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## **'Purposeful togetherness': Theorising gender and ageing through creative events**

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### **Abstract**

Events and festivals are recognised as valuable tools to contribute to social sustainability and community cohesion. However, within this, the experiences of old people are often overlooked, and the important roles events can play in older lives underestimated. Research within both tourism and events has tended to neglect the gendered experiences of ageing, with old women in particular overlooked in terms of their experiences as tourists or event participants. This paper draws on a qualitative study with thirty-three women over the age of 65, participating in regular creative events in rural England. Using a feminist gerontological framework, we explore some of the gendered experiences of ageing for our study participants, and the contribution that participatory creative events play in terms of social sustainability within this group. We find that events provide an escape from routine and a supportive environment in which self-worth is fostered through creating and socialising. The space to make and to reminisce with peers also has a restorative effect which requires regular events if it is to be sustained. Life stories - elicited through narrative inquiry and framed within feminist gerontology - provide a holistic understanding of the role of events in the lives of these women.

### **Keywords**

Ageing; Creative events; Feminist gerontology; Gender; Narrative; Social sustainability

## Introduction

Events research has tended to largely be interested in the experiences of young people due, perhaps, to the attraction of music festivals and major sports events. There has also been little interest in taking a feminist approach to understanding life experience and the importance of this in the social sustainability of events. There are, of course, a few notable exceptions to this (Wood, Jepson & Stadler, 2018; Pielichaty, 2015) and a small but growing body of research within leisure (e.g. Gibson et al., 2002 & 2003; Henderson & Gibson, 2013) and tourism (e.g. Ferrer et al., 2016; Sedgley et al., 2011; Small, 2003). In a world where populations are ageing and life expectancy is increasing, it is time to recognise the value in better understanding the experiences of the old<sup>1</sup>, and the gendered nature of ageing.

The proportion of women 70+ is rising, as average life expectancy increases (Thomas, 2015). According to DEFRA (2011), nearly half (49%) of all people in the UK aged 75+ live alone, while TNS (2014) report that a million older people (65+) in the UK say that they always or often feel lonely. These concerns are particularly acute among older women where, due partly to longer lifespans, there is greater risk of social isolation and poor mental and physical health. Worldwide, women account for 55 per cent of the population aged 60 years and over. Among the very old (aged 80 and over), there are almost twice as many women as men. These women are more likely to be widowed, and to have less education and have worked for fewer years. They also, therefore, have fewer financial resources to draw upon in later life (ILO, 2009). For example, in the UK more than 70% of men aged 65 and over are married, compared to around half (49%) of women in this age group. More than a third (35%) of women over 65 are widowed, compared to 14% of men (Office for National Statistics, 2018).

Despite this, little research has focused on the gendered experiences of ageing either within event studies or in broader disciplines. For example, social gerontology tends to see gender as a variable, or simply 'adds on' the experiences of old women to what is already known about old men, failing to engage with gender as a social process and organising principle that forms men's and women's experiences throughout the life-course (Krekula, 2007). The different experiences, positions and resources available to old women, compared to old men, reflect women's experiences in earlier life. Gender does matter to the experiences of ageing; the two are intimately linked, although they are often treated as separate by academics and policy makers (Biggs, 2004). Indeed, Russell (2007: 187) argues that "[o]lder people themselves construct ageing as a gendered phenomenon". However, feminist scholarship has largely neglected old women, focusing more on early and middle life and practices associated with work and motherhood. Feminist gerontology aims to bridge these gaps in both social gerontology and feminist research, focusing on the gendered experiences of ageing and the socially constructed meanings and values of old women's lives (Freixas, Luque and Reina, 2012).

In line with Eizenberg and Jabareen's (2017:80) conceptual framework, creative activities, through events, have the potential to affect the four social sustainability domains of 'safety', 'equity', eco-prosperity, and 'sustainable urban forms'. In particular, within our research context, the domain of *equity* (fostering participation and reducing alienation) is where events have the potential to be effective sustainability interventions. In one of the few studies focusing on older populations and social sustainability Liu et al (2017:663) highlight two related key factors, *wellbeing* and *social justice* (equity). Indeed, there is a large and growing body of research that evidences the benefits to

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<sup>1</sup> Following Calasanti (2008), we use the word 'old' rather than 'older' as a political act against ageism and an attempt "to normalize the differences that accrue in later life" (p.155).

wellbeing of creative activities (e.g. Wood, Jepson & Stadler, 2018; Bedding & Sadlo, 2008; Cutler 2012; Kenning, 2015; Maidment and Macfarlane, 2011), of getting out of the house into a 'third space' (Alidoust, 2019), and of regular social interaction (Beard et al., 2016). Events can provide the catalyst for these factors to converge and therefore have the potential to enhance social sustainability in a variety of communities. Such events can be smaller scale, community driven, intergenerational, and regularly occurring - many of the characteristics overlooked in current events research (Armbrecht et al., 2019; Getz & Page, 2016). In this paper, we use a feminist gerontological framework to explore how whole life experiences affect perceptions of and reactions to later life and the role participatory creative events can play in this.

Drawing on a larger study into creative arts events for old people, we present narrative life stories for three old women to illustrate some of the intersections between gender and ageing and the role that events can play in old people's lives. Each individual narrative was created collaboratively as the women discussed their lives with each other and with the researchers. Our humanist approach created an environment where they could reflect upon and edit their 'story', giving ownership and allowing a whole life perspective of the phenomena to emerge.

Our participants' stories show the importance of regular creative event participation in the lives of these women, and that the significance of this can only be understood through an appreciation of their broader life experiences. We discuss these in relation to the potential for such socially sustainable events, of other types and in other communities, and call for further research drawing on feminist gerontology in event studies.

### **Theorising gender and ageing**

Dominant ways of thinking about ageing have often focused on a deficit model, in which ageing is seen as a process of steady decline and loss with old people becoming progressively more dependent and less 'useful' and connected to wider society (Hugman, 1999). Gerontologists have long critiqued this model as oppressive and denying the lived realities of many old people's lives. This deficit model has been largely replaced in research and policy terms by the active ageing paradigm, adopted by both the WHO and the European Commission (Carroll & Bartlett, 2015). Ideas of 'active ageing', 'successful ageing', 'healthy ageing' and 'productive ageing' focus less on what old people cannot do – deficits – and more on what they can still do - for themselves, their families and communities. Active involvement in a range of activities – including work (paid or unpaid), physical activity, social engagements and civic duties – is presented as a way to age 'successfully', and to ward off many of the perceived horrors of frailty and dependence traditionally associated with old age (Boudiny, 2013). Research on so-called 'silver tourism' often adopts the active ageing paradigm, focusing on the ways in which events, travel and tourism can contribute to improved physical and mental health amongst old people, and exploring the market potential of the senior tourist segment (Ferrer et al., 2016; Wright, 2018).

The active ageing paradigm remains popular in research and policy terms, as it seems to offer at least a partial response to some of the perceived 'problems' of ageing populations and their economic, social and physical dependence on younger generations. If old people can be supported to engage in activities and practices that will contribute to prolonging their independence and mobility, they will be less reliant on others and less of a drain on the state. Van Dyck (2014) argues that this approach is deeply problematic, as it suggests "that there is not merely a general potential to influence the ageing process in a 'positive' way, but an individual responsibility to do so" (p.94). This results in a lack of attention to structural impediments that can affect many old people, such as

poverty and isolation, and applies only to the healthy 'young old', marginalising the 'old old' and those with poor mobility and health problems who are not able to age 'actively' and 'successfully'.

Sedgley, Pritchard and Morgan (2011) urge tourism researchers interested in the experiences of old people to engage with critical gerontological perspectives that question dominant ways of thinking about ageing and old people. Feminist gerontology represents a position from which to critique societal, policy and research perspectives on age and ageing. As Garner (1999) argues, "[t]o become old in Western societies is to be devalued" (p.4), and old women in particular have been "systematically denigrated" (p.3). However, both feminists and gerontologists have tended to ignore the experiences of old women. As Krekula (2007) notes, feminist research has concentrated predominantly on young and middle-aged women as mothers and/or workers, and the old woman has been marginalised in much feminist work, ignored or appearing only as a burden to her younger kin. Equally, although social gerontologists have frequently studied old women, this has rarely been from a gender perspective. Gender is often treated as a variable; the experiences of old women are 'added on' to or compared to what we know of old men, and the gendered aspects of old people's lives have rarely been explored (Krekula, 2007; Calasanti, 2008).

Ageing, as with other life experiences, is a gendered process and there are clear differences in how men and women experience ageing. Women are more likely than men to experience poverty in old age, largely as a result of their lower engagement in paid work throughout the life-course and greater responsibility for caregiving, meaning old women tend to have poorer pensions than old men (Foster & Walker, 2013). Limited access to resources undoubtedly restricts the ability of some women to participate in certain leisure or art activities. Additionally class identity may also influence participation in some activities over others. For example, the term 'craft' may be seen as more acceptable than 'art' for women who see themselves as working class (Carter et al, 2018). As feminist research has long demonstrated, female bodies are subject to higher surveillance and critique throughout the life-course than are male bodies, and this continues into old age. Old women's bodies are more likely to be seen as deformed, desexualised and repulsive (Silver, 2003). Old women's bodies continue to be central to how they are perceived and (de)valued, but judged negatively against standards of youthfulness, ability and sexuality. As Twigg (2004: 61) argues, "the older female body is both invisible – in that it is no longer seen – and hypervisible – in that it is all that is seen." Women are more likely than men to experience chronic illness and disability in old age, and thus to be the recipients of care. However, women also live longer, if not necessarily healthier, lives and tend to create and sustain better social networks and lasting friendships. They also tend to be more engaged with their adult children and grandchildren, if they have them, and are key consumers of culture in the form of books, theatre, cinema and talks (Freixas, Luque & Reina, 2012). Women's experiences of ageing are thus complex and nuanced.

Men's experiences of ageing are also gendered, although they are rarely recognised as such. Men's experiences throughout the life-course also profoundly shape their aged realities, and men may suffer from loss of power and autonomy in old age in ways that challenge and potentially undermine their sense of self as masculine (Calasanti, 2008). While men's bodies may be subject to less overt control and censure than women's bodies throughout the life-course, including in old age, men may still experience frustration and alienation in relation to their aged body. Old men often report feeling there are few social activities open to them, and they are less likely to maintain strong social networks, contributing to loneliness (Russell, 2007).

There is a 'double standard of ageing' (Sontag, 1997), through which ageism and sexism intersect to differentially affect the experiences of old men and women. Feminist gerontology recognises ageing as a gendered phenomenon and explores the power differentials that shape the relational

categories of both gender - men and women – and age – young and old (Calasanti, 2004). Feminist gerontologists centralise issues of power in analysis, and consider how old people's experiences and identities are shaped by gendered experiences throughout their lives. Research informed by feminist gerontology aims to include old people – women and men, as appropriate to the research questions – as participants rather than subjects in research and to advocate for change in attitudes and practice in relation to ageing and old men and women. Hooyman et al. (2002) explain that

feminist gerontology views gender as a relational construct that provides women and men with advantages and disadvantages throughout the life course. Feminists pursue a holistic view of people's lives, emphasising strengths, oppression, differences, and abilities; analysing old age in a more inclusive manner; and advocating social change to reduce inequalities (p.10).

In this project we adopted feminist gerontology as an approach to try and understand some of the gendered experiences of ageing for the old women in our study. In the next section we explain the research methods we adopted to engage these women as participants rather than subjects in the research, and the use of participatory creative events as a means through which to explore these old women's gendered life stories and current identities.

## **Methodology**

### *The events*

The creative events took place each week in a community centre and local arts venue and were supported by the charity Age UK. A professional artist, who specialised in working with old people, designed and led each three hour event, and provided the materials. The events were designed to use the women's past experiences and existing skills and to develop these further into more creative and artistic activities, thus, overcoming some of the perceived barriers to participation and providing a level of challenge and creativity which gave them the most enjoyment and sense of achievement. Over the 6-month data collection period the creative events included pottery, mosaics, silk painting, origami, iPad art, rag wreath making and felting. All of the sessions resulted in an individual artefact to be taken home by each participant.

### *Method*

Our core method, narrative inquiry discussions, allowed for better integration of a feminist gerontological approach. Central to this approach is the researchers' presence within the groups (in line with the tradition of ethnographic fieldwork), maximising the likelihood of obtaining rich, insightful data through researcher-participant relationships built on trust, rapport, empathy and friendship (Gubruim & Holstein, 2009). Furthermore, 'doing the art' with others allowed us to reflect on our own feelings in terms of what we create, how we relate to those around us and how we think and feel about this afterwards. This enabled us to more sensitively and intuitively 'edit' the discussion narratives to form each individual's own story. The community nature of the events was utilised to schedule small discussion groups facilitated to understand shared experiences and gain rich insights through dialogical narrative focussing on lived experience. These discussions were free flowing, allowing participants to choose what they shared and how.

Each group took part in three activities (one per week) and three narrative discussions lasting about one hour and conducted the following week, prior to the next activity. To create a more informal

environment lunch was provided for the participants during the discussions. This allowed conversation to flow more naturally as we ate, shared food and thus, had a focus parallel to the conversation (Herman et al., 2019). During the lunchtime discussions the women were encouraged to share stories around how they spend their time now - a typical day - their life histories, the role of creativity, art and craft in their past and present lives, and their thoughts on the events and the artefacts created. The women were encouraged to become co-researchers, commenting on the narratives of others and asking questions themselves (see discussion format and schedule in Appendix A).

Following Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000, p.61), the role of the researcher within the discussion groups was kept to a minimum in order “to elicit a less imposed and therefore more 'valid' rendering of the informant's perspective”. As required of narrative inquiry, we aimed to avoid (or keep to a minimum) any pre-structuring of the discussion, instead using everyday communication in the form of story-telling and listening. The resulting narratives offer deep insights through ‘natural’ story-telling, an essential method through which people make sense of lives and experiences. As Frank (2013, p. 25) states, “telling stories is a way people make sense of experience, produce and maintain sense of identity, and reconstruct a sense of order in disrupted lives”. This method also values the mundane, taken-for-granted, unremarkable features of life that interviewees, in more formal interviews, might not feel worth commenting on (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

After transcription and the teasing out of individual ‘stories’ each participant received a draft of their ‘story’ in the form of a booklet. This consisted of a sympathetically edited text derived from the transcripts and fully maintaining the voice of the speaker. Participants were then asked to comment on their own story in one-to-one discussions or by adding comments to the booklets as preferred.

This vital phase gave ownership to those involved and left them with a lasting artefact that could be shared, further building self-worth, identity and belonging. In this way the research design developed so that participation in the project itself was enjoyable and beneficial.

#### *Participant recruitment and location*

The research took place in two rural locations within Yorkshire, England. These regions were selected as having the potential for social isolation for old women, to draw upon the experience and expertise of our Arts Provider partner and the support of a local branch of an age-related charity (Age UK). Eligibility to take part was based on engagement in similar social activities (as well as age 65+). Ideally, we sought to involve those who had an interest in creative events and who were at higher risk of loneliness, alongside a mixture of background, experience and level of wellbeing. All participants were white reflecting the mono-ethnicity within the region.

In total, 33 participants took part in the research, 48% of whom lived alone. Ages ranged from 66 to 89 and all were either fully or semi-retired. There was a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds due to the two regions and venues selected.

The activity and discussion venues were familiar to the participants and informal (community centre, community art space). The varied events were designed by the Arts Provider based on their considerable experience of delivering art and craft events to old people and included activities which were new to the participants, with some element of challenge and creativity.

Although the activities remained the same at both venues, in one location the events were framed as ‘craft’, as the art facilitator’s past experience had identified that those who saw themselves as more working class preferred the term ‘craft’ and did not see themselves as creative or artistic but as ‘makers’. The more middle-class group recruited in the second location were happier to associate

themselves with 'art'. The location of the events also reflects this in that a community centre was used by the artist facilitator in one area and an arts hub/gallery used in the other.

As experiences of isolation and loneliness are of interest in this research, we were cognisant of the need to make the sessions accessible. Venues were chosen with this in mind, and recruitment aimed to attract those who might otherwise have found it difficult to attend such sessions. We drew upon the support of volunteer agencies in the regions to provide transportation as necessary.

### *Analytical approach*

All of the resulting 33 stories provided privileged insight into the lives of these women and the role of social creative events within them. The stories were analysed separately by the two co-authors and our approach was not to dissect the narratives into themes but to keep the stories-within-the-stories intact. We therefore maintained the narrative inquiry approach from data generation to analysis. In considering each participant's own story, we initially focused on content and structure, identified the types of narrative resources drawn upon and considered the effects that the stories had on the storyteller and the listeners.

Reflective of the feminist gerontological approach adopted, and in order to present our findings as narratives that remain true to the storytellers, we have chosen to focus on just three in this paper. We selected these particular narratives because they represent differing aspects of life experience and the stories through which these are told.

## **Findings**

In the following sections we present the narratives of three of our participants – Kathy, Maureen and Shona (names changed and other identifying material anonymised). Following the narrative format of the interviewing and the theoretical framework of feminist gerontology, we present their stories in terms of 'then' - their memories of life in young and middle age – and 'now' - life in old age, as it is impossible to understand their experiences now without taking account of other times in their life histories. The creative events provide a forum for the sharing of these stories but also play an important role in the contemporary lives of each of the three women.

### **Kathy's story**

#### ***Then***

Kathy spoke very fondly of her childhood, when she had felt loved and valued. However, this was tinged with some sadness because of the death of her brother, and her mother's subsequent depression.

*Well I was born in [market town] in 1937, which was two years before the war. And my brother died when he was six with meningitis and I had a sister that was 13 years older than me, but Fred would have been six, so there was six years between them, just about. So I realised a lot of years later that if Fred hadn't have died, sadly, I wouldn't be here eating this lovely lunch. My sister told me before she died, she died in '66, and she told me that 'you came for a reason' because we wouldn't have had my mother otherwise. Because in those days there was no tranquilisers or anti-depressants or anything and losing Fred was, it had got to her. So I came along.*

*I thought the whole of the world loved everybody else because that's all I knew. All my Aunties and everybody, they all came to see me because they would realise it had sort of saved my mother in a way, I suppose. It was lovely though, 'cause family life was good, wasn't it? Family life was good. You knew where you stood, didn't you? It was good.*

She married at 23 but that ended badly. For Kathy, this was a difficult period as she felt shame at getting divorced at a time when this was very unusual. She obliquely referred to her own depression.

*We used to go dancing and I met him. And we got married when I was 23 and we went to live at Woodside Lane, 'cause he managed a site. And unfortunately he was a womaniser so he went off with somebody else and I just went rapidly down and down and my mum and dad, poor things, they had trouble with me, so the doctor said if I didn't get away I probably wouldn't survive, so I went to work in Harrogate. That's how I met my present husband. I'd divorced this other one, you see. Well you know the first person I was married to was a positive waste of time really. And that really, I was silly at the time, it really took it out of me did that 'cause nothing like that ever happened in our family, it just didn't happen. They're more open now and it doesn't matter now, does it? Not like it did. It was terrible when I was young, it was unheard of really.*

Kathy worked throughout her adult life, and she found work an enjoyable, sociable and positive experience.

*I met a friend at the marketplace and he said, 'Austin Reeds are moving here, why don't you go for a job?' I was about 30-ish then. Anyway I applied, but they said I could have a job if I went down to live in London. So they gave me a bedsit in Earl's Court in London and I lived down there and trained... Oh it was good, we all moved together you see, we had some fun really. And I was chairman of the social club, so we used to do all the Lyke Wake Walk and everything, it was great was that period, I liked that.*

However, although she remarried, more happily this time, and was broadly positive about many aspects of her working-age life, she was unable to get pregnant and her lack of children was clearly a source of pain for her.

*Oh that was the only thing I always wanted, children. I never had any. And I used to go all over, gynaecologists. There was one woman at York, they called her Doctor Roy I think she was, she was a massive woman, 'nothing wrong with you, woman', she said, 'you're perfectly alright'. Well I can't have been because I didn't.*

Again, her struggles with mental health are apparent in her open admission of her desire to 'pinch' someone else's baby.

*I could have pinched somebody's. I know, it's a horrible feeling. There used to be a big white Silver Cross in Thirsk, those big Silver Cross prams and it was white, but it had seen better days and inside it was absolutely filthy and there was no covers and there was this little blond-haired baby and I kept seeing him sat up and somebody had a put a newspaper or something with a few chips on near this child you see, and I used to go like this [gestures to pick it up] and I used to think, 'I could take him home with me and wash him and get him lovely and comfortable because nobody wants him'. And how I didn't sometimes was beyond me and I kept seeing this same child. And then somebody would say, somebody somewhere had taken a child and it was a wicked thing to do and I used to think 'no, that woman is desperate', you see. Because that child wasn't loved or wanted. And the poor little thing, and I used to, it's a horrible feeling, it really is.*

Kathy's young and middle-aged life was varied, encompassing work she found rewarding and a loving wider family. However, her first failed marriage and her subsequent inability to get pregnant and have children caused sadness, and probably mental health challenges for Kathy throughout her adult life.

### **Now**

Talking about her life now, Kathy appeared lonely and frustrated. Her desire to connect with other people is palpable but is often unmet. Her second husband is still alive, but does not seem to provide her with the company and connection she craves.

*I'm starting to think my days must be very quiet. Not very eventful, when I've listened to everybody ... too much time in the day, because like I say, I'm a people person ... I sometimes look out and think, 'if everybody'd died and there's only me here, nobody would know'. I mean there's Al, but he's alright doing his crosswords!*

*I don't go out on a night very much because I don't want to leave Al and he doesn't really particularly want to go out. And if I go out, very occasionally, I'll come back and he'll say, 'oh it's empty without you', and I've only been a couple of hours. He'll go if I go, he won't go on his own. Well we're both 80 and you know we're lucky really. He's quite content, which is a good thing, doing nothing.*

Kathy and her husband would both be classed as 'oldest old' (Choo & Chi, 2002), and so poor health and deterioration are features of their contemporary experiences. Kathy's frustration with her husband – who, based on Kathy's description, may have some signs of dementia – was clear. She presented him as a good, kind man, but she is struggling to cope with him in his older years.

*I'm lucky I still have Al but he says the same things now, 'can I get you anything?' – 'no thank you' and he says 'are you sure?' and I say 'yes' and then he waits a bit and says 'is there anything I can get you?' and I say 'no'. And then I think 'I'm going to have to go in that cupboard, I want to go in that cupboard', so I go in the cupboard, he'll say 'what can I get you?' and I say 'nothing' and he'll say 'well what are you looking for then?' Then I close the cupboard, 'I'm not looking for anything'. So he's got you know, he's got a bit like that you see. Old age, isn't it? But we're lucky. Aren't we?*

Throughout her story, Kathy compared her own experiences now to her earlier life and that of previous generations. In doing this she comments on the changing expectations of ageing and of being old. Often this reflected a sense of nostalgia and longing for a time passed.

*It's our age, it's our age. And I don't think, personally, I don't know if you all agree, that we don't accept it the same, we don't accept old age. And that's the difference. I don't think we do. I think we're up here thinking 'I shouldn't be like this'... We think we should be doing, don't we? I think they [old people of previous generations] were far more content in their own way because they accepted old age. There were certain parts of your lives that you, they accepted. You know like being very young and then getting to middle age and then old age and we don't do that, do we? No, I don't and that's the trouble. It's modern ways, modern living isn't it?*

For Kathy, the creative events are a long-standing aspect of her routine. She values the social aspect to chat and to get out of the house, and possibly away from her husband for a time.

*I must have been coming here the longest because I've been coming, oh I don't know, Joan was the warden here. I've been coming a lot longer because Joan used to sit on a round table*

*over there, maybe ten years, maybe longer. However long it's been going ... So it's a lot of years 'cause Joan's been dead a few years. So I've been coming a long time.*

*Do you know what I think? It's quite nice to do this, and have a chat, isn't it? Wouldn't it be nice if we did a bit more of this in here maybe? Having a discussion, now and again, just a little sit around – providing we had a nice lunch.*

Although Kathy is the only one of the three women whose stories are presented in this paper who does not live alone, she is still clearly lonely and frustrated. The creative events provide an important opportunity for her to get out and socialise with others.

## **Shona's story**

### **Then**

Shona has been disabled all her life, and so physical limitations have been a constant feature for her.

*I was born on a farm about just a mile out of Brampton. It isn't a village, just some houses. My earliest memory is being in hospital because I was born with scoliosis and I had a dislocated hip. I hadn't a hip joint so I was in hospital. I can't remember much about it but I went in when I was 18 months and I was four when I came out, so it was quite a long time.*

*Then I was in plaster for quite a while and I can remember dad had a pram and he'd cut the sides out and he used to take me all over the fields. I went to see the cows, the sheep, everything. Where dad was, I was! I was a right daddy's girl... So I lived there 'til I was 19 and then I got married. I lived on Stockley Road just about half a mile from where I'd lived.*

She married young and had two children. Several years later she became pregnant again and at this point split from her husband to become a single mother.

*I went to secretarial college and then I worked at the potato marketing board, absolutely loved it there, and then we had the girls... Then when the girls were 12 and 14 I was expecting Paul and unfortunately my husband couldn't cope with another one coming along so I decided to go solo, do it on my own, and so I moved out of Brampton and I moved to [county town] which is a whole three miles from where I started!*

Shona's life has been punctuated by numerous tragic events, notably the death of one of her children, her own ill health and the loss of her parents, who she was close to.

*Then we had the Millennium and in 2001 my younger daughter had terrible headaches and it ended up she had a brain tumour. In the meantime my mum and dad had come to live in a bungalow. They'd sold the farm because my mum had Parkinson's disease. They came to live behind us in the next street but the gardens met at the back so that I could help my dad with my mum and he could help me with Paul. Mum had to go into a nursing home 'cause my dad started with Alzheimer's, so they went into a nursing home.*

*My son was 14 when I found out his sister had got a brain tumour, I remember my son was putting new wheels on his skateboard. She lived two and a half years which was horrendous really. It was a really hard time and she died, he'd be 17, he'd just had his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday when she passed away. The next year my dad died and then I got breast cancer. The next year my mum died, and I had a hysterectomy as well, about two months after Sharon died. Then I started picking myself up.*

Shona's young and middle-aged life was difficult in terms of health, loss and being a single parent to three children. However, she talked about how she 'picked herself up' and spent more time discussing her life now, than dwelling on difficult times in the past.

### **Now**

Shona would be classed as 'young old' (Chou & Chi, 2002) as she is in her mid-60s, but her poor health remains a strong characteristic of her everyday experiences.

*This morning I've cleaned up, I've done housework 'cause it needs doing. I have no routine because I don't do routines because then it interferes in your social life if you have routines. You know, if somebody wants to go out, I go out, so I just do my housework as and when I'm at home.*

*I am on my own. I do a lot of embroidery and craft sewing and what have you 'cause being disabled I do what I can. I have to work my life around my body but that doesn't stop me doing things, because I have been like this since birth so I have learnt over the years that you've got to adapt to your life, you know. It doesn't run me, if you know what I mean. I'm in charge, not it.*

Shona lives alone, but has an active social life, meeting friends and attending regular events, like the ones in this study. She remains close to her adult children and regularly sees her grandchildren as well.

*Wednesday once a month I go to the lace group, Thursdays I go to lace classes on a Thursday night and Friday I stay at home and try and get some work done on a Friday. But not always! Saturday I usually go out with my daughter for coffee or she comes to visit or something like that and then Sunday my son comes with his two little boys, you know, keeps me busy. In between I have quite a few friends and go out and do things.*

Shona is one of the younger members of the group and she initially felt she might be too young to enjoy the events.

*I first came here to see a film but I did think I was too young to come. I'm 66 and I would only be 60 then and I thought 'too young to go there' but when I got here I enjoyed it. Sometimes I do get a bit bored I'll be honest, but I really, really like doing the quizzes, 'casue we do quizzes, and I'm really enjoying these sessions where we're doing creative things. I can't just sit and natter and watch the world go by. But to be fair, as you get older you slow down. I mean I don't do as much now at 66 as I did at 60. So you slow down, so you're quite happy to sit and chat. Too much energy when I first came!*

However, she really enjoys craft activities and has done throughout her life, and so the active participation in these art events is fun and stimulating for her.

*When I was doing the mosaics I didn't even realise we'd got anywhere near to teatime. At home I can end up having my dinner at 9 o'clock at night 'cause I've got that busy and I'll just do another little bit and I'll just do another little bit and I'll just do another little bit. I can really forget myself doing things like that.*

*I had a really good laugh last week because Jane and me were clipping tiles and we made a real mess down below and Jane said to me 'all that mess you've got down there' 'cause I was clipping everyone else's tiles because I'd finished mine. I said 'I did nothing, you did all that!'*

*but Claire was worrying about all this mess on the floor and me and Jane were just blaming each other for it! No, I loved it.*

For Shona, art and craft have played an important role throughout her life, providing her with focus, enjoyment and relaxation around the limitations of her disabled body. The creative events provide a form of continuity with her earlier experiences in this way, whilst also offering opportunity to socialise and have fun with others.

## **Maureen's story**

### ***Then***

Maureen came from a relatively poor but happy background.

*Well I was brought up at [place] in what was called Brick Yard because they used to make bricks, well before I was born. We didn't have television. In fact we didn't have electric until we moved into the village to get electric and water when I was 21. Before that it was an earth toilet and a pump. I can't say we were ever bored there.*

She also married young, and this seems to have been a happy marriage. The death of her husband, suddenly and unexpectedly in their late 50s, was a shock and source of sadness for Maureen. Her friends helped her through this difficult time.

*I started work in a bakery. I worked there until I left to have the boy, and he's 50 this year. Got married, had a daughter, son and daughter, and I've two grandchildren.*

*My husband, he was a draughtsman, and he couldn't get a job anywhere because they had all gone onto computers and he couldn't get on with computers. He was a drawer, you know. He got a job packing cream at the dairy. They took him on for Christmas packing cream and kept him on. Quite a change but he said it was a job and he says our house was paid for so he says 'that'll do 'til I retire'. Well he didn't get to retiring. He came home from work and went for a bath and died in the bath.*

*Bit of a shock for us but you get by. You get on, life has to go on, as he would have said. I had some very good friends who just let me talk. They offered you bereavement counselling but I said I think it's just like opening doors. Once you've gone through that door it's easier the next time to go and do it. Going shopping was hard. I don't drive and I'd never gone shopping on my own because he always took me with him. But you do these things... But as I say you get by, you do things and at least it gets easier. Now I go coffeering with the girls who were good to me. You find out who your friends are. They let me talk.*

Maureen's young and middle age appears to have been relatively happy, but the death of her husband marked a sharp disjuncture, the repercussions of which would continue into her old age.

### ***Now***

Maureen is in her 70s so she would be classed as 'old-old' (Chou & Chi, 2002), although she retains relatively good health. She lives alone but fills her life with activities.

*I do all my own gardening. Go into town for coffees. Go on trips. There's always something you can do. But yes, that's how I fill my time in, coffeering and I love gardening. I don't do a lot of housework, I'd rather be out in the garden.*

Maureen often goes on bus trips. Her ability to do this is sometimes limited by the expense, which is reflective of her finding herself unexpectedly alone in retirement and without her husband's pension.

*I go on a lot of bus trips. Was on one yesterday. We went to see the daffodils at Barndale but the bus wasn't allowed to go up. I should have gone on a trip last week but I cancelled. I just couldn't afford it. I know it wasn't expensive, just down to Eastbourne. But you know when you have your own house and I've had such a lot of things gone wrong lately and I want some new fencing up and things and I thought, well, you have to get your priorities right.*

She enjoys the sociability of the bus outings, regardless of the focus of the trip.

*I go on the bus trips about once a fortnight or sometimes it can be once a week. Last Sunday I was going to go with a friend who said 'oh I'm going to Cheshire Oaks'. 'Oh,' I says, 'I don't like Cheshire Oaks because I don't like shopping' but I says 'it's a day out, I'll go on a day out'.*

The loss of her husband in middle age is still keenly felt, and she mentioned the need to be proactive and do things to try and avoid loneliness.

*Well I've lived on my own for 16 years nearly, since my husband died. You know it's nice to get out and see somebody because you do get lonely. There's no getting away from it however long it is, you know, you do get lonely.*

The creative events are an important part of her weekly routine, and a further opportunity to socialise.

*I've come here every week. Well unless I'm not feeling very well or it's been absolutely pouring down because it takes me about 20 minutes to walk it. You can't just come once, you have to give it a few weeks to see.*

Maureen comments on how other people in her circle view the events as being for 'old people', and not for them. However, she is more willing to recognise herself as old.

*I called on my auntie one Monday. She said 'it's for old people over there on a Monday'. She was well into her seventies, 'it's for old people'. She wouldn't come because she thought it was for old people, yet she was old. I can meet people as I'm walking up here who'll say 'I know where you're going, you're going to old people's club'. I think, 'but you're an old person yourself, you know'. I mean yes, there is some old ones. But some of us aren't as old as the others. I suppose you're only as old as you feel. Ah well, I'm well into my seventies. Don't feel it sometimes, but yes I am.*

The creative events are another important meeting opportunity for Maureen and a way to stave off loneliness.

*I suppose it's more interesting doing these things in a group. I wouldn't do it at home on my own, a lot of these things. It's more interesting because you're seeing what they're doing and how they're doing things as well. You're meeting other people and if you're on your own they can be long days and a lot of people don't get out. I think you can go and you can just say hello to somebody and that can make their day because they might not see anybody that day. So coming here, they can meet other people, can't they? You meet people, don't you, and as I said, they can be lonely days.*

Maureen seems to still miss her husband, 16 years after his sudden death, and talks about loneliness despite her seemingly active social life. She proactively engages in a wide range of activities, of which the creative events are an important part, to make sure she remains connected to other people.

## **Discussion**

The three narratives presented above illustrate the power of a feminist gerontological approach for understanding the lived realities of old women's lives. Kathy's sense of boredom and frustration with her day-to-day existence makes sense in opposition to the excitement of her working life, and her sense of loss and grief at not having had children. Shona's continued close relationships with her adult son and daughter are linked to her earlier experiences of being a single parent and of the tragic death of her other child. Maureen's drive to get out and be sociable, taking part in as many trips and activities as she can afford, is set against the context of the unexpected death of her husband in middle age, and her consequent fear of loneliness. Taking a whole-life perspective enables deeper understanding of the contemporary lives of these women, and offers insight into their experiences, fears and desires in later life (Calasanti, 2004).

Ageing – as with all life experiences – is a gendered process. Kathy's story illustrates how women who cannot have children can suffer a deep sense of sadness and absence, which may follow them through into old age. Her experiences of living with, possibly caring for, a husband who may have dementia or other age-related conditions, is common for many old women. Kathy clearly feels a complex mix of frustration with him, resentment at the limitations his needs may place on her ability to go out and do things, and a sense of guilt and duty, as she is 'lucky' to still have him. In contrast, Maureen – like many old women – finds herself widowed and living alone, and her sense of loss in relation to her husband is clear. Her female friend network has proven to be extremely important, both in terms of helping her through her initial grief and in sustaining her social life and opportunities for interaction into old age. Shona's life has been characterised by both disability and caring for others - her children and her parents - both experiences that disproportionately affect women. These gendered experiences have shaped the lives of all three women in subtle ways that may be less apparent if we had focused only on their experiences of the events in this study and not discussed their whole life stories with them.

We have chosen to present the narratives of just three women in this paper, as we wanted to try and give some deeper insight into their unique life experiences. Even in relation to these three women we have had to be selective and edit down the rich narratives we created with them, due to constraints of space. We are also conscious of the other 30 women in the study whose stories we did not present here, all of whom have also lived rich and complex lives that would be relevant and informative to the discussion in this paper. However, as with any research project, authors have to make choices and in so doing foreground certain voices and issues and silence others. Our intention here, in line with our feminist gerontological framework, was to select just a few examples and to try and let these women's voices be heard and to let them explain key moments in their life, both today and in earlier years. To try and understand more about old people's lives, needs and experiences we need to listen to their life stories, and this paper is an attempt to begin to do this in the context of events.

The voices of old people – and old women in particular – are noticeably absent from the events literature, but it is clear that the creative events in this study play an important role in the lives of

the women whose narratives are presented above. For all of them, albeit in different ways and for slightly different reasons, the events provide a focus to the week and a chance to get out of the house, socialise and do something interesting and practical with others. Their lives as wives, mothers, carers, grandmothers, daughters and a host of other interconnected roles and identities have a huge impact on who they are now, how they feel and what they do. The events provide both a link to the past and an escape from it, as well as from the other aspects of their day-to-day lives. Events can provide a safe space in which to share similar and contrasting experiences.

The events themselves and the activities taking place within them - art, creation, being listened to and reminiscing - undoubtedly led to feelings of equity and inclusivity that were perhaps lacking in other aspects of their lives (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017). For these women, the chance to learn new skills, be artistic or creative, are important in defining who they now are (Kenning, 2015). Doing this within an event setting allows for the additional wellbeing gained from talking to peers, of reminiscing and of supporting each other (Liu et al, 2017; Maidment and Macfarlane, 2009). This may happen in other situations (on the bus trips, coffee mornings, family gatherings mentioned in the discussions) but there is undoubtedly something unique in doing this whilst creating an artefact. It is this combination that makes these events so important in their lives and indicates a way in which events can contribute to social sustainability.

This has significant implications for other events and tourism contexts as our research highlights the importance of the *everyday* in overall life experience. Events and tourism researchers have tended to concentrate on extraordinary or one-off experiences but here we see that regular and comparatively ordinary activities are also rich sources of happiness in older age. Interestingly, Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, (2014) found that ordinary (rather than extraordinary) experiences become increasingly associated with happiness as people get older. The elements of these experiences that could transfer to other tourism contexts are, being out of the house, being with others and being active rather than passive. Making and/or creativity is important here but other activities may also create similar senses of achievement, belonging and self-worth. The value of being together, engaged in an activity, and with opportunity to talk, share experiences and life stories is valuable at all ages, but perhaps particularly in old age. Future research could usefully build on these findings to enhance understanding of the ways in which events and tourism can contribute to well-being and happiness in old age and the implications of this for social sustainability in the context of rapidly ageing societies.

## **Conclusions**

Our study highlights the variety of life experience within this population, the gendered nature of ageing and the importance of socially creative activities in supporting these women. The recounting of happy and sad times had a markedly positive effect on the self-worth and social identity of both the teller and the listeners. The creative sessions created a catalyst for this to happen in a 'safe' and supportive environment. Reminiscence was also found to be restorative for these women when reflecting on life histories or, indeed, on last week's activity. Being amongst female peers, helping each other and learning from each other, appeared to build self-confidence and strengthen feelings of acceptance and belonging amongst the women involved. These benefits mirror those highlighted by Eizenberg and Jabareen's (2017) social sustainability framework, and demonstrate the importance of a safe space, of inclusivity and equity amongst participants. Wellbeing, as a main component of social sustainability identified for older people (Liu et al. 2017), is developed through the activities themselves, in the creation of 'art' and in the sharing of experiences. Similar

conclusions have been drawn by other researchers exploring the link between 'craft' and wellbeing (see for example Kenning, 2015; Maidment and MacFarlane, 2009 and 2011) however, we believe that this is the first research in this area that has considered the wider social sustainability aspects of creative events through a whole life perspective.

We have also demonstrated the benefits to both researchers and participants of employing a humanist narrative approach and for framing this within feminist gerontology. There is undoubtedly a healing power in telling your story and in feeling listened to, which we witnessed and experienced ourselves. We therefore recommend that future research into socially sustainable events, tourism or leisure considers the person and their life experience holistically and in a way that provides personal benefit to them. In our study this was mainly through the provision of the activity at the event and the opportunity to reminisce.

For events to be socially sustainable and to enrich the lives of other old women we make a number of recommendations. The regularity of occurrence was particularly important, allowing for the development of social connections and a looked forward to weekly 'time-out' from home and routine. For these women it was important to being doing something with a purpose; not just killing time but creating something beautiful and/or useful. We also suggest designing events with a consideration for past life experience. The women in our study often drew upon past experiences whilst learning something new. The sense of achievement gained from completing an artistic artefact was also very important and undoubtedly built feelings of confidence and pride. Therefore, each event occurrence needs to be designed to create some challenge, an achievement and an atmosphere of sociability and mutual support.

The sustainability of such events requires longer term commitment from government, local government and charity funders as consistency is vital. Indeed, we were very cognisant of the fact that the creative events ended with the research project, as the funding finished.

We recommend that further research explores similar smaller scale repeated events, of differing types, as these potentially have greater meaning in attendees' lives. Several of the narratives hinted at the importance of terminology in encouraging or discouraging participation, particularly the use of the word 'art' versus 'craft'. Similarly the perception of the venue as 'community' or 'arty' influenced their 'comfort' in attending. Further research into the framing of the event and its effect upon attendance would therefore provide useful practical guidance for community art event designers.

The experiences of old men and their willingness to attend regular creative events will undoubtedly reveal differing perspectives. Our art/craft events were not designated women-only, yet no men attended. Further research considering the reasons for this and the types of activities which would engage and benefit men in a similar way need to be identified.

We have demonstrated in this paper the power of feminist gerontology for understanding the contemporary experiences of old women's lives and for drawing attention to the ways in which events can form important parts of routine schedules and social interaction. Ageing is a gendered experience, and we call for more research into the gendered aspects of engagement with events at different stages of the life-cycle. Feminist gerontology offers one approach for critically reflecting on the intersections of age and gender in the lived experiences of men and women's lives, and offers a fruitful approach for further research into events, ageing and social sustainability.

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## Appendix A – Narrative inquiry discussion group format and schedule

**Set up:** Groups of 3 to 5 plus two of the research team, one hour discussion held over informal lunch. Minimum input from facilitators. All participants encouraged to become the storyteller and ask questions of the storyteller. Sessions audio recorded.

### **Week 1 Present lives**

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#### Phase 1

- We'd like to hear stories of your daily lives
  - Let's start by telling us a little about a typical day.
  - Join in, chip in, ask Qs, add your story as we go
  - Is there anything anyone would like to hear more about?
- 

#### Phase 2 (ongoing)

- Immanent Qs – tell us more about..... What happened then?
  - Who'd like to add anything?
- 

#### Phase 3

- Now let's talk about a specific day - last Monday. Tell us what you remember about that
  - Use photos of session/art produced
  - Use of immanent language heard in first phases
- 

#### Phase 4

- Recorder still on but session closed – less formal chat
  - Reflexivity, field notes
- 

### **Week 2 Past lives**

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#### Phase 1

- We'd like to hear stories from your past
  - Tell us a bit about ...
  - Join in, chip in, ask Qs, add your story as we go
  - Is there anything anyone would like to hear more about?
- 

#### Phase 2 (ongoing)

- Immanent Qs – tell us more about..... What happened then?
  - Who'd like to add anything?
- 

#### Phase 3

- Now let's talk about a specific day - last Monday. Tell us what you remember about that
  - Use photos of session/art produced
  - Use of immanent language heard in first phases
- 

#### Phase 4 as before

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### **Week 3 Art and Craft**

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#### Phase 1

- We'd like to hear stories about art, craft, making in your lives
  - Join in, chip in, ask Qs, add your story as we go
  - Is there anything anyone would like to hear more about?
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#### Phase 2 (ongoing)

- Immanent Qs – tell us more about..... What happened then?
  - Who'd like to add anything?
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#### Phase 3

- Now let's talk about these Monday craft sessions...
  - Use photos of session/art produced
  - Use of immanent language heard in first phases
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#### Phase 4 as before

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