’ve run marathons, I’ve climbed Kilimanjaro, I’ve done 100-mile bike rides and it’s as much as anything to prove that I’m physically fitter than people half my age. So, there was a little bit of ‘right I’m going to show the lot of you’.”

As discussed in the Literature Review, Tyler argues that stereotyping is a form of Social Abjection (2013), with the practices of stereotyping “produced, mediated, embodied and lived” (2013, p. 214). Homi Bhabha describes stereotyping as an “everyday drama”, (1983, p. 23), which comes closer to the theory of ‘abjection as normal’, suggesting that negative age stereotyping is part of the fabric and discourse of organisational life. What this gives rise to, so the data suggests, is the constant need to ‘prove oneself’, a theme that resonated across many of the interviews. As discussed in the review, literature confirms that women have always felt the need to be ‘better’ than man in the workplace, to work harder and to fight for one’s place at the top of the company, and certainly the need to “*be exceptional*” (Linda) was no different here.

However, this need to prove oneself physically took a much darker turn when women discussed the lengths they went to ensure that they did not present an ageing, sick or frail body within the workplace. Gatrell (2011b) evidences this need from her work with pregnant women, and it apparently remains the case with the ageing body. Frances has recently recovered from pneumonia, having “*worked myself into a*

frazzle” and both Kim and Annette have ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis), caused, they believe, by the stress of work and, critically, the need to cover it up:

“I was so worried because I don’t want to be looking like I’m not pulling my weight because I was born that way, and in the end the ME just made it an added pressure really because I don’t want to be written off as someone who can’t hack it. So, I over compensate and made myself sick which is why I ended up with ME in the first place really” (Kim).

‘The Mad Old Woman in the Corner’: Reflections on the Menopause

Given the reflections in this chapter as to how the older, female body can be considered abject in the workplace, to the extent that such abjection can be considered ‘normal’, it is hardly surprising there is a thread running through many of these interviews about the need for control. Specifically, control over one’s body, particularly when control equals competence (Young, 2005). This is explicitly affirmed by Gaynor:

“You don’t have to appear young and pretty, that’s not a pre-requisite, but you do have to appear I think in control ... I think as a woman you certainly have to appear to be in control of your body, because that gives the impression that you are in control of your intellectual age and your competence”.

The abject, ‘leaky’ maternal body has been well considered by scholars (and related in Chapter Two), with the deficient narrative extending beyond the actual assessment of physical health, leading to negative evaluations of women’s all-round functioning and intellect (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000; Evans, 2002; Gatrell, 2011b). As notable is the cultural grammar surrounding the menopause, which is shrouded in terms of atrophy, abjection and failure, viewed as problematic (Martin, 1992). The question this section will consider is whether the respondents concurred with these views, observing their own menopausal body (peri- or post-menopause), or the so-called ‘non-maternal’ body (Gullette, 2004) as ‘out of control’ as the maternal body?

In stark contrast to much of the menopause literature, presenting menopause as a relatively uniform biological occurrence between the ages of 45 and 55, (Natchgill &

Heilman, 2000; Blake, 2006), this data set concurred with research describing menopause as “neither uniformly described nor universally experienced and positive evidence of its actual occurrence is not immediately available for study” (p. 216, Formanek, 1990; Goodman, 1990). Nineteen of the respondents replied to question regarding their menopausal experience with a variation on the answer of ‘no idea’ or ‘not sure’ and these responses can be divided into two groups: those women who had a physical intervention causing somatic uncertainty and those who had experienced no symptoms. Looking at the first group, the physical interventions included contraception (the pill, the Mirena coil or depo injection); an elected endometrial ablation; early hysterectomy for fibroid treatment; side effects of chemotherapy outweighing menopausal symptoms and IVF treatment causing a cessation of periods. In the second group, a further ten women experienced no symptoms and therefore assumed themselves to be post-menopausal.

This is a key finding in the ongoing discussion of menopause in the workplace and contemporary theorising (i.e. Jack, et al. 2016; Hardy, et al. 2018). Essentially, the majority of participants displayed either an indifference to the menopause, “*I didn't really notice it all really*” (Brenda) or expressed an ability to control it, “*Well I've had absolutely nothing to do with it*” (Linda), with no sense of reluctance, embarrassment or fear, just matter of fact. Our considerations around the menopause were relatively short, commonly accompanied by an apology for not having much to say, or an expression of guilt “*I don't dare tell my girlfriends because some of them are having such rubbish times and I had absolutely nothing*” (Linda).

This posits an interesting reflection as to how the experience of the menopause relates to the theorising of ‘abjection as normal’ and two considerations are relevant here. Firstly, the potential need to remain silent even if the experience of menopause is non-existent or positive. Whilst aware of research (Chapter Four) highlighting indifference towards the menopause (Martin, 1992; Hvas, 2001) or inconclusive outcomes with regards to workplace consequences (Jack, et al. 2016; Hardy, et al. 2018) there is limited menopausal research that reflects the positive benefits of the menopause and

the potential impact of this at work (Brewis et al., 2017). Meg stated how much more “*emotionally stable*” and “*productive at work*” she now felt without the upheaval of PMT, and Gail concurred:

“I flew through my menopause in a way, but what I realised is that I wasn't feeling exhausted like I used to when I was having periods. There used to be times when I wanted to curl up and you know what it is but urgh... always on a major presentation day. And then I started to realise that I wasn't carrying tampaxes in pockets, I wasn't thinking about it, I was through. ... it was really that simple. I had hot sweats at night but thought I was worrying about the business. But I was grappling with big things. Never conscious of the menopause and I felt great. A real sense of freedom. Head clear. Before I'd have headaches, or just not 100%. Definitely the reverse of brain fog. Definitely. Then it went. Then the weight went. It was like a release.”

So, there is a suggestion here that the ‘out of control’ abject body might *not* apply after the menopause, providing a challenge to perception of the weakened embodied status of the non-reproductive body. Far from losing control of the body, respondents discussed the menopause *giving* them a sense of control:

“Not menstruating has made me feel more in control. So, my body just feels more contained, more my own, it feels I'm steadier now, so I haven't got those monthly rhythms in terms of my mental state. I haven't got periods, so it just feels much more... mine... feels like I'm much more in control of it, which feels good” (Eve).

Secondly, it is important here to recognise that whilst some respondents were dispassionate about their own menopausal experience, all interviewees concurred with the virtual silence in the workplace regarding the menopause (Griffiths, et al. 2010) and agreed that this silence has consequences. Jude's current experience of a problematic peri-menopause is useful for understanding the practical difficulties of menopausal symptoms in the workplace:

“I think it feels tough sometimes... because I'm sweating, hot, pain, uncomfortable, look in the mirror and feel awful some days. An example this week would be, I had the board meeting on Tuesday. So, the board is starting at lunchtime and I am extra hot, extra sweaty, extra curly hair, extra make up

round my chin rather than on my face, and I'm thinking, I've got to stand and present. So, my routine was on Tuesday morning, get in early, have a change of clothing with me as well, in the same colour, take all my make-up, all my stuff and before I go in at 12, at 11 I'm in the toilets sorting myself out. Then I'm boiling sorting myself out and so my hair is already curling as I'm straightening, then you feel conscious of it cos you're so hot and warm and you want to make a good impression. Plus remembering what I'm going to be saying for the day ... I don't think anyone realises what that feels like unless you have to sit there and do it. And then you do the session and feel brilliant and walking to the toilet and thinking I'm going to burst into tears and just like, where did that come from? That's makes you think, can I, will, I, can I control it enough in a normal conversation?"

Unsurprisingly, being the sole women on the Board, Jude recognised that an open discussion on the menopause at work could be construed as “*having a serious illness*” and – as she is suggesting above - of seeming less than competent (Fineman, 2011; Gatrell, 2011b). It was further agreed by participants that the desire to present a healthy and youthful presence can lead women to seek a medical solution to demonstrate total wellness in the workplace, even if it has potentially negative health consequences (Gavranich, 2011). Jill describes the advice she received from her gynaecological consultant who told her that taking HRT would ‘prolong’ the menopause: “*she said, ‘the way I look at it you go on it while you get through the time you are working, and then when you slow down you go off it’.*” Stephanie did take HRT, but believes she acquired an auto-immune illness from coming off HRT too quickly.

Equally the women interviewed believed that an open dialogue in the workplace on the menopause could only be a positive alternative to silence. Carolyn, previously HR Director of a sizeable media company and an advocate for compassion at work, is explicit on the needs of the organisation to bring the menopause conversation alive in the workplace:

“I think for me a big thing is around the physical changes and, linked into that, the emotional changes of the menopause that we don't pay any attention to in the work place. The embarrassment of hot flushes ... I've been in meetings where people have had hot flushes and that whole sense of how people around the room respond to that, how they feel about that happening.

I just don't think we talk about it enough or understand it as a phase... we need to make much clearer, better provision for this".

In theorising 'abjection as normal', this is an interesting discussion point. Whilst those respondents who commented stressed the desire for a 'normalisation' of the menopause discussion, this is in direct contrast to the pathological presentation of it as an illness. And so, the silence surrounding menopause disavows all experience, enabling negative assumptions to thrive. For example, Kathleen had been discussing one instance of post-menopausal bleeding, some 14 months after her last period which she found shocking, embarrassing and '*hideous, just hideous*'. For her, a 'normal' discussion is:

"I think it's just trying to get it across that it's a perfectly natural thing that happens. Recognise that it's okay to talk about it, umm and perhaps even having an acknowledgement that, you know, you might have to go home and that's okay. I mean for me that day I was just, I just wanted to go home, I felt dirty, I felt really uncomfortable, embarrassed. I think knowing even that there is somebody that you could just go and talk to."

As no respondent's organisation had a workplace policy for the menopause, concern for the pathologising of their experience stemmed from an awareness of media coverage and anecdotal reporting, with some interviewees contacting me in January, 2018 to express disquiet at the Radio 4 Women's Hour coverage of the menopause. With the 'horror themed' logo and an emphasis on, what one interviewee described on the phone to me as the 'crazy bird syndrome', respondents were not seeing their own experience reflected in the research. As mentioned in Chapter Two, this chimes with NAPO's (the Professional Association for Family Court and Probation Staff) recent menopause workplace policy leaflet and also some of the content and direction of the Chartered Institute of Professional Development's 2019 menopause report. And so, the promulgation of the 'normal' menopausal body as abject continues.

It is as if centuries of medicalising women and their reproductive (or non-reproductive) bodies has cast a long shadow. Women's bodies have been portrayed throughout history as weak, deficient and frail, or 'leaky', their bodily fluids the

principal sources of impurity that fosters abjection and social exclusion (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011) and researchers have long posited that it is in the interests of the continuation of the patriarchy that this continues (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007). Scholar Levine-Clark suggested the framework for gendered employment legislation started here, with the female body believed to be biologically unstable, women could not be treated in the same way as their able-bodied men (Levine Clark, 2004). Ehrenreich and English suggest, “It was a world view, which proceeded from the Market, from the realm of the economic, or ‘public life’. It was by its nature external to women, capable of seeing them only as ‘others’ or aliens” (p. 526, 2005).

Who Cares?

At the start of this chapter I suggested there are three specific ways in which professional older women can be excluded within the organisational culture, and this exclusion normalised, disregarded and/or accepted. That is, they are not young, they are not male, and they are not always present. This section will consider how abjection is employed as an instrument of exclusion and marginalisation when the caring agenda for this age group is considered, rendering many older women into a part time state of difference, or ‘otherness’. I am not alone in arguing that caregiving is normalised as ‘woman’s work’ or taken for granted (e.g. Tronto, 1993; Rossi, 2005; Donnelly, 2015; Gupta & Poo, 2018). However, where caregiving issues are deliberated on, academically and through practitioner efforts, they are mainly directed towards younger female executives, rendering the considerable caregiving issues of the middle aged female executive of little interest, enabling ‘*abjection as normal*’ to exist.

Academics suggest that for the patriarchal system to be preserved, control must be demonstrated and those within business should be logical, rational and *present*, with disorder, impermanence and uncertainty disrupting the status quo (Höpfl, 2007; Fotaki, 2011; Evans, 2017). This state of ‘otherness’ within the corporation, alongside the confluence of age and gender, is effortlessly maintained when women follow flexible career paths. As Evans suggests, “the imagined paths of men and women into

public life would appear to take two distinct forms: the former a straightforward career, a line leading ever upwards, and the second, for women, a curved and tortuous path, always at risk of the slings and arrows of fortune” (2017, p.65).

As discussed in the Literature Review, organisational policies have been directed towards keeping the professional mother within the organisation, with improved maternity, paternity and flexible working guidelines. But the caring concerns of the professional at midlife, with or without children, has little resonance in the academic literature or within organisational practice. Practitioner discussions or policy appear limited, with very few employers extending their flexible work/life policies to cover the full range of caring responsibilities beyond parenting (Phillips et al, 2002; Evandrou and Glaser, 2003; Ackerman & Banks, 2007; Vickerstaff, et al. 2007). One of the findings of this study is that this is an extraordinary omission given the prominence of caring at this stage of life and its influence on the otherwise upwards trajectory of the older woman’s professional career.

‘Dependents this way and Dependents that way’

As commented on in Chapter Five, academic research provides many examples of people at midlife being framed in the context of their ‘empty nest’ (e.g. Adelman, et al, 1989; Putney & Bengston, 2001; Hodges, 2012) with the majority of those in their 50’s “no longer carrying the burden of supporting children”, living a life that is “cash and time rich”, whilst being “free and autonomous” (Scales & Scase, 2000, p. 35). Yet within this study, half of the respondents still had dependent children living at home, with eight of the women interviewed still having two or more dependent children at home.

At one extreme is Cyn (46), a full-time nurse, with five dependent children, the youngest of whom is six years old. Full of humour and vivacity, Cyn still describes her life as “*physically and mentally exhausting*” as she works 14 hour shifts so as to have a day off in the week to make childcare easier. Martha, a full-time GP, also has

two young children (aged six and seven), whom she and her female partner adopted five years ago when they were both 45 years old. In a similar way to any parent with young children, Martha describes feeling equally tired and far too exhausted to discuss how she feels at midlife:

“I almost think my life has been so overwhelmingly ruled by having the kids, and that actually everything else has gone by the by, so that feels, I think it’s fair to say, I felt exhausted, so I don’t, I’m not sure I’ve had much time to think how I feel (about midlife).”

Of course, many working mothers would describe their lives in a similar vein, that is, one of juggling and tiredness (Hochschild, 1997; Marshall & Tracy, 2009), with, I would argue, the concomitant assumption that this is directed towards the younger mother. Yet the difference in this study lies in the stories of the multi-faceted caring responsibilities facing the respondents at midlife, making a full-time presence in the workplace for some women seem impossible. As well as many respondents having dependent children, almost half the respondents had one or more parent with a form of dementia for whom they were actively involved with the caring; three respondents were caring for their seriously ill husbands; two, a sibling, and a further two their teenage daughters who were coping with a mental illness. One respondent was, last year, actively caring for her mum, her aunt and her mother in law at the same time, whilst another was juggling seven grandchildren and a mother with locked-in syndrome. Extraordinarily, a third of respondents took a break, or stepped down, from their role, albeit temporarily, to manage these situations, with only one husband described as sharing the caring responsibility.

Joan Tronto’s observation that the caregiving role remains that of ‘fate’, with many women taking on this role due to societal norms appears, from the research, to remain remarkably persistent (Tronto, 1993; Rossi, 2005) and that this issue can become more urgent at midlife is also prevalent (i.e. Marks, et al., 2005; Trethewey, 2011; Hodges, 2012; Lips & Hastings, 2012). Scholars highlight the silencing of women’s bodies in the workplace (Fotaki, 2011), illustrating ‘abjection as practice’ (Gatrell, 2013), and

argue that the speaking, female subject “exists uneasily in the symbolic order” (Rizq, 2014, p. 47). I would further theorise that this ‘silence’ is exemplified by a disregard for midlife caregiving issues that give rise to these temporary absences. Such absences *disable* the ability to work full time, whilst *enabling* the maintenance of the full time patriarchal norm, supporting the theory of ‘abjection as normal’.

Tina’s story highlights this well. A senior professional within the media industry, she took eight months off work to recover from Hodgkin’s Lymphoma cancer and care for her teenage daughter with mental health issues. On returning to work and still needing flexibility, she described “*seeing the writing on the wall*” and took redundancy. She spoke with resignation:

“I don't know, I am... I am... I feel underutilised but it's like, of the available options at the moment, I am better to be underutilised. Better to be underutilised and available (to my daughter)”.

Frances, a Finance Director, had a different experience at her university. When her father became seriously ill, she took five weeks off and was fully supported, returning to work with no issues. She considers herself “lucky” and cites the experience of her best friend who recently lost both parents:

“She chose to take a job that was less hours, so she could look after her parents, but she also has a sister, just 60, who has had two strokes and a heart attack. So, she took a job which was a 20-hour week, so she had the flexibility to not only look after her parents but also look after a disabled sister. That was the choice she took, so she took much less money, and a significant cut in money and status to look after them”.

‘Way Out, not Way In’

The majority of respondents discussed a desire, or more urgently, a *need* for flexibility at this time of life. Yet senior professional roles offering such flexibility were described as “hens teeth”, or, significantly a “way out, not a way in”, with part time roles viewed as incompatible with senior leadership (Donnelly, 2015). Or, put another way, incompatible with the male paradigmatic organisation. It appears there is a

‘vicious circle’ at play here. Caregiving issues at midlife can lead to a need for (temporary) flexibility. When this is disavowed, senior women leave their organisation with minimal disruption, thereby enabling ‘abjection as normal’ to thrive. Eve, a clinical director within the NHS (who has since left her role) states:

“It’s a bit like, ‘if you’re with us, you’re with us completely’. So being part time is a real problem in a leadership role, in a very senior leadership role. So, it’s like I’m not taking it entirely seriously, or I’m not committed. I think there is that going on... In fact, they have outlawed it. They have said you can’t be in those positions now without being full time. So, I am very much a historical hangover (laughs)... yeah I’m a throwback...”

Donna agrees, and from her viewpoint of multiple non-executive director roles, notices a repeated inflexibility towards professional older women: *“It’s a tragedy because they’re seen to be not serious about their job, that’s the culture, that’s a male culture. So, we’ve got to do something about those cultures and make it okay for women to have flexibility”*.

Only one respondent managed to navigate a job-sharing role and Lori’s story is a useful example of a creative solution born out of desperation. A director within an international financial institution, Lori has worked full time for fifteen years, nearly the lifespan of her now 16-year old twins. She is the breadwinner in the family, with limited financial choices, and recent family events have caused a “*storm*” in her life. The convergence of her mother’s heart condition, her daughter’s anorexia and lack of sleep, which she attributes to menopause, has led Lori to move from a full-time position to three days a week, a situation she describes as *“really hard, Lucy, it’s been really, really, hard, really hard”*.

The seriousness of the situation facing both her mother and daughter meant that Lori was about to step out of the organisation, but for a chance meeting in the lift with her female colleague. Of a similar age with three children and a dying father, her colleague was also about to resign: *“She was just going, ‘I can’t do this anymore, I can’t do this,*

I'm being pulled in too many different directions'." Together they crafted a job-sharing solution which they presented to their boss as a way to "win all round".

"I can absolutely see that vulnerability would limit or prohibit some people from being able to find their way through it and actually the easiest option might be just to stop, back away, change whatever it is, whatever it is that people choose to do umm, yeah because it's not easy. It's definitely a period, I remember going through kind of a foggy tunnel going 'agghhhh', I actually don't know what I'm going to do and how I'm going to do it".

Lori is under no illusions that had she not understood the HR function, and taken ownership for a solution, this job-sharing option would not have been available:

"He (her boss) probably would have said, 'Lori I'd love to help, but sorry it's a full-time job'. So even though I'm sure he'd have had massive sympathy and still wanted to retain me, if I had said 'I don't know how else to do this job, I want to do it three days a week', I'm sure he probably would have said, 'oh, I don't how I'm going to do it, sorry'."

Silence and 'The Last Taboo'

What is being suggested in this chapter through the data, is that 'abjection as normal' is enabled and preserved through silence - systemically and individually. Kristeva notes that abjection can be maintained, and normalised, when one functions as a 'stranger' in an environment and does not assume the status of vocal equality: "Your speech has no past and will have no power over the future of the group: why should one listen to it? You do not have enough status- no social standing" (1991, p. 9). She further maintains, "the 'foreigner' is at once identified as beneficial or harmful to that social group and its power and, on that account, he is to be assimilated or rejected" (1991, p. 10) and certainly, authors have suggested that the closer the older women gets to power, the more urgent the need to exclude or put them down (Evans, 2017).

Stephanie, a senior figure in media, is an advocate for gender and age equality within her industry and unafraid to call out what she perceives as transgressive behaviour. She offered dramatic examples of being routinely silenced with '*uncontrollable*

hysterical rage” from her boss for her public openness in going to the press to discuss ageism, sexism and the menopause without an organisational remit. She further suggests her organisation, and the media industry at large, ‘turns a blind eye’ to the departure of professional older women:

“I don’t think they even recognise that it’s a problem for them, they’re quite happy for them (older women) to leave, it’s not a problem for them. ‘Oh, that’s good they’ve gone, we can bring in another one’. I know really good women who are no longer working, and I think, so did they just have nothing left to offer? It’s the lack of imagination that’s shocking and a waste to society”.

And it is possible that the culture of silence experienced within many organisations is reflective of society, which encourages older women to remain quiet and keep their expectations low (Young, 2005; Twigg, 2013). Patricia, a senior academic, expressed this wisely: *“I think within the wider culture there is something that is encouraged and makes us as older women withdraw. Have lower expectations. Keep quiet. Don’t expect to be noticed. Be unassertive”*. Whilst issues surrounding older women, such as menopause, are held to be ‘taboo’, silence is also preserved. Anthropologist Mary Douglas noted that disgust reactions are always anchored to wider social beliefs and structures of taboo (Tyler, 2013; Cohen, 2005), leading, as Kristeva notes, to “a realm of silence” (1991, p. 15). Carolyn, previously an HR Director who still leads the way in diversity, particularly for older women, agrees that issues of ‘taboo’ lie at the heart of the silence:

“I can only assume that it’s because we fit into a male paradigm, and it’s either that we’ve got no relevance as older women, or that it’s a bit squeamish and we don’t want to talk about it. I would say even mental health, which is supposedly the last taboo, is being talked about more than menopause and women’s issues, so actually I would say the last taboo is older women’s issues not mental health.”

And this silence, enabling ‘abjection as normal’, is as much maintained by the individual, as it is systemically. Angela, for example, was extremely aware that she and her HR Director were *“letting each other off the hook and letting the organisation off the hook”* with regards to their organisations’ ageist policies:

“I worry that the nature of work is going to be the elites are going to be even more protected in, you know, like an echo chamber. So, the people who can run an organisation sit at the top and then there’s us ... the more invisible we are, umm, we’re not going to know what happens”.

Respondents recognised the impact of the culture, with their ‘heads down’ approach to gendered ageist issues a response to the vulnerability of their attained position. Certainly, in the ‘contest’ for diversity, ‘battle’ language was invoked. Interviewees expressed ‘fighting’ their way to their positions, being exhausted or feeling like a ‘wrung out rag’ with a keenness not to ‘rock the boat’:

“I think because the path is so, so hard you’ve got to fight and fight and fight, and you’ve got to also keep your eyes open for what’s really an opportunity and what’s a dead-end thing. Try and take the one, but not the other. You’ve got to be there, you just got to keep going because otherwise the opportunity won’t be offered to you” (Gaynor).

What is it possible to theorise from this data, is that when an organisation acts as a place of social abjection, holding professional older women’s positions as taboo, or as the deficient ‘other’, abjection is normalised through silence, or ‘turning a blind eye’.

‘A Force for Good’

Of course, the experience for professional older women is not homogenous, and for seven interviewees the issues surrounding the intersection of their age and gender has not been an issue at this stage of their career. What is particularly pertinent here is that all seven women share a common factor of personal power, or work within an organisation with majority female power. Linda is CEO of her organisation and Brenda, at the time of our interview was Managing Director (Brenda has recently resigned and set up two further companies). Jill and Paula’s CEO’s are female, and actively engaged with promoting women within their organisations, and for the three remaining respondents, the executive Board (or senior leadership team) is at gender parity or majority female. This is a responsibility all seven respondents recognised and took seriously, as expressed by Michelle:

“So, there are four of us women on the Board and your gender genuinely plays no role ... your skillset will play a role but we’re very, very supportive of women. There’s no barrier to you becoming... achieving executive position... it’s about your skillset and how you develop your skillset. The hard bit I think is having the mentors, the people who give you the coaching, the determination and fan the flames a bit. I am conscious of my responsibility as a female director to say actually we should be promoting the role of women, we should be working with women in a different way and getting the skills they’ve got. I would champion the course for women as long as there’s breath in my body.”

Brenda expressed an impatience with the gender discussion, believing that “sex was completely irrelevant”, whilst later in our discussion recognising how far she drove the agenda at her organisation: *“There wasn’t really an attitude, I don’t think, because I drove the values. I mean all of the bosses of the departments were women actually, so boss of the programme department, most of the programmers were all women, boss of the marketing department was female, I was female as managing director, MD of HR was female ...”*.

From the 30 interviews, only two respondents discussed a proactive search for older people at a senior level within their organisation. Curiously, both interviewees were those with female MD’s and both Jill and Paula expressed an awareness of the difference this made to the organisation:

“I think it’s very important. She’s sort of open and interested in others views but you know she ultimately makes the decisions and we are not a democracy. But she is very well respected and is a good strategic thinker and I think people always like working with her so people come with her and know she works in a flexible way. She can see the greater good for adding value to the organisation in a number of different ways... some people have permanent contracts, some fixed contracts, some secondments. It’s a mix and match but getting that meant getting particular skills and seniority. I think the thinking is that by having all these different interests those people bring their contacts and interests back into the organisation”.

On reading these seven interviews, there is strong sense that these women are driving through a new organisational agenda where there is a more considered approach towards gender, age and flexibility. In stark contrast to interviewees such as Kathy

and Angela, who, as HR Directors expressed a desire for diversity but were blocked by the predominant male leadership team, these are women who are making change happen. Frances is Director of Corporate Finance at an academic institution where there are more senior women on the Board than men:

“I think what we’ve done recently, which is quite interesting, is there has been an acknowledgement that people may not want to do five or even 4 days a week. We’ve got a new head of tax who reports into a group head of tax, and the new head of tax is a lady virtually my age, and she came to the university a bit like I did and said you know what I don’t want to work 5 days a week. I’ll be available on the fifth day but I’m not coming into the office, and that kind of has started to be more of the norm...”

These examples may be few, but they offer a refreshing alternative to the dominant narrative. If abjection is a means used to disadvantage certain groups, dividing some groups against others on the basis of a power dynamic in which women must be construed as powerless (Höpfl, 2000; Arya, 2014), what these seven women are conveying is an interruption to the dominant pattern, where abjection of the older women is not the ‘norm’. If, as researchers have suggested and this study echoes, there is a deeply embedded resistance to older women in power (Kets de Vries, 1995; Duffell, 2014), once a parity or majority of female executives is present, cultural assumptions, organisational practices and patterns of interaction that benefit men and put women at a disadvantage, may be shaken (Acker, 1990; Ibarra, et al. 2013).

Summary of Key Findings:

The findings from this chapter evidence the multiple conscious and unconscious ways in which middle aged female executives are excepted and marginalised within the organisational setting, enabling the theoretical perspective of ‘*abjection as normal*’ to exist. In other words, the abjection of the professional older woman is barely noticed, remarked on or written about, permitting the maintenance of the male paradigmatic status quo to remain remarkably unchecked. In developing this theory, the findings demonstrate there are three ways in which the abjection of the female executive at midlife is normalised. That is, whilst the male older body remains a common (and

dominant) presence within the organisation, the female older body is rendered to a state of 'other', or lesser than. Their indiscernibility within the higher echelons of the workplace, as evidence in this study, preserves the normal, taken for granted male notions of order. Rather than giving organisations a state for concern, instead attention is directed to maintaining the pipeline of younger female managers and leaders, with youth-oriented organisational policies. This orientation further enables 'abjection as normal' to thrive, with the female older body considered abject and respondents striving to maintain a 'normal' youthful presence. When the organisational lens is turned towards the older female executive through menopausal discussions, the 'normal' body is again an abject one. That is, the menopausal transition is pathologised with attention directed to the problematic state of the ageing body and concomitant negative impact on the organisation. If the potential for the positive menopausal body is disavowed, perhaps this becomes the taboo topic?

The normalisation of the female as caregiver is well recognised in academic literature, nonetheless the acknowledgement of the multifarious caring issues facing the middle aged female executive within the workplace setting is exceptionally limited. This study challenges the assumption of the middle-aged woman as an 'empty nester', demonstrating instead a complex confluence of caring encompassing parents, partners, sibling and children. So much so, a third of respondents in this study had to take a (temporary) break from the workplace. The theory of 'abjection as normal' emphasises the existence and impact of gendered ageism, demonstrating a passivity towards this stratum, rendering their exit from, or struggles to remain full-time within, the workplace insignificant. Building on the theory of 'abjection as practice' (Gatrell, 2017), this is a different lens through which to view the presence (and absence) of senior older women within the workplace, emphasising indifference and acceptance, above action and regard.

CHAPTER TEN

The ‘Fragile Threshold’ of Midlife

“A wind that jostles and ruffles but bears us toward our own unknown and who knows what future” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 19)

Introduction

The previous chapter theorises the situated experience of the female professional at midlife as (often) one of normalised abjection and considers some of the disablers to their progression forwards in the organisation. In writing about Social Abjection (Tyler, 2013), Spivak asks of those being made abject “why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you, that you are silenced?” (1990, p. 62). Whilst the following chapter (Eleven) demonstrates a revolt against the silence, I venture here that there is a fragility and an oscillation present in the middle years that precedes, and sometimes prevents, revolution and transformation. So, I propose in this chapter that Kristeva’s metaphor of a ‘fragile threshold’ (1982, p. 3) is a thought-provoking way to theorise the respondent’s personal experience of their middle years, and the effect this experience has on their subsequent career decisions.

The word ‘threshold’ itself already has a metaphorical meaning in everyday usage (together with its literal meaning) and, Keltner suggests, is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life, or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold (2014). Yet rather than invoke the word ‘crisis’ alongside midlife, playing into the anecdotal, partisan recording of the midlife theme, I propose that the multiple ‘fragile thresholds’ the respondents in this study experience are more nuanced and heterogeneous, yet nonetheless, evident. What is of interest to this study is why, at the respondents ages, such manifold transitions take place and I would argue that such changes do not happen in a vacuum, with the attainment of reaching middle age being the sole signifying event for change (Bridges, 2004, 2017).

Instead, this chapter is going to consider the effect of multiple experiences of loss at midlife and the effect of facing mortality in the middle years. Prior to the interviews, these were not themes I anticipated covering in this thesis, nor, as is evident in the Literature Review, do academics tend to posit the fear of mortality or loss as a significant theme in the organisational literature about midlife career decisions (Bridges, 2004; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Trethewey, 2011; Ket de Vries, 2014). Yet in every single interview the subject of ‘loss’, in one form or another, was discussed, together with the impact on the respondent’s decisions about work and their relationship with organisations.

Loss is of course discussed in relation to the middle-aged body, highlighted in the Literature Review, in terms of perceived loss of beauty, visibility and sexuality (e.g. Hakim, 2011; Trethewey, 2011; Twigg, 2014). Moreover, the concept of loss is prevalent in the literature surrounding abjection, with Keltner, in her book ‘Thresholds’, suggesting that Abjection and Loss are conceptual kindred spirits with Love being the “jubilatory antidote” (2004, p. 1184). Loss, for Kristeva, is at the core of meaning and being, believing that in the giving of form and meaning to the experience of loss, ‘I’ may regain a sense of self and the world (Keltner, 2004). Loss forms one of the pillars of discussion in her book *Black Sun*, in which Keltner states, Kristeva views loss as something that “both nourishes and threatens that central emptiness essential to subjectivity” (2004, p. 1185).

Just as psychologist William Bridges described a transition as a stage of ‘disorientation’ and ‘reorientation’ (2004), so too does Kristeva’s notion of abjection involve an “act of orientation” (Covino, 2004, p. 64) which is a rich description of the shifting narratives offered by so many of the respondents. Scholars assert that abjection is a psychological, emotional and physical phenomenon which involves the tension between the reality of an unruly semiotic body and the desire for an orderly symbolic mind (Grosz, 1994; Covino, 2004; Cohen, 2005). Described as a “before and after picture – who I am and who I would become” (Covino, 2004, p.64) so Kristeva’s

theory of abjection is concerned with figures that are in a state of transition or transformation, or, as Keltner suggests “*at a threshold, the common point at which all her major concepts converge*” (2011, p.6).

So, whilst a sense of hopefulness and vibrancy permeated the interviews, commonly punctuated by laughter, the notion of perceived and actual loss remained a meaningful theme for the majority of respondents. Discussions included the loss (or potential loss) of parents and friends; the departure of children, the loss of a career. The perceived loss of sexuality or fertility was considered along with the sense of loss of beauty, youth and fitness, and of identity. Emotions were high, with fear, guilt, exhaustion, uneasiness and disappointment existing alongside those of joy, relief, astonishment and abundance. In this chapter, the significance of such losses will be discussed together with the multiple thresholds experienced by the respondents and the impact on their decision making and future career pathways.

‘The Messiness of Midlife’

Despite midlife, as discussed in the literature review, being described as the “last uncharted territory” of the life course (Brim et al., 2005, p.1), with Gullette urging for the “degradation of midlife... and the unprecedented damage to the life course” to become the biggest story of our time (2011, p.4), homogenous descriptions of midlife persist. Anecdotally and academically, midlife can be either linked with the word ‘crisis’ or decline (Menon, 2001; Gullette, 2011), or a stable stage in life where one feels “on top of the world and in control of our lives” (Rossi, 2005, p. 581). There is an increasing urgency to replace such a negative narrative with one of progress – or at least a *different* narrative that recognises heterogeneity and of different experiences (Trethewey, 2001; Gullette, 2004). Although, as discussed in the literature review, the possibility exists for the middle aged professional woman to experience ‘reincarnation, autonomy and revival’ (Pringle & Dixon, 2003), or orderliness and stability (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), data from this study supports the evidence that midlife is more effectively theorised as that of a transition period, or a threshold, that

may (or may not) lead to a chapter of new stability or equilibrium (Easterlin, 2003; Bridges, 2004; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008).

To shed further light on this, within the data set a high proportion of respondents (two thirds) at the time of interviewing, were in the midst of career changes. In contrast to the literature suggesting the trajectory for professionals at middle age is that of a decline narrative - either out of work or towards self-employment (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Hodges, 2012), the range of career movement within this study is multifaceted. There were as many respondents in the process of stepping up within their organisations, as were moving to self-employment; with further transitions including starting a job-sharing role; facing retirement or embarking on student life. Of those who were not currently in the midst of flux, the desire (or intent) to change in the near future was much discussed – with intended moves including the prospect of future challenging roles within and outside of their organisations, or retirement. For some women in this study, the threshold is hopeful, a stepping up, “*a beautiful adventure*”. For others, it is confusing, “*a crazy, challenging age*”, a stage where they are in need of support to understand and cross the threshold. What is evident is that in the construction of midlife, of menopause and of their age identity there is a choice of narratives, yet as Gullette states, “midlife has no distinct borders: it’s perilously malleable. All the borders are messy: having no objective reality, they must be” (2014, p. 180).

The range of emotional responses towards the midlife experience is, of course, as heterogeneous as the women themselves. As much as abjection is infused with complexity, so too does this study demonstrate that midlife can be a complex, heterogeneous stage of life - “between an achieved sense of confidence and a fearful sense of danger and decline” (Gullette, 1997, p. 235), and, for many, a time of reassessment when a questioning of beliefs, values and assumptions may take place. As Bridges suggests in his theory of Transitions, change is situational, but transition is psychological: “it is not those events, but rather the inner reorientation and self-

redefinition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of those changes into your life” (2017, p.12).

Facing Mortality: Avoiding the ‘Nasties’

Kristeva asserted that there are some relatively universal forms of abjection, the foremost being the corpse, “Death is the absolute in life that I recognise and turn away from simultaneously... refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live...” (1989, p. 3). She privileges the corpse as a paradigm of the abject because it evokes “that which is left after all has been lost” and in this section, I will consider the impact of mortality, actual or potential, on the respondent’s decision making.

Carolyn was my first interview and I remember being surprised in listening back to our conversation by how significant the concept of mortality was to her decision making. Carolyn had recently made the decision to leave her role as HR Director of a media organisation in order to complete her master’s degree and study for a PhD. This was a substantial career change, given that she had recently been appointed to the Board. On the face of it, tedium was offered as the reason for the change in career, “*Quite frankly, I was bored*”, but as the interview progressed, the act of turning 50, and ‘turning towards death’ was uppermost in her mind:

“Life is finite, which I know sounds ridiculous because the only thing we all share is the fact that death is inevitable. But I think it’s that sense of when you’re younger time just stretches out before you, and you know its infinite, and I think when I hit 50 it was very much about actually at some point I’m going to get old and I’m not ready for that.”

She describes her shift out of her corporate role as “*self-indulgent*” yet “*better than the alternative*”. By exploring this notion of the ‘alternative’, Carolyn revealed that the death of her mother at 54 underpinned her decision making (Carolyn is 53), as “*she didn’t get to enjoy this part of life*”:

“In the next 20 years I shall be 70 and that feels old and I’m not quite ready. I’ve got lots more to do yet... I’m not ready to sort of start the slow road to decline, I’ve got energy and I want an adventure and the adventure takes different shapes and forms. My PhD is an adventure.”

Carolyn’s notion of the ‘slow road to decline’ suggests she has been offered a direct reminder of the inevitability of death, which she is rejecting. As Kristeva states: “I am forced to recognize my own mortality, yet unable to do so at the same time, thus, I must repel it, reject it, abject it” (1989, p.13). Or, as Michelle viscerally describes: “*Oh my god! I’m only twenty years away from being in the same state as my parents*” (who both have dementia).

With the concept of abjection described as “the process by which one separates one’s sense of self from that which immediately threatens one’s sense of life” (McAfee, 2004), this sense of threat is evident in Brenda’s description of her current career state. Having recently left her role as CEO of a major cinema chain, Brenda has already embarked on setting up three further companies, one with ex-employees; one with her son and another as an angel investor. She describes her mother as a “*ball of energy*” which is a great description of Brenda herself, who, far from slowing down, feels like she is speeding up:

“I do slightly wrack myself as to whether actually I’m making myself busier. The idea was that I would ease back a little bit, but the trouble is everything is so interesting, so lots of entrepreneurial things that keep happening and I keep being offered things and I think ‘ohhh, that’ll be fun’.”

Brenda identifies strongly with her mother and it is this act of identification, and of watching her mother care for her step father, that appears to be driving a capacity for work; her desire for change and her need to ‘make the most’ of this time of life. She uses the word ‘dread’ and potential ‘nasties’ throughout the interview:

“I’m more like my mother really. So, I’m watching my mother and how hard she’s finding it with my 87-year-old stepfather, he’s nearly blind now and he’s very dodderly, and stopped them being able to go abroad and on holidays. They’re trapped in their house quite a lot, and all those sort of things, and I think ‘oh God, if I’m going to be like that as well, that’s a definite dread’.”

Furthermore, Brenda translates this fear to her own life:

“I have a dread of that, that I’m going to end up looking after my spouse which, just because I’m coming up 60 he’s 64 ... when you see people who are tied into having to look after their spouse and it’s part of the promise, and I have an absolute dread of that.”

What is particularly pertinent about this exchange is how Brenda, by facing into the threshold of mortality, extrapolates her mother’s current experience into her own potential experience, and uses this understanding to make future decisions:

“I need to grab my time, I need to grab my time and I need to organise my work around the possibility that this will start happening...which makes you think actually one should simplify one’s life sooner rather than later so that not too much falls over. Because nasty bits of news do happen to us now in 60’s. Lots of my friends and peers are having those sorts of hospital visits, and there’s the nasties coming on and one starts to attend more funerals.”

‘The Ticking Clock’

As Brenda and further respondents suggest above, it is apparent that the losses, fears and changes surrounding the threshold of the middle years act as a spur for future change and growth – ‘the ‘ticking clock’. Describing a threshold as an ‘in-between zone’ (Keltner, 2004, p. 372), the notion of ‘time’ for Kristeva is a visceral concept, “*it thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible*”. In *Time and Sense*, Kristeva says: “*Death is not a final destination, but a death drive inherent in Being... its indispensable lifeblood*” (1996, p. 313), offering a perspective of the urgency to attend to time given the ‘inherency’ of the recognition of mortality and the ‘lifeblood’ that might fuel a future direction. This concept is prevalent in the interviews and articulated by Michelle:

“The recognition you have of mortality, and that suddenly you’re like, ‘oh, jeez, I’m more than half way through my life’ ... that suddenly hits you, and it’s bizarre. Your life seems to suddenly hit you”.

Time as a theme echoes across the interviews. Often this concept is described wistfully, in the past tense, in that it has “*flown by*” (Carolyn). But more commonly it

is described urgently, as a future need that one must ‘grab’ hold of, for, as Chris somewhat sadly notes, “*we haven’t got many summers left*”. For other respondents, this ‘ticking clock’ is a looming presence, signifying potential danger. For example, Tina describes the anxiety she and her siblings are experiencing watching their parents deteriorate health wise: “*It’s like watching a timer, but you just don’t know if it (a potential health crisis) will be in a year’s time, five years’ time or 10 years’ time*”. More commonly, in an uncannily similar way to the so-called biological clock that ticks away for many women, the threshold of midlife is a phase that signals the need for change, as Chris poignantly states: “*I’m running out of time, running out of earning potential, running out of who wants you.*”

The ‘Robust’ Midlife Body

Respondents offered further visceral examples of ‘staring death in the face’ through facing their own, and others ageing bodies. In the abjection of self, Kristeva claims, abjection is at the peak of its strength. It is both a state of crisis, in which the borders between self and other break down in the confrontation with the abject, as well as a constitutive process of rejection, in which the border between self and other are constituted through the exclusion of the abject (Keltner, 2011). Abjection thus has both a positive and negative meaning, or as Kristeva states, “I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (1982, p. 3).

In contrast to much midlife literature (Trethewey, 2011; Martin, 1992; Lips & Hasting, 2012), the majority of respondents describe the sense of feeling ‘fitter than ever’ at this age, “*pushing physical boundaries and defying age stereotypes*” (Carolyn), and feeling full of “*vim and vigour*” (Stephanie). In theorising midlife as a ‘fragile threshold’, I contend that the desire of respondents to present a fit, youthful body is as much about ‘fitting in’ with the corporate environment (Haynes, 2012), as it is a rejection of the potential ‘abject’ body. As will be discussed in the next chapter, when the corporate environment treats the female older body as abject, respondents recognise that it is in their self-interest to slow down the ageing process (Furman, 1997; Hurd Clarke, 2011), and present themselves in as youthful a form as possible.

Equally, the core of abjection is turning one's back on potential decay and so the individual might have a need to rid themselves of their 'unwanted' abject, ageing body, orientating towards "achieving the hygienic fantasy of a clean, whole and proper self" (Tyler, 2013, p. 27).

Linda looks at the "frumpy" photos of her mother at fifty and rejects this image for herself, ensuring she follows strict disciplines for her own body, weight, hair, clothes and exercise regime. Frances describes "pounding" her body at the gym, to avoid her mum's experience: "*My mum was crippled with arthritis at a very young age, so when I was in university she was in a wheel chair, but her immunity was never checked, but that's why I'm so adamant that I'm going to keep fit.*" Both Michelle's parents have dementia, driving a need to stay fit: "*I've got to look after myself cos I don't want vascular dementia and so I get to the gym*". And if not parents, midlife is the age when the possibility exists for "*stuff starting to go wrong*" for one's peer group, as Eve suggests:

"I feel really fit, really healthy and pretty robust actually and am amazingly grateful for that ... I have been very free from illness, scares, but a lot of my colleagues, friends, are starting to have cancer. I kind of let this in a bit, and then I go and do a boot camp and maybe drink a bit less wine and think 'thank god it's not me'."

Kim's experience is more personal. Despite her attacks of ME, she describes being "*braver personally, professionally, physically than I've ever been*" recently taking on a personal trainer, which she describes as "*life changing*". I was curious as to the timing of this:

"Why now?... This will sound a bit weird I think, but because I'm not dead. There was a real chance, I mean I was really ill at one point and I was almost doing the fainting and it was tough because it was like 10 times a day. I was trying to work and it was horrendous, but I was determined and I didn't used to get much warning because I was learning, so I'd be flailing about and knocking things over and crashing into things, but I kept working in the main ... and it was a bit scary, my dad had obviously died and I've lost a lot of people young and I think it's that."

‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall’

Of course, not all respondents describe their ageing bodies in positive terms or intend to discipline their bodies into a fitter form. For a small number of respondents, they openly describe their ageing body as a site of disgust (“*hideous... horrible body*”) at one extreme, or treated with humorous ambivalence at the other, lending weight to the idea that abjection is as much about the threshold of desire as it is its discontents (Covino, 2004). In Evans’ 2017 book, *The Persistence of Gender Inequality*, she describes twenty first century woman gazing despondently in front of the mirror, suggesting the world in which this woman lives is one of ruthless self-examination and social expectations. The mirror is often the site of abject recognition, a very real site of ‘who I am and who I would become’ (Covino, 2004). There is an urgency to Meg’s comment: “*I want to look in the mirror and not shrink in horror and that requires me to maintain a certain weight. That’s my goal. To maintain a certain weight and I know I can do that. I know I can do that and I will.*” Or as Nancy says: “*I still feel young until I look in the mirror*”, or Chris adds: “*I notice my age because I catch myself in that lift in the mirror... Bags under my eyes, lines on my face, I don’t like it, so I don’t look*”. Michelle describes the toilet scene at work: “*It’s funny, you go to the loos here and women of a certain age are doing that (pulling skin from face back) we’re all doing that, pulling the skin back slightly.*”

Scholars suggest that, in consideration of our embodied status, one should consider the dual perspectives of women’s relationship with their own ageing body and the perception of others (Gatrell, 2008), particularly if, as Shildrick and Price claim, women’s bodies are makers of who they are, what they are and what resources they can attract (1998). For some respondents this vulnerable threshold between looking old and feeling young, is only recognised through the gaze of others, as Angela suggests:

“My youngest sister is stunning and when she walks in I think, ‘well I was like that once, she’s not had kids’ ... so she’s all flat tummy, big boobs, very long

blonde hair. She does turn heads, and in a very male environment I was used to that as well, and it was only when I saw her recently that I thought, 'do you know, that's gone, that doesn't happen anymore'."

Thus, the desire for recognition and the maintenance of one's perceived position relative to the gendered order can be powerful and seductive (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Kenny (2010) outlines how, if we seek a reflection of ourselves in another and find they do not recognise us, then 'the subject can experience itself as abject'. Kathleen offers a poignant reminder that youth has transferred from one generation to another:

"I don't know that I feel any less sexy than I did when I was younger, in fact I probably feel more attractive. But one thing I do notice that really strikes me is my daughter's taller than me, and slim and very athletic, she's very striking looking, she's got incredibly long hair and when I was out with her yesterday walking down the street I was very much aware of people looking at her, and I thought 'they're not looking at me anymore'. I've noticed probably for about the last 10 years you get less of that from people who are strangers, you know, whereas before you would get, you were aware of glances or whatever, so it's almost like you become slightly invisible".

'The De-Sexualised Body'

In her interviews with older women, academic Julia Twigg describes midlife as a potential "cultural exile from femininity" (2013, p. 62). There is some resonance here within the data, however respondents, like Kathleen above, were more likely to describe it as a 'cultural exile' from sexuality. Scholars suggest that older women are penalised for their appearance and lack of sexuality (Hodges, 2012; Trethewey, 2011), presenting a 'spoiled identity' in workplace where beauty confers status and privileges (Goffman, 1976; Hakim, 2011). Eve, who has recently taken early retirement from her role as Senior Director within an NHS Trust, describes her 'liberation' at not being in the 'sexual marketplace' anymore, which she links with her age and her decision to let her hair go grey. Yet she was curious to note that her sexual 'emancipation' was happening at the same time as her cultural 'exile' at work:

"I used to be able to cut into a conversation and the whole room would go quiet. I commanded a lot of respect. I think people were slightly afraid of me.

And there was a sense of me being very much the top of my game. But I do suspect that there is something very unconscious going on about an older woman, and that may be me, that may be what I am projecting, and I am not quite believing in myself. So, I hold back slightly. I don't cut through."

Kim, an Executive Director in a financial services organisation, presents a picture of working within an organisation where sexuality and youth are prized:

"I think I use my femininity in a way that Emily Pankhurst might not have agreed with. I've never slept my way into any position or anything, but I can be a bit flirty, I have a good sense of humour, I'm quite sarcastic, I hide behind humour a lot, I use it as a defence mechanism."

But losing her sexuality makes her feel vulnerable: *"I am fearful of being older when I can't get away with the using my feminine wiles...I would hate that anyone would ever think, does she know who she is, she's an old biddy, she can't get away with that any more... I hope I don't look my age, but one day I will and that does bother me."*

And this is a vulnerability laced with evidence, for Kim further offers an example of a senior colleague who has been moved out of the UK business because of her diminishing sexuality and refusal to 'play the game':

"If you are not attractive and don't make the best of yourself you are marginalised... so (her colleague) doesn't wear any make up, wears the same clothes, she fluctuates with weight and in Paris she has been successful, but it didn't work here (in the UK). People here (in her organisation) like women to look like they're making more of an effort and I think makeup, hair, all those things ... supports justifying your position."

Kim's example is interesting in the light of Hakim's work on 'erotic capital' or erotic power (2011). As described in Chapter Two, Hakim suggested that the seven elements of erotic capital, being beauty; sexual attractiveness; liveliness; fertility; sexual competence; social skills and social presentation are the means by which power relations are reaffirmed, urging women to develop and exploit this due to the apparent 'male sex deficit'. In the considerable academic critiques, no mention is made of age or the potential limitations in the workplace of waning sexuality which the respondents here are describing (Green, 2012; Warhurst, 2012; Schmitz, 2013). It can

be argued that the supposed ‘de-sexualised’ body enables women to enter the masculine realm with scholars arguing that the price of entry to leadership is the subordination of feminine values, an “annihilation of the feminine” (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007, p. 201). This theory is echoed in part by Kim’s further comment when discussing how it feels to be the oldest woman in the senior leadership team:

“I find it hard... some of the guys they feel I’m one of them sometimes, which is good in a way because it means that they treat you a bit more as an equal. But then they talk to me about women here, ‘oh actually she’s attractive’ and I say, ‘but is she good at her job’ and I do think well you obviously don’t see me in that light anymore.”

For respondents, it is not that these losses, that of perceived beauty, youth, sexuality or visibility have a direct correlation with career decisions, but there is a vulnerability, a fragility, here, at the recognition of the fading of youth. Just as Simone de Beauvoir, writing about woman as Other, described, ‘the siren whose song lures sailors upon the rocks’, so do some women feel the loss of such powerful sexuality. In Mavin & Grandy’s theory of Abject Appearance (expanded in Chapter Six), they note how women traverse the “complex, ambiguous and precarious in-betweens of masculinity/femininity, revealing/hiding one’s body, conservative/fashionable dress, social conformity/individual creativity and sexuality/ asexuality” (2016, p. 1101). In a similar way, women within this data set negotiate the transition between ageing/youth, sexual/de-sexualised body, beauty and repulsion. These are further thresholds to navigate, leaving respondents at middle age perhaps “caught in limbo between loss and identification” (McAfee, 2004, p. 67). In her interview Lori suggests that “*vulnerability limits possibilities*”, which has resonance with the literature that proposes if the ageing body is held to be inadequate, so too, by extension, might some professional women at midlife hold themselves to be inadequate (Young, 2005; Twigg, 2013).

The ‘Tsunami of Stuff’: Losing Control

When Lori suggests that her “*vulnerability limits possibilities*” what she is also describing is a loss of control. Control is prized by many of the respondents, for these are senior professional women who are used to being in control of their lives, particularly (as will be discussed in the next chapter) when control in the workplace is linked with competence (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000). As Gaynor suggests: “*I think you have to look kind of fit and confident, I think you have to look well, I think you have to look competent, I think you have to look like you are in control of your body.*” But control is also critical in the light of others loss (particularly one’s own ageing parents). As Michelle states:

“I would never want be in a care home. I would book myself into Switzerland before I did that...I want an independent life and I want to be in control of my own life. I couldn't contemplate the thought of people doing things for me, cos I'm so used to doing everything myself. I've never been a woman that men pander round and put you on a pedestal and pull chairs out. I've been the one, you know get to the bar first, so I would find that sort of not being in control of your own life quite difficult.”

Kristeva describes abjection as a “universe of borders, seesaws, fragile and mingled identities, wanderings of the subject and its objects, fears and struggles, abjections and lyricisms” (1989, p. 135) and the ‘fragile threshold’ of maintaining or losing control can be very tenuous for many of the respondents at this “*challenging age*” (Lori). I would posit that the collision of events that can happen at midlife might be not only unique to this age, but also have lasting career consequences. This is an area that is under theorised (Gullette, 2004; Brim et al., 2005), although, as highlighted in Chapter Five of the Literature Review, some scholars suggest that compared with both young adulthood and later life, midlife is shown to be a time during which there are significant increases in the proportion of stressors. Such stressors pose financial risk and involve children, with women reporting more frequent overload, network and child-related stressors than did men (Almeida & Horn, 2005). In the highlighted research exploring why women exit from corporate life to self-employment, or ‘opt

out' of organisations, the transition is described as a 'constrained choice', restricted by gender biased organisational structures, policies and procedures, as well as stereotypical views of gender roles (Lewis & Simpson, 2010, Hodges, 2012; Stone, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Much as organisational structures have consideration in career decisions at midlife, scant mention is made in the literature about how some professional women are coping with a complex collision of care (children, siblings, partners and parents), together with financial, work and health issues (menopause or otherwise). All of which have physical, mental and emotional manifestations. For some women this is a temporary situation from which they rebound, for others, it has lasting consequences. Lori, whose mother has heart problems and teenage daughter has anorexia, articulates the sense of losing control:

“With a mental illness like anorexia, I’m just not really prepared for it as a parent. It’s the hardest thing I’ve had to do, and still do, as a parent because to see your child in that kind of pain and angst it just rips your heart open, it really does and there is no simple solution. There is no, now I go and do this (snap) and then I do that (snap) and it gets fixed. It just doesn’t work like that. Unfortunately, with mental illness there’s no kind of end game. It’s not something we can control at all. Being a business woman, you’re used to being able to control things, fix things, sort things and my husband’s the same and we can’t you know, we’re not able to do that”.

Whilst Lori, as discussed in the previous chapter, was able to negotiate a move from a full time to a part time role, supported by her colleagues, husband and parents, Chris is in a different position. Of all the respondents, Chris has experienced considerable loss in the last two years. Divorced two years ago, coping with a difficult relationship with her ex-husband and two children, she lost her job aged 55, due to a company merger. She describes this as a “*huge, huge shock*”, suffering grief from being separated from the people she called her “*work family*”. She has a new job she loves, but, being on probation, she must work full time (or 24/7 as she suggests) whilst also managing the complex needs of her father in a care home, without the support of her siblings. The inability to control events is proving demanding:

“I feel more pressured now than I probably did when I had the kids at home when I was 30 because a lot of the stuff I can’t fix, but it’s exhausting, it’s absolutely exhausting. I’d love to say ‘well it all doesn’t matter, and I’m kicking back, and they can fire me if they want, and fuck the lot of them and I’m just going to go around the world for a year’. But it doesn’t feel like that. It feels worse. I’ve now got a mortgage and the kids need money. And I’m fine now but I have a lot of anxiety, I’ve got no safety nets in my life, there is no back up. There is no back up.”

Despite similar financial constraints, it was not felt to be an option for a number of the respondents to remain in employment faced with, what Michelle described as the “*tsunami of stuff*” at midlife. The stress of caring for both her father and sister with special needs caused Annette to suffer post-viral syndrome, which three years on, she is still coping with and unable to work full time. Melissa, who left her role and has since set up her own business, described the “*trauma*” of placing her mother in a care home:

“I seemed to cope quite well up until one night she rang and was screaming down the phone, ‘I hate it, I hate it, I hate it’ and she just screamed and let this horrible scream out that I’d never heard before. I came off the phone and I was just traumatised, so it really affected me from then on, so I kind of coped for about 6 months and then it was all too much.”

These examples are not isolated incidents. There was barely a respondent who did not tell stories of complex coping which they had not faced at any other stage in their lives. Jill, who was caring for her mother, mother in law and aunt, describes her life: “*I think my life has been either working and studying, or working and children, or working and caring*”.

For some of the respondents though, work is the place that offers control, in a life where plans and dreams have been abandoned. As Hochschild found in her research, *The Time Bind* (1997), for some people work had become more attractive, offering a sense of belonging where home had grown more stressful. Robin’s husband suffered chemical poisoning early in their marriage and ongoing heart problems as a result. They lost their savings pursuing a legal case: “*So we’ve kind of got to a place where*

we've stopped making plans. It was just, let's just get through this. Because it just got too painful. We are still in the same house we moved into when we first got together which wasn't our plan, so we sort of stopped thinking longer term." She loves her role as Board Director at a college for young adults with special needs, has no intention to retire and has strategies to move mentally from home to work: *"I put the lid on the box and then I get the box that says work and use the journey to do that process. So, by the time I've arrived at work, I'm thinking about work and I get on with work, and ditto when I go home."*

The Menopause: Losing and Gaining Control

Perhaps at this time of life, when so many respondents discuss feeling out of control, for some women the desire to pay attention to their bodies is unsurprising, being one element that is 'controllable', as Eve suggests:

"So, I'm more attentive to my body... I eat better... I feel probably more in control of my body now than I have done through child rearing years, through getting pregnant and all of those changes and breastfeeding which I did for a year for each of the children... then kind of getting fit then having another child... so it's felt like there have been a lot of years when it hasn't been entirely under my control. This (the menopause) feels under my control."

Yet for some women, much as the literature might suggest that the menopause provides women with a 'neat' biological marker signalling the threshold of fertility (Shilling, 2012), it appears in the data to be anything but so well-ordered. Viewed through the theoretical lens of abjection, it is as if the lived experience of the menopause can be for some women the breaking point, the threshold, between the desire for an 'orderly symbolic mind' and the 'unruly, semiotic body' (Keltner, 2011; Covino, 2004). As Kristeva's notion of thresholds manifests itself in the chaotic orientation between the controlled and uncontrolled (Höpfl, 2000; Gatrell, 2017) what is interesting to explore in the data is how control is exercised at menopause, either through a 'mind over matter' approach, a rationalisation for life's trials or a medical solution.

In the previous chapter, evidence was offered as to the heterogeneous menopausal experiences across the data and, as discussed, the majority of respondents displayed an ambivalence towards the menopause. Yet, despite this indifference, respondents are still describing a phenomenon they believe they can control, or should be controlled, through their mindset. Whether it is a “*grit my teeth and get on with it*” approach, (Gaynor), or a strategic decision: “*Some people can go through the menopause without noticing can't they, so I've decided that's going to be my strategy*” (Kathy). In contrast to the literature that suggests that the more senior the woman, the more difficult their menopausal symptoms at work (Griffiths, et al., 2010), some respondents believe that their full, busy lives preclude ‘moaning’ about the menopause:

“For the majority of people I know it's not something that when I get together with friends we even mention or even moan about ...I think if you're the type of person that's very driven and focused and you get on with life, then you shrug your shoulders. It's not front of mind, I've got other things in my life that are far more important than that, and maybe if I were a stay at home mum with nothing to do and I felt hot then it would occupy my mind, I have got more important things to think about.”

What constitutes the core of abjection is not so much weakness but the evident failure of social intent, the inattention that betrays ‘self-control’ and ‘self-direction’. In other words, when faced with the ageing, menopausal body, agency and control is prized, for without this, “the individual is exposed as a body with organs but without agency. This orphaned body fills out the social imaginary of a fourth age without agency and without redemption” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011, p. 139). Control can take different forms and for some respondents using the menopause as a defence for an otherwise unruly body appears to offer a sense of personal agency. Nancy discusses her “*many more inches round my middle...cos your shape changes with the menopause*”, whilst ruefully accepting that she has stopped doing any fitness due to work pressures. She discusses the sensation that her “*body doesn't keep up with me anymore*”. Kathleen talks about her lack of concentration due to the menopause, whilst at the same time talking about her 60/70-hour regular working week, lack of sleep and missed meals.

Cyn describes her “*menopausal exhaustion*”, in the same breath as her regular 12-hour nursing shifts and five children living at home.

So, the ‘fragile threshold’ between control/no control is interesting when the relationship between the menopausal experience and personal life events is taken into consideration. That is, in this study there is an association between those for whom the menopause is, what Kathleen calls, a “*hideous event*”, and the presence of significant life stressors. Utz, as related in Chapter Four, describes the ‘idiosyncratic variations’ of the menopause for all women, stressing the experience might depend on personal characteristics, but more likely on the social, cultural and historical contexts in which a woman is experiencing midlife (2011). This study also echoes the call by scholars to consider the menopause from a “bio-socio-psycho-cultural perspective” (Hunter & Rendall, 2007, p. 261; Brewis, et al., 2017), or simply put, more than just a medical challenge.

Describing the menopause as a “*depressive illness*”, Martha’s narrative is useful here as she finds herself at 55 wrestling with biological, social and psychological transitions. Martha is a GP, and she and her wife decided in their early 50’s to adopt two young siblings with special needs. As her partner, a lawyer, has given up work to look after the children, Martha has gone back to working full time in order to provide the family with financial stability. She first describes the indignity of being called ‘gran’ at the school gates (and subsequently dyeing her grey hair for the first time) and then the loss of her ‘social gang’:

“I sometimes feel a bit sadness in a way because I’m not quite sure where I’m at in terms of the social circle... I feel I’m in between two gangs if you like, that’s what I felt, because I think having moved to the village and sort of made friends within our age group, I now feel I’m not sure which camp I’m in which is a little bit unsettling and quite apart from the fact that I’ve got no time to be in any camp. I feel slightly alone and out on a limb.”

As her parents are both ill and disabled, not only does Martha have little time to visit them but there is limited childcare support. Fitness is important to her mental well-

being and a critical part of her positive identity, but with time squeezed and energy depleted, she states: *“I just feel like I am the older lady, so I’m doing my treadmill, but you know I can’t kick ass...I think that is a real loss”*. Martha equates her perceived physical weakness with the menopause:

“I think I have felt much physically weaker, losing muscle mass and waking up with hot flushes. It’s difficult to know whether I feel more emotional because I’m more tired with the kids ... or moods due to the life changes or the actual menopause. It’s chicken and egg. I’m blaming the menopause.”

Martha currently takes HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) and has no problem in prescribing it: *“Why would you not take something that helps, as opposed to thinking that you’ve given in when you can reach for the HRT... if it does anything for my youth or my muscle mass then bring it on.”* She was also one of three respondents who had a positive experience of HRT, with Robin crediting it as *“saving my life”*. It appears HRT gave these women a sense of control over their lives at a time when it felt anything but. Lori was relieved with her ‘diagnosis’, joyfully urging the doctor to *“give me more tablets!”*. And the desire for control is understandable, for if the maternal body is held to be abject in the workplace (Gatrell, 2008), there is no reason why the advent of the non-maternal body should be any less distressing when held in the gaze of others.

As discussed extensively in the literature review, history provides us with a litany of evidence demonstrating centuries of medicalising women and their reproductive bodies (Rudman & Glick, 2008) and it is interesting to note that no respondent was advised to consider CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) over HRT, despite evidence of success (Hunter, 2007; Hunter et al. 2012). Scholars assert this has led to the positioning of HRT being positioned as the unquestioned solution to women's distress and bodily changes at midlife, serving to reinforce the notion of the menopausal body as inherently deficient, necessitating medical intervention (Perz & Ussher, 2008).

Stephanie, juggling a young child, a full-time job and both parents dying had stopped sleeping: *“So I went to the doctor and said, I’m just so exhausted that sometimes I could cry, and the doctor said well you don’t have a family background that would mean that HRT wasn’t a good idea, so go on HRT.”* Stephanie did go on HRT, hoping for a panacea for her tiredness and grief, but chose to take herself off it after a year, after ‘scare reports’ of the potential side effects. She believes that by doing this too quickly, she acquired an auto-immune illness:

“So, I couldn’t go back on HRT because I now had an auto immune illness and I had to take drugs that prevent you from sleeping, so was actually back to worse than square one. I had an auto immune illness and difficulty sleeping and I was visiting my mother and my child was ill ... I think if I had had the option I can imagine I would have dropped out of the workforce. As I was the sole breadwinner I couldn’t drop out of the workforce, but that was really a very difficult time.”

Even without potential menopausal symptoms, Donna was recommended HRT:

“I went to the doctor about something else and he said, ‘oh you must be going through the menopause, how’s it going, and do you want HRT?’ I’m thinking, ‘no, no, don’t offer me that I don’t want it, why would I want that?’ My mother took it and I remember it just prolonging (the menopause), it prolonged and prolonged and prolonged...”

And Jill further questioned the confusing role of doctors or gynaecological experts in their decision making:

“I’ve resisted HRT but I kind of wish in a way I didn’t, because I look at my friend who looks fantastic and she’s on HRT. I think ‘bloody hell I should have done that, she looks amazing!’ But she is a gynaecological consultant and she obviously knows all about it and she said she would do it. But then she said it prolongs it (the menopause), so what’s the point then? She said, ‘the way I look at it, you go on it while you get through the time you are working, and then when you slow down you go off it then’, and I thought ‘what’s the point of putting it off?’, but I have to say she looks fantastic!”

As suggested at the start of Chapter Four reviewing the literature on the menopause, confusion is probably to be expected, given that contemporary research into the

menopause is still in its infancy, with dedicated but few academics taking the lead (e.g. Griffiths et al., 2010; Hunter et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2019). In theorising women's middle years as a 'fragile threshold', it is apparent that not only does the menopause occur in women's lives at a time when, for some, there is considerable uncertainty, but it is also a phenomenon for which there are multiple constructs. Viewed by respondents as a "*disability*" (Stephanie) or a "*bore*" (Donna); it is to be ignored as much as it is to be controlled. It can be blamed by respondents for weight gain, loss of energy and mental shortcomings, as much as it is heralded as a liberation, a new beginning and a 'massive relief'. Providing evidence that our reproductive use is coming to a close, it is a biological manifestation of the ageing body which is both feared and cheered. As women's capabilities and faculties have, for centuries been closely tied to their reproductive use (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000; Evans, 2002; Gatrell, 2011), it is unsurprising if some respondents embody this loss keenly, seeking control in different forms.

Yet, turning again to the workplace, the negative menopause discourse and the "social construction of the female invalid" (Formanek, 1990, p. 452), can be harmful for female leaders. Once a body is medicalised, and it is more usually women's bodies that are at the receiving end of a 'diagnosis', the suggestion is that it is deficient and frail. If it is faulty, perhaps, as it was in the Victorian days, it is not worthy (or capable) of power (Bartky, 1990; Bell, 1990), giving employers an 'excuse', albeit hidden, not to hire or promote such an 'emotionally unreliable' person.

Searching for Outliers

This chapter has been seeking to understand and recognise the role that loss, in its multifarious forms, plays in the kaleidoscope of the middle years and future decision making. In an effort to ensure the heterogeneous experience of respondents is acknowledged, it is important for me to consistently search for outliers to the theory presented. Turning to those respondents for whom the middle years were consistently presented positively, there still remained a wistfulness of what has gone before and lost forever. Donna, so dynamic about her middle years and her non-executive roles,

describes her regret at giving up her full-time job of CEO at the request of her (now ex) husband: *“I sort of regret giving up because I could have, I think I could have done greater things in my career.”* Dawn, who had just resigned from her role and spent much of the interview describing her joy of early retirement, suggested at the end of the interview, somewhat wistfully:

“At the time when I was most stressed, if they have intervened then with some real help I probably wouldn’t have got the stage where I was like, ‘yeah right, this is not worth it’. I just needed help, and (if it was given) I would have not turned away, resigned and seen it as done.”

Vibrant and energetic, Meg describes the house without her children’s presence: *“It’s easier in that I don’t have to cook a meal for four every night. I miss them. It’s lonelier without them. The house is quieter without them. I miss all their mates hanging around.”* She goes further to describe how this loss is the galvanising moment for her and her partner:

“But I think this is a time now that my husband and I redefine ourselves. This is now the time that we go, ‘OK, kids aren’t here, what do we want with our lives? Where do we want to go from here?’”

Meg’s comment is a good place to end this chapter, for not only does she share the questions at midlife that appear common to many respondents, but also eloquently leads us to the next chapter, that of making change happen. When midlife is summarised by many by the single word of ‘crisis’, it presages a homogenous experience that appears to be anything but the case for the majority of respondents. However, this is an important and unexpected chapter with the shadow of mortality and loss looming large in most interviewee’s minds and acting as a stimulus for subsequent career decisions – not subjects that are often had within a corporate environment. It might be possible to view this chapter as agreeing with those contemporary scholars who position midlife as the nadir of the lifecycle (Easterlin, 2003; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008) with the discussions of messiness, the sense of being out of control and mortality. But this is to render the respondent’s experiences

as a uniformly negative experience, removing the joy, the humour and the love for others that is present in these interviews, whilst sometimes in a simultaneous state of difficulty, grief or loss.

Summary of Key Findings:

Midlife can be theorised as a fragile threshold. It is, for most respondents, a phase signified by change and a time for reassessment and in this, the data agrees with the narrative of midlife as a period of transition (Bridges, 2004). However, the data suggests there is a theoretical richness to this transitioning period for middle aged women, that is more than an “existential necessity” (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008, p. 84) or a maintenance phase within a supposed ‘normal’ life span, prior to that of Generativity or Stagnation (Super et al., 1996; Vaillant, 2012). Instead, one can theorise midlife as a time of practical as well as emotional vulnerability, oscillating between states of control or lack thereof. Practical implications for respondents at this stage of life are significant, with a collision of events including caring responsibilities impacting at the same time as menopause and potential health issues. This lends weight to the theory of menopause being a construct that, as well as biological, is socially, culturally and psychologically determined (Hunter & Rendall, 2007, p. 261), a theory one might extend to the respondent’s experience of midlife itself. Emotionally, respondents within this data set are negotiating the transition between age/youth; sexual/de-sexualised body, beauty and repulsion, which can leave professional women at middle age caught in a fragile, limbo-like state of identification. However, to label this period as one of emotional decline or crisis, is to simplify a heterogeneous experience and disavow the emotional experience of joy, satisfaction, liberation and love, which are as inherent in these discussions.

There is a corresponding fragility in the sense of loss pervading the interviews, with a particular emphasis from respondents as to the experience of coping with the actual or expected death of loved ones and consequently, facing their own mortality. In the manifold theories of motivation at work discussed in Chapter Five (i.e. Ryan & Deci,

2007, 2017), including those theories that concentrate on midlife (i.e. Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004), very little mention is made of the impact of ‘staring death in the face’ as a key driver for career reassessment, providing an urgency to decision making (Kets de Vries, 2014).

It is, as a consequence of the above, clearer to appreciate why two thirds of the data set were in the middle of career changes, for I contend the experiences discussed in this chapter are unique to this stage of life and have lasting career consequences. However, in contrast to the theories of midlife as that of decline, the respondent’s changes were manifold, including stepping up within their organisation as well as stepping down or out. The theorisation of midlife as a ‘threshold’ here is noteworthy, for surprisingly, in the majority of cases where participants stepped away or out of their organisation (whether through personal choice or otherwise), this was intended as a temporary coping measure. For the most part, the intention of participants was to return to full time workplace participation – the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘Not Me’ and Midlife Revolt

“Thus, women...are connected to the object. Life, the connectedness to the object rather than to the self, and the relationship with time, which is not the road towards death, but is birth, something starting anew”
(Midttun, 2004: Interview with Julia Kristeva)

Introduction

In 2001 Trethewey urged researchers to persist in finding alternative, positive, narratives for professional women at midlife and this chapter presents the findings where respondents, in the stories they offer, challenge homogenous accounts of midlife decline (Martin, 1992; Gullette, 2004). In their interviews, the participants discuss and distance themselves from the theories of midlife mental and physical decline and of creative limitations (e.g. Velkoff & Kinsella, 1998; Perz & Ussher, 2008; Lips & Hasting, 2012). The findings also challenge the pervasive theoretical concept that motivation after midlife is directed towards a ‘stepping down’, or a quiet life of generativity (Levinson, 1979; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Vaillant, 2012). Instead, the respondents offer proactive tales of energy and ambition, with some 70% of respondents choosing to step up within, or outside of, an organisation, presenting the possibility of a gendered theoretical approach to motivation after midlife (Karp, 1987; Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Gersick & Kram, 2002).

So, in this third findings chapter, a narrative of agentic self-determined growth, resilience and ambition is presented, that of female ‘revolt’, demonstrating how the respondents accept vulnerability and embrace a turning point in their lives. Indeed, I advocate that it is partly *because* so many of the respondents have faced abjection and loss in their professional and personal lives, and that of ‘staring death in the face’, they are able to articulate and recognise what they do not wish to be, that is, ‘not me’, and embark on their next chapter of their lives with vigour. Their stories bring life to Kristeva’s phrase, “*the place where I am not, and which permits me to be*” (1982. p.3) as they actively resist the decline identity, the ‘undesired self’ (Hogg & Banister,

2001). Furthermore, there is a different conversation here as to how women perceive success, how they intend to step up within and without their corporate setting, with some rejecting the corporate structure of power, not being seduced by the “illusions of corporate satisfaction” and ambivalent “to their role as corporate actors” (Höpfl, in Wilson, 2000, p. 100).

In a similar way as the notion of thresholds echoes through Kristeva’s writing, so too is the theme of ‘revolt’ prevalent (Oliver, 2002). Not only is ‘revolt’ the direct theme of her books and collected interviews at the turn of the twenty first century but also ubiquitous in her writings on abjection, melancholia and love (Kristeva, 2000, 2014; Oliver, 2002). Keen to stress the etymology of the word, Kristeva urges her readers to consider the broad meanings of revolt and revolution, as she urges: “*do not rely solely on the appearance of image of a word and its meaning. Go further, go elsewhere, interpret. Interpretation as I understand it, is itself a revolt*”. (Oliver, 2002, p. 414). And so, for Kristeva, revolt is as much about rejecting boundaries and abjuring beliefs, as it is about movement and renewal. As she says, “*the word does not involve the notion of force, but strictly indicated opposition: to leave (a party), to abjure (a belief), to turn away (from a dependency)*” (Oliver, 2002, p. 515). And as well as the rejection or departure from something, revolt is as much as about evolution and the displacement of the past, and the necessity of a culture of revolt in a society that is alive and developing, not stagnating. “*The future*” Kristeva states, “*depends on it*” (Kristeva, 2002, p. 415). Therefore, this findings chapter will explore these themes of revolt in the light of the respondent’s stories, theorising that many professional women experience a ‘turning point’ at midlife, rejecting the prevalent social myths and assumptions as they reconfigure success for the next chapter of their lives (Pringle & Dixon, 2003; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). That such affirmative narratives are commonly obfuscated in both in academic and popular midlife literature is perhaps unsurprising, for the complex challenges of midlife as presented in Chapters Nine and Ten can become the sole story of the ‘crisis’ of midlife, enabling decline’s discourses to be “*simple, thorough, vastly diffused, sly and all-explanatory*” (Gullette, 2004, p. 132).

Confronting Assumptions: “Bucking the Trend”

The pervasiveness of the myths and assumptions surrounding midlife, the menopause and older women have been detailed at length throughout this study, yet they cannot be understated. In the introduction to this study, the 2018 Hampton-Alexander Review was noted. Commissioned by the Government to understand the reasons lying behind gender inequality at Board level, it revealed commonly held prejudices about female leaders. Amongst the top ten reasons previously given for not promoting women onto Boards included discriminatory assumptions such as: ‘they don’t fit in’; ‘it’s too complex for them’; ‘they don’t want the hassle’ and ‘all the good ones have already gone’ - biases that have plagued women’s progression in organisations for years (2018, p. 3). Whilst authors of the Review are keen to distance themselves from these remarks, stating how rare such comments now are, the moderate growth statistics for women on Boards, University Governors, Charity Trustees, Executive Committees and with Direct Reports demonstrate the existing uphill battle for gender equality (Vinnicombe, et al., 2018). Indeed, Inga Beale’s quote at the front of the Review speaks volumes: “Those women who have been a CEO in a large organisation will say, and in fact some will know, that our successors are going to be men. Speaking to several of them, the common view is that Chairs think they have done their bit by hiring a woman, now the role can go back to a man. It feels as though we took two steps forward and are now taking one step back” (2018, p. 7). Again, I will argue that the maintenance of myths about professional middle-aged women serves a purpose in ensuring a static (male) status quo in organisations, with findings within this chapter providing evidence that challenge persistent assumptions.

Carolyn describes one of her many midlife motivations as “*bucking the trend*”, and her palpable frustration at the supposed myths surrounding women at midlife emanates from many of the respondents. They offer an astute awareness of the damage these narratives can cause not only to the individual, but also to the broader societal and cultural perception of, and action towards, older professional women. Carolyn is

clear in her belief that the decline narrative can imbue women at midlife with a limited mindset, *“I think there is a lot of challenging to be done which is actually you don’t have to do that, you don’t have to be like that, you have choices”* and further explains:

“I don’t believe memory declines with age, I don’t think physical capability declines with age, not at the rate that people would have you believe, I don’t think motivation declines either, which is where I get to with the self-fulfilling prophecy thing which is if you say to yourself, I’m over 50 therefore I can’t or shouldn’t then you won’t...”

And Stephanie is clear that the assumptions applied to older people simply homogenise the ageing process:

“You can’t assume the idea that just because you’re older you stop wanting to change and challenge yourself. I know some people are like that I know people who are twenty years old who are like that and you have to judge it by the person.”

Stephanie and Carolyn are not alone in their frustration, with respondents in turn describing the lack of professional older women in business as an “untapped resource”, “a waste of good talent” and “a tragedy”. Michelle summarises this frustration:

“I think we have a way to go before we overturn the society image about valuing the skills that women have in middle age. We have so many skills... life skills... professional expertise... learning knowledge and all that stuff that you’ve collected like a bird’s nest and then not to use that feels like a bit of a waste, you know.”

This is not to say that respondents, as detailed in the previous chapter, do not feel fear, worry, loss or exclusion as part of their future story, but that the findings proffer as much of a sense of joy, liberation and wonder in their experience of midlife. These respondents are women who describe midlife as a “good age” and a “lucky age”, energised by “exciting plans”. They appear ready to take on challenges, often seeming bursting with urgency and a vibrancy. And, as the respondents describe the benefits of middle age, the same positive, proactive language is repeated by the majority:

“confidence... maturity... wisdom... experience... assertion... care less... speaking up... calmer... rational”.

What shines out from the data is a desire from the respondents to offer alternative narratives to the culturally pervasive decline account. ‘Progress narrative’ is the term used by Gullette for “*stories in which the implicit meaning of aging run from survival, resilience, recovery and development*”, insisting that people need to feel they can “*colonise the future with some degree of success*” (2004, p. 17). Bridges theory of Transitions discusses renewal at any stage of life as the ‘New Beginning’ (2004) and Kristeva, citing Colette, hails the ability of women “*to metamorphose, to reconstruct oneself, to be born again*” as one of the factors of female ‘genius’ (2002, p. 502). In the following section, the ways in which respondents challenge prevailing myths and assumptions is further explored, as they reflect, ‘reconstruct’ and reconfigure their lives at midlife, refusing to be defined by a narrow life trajectory.

Stepping Up: “Rising Stars”

As described in the Literature Review, many scholars depict middle age as an age group who is ‘opting out’, whether through constrained choice (e.g. Cabrera, 2007; Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Pompper, 2011) or independent choice (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Hodges, 2012; Carradus, 2014). Yet within this study, some 70% of the respondents intend to step up within their careers, providing an important finding and counterpoint to much of the literature. A third of respondents intend to stay within their profession or organisation and move further up the career ladder - despite the considerable barriers depicted in both the previous chapters of exclusion, caring responsibilities and full-time work. Lori, whose story has been told across the previous two chapters, describes herself as “*still very ambitious*” and has every intention of returning to full time work after the caring for her daughter and mother has stabilised. And at least four further respondents have recently been promoted on to the Boards of their organisations. Kathy, now on the Board of her financial institution describes herself as a “*rising star*” and is emphatic about her ambitions (“*to earn as much as I can at the highest level I can*”), in the knowledge she is both good at her job and loving

her role. Gaynor is clear that, having fought to get where she has in the academic world, she is not stopping now:

“I wouldn’t actually want to give up my career. Why would I give it up now when I’m just probably through the glass ceiling? I’ve got there, so I’m not going to give it up at the moment... I don’t want to step back to being everybody’s personal assistant (at home) which is what was expected of me before. Everything from people’s care through to their dry cleaning, through to phone calls, through to anything was my job for the whole kit and caboodle. Now, people are starting to do things themselves and my partner’s doing something. It’s just great”.

And Frances, a corporate financier, confronts the gendered notion of retirement. At 55, she describes herself as having a “zero tolerance to boredom” with no plans for retirement. Yet what she notices is how often people ask her when she intends to retire:

“I think I’ve got to almost the offended stage, because when you reach a certain age, and you’re a woman, people will say to you, ‘oh when are you retiring?’ And that conversation, that’s come up more times recently than I think is comfortable. I don’t believe the first thing people say to a man who is 55/56 is ‘oh, so when are you retiring?’”

There are also women within this study who, as detailed in the previous chapter, still face the struggle to return to an organisation, yet their desire to step up to full time work remains undimmed. Niamh took an undesired break from her career as a Head Teacher, as she pursued an unfair dismissal case for being sacked (which she won). Despite a dent to her confidence during this period, she describes herself now as “*full of energy and life*”, with the legalities and her divorce behind her and wanting to step back up to a full-time career headship post. Similarly, Gail’s caring for her mother (who had ‘locked in syndrome’) for five years prevented her from travelling. Although she held UK based CEO roles, she gradually moved into non-executive roles to manage the situation. After her mother died, she has been trying to return full time to the workplace, describing herself as “*energised and engaged about the exploration of this world than ever before. I think the future is open. There is a whole journey waiting for me. The future is definitely not ‘not working’. I just want more of it really!*”

And for those who have stepped out of being employed by an organisation and into self-employment, a similar energy is palpable. Eve, who now runs a counselling practice, describes herself “*at the top of my tree*”, and “*never been so busy*”, with Donna using similar language about her busy non-executive career (she holds some seven non-executive directorships): “*I’ve never had a problem working, in fact I have more jobs offered to me than at any other point in my life.*”

Such stories lend weight to the research that refutes the claim of achievement declining at middle age, being instead for some a peak period for competency and mastery, for career satisfaction and – particularly for women – a period of empowerment (Almeida & Horn, 2005; Denmark & Klara, 2007). So, the possibility exists for a gendered approach to midlife and career decisions and certainly the scholar Karp noticed a significant difference between the genders at approximately 50 years, with men beginning to develop an “*exiting consciousness*”, whilst women were still striving to make their mark. He suggested, “*for the most part, the women interviewed are being ‘turned on’ at the same age that their male counterparts are considering whether to ‘turn off’*” (Karp, 1987, p. 218).

‘Gendering’ Midlife Motivation

As highlighted in Chapter Five, Karp’s conclusions are important, and findings from this study concur with women being ‘turned on’ at this stage of life. Whilst there is considerable evidence in the literature supporting a shifting of motivation at midlife, scholars commonly suggest the ‘achievement’ motivation declines at midlife and is replaced by the ‘growth’ motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017; Calo, 2011; Vaillant, 2012; Rauch, 2014). Whilst most respondents agree with the desire for ‘growth’, there is limited evidence in this study for a decline in the ‘achievement’ motivation.

Despite challenges to the conceptualisations of lifespan models (Erickson, 1959; Levinson, 1979; Vaillant, 2012), the notion of career decline after midlife remains

remarkably ubiquitous in corporate literature (Greller & Stroh, 2004; Fineman, 2011). Even when corporate scholars recognise the assumptions of midlife as “hopelessly out of date with reality” (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; p. 84), the supposition still remains that executives will be looking to move out of their organisations, following a path of vocational inner growth and self-actualisation (ibid, 2008). Whilst Strenger & Ruttenberg’s study does not specify an alignment to male executive motivation, all their examples are male, with no suggestion that midlife motivation might differ for women or perhaps entail an increase in ambition for some executives.

One of the many assumptions about motivation at midlife is that the transition involves a shift towards generativity (Levinson, 1979; Vaillant, 2012), towards meaning and to leaving a legacy for the next generation. Whilst these are concepts mentioned by respondents as important, I would propose there is a gender bias in these assumptions. When women have spent their lives caring for others, it is perhaps a relief to take time for oneself. There are as many respondents within this study who want to ‘give back’ and leave a legacy, as there are those who admit there is freedom in *not* caring and an enjoyment in looking out for yourself for once. As Michelle says:

“I’m used to fixing everything for everybody no matter who. Time to stop it now... We all need that little bit of confidence to say, ‘actually you know I need to look after me in all of this’. A lot of people rely on me and there now needs to be an investment in me...”

This sense of liberation and motivation appears, in the findings, to go hand in hand with a turning point away from the chaos of midlife collision (as delineated in the previous chapter) and alongside, what Margaret Mead famously described in *Life* magazine as ‘post-menopausal zest’ (1959). The following sections will consider this concept further, as well as further impetuses that the findings suggest give rise to a potential increase in the achievement motivation for professional women at midlife.

Post-Menopausal ‘Zest’?

On a David Frost show in the 1970’s, Mead again publicly attributed her energy to her post-menopausal zest, a sensation that, some 50 years later, still has limited acknowledgement in research (Martin, 1992; Hvas, 2001; Chrisler, 2007). Interestingly, within this study, the majority of respondents recognise the difficulties they experienced during peri-menopause and menopause as temporary, as Meg’s comment suggests as she reflects on this period of her life: *“But it passes (the difficult symptoms of the menopause). Those moments are just moments. They don’t define you and they are not forever”*. Stephanie is positively buoyant about her post-menopausal self:

“That’s something else I think people don’t recognise about this age is that your children leave home, your parents die, you overcome the effects of the menopause and you feel absolutely fantastic. So, I’m relieved of lots of the issues and I actually think people in my age group, loads of them haven’t got any problems at all and feel very good”.

And many respondents are clear in their recognition of the temporality of events they faced at midlife. In a similar way to Stephanie, Jill found herself at midlife with two teenage children still at home, a difficult menopausal experience, a full-time job, whilst also caring for her mother, aunt and mother in law. This is a time in her life she described as *“just unbelievable, full on, disturbing and very, very hard”*. By the time of our interview, Jill is 54, her three older relatives have died, and her children, whilst still at home, are more independent. She describes her life as such:

“They’re all gone now. And obviously I miss them, but actually you go through that and now we have time to enjoy... so I think my life has been either working and studying, or working and children, or working and caring. And I think that really the last couple of years have just been about me, about us. Which has been really nice.”

The fact that ‘time passes’ might seem obvious, yet, when the workplace is taken into consideration, it is in the ‘limbo’ state or the state of reflection (as described in the previous chapter) when so many career decisions are made that have profound

consequences on the future. Jill didn't pursue the opportunity open to her to step up in her career at this point in her life, stating “*she didn't feel it was an option... with all the responsibility*”, yet is now actively pursuing her next career chapter: “*I'm Head of Learning & Development ... 24 centres across 9 countries and I suppose it is one down from the directorship and I love it. I can now travel. I absolutely love it. I love it, because I can do that now. I am not restrained now.*”

What this suggests is that perhaps the post-menopausal experience of ‘zest’ is as much a “bio-socio-psycho-cultural” experience (Hunter & Rendall, 2007, p. 261) as that of the menopause? As far as I am aware this has not been the subject of research - but the possibility remains that, as the respondent's post-menopausal biological (hormonal) state normalises and adapts to lower levels of oestrogen, so too do the women adapt to life with fewer dependencies, experiencing a release of energy and enthusiasm.

This is not to say that a natural post-menopausal ‘upsurge’ is every respondents experience. Apart from those respondents who had early menopause or did not really notice it, many were cognisant of the need to consciously, and positively, shift their mindset to the next phase of their life. Jude, for instance, whose difficult peri-menopausal experience was highlighted earlier, is beset by familial and medical advice: “*Everybody keeps saying you are only at the start and then I go, ‘oh my god if I'm only at the start, bloody hell, god help me’ ...*”. But she is clear as to her choices for her post-menopausal period:

“My mother in law said she felt really old (after the menopause) and that was it, that was the end of her use. I don't feel like that at all. I feel the absolute opposite of that. However difficult now, I think it is the next stage of my life and that'll be really good. You have got to see it as a positive. I want to work my way through it and be proud to be through it.”

The prevalent negative menopause media publicity was discussed by a number of respondents who reflected on their choice to either ‘conform’ or break stereotype. Having ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) and holding down a Board Director role,

Kim is used to being pathologised in the workplace and throughout her interview discussed her motivation to challenge assumptions of her capability. This is useful learning for her as she faces her post-menopausal self:

“I am worried about what the media says about (menopausal) women - they aren't able to perform, and their brain doesn't work as well. That panics me a bit but then I thought, well okay but people have said different things over the years, people wrote me off with ME, 'god, you're not going to be able to do a job like that with ME' and I have. So, stereotypes are there to be broken not conformed to...”

Given, what Michelle describes as “*the syntax that suggests you should just give up*”, it is unsurprising how keen respondents were to stress that their minds were as sharp (or sharper) than in their younger years. As Carolyn studies for her PhD, and Cyn for her masters, Gaynor describes herself as still having the “*intellectual edge*”. Stephanie is “*fizzing with lots of ideas*”; Niamh is “*more mentally alert*” and Gail believes the menopause has given her a “*mental sharpness that I didn't have before*”. In Meg's interview, she describes the moment when her desire to ‘give in’ to what she had read about post menopause, including weight gain, sudden ageing and “*brain drain*” was appealing. She described how much easier, in the moment, this route felt, and the self-discipline it took to change her mindset:

“I think it's very easy to say, 'oh god, I'm post-menopausal, so inevitably I'm going to put on weight and inevitably I'm going to look old'. I'm not going to buy into that. I did go through a stage of thinking, 'OK, I've put on weight and that's how it's going to be cos I'm menopausal', then I proved to myself that I could lose weight and so now I recognise that it's not an inevitability. It just takes discipline and work.”

The Undesired Ageing Self

What Meg is alluding to here is the acknowledgement of what she does *not* want to be that operates as a life stimulus (Hogg & Banister, 2001) - as Kristeva importantly states, ‘the place where I am not, that permits me to be me’. In asking about the respondent's perception of middle aged, rejection came before acceptance with answers ranging from: ‘*It does not define me*’ ... ‘*don't label me*’... ‘*I don't accept*

it'... I've never thought of it'... I don't know... I don't buy it'. Scholars have suggested that our 'possible selves' are used as psychological resources to motivate behaviour (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987) and for many contemporary psychologists the focus is on the 'pull' of the future, or the Ideal Self, to understand motivation and behaviour (i.e. Boyatzis, 2006; Locke & Latham, 2006; Peterson, et al., 2007). With regards to motivation, little attention is paid to the 'push' of the past, or the 'undesired self' (Ogilvie, 1987) - that is, the self that a person is fearful of becoming and in opposition to the ideal self. Research exists as to the relevance of the 'undesired self' in the marketing field where customers imbue products with negative meanings (Hogg & Banister, 2001), and I would propose that similar applicability is significant in this study and provides further evidence of a propulsion for achievement in professional executive women at midlife. For the 'undesired self' explicates what the respondents fear about their future through what they notice (and reject) in themselves, in other people, and in societal and cultural 'norms' and assumptions.

Chris, pursuing a full-time media career, is clear what is driving her motivation: *"I don't want my world to shrink... I can see it in friends of mine already and it's terrifying. I've got far too many friends living their lives very conditionally."* There are so many echoes of fear and dread in Chris's interview - of mortality, of ageing, of what (or who) she does not want to be: *"I don't want to be boring, I don't want to be boring, I don't want to be samey, I don't want to be dull"*. Asked what she did want to be, Chris answers, *"I want to be... I want to be engaging, I want to be interesting and I want to be relevant"*. Chris is not alone in her rejection of the undesired ageing self. Brenda is equally passionate about the lifestyle she dreads, stating with some derision:

"What I have a dread of is the sort of life where it's defined by, 'gosh I'm terribly busy, it's Wednesday and I've got to go to the doctors and it's Thursday and I've got a trip to the dentist, and you see that in people as early as their 60's... As people get older their life does get smaller and that's a conscious thing that you to do. Maybe if you don't accept that, maybe your life doesn't get smaller?"

As I read Brenda's words, I am reminded of Kristeva's writing that "*just because one is a foreigner does not mean one is without one's own foreigner*" (1991, p. 17). That is, just because women are 'othered', they can still except themselves from their own gender. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of Carolyn's midlife motivation stems from the loss of her mother at 54 (the age Carolyn is approaching), and her desire to live her life to the fullest. In a similar way to Chris and Brenda, Carolyn excepts herself from 'undesired others' at midlife, separating her own motivation from the norm: "*I've always had this thing that people give up physical exercise when they get older as an excuse because its 'oh I'm 50 so I can't do that', which is, I think about motivation. I think people put excuses and barriers in their way that don't need to be there.*" There is as much within Carolyn's interview about 'revolting' against the norms and assumptions for middle aged women and driving herself forwards – through her body and fitness - to prove something to herself and to an invisible audience:

"I want to prove to myself, and probably to other people, that actually being in your 50's doesn't define you, as, you know, getting ready to watch Jeremy Kyle on the tele... so I've run marathons, I've climbed Kilimanjaro, I've done a 100 mile bike rides, and it's as much as anything to prove that I'm physically fitter than people half my age. So, there was a little bit of, right I'm going to show the lot of you, not that anybody particularly asked me about that, but there was a proving that I could still do it..."

The strong feelings raised here by respondents is prescient of what Kristeva (cited in Meagher, 2003) suggests when she renders abjection a bodily experience, a feeling, "*a visceral suspicion that one is, or could easily become out of bounds, unruly, disgusting*" (p. 33). The abject is, as such, the process that separates from one's environment what 'is not me' and these respondents are vigorously rejecting one version of middle age, perhaps enabling the constitution of a narrative through the dis-identification with another (Cohen, 2005). As much as resilience offers a motivation aligned to 'pull', acting through positive emotions (Frederickson, 2001; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004), it suggests to me that the 'undesired self', the 'that is not me' functions through aversive emotions and is as powerful. As Ogilvie suggests in his

paper on the ‘undesired self’, “*without a tangible undesired self, the real self would lack navigational clues*” (1987, p. 380).

‘Braver, Stronger, Fitter’: Loss and Gain

In considering here the propulsions for this midlife mindset, it is perhaps unsurprising the words ‘resilience’ and ‘growth’ were repeated so often by respondents. As discussed in the previous chapter, every woman I interviewed had faced varying degrees of loss and adversity, and significant change, by this stage of their lives. At the same time, their lives were also shored up by experience and learning, a sense of control, perceived social support and some balance and perspective – all protective factors that enable resilience, particularly in high achievers (Reivich & Shatte, 2003; Sarker & Fletcher, 2014). Robin, whose husband has been ill for some 20 years, uses similar words:

“Some days I think I’ve got such a wealth of experience, and it helps me to deal with life and what’s thrown at me. I sort of think, ‘gosh, if I were a lot younger I don’t think I’d have the resilience or the flexibility to be able to just shut things off’ which is what I tend to do. So, I keep things in boxes. If were a lot younger I wouldn’t have the mindset or the understanding that that is the way to cope with it, for me.”

And Robin is not an isolated example. Niamh, for example, who has recently won a lawsuit for unfair dismissal and is coping with her divorce, discusses ‘bouncing back’ from adversity:

“Obviously the stuff around the job and marriage break up was stressful but actually you kind of push through it. People say, ‘oh you coped really well’ and I think, well actually ... at least I’ve got my parents, you know, at least the girls are settled, at least I’m working, so there was always the kind of the upside to things. I don’t dwell, I mean there are times when I think this is really shitty, but I always think, ‘I’ve got this’, and ‘I can always do this’ ...”

But the nature of resilience is more than just the ability to develop psychological and behavioural capabilities that enable survival through crises (Masten & Reed, 2002;

Robertson, et al. 2015). It is also about growth through, and beyond, loss and adversity. That is, resilience allows a person to rebound from adversity as a strengthened and more resourceful person (Rutter, 2000; Masten & Reed, 2002; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). For example, Kim describes herself as “*braver, stronger, fitter*” as she comes to terms with her ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) and Lori, who is caring for her daughter and mother suggests:

“You know yes, definitely, I feel from all these other challenges, certainly from a life point of view, I feel wiser than I’ve ever felt before. I feel things have come far more intuitively just because I’ve done things before and I’ve got more experience under my belt ... I feel, as you know, as big and powerful as I have ever felt at any other point in my career and life”.

There is an underbelly of fire in some of these responses, a sense of ‘taking on the world’, staring the myths in the face and proving them wrong. As I re-read the interviews, I’m struck by the language of challenge and fight, of pushing and passion, of which Frances is a good example:

“All the time in my career when I’ve been undermined, belittled, taken for granted, I will use it to my advantage. I’ve always been very positive about what I want and if people underestimate me, that’s their problem not mine.”

What the data is providing is evidence that supports an *increase* of the ‘achievement’ motivation for many professional women at midlife, fuelled by the abating of difficult physical, emotional and familial circumstances that, in turn, drives a resilience and desire for growth. Many women acknowledge the decline narrative, whilst rejecting this (‘Not Me’) in favour of a ‘progress’ narrative that offers a more positive and energising story, with space for an ambitious future. Yet at the same time, respondents are challenging the meaning of achievement and ambition in today’s workplace, desiring, in the main, a flexibility that appears limited for professional female executives. So, there is a call for a reconfiguration – in language and practice – for how achievement is recognised and enabled in the workplace, examined further in the following sections.

'To Stop, To Pause, To Change'

After the breathlessness of midlife events, for many respondents there is an experience of a turning point, a moment in time where the need is, as Lori says, "*to stop, to pause, to change*". There is something particularly potent and poignant about the questions many of the respondents present that chimes with earlier themes, that is: facing into mortality; the notion of time being 'squeezed' and the concomitant shifting of priorities. Respondents reflect on meaning, belonging and the sense making of midlife. Carolyn poses herself multiple questions about meaning:

"If I only have 4 years left, like my mum did unbeknownst to her, what would I want to do? What does it mean to be 50? In the next 20 years, you're going to be 70, so what does that mean and what will your health be like? ... Will you be mobile and will (her husband) still be alive?... What do I want to be known for, what do I want to stand for?"

Brenda, recently divorced, is wistful about belonging:

"And then my immediate family were very angry when we got divorced. My eldest son said, 'you know that we're a small family and what have you done?' So, the other thing about being this age, this is a key one actually, is 'who do I belong to?'"

And Michelle questions her plans:

"Your life seems to hit you, so my husband and I have been having this conversation, we need a plan and we need to manage our money. We need to decide; do we want to live here? In Spain? Do we want to travel? What do we want to do? What will be our hobbies? What will be our social group?"

Kristeva understood the search for meaning and revolt against the status quo. She suggests that "*revolt has always meant a turning in time, space and kind, suggesting different forms of social political and ethical transformation*" (McAfee, 2004, p. 107) and spent much of her life calling for a revolution, not so much a political one, as a cultural and psychological one. She appreciated writers and artists who dedicated their lives to thinking and uncovering meaning in their lives, defining revolt as the ability "to call things into question" (2002, p. 12). As she states: "To think is to revolt.

Meaning is revolt” (2002, p. 39). Brenda articulates the need for space and time to reflect:

“By the time you’re a 50 year old woman, it’s all about time, it’s all about wanting time, it’s all about wanting time enough to get bored, so that I’m ready to come back again ... and I think a lot of women in their 50’s and 60’s are feeling that, so if only organisations can give people time.”

The questioning and the search for meaning at this stage of life has resonance for organisations (Hollis, 2016), but reflection time is not built in to the make-up of the patriarchal organisation, which, as has been previously discussed, demands of their leaders a full-time dedication and pre-occupation, following a linear pathway with no uncertainty (Höpfl, 2000). Yet, contrary to much of the lifespan literature, the need to reflect and consider one’s life’s journey does not necessarily correlate with the desire to step out or retire (Vaillant, 2012; Levinson, 1979). Far from it, as critical to this study is how the many of the respondents describe the desire for greater flexibility and work/life balance, *in order* to enable their ambition.

Jude’s story is interesting in that she is the only person within the study to have left a very senior role within a blue-chip organisation, taken a year out (*“the best thing I ever did”*) and returned to a different organisation, stepping up to a Board Director role: *“It’s a big role, probably double treble the responsibility I had before. It’s quite a different starting again, with a brand new executive team who are a new team themselves, with a new environment, different challenges.”* She’s quite clear that her ability to accept the challenge and make the step up is due to her time out from organisational life: *“Funny, I don’t feel phased by it at all and I think the break has taught me a lot, that I can do it”*.

‘Feeding all parts of my Life’

So, what many respondents are describing is not a decrease in ambition, but an increased recognition for how this ambition might be realised at this stage of their life. For example, success is realised through *“excitement not status”* for Jude, *“ambition*

not aggression” for Donna, and *“stimulus, not scrambling my way up”* for Brenda. Money is important but not an end in itself, *“I’ve never done what I’ve done for money, I’ve done it for stability, I’ve done it to feel safe”*, with *“agency and choice”* being desired commodities. For many more respondents the language of achievement at midlife is about *“adventure...challenge...change...creativity... learning”*. Angela describes the desire to *“feed all parts of my life”* and Kathy suggests: *“I think women will make a judgement call in favour of life rather than work more easily or with more conviction than a man would...”*.

This desire for a greater work/life balance is noteworthy, in that the more constrained the need to remain full time within the organisation, the more significance is attached to leaving. Indeed, the language used is more akin to escape than retirement. Kathy is waiting for her pension at 55 to enjoy her *“fifteen years of freedom”* and describes a *“yearning, a longing ... for fresh air and freedom”*. Jill describes shrugging off her *“restraints”* whilst Carolyn, in leaving her organisation, has *“rid myself of the shackles”*. Chris, in planning for her future, describes her ‘escape route’, *“I’m building, I’m starting to think about my life boat, rather than having my lifeboat thrust upon me”*.

On face value, the data suggests the respondents intend to leave their roles with dreams that include being a Governor; a mindfulness/yoga teacher; a world traveller; a NED (non-executive director) or running a tea shop. Yet a closer look at the data demonstrates that every dream of leaving is counterbalanced by an ambition to remain (and step up) at work if greater flexibility were within their grasp. Despite Kathy’s strong language surrounding escape and freedom, she later discusses at length her intention to *“continue with pleasure”*, as receipt of her pension will give her options. She is clear that she intends to *“fill my life in the future as well, I don’t want to just stop”*. And as much as Cyn is emphatic about leaving the NHS on receipt of her pension, she has also just embarked on a part-time master’s degree (which she studies for alongside her full-time nursing role and five children) just in case she *“changes her mind”*. Whilst Chris is planning her ‘escape route’, she is also hoping that her

company will retain her well into her 60's and articulates her desire for flexibility, balanced by the aspiration to be appreciated and valued:

"I think there needs to be a conversation around 'how can we get the best out of you for a win/win for both of us?' You know, 'we love the way you do whatever you do, how can we get more of that?' 'How do we dial that up, dial down the other stuff that's getting in the way and negotiate a way that's going to work?' I would love to them to say to me, 'Well, you're 60 Chris, we've loved you being here, you've had a great impact, is there any way you can work for 3 days a week?' I'd say yeah, terrific".

What is common across much of the data is three factors: the enjoyment and innate interest in work; the desire for flexibility from an organisation to give respondents space to 'feed all areas of their lives', thus achieving a sustainable work/life balance, and the ability to grow and develop inside and outside of the organisation. Michelle describes this well. She is on the Board, and well aware that work is a major part of her identity: *"What I am, my persona, manifests itself in what I do. So, work is very important to me. It's not the be all and end all, but it is important to me and it's taken me 'til I'm 50 to realise that"*. Michelle has no intention of giving up work, expressing an ambition to remain in work and step up further within her NHS Trust. But she is also articulate about her need to include learning as part of her motivation to achieve at work:

"I want to keep learning. I think to make sure you don't feel like you've arrived and that is the destination. It's not a destination for me, it's a stop on the journey for whatever the rest of my life should be. Learning means doors open, and that gives me flexibility to say, you know, I'm a grown up now. I can make a choice about it."

Creativity and adventure are words repeated throughout Carolyn's interview. She describes her organisation as offering just *"stifling sameness"* and suggests: *"it wasn't physical energy that I was lacking, quite the contrary, I had loads of energy and loads of ideas and loads of things I wanted to do, but it's just this stifling sameness that I just found really, really dull"*. Her energy and ambition are now being directed towards studying for a PhD (with a focus on creativity). Kristeva understood this

desire well, and in her search to find common traits of the ‘female genius’, she describes women’s “*intoxication with life, their interest in the other. Contrary to what is often stated - they say women are narcissistic - I believe them to be less narcissistic than men, and they have a far stronger relationship to things outside of themselves, be it children, love relations, or social life*”.

Stepping Up – A Constrained Choice

Yet what remains concerning is that, despite this apparent ambition, energy and desire to work, the corporate requirement for leaders to be full-time remains implacable. There are very few examples within this study of women holding a leading role within their organisation, whilst retaining the ability to operate part-time – unless (like Brenda and Linda) they run the company. The male order, or as Höpfl suggested, the male ‘homologue’ (2000), has a firm grasp.

Kim, a single woman and breadwinner, articulates her desire for a four-day working week, describing both a financial constraint as well as that of ‘presenteeism’ – the need to be a visible, full time presence:

“This is a high energy job that I do, and which I’ve done against all odds really with ME. Getting into my mid 50’s makes me nervous. I have to work financially. It scares me, but I have to. So, I think if I could go part time I could still do a really good job, but I don’t know if that’s accepted ... you’re seen then as on your way out, whereas I’m seeing it as a way of remaining on my way in.”

After her recent divorce, Chris is in a similar position to Kim. Single and the breadwinner, Chris is keen to stress her enjoyment of her role: “*I’m very happy here, it’s a great role and there’s a lot of opportunity, a lot of scope, from a people point of view*”, whilst later in the interview describing her anxiety at the pressure to retain her senior full-time position and build up a ‘nest egg’:

“And I’m fine now but have a lot of anxiety. I’ve got no safety nets in my life you know, I’m not going to inherit a palace in deepest darkest Sussex, my

family are from Lincolnshire and have nothing. I've got nothing... there is no backup, there is no backup."

This is a generation of women who have witnessed unprecedented change in both pension rules and statutory retirement age – the latter of which was abolished in 2011. Within the study there are women with financial freedom associated with home ownership and a final salary pension, and those who have seen their anticipated 'pension pot' deteriorate. Gaynor – who has recently been promoted twice - discusses her resentment as her pension scheme at an academic institution has been “wrecked”, leaving her “with no incentive to give up work”. Robin provides a good example of someone who at 62 is working full time, has recently stepped up the Board - and has been the sole breadwinner for 21 years after her husband's chemical poisoning prevented him for working other than sporadically:

"I also thought I'd be able to finish at 60 (laughs)... What happened? Well the government happened! And to be honest most of my friends have retired at 60 because they work for organisations where you can take your pension at 60. But quite a lot of the ones I work for have moved their goalpost along with the government's pension plans."

Angela's role in leading the agenda within her organisation for diversity and inclusion has been described previously, and she is passionate about valuing difference, particularly related to the age agenda. She is equally thoughtful about the challenges of this, not only in terms of trying to get her agenda noticed and taken seriously within her organisation, but also questioning the very culture she is endeavouring to change:

"I work really hard to get more women at senior levels in these organisations, but why would anyone want to be a senior member of these type of organisations? They're designed by men, women wouldn't design them like this, the cultures, the structures, the politics ... we wouldn't design these places, so why would we want to be part of them? I think that's a fundamental challenge with this 'Women on Boards' agenda. We need to try to change the organisation, not just try to squeeze more women into this mould."

What Angela is challenging is the structural make up of her organisation - a patriarchal set up that plays to the freedom, ability and desire to work full time, where success is

equated with the prioritising of full time work above all other areas in life. She has been offered a move across to the fee-earning part of the business but is clear that she is not driven by “*the long hours, lots of travel, uncontrolled lifestyle... so I’m wary about stepping into something that takes control away*”. Asked what other areas in her life Angela would like to pay more attention to (if she wasn't working full time) and I am given a list of her voluntary work within the local primary school and university Board; her four siblings and three adopted nieces; her separated twin sister whose children she helps with; her parents and in-laws who are in care. It is a rich list that is ambitious in its own way, combining paid work, voluntary work, care, friends and family.

This is perhaps an example of what Kristeva keenly stressed as the desire for women to develop a ‘mosaic’ or ‘kaleidoscopic’ identity’. As she states: “my universalism has nothing absolutist about it; it’s closer to a mosaic: The One remains, and at the same time it realizes itself in plural forms. This can relate to a female identity – realising itself in plural forms”. What is unfortunate about Angela’s story is that, despite her senior position in Human Resources, she feels unable to tackle the organisational set-up and discusses leaving and placing her energy elsewhere. As one scholar suggests: “Women often don't feel themselves to be powerful, and that is not just a matter of individual perception – it is systemic property. Over generations and across cultures, political and social systems have been constructed to ensure women don't get access to power” (Sinclair, 2007).

Reconfiguring Success: ‘Radical Strangers’

The reason that the language of ‘revolt’ is so important for this chapter is that, in one simple word, it summarises the frustration with the patriarchal set up of the workplace that so many women in this study appear to experience, together with a determination to revolt against a destiny as “mad, bad and sad” (Appignanesi, 2009, p.11) . Scholars have suggested a number of ways in which power and action can be practiced by professional women, other than the usual understanding of directing from the top

(Sinclair, 2007), and by using the term, 'Radical Strangers' I have adapted Kristeva's two final words in her essay, *Strangers to Ourselves*, (1991), being 'radical strangeness', to describe the fragments of rebellion within and without the corporation where the 'norm' is being challenged by respondents.

Within the organisation, Lori is one example of a 'change advocate' (Sinclair, 2007), using her voice and actions to demonstrate that job-sharing is possible at a senior level. Now a role model within the global organisation and lobbying for change, she presents the possibility of greater flexibility for older women being considered in Latin America and Asia:

"I had lots of messages of, you know, 'fantastic you've been able to make this happen', 'good on you', 'brilliant, we've been able to keep both of you', yes, so lots of credit for being able to make it happen. Even from our other global colleagues as well because I think culturally this is really different. Doing a job share was really quite alien to them, so they were like, their eyes went, 'wow! how can we do this?' Even now they're working through their policies of how they could physically and legislatively make it happen again in UK, Latin America and in Asia."

Contrary to research suggesting female leaders are deliberately unhelpful to each other, or other women in their organisation (e.g. Cowan, et al., 1998; Mavin, 2008; Benenson, 2013; Ellemers, 2014; Derks, et al. 2015), multiple examples were offered by respondents of proactive support and encouragement. Michelle is passionate about using her position of influence on the Board to develop women across her organisation at all levels, through coaching and mentoring, and through a recognition of the need for flexibility and learning:

"The hard bit I think is having the mentors, the people who give you the coaching, the determination and fan the flames a bit ... so I am conscious of my responsibility as a female director to say actually we should be promoting the role of women, we should be working with women in a different way and getting the skills they've got. If you want a career you've got to do your bit too as well, you're not going to get automatically promoted, it's a give and take, but I would champion the course for women as long as there's breath in my body."

The importance of role models within an organisation has been well noted by scholars (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Bass & Riggio, 2005; Sealy & Singh, 2010) and Stephanie is a great example of this. As one of the oldest female executives in the media industry, who has faced considerable discrimination in her career (described in Chapter Nine), and actively fought to bring this to public notice, she is aware of the positivity of remaining in her position:

“There are so many young women saying, ‘I admire you because you’re an older woman, you’re a real role model for me, you’re a real example to people in the industry’. They might have been lying, but from younger people I felt a genuine respect and admiration for what I had learned, and I still feel that. Every year I do something at work that I’ve never done before, but I also help people to do something that I have done before, and I help them do it better, so they can learn by the failures and successes of the past”.

Paula’s organisation breaks the normal organisational mould in many ways and perhaps comes to closest to an example of ‘radical strangeness’. An NHS organisation, it is staffed at senior levels by older women (between 40 and 65, with one male exception), with flexibility built into the set up: *“So we have got all sorts of arrangements. People are running several roles usually, and it is probably the norm that people are working part time, and they are either in other roles the rest of the week or have caring responsibilities the rest of that week... you just sort of do what people feel comfortable with.”* What felt unusual in this interview is that Paula didn’t present this as a radical organisation, but just a normal *“mix and match”* place. The influence and role modelling of the female Managing Director is clear, as she actively seeks older people with interesting skill sets and networks to join the organisation. Paula was clear about what kept this team productive:

“I think autonomy, flexibility, reducing bureaucracy and, you know, the organisation is about innovation and doing new things ... so having that approach is helpful. People can suggest stuff and develop things and see where you get to. The notion that older people are not innovative is just a generalisation and I don’t do generalisations. You can meet people of 22 who have got that mentality, so it is not an age-related issue.”

Scholars are clear that success can also be reconfigured outside of the organisation through collaboration and experimentation, consciously experimenting with new forms of leadership (Sinclair, 2007). Niamh discusses the new direction for Head Teachers based on an approach of ‘Co-Headship’ (which she studied for her Masters) in an attempt to bring women to the top of the profession and share skill sets in a participative manner. She describes how “*the Napoleonic head is a thing of the past*” with schools recognising the impossibility that “*one person cannot embody all the features and functions*” of the massive role of leading a school.

Meg, a journalist and actor, provides an interesting example of being a ‘radical stranger’ in the acting profession, as she consciously strives to work against the norm of the notoriously youth oriented acting profession. Whether discussing menopause, acting or midlife, Meg is passionate about controlling her life through managing her mindset:

“Filming seems to be more lucrative and I’ve been having more jobs filming. I’m now of the age, sadly, where I get cast as grandmothers (laughs). I don’t like being cast and I don’t like going to the auditions and hearing they are looking for a grand-mother, ‘oh god, great’, but the roles are more interesting. Like any woman the older you get, the more complex life is, and it’s the same with acting. The roles are fuller, more in depth, more interesting, more complex. So, yes, I would like to make it expand. I’d like to play on it... I’d like to sell myself as an older woman. If that’s what it takes, it’s cool”.

Scholars have also accepted that leaving the organisation (loudly and visibly) is an active, vocal step towards change (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Bradshaw & Wicks, 2000; Sinclair, 2007), rather than one of failure or ‘opting out’ (Cabrera, 2007; Stone, 2007). Brenda, for example, describes the “*insanity*” of working full time within the existing organisational confines, whilst Tina is clear that “*women over 50 are much less willing to pretend that they are going to tap dance enthusiastically for the new broom that is constantly arising. You think (groans) enough of the new brooms, I have already seen 5 new brooms (laughs)*”. Brenda describes the patriarchal culture as “*men trying to carry on through the corporate ladders and still believing they’ve got*

somewhere to go". A serial entrepreneur, who has just sold her business for several million and is currently setting up several new companies with women deliberately at the helm, Brenda is clear about her priorities:

"I'm certainly competitive and like to win and all of those things, but I don't think I've got all consuming ambition, and I wonder if a lot of women don't have all consuming ambition? In the end all the corny bits really matter ... that you've got to have your family ... I suspect a lot of women when they balance their values think actually if there was a problem over here with the family or whatever I'd give up all of this (her career)".

Brenda is cognisant that the money she has made gives her choices, and when one listens to her interview (and I remember the sensation sitting with her), you are infused with her passion for business, for life, for growth and creativity: *"The idea was that I would ease back a little bit, but the trouble is everything is so interesting, so lots of sort of entrepreneurial things that keep happening and I keep being offered things and I think ohhh that'll be fun!"* As she is currently reinventing bingo and interflora for the 21st century, Brenda discusses 'retiring' somewhere around her 80th birthday.

Brenda's proactive, positive nature is a good place to end this chapter, the purpose of which is to offer a counterbalance to prevailing myths and assumptions about professional female executives, highlighted by the findings. Key to this chapter is the recognition that ambition, and the language of achievement, plays a significant role in the life of the professional female at, and beyond, midlife. Far from 'opting out' of the corporate game, the findings highlight a majority of respondents interested and engaged in their careers, and willing to push through considerable hurdles to achieve their career goals. For many, this is enabled after a tumultuous midlife period of loss and adversity has abated, or been accepted, freeing their sharp minds towards a new chapter of growth and accomplishment. The desire though to combine this ambition with flexibility is keen, with many respondents describing the sensation of feeling *"time poor, not age poor"*. For some respondents a flexible work/life balance is achieved through their realisation of financial options, whilst others are constrained to work full-time. The frustration and anger with the existing set-up of the patriarchal

organisation is palpable, with the lack of flexibility described as a “*tragedy*”. But respondents continue to find new ways to reject the decline narrative laid out for them, and revolt against existing ‘norms’, offering fragments of hope for a reconfiguration of what success can mean for a professional female at midlife. As Kristeva states: “*Rejection on the one hand, inaccessibility on the other: if one has the strength not to give in, there remains a path to be discovered*” (1991, p. 5).

Summary of Key Findings:

In theorising midlife as a period of revolt, the findings demonstrate a refutation of the cultural narrative of ageing decline; a renewal of energy and post-menopausal zest; a resistance to the contextual demands of the organisation to remain invisible and a desire to reconfigure what success might look like in the second half of life. It is reflective of what Kristeva theorised as new forms of revolt, “which go against the tide of the oppression and fear of unsolvable crisis as well as idealistic enchantment” (2014, p. 2). Whilst for Kristeva, this new route to reform involves an inner experience, or psychoanalysis, she also calls for innovation and reform through people being “unique, inquisitive and uncompromising... passing on and sharing a language of revolt” (ibid, p. 3).

This is the similar sense of revolt given by respondents, who react with dismay to the continued societal assumptions of an age-related waning, embedded within the context of the organisation. Who also distance themselves from theories of midlife mental and physical decline and of creative limitations. In contrast to the normative life span models, predicting a midlife (and beyond) career path of generativity, advocacy and vocational acts, the findings offer the theoretical possibility of gendered approach to midlife with women ‘turning on’, whilst men are ‘tuning out’ (Karp, 1987). The language of achievement, ambition and growth are presented, with 70% of the respondents intending to, or actively participating in, a step up in their careers, evidencing the theoretical proposition of midlife revolt and lending weight to Gullette’s proposed midlife ‘progress’ narrative (2004).

After crossing the temporary 'fragile threshold' of physical and emotional midlife vulnerability as depicted previously, the data suggests the notion of 'post-menopausal zest' is a common experience for many respondents, with a release of energy and passion after the peri-menopause and menopausal periods. In a similar way to the experience of menopause, it is also apparent the so-called 'zest' is socially and culturally predicated, experienced at the same time as an acceptance of, or the release from, caring, menopausal and health issues.

Finally, there is an impatience with the inflexibility of the normative set up of the organisation at senior levels. Whilst scholars argue this enables a maintenance of the status quo, there is evidence, albeit limited, in this study, that change is possible once women achieve more influential positions.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Discussion

Introduction

The aim of this study is to understand how professional women aged 45 and over experience their middle years and how this experience may influence subsequent career decisions, with the heterogeneity of the experience of middle age being a defining characteristic of this study. Beyond the interpretation of midlife as a crisis, a “constant drizzle of disappointment” (Rauch, 2015), or even the nadir of life (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2015), this study agrees with those scholars who suggest the middle years are a fascinating stage of life, worthy of study (Trethewey, 2001; Gersick & Kram, 2002; Gullette, 2004; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). As discussed in Chapter Five, in order to present life as a predictable series of stages, life span scholars are keen to give each stage a label. As Levinson states in his book, ‘Seasons of a Woman’s Life’, all of the women in his study after the age of 45 had “terminated the Culminated Life Structure of the outgoing era”, with this shift being “wrenching” for all respondents (1996, p. 408). Not only had they (all) recognised their “marriage enterprise” had been “a partial or massive failure” (ibid), but with age came a recognition that the defined ‘middle adulthood’ is a “time for progressive decline – of growing emptiness and loss of vitality” (ibid., p. 20). Although contemporary scholars insist life spans models and academics, such as Erikson (1959) and Levinson (1979), are out of step with the fluid, flexible career landscape of the twenty first century (McMahon, et al. 2012; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2018), the ubiquitous identification of midlife as one of decline remains remarkably pervasive. As Sheehy notes in her updated 2006 introduction to ‘Passages’, although Erikson “sketched out three stages of adulthood in only a few paragraphs, they were profound and prophetic” (p. xvii). As some scholars argue, when midlife is laid out as a problematic period of decline, the beginning of senescence, an expectation is created: “the beliefs we imbibe about our waning powers may turn out to be self-

fulfilling, because our culture teaches us how to be old” (Levy & Langer, 1994, p. 991)

Moreover, the homogenous nature of midlife theorisation leaves little space for individual contribution, let alone a gendered experience, with the women’s midlife pathway either ignored or treated as deviant (Gilligan, 1982; Bateson, 1990; Gersick & Kram, 2002). As will be discussed below, it is not that the respondents in this study experienced (or are experiencing) their midlife with an abundance of positive energy. Far from it, for the emotional acuties of loss, sadness and confusion were as much a defining feature of the findings as those of joy, expansiveness and liberation. Yet in the same way scholars urge for the menopause discussion to be one of biology ameliorated by social, cultural and psychological circumstances (Hunter& Rendall, 2007; Ayers, et al. 2010; Griffiths et al. 2010; Hardy, et al., 2019), so too would I theorise midlife as a social construct predicated on societal discourse, cultural expectation and personal identification.

Reconsidering the Assumptions

In the introduction to this study, I proposed that the experience of professional women at midlife is shrouded in bias and assumptions, which is open to exploration. In this discussion, my intention is to revisit these expectations and discuss how the findings have challenged them, adding to theory.

‘There is no problem’

The primary assumption to be addressed in this study is the invisibility of concern surrounding the retention, promotion and valuing of professional middle-aged women. Factors addressed throughout this study that enable this assumption to flourish include the belief that gender issues within organisations have been solved (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011). That is, if there is a problem, it is individualised, not systemic (Peters, et al., 2013) with a cultural inattention to issues of age, acknowledged as “the surreptitious backcloth to social divisions and key decisions in

organisations” (Fineman, 2011, p. 2). I use the word ‘invisibility’ with care, for it is a word that is used in academic, individual and media reporting when the subject of the middle-aged woman (or their middle-aged body) is discussed (e.g. Arber & Ginn, 1991; Twigg, 2004; Young, 2005; Lips & Hastings, 2012). It is a word that suggests that older professional women are present in organisations but indiscernible. Whilst this is often the case, data within this study suggests care should be taken with this term, given the extent to which many respondents were the *sole* representative of their gender and age group at a senior level within organisations.

When the marginalisation or exclusion of professional women within organisations is discussed, academics have acknowledged how the language can often be framed in that of blame, (it is their fault) or personal aspiration (it is their desire) (Terjesen, 2005; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Hodges, 2012; Peters, et al. 2013; Perrons, 2016). When age is added to the argument, and the female professional at midlife is considered, the same two factors are replayed. Centuries of medicalising older women enable the assumption of the weakened embodied menopausal body to remain intact, with older women potentially unable to cope at work (Simon & Reape, 2009; Gavranich, 2011), or opting out for a life of freedom and autonomy, framed by self-employment (Pringle & Dixon, 2003; Stone, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). As reported by senior influential men in the Hampton-Alexander review, “Most women don't want the hassle or pressure” (of a Board level senior role) (2018, p.23). Only rarely is the prevailing elite and masculine employment culture mentioned (Perrons, 2016).

Thus, the framing of the issue as intrinsically individual, enables a curtain to be drawn across the systemic abjection of the professional older woman, evidenced in this study. Scholars have theorised abjection within organisations as being in practice (Fotaki, 2011; 213) as well as ‘abjection as practice’ (Gatrell, 2017), highlighting the active organisational practices of abjection towards women when, for example, they are breastfeeding. ‘*Abjection as normal*’ builds on these theories by suggesting that, when exploring organisational practice and taking age into consideration, abjection is not

necessarily an ‘active’ practice, but a passive, insidious, taken-as-normal situation – hence the assumption ‘there is no problem’ thrives. The data suggests that exclusionary practices are embedded systemically across many organisations through language, training and inflexible workplace policies, that are, at best, not recognised, and, at worst, ignored and perpetuated.

The word ‘normal’ is worth further exploration here and I am reminded of Butler’s work in gender norming (2004). As she states, “A norm is not the same as a rule, and it is not the same as a law. A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalisation” (2004, p. 41). Importantly, she describes how a norm, once embedded in social practices, may prove to be “recalcitrant to any effort to decontextualize its operation” (ibid). That is, the norm may or may not be explicit, indeed it usually remains implicit, but it is hard to change and yet is “discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (ibid). The outcome of this, the marginalisation of the middle-aged woman, may or may not be obvious but it is certainly dramatic in its effect, which is echoed in the statistics evidenced in Chapter One, and the findings of the study. ‘Normality’ for many respondents was having a male boss, with 17 respondents having a male line manager, one respondent being the sole woman in her Boardroom, and 15 respondents being one of few (less than five) female senior leaders over 50 at this level in the organisation. Only three women have a female boss, with two women being the CEO – both of whom set up their organisations. Of itself, this does not necessarily constitute ‘abjection’. However, it becomes possible to argue that when the present male body is desired and noticed, and the older female body is marginalised, inessential or invisible, this is evidence of ‘abjection’. When both states are normalised, with a lack of recognition of embedded practices being imperceptible to many and difficult to label, ‘abjection as normal’ is established and the male normative status quo is maintained.

One could argue this is different to Tyler’s social theory of abjection, where abjection is understood as a mechanism of governance through aversion, and in which the practices of abjection are “cultivated, incited, repeated, practiced, mediated and

performed” (2013, p.13). And yet, as I re-read the transcripts and reconsider the cultural practices of abjection described by respondents, it is possible to identify regular acts of abjection. The fact that these acts are embedded and normalised does not make them any less cultivated, repeated or performed. The study relates three specific ways in which middle aged female executives are held to *be* abject, or *feel* abject, as a result of an interdependence of the masculine, full time and youthful orientation of an organisation. The active cultivation of youth within an organisation is known, propagated through recruitment and training and embedded in language (e.g. Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Griffiths, 2007; Billett, et al., 2011; Fineman, 2011; Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). Practitioner literature contributes to this with articles using apocalyptic language including the ‘grey tsunami’, the ‘demographic time bomb’ and the ‘perfect storm’ of the ‘demographic risk’ (Calo, 2008; Strack et al., 2008; Karpf, 2014), with the ageing workforce persistently viewed through a prism of complication and difficulty. To a degree this relates as much to the middle aged male executive as to the female, yet the steadfast dominance of men at a senior level in the majority of industries evidences the historical and cultural robustness of the patriarchy, rendering the older female the ‘other’ (Puwar, 2004), or, in Kristeva’s language, the ‘Stranger’ (1991).

Evidentially in this study, one of the most significant factors contributing to the maintenance of the status quo is the ongoing demand for senior executives to be full time, leaving little flexibility for issues surrounding parental, sibling, partner and child care (Fagan, et al. 2005; Donnelly, 2015). Whilst explored further below, the importance here is that caring issues at midlife are ignored (‘there is no problem’), with organisations demanding a full-time dedication and preoccupation from their executives, constituting a further act of abjection. In considering the intersection of acts of abjection, when the subject is neither male, young nor (always) full-time, the theory of ‘*abjection as normal*’ highlights the impact of silence towards this gendered age group.

‘Winding Down at Midlife’

A manifestation of the practice of ‘*abjection as normal*’ is the assumption that professional women at midlife are motivated in the same way as their male counterparts (Karp, 1987; Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Gersick & Kram, 2002). It is a taken for granted assumption, I would contend, that has enabled lifespan models, extensively reviewed in Chapter Five, (e.g. Erickson, 1959; Levinson, 1979; Vaillant, 2012) to remain so remarkably intact over the last 50 years. Written by male scholars, and some scholars have contended, *for* male executives (Gilligan, 1982; Bateson, 1990; Gergen, 1990; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018), the persistent generalisation is that this chapter of life is dedicated to generativity, self-actualisation and ‘taking stock’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Calo, 2011). Presenting a challenge to lifespan theory, one of the most surprising findings of this research is evidence from respondents showing that the majority of professional older women in this study (some 70%) had the desire to ‘step up’ within their careers. That is, the positive intention to either remain at their organisation in a higher role, step up with an alternative organisation or reconstrue their lives to achieve in different way. Indeed, as many of the respondents discussed caring for others throughout their life, a new chapter of generativity was far from their minds.

This is not to say that many respondents did not want to engage with a future life of generativity and meaning, but that it might be constructed in a new way – that is, combined with a flexible, ambitious career. The transition for many professional women who are coming into their own at midlife means understanding the need to care for herself, in addition to others she cares about (Gersick & Kram, 2002). Part of this transition might mean the need to stop, to pause and to reflect. But, as has been identified earlier in this study, reflection time is not built in to the make-up of the patriarchal organisation, which, as has been previously discussed, demands of their leaders a dedication to a linear pathway with no uncertainty (Höpfl, 1992; Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002; Fagan, et al., 2005; Donnelly, 2015; Mainiero & Gibson,

2018). Yet, again contrary to much of the lifespan literature, the need to reflect and consider one's life's journey does not necessarily correlate with the desire to step out or retire. Far from it, as critical to this study is how the many of the respondents describe the desire for greater flexibility and work/life balance, *in order* to enable their ambition.

For what is rarely discussed in the reviewed literature is the difference in motivation that might lie behind the career decisions at midlife (Karp, 1987; Gersick & Kram, 2002), and importantly, the stimuli for this difference. When motivation for midlife professionals is explored, it is largely through the lens of the linear career, with the reward at midlife being a financial sum of money, enabling the autonomous search for alternative meaning. Yet, this study offered the unexpected finding that mortality and loss were central to respondent's decisions about career decisions and their future relationship with the organisation. And far from being a morbid topic, the fear of mortality, of 'staring death in the face' and the experience of multifarious loss acted as an energising force, propelling respondents to make the most of the next chapter of their lives, acting as a significant driver for career decisions. Indeed, the significance of this experience is in direct contrast to the invisibility within organisational literature (Kets de Vries, 2014).

Therefore, contrary to the assumption that executives desire to wind down at midlife, what the data is providing is evidence that supports an *increase* of the 'achievement' motivation for many professional women at midlife, fuelled by the abating of difficult physical, emotional and familial circumstances that, in turn, drives a resilience and desire for growth. Theorising this experience as "*Not Me: Female Revolt*", many women acknowledge the decline narrative, whilst rejecting this in favour of a 'progress' narrative that offers a more positive and energising story, with space for an ambitious future. Yet at the same time, respondents are challenging the meaning of achievement and ambition in today's workplace, desiring, in the main, a flexibility that appears limited for professional female executives. So, there is a call for a reconfiguration – in language and practice – for how achievement is recognised and enabled in the workplace. Theoretically, this leaves space for the potential of a

gendered concept to midlife motivation that questions the one-dimensional, male oriented, fifty-year old linear career pathway, releasing the possibility for a female-inclusive, integrative, flexible approach.

‘The ‘Freedom’ of Midlife’

Within this study it is argued that the reticence to discuss the caring responsibilities for professional middle-aged women exemplifies the theoretical position of *‘abjection as normal’*. Not only do the temporary absences that such caring demand enable the full-time masculine cultural norm to be maintained, but, with the caring issues ignored, bias towards the promotion of female executives such as the ‘good ones have gone’, they ‘don't want it’ or are simply ‘not available’ are allowed to prosper.

That middle aged professional women might experience a reincarnation or renewal at midlife is not new (e.g. O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Muhlbauer & Chrisler, 2012; Whiston, et al., 2015; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017) and these findings are supportive for this potential. Yet within the literature, for many scholars the notion of a midlife resurgence is intimately linked to the concepts of freedom and autonomy (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Chrisler & Mulhauer, 2007; Denmark & Klara, 2007; Hodges, 2012; Carradus, 2014). That is, based on the assumption that professional women at midlife lead autonomous lives, with their caring responsibilities (for children) over and whilst this is the case for a number of respondents, it does not reflect the full heterogeneous experience of this data set. I am not alone in arguing that nothing is more ‘taken as normal’ within an organisation than the caring role that women adopt (Tronto, 1993; Rossi, 2005; Perrons, 2016). This is not to suggest that expectations of care and gendered role sharing, including the effect on retention and promotion are ignored as topics of academic and practitioner interest, with many organisations making efforts to adjust their maternity/paternity policies to reflect the need for equality. Certainly, some scholars contend that in the last twenty years, research, policy and public discourse about the challenges and the importance of integrating work and family life have attained a visibility that is hard to ignore (Korabik, et al.,

2008). The debate, it is argued, has extended beyond the parent/child ‘struggle to juggle’ to develop a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of the factors that influence the work-family interface for all (Ackerman & Banks, 2007; Korabik et al., 2008; Voydanoff, 2008). And yet, as evidenced within this study, organisational policy remains directed towards younger parents, with the extensive juggling that professional women at midlife might expect to experience receiving only modest attention (Almeida & Horn, 2005; Ackerman & Banks, 2007; Coleman, 2011; Ben-Galim & Salim, 2013; Jarvie, et al., 2015).

The findings demonstrate that this is a significant omission. Given my own caring responsibilities and those of my colleague, client and friendship circle, perhaps I displayed a naivety towards the extent of this issue, yet the fact that one third of the respondents within this study had to take a break from work to cope with their caring obligations was alarming. As discussed in the findings (Chapter Nine), it is worth repeating that half of the respondents had parents with dementia (for whom they took an active caring role) and seven were caring for members of their family, including partners, siblings and teenage children with mental health issues. Furthermore, the assumption that by midlife older mothers are ‘empty nesters’ appears, within this study, to be far from reality. Half of the respondents still had dependent children living at home, with eight of the women interviewed still having two or more dependent children at home. The findings should not be a surprise as they reflect a number of societal demographic trends (Pierret, 2006; Whitehead, et al., 2008; Smajdor, 2009; Jarvie, et al., 2015; Perrons, 2016). As evidenced, middle-aged people tend to have parents who are alive, with fewer siblings to share the caregiving. Adult children are likely to live further away from their parents, making the caregiving more complicated and disruptive. Women are having children at later stages, so their parents are older whilst their children still young. Support for children might last longer than that of their parent’s generation, often reaching into their early and mid-20’s as they acquire further learning or struggle to get on the property ladder. Finally, women are more likely to work outside of the home, making it increasingly difficult to provide caregiving services.

Moreover, the significant issues of caring that I argue are unique to midlife, enable us to think differently about how to theorise this stage of life, encapsulated in this study with the notion of the *'fragile threshold'*. The word 'fragility' suggests an instability, an uncertainty, but also a tenderness and delicacy of care, all concepts that are perhaps at odds with an assured, logical, masculine, 'certain' organisational culture (Höpfl, 1992; Höpfl & Matilal, 2007). The sense of middle life's ambiguities and complexities that infuse Kristeva's writing are inherent in the oscillation between the control, competence and credibility necessary for a senior role, and the 'out of control', emotional experience of midlife caring that respondents discuss. Neither are these issues necessarily negative. Both older motherhood and parental caring have been theoretically problematized in the medical literature and mimicked in media reporting (e.g. Jolly, et al., 2000; Bewley & Braude, 2005; Shaw & Giles, 2009; Smajdor, 2009), with older motherhood represented as a medical, economic and moral dilemma, and parental caring a 'burden' (Morgan, 1996). And yet, the affirmative compassion reported by respondents towards their familial caregiving is more representative of the midlife caring experience, delineated by the sense of 'fragility'. Whilst throughout this study, the threshold of midlife has been aligned with Kristeva's notions of 'me/not me' and the manifold, complex transitions middle aged women personally experience, the findings are a reminder that, as parents die and (some) children leave home, a further threshold is crossed, enabling the possibility of a different future.

'Menopausal Mayhem'

Striking the balance in theorising the menopause is not easy. The desire remains amongst scholars for an open discussion of the menopause leading to organisational action and policy (Brewis, et al., 2017; CIPD, 2019). Whilst contemporary theorising of the menopause is in its early years, academic interest in the menopause has increased, with a welcoming keenness to break the silence surrounding this subject and present a balanced perspective (e.g. Jack, et al. 2016; Hardy, et al. 2018; Hardy, et al., 2019). This is overlaid by a concern with how the menopause is constructed, for

if the ageing female body is again held to be abject, weak and frail, the professional status of the middle-aged woman is aligned to the historically constructed incompetent, irrational and abject body (Gersick & Kram, 2002; Young, 2005; Krekula, 2007; Fineman, 2011; Peters, et al., 2013). Yet there continues to be a reverberation in contemporary research of the 1960's debate (medical menopause versus natural menopause), with the presentation of contrasting outcomes regarding the effects of the menopause on the professional woman in the workplace. As discussed previously, whilst some research highlights individual indifference from middle aged women towards the menopause (Martin, 1992; Hvas, 2001) or inconclusive outcomes with regards to workplace consequences (Jack, et al. 2016; Hardy, et al. 2018), this contrasts with the studies stating more severe workplace consequences. In a recent meta-analysis of some 104 menopause publications for the Department of Education (Brewis, et al., 2017), the authors point to evidence estimating the number of women negatively affected by menopause transition symptoms at work varying from 10% to 53% (e.g. Mishra & Kuh, 2006; Griffiths & Hunter, 2014). Considerable effort is made to calculate the annual economic cost of the menopause (due to absence from severe symptoms) to the UK workplace, roughly estimated at its lowest end as some £7,276,334 (Brewis, et al., 2017, p. 68).

As in any socially and culturally constructed phenomenon, such as the menopause, language matters. Whilst, as discussed earlier, some studies emphasise the importance of the 'biopsychocultural' approach to understanding the menopause transition, (e.g. Kittell et al. 1998; Morris & Symonds 2004; Mishra & Kuh, 2006; Hunter & Rendall 2007; Jack, et al. 2014; Griffiths & Hunter 2014) the language of symptoms, negative effects, burden and cost, remains the most frequent way of reporting on the menopause.

These contemporary debates lay a helpful foundation stone for a discussion as to the respondents perceived and experienced their own menopause. Whilst data within this study support the research that identifies menopause as a heterogeneous experience, the findings build on the theory of menopause as socially and culturally constructed,

that is, more than just a medical challenge (Ballard, 2002; Utz, 2011). Data from this study demonstrate that whilst the menopause is a biological reality, the experience of it is dependent on context, environment and mindset. This is by no means to deny the breadth and depth of reported symptoms, except to relay the considerable (and complex) research that suggests symptomatic indications conflate with age, lifestyle, emotional meaning, cause and effect of the vasomotor disturbance (i.e. sleep disruption), relationships or health history (Ballard, 2002; Blake, 2006; Jack et al., 2014). Furthermore, the majority of respondents were not only indifferent to their menopause experience, with two thirds of respondents being underwhelmed by the menopause, oblivious to symptoms and ambivalent to the discussion. They also firmly rejected the pathologising of the experience they did have, with the notion that they were an economic burden or cost to their organisation being an anathema – ‘*not me*’.

This is not necessarily a popular point of view, with contemporary commentators suggesting that to equate the experience of menopause with mindset, as opposed to a biological or medical challenge, places women back in the Victorian days of the ‘hysterical’ woman (Frostrup, 2018). Yet evidence continues to be produced that demonstrates the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and online awareness training in relieving peri-menopause and menopausal symptoms (Hardy, 2018; Hardy, et al., 2019). And I would further venture that the embedded nature of the decline narrative, ‘*abjection as normal*’, permeates through into media reporting and organisational policy in a remarkably persistent way (Jack et al., 2016; Radio 4, 2018; CIPD, 2019), which left some individuals within this study to render their own menopausal bodies as fearful and abject.

Additional findings from this study enable a different for understanding and theorising the construct of menopause. Although the data is limited, it remains significant that at least three respondents were able to highlight specific examples of the beneficial impact of menopause, including increased concentration, control and productive energy. This is an important finding with data suggesting that the ‘out of control’ abject body might *not* apply after the menopause and far from losing control of the

body, respondents discussed the menopause *giving* them a sense of control. Whilst there are studies that point to individual positive development post-menopause (e.g. Ballard et al., 2002; Jack et al., 2014), I am not aware of any menopausal research that theorises the menopause as a constructive benefit for professional women, with an ensuing impact of such advantages at work. Whilst the 2002 SIRC (Social Issues Research Council) Report exploring the lives of ‘fiftysomething’ women, is unusually positive about menopause, the report is sponsored by HRT Aware and indicates that this positive experience is “particularly evident among women taking HRT, where the perceived improvement in careers, relationships, health, well-being and, sex-life, is significantly higher” (p. 2). Therefore, one might assume an inherent bias in the report.

Presenting a constructive benefit of the ageing, menopausal body is an important counterbalance to many prevailing discussions, particularly in the light of evidence supporting women’s inability to talk openly about the menopause at work for fear of being negatively labelled (Griffiths & Hunter, 2014; Jack et al., 2014). The theorisation of ‘*abjection as normal*’ suggests systematic organisational rejection and exclusion through invisibility and ignorance. Tyler states that “abjection is a concept that precisely hovers on the threshold of body and body politic” (p. 21), and, as has been extensively discussed in this study, the reproductive body has been a subject of extensive research, with women problematized in the workplace for their leaky, maternal bodies. The deficient narrative extends beyond the actual assessment of physical health, leading to negative evaluations of women’s all-round functioning and intellect (Annandale & Clark, 1996; Witz, 2000; Gatrell, 2011b; Evans, 2002). Therefore, if the ageing body is considered abject, and that abjection is normalised, respondents will work hard to present a competent body that is held to be youthful, smart, noticed – and, in control. But this study suggests that the advent of middle age for women, when occupying a professional role of status, triggers the need to act and look young, to be ‘well’ and to present a fit, vigorous body at work. This is considered in some literature (Trethewey, 2001; Morris & Symonds, 2004; Putnam & Bochatin, 2009; Gatrell, 2017), but data from this study evidences the extent of this control. For example, respondents took action by hiding illness resulting in ME (Myalgic

Encephalomyelitis) and pneumonia; by concealing their age for up to a decade; and by acting on medical advice to take HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) to ensure potential menopausal symptoms were not evident at work. Despite this, the majority of women within this study considered their bodies as robust, healthy and fitter than ever, talking with pride about their bodies. As is discussed earlier in this study, one can theorise this process of simultaneous pride and repulsion as akin to the concept of the ‘undesired self’ (Ogilvie, 1987) - that is, the self that a person is fearful of becoming (or that is considered culturally abject) and in opposition to the ideal self. Put another way, the ‘undesired self’ explicates what the respondents fear about their future through what they notice (and reject) in themselves, in other people, and in societal and cultural ‘norms’ and assumptions (Hogg & Banister, 2001).

‘They don’t fit’

The final bias to be discussed here and that scholars believe proves a barrier to women’s progression through corporations is that they do not ‘fit’ the corporate environment (e.g. Peters et al., 2011, 2012; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Sealy, 2018; Vinnicombe, et al., 2018). Whilst this remains a relevant and disabling prejudice for many professional women of all ages, it is particularly acute for the ageing female executive, whose point of leadership can often be a solo effort, in the minority. Therefore, when the middle-aged women might feel she does not fit into the corporate culture, it is not necessarily an erroneous assumption. ‘Identity-fit’ modelling maintains that individuals who perceive themselves similar to the organisation’s prototype (typified by their leaders) will feel they ‘fit in’ (Stets & Burke, 2000; Peters, et al., 2012), particularly when agentic characteristics and leadership roles, discussed in Chapter Three, are stereotypically aligned with supposed masculine traits. And, as predicted by social identity and social network theory, the male director group does appear to prefer and promote candidates similar to themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004), leaving the older female executive in a position of marginalisation. This study supports these findings and I

would argue that the invisible (or unspoken) abjection of the older woman increases the likelihood of such exclusion.

Conceptualising the older female executive as a ‘radical stranger’ in ‘revolt’ against the corporate status quo enables us to think differently about the women’s role within the organisation. The reason that the language of ‘revolt’ is so important is that, in one simple word, it summarises the frustration with the patriarchal set up of the workplace that so many women in this study appear to experience. It is interesting that Kristeva was so keen to emphasise in her writings and interviews the etymology of the word revolt, stressing its potential for “making gaps, rupturing, renewal” (2002, p. 85). Scholars have suggested that the rhetoric of progress for female leaders hides the greater inequality and should be abandoned as we are “deluded by their ascension through the hierarchy that this is progression” (Evans, 2017). Yet to abandon the ‘progress’ narrative not only negates the potential for development that exists, but also disavows the possibility for a different kind of leadership, fragments of which are suggested by respondents and detailed in Chapter Eleven.

Meyerson developed the concept of ‘tempered radicals’ to affirm the practices of leaders who work towards the success of their organisations whilst being true to their values (1995). In a similar vein, the last two words of Kristeva’s essay, *Strangers to Ourselves*, is “*Radical Strangeness*” (1991, p. 195) as she hopes for the emergence of a ‘paradoxical community’ that can reconcile and withstand its multiple societal elements. Scholars have suggested a number of ways in which power and action can be practiced by professional women, other than the usual understanding of directing from the top (Sinclair, 2007). By using the term, ‘Radical Strangers’ I have adapted Kristeva’s words to describe the fragments of rebellion within and without the corporation where the ‘norm’ is being challenged by respondents offering cautious optimism for the prospect of change and equality, particularly when there is personal agency or female majority in power. There is strong sense that these women are driving through a new organisational agenda where there is a more considered approach towards gender, age and flexibility. For what is common across much of the

data is three factors: the enjoyment and innate interest in work; the desire for flexibility from an organisation to give respondents space to 'feed all areas of their lives', thus achieving a sustainable work/life balance, and the ability to grow and develop inside and outside of the organisation.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Conclusion and Recommendations

Theoretical Contribution

The core contribution of this study to organisational theory is to provide evidence that challenges the persistent assumptions and social bias that surround professional middle-aged women and their retention and promotion within organisations. It replies to the call from scholars to provide an alternative narrative to that of decline and to add to the discussion as to how success can be reconstrued at this stage of life. The key theoretical contributions of this study can be encapsulated as follows.

Firstly, this study supports and progresses the literature surrounding the barriers to progression for women within organisations by proposing a new theory of '*Abjection as Normal*'. The findings of this study suggest that the contextual prejudice towards, and exclusion of, older women within organisations is frequently normalised or ignored - posing little interest to decision makers or academics, and often accepted by women themselves. Indeed, this theory goes further by proposing that, through turning a convenient blind eye to the issues facing female executives at midlife, particularly those of caring, systemic abjection enables the maintenance of the paradigmatic status quo, and obfuscates the desire for progression.

Secondly, this study considers the state of abjection as one of vulnerability and theorises the stage of midlife for professional women as a '*Fragile Threshold*', that is, a tenuous transition phase between loss and gain. Loss and impending mortality at midlife was an unexpected and significant point of discussion throughout the interviews, including perceived loss of youth; of beauty and of sexuality, and actual loss of fertility; of parents and of health. It is rare in organisational literature to read about the impact of impending mortality on motivation and career decisions and this study starts an important theoretical discussion on this topic.

Lastly, the study explores Kristeva's notion of Revolt and Revolution, theorising the desire of professional women to challenge gendered and ageist assumptions, and to progress and achieve, as one of *'Not Me: Midlife Revolt'*. Presenting a challenge to lifespan theory, one of the most surprising findings of this research is evidence from respondents showing that the majority of professional older women in this study (some 70%) had the desire to 'step up' within their careers. That is, the positive intention to either remain at their organisation in a higher role, step up with an alternative organisation or re-construct their lives to achieve in a different way. It considers further whether motivation at midlife might be gendered, with women 'turning on' while men are 'turning off'.

This research journey started with an exploration of how professional women aged 45+ experienced their midlife and how this experience impacts on their career decisions. It concludes with the encouraging discovery that, despite manifold and complex experience of loss and exclusion at this time of life for so many respondents, it impels a period of ambition, positivity and growth.

This conclusion is unexpected. The original purpose of this research project was to shed further light on the problematic retention, inclusion and promotion of older women within organisations, and to explore further the notions of decline. Some scholars equate midlife with a decrease in ambition and an increase in physical, emotional and mental uncertainty. Alternative research directs attention to the notions of freedom and liberation, with older women absconding from their full-time careers as their children 'flee the nest'.

All of the above remains true for some women, yet, as the research progressed, the findings presented further complex, and interesting, narratives presenting an alternative to the existing narrow, binary descriptions. The data demonstrates that older women can be systemically excluded within organisations on three counts – they are not young; not male and (still) not following a linear career path. For many, the complexity of caring for others at this stage of life is significant. The findings further

show that multifarious loss at midlife can project professional middle-aged women into a messy period of transition as they ‘stare death in the face’. In emerging from this stage, the data demonstrates a desire for progress and achievement and, contrary to the pervasive tale of midlife decline and departure, for stepping up. Put another way, many of the women in this study do not want to leave their organisations and are seeking a way in, a way up and a flexible way to navigate the issues surrounding their lives at this age. Not only this, there is a strong sense that as these women attain power, they are driving through a new organisational agenda where there is a more considered approach towards gender, age and flexibility.

At a time when women over 45 are increasingly moving into positions of power, albeit slowly, this research makes a particular and timely contribution to the conversation surrounding the intersection of gender and age, and the impact of midlife on career decisions.

Originality

The theoretical conceptualisation of the exclusion and invisibility experienced by some older women within (and without) organisations as ‘*abjection as normal*’ is original. Firstly, this theory builds on existing research that frames abjection as a valuable organisational paradigm (Fotaki, 2011; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Gatrell, 2017), offering a fresh perspective on the attitudes and behaviour towards professional older women. Fotaki (2011) recognised the practice of ‘embodied abjection’ within academic institutions, which can be read as abjection *in practice*, that is, how abjection manifests within a specific male-ordered environment. Gatrell further theorised the active process of hostile behaviour towards lactating, ‘leaky’ bodies, offering the contemporary theory of ‘abjection *as practice*’ (2017). Building on Fotaki’s work of implicit abjection in practice (2011, 2013), Gatrell indicates an explicit and purposeful practice of abjection towards those who dare not conform to the masculine norm of the organisation (Kenny, 2016; Gatrell, 2017). Or, put another way, fail to confine their leaky bodies within the borders of what might be considered acceptable

organisational behaviour, where the body “must bear no trace of its debt to nature” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 102; Gatrell, 2017). This thesis offers a further development, with the theoretical possibility that, rather than a deliberate practice, the abjection of older women is insidious and taken for granted. That is, it is normalised, invisible and unrecognised.

Secondly, the theory brings together many of the findings under a theoretical ‘umbrella’, enabling a discussion to be had about the barriers to progression, including those of embedded language and practice. With much theory based on the ideas of middle aged decline, this study challenges this supposition. Finally, this theory uncovers a significant omission in the discussion about care issues for middle aged female professionals. That women pick up the majority of familial caregiving duties, and that this is ‘normalised’ to the extent that this is routinely accepted, is already recognised by academics. However, with such deliberations focused on the care of children and the retention of younger leaders, the research is incomplete in addressing the issues of older mothers and the care of elderly parents and family members that appear to arise for older female executives.

The conjectural framing of midlife as a *‘fragile threshold’* is original, offering a counterpoint to the literature that presents midlife in a binary fashion. Whilst agreeing with the research that presents midlife as messy transition (Bridges, 2017) and supportive of the literature that frames midlife as one of reincarnation (Pringle & Dixon, 2003), this study suggests a position of ‘both, and...’. That is, the fragility and vulnerability of midlife is messy, chaotic, positive and interesting. Most of all, the data from this study suggests it is a heterogeneous experience that cannot be easily generalised into one neat homogenous practice. Through the theoretical lens of abjection, this conceptualisation has also enabled the discussion of loss and mortality to emerge from the data. In considering the nature of expulsion and thresholds, it uncovered the critical importance of the experience of loss, and the fear of mortality, on career decision making.

I feel uneasy about equating the desire to ‘buck the decline trend’ to that of ‘*Midlife Revolt*’ as original but within this theme are two significant findings. The first is the nature of resilience and growth that stems from the ‘undesired state’ of ageing (Hogg & Banister, 2001). Building on the theory of the Undesired Self (Ogilvie, 1987), this finding suggests that when old age is considered alongside that which is undesired, it is highly motivating and propels a period of urgent growth – the ‘making the most of the time I have left’. Alongside this urgency, is the respondents’ revolutionary spirit, framed as ‘*Not Me*’, whose data builds on Gullette’s midlife theory of the Progress Narrative (1999; 2004). Knowing that the majority of this data set wish to reject the labels of midlife ‘decline’ is heartening. Knowing that the majority also intend to progress with their careers in the spirit of ambition and achievement is meaningful.

Limitations

This thesis has looked at the experience of *some* professional women as they age, and the impact of this experience on their career decisions. Without question, any number of theses could have potentially been written about each analytic insight produced, and infinite alternative analytic directions could have been pursued in the data. However, as a social constructionist, I trusted that as long as the direction I took and the reason for this direction was explicit, this would suffice. Ultimately, I explored the data in the light of relevance and impact on organisations, being the field I am operating within, with the actors’ own insight directing the categorical codebook.

I took seriously useful guidance offered to me at Panel Progress Interviews at Lancaster University in 2016, and after the transfer to University of Liverpool in 2017, as well as at both Summer Schools (Malvern, 2017; Capri, 2017). I was advised to justify the data sample number of 30 participants, which I related in Chapter Seven. Without doubt, this research reached conclusions after interviewing a small number of women and it would benefit from being extended further to test conclusions. After counsel, I extended industry sampling to include professions such as nursing and teaching, however I did not manage to talk to women within the government or police

(not without much endeavour), as these were both industries of interest. It is a fair challenge that this study would benefit from greater depth, both within industry and within topic. Any number of topics within this thesis, including midlife, menopause, older motherhood and mortality would benefit from a more intense lens and it is a potential limitation of the study that so many important issues are discussed in one thesis, even if these topics do answer the broad research questions.

It was suggested to me to explore a case study approach, as opposed to the methodology of thematic analysis (or combined with thematic analysis). This would enable the full narratives of the speakers to come alive, rather than picking apart the data to delineate generalisable themes. This approach intrigued me, and I explored the possibility further by informally writing two case studies. It became clear that anonymity would be challenged through the use of case studies and I abandoned this approach, whilst recognising it would have offered further perspectives.

As discussed in Chapter Seven, whilst the data sample came from a relatively heterogeneous industry sample, I am also aware that it represented a small stratum of society – that of white, middle class women. Without doubt, this study would benefit from the exploration of the intersection of gender, age and race. I also chose to exclude the study of male executives within this study. This was a strategic choice based on time available and a preference to firstly study the least represented in organisations. I clearly cannot claim that my results are representative of all professional women experiencing midlife. However, I certainly believe that my findings are indicative and relevant to a broader population outside of this data set, and their experiences as related to me, and subsequent themes, rang true.

What would I do differently if I started over again? I hesitate to answer this question because, ultimately, this research is the by-product of choices I made at the time that were within my scope of ability as a part-time researcher, whilst running a full-time business. I am not sure of the different direction this research would have taken had I been able to immerse myself full-time in the research journey, and in the University

of Liverpool's doctoral community. The outcome of my reality meant working with one qualitative technique, semi-structured interviews, and limiting the data sample to a practical number, within the time frame I could manage. Certainly, thematic analysis was no more convenient a method than any other. If anything, with some 900 pages of data to immerse myself in, this commonly felt like an unmanageable choice of analysis. However, I may have submersed myself more comprehensively in one topic and limited case studies.

Implications and Recommendations

There are three likely audiences for this study, that of academia, organisational practitioners (including Human Resource and Learning and Development professionals), and of course for professional older women. That it might inspire younger women on their ageing journey would be a bonus!

Future Research:

As discussed above, this research is not without its limitations, nor does it attempt to answer all questions that might arise when considering how professional women might experience their middle age. However, the significance of the meta-themes and findings suggest there is a richness of data here, providing further opportunities for research, together with possible recommendations for organisational practice. There are three areas within this study that I believe merit further investigation:

The systemic abjection of older women in particular merits further research, particularly with the urgency of the call for caring responsibilities to be considered in organisational policy making, rather than taken for granted. As caring responsibilities for elderly parents are only going to increase with our ageing population, this is an urgent, contemporary debate. Does the theory of 'abjection as normal' stand when extended to a broader population? I believe there is a need, and an opportunity for an important study, focused specifically on the needs and experiences of black and ethnic minority women as participants, paying careful attention to the issues of

intersectionality and inclusion. Of further interest is the extent to which this theory can be extrapolated to the male executive population? As organisations move towards youthful leadership, will older men also be considered as abject bodies? As paternity policies mature, will older male executives take a greater share in the caring for elderly parents, driving policy change?

Building on the existing lifespan models, (i.e. Levinson, 1979; Vaillant, 2012) and the research that has already been conducted on midlife motivation (i.e. Karp, 1987; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004), it will be interesting to test the possibility of a gendered difference towards midlife career stimulus. Together with this consideration, it would be of interest as a further research avenue to consider the impact of loss and fear of mortality on decision making, the so-called '*fragile threshold*'. Building on Hogg & Banister's work (2001), what extent does the 'undesired ageing self' drive career decision making?

As the attitude towards, and experience of, the menopause transition is currently the subject of academic and public attention, it remains possible to make a significant theoretical contribution. This research offers the potential to consider further the positive outcomes of menopause, providing a balance to the 'fear' narrative and extending current work on menopause, and post menopause, as a bio-socio-psycho-cultural experience (Hunter & Rendall, 2007).

Organisational Recommendations:

The dynamics of abjection are subtle and well embedded. This means that through normalisation, they are not noticed, commented on and frequently invisible. For this research to have an organisational impact, it will require the desire to choose to notice. Data from this study suggests that many organisations are keen to turn a blind eye to the retention and promotion of older women, hence the perpetuation of '*abjection as normal*'. It is not hard for an organisation to say, 'so what?' if it enables the maintenance of the existing paradigm. And yet a number of societal shifts may compel organisations to increase their awareness. This includes the decrease in numbers of

births in the UK, the increase of the ageing population, the slow realisation of equality in its many diverse forms and governmental policy/societal shifts acting against discriminatory practices.

Should an organisation choose to actively consider their systemic practices, there is evidence from this study that suggests many professional older women have the will, the energy, the mental capacity and the ambition to further achieve. In the reconstruction of what success looks like to this age group, data from this study enables the argument that flexibility is of overriding concern. With flexibility, caring responsibilities are realised in tandem with the desire to achieve. Without flexibility, older women leave organisations silently or realise 'revolt' elsewhere, forging careers in different forms.

That some organisations are managing to break the silence over the menopause is noteworthy. How this is constructed and presented is paramount, so that the cessation of menstruation is as normal as the starting of menses, with potential problematic symptoms presented alongside potential benefits. It will be useful for organisations to understand the difference between pathologising and normalising the menopause debate, so that women are free to choose their response, rather than victims of an organisation's campaign, however well-intentioned.

Policy Recommendations:

With regards to specific policy recommendations, the following points can be considered: data from this study suggests that many professional older women possess ambition, resilience and drive to contribute to the management of organisations in a meaningful way through, and beyond, their middle age. In order to enable this, and realise equality and diversity across the organisational field, policy makers can explore where discriminatory practices of ageism (and in particular, gendered ageism) place barriers in the way of progression. This includes training, wellbeing, care and flexible work policies directed towards this age group. With specific regard to policy

governing care issues, data within this study suggests caring at midlife is a significant issue for older women who face multifarious, generational caring demands. Flexible working, including job sharing, will enable the talent of professional middle-aged women to remain within the organisation, rather than perpetuating their departure. As the workforce is currently recognising the need for contemporary menopause policy, the messaging of this policy needs care and consideration so that it is not pathologised within the workplace. This means menopause policy should be communicated in a balanced way, demonstrating potential symptoms alongside possible benefits.

Closing Thoughts:

In the preface, I relayed an experience at the Cheltenham Literary Festival. I would argue in conclusion that the theorisation of '*abjection as normal*' goes some way to explaining the response of the audience and the swift acquiescence to the decline narrative. As has been reiterated through this study, history has cast a long shadow as regards the medicalisation and problematizing of the older women's experience – so much so, it is barely noticed or remarked on. More insidiously, the decline narrative is perpetuated in manifold ways through academic, medical, media and practitioner language, overshadowing the considerable academic evidence discussed in this thesis that offer contrasting constructions. What this means is that many of the contemporary academic discussions surrounding the experience of the professional female executive at midlife, intended to open and broaden the visibility of this age group, remain viewed through a prism of vulnerability, abjection and one of burden.

To summarise these discussions: the ageing body remains one of difficulty and worry, viewed through the organisational lens as one of looming risk, declining capability and decreased motivation. This also means older women can perceive themselves as abject bodies – that is, the possessor of a vulnerable body that should either be disciplined into shape to present a youthful exterior, or a frail body in decline. Older motherhood and later reproduction is consistently stressed as a medical, social and economic cost to society, with the contrasting experience of children leaving home medicalised as a syndrome. As the debate continues as to the medicalisation of the

menopause transition, it remains framed in a language of extensive and increasing symptoms, burdensome and costly to the workplace, with relief from menopausal difficulty commonly offered through Hormone Replacement Therapy or antidepressants. The caring experience of this 'sandwich generation' is frequently framed as one of survival and encumbrance which, whilst evidenced in this study as difficult, leaves little space for the expressed joy and compassion. It is little wonder that women at midlife might embrace, or believe, the decline narrative more swiftly than that of revolt and revolution.

The roots for titling this study, 'Embracing the Middle Years', lay initially in my own desire to embrace the cause of middle age gaining a greater understanding of the physical, mental and emotional manifestations, and the ability to theorise therewith. It was certainly no instruction, or implied direction, to respondents that this was an age they should cherish, love or 'clasp to their bosoms' – all etymologies of the word 'embrace'. Yet it is possible to say that the majority of respondents do cherish their middle years, whilst accepting the many concomitant difficulties. Equally, 'embrace' means to be inclusive with, or be equal to, others, and certainly as this study concludes, there is a resounding call from respondents for desired equivalence and inclusivity.

And so, I would offer in conclusion cautious optimism. Studying this area has demonstrated that nothing is inevitable at middle age – neither a crisis of decline, nor a declaration of roaring ambition. Everyone is different in their individuality and homogenising this age group does a disservice to both genders. Fortunately, what is inevitable is that change is happening, albeit slowly, together with a recognition that our long-held conceptions of age are unreasonably out of date and worthy of challenge. Through theorising the experience of middle age, I hope this study plays a small part in stimulating the debate that enables professional women to embrace their middle years with pride.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

Participant Information Sheet

RESEARCH TITLE: “FEMALE EXECUTIVES: EMBRACING THE MIDDLE YEARS”

I am a PhD student with the University of Liverpool Management School, exploring the experience of middle-aged women (45+ years) in executive roles.

What is the background to the Study?

Despite positive strides forwards, the global retention and promotion of female executives remains a significant organisational issue. Efforts to understand this complex challenge are largely directed towards younger women, with little research directed towards understanding how female executives aged 45+ grapple with the physical, emotional and social demands that appear distinctive to this age group - a critical group who are now beginning to influence organisational policy and research.

What are the aims of the Study?

The aim of this PhD research project is to gain a rich understanding of the ‘middle years’ as experienced by female executives over 45 years, and to explore in turn how such experiences influence future career decisions. I am also interested in understanding to what extent this experience is aligned with the organisation’s attitude towards ageing and older executives. Lastly, it is my intention to give voice to a group of women who are not often heard or acknowledged in organisational studies and potentially challenge assumptions of midlife for professional female executives.

Who is the Researcher?

I am passionate about the understanding, retention and promotion of female leaders. I run a company called Mindspring (www.mindspring.uk.com) and work as an executive coach and consultant. I am embracing my own middle years by undertaking this PhD!

Why have I been approached?

You have been approached as I would like to interview approximately 30 women who will be employed, (or have been employed), at a management level with responsibility for others. Participants are likely to be working within the public or private sector, with some having left their place of employment. I am interested in interviewing women with and without children (whether living at home or not), and those with parental responsibilities.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. If you withdraw within two weeks of commencement of the study any interview data will be removed. After this point the data will remain as part of the study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

I will be gaining information preferably through 1:1 face-to-face interviews (or Skype if this is easier for you). Interviews will be held either at your or my office premises and will last approximately 1-1.5 hours. The discussion will be recorded on an encrypted device and then transferred to an encrypted computer with the information being immediately deleted from any mobile devices following transfer.

Will my data be identifiable?

Only the researcher conducting this study will have access to the interview transcripts and recordings:

- Audio recordings and hard copies of any data will be anonymised. The files on the computer will be encrypted (that is no-one other than the researcher will be able to access them) and the computer itself password protected.
- Hard copies of any data will be stored securely in locked cabinets in the researcher's office (or at the University premises if provided and available).
- In accordance with University guidelines, data will be kept securely for up to ten years after which they would be destroyed.
- Any identifiable information will be removed from the data including names of individuals and companies unless participants give their express permission to include them.
- Anonymised direct quotations from the interviews may be used in reports, academic publications including papers and books and presentations.
- All your personal data will be confidential and will be kept separately from your interview responses.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be summarised and reported and may be presented at academic or business/research conferences and submitted for publication in an academic or professional journal or book.

Are there any risks?

There are no risks anticipated with participating in this study. However, if for any reason you feel distressed with the questions being asked, we would recommend you contact your GP.

Are there any benefits to taking part?

I hope you will find it interesting to participate in the study and pleased to contribute to the understanding of women over 45+ years in leadership positions.

Who has reviewed the project?

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool University.

How do I contact the researcher and/or obtain further information about the study if I need it?

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at:

Lucy Ryan
07968 180451
lucy@mindspring.uk.com
Skype: lucy.ryan27

Complaints

If you wish to make a complaint or raise concerns about any aspect of this study and do not want to speak to the researcher, you can contact:

Professor Caroline Gatrell
Head of Organisational Studies
University of Liverpool Management School
Chatham Street
Liverpool L69 7ZH
Email: C.Gatrell@liverpool.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

APPENDIX TWO

Outline Interview Schedule

LUCY RYAN: PhD: ID NO: 201236803

RESEARCH TITLE: “FEMALE EXECUTIVES: EMBRACING THE MIDDLE YEARS”

Below are questions I have outlined to guide our interview together. There is considerable flexibility in this schedule.

LIVED EXPERIENCE:

- What is your experience of ‘middle age’ – physically and emotionally?
- What is it like to inhabit a middle-aged body?
- What’s your experience of the menopause and has this affected you at work?
- What is liberating about being older at this stage of your career?
- What’s challenging about being your age at this stage of your career?
- When are you made aware of your age?
- What assumptions do others have about your age?
- At the moment, what influence is this experience likely to have on your future career decisions? (Or already has had on your future career decisions?)
- Are you given any ‘caring responsibilities’ at work?
- What are your caring responsibilities out of work?
- To what extent has your role as a ‘carer’ (children, parental, other) changed at this stage of life?
- How do you combine your multiple roles?

ORGANISATIONAL ATTITUDES:

- What is (or were) your organisation’s attitude to ageing?
- How does your organisation treat middle-aged women?
- What assumptions does your organisation or others within your organisation have towards midlife?
- How does your experience align with the organisational narrative about ageing?
- To what extent do you believe there is a gender difference in attitudes towards executives at middle age?
- To what extent are the organisational policies for the retention of women directed at older women?
- What keeps you at work? What will keep you there? What would have kept you there?
- What would an organisation need to do to retain you at this stage?
- What enables professional women to succeed in the latter part of their careers?

APPENDIX THREE

Summary – Social Demographics of Study

Number in Study	30
Mean age of study	55.45
No. with children	80%
Dependent Children (6-18 yrs)	50%
2+ dependent children	26%
Breadwinner	9
Working Full Time	22 full- time/6 part-time/2 retired
Ambition to step up	21/30 (70%)
Dependent/ill parents	13 (plus 7 with family members needing care)
Recently bereaved	3
Male Partner = caregiver	1
Menopause	1 perimenopause; 11 post-menopausal; 5 ongoing; 13 no idea
Relationship Status	25 married; 1 x same sex marriage

APPENDIX FOUR

‘Most Surprising’ theme from each individual (Excerpt from Reflective Journal 2)

In the methodology I described the Journal I kept, after advice from the Capri Summer School, to record the most surprising theme/s that arose from each respondent.

Here is the summary of this Journal:

Name	Most Surprising Theme/s
Eve	Loving the grey! Loving the body. Menopause gives her control.
Martha	Loss (of independence; of health; of social group; of fertility). Hating middle age. On HRT. Prescribes it. “Menopause is like a depressive illness”
Stephanie	Collision of f/t; dad dying; teenage daughter; menopause; HRT auto immune illness. Oldest woman in company. Org wants her out. Fighting for rights of older women
Carolyn	Leaves FT role for ‘adventure. Older women “last taboo”. Speaking out on diversity. Fear of mortality. Believer in Agentic Growth and making most of middle age
Kathy	“Crave fresh air and free time”. Older workers should go. Make way for the young. Menopause = mindset.
Linda	Disciplining the body from head to toe. Disciplined life. God = values = discipline
Donna	Ex-husband made her leave FT role. Get your voice heard. It’s up to you. Indifference to menopause
Michelle	Midlife hits you – need a plan. “Keep your mojo!” Extraordinary energy and positivity. Fun. Vanguard of diversity and moving women up
Kim	“Don't write me off”. Spent career proving self. Has ME. Sexuality. Used it throughout career. Terrified of losing it. Fear of age and loss of control.
Frances	Fierce. Intends to work full time for many years. “Woe betide anyone who tries to undermine me!”
Lori	Collision of events. Extraordinary interview. Daughter and mum ill. Menopause difficult. Stepped down. Carved only job share role in history of company
Brenda	Unbelievable entrepreneur. Setting up three companies. Afraid of mortality and ‘nasties’. Ticking Clock. Grab your time now
Gaynor	Battle language. Fought to get to top. Will fight to stay there.

Angela	Spearheading initiatives for women/older women. Struggling. No pay rise for years. Signals that 'time up'.
Nancy	Want to stay. Want to move up. How can I with 3 young children and sick parents? "I can't manage anymore"
Chris	Extraordinary sense of loss (of marriage; of children; of job; of freedom; of friends), combined with positivity for new job, albeit full time. Questions self; brand; look; body.
Tina	Returned after Hodgkins. Got signals that times up. Had to leave to care for daughter
Kathleen	Resurgence of menopause. 'Horrible'. Hideous. Filled with embarrassment. Wants to travel the world.
Melissa	Trauma of placing mother in care. Stepped out of job. Setting up own new company now
Robin	Husband ill all her career. Forced breadwinner. Resilient – word used throughout interview
Niamh	Positivity and energy despite going through protracted legal case for unfair dismissal
Dawn	Retired but would have stayed if had been treated well. Very quiet. Very careful
Patricia	Oldest interviewee. 69. Works full time as academic. No intention to retire. Fearful of not working
Cyn	5 children at home! Works full time as nurse. Studying for a masters. Truly remarkable but very down to earth
Jude	Horrible, dripping, peri menopause. BUT stepped up to Board position. Managing silently
Paula	Company recruits for older people! Flexible arrangements. Doesn't see anything unusual in this.
Jill	Cared simultaneously for mum, mum in law, aunt whilst working full time. Stepped up since all 3 died. Very happy with new career. New lease of life
Gail	Mum locked in syndrome. 7 grandchildren. Full time CEO Financial institution. Stepped out to care. Trying to get back in
Annette	Got ME after caring for Dad and Sister. Not returned to work.
Meg	Optimistic mindset. Works full time and multiple evenings. Mindset = key

APPENDIX FIVE

Sample of Codebook

**First Order Theme:
Experience of Menopause (Meaning and Context)**

First Order Term	Explanation/quote (* = VIP quote)	Who/where
“No idea”	Coil Early hysterectomy/early fibroid + menopause Depo injection Not noticed – early operation Unsure, because sudden period Not really sure, probably post-menopausal No idea, on pill Chemotherapy for cancer when younger, early menopause, overrode any menopausal symptoms Periods stopped after IVF, cancer, put on HRT, no idea; no menstrual cycle to stop Ablation	SH4/AB11 BN5/FG9 KP12 NS8 KG10 DM4/MD8/NOC KH MD3 TM6 Cyn
Can’t remember.	Memory recedes Can’t remember – long time ago Didn't notice – too busy	AB5 PT4 BG15
Symptoms recalled	Flushing None Lack of Sleep “Resilience knocked” Stress, anxiety (makes it worse) *Good long description of perimenopause Coping with symptoms Weight gain Still going on years on (not neat) Peri-menopausal emotions Heavy bleeding – had ablation – “mucky” – everything ‘sealed’ Sudden period recently after 14 months of nothing Relieved migraines; dry skin; dry hair Energy dipping (but look at what she does!)	AB5/ML3/JH4/SB2/C S5/KG7/MM3/MA CH/AB/MD8/JG/KH/ NOC/DW/DM/TK LS/JL3/AB2/MM3 LS LS/JL3 JH4 JH5 NS8 EST1/GC7/KG8 EST1/JH4 CS5 KG8 KG10 CM5

	<p>UTIs (but not sure if menopause) Very mild, protracted Physically weaker, muscle mass gone, tired, flushes</p>	<p>MD8 GC7 MA8</p>
<p>Feelings attached to menopause</p>	<p>“I feel lucky” (to be post-menopausal) *“I feel relieved to have control of my body again” “I feel energised” “I feel liberated” (MM good quotes on liberations and perceptions below) *“I feel energised, relieved, it's a weight lifted. “It’s hard hard hard” “I underestimated how hard it would be” Lack of control Embarrassment “You need confidence to survive perimenopause” “Yet menopause = new stage of life = liberation” “I feel proud to be through it” “Signalled end of being able to have children” “Shouldn't have to experience if not had kids” (tongue in cheek she says) “It’s a prompt, a signifier, for middle age” “It’s no loss, I’ve had enough children” *Gave her control over her body “You just grit your teeth and get on with it” It’s mucky but I’m all sealed up now” (with an ablation” When daughter’s puberty met her menopause met the merger process = very challenging Horrible embarrassment of sudden leaky period “hideous, hideous” “I don't feel anything. Nothing really” Far too busy for maternity and menopause “I’ve told my body I will not have menopause – mind over matter!” “You just shrug your shoulders and get on with it” Meaning and context matters. ‘I choose to blame the menopause’</p>	<p>AB5 EST3 EST2/MM3/LK MM7 GMC12 JL3 JH4 JH7 JH7/EST2/MM4 JH8 KP8 KP11 KP11 EST1 EST2 EST4 GC8 CS7 KG7 KG8/KG23 DM5 BG16/LW6/DM BH16/JW8 DM4 MA9</p>
<p>Benefits of Menopause?</p>	<p>Control of body Sharper mind, increased focus</p>	<p>EST4 GMC12</p>

	Feel better, sharper	MM7
Menopause as pathology	<p>“Give me some tablets!” (Relieved with a diagnosis)</p> <p>*By GP</p> <p>Confounding sleep, flushes, menopause with hard work</p> <p>“If I told work, they’d treat it as an illness... there would be no consideration”</p> <p>Attributes weight gain to menopause (even though says has given up exercise)</p> <p>“Menopause is not a pathology, it’s just frame of reference”</p> <p>*“Menopause is like a disability”</p> <p>Very tired but doesn't blame menopause = kids + work</p> <p>Energy dipping (but holding down 5 jobs) + work contributing</p> <p>Thought she had menopause but was pregnant!</p> <p>*“Don't pathologise it – you just have to reframe those hot flushes”</p> <p>“It’s all about how you think about it”</p> <p>“Menopause is like a depressive illness</p>	<p>LS 8,9,10</p> <p>CH/*SB3</p> <p>JL3/JH6</p> <p>JH6</p> <p>NS11</p> <p>EST2</p> <p>SB9</p> <p>CS6</p> <p>KG10</p> <p>MG21</p> <p>SM4</p> <p>VM4</p> <p>SA13</p>
Role of the ‘expert’ (doctor, consultant, media, other women)	<p>“Blinded me with science” – doctor</p> <p>“Gynae consultant knows it all”</p> <p>“Medicalise yourself whilst still at work” advice</p> <p>Doctor wants me to take HRT. I don't.</p> <p>*Fears of negative media</p> <p>Negative stories from other women</p> <p>Changed doctors when wanted to take her off the pill</p> <p>Doc wanted me on HRT – refused</p> <p>*Rich description of being GP and advising women – meaning and context</p>	<p>LS7</p> <p>JL3</p> <p>JL3</p> <p>JH6</p> <p>KP13</p> <p>KP13</p> <p>KH</p> <p>DM5</p> <p>MA13</p>
It’s a secret	<p>Don't talk about it (at work, with others)</p> <p>*Fear of organisational response (treated as illness)</p> <p>*Silence of HR towards menopause</p> <p>Don't talk about it, even though it’s obvious</p> <p>Generational secret</p> <p>*Screamed at when talked to press and broke silence</p> <p>*Good eg of silence in board room/just bring into the open</p>	<p>LS</p> <p>JH6</p> <p>CH</p> <p>JH4</p> <p>JH7</p> <p>AB9</p> <p>KG20/23</p> <p>KG23</p>

	*Centuries of silence very hard barrier to break down	
HRT	<p>*Taken and positive experience (“saved my life”)</p> <p>Experience of coming off it</p> <p>Hype vs Facts</p> <p>Desire not to take</p> <p>Alternatives tried (sage tablets; exercise; self-help)</p> <p>Wish had taken</p> <p>Old fashioned and “the last thing I’d do”</p> <p>Hated experience of HRT</p> <p>Auto immune illness from coming off HRT</p> <p>Can’t take because family link to breast cancer</p> <p>Put on HRT in 40’s to prevent osteoporosis</p> <p>*Gone on to HRT (and happy to “dish out” as GP)</p>	<p>RG2/LS4/MA11</p> <p>RG2/SB3</p> <p>CH</p> <p>JH6</p> <p>NB2/JH6/CS6</p> <p>JL3</p> <p>JH8</p> <p>GC7</p> <p>SB4</p> <p>KG9</p> <p>KG23</p> <p>TM</p> <p>MA10</p>