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Imagining feminist old age: Moving beyond ‘successful’ ageing?

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a project that aimed to generate new feminist visions of later life, inspired directly by Sandberg and Marshall’s paper ‘Queering Aging Futures’ (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017). Creative workshops with groups of self-identified feminists led to the generation of a range of artefacts exploring personal visions of a good feminist old age. This paper firstly considers the features that participants most frequently imagined – which were independence, social connection, pleasurable encounters with water, and good health – here treating feminism as a participants’ resource explored through inductive analysis. The paper then explores the extent to which participants were able to imagine good feminist old age beyond the normativities of ‘successful ageing’, using a more deductive style of analysis drawing on feminist theory and feminist gerontology. Several participants imagined powerful and agentic old women who resisted the idea of older women’s powerlessness. Some imagined new emotional and psychological foci for later life, clearly distinct from those of mid-life. Others imagined future physical decline and ways of embracing or overcoming it. Finally, drawing on feminist theory about the need to be reflexive and accountable in knowledge production, the paper concludes with consideration of the researcher’s own imagined feminist old age and feminist history, and the implications this might have for the analysis presented.

Keywords

Feminism, feminist theory, creative methods, non-normative aging, feminist aging, queering aging,
Imagining feminist old age: Moving beyond ‘successful’ ageing?

Introduction

Critical gerontologists have identified fundamental problems with aspirations for ‘successful’ ageing (Katz & Calasanti, 2015), drawing our attention to its problematic entanglements with neo-liberalism (Minkler & Holstein, 2008), Western norms (Liang & Luo, 2012), ableism (Gibbons, 2016), heteronormativity (Marshall, 2018) and very limited forms of reproductive futurity (Chazan, 2020). In their paper ‘Queering Aging Futures’, Sandberg and Marshall develop this critique, calling for new visions of a good old age that do not depend on health, wealth and having grandchildren, and which understand old age as a stage with its own foci and priorities, rather than as extended mid-life (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017). They suggest specific theoretical lenses that might fruitfully be employed to undertake this work, identifying feminist theory, queer theory and crip theory as particularly promising candidates. The project discussed in this paper – *Imagining Feminist Old Age* – was conceived as a direct empirical response to this call, aiming to generate new explicitly feminist visions of a good old age. I extended Sandberg and Marshall’s focus on feminist theory into methodology, by recruiting participants who identified as feminist and using research methods that treated feminism as an everyday resource that participants could draw on to generate new visions of positive old age, using creative methods. In this paper, I employ feminism in three different ways. Firstly, treating feminism as a participants’ resource, I ask ‘what was imagined when participants imagined a good feminist old age?’ Secondly, I draw on feminist theory and feminist gerontology to drive further analysis, focusing on the extent to which the visions produced did move beyond the normativities of successful ageing. Thirdly, I employ reflexive and autobiographical techniques developed within feminist theory in order to produce more accountable knowledge (Harding, 2004; Stanley, 1991). In this way, I demonstrate that feminism can indeed be a useful tool to generate new, more inclusive visions of a good old age, thus offering alternatives to the normativities of successful ageing.
Feminism as a resource for reimagining old age

Feminist theory is, of course, diverse and plural - perhaps more helpfully thought of as an optometrist’s case of lenses, rather than a single lens offering one view. Feminist movements, and the feminist theories they draw on, are often described in terms of first, second and third waves, to characterise distinctive concerns, epistemologies, and theorisations of gender, although Hemmings (2005) argues that this is an oversimplification that obscures feminist history. Black feminist (Hill Collins, 2000 [1990]), womanist (Walker, 2005 [1983]) and intersectional feminists (Crenshaw, 1991) have argued for the vital importance of considering the interplay of other axes of oppression, such as race, alongside gender, and for the importance of centring the voices of the most marginalised (Phipps, 2020). Recent conflicts between trans-inclusive and ‘gender critical’ feminists make particularly clear how diverse feminist theory is on such fundamental issues as the nature of sex, gender and the body (Hines, 2019; Sullivan, 2020).

Historically, mainstream feminism paid little attention to ageing and old age although, as a generation of long-time feminists reached retirement age, several have turned their attention to ageing (e.g. Heilbrun, 1997; Segal, 2013). However, there is a long tradition within gerontology and critical age studies of feminists applying feminist theory to the topic of ageing and later life, including special issues in this journal in 1993 and 2004 (vol 7, issue 2 and vol 18, issue 1). Theorists such as Woodward (Woodward, 1991), Gulette (Gullette, 2011) and Holstein (Holstein, 2015) have demonstrated the necessity and productivity of thinking critically about both age and gender. Scholars working in a more intersectional vein have drawn attention to the further significance of axes such as race and social class (Calasanti, 2004). Feminist gerontology has been central to calls to recognise the significance of caregiving and the body in old age (Twigg, 2006), and the need to theorise and take seriously the ‘fourth’ age (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). There is also a body of work theorising later life sexuality within feminist paradigms (e.g. Cacchioni, 2015; Jones, 2020; Marshall, 2018). Hitherto, feminist gerontology has focused more on critiquing and analysing existing conditions of ageing than envisaging new ones.
However, beyond academia, feminist work in the literary arts has extended visions of old age in a variety of exciting directions. Waxman coined the word *reifungsroman* (novel of ripening, by analogy with *bildungsroman*, a novel about growing up) to characterise a new genre of novels about older women that treat later life as a time of adventure and personal development, rather than continuity with mid-life or decline (Waxman, 1990). Oró Piqueras (2020) argues that authors such as Penelope Lively, Angela Carter and Doris Lessing create visions of late life female sexuality that stand outside familial and patriarchal relationship norms, challenge cultural norms about beauty, and inhabit queer time and queer space (Halberstam, 2005). Feminist science fiction and speculative fiction offer particular possibilities for reimagining ageing through a feminist lens. For example, Elizabeth Moon’s *Remnant Population* features an older woman’s rejection of traditional family responsibilities and developing relationship with an alien civilisation (Moon, 1996) and Catherine Lundoff’s *Silver Moon* follows the adventures of a group of women who turn into werewolves at menopause (Lundoff, 2012).

There has been little empirical work in the social sciences exploring the potential of feminism to enable ‘ordinary’ people (people who are not artists or celebrities) to reimagine old age. One notable exception is the *Look at Me!* project (http://lookatme.group.shef.ac.uk/index.php) which used photography and other creative media to enable older women to create personal images relating to their own experiences of ageing (Hogan & Warren, 2012; Richards, Warren, & Gott, 2012). *Imagining Feminist Old Age* shared with *Look at Me!* the classic feminist move from personal experience to the political, by inviting participants to reflect on their own specific experiences and situation and link that to wider issues and shared experiences. *Imagining Feminist Old Age* differed in its explicit focus on generating new visions of positive old age, rather than reflecting on experiences of ageing so far, as well as in the specific creative methods used.
Generating alternative visions

Generating new visions of old age is inherently challenging precisely because participants are being asked to move beyond what is easily culturally available (Richards et al., 2012). Imagining yourself into old age is furthermore widely recognised to be difficult, due to external and internalised ageism (Bytheway, 2005; Macdonald & Rich, 1984) and the inherent difficulty of envisaging the necessarily unknown future (Adam, 2014). Thus, there is an innate methodological challenge to the project of generating new personal feminist visions of a good old age. It seemed unlikely that simple interviews or talk-based focus groups would enable the desired degree of thinking-outside-the-box. *Imagining Feminist Old Age* therefore employed creative methods, in the hope that they would enable participants to access inventive, imaginative and playful parts of themselves (Gauntlett, 2007). The specific creative methods were chosen for pragmatic reasons of cost in an unfunded project, and because I had used similar methods successfully in a previous project (Jones, 2011).

Fieldwork took the form of a 90-minute workshop session run with groups of self-defined feminists of any age. Workshops started with stimulus activities designed to provoke imaginings of later life: a brief quiz focused on positive ‘ageing facts’, in order to move people on from any initial reluctance to imagine personal ageing; an introduction to the ‘decline’ and ‘successful’ ageing narratives, and this project’s interest in creating alternatives, including showing collages of images representing each storyline; and group discussion to generate a list of ingredients for a feminist good old age. The main part of the workshop (c. 45 minutes) consisted of participants creating a personal vision of a good feminist old age, using a wide range of arts and crafts materials (e.g. pens, pastels, glitter pens, stickers, paper bags, paper dolls, different weights and colours of paper and card, pipe cleaners, ribbons, sequins). After completing their creations, participants wrote answers to three questions:

1) What does your creation show?

2) What do you think are the three main things that would enable you to have a feminist old age?
3) What was it like to imagine your feminist old age?

They also filled in free-response demographics forms, which included a question about feminist influences (see ‘Analysing visions’ below), filled in a consent form, and chose pseudonyms.

The data thus consist of the creations themselves, written answers to the three questions, the demographics forms, flipchart notes and my own field notes, some of which were written during the workshops but most of which were written immediately afterwards. I analyse the images predominantly in terms of the stated intention of the creator, as a form of participant verification (Jewitt, 2013) but also, following Richards et al. (2012), consider them as independent objects where this offers additional insight.

In the discussion that follows, I comment on the data in relation to each group as well as for individual participants, since the workshop structure and the extensive discussion between participants means that each individual creation was produced within a wider discursive context of the particular group, which also needs to be taken into account. The table below describes the nature of the groups and the main demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 1: Overview of groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of group</th>
<th>No. of</th>
<th>Genders</th>
<th>Age range (mean)</th>
<th>Ethnicities</th>
<th>Sexual identities</th>
<th>Living with disabilities?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic group</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 male 8 female</td>
<td>21-62 (47)</td>
<td>All White ethnicities, some non-British</td>
<td>4 heterosexual / straight, 2 lesbian / gay (woman)</td>
<td>1 ‘non-disclosing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People attending an international feminist academic conference in the UK. Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ranged from undergraduates to professors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voluntary organisation group</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>All female</th>
<th>26-57 (44)</th>
<th>3 Black African, 1 Black British, 2 mixed race</th>
<th>4 heterosexual, 1 homosexual, 1 straight/bi, 0 'don’t feel need to categorise’ 1 ‘hetero / politically pansexual’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers and volunteers at a voluntary organisation in London, UK.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campaigning group</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>8 female</th>
<th>61-74 (67)</th>
<th>All White British or White Irish</th>
<th>4 heterosexual, 1 ‘heterosexual in principle if not in practice’, 2 ‘female’, 1 ‘celibate’, 1 ‘open’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members of a feminist campaigning group, South East England.</td>
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Analysing visions

The project was explicitly framed as being about feminist old age in both the recruitment materials and workshops but what was meant by ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ was deliberately not defined. In fieldwork, I treated feminism as a pre-existing participants’ resource, rather than as something that I defined for participants, because I was interested in feminism as an everyday concept and practice,
and in what ‘feminism’ suggested to these participants. I recruited feminists because I thought that they might have access to distinctive resources to enable them to reimagine old age – all participants were assumed to have some understanding of feminism through their willingness to participate in a project focusing on imagining feminist old age. The demographics form asked participants to ‘briefly describe the kind of feminist that you are, or the main feminists who influence you’ and so supplies some information about the kinds of feminism that participants were familiar with.

The academic group, perhaps unsurprisingly, predominantly cited named feminist academics, with Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer each being mentioned by three people. Other named feminists were evenly spread between those who, like de Beauvoir and Greer, are usually associated with ‘second wave’ feminism (e.g. Dworkin) and those most commonly characterised as ‘third wave’ feminists (e.g. Butler), with only one person mentioning first wave feminism: ‘suffragettes’. One member of this group cited only black feminist scholars (bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins). All the other participants from this group cited only white feminists, apart from one who also cited Ann Phoenix. Only one member of the academic group cited concepts rather than individual feminist scholars, listing ‘consent, intersectionality, bodily autonomy, among many others’. In the academic and campaigning groups, several people cited feminist novelists such as Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie being mentioned by two people. The voluntary sector group cited family members more than the other groups, chiefly mothers but also grandmothers and daughters. Oprah was also mentioned by two people from this group, and Iyanla Vanzant and Maya Angelou each by one person. I had anticipated that the #MeToo movement might have been an influence on younger participants but this was only mentioned by one person, who was from the voluntary sector group. The campaigning group mainly named family members and feminists who are usually associated with the second wave, with Sheila Rowbotham appearing twice. This group also cited concepts much more than the other groups e.g. ‘equal rights and solidarity’, ‘socialist feminism’, ‘education’, and ‘emancipation’.
I conceptualised my task as the analyst to be to identify commonalities in what was imagined under the rubric of ‘a good feminist old age’ and to compare this to the wider set of possible feminist framings that my knowledge of feminist theory, and feminist gerontology in particular, makes available to me. This knowledge is, of course, deeply shaped by my particular life experience and standpoint (Harding, 2004; Hill Collins, 1997) and, for this reason, reflexive consideration of what I do and do not recognise as feminist has been an important part of the analytic process. I therefore commenced analysis with an inductive thematic analysis of the data at a predominantly semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2018). I identified recurring themes in how a good old age was imagined, regardless of whether those themes appeared to me to be feminist or beyond current dichotomies. I clustered codes such as ‘family’, ‘friends’, ‘the sea’ and ‘swimming’ into initial themes such as ‘the importance of social connection’ and ‘watery pleasures’. Once I had reviewed and finalised these themes, I attempted to set them to one side and deductively re-analysed the data in the light of my knowledge of feminist theory and feminist gerontology i.e. at a latent level, aiming to identify either distinctively feminist visions or visions that might go beyond current dichotomies of ageing. This analysis led to a different set of themes such as ‘powerful old women’ and ‘accommodating disability’. Finally, I asked how my own particular feminist history and commitments might affect my analysis. How might having the demographic characteristics I do (e.g. middle-aged, cisfemale, white, queer, highly educated, not-significantly-disabled) and my own particular history with feminism (raised in broadly second-wave feminism but later moving into more third wave, trans-inclusive and intersectional feminisms) make some parts of the data more visible to me than others, and what I might be missing? To aid this reflexive process, I created my own vision of a good feminist old age at an early stage of fieldwork, which I also discuss. In this paper, I combine all these types of analysis, making clear which type of analysis each finding is derived from.
Common imaginings

In this first section, I discuss the aspects of a good feminist old age that were most prominent and common in the inductive analysis of the data, in order to identify what imagining a feminist old age suggested to participants. This analysis demonstrates that the concept of feminism can be used to enable ‘ordinary’ people to envision personal ageing in a positive light.

Independence

‘Independence’ was by far the most common answer to the question ‘what do you think are the three main things that would enable you to have a feminist old age?’ Independence was also identified as a vital ingredient for a feminist old age in all three initial group discussions, with discussion focusing mainly on autonomy, independence in personal care and financial independence. The campaigning group specified the particular significance of independent financial means for women, discussing the ways in which women were less likely to have occupational pensions because of periods of unpaid family work. This group also identified ‘no sudden changes to pension age’ as an important ingredient, referring to a recent raising of the state pension age in the UK for a cohort of women currently in their early 60s. All three groups also identified access to transport, especially public transport, as a key issue in maintaining independence. Independence was less explicitly visible in the individual creations but was an implied pre-requisite for many of the activities and scenarios imagined e.g. walking in the countryside, visiting friends, going to the theatre. It was also explicitly referenced in some creations, for example, Olive from the campaigning group wrote ‘Free to say “no”’ as part of her image and Dorothea, from the same group, wrote ‘Friends + family (there but not too close)’, ‘Solitude’ and ‘Me, free’ on her creation.

Community and social connection

While independence was very important, social connection and contact with family and friends was also a strong theme in all the data. The voluntary organisation group focused particularly on contact with family, whereas the other two groups also imagined social connection through friends and
wider communities. One participant in the voluntary organisation group stated categorically ‘As an African woman, family is really important to us, so it would be really important to me to see lots of my family when I’m old’. My field notes observe that ‘I felt positioned by this comment as White and therefore as not understanding and so needing to be told’ and the memory of this slightly uncomfortable feeling probably contributes to me noticing this difference between the groups. The campaigning and academic groups did also discuss and represent connections and support from family but they placed equal emphasis on friends, and additionally emphasised the importance of wider connections, specifying needs for LGBT spaces and communities, ‘being taken seriously in feminist communities’, intergenerational contact beyond the family, and multi-ethnic communities.

For example, in the academic group, Grace dressed a paper doll in street maps of Brighton and Bristol and wrote that she had chosen Bristol ‘because I want to live in a place with a diverse demography’ (See Picture 1).

**Picture 1: Grace’s creation**

The campaigning group also identified good support for people caring for family members as a vital ingredient for a feminist old age, highlighting as an ageist injustice the fact that in the UK the carer’s
allowance is not currently payable to anyone aged over 65, especially given that the majority of carers are older people.

Both the academic and the campaigning groups mentioned co-housing as an ingredient for a feminist old age. Gorgeous Grey, from the campaigning group, particularly emphasised housing in her creation. She wrote on the image itself ‘Communal living: [...] friends (old and new) – like a student hall of residence’ and summarised her creation as showing, among other things ‘A shared residential environment with support to participate in local life and community’. In her list of the three main things that would enable her to have a feminist old age, her first item was ‘change of housing policy to facilitate cooperative living’.

Watery pleasures

Water featured prominently in ten of the 24 creations and was a clear theme in the inductive analysis. Water was very commonly represented as part of the creations, as in Pictures 2 and 3 which show Jazzy and Malaika’s imaginings during the voluntary sector group workshop.

Picture 2: Jazzy’s creation

Picture 3: Malaika’s creation
Many of these participants imagined living close to water and/or swimming regularly, Christine from the academic group also used a water-based metaphor about slipping loose her moorings and setting sail, which I discuss in more detail later.

**Good health**

Mental and physical good health was another very clear theme in the inductive analysis. It featured particularly prominently in the group discussions and the lists of three main enabling factors but was also evident in the creations. In the voluntary organisation group, someone said that she wanted her brain to be okay and specified that this meant keeping up to speed with modern society and also with technology. Another participant in this group said that she wanted her brain to be up to her doing intellectually stimulating stuff and exclaimed that maybe she would do a Ph.D. in old age. She then added that alternatively she would like to be ‘gone’ with dementia and ‘in Lala land’.

This theme of good mental and physical health did not appear in the deductive analysis and I do not recognise good health as a specifically feminist vision of a good old age – indeed prioritising what is conventionally seen as good health might be seen as antithetical to some feminisms, given crip theory’s call to reject ableism and able-mindedness (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2011). Water also did not appear in my deductive analysis – although it could potentially be seen as a feminist issue given
symbolic associations between women and water (Hayman, 2012) – whereas independence and social connection did. Undertaking both inductive and deductive analyses makes more evident these differences between my own perspectives on what constitutes a feminist vision and participants’ perspectives.

New visions

In this second main section I discuss themes that I identified predominantly through deductive analysis, when I was looking particularly for material that might move beyond the current dichotomy between decline narratives and successful ageing, and for imaginings that seemed to be specifically feminist.

Powerful old women

Feminists have long argued that the intersection of ageism and sexism means that old women are perceived as powerless and in need of protection (Holstein, 2015; Macdonald & Rich, 1984). Some have called for a reclaiming of ‘crone’ identities as a remedy (Greer, 1991; Ray, 2004) and others for a focus on social justice (e.g. Westwood, 2018). Several participants in the workshops imagined claiming power in old age, and the campaigning group commented extensively on issues of power in their initial discussion.

In the academic group, Grace wrote that her creation (Picture 1) showed:

“Hearts for eyes because I never want to lose my curiosity and zest for life and “fierce” for mouth because I want to continue to speak truth to power. Body is coloured neon bright because I want to be noticed – not in a male gaze way but for my fierceness. Back of head is red to show constructive anger.”

Gabrielle from the voluntary organisation group decorated a paper doll with sticker slogans reading ‘fierce’, ‘time to shine’, ‘sassy’, ‘live laugh love’, ‘worry less’ and ‘limitless’. She summarised her creation as showing “Live my best life. Enjoying nature and music. At the same time be fierce and
sassy with no limit and boundaries” and answered the question about what it had been like to imagine her feminist old age with “To be limitless and enjoy my life, with the things I love. To be powerful over my self.”

In the campaigning group, Simone drew the outline of a figure with question marks, wide eyes and a prominent nose, which she explained as she was drawing indicated being ‘nosey’ (see Picture 4).

**Picture 4: Simone’s creation**

‘Nosey’ is also one of the words she wrote as part of the creation and features in her description of what it showed “That a feminist old age is **colourful** (denoting ‘freedom’ to be what you want to be (e.g. bold) **free** to go where you can (i.e. finance +/- lack of support does not dictate your movements) and **respected** by society and family so one is not inhibited from being nosey and inquisitive.” ‘Nosey’ is an interesting choice of adjective because it is potentially a negative term – it implies inappropriateness, in a way that synonyms such as ‘inquisitive’ or ‘curious’ do not. However, here she could be seen as confronting the possibility that older women being curious might be
inappropriate, and resisting that by reclaiming the term ‘nosey’ into a positive attribute, with the phrase on the drawing itself ‘Respected nosey + inquisitive with access to PEOPLE!’

In the campaigning group, several participants included items in their list of the three main things that would enable a feminist old age that reimagined the social value of older people, and older women in particular. For example, Gorgeous Grey listed “Change of attitude amongst younger people to realise older women have a lot to offer” and Vanessa’s first item was “a much better balanced system of representative democracy – so more women in both Houses, obviously, but better age representation too”

A new focus for life

Before ‘successful ageing’ came to prominence, with its focus on maintaining mid-life attributes and concerns as long as possible, gerontological theory offered alternative foci for later life. While disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961) seems unlikely to offer a positive vision of later life, explicit alternatives to it, such as Tornstam’s gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005) or theories from beyond gerontology, such as Erikson’s stages of psycho-social development (Erikson, 1959), might suggest alternative foci. Both these theories have been much criticised for creating their own normativities, homogenising later life, and, in the case of Erikson’s theory, assuming a white, male, Western subject (Gilligan, 1982). However, if they are conceptualised simply as possible alternative visions, not norms to be aspired to or criteria for older people to be measured against, they might offer potential alternative foci. I was therefore particularly interested in the deductive analysis in whether participants imagined new foci for old age that differed from those of successful ageing.

There is some evidence of such a shift of focus in Christine’s account. During her participation in the academic group, she wrote that her creation showed:
“Finally addressing family issues round my father; writing the book; living near water and being near the sound of waves; tending my garden; loving and being loved; reconciling my family; doing what I want now – no more delayed gratification”

And in response to the question ‘What was it like to imagine your feminist old age?’, she wrote:

“A great pleasure but awareness of the need to slip loose my moorings, and set sail. Life would be a return to a future I envisaged when much younger, and chance for redress and address of family issues long carefully stored away finally to have only responsibility for myself.”

Erikson characterises the existential question of the eighth developmental stage to centre around ‘Is it okay to have been me?’, in contrast to the seventh stage ‘middle adulthood’ when, he argues, the existential question is ‘Can I make my life count?’. Several clauses of Christine’s poetic words speak to a focus on life evaluation rather than productivity: ‘Finally addressing family issues around my father’, ‘reconciling my family’, ‘chance for redress and address of family issues’, and the phrase ‘finally to have responsibility for myself’ contrasts particularly strongly with the seventh stage focus on responsibilities of parenthood and work. Her comments about slipping loose her moorings and setting sail could also be read as a vision of gerotranscendence.

Bertie chose a paper bag as the base for his creation (see Picture 5), which he labelled as a ‘knowledge sharing bucket’ with the explanation:

“I chose the bag to base my old age on as it’s something people can take things out of. In that sense I hope that when I am old I have people around me who I can share knowledge with and bestow any book collection to. I want my old age to be full of knowledge sharing with those I care for and those who need / want my knowledge.”

Picture 5: Bertie’s creation
Bertie’s vision of being a purveyor of knowledge in old age is based on familiar traditional archetypes of wise elders. It is noteworthy that a focus on older people’s wisdom is not a feature of successful ageing discourses. In this sense, Bertie’s imagining of being a purveyor of wisdom offers a positive alternative to visions found within discourses of successful ageing.

Critical gerontologists have argued that successful ageing perversely avoids all consideration of the end of life and of living one’s life with an end horizon close by (Bytheway, 2011). While there was little mention of death in the workshop discussions or creations, one participant, Olive from the campaigning group said that one of the things her creation showed was “I would like to be able to leave the world on my terms.” Bertie included a comment on the back of his ‘knowledge sharing bucket’ that bucket is a ‘play on kicking the bucket’, a jokey euphemism for dying. Christine’s comment about “slip loose my moorings, and set sail” could also be understood as a reference to death, although it might instead refer to embarking on the new stage of life she is envisaging.
Accommodating changes to health

Given the prevalence of age-acquired disability, cognitive changes and increased rates of ill health with longevity, critics of successful ageing have argued that it is particularly crucial that conceptions of a good old age do not require the absence of disability and ill-health (Grenier, Griffin, & McGrath, 2016; Sandberg & Marshall, 2017). There was some evidence of participants in *Imagining Feminist Old Age* envisaging a good old age with physical changes and disabilities but little evidence of imagining significant physical ill health or cognitive changes or disabilities.

One participant in the academic group, who chose the pseudonym ‘Rambler’, imagined a future technology that would enable her to carry on ‘rambling’ (hiking) in the face of imagined future bodily vulnerabilities (see Picture 6). She made two models out of pipe cleaners, one representing herself with a rucksack and the other ‘Robodog’ “my robot dog carer. Robodog has special GPS on his tail. He carries first aid equipment on his back and other survival gear. He can plot our route and send a signal back to base. If I’m in danger, he will stay with me til help arrives.” She placed the figures on a map section of a place she particularly likes to ramble.

**Picture 6: Rambler’s creation**

This creation acknowledges likely physical changes with ageing, leading to increased vulnerability and so the possibility of no longer being able to undertake an activity that is personally meaningful.
Here, imagined future technology (and not very futuristic technology at that) enables Rambler to embrace, or at least recognise, moving beyond mid-life physical capabilities into more limited ones.

Other participants also recognised likely future impairments within their imagined good old ages. For example, Grace, also from the academic group (Picture 1), noted that she had used “signs instead of ears because I’ve already lost hearing in my right ear (sudden deafness) and might as time goes by have to start using sign language for communication.” Dorothea from the campaigning group wrote that one of the things her creation showed was “My health is dodgy but I keep on going with help from professionals + alternative therapies.”

Thus, in the deductive analysis of this dataset, I identified three ways in which imaging a feminist old age offered alternative positive visions to those usually found within discourses of ‘successful’ ageing. Firstly, asserting and claiming older women’s power and agency offers a challenge to the reduction of older women to sweet Granny archetypes (Holstein, 2015) and to neo-liberal visions of compliant consumers (Minkler & Holstein, 2008). Secondly, imagining new distinctive foci for later life – such as life review, purveying wisdom and envisaging death – moves us beyond extended midlife (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017). Thirdly, envisaging a good old age with physical changes and disabilities makes positive old age available to much larger proportions of the population and contributes towards destigmatising bodily differences (Changfoot & Rice, 2020; Grenier et al., 2016). This dataset thus demonstrates that using feminism as a lens can enable people to imagine positive visions of old age beyond those of ‘successful’ ageing.

In the final main section of this paper, I turn to more reflexive consideration of my own role in the data analysis.

The researcher’s imagination

In the workshops I endeavoured to walk a tightrope between, on the one hand, potentially traumatising participants by forcing them to think about stigmatised and unwelcome aspects of ageing and, on the other hand, generating only very positive ‘Third Age’ (Laslett, 1989) visions of old
age that might do little to challenge existing visions of successful ageing. I tried to enable discussion of bodily and mental changes, and common losses such as bereavement, and to keep a focus on late old age e.g. always referring to ‘old age’ not ‘older age’ (Andrews, 2000). I took some encouragement from Gullette’s own imagining of personal old age and her conclusion:

“I have speculated about finding myself with the body-mind so different that it might threaten selfhood. There are conditions I think now I might not want to endure. But I can imagine deciding to go on living with, say, gradually increasing memory loss if I could be assured of having respectful home care given by people capable of relishing what is left of my selfhood. Many people go through devastating changes (I think of Stephen Hawking) without losing heart, purpose, and self-continuity. Why do people in visioning possible futures underestimate their own defences?” (Gullette, 2011, p. 56)

However, given my ethical responsibilities to participants whom I would only be meeting on a single occasion, I felt unable to push them hard to imagine stigmatised futures. I did feel able to push myself to do so, and present here what I imagined, as one example of a vision of a feminist deep old age. I then attempt to use what I imagined to give me analytic traction on my interpretation of other people’s visions, thereby aiming to produce ‘unalienated feminist knowledge’ where ‘the reader [has] access to details of the contextually-located reasoning processes which give rise to “the findings” ’ (Stanley, 1991, p. 209). I ask ‘if this is my vision, how does that help to explain what is more and less visible to me in other people’s visions?’

In response to the question ‘What does your creation show?’ I wrote:

“It shows me living in a care home in the town I currently live in, with dementia. I don’t talk much but the care worker is still talking to me and relating to me as a proper human being. It’s a really well-run care home with excellent food, and the staff are well-paid, well-supported and well-trained, not exploited and underpaid, so they have the time and skills to relate properly to me. The care home has a kitemark for LGBT inclusion, other LGBT
residents and staff, and the staff don’t misread me as straight because I have children. I’m about to have a bubble bath, not just a functional shower. I have my own cat who likes to spend hours on my lap and I’m wearing comfortable sensually-pleasing clothes – a red velvet top and soft grey fleece trousers. [...] My two adult children are shown at the top – one lives locally and comes to visit me regularly and gives me head massages (as I used to do for him) [...]"

This vision chimes with the other visions in its emphasis on human connection, the need for ongoing recognition of social value, the continuing significance of personal preferences and, interestingly, another reference to watery pleasures, here in the form of a bubble bath. It differs in specifying living a good old age with dementia, and imagining features that would enable this, including what Ward and Price identify as ‘performative support’ for LGBT+ identities (Ward & Price, 2016).

How, then, does having generated this vision of my own feminist good old age help to explain what is more and less visible to me in other people’s accounts?

The first effect is to make it very clear how necessarily partial a source of information a drawing, some written comments and a group discussion are for understanding the futures that were imagined. For my own creation, for example, I responded to the question ‘what was it like to imagine your feminist old age?’ with ‘Emotionally demanding. [...] But also moving when I imagined my son giving me head massages – the classic intergenerational contract in physical form.’ I know exactly what I meant by ‘the intergenerational contract’ here but when Vanessa wrote that her creation shows “the rapid developments in AI allow coming generations of women to live their chosen lives unjudged and able to change those lives with advancing years” I am not entirely sure what she is envisioning about how AI will benefit women. Similarly, I know how important having a cat is to me in imagining personal continuity with dementia but I do not know if there is any particular significance to dogs in Rambler’s imagining. Thus, having created my own vision creates a useful analytic caution about interpreting other people’s visions.
A second effect is to make visible to me how important structural and political features such as regulation (the LGBT kitemark) and economic and organisational features (well-paid, well-trained care home staff) are to my vision of a feminist future. This makes me recognise that I found it easiest to recognise as feminist visions the creations of the campaigning group, who spoke and wrote most about similar issues.

In fieldnotes immediately after this group I wrote:

“...I felt very much in sympathy with them because they identified structural, social, economic and political features that would enable a good feminist old age much more clearly than the other groups. I recognised this discussion as feminist very easily. It reminded me of discussions I took part in in the late 1980s and the 1990s in feminist circles, especially socialist and other left-wing feminist circles. There was the same focus on the personal being political and the significance of legal, political and economic structures as well as cultural ones.”

In contrast, the academic and voluntary sector groups spoke and represented less about structural features and more about individual experiences. I found it harder to identify distinctively feminist visions where the focus of the creation seemed to be a heterosexual couple relationship, or the pleasure of swimming in a tropical sea. This is a further reason that also undertaking the initial inductive analysis was important: while inductive analysis too is necessarily affected by the analyst’s perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2019), attempting to temporarily set aside my own views as to what constituted a feminist old age means that the imaginings of more participants are included in my analysis, and enter the public domain via this paper.

Conclusions

*Imagining Feminist Old Age* set out to generate positive visions of old age beyond the normativities of successful ageing, by using feminism as both a participants’ resource and an analytical lens. The most frequently imagined features of a good feminist old age were independence, social connection,
pleasurable encounters with water and good mental and physical health. Less commonly imagined features that seemed to go beyond the normativities of successful ageing were assertions of older women’s power and agency, an imagining of new foci for later life beyond those of midlife, and visions of a good old age with physical changes and disabilities.

The visions created by the participants share many features with the norms of successful ageing — good health, independence, even social connection, are all desirable attributes of compliant neo-liberal citizens/consumers (Katz & Marshall, 2003). This is unsurprising — it is difficult to step outside social norms, as Richards et al. (2012) also found. Indeed, new visions of old age might not be intelligible or recognisable, to the analyst or to the reader, if they did not connect to these widely-known existing ideas about what constitutes a good old age. However, research and other creative projects can endeavour to extend the range of what is imaginable. Rather than a metaphor of spectacular, completely new visions, perhaps Imagining Feminist Old Age achieved something more akin to creating gaps in a curtain, pushing back some boundaries, or opening a window to let in some fresh air.

Returning to the original metaphor of feminism as a set of lenses for thinking about alternative visions of a good old age, I have endeavoured to give an account of which of the lenses from the optometrist’s case I have used myself in my analysis, especially where I can trace some of the consequences this has had for the analysis and hence for the conclusions I draw. I found it easiest to identify what felt to be quite second-wave socialist-feminist types of visions — those that focused on political, economic and structural issues. I had to work harder to recognise visions that were more individualised as feminist ones. Perhaps because the feminism I encountered in my teens and twenties was broadly socialist-feminist, it felt comfortable and familiar to identify these kinds of visions. Writing this paper during the Covid-19 pandemic, and at a time when issues in my own family have given extra urgency to imagining old age, has perhaps led me to prioritise these feelings of comfort and familiarity more than if I had been writing at a different, less anxious moment in
time. This has meant that the analysis I have presented is not strongly intersectional or post-structuralist, for example, despite the data evidently being suitable for such an approach. A co-researcher would have been extremely helpful in interrogating my thinking and pushing my reflexivity further – future work taking a similar analytic approach might benefit from being undertaken by a small diverse team.

Future work might also fruitfully combine feminist lenses with queer and crip lenses at the analysis stage – some of the data generated within *Imagining Feminist Old Age* would lend itself particularly well to a crip theory analysis, for example, and future projects might fruitfully combine these three theoretical lenses in different ways. There is also scope to employ further theoretical lenses not considered in Sandberg and Marshall’s original article, such as decolonial theory or critical race studies (Chazan, 2020).

This paper has demonstrated that feminism can be treated as a participants’ resource to generate new ideas about a more inclusive positive old age from people who identify as feminists. Inviting research participants to position themselves as feminists opens up specific imaginative space that might not be available without that positioning. Other papers within this special section suggest that the same is true of asking participants to position themselves as disabled, queer and/or Indigenous. Whatever non-normative theoretical lenses are chosen, it is clear that much work remains to be done if we are to extend positive visions of old age to be more inclusive of diverse ageing experiences.

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**References**


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1 No participant in the workshops discussed or represented the possibility of developing dementia or other cognitive impairments, except for the brief mention in conversation by the person in the voluntary organisation group of being ‘gone’ with dementia and ‘in LaLa land’.