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Behaving disgracefully: the impact of internet dating site use upon the identities of women in middle age

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Behaving Disgracefully: The Impact of Internet Dating Site Use upon the Identities of
Women in Middle Age.

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Declaration:

None of the material contained in the thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in the University of Durham or any other university. None of the material contained in the thesis is based on joint research.

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study that explores the experiences of a group of thirty middle-aged women who, after the loss of a long-term relationship, were using Internet dating sites to find heterosexual relationships and enjoy casual nights out. The research follows women on their journey through their experiences of using dating sites, interacting with men online, and eventually meeting men for offline encounters.

The central theme of the thesis is the ways in which women understood and negotiated their identities as single, middle-aged women and how they incorporated often sudden and unexpected change into a linear life story of the self. Central to identity construction were issues of the ageing self over time, sexuality and femininity (and the intersection of all three), which were brought into sharp focus for women entering the dating scene in the middle years. Their experiences of interacting with men, both on and off the dating sites, reveals how women understood, circumvented and challenged heterosexual norms of behaviour and sexuality for the middle-aged woman that were perceived to regulate and restrict their behaviour and use of social space. Importantly however, alongside women's accounts of empowerment as single women sat the almost compulsive desire for male company that fuelled their intensive use of the dating sites.

Women were enabled by the dating sites to have many new adventures, date a wide variety of men and enjoy many sexual encounters. This change in behaviour was often perceived as a fundamental challenge to the self as many women understood their dating behaviour as 'acting out of character'. The research shows however, that despite the risk of being placed as 'unrespectable' in the eyes of others, women nevertheless embraced their opportunity to behave 'disgracefully'.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The fast pace of technological innovation in contemporary society has resulted in dramatic changes in the field of interpersonal communication. The introduction of email and real time chat for example, has enabled people to communicate in ways that challenge the boundaries of space and time. Face-to-face interactions are being increasingly accompanied or replaced by computer-mediated communication, a phenomenon that has spawned interest across a range of academic disciplines, seeking to explore the impact of technological innovation upon social interaction and interpersonal relationships. What is crucial to research of this kind, however, is that it looks further than a simple exploration of the perceived positive or negative effects of technology upon interpersonal communications. Technological innovation has not only provided new media of communication, it has often enabled change in the very nature of those social interactions. Change has occurred within language for example; abbreviations used during text messaging are introducing new phrases and word constructions into the English language (Crystal, 2001; Rubin, 2003). Similarly computer-mediated communication has enabled a change in the nature of social networks as people form friendships with others all over the world, often without ever meeting them in the flesh (Rheingold, 1993). Technological innovation is an ongoing process, which will continue to impact upon social relations in the future in unforeseen ways, making this an exciting and cutting edge topic for research.

This thesis explores the impact of IT upon a specific area of interpersonal communication; dating and romantic relationships. The use of Internet dating sites has increased rapidly over the last ten years and the boom is set to continue. It is predicted that by 2011, six million Europeans will be online looking for romantic partners and friendship (http://www.jupiterresearch.com). Alongside the growing popularity of online dating, the stigma of the online dating site as a last resort for those who lack social skills appears to be diminishing (Goodwin, 1990). Online dating provides a quick, convenient and relatively inexpensive way of contacting potential dates all over the world from the comfort of your own home. Not only are sites an effective way to contact single people in order to arrange offline dates, they have become an activity

and medium of interaction in their own right, as many spend their spare time chatting online to cyber-friends and lovers. A central aim of my research was to explore how turning to technology to find dates and forge social networks impacted upon the social interactions and social relationships of those who used the sites. In other words, in what ways and to what extent did the users of online dating sites perceive their interactions with others as fundamentally changed? Also, from a wider perspective, in what ways did using the sites impact upon dating behaviour, understandings of heterosexuality, gender, ageing and self identity?

This research looks specifically at the experiences of a group of heterosexual, middle-aged women who were single and had registered on online dating sites searching for dates with men. It follows the women on their journey through the experience of using dating sites: from learning IT skills, interacting online, to embarking upon offline dates. It seeks to complement large-scale quantitative studies (Fiori, 2004) by looking at the impact of IT at a micro level. I look behind statistical trends to explore what it meant for women to integrate Internet dating into their lives and how this impacted upon, or indeed changed, their subjectivities and experiences.

Whilst my research draws on women's experiences of using technology to make changes in their lives, it is important to stress that technology is not the pivotal focus of investigation. This thesis is fundamentally a story of selves and centres around the construction and maintenance of identity for respondents who found themselves single in middle age. Indeed respondents' identities as middle-aged women informed their understanding of using the dating sites, as well as other interconnected issues such as sexuality, femininity and heterosexuality. The question 'who am I?' was in the forefront of respondents' minds after a time of transition and change in their lives that preceded Internet dating site use.

Elliott (2001) points to the fact that identity is a topic that has been approached from many perspectives and often the use of the terms 'self-identity' or 'subjectivity' can be vague or confusing (Elliott, 2001: 9). It is perhaps important therefore to state briefly my own interpretation of the terminology that is used throughout the thesis. I use the terms 'self', 'subjectivity' and 'self-identity' interchangeably to refer to respondents' understandings of their sense of self. These terms therefore point to how

women reflexively positioned and understood themselves as 'selves'. I use the term 'social identity' to refer to the ways in which women were positioned by others as a result of broader social categories such as age, gender or their status as single women. This is not to imply however, that self-identity and social identity are mutually exclusive terms. Subjectivity cannot be divorced from wider social and cultural categories that will inform the subject's appraisal of their sense of self. The self is not sealed away from social relations but an integral part of those relations. On the other hand however, selves are not passively moulded by wider social relations. The process of self-construction involves the complex interplay of wider social relations and the creativity and agency of the individual. This crucial point is highlighted throughout the thesis.

My initial motivation for carrying out this research was as a result of observing a middle-aged friend of mine go through a painful divorce and subsequently embark upon a period of intensive online dating. I supported her through the excitement and disappointments that accompany the process, but what captured my interest, both as a friend and as a sociologist, was how the process of interacting on the sites was impacting dramatically upon her life and her sense of identity. She talked in terms of feeling 'a different person' and indeed her sense of self and attitude to dating changed quite dramatically over a period of time. As a single middle-aged woman I also logged on to several Internet dating sites and experienced first hand the seductive lure of the sites, which provided instant access to a seemingly endless parade of potential dates. I was unprepared for the enormity of the impact that using online dating sites had upon my life and found myself wanting to explore in more depth, the nature and implications of such changes upon social interaction, social relations and identities.

Middle age is a slippery term with no clearly defined age boundaries. Gullette (1997) suggests that entering the midlife cohort is a subjective experience that is often only recognised retrospectively,

> In time we join the group of those debating within ourselves whether or not we already belong in the unhappy [middle age] class. The age at which this occurs remains undetermined [and] the process is lived as a seamless experience.

Sometimes, retrospectively, it appears to have happened in a moment, like walking through a door: the "Entrance into Midlife aging" (Gullette, 1997: 5).

Within my research, I chose to interview women who defined themselves as middle-aged, rather than choosing a sample between two arbitrarily selected age boundaries. As a result, respondents ranged in age from forty-eight to sixty-two which reflects in itself the fluidity of middle age as a specific age cohort and the range of potential experiences contained within it.

Middle age is an under theorized age cohort in ageing studies and feminist literature. Often characterized as a period of transition, it is seen as a time when the first signs of ageing (or rather getting 'old') are brought into focus, a phenomenon that is deeply gendered (Sontag, 1972; Itzin, 1986). What research there is into women's middle years is often couched in negative terms, for example the menopausal woman is often associated with loss and redundancy (see Ussher, 2006). This research seeks to highlight the subjective understandings of ageing of a group of middle-aged women and explore how discourses of ageing impacted upon and contradicted their daily-lived experiences of being middle-aged. From my research emerged the themes of transition, growth and positive change that encapsulated the journey through middle age for my interviewees, themes which make a fascinating and fruitful addition to both life course studies and feminist discourse.

It is perhaps easy to assume that technological innovation causes change in society without any consideration of how society influences and shapes technology. I am anxious to distance my research from any claim to technological determinism which implies that, 'technological innovations are themselves *uncaused-* in the sense that they arise only from the working out of an intrinsic disembodied impersonal logic and not from any social influence' (Edge, 1988: 14. Original italics). Social, political, economic and cultural agendas drive technological innovation, which in turn can impact in often unforeseen and unintended ways upon society. The relationship between society and technology is complex and cannot be conceptualised as unidirectional. Consideration must also be given to the forces that shape IT, '...the relationship between technology and society is genuinely an *interaction, a recursive*

process: causes and effects stand in a complex relationship' (Edge, 1988: 15. Original italics).

Any discussion of the impact of technology upon social relations must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of those who are denied access to it. Many older men and women are on the wrong side of the digital divide. Research into the 'grey divide' (Millward, 2003) suggests that older sections of the population are less likely to own a computer or learn computer skills than their younger counterparts. The reasons most commonly cited include lack of financial resources and technophobia, although it seems the divide is gradually closing as more and more older citizens gain access to computers and IT training (Blake, 1998; Bosler, 2002). My respondents all owned a computer, although in many cases this was a relatively recent acquisition. In the context of literature suggesting that technology is an alien environment for women (Spender, 1995) this research explores older women's accounts of learning IT skills, and how they understood the experience of bringing a computer into their home and lives.

Here I set the scene for the chapters that follow by placing my research within wider theoretical and conceptual issues that underpin the accounts of the women who were interviewed. Methodological issues surrounding how I carried out the research are dealt with in the following chapter. Firstly, however, I seek to highlight a discussion of the implicit conceptualisation of self-identity that underpins respondents' accounts of Internet dating and place this within the theoretical framework of Ricoeur's work on narrative identity.

Stories of dating, stories of selves
Women's accounts of dating must be understood within a wider context; the life history and social locations of the storytellers. Women entering middle age have histories; a past filled with life experiences and relations with others that collectively make them who they are in the present. They are likely to have experienced perhaps several significant relationships with others, which will inform their understandings and expectations of heterosexual relationships; they will have dated in their teens and may subsequently draw upon these experiences from the past in order to make sense of dating in middle age; they will have their own preconceptions of IT, which may be

a new and perhaps somewhat daunting phenomenon to them. At a broader level, women who are turning to dating sites in middle age are likely to have experienced both loss and change in their lives. Embarking on the dating game in the middle years, let alone using technology, signals a turning point that could indeed herald the construction of a new 'chapter' after a period of loss and upheaval (this is discussed fully in Chapter Four). As I listened to stories of women's dating experiences, I was immediately struck by the fact that in order to tell their stories, they drew upon events from the past, subsequently placing their current experiences within wider understandings of the life story as a whole. Thus a number of related themes emerged within my research, which highlighted the conceptualising of the life course for women, their situatedness within it as middle-aged women and the appropriation of time in the telling of their stories.

At a more fundamental level, however, their accounts of using the dating sites were intertwined with complex and multiple stories of the self across the life course. Stories of selves that were changing, growing or perhaps damaged by painful or challenging experiences in the past. Women's accounts attempted to rescue the self from the unpredictable, the unforeseen and the painful, constructing a self that was repaired, intact and in control of the present and the future, despite the misfortunes of the past. Stories of the self worked to paper over the cracks of discontinuity and restore a linear and coherent sense of self.

Why was change perceived as such a fundamental threat to the self? Respondents' stories were often premised upon the Enlightenment view of the self as an inner core or essence that may be moulded by life experience but remains essentiality coherent and linear throughout our lives. This Enlightenment or modernist model of the self provides the individual with a sense of uniqueness and also a sense of linearity over time. The modernist self is the property of the individual and is understood as largely unblemished by wider social relations, a self that can be mastered via rational means. Common sense understandings of the self in contemporary society tend to place responsibility with the individual to embark upon a reflexive progressional journey of self-improvement, pursuing self-growth and understanding. The self is constantly worked upon as a project (Giddens 1991), which needs to be continually reflectively monitored. Interestingly, this is an introspective process; self-growth comes from

looking inward, 'getting in touch' with the self, rather than looking outward to wider social relations. Popular psychology literature for example encourages us to 'find ourselves' and then work upon self-improvement, which assumes the presence of an inner, knowable and unified self to be found. Rose (1999) explores how the psy-professions regulate the self by encouraging introspection and self-evaluation, again based on the assumption that there is a knowable stable, coherent entity that is the possession of the subject.

Bauman (2004) argues that whilst the common sense understanding of the unified modernist self is in fact an illusion, it has not been abandoned in favour of a decentred, fragmented postmodern conceptualisation of self. Whilst changing social conditions within contemporary society arguably make a coherent and unchanging life plan less achievable, it seems that individuals still fight against the uncertainty of the postmodern condition, which evokes a self which is fleeting, malleable, and non-committal. Indeed Turkle, points out that the concept of multiple selves is seen as pathological from a psychological perspective, whilst a stable and unified self is equated with a 'healthy' self-identity (Turkle, 1995: 261). The postmodern model of the self would not balk at life changes but simply adapt chameleon like to another set of circumstances, yet the need to repair, restore and recreate the self over time emerged as a central theme to my research. Respondents put a great deal of effort into stories of self that served to 'paper over the cracks' of discontinuity to restore linearity and coherence between selves before and after a hiatus or time of change.

Narrative identity

How then are we to understand respondent's stories of self in middle age? Ricoeur's (1991) theory of narrative identity is a wholly relevant theoretical framework within which to explore this sense of continuity and change that underpinned women's accounts[1]. What follows is an outline of Ricoeur's narrative theory and how this provides an explanatory framework within which to understand the accounts of respondents. It is important to note however, that I would stop short of suggesting that

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[1] Whilst Ricoeur's work on narrative identity is focussed upon in the thesis, it is important to note that his is not the only approach that is available. Maines (1993, 2001) and Järvinen (2004) also consider narrative from an Interactionist perspective, drawing upon the work of George Herbert Mead (1934). Mead's work acknowledged a temporal perspective to understanding and actively constructing the self and can offer further insights into how narratives are both constructed in terms of the past and yet rooted firmly within the present; within everyday lives.

my research could be described as wholly narrative research. I have appropriated aspects of narrative theory and method which were relevant to the process and aims of the research and would therefore suggest that this is a qualitative study which has been informed by narrative approaches (see Chapter Three for further discussion).

Ricoeur's underlying concept of the self suggests a post structuralist model that is socially produced and changeable rather than a fixed and coherent, essence. Yet here lies the crucial point, in that the process of telling (and retelling) of narratives of self can do the work of *creating* the linear sense of self that is so desired by the teller. Indeed the stories told by respondents worked to restore the sense of linearity over time after a sudden loss of selfhood. Narrative identity could be seen as working as a form of identity maintenance for women who integrated normative expectations of ageing, gender and heterosexuality (and the intersection of all three) with stories of resistance and change. Narratives were told on multiple levels; stories of dating were underpinned by stories of self and one couldn't be understood without the other.

Ricoeur's narrative theory is underpinned by the assertion that subjects are not just telling stories to *represent* their lives but actually *become* those stories. Thus narrative identity is an ontological state. Somers and Gibson (1994) refer to this as 'conceptual narrativity' and suggest it is based upon the following premises,

> That social life is itself storied and that narrative is itself an ontological condition of social life...that stories guide action, that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and what is happening within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately linked repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 38-39).

Narrativity as an ontological state has implications for the construction of self and identity. Ricoeur's narrative self stands between the Cartesian self that can reflect

upon itself and know itself outside of the social world, and a socially constructed self, which cannot know itself unmediated by wider social relations The narrative self is storied and open to constant reinterpretation over time. The self is in a constant state of becoming,

> The self does not know itself immediately but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts, which are articulated on the symbolic mediations which always already articulate action and, among them, the narratives of everyday life. Narrative mediation underlines this remarkable characteristic of self-knowledge - that is self-interpretation (Ricoeur, 1991: 198).

In this respect, Ricoeur's conceptualisation of the self is a product of social relations but the emplotment of narratives adds a creative dimension and therefore stresses individual agency in constructing and understanding self and identity across time. Therefore, a middle ground is found whereby the individual is inextricably bound to the social world and yet has agency to construct a constantly emerging sense of identity (ies),

> How individuals recount their histories -what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience -all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life: they are the mean by which identities may be fashioned. (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992 cited in Reissman, 1993: 2)

Ricoeur's emphasis upon the active creation of the self through the process of storytelling rescues the subject from the passivity often implied in post structuralist accounts. Foucault (1975) for example, has been criticised for his emphasis upon power within social relations as restraining the individual, which underplays the agency of the individual in actually resisting power but also working to actively create and maintain the self at a micro level.

The self and other: continuity and change

Ricoeur's narrative theory produces a model of the self which allows for continuity and change across time. Central to the construction of a narrative identity is the concept of time. The construction and unfolding of identity within a temporal context leads him to consider identity as dialectic between two meanings of identity, namely: idem and ipse. In order to be a person, Ricoeur argues, we need both these aspects of identity. Firstly, idem identity emphasises permanence in time and is dialectic between self and sameness. Ricoeur refers to *numerical identity,* which in the sense of idem denotes 'oneness' and *qualitative identity*, which infers an extreme resemblance between two things so similar they cannot be distinguished between. Over time however, our physical appearance can change due to ageing. Here Ricoeur introduces the idea of the *uninterrupted continuity* of an individual across time,

> The demonstration of this continuity functions as a supplementary or a substitutive criterion to similitude; the demonstration rests upon the ordered series of small changes which taken one by one, threaten resemblance without destroying it (Ricoeur, 1992: 117).

Ricoeur suggests that time is placed as a threat to identity by being seen as a factor of, *'dissemblance, of divergence, of difference'*. (Ibid.). In short, idem identity answers the question, 'what am I?'

Ipse identity answers the question, 'Who am I?' It can be viewed as a dialectic between self and other than self. In other words, it is the self that is formed in relation to others in the social world and involves the process of self-reflection. We orientate ourselves in the social world by identifying not only with other individuals but also wider cultural and public values. The relation between the self and other is not merely one of comparison, in that we can internalise wider cultural norms and *become* the other, 'The selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead, one passes into another' (Ricoeur, 1992: 3). Ipse identity is a sense of self that does not assume some inner unchanging core but allows for the self to unfold and change, being in a continual state of becoming across time. Ipse identity not only allows for a self that unfolds over time but also sees the self as variable. We can therefore have a different sense of self in

relation to others or in different social contexts. Narrative identity, argues Ricoeur, sits between two polar positions, where idem and ipse overlap and at the other extreme, where ipse is not supported by idem.

Character, argues Ricoeur, is the point in which ipse is overlaid by idem. At first glance character is seen as innate, unchanging and sustained throughout the lifespan of an individual. 'By, "character" I understand the set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of a human individual as being the same' (Ricoeur, 1992: 119). Ricoeur points to the fact that character is not static but changes across time, suggesting that character consists of two elements: *habits* and *identifications. Habits* can be viewed from a temporal perspective as dispositions we already have and those we acquire throughout our lives. In this respect, Ricoeur argues that a process of 'sedimentation' takes place in that the innovation behind the acquisition of habits is overlaid by a sense of sameness. As a result, acquired habits become seen as personality traits that we have *always had*. Thus ipse is obscured by idem.

Character also consists of *acquired identifications*, which are the identifications we make with other individuals, groups and wider social and cultural norms. These become internalised to produce subjectivities. We can recognise ourselves in others and assume this otherness as our own. This draws us to the link between idem and ipse, in that we cannot think of idem without ipse, we cannot think of ourselves free from our sense of otherness. Thus character is the point where idem and ipse become confused. In fact Ricoeur illustrates this point by considering how people's actions can differ from the fixed behavioural traits attributed to them as their 'character'. At this point people are often seen as acting 'out of character'. The significance of Ricoeur's understanding of character is that it allows for a sense of stability and yet change within the life narrative. The issue of character can be central to narratives of self as often the point of the narrative will move towards an illustration of a set of characteristic traits that make the teller unique in herself and in the ways she deals with the world around her. Chapter Seven explores how respondents drew on their sense of acting 'out of character' in order to understand perceived change in their dating behaviour.

Dark Night of the Soul

Narrative identity sits between the positions where idem and ipse overlap and where they part company. Ricoeur (1986) argues that the stories people tell seek to protect and construct a linear sense of self over time. At a time of traumatic loss or change however, we experience a 'dark night of the soul' moment where idem splits apart from ipse and the sense of who we are disintegrates. We are unable to make sense of the event within the wider context of our lives and our sense of self is brought into question. At this point it is only when we start to ask, 'who am I?' that the process of reconstructing the self through narrative begins. Stories told over time seek to paper over the cracks and make sense of an unexpected hiatus within the wider context of the life course. Stories are told and retold until the teller is satisfied that a particular version events were 'the way things were'. Becker (1997) stresses how disruptions in people's lives are given meaning through narrative. Coherence, order and linearity are created out of what seems like a string of chaotic events. It is the process of telling stories of the event that seek to reinstate linearity back into an understanding of the self over time. Indeed the interview can provide a space for narratives to be told which are part of this process of understanding change within a linear story of the self.

Narrative and time

Ricoeur stresses the centrality of subjective understandings of time in his theory of narrativity. The emplotment of a narrative for example, will encompass a sequence of events from the past to construct a story. Although these events will contribute to the point of the story, they may not be ordered chronologically. Ricoeur also, however pointed to the fact that narrative identity involves the construction of self by reading time backwards. In other words we make sense of the present by reference to the past and this informs our future actions. Added to this Ricoeur sees the appropriation of time within narratives as unidirectional. Within narrative we read the beginning of the story into the end and the end into the beginning, thus the self becomes what it always was,

> Memory…is itself the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellation of potentialities that the narrative retrieves. The end of the story is what equates the present with the

past, the actual with the potential. *The hero is who he [sic] was* (Ricoeur, 1985: 186. Original emphasis).

Ricoeur's work highlights the role of memory in the appropriation of past events in order to understand the present. This is particularly pertinent for those in middle age who pause perhaps to reflect upon the past and ponder the future. Yet a progressive model of a linear self is perhaps harder to construct as the future can be understood in terms of cultural understandings of ageing, that are framed around decline and loss. Narratives of self have to accommodate competing discourses to make senses of their own story of self-growth and development.

Public narratives

Personal narratives are not told in social isolation. They draw upon cultural resources from a world that is itself already storied. People make sense of their lives and their relations with others in terms of wider cultural and public stories. Somers and Gibson (1994) describe public narratives as,

> Those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual...Public narratives range from the narratives of ones family to those of the workplace...church, government, and nation (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 62).

Thus personal narratives are inextricably bound to the social world, which enables stories to be understood within common frameworks of understanding. Whilst public narratives can indeed provide frames of meaning, however, they can similarly serve to silence stories. Public and cultural stories do not exist in a social vacuum and this raises the issue of power as a normalising force of certain discourses in society. Not only are narratives situated within wider power relations, they are performative in that they are constitutive of those relations. So whilst personal narratives may draw upon wider public narratives, at the same time, public narratives (and the power relations that underpin them) are reproduced within narratives. Ewick and Silbey suggest that,

> The pervasiveness of power relations in society may to some extent be due to the fact that they are produced and reproduced in personal, unique stories, so

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that public narratives intertwine with the personal and specific are thus presented in numerous ways (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 212).

The construction of a personal narrative will draw upon wider public narratives without necessarily challenging 'common sense' assumptions, drawing the listener to the point of the story rather than giving a critical consideration of power relations that may be implicit within them. This suggests that the act of narration is, in itself, an effect of the workings of power. Foucault's (1998) work on the subtle workings of power suggests that power is subtle, invisible and can be experienced as productive rather than prohibitive. Power works as a normalising force, which encourages the self-regulation of subjects. Is the act of narration part of this process? Foucault argues that we live in a 'confessing society', which openly encourages subjects to 'confess' their inner thoughts to a variety of audiences. The supposed freedom to tell such stories masks the subtle power relations that make the confession the focus of regulation of the subject (Foucault, 1998: 59). As a result of technological advances, there are arguably an increasing variety of public audiences to receive our personal stories. Internet dating sites are a pertinent example where intensely personal narratives of self can be told to 'strangers' all over the world. Cohen (no date) suggests that contemporary Western society provides many opportunities for private narratives to be told publicly and simultaneously create eager audiences to hear them, 'The incitement to participate vicariously in other people's more exciting and dangerous lives is taken to its limits in the confessional diaries and life stories which feature so prominently in the popular press' (Cohen).

Narrativity is not, however dooming the individual to live passively within a cage of ideology,

> Conceptual narrativity offers a way of considering the kinds of stories which people tell without considering such stories as either expressions of an 'authentic' identity, or as ideological 'traps'. Rather stories are actively worked up by social actors, though not of course from an endless repertoire of social narratives (Lawler, 2002: 254).

Social actors have the agency to use public narratives creatively and as a result subversive stories can be told. Ewick and Sibley suggest that such stories bring together the local, individual story and the generalised public narratives. Subversive stories are not necessarily an outright rejection of power relations but the merging of wider public narratives with more personal stories of resistance.

Narrative, ageing and the body

Ricoeur (1992) conceptualises the self as embodied, seeing the body is an integral part of how the subject acts and suffers in the world. In acknowledging the material body as part of human consciousness, Ricoeur moves away from the Cartesian self, which is predicated upon the mind/body split, stressing the centrality of the body for identity, referring to this as 'existence'. 'Existence is what subjects have who have the capacity for acknowledging that they have bodies in the material world' (Simms, 2003: 12). Ricoeur's emphasis upon both the centrality of embodiment to self identity and the integration of wider cultural narratives into personal stories of the self provides a useful framework for a consideration of the ageing self which was articulated as an integral part of self construction for respondents.

An awareness of the outward appearance of ageing upon the body in the middle years can indeed be a bitter pill to swallow but arguably, ageing can impact at a more fundamental level, contributing to a sense of loss of a coherent unified self. The body appears to be no longer effective as an outward display of an 'inner' self. What happens when the body presents an identity, which no longer 'fits' with a subjective understanding of the self? Literature on ageing often refers to the concept of the ageing body as a 'mask' (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1996; Biggs, 1993).'The 'mask of ageing' rests on the premise that there is,

> A distance or tension between…the external appearance of the face and body
> and their functional capacities, and the internal or subjective sense or
> experience of personal identity which is likely to become more prominent in
> our consciousness as we grow older (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995: 151).

The mask of ageing is premised upon the view that the inner self and body *can* be divided, but narrative identity rests on the assumption that subjectivity is inevitably mediated through the body. How is it then, that the ageing body can be felt as somehow alien to or split off from the self? De Beauvoir suggests that this process of feeling split off from the ageing body is a defence mechanism, a form of denial. Denying ageing and feeling 'young' inside is a splitting off of ageing as something that will never happen to us,

> When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that that will never happen to us- when that happens, it will no longer be ourselves that it is happening to (de Beauvoir, 1970: 11-12 cited in Andrews, 1999: 3).

A denial of ageing requires a psychological distancing from the body which bears the physical signs of the ageing process, but is it the passing of chronological time that is being denied or distanced from? Or is it rather the cultural meanings attached to ageing? Narrative identity seeks to create a sense of self by drawing upon a world already storied. In order to understand the ageing self, the subject draws upon wider cultural and public stories which pre-exist the individual and which give meaning to the ageing process. In Western societies where great value is placed upon youthfulness, the ageing body becomes a symbol of failure, fear or disgust. Narratives of ageing selves work to integrate subjective experiences of ageing with largely negative cultural stereotypes. The distance expressed between the self and the ageing body symbolises the distance between a subjects lived experiences of ageing on the one hand, and wider societal values which place ageing in negative terms. It is precisely the process of distancing the self from the ageing body that resonates with Ricoeur's view that we experience the world through the physical body. Narratives which express such a distance are acknowledging that subjectivity is always mediated though the body. The impact of wider social (power) relations upon women's embodied experience of ageing can be resisted, but not ignored.

Narrative genres
Somers and Gibson suggest four features that give a narrative its structure and content. It should contain: *relationality of parts* in that all events and characters

should link together in some coherent and meaningful way; stories told must have *emplotment*, in other words a point of thread that runs through the story; *selective appropriation* refers to the fact that some events will be selected for a certain narrative and others left out; and finally, *temporality, sequence and place* refer to the fact that events will be ordered in time and place (the sequential ordering of events may not be chronologically correct but rather serve to reflect the meaning of the story) (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 58). A narrative containing the above features provides some structure and meaning to the story being told. Added to this, however, Ricoeur (1992) points to the fact that literary genres are often used as a resource to give a further layer of structure and meaning to the narrative. Familiar narrative genres such as romance, comedy, satire or tragedy offer a wealth of resource, which can be appropriated within narrative construction.

Contemporary society is awash with autobiographies of the rich and famous for example. Whilst each has a specific and person life story to tell, they tend to follow the hackneyed genre of 'survivor through adversity' whose progressional journey subsequently entails increased self-knowledge and growth. Often, however, the end of the story finds the subject laying claim to the self they have always been, 'I am still who I always was, fame has not changed me'. This resonates with Ricoeur's understanding of the relationship between time and the self. The reading of the beginning of the story into the end and the end into the beginning, results in the hero becoming who they always were. Gergen and Gergen discuss autobiographic genres,

> With the emphasis upon individual achievement, autobiographies tend the follow the classic lines of the 'monomyth'...in its clearest form, the monomyth is a saga of a hero who triumphs over a myriad of impediments. When applied to the lifespan, the monomyth is a heroic trajectory' (Gergen and Gergen, 1983: 195).

They go on to suggest, however, that the use of this genre is gendered, 'the monomyth speaks most directly to the lifespan of a man, not a woman,' they suggest that women's stories tend to be multiple and intermingled' with the lives of others whilst men tend to be, 'concerned with the pursuit of single goals and rarely revealing about emotional experiences' (Gergen and Gergen, 1983: 196). This resonated with the

accounts of respondents within this research who indeed drew on variation of the 'monomyth' genre in order to tell stories of the self. Ultimately, As Chapter Four reveals, their life stories, which were characterised as ones of survival, independence and strength were simultaneously given meaning and structured by their relations to significant others in their lives.

Romance genres

The appropriation of wider cultural narratives within personal narratives bridges the gap between individuals and the social world. One such example is the romance narrative, which contains several familiar genres that are repeated within romance literature and films. Familiar romance genres can be seen as encapsulated within the popular 'Mills and Boon' series, which has produced hundreds of novels all broadly following a number of recognised themes. The plots tends to centre on a (young) female heroine and her fight to win the love of the initially cruel but ruggedly handsome object of her desire. The couple survive the twists and turns of the story to of course live happily ever after. This theme of love 'taming the (male) beast' can be found in fairy tales, such as Beauty and the Beast for example.

Despite the fact that such stories are romanticised (the hero and heroine are usually placed in an exotic location), Jackson (1999) raises the important point that romance narratives can be easily appropriated into personal narratives simply because they are so pervasive and therefore familiar. It is through such genre that people understand their experiences of romance and relationships. Thus personal and public narratives merge as individuals position themselves as the subject of a variety of romance genre within the context of their own daily lives in order to make sense of their romantic encounters. Romantic love is largely seen as evoking intensely personal emotions but Jackson points out that these emotions are indeed culturally and socially mediated and we understanding our emotions through the learning of scripts, which circulate in society and precede us as individuals. In line with Ricoeur (1992) who asserts that individuals tell stories of the self in a world already storied, Jackson highlights how the romance genre informs us of our understandings of love,

> We do this by participating in sets of meanings constructed, interpreted,
> disseminated and deployed throughout our culture through learning scripts,

positioning ourselves within discourses, constructing narratives of self. We make sense of feelings and relationships in terms of love because a set of discourses around love pre-exist us as individuals and through these we have learnt what love means (Jackson, 1999: 106).

Romantic love did not emerge explicitly as a central theme of my research, possibly due to respondent's close proximity to a recent long term relationship break up (which had temporarily at least, shattered their belief in any 'happy ever after'), but nevertheless women drew upon certain aspects of romance genres to make sense of their experiences and hopes for the future. Whilst respondents showed ambivalence concerning falling in love, their accounts were underpinned by the desire to have relationship with a man (albeit casual) which brings us to another central issue within women's stories; understandings of heterosexuality and femininity.

Heterosexuality, femininity and the self
Jackson (1999) stresses the fact that in political terms, many women assume the norm of heterosexuality without expressing or indeed recognising this as a political identity. Jackson argues that,

> Many of the identities derive from their location within heterosexual relations – as wife, girlfriend, daughter or mother. Attachment to these identities affects the ways in which women experience the institutions and practices of heterosexuality (Jackson, 1999: 130).

Feminist critiques have sought to expose heterosexuality as a normalising institution that is underpinned by unequal gendered relations. Rich (1980) writes of the fact that pervasive heterosexual norms drive women into 'compulsory heterosexuality' in that they are constantly bombarded with the myths of heterosexual pleasure and the normalisation of heterosexual relations as an institution, which denies women the possibility of a lesbian sexual identity, a site of resistance to the heterosexual norm. Rich suggests that historically, lesbianism has been ignored or stigmatised. She attempts to move away from the negative assumptions attached to lesbianism by using the term 'lesbian experience' arguing that this is a site of resistance to heterosexual normativity. Further than this she describes all women's relationships with other

women as being on a 'lesbian continuum', which encompasses all manner of relationships between women.

Rather than seeing heterosexuality as an institution from which power emanates, Butler (1990) approaches the issue of heteronormativity from a different starting point. She talks of a heterosexual matrix, which includes homosexuality as a part of normative heterosexuality. The matrix is a framework for cultural understandings of desire, gender and sex. An emphasis upon sex as 'natural' places an emphasis upon difference between the sexes and because it is within a heterosexual matrix that difference is understood, heterosexual norms proliferate whilst homosexual activities become pathologised or silenced. Thus sexuality becomes framed in cultural terms in favour of the normative framework of heterosexual desire. Her emphasis upon gender as a performance, the repetition of which produces gender, unsettles the notion of a fixed self behind the performance. Butler is highlighting here that heterosexual power only exists in relation to homosexuality, a view echoed by Jackson,

> Homosexuality and heterosexuality serve to define each other, that the one can only exist without the other, that neither makes sense without its other: they are co-constructed in a reciprocal, but hierarchical relationship (Jackson, 1999: 173).

None of the women I interviewed laid explicit claim to a heterosexual identity Interestingly, some women identified their heterosexual identity indirectly by stating *what they were not*. Women distanced themselves from a lesbian identity, often qualifying a remark such as the desire for female company with ' I'm not a lesbian, don't get me wrong', which stated their desire for female company whilst simultaneously very firmly distancing themselves from any (stigmatised) sexual connotations.

Beyond a critique of the pervasiveness of heterosexual norms, feminists have also been keen to expose the unequal gender relations which underpin understandings of masculinity and femininity within a heterosexual framework. Jackson points out that that gendered inequality takes many forms within a framework of heterosexuality and argues that feminist critiques should not focus purely upon the construction of female

sexuality in terms of male desire (for example Dworkin 1987), but encompass all areas of daily lived experience,

> Everyday heterosexuality is not just about sex, but is perpetuated by the regulation of marriage and family life, divisions of waged and domestic labour, patterns of economic support and dependency and the routine everyday expectations and practices through which heterosexual coupledom persists as the normative ideal, a 'natural' way of life (Jackson, 1999: 26).

It seems there are pleasures to be had within heterosexual relationships that keep women coming back for more. Despite the disappointments of previous relationships, respondents were logging onto dating sites in order to seek male company. Indeed Langford highlights the speed at which the 'love cycle' is repeated in contemporary social relations (Langford, 1999: 2). How does feminist critique sit alongside the pleasures to be had for women within a heterosexual relationship? Many feminists (Ramazanoglu, 1994) acknowledge the possibility of pleasure within heterosexual relationships but suggest that often-unequal power relations leave these pleasures largely unachieved. They seek to highlight the gap between persuasive idealistic discourses of heterosexual relationships and the reality on the ground, from the romance novel to everyday life.

The pervasiveness of the ideal of heterosexual coupledom can be seen to place the single woman as 'outside' of the norm and somehow missing out on the pleasures to be had as part of a heterosexual couple. Langford (1999) found in her research into heterosexual relationships, that narratives of freedom and independence sat alongside womens' perceived need to have a man in their life in order to be fulfilled,

> Despite expressing the view that women do not need a man to be happy, women's accounts suggest that this confidence was not necessarily experienced at an emotional level. On the contrary, it was associated with fears concerning attractiveness, desirability and the ability to cope, and with a certain ambivalence concerning freedom and autonomy (Langford, 1999: 50).

An important point made here concerns the fact that women often only felt attractive and desirable if a man validated their desirability. Indeed Butler (1990) echoes the point that femininity is only fully realised within the heterosexual encounter. Femininity can only be validated by the masculine, and their understandings of what it is to be desirable and attractive are inevitably placed within a framework of masculine desire. Further than this, understandings of gender and femininity form an integral part of subjectivity. Women therefore needed a man to feel a completed and validated self. To return to the words of de Beauvoir, 'Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.' (de Beauvoir, 1983: 3).

Heterosexual relationships are often linked to the notion of romantic love. Common romantic scripts often articulate a self that is 'torn apart' or 'incomplete' at the end of a relationship until a 'soul mate' is found and the self is made 'whole' once more. De Beauvoir (1983) argues that dominant discourses of romantic love also seek to shore up the notion of women's selves being in need of salvation through the love of a man, freeing the self through self-sacrifice within a love relationship. Could it be however, that recent social change has enabled the development of heterosexual relationships that are based upon more equality between the sexes?

The Self and the Pure Relationship

A more democratic conception of selfhood within romantic relationships is given by Giddens'(1992) notion of the 'Pure Relationship'. Giddens' argument is that the self in contemporary society is worked upon reflexively as a life project, focussing upon a progression model of self-development. He argues that the nature of relationships has changed to incorporate individual self-growth and autonomy. Thus there is a move away from the traditional romantic genre of selves merging, two incomplete selves becoming whole within a romantic partnership. Instead the relationship flourishes by allowing each partner freedom for self-growth; in fact Giddens argues relationships are a key site where narratives of self are constructed in a mutually supportive environment,

> The pure relationship can provide a facilitating social environment for the
> reflexive project of the self. Boundaries, personal space and the rest, as the

therapeutic manuals say, are needed for individuals to flourish in a relationship rather than slide into co-dependence (Giddens, 1992: 139).

Despite the fact that the pure relationship flourishes as a result of mutual self-disclosure, it does not imply any promise of unconditional long-term commitment,

> It [a pure relationship] refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it (Giddens, 1992: 58).

Giddens suggests that the pure relationship is indeed dependent upon equality between the sexes and paints an optimistic picture of plastic sexuality, where female sexuality is described as autonomous. Jamieson (1999) points out however, that the changes which Giddens is detailing are not necessarily as tranformatory as he suggests. She argues that Giddens draws upon therapeutic discourse concerning self-growth and change without critically assessing the gendered assumptions that may underpin them (Jamieson, 1999: 449). Secondly, despite Giddens' optimistic view concerning equality of the sexes, research such as Langford's above, often reveal inequalities within the daily lived experience of heterosexual relations. Finally, Jamieson points to the high levels of relationship breakdown in contemporary society. Whilst Giddens sees this in a positive light as it appears to show that men and women are less likely to stay in unhappy relationships, she suggests,

> It seems more plausible to see the fragility of heterosexual couples as a consequence of the tension between strengthening cultural emphasis upon intimacy, equality and mutuality in relationships and the structural supports of gender inequalities, which make these ideals difficult to attain (Jamieson, 1999: 812).

Jamieson's view resonates with the earlier work of Luhmann (1986) who suggests that the democratisation of love is actually leading to a battle ground within heterosexual relationships as women's demands for equality within a relationship do not sit easily

with wider social structures underpinned by patriarchy. Thus the tensions involved in the wider structural break down of traditional patriarchy are being played out within the home, and so putting strain on relationships (Luhmann, 1986: 23).

Bauman (2003) argues that the modern quest for autonomy has a double bind in the relationship stakes. Whilst the fluidity of modern society encourages us to look for the stability of partnership, that same fluidity makes us fear commitment and crave autonomy for the self. He describes those who,

> Despairing at being abandoned to their own wits and feelings, easily disposable, yearning for the security of togetherness, and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to 'relate'; yet wary of the state of being related and particularly of being related 'for good', not to mention forever- since they fear that such a state may bring burdens and cause strains that neither feel able nor are willing to bear, and so may severely limit the freedom they need...to relate (Bauman, 2003: viii).

Does the Internet actually enable the development of the pure relationship? Undoubtedly the dating sites offer abundant choice, which may enhance a sense of freedom and autonomy. Also, many relationships form online in cyberspace between couples on different sides of the globe where a relationship flourishes despite the absence of physical proximity. A great deal of self-autonomy and anonymity can be kept within these relationships; they offer intimacy at a distance, at convenient times of the day, so as not to intrude with personal daily schedules. They can be disposed of easily and acquired with minimum effort. Relationships online tend to be carried out at speed which has been referred to as the 'Boom and Bust scenario (McDowell, 2001). Relationships tend form quickly but fizzle out just as fast with few consequences for either concerned. Bauman takes up the issue of speed, arguing that online relationships,

> Seem to be made to the measure of a liquid modern life setting where romantic possibilities...are supposed and hoped to come and go with even greater speed and in ever thinning crowds, stampeding each other off the stage and out shouting each other with promises to be more satisfying and fulfilling. Unlike

'real relationships,' 'virtual relationships' are easy to enter and to exit. They look smart and clean, feel easy to use and user friendly, when compared to the heavy slow moving, inert, messy stuff (Bauman, 2003: xii).

One doesn't have to search far to find Internet dating stories making the headlines,

Man proposes after four minutes: A single father-of-two proposes to an American woman he met on the Internet four minutes after flying 4,000 miles to see her for the first time (BBC News. 15/04/07).

There are many such stories to be found which highlight in a general sense how social expectations of love and relationships are changing as a result of opportunities enabled through Internet dating sites. The story above highlights several issues, including the increase in long distance relationships that may be carried out online for many months; the prospect of falling in love online with a self constructed via text in cyberspace and finally the speed of relationship progression. In other words the quality of the relationship is based more on the here and now rather than longevity and shared experience.

Paradoxically however, dating sites are marketed using the familiar romantic narratives of living happily ever after, finding your soul mate or 'other half'. The tension lies in a pay off. Love 'forever more' involves commitment, which may compromise a sense of individualism and autonomy, whilst those who graze through relationships at speed risk the threat of lacking an anchor for the self and being alone. Internet dating has allowed for new ways of thinking about relationships but has also challenged at a more fundamental level our understandings of self-identity. The final section of this chapter looks in more detail at the impact of the Internet upon the formation and presentation of self-identity.

Cyberselves
Turkle (1995) celebrates the 'freeing' arena of cyberspace that allows for self-experimentation without the fear of offline repercussions. Emphasis upon the experimentation with the self-online suggests the construction of a postmodern model of multiple selves, 'The Internet is another element of computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people can build a self by

cycling through many selves' (Turkle, 1995: 178). Within the context of the dating site, however, such experimentation tends to be limited. Hardey (2002) points out that online dating sites straddle the online/offline worlds in that the goal of online interaction is an offline meeting, thus self-experimentation online can lead to claims of misrepresentation if an offline meeting occurs. What is significant about Turkle's work, however, is that she suggests that the process of self-experimentation online can impact upon our sense of self offline. This aspect is pivotal to my research. Narratives of self are influenced by an individual's social context and yet cyberspace can be seen to unsettle the very space they inhabit by providing new horizons and networks unbounded by space and time. A central question within my research was whether online interaction challenged the online/offline divide and influenced offline identities and lives as Turkle suggests.

Self-presentation online is done largely via textual communication. Goffman's work on the *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life* (1990) provides a useful framework within which to explore the presentation of self via computer-mediated communication. Goffman's conceptualisation of self is a self formed through numerous daily interactions with others and is therefore essentially a socially produced self. Within cyberspace, communication is not bounded by space and time and the 'performance' of self-presentation is not carried out in the physical presence of another. This has several implications for the presentation of self in cyberspace. Firstly, the time delay in asynchronous communication (email) allows for more control over self-presentation (Geogehan, 2002). An email can be carefully constructed, reflected upon, rewritten or even deleted. Thus the presentation of self can be more carefully controlled over time, often enabling the construction of a more idealised sense of self.

Goffman stresses that the performance of self-presentation is not complete until the audience has made their own interpretation of the performance (Goffman, 1990: 27). Online, presentation of self is a process that is completed by the interpretation of a textual communication. Email or real time chat provides limited information about a person and in the absence of bodily cues, vocal intonation and facial expression, the 'audience' may read between the lines, allowing imagination and wishful thinking to 'fill the gaps'. This often leads to an idealised version of self online where within an

interaction, not only does someone have more freedom to present a more idealised version of self due to the anonymity of online communication, but the person receiving the email can validate the image of an idealised self. Walther (2006) calls this the 'hyperpersonal effect' of cyberspace where the receiver of an email will perceive an idealised picture of the sender and respond positively. Thus the idealisation of self becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Interaction in cyberspace has been described as 'disembodied'. Goffman (1990) argues that the body is an integral part of self-presentation; He refers to bodily characteristics as 'personal front',

> ...The items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes. As part of personal front we may include...clothing, age and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture and speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures and the like' (Goffman, 1990: 34).

Not only can the body enhance our performance, it can similarly let us down by causing embarrassment or a 'failed performance'. The body can give off an unintended impression of the self that is out of the control of the performer. Cyberspace provides anonymity in the sense that the physical body is hidden from others and so on the one hand, there is less opportunity for the body to spoil a performance, whilst on the other, the physical body cannot be used to aid presentation of self. The context of the dating site does allow for photographs to be posted however, which display the body on the screen, albeit it from a favourable angle! The photo does indeed add a dimension of embodiment to the construction of the self-online and has the advantage of being a static concept, frozen in cyberspace, never likely to blush or stammer or harm the performance. The growing emphasis upon sophisticated marketing of the self is highlighted by a service offered by 'Match.com', one the largest online dating sites; a top photographer to make sure your profile photograph is eye-catching,

> Celebrity stylist Jay Manuel, known for appearances on "America's Next Top Model," gives a crash course on Match's Web site to help amateurs

find their best camera angle and most flattering expression. His tips for
bringing out one's inner supermodel: Take your photo using a camera
flash and a naturally lit room; black clothing is often best for a head shot;
and try using an indoor fan to capture a tousled, dynamic image (Reuters
(26/12/2006) at: http://news.com.com/2106-12-0.html.).

Physical embodiment can be expressed, or implied through text online. As Turkle
suggests, 'one's body is represented by one's own textual description so the obese can
be slender, the beautiful plain, the nerdy sophisticated' (Turkle, 1995:12).
Interestingly, it could be argued that textual communication can actually imply
embodiment. A study by Jacobson (1999) points to the fact that in some cases, the
words, the tone and the structure of emails actually gave the other person online an
impression of the stature of the person. One of Jacobson's respondents found,

> Her words were huge. Her rapier wit was killing. I was sure she was gigantic
> physically. If her words were any indication of size… she had to be six feet
> tall…My impression of her based solely on what she wrote was one of
> towering everything - guts, strength, physical dimension. I was sure she was
> fearless…as it happens, she was tiny! (Respondent in Jacobson, 1999: 13).

Whether represented via text, implicitly or explicitly, it seems that embodiment still
forms an integral part of self-presentation or the imaginings of other selves online.
The construction of self online without the constraints of the material body, can be
seen as positive in that we can leave behind the social markers such as age, gender,
race and ability, and experiment with radical forms of identity. This argument is
complex however as it could be argued that social differences can be expressed in
other forms, for example the use of gendered conversational styles or gendered
expectations of dating (Spender, 1995). Interaction in cyberspace raises many
fascinating issues concerning the construction of self, and as technological innovation
develops, we could see further media of communication in the future with unforeseen
ramifications for self construction and presentation of self to others.

Conclusion

This chapter helps to lay the foundations of this thesis by exploring theoretical and conceptual issues that underpinned respondent's accounts of using the dating sites.

In later chapters I explore women's own personal experiences of online dating, focussing in particular upon issues that were articulated by respondents as significant to them. Chapter Four looks at how women understood their positioning as middle-aged within the life course and how they made sense of their lives and identities over time in relation to significant others. Chapter Five finds women at the start of their Internet dating activities and considers the relationship between women and their computers and how technology allowed them to take control of their lives. Chapter Six Focuses upon women's experiences of interacting in cyberspace and how they learnt the skills to market the self within the context of the dating sites. Finally, Chapter Seven moves across the online/offline divide to highlight women's experiences of offline dating and the ways in which their subjectivities and lives were challenged by the use of Internet dating sites.

Before looking more closely at the accounts of respondents however, the following two chapters serve to further contextualise and build a solid foundation for an exploration of respondent's experiences. Chapter Two places my research within the wider context of existing academic literature in relevant fields, whilst Chapter Three sets out a discussion of methodological issues and highlights the methods appropriated in order to carry out my research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is twofold: first it aims to provide a flavour of the academic debates which underpin my own research; and second it aims to highlight how my research is situated within two largely under-researched areas, namely: middle age within the context of the life course; and the nature and impact of older women's social interaction in cyberspace. What follows is an overview of existing literature drawn from somewhat disparate academic areas. As a result I have divided the chapter into three parts: Part One looks at ageing and the life course, focussing particularly upon middle age and the intersection of gender and ageing; Part Two focuses upon gendered relations in cyberspace and computer-mediated communication; and finally, Part Three looks specifically at the field of Internet dating. While my research comes from a sociological perspective, this review covers a broader scope of literature across disciplines, including gerontology, psychology and communications studies. The literature in this review has been drawn upon from academic work over the last twenty years and focuses upon both theory and research. This chapter situates my research within a wider context in order to provide a broader understanding of the issues that are found in the following chapters. It is not a definitive list of literature but rather a rather an overview of the debates and issues that caught my imagination and interest.

Part One

Ageing

Andrews suggests that the last twenty years has shown an increase in research on ageing across a variety of disciplines including sociology, psychology, gerontology and social policy (Andrews, 1999: 301). The sudden growth of literature in ageing has been partly driven by demographic changes in society, the so-called 'greying' of the population (Cockerham, 1991; Radford, 1998). Wilson highlights this trend as a global phenomenon, 'One of the great successes of modern times is that in world-wide terms, more people are living longer, there are fewer early deaths and there is

greater prosperity' (Wilson, 2000: 1). He adds however, that such an upbeat message should be tempered as, '...the fear of old age is part of our heritage and pervades our societies and our policies' (ibid). Social policy literature tends to emphasize the ageing population as a problem, conceptualising ageing as a collective, inevitable march towards physical decline and thus dependency upon the state. Hunt (2005) suggests that the proportional rise in the numbers of older citizens in Western societies, coupled with the awareness of the impact this will have upon health service resources may actually increase the prevalence of ageist attitudes (Hunt, 2005: 37). Moody (1993) refers to the reduction of the ageing body to a series of potential heath problems as 'bio-medicalisation' which reduces the ageing body to,

A set of indicators: the 'social book keeping' tradition has amassed a great deal of data about aspects of bodies (diet, health, weight, health sickness, etc and living conditions.) Both state agencies and their critics have demanded such empirical data in order to assess and argue about, the distribution of resources to the frail, the sick and the infirm (Featherstone and Wernick (Eds.) 1995: 1).

Aside from the policy implications of an ageing population however, sociological literature has begun to look more closely at the social and cultural meanings that are attributed to ageing and the associated life stages that inform individual experiences of moving through the life course. This also represents a move away from a macro concern with ageing in general towards a micro approach to the (varied) daily-lived experiences of growing older (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995; Hockey and James, 2003; Hunt, 2005). Recognising ageing as a social and cultural phenomenon reveals the ageist assumptions that underpin our understanding of the ageing process. Policy literature on ageing tends to focus upon the elderly, but of course we are, in a temporal and biological sense, ageing from the day we are born. Children and young adults are described as 'growing up' rather than in terms of 'ageing'. It is from the middle years that arguably we begin to understand 'ageing' as a euphemism for 'growing old'. Thus the early traces of fear of old age can be found in the middle years through the consumption of anti-ageing creams or plastic surgery for example which attempt to hold back the effects of advancing years upon the body. Gullette refers to this as the beginning of 'age anxiety' (Gullette, 2004: 10).

Gullette (2004) in her book, *Aged by Culture* highlight how we are 'aged' more significantly by culture than by the passing of the time. In Western societies, which place great value on youthful bodies, middle age and beyond is seen as a gradual move away from the youthful ideal and as a result ageing is understood in terms of decline. Hockey and James also highlight the role of culture in shaping people's attitudes to ageing, 'The themes of physical decline, dependency, marginality and passivity...which commonly appear in both verbal and visual imagery, help to sustain certain cultural stereotypes of ageing' (Hockey and James, 1993: 23). Hareven echoes the view of Hockey and James arguing, 'The characterisation of the aged as 'useless', 'inefficient', 'unattractive', 'temperamental' and 'senile' accompanied the gradual ousting of people from the labour force at age sixty-five' (Hareven, 1995: 131). The ageing individual is also vulnerable to the gradual loss of power and status. Indeed Hockey and James point to the fact that the elderly often share the status of children as socially disempowered and disadvantaged groups, 'sustaining the dominance of one social group – 'adults' – at the expense of the marginal groups such as children and elderly people' (Hockey and James, 1993: 38).

Negative perceptions of ageing not only influence the way older people are perceived by other sections of the population but also impact heavily on self-perception, 'People's self conceptions are so much moulded by the attitudes they perceive around them. Negative stereotypes die hard' (Bond and Coleman, 1996: 340). Literature detailing the power and influence of negative stereotypes of ageing often plays down however, the resistance of older people to such stereotypes, 'There are few studies on elderly people's self-image, but those there are suggest that most elderly people are painfully aware of the crude negative stereotypes, and to varying degrees, resist them' (Ginn and Arber, 1993: 64). This view is supported by other research (Leonard and Nichols, 1994; Marshall and McPherson, 1994). Minichiello et al. (2000) found that older people themselves exhibited ageist attitudes through, 'an internalisation and acceptance of ageist stereotypes and prejudices through their perceptions of what 'being old' was' (Minichiello et al., 2000: 259). They point to the distinction made by respondents between 'ageing' and 'being old'. Within their research, 'ageing' was seen as 'not yet old' and was associated with such words as, 'motivated, busy, interested, positive, useful and purposeful and still trying' (ibid.). The emphasis upon activity and motivation tends to place the onus on the individual to avoid the

stereotype of dependency and infirmity in old age. Minichiellos respondents' mention of 'still trying' hints at the moral obligation of the individual to endeavour to fight the ageing process and not 'let themselves go'. Wearing (1995) argues to the contrary however, that the emphasis upon activity can be seen in a positive light as it can offer an, 'effective challenge to the discourses of old age by displaying what an older person *can* do in contrast to what they can't' (Wearing, 1995: 272). Remaining active has been referred to as ageing 'successfully' (Neuhaus and Neuhaus, 1982; Ginghold, 1992). Andrews draws attention however to the ageist assumptions that underpin this strategy,

> The unspecified, but clearly preferred method of successful ageing is, by most accounts, not to age at all or at least to minimise the extent to which it is apparent that one is ageing, both internally and externally (Andrews, 1999: 305).

Active ageing also allows older people to define those who are frail or housebound as a separate category from themselves, thus distancing themselves from what are perceived as the negative connotations of old age. Thompson et al. (1990) carried out research into the self-perception of older people and found that many respondents regarded 'old people' as a separate group from themselves,

> People who themselves are old by conventional standards, often refer to 'the old folks', clearly indicating a group (usually dependent or housebound) to which the speakers do not perceive themselves as belonging (Thompson et al. cited in Andrews, 1999: 306).

Not all literature on ageing focuses upon the negative aspects of growing older. As the current post war 'baby boomers' approach their later years, they have been targeted by consumer groups who recognise them as a lucrative market. There has been emphasis placed upon increasing lifestyle choices available to older people, which enable them to maintain social inclusion and actively construct identities (Biggs, 1997). Featherstone and Hepworth point out that often retirement gives an individual more time to develop other interests, indeed the magazine, 'Choice' which is aimed at the retired sector of society (aimed at readers over fifty), emphasises that this is a time

for its readers to, 'fashion their lives afresh' (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1996: 328). Of course it should be noted that not all sections of the retired population will have the material resources to access the myriad of, 'lifestyle choices' on offer.

Life stages

Ageing is generally understood in terms of moving through a number of recognised life stages. Stages such as childhood, adolescence and middle age are socially constructed categories and changeable over time and across cultures (Hockey and James, 1993, 2003; Hareven, 1995). Each life stage has attached to it a wealth of assumptions and stereotypes that will be attached to its members. Membership of any stage along the inevitable path from birth to old age and death is transient, 'without effort we will move from youth to old age…with ageing all we need to do is stick around, ageing will do the rest' (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995: 8).

Blytheway (1995) argues that 'old age' should be abandoned as an age category altogether. He argues that age should be conceptualised as a psychological frame of mind, whilst old age should be seen as simply, 'A cultural concept, and a construction that has a certain popular utility in sustaining ageism within societies that need scapegoats' (Blytheway, quoted in Andrews,1999: 302). Andrews, however takes issue with this point, arguing that this view is a form of ageism in itself; why should we want to illuminate older age categories when younger ones such as childhood and adolescence remain, 'why is it just old age that comes under the scalpel?' (Andrews, 1999: 302). Blytheway's voluntaristic view tends to suggest that changing attitudes will overcome unequal power relations in a society, which discriminates against older people. Would removing a label remove discrimination and marginalisation as well? Gullette (1997) argues that the march of time is understood differently in different stages of life. Whereas from youth to the adult years, the progression of time and entry into life stages such as childhood or adolescence are seen in terms of progress, from the middle years, the passing of time is seen as decline and entry into subsequent life stages is resisted (Gullette, 1997: 50). She points out however, that in view of the fact that in contemporary Western society people are, in general, healthier and living longer than ever before, why should such negative discourses of ageing be accepted? A narrative of decline is, after all, she argues, counter intuitive to our sense of self-esteem and sense of identity.

It is an acknowledgment of the social and therefore fluid nature of life stages that has led to a change in the way the life course is conceptualised (Katz and Marshall, 2003; Hunt 2005). Hunt outlines the change in conceptualisation of the life course from a 'life cycle' to a 'life course' approach (Hunt, 2005: 10). The life cycle approach is premised upon common sense understandings of inevitable universal biological changes to the body associated with ageing, which are then linked to stages in the lifecycle. A psychological aspect can also be found in the life cycle approach which medicalises movement from one life stage to another (for example, the mid-life crisis). Yet there were weaknesses to this model; firstly it places too much emphasis upon biological ageing and backgrounds social factors. As a result of this life stages were deemed fixed and universal rather than changeable; secondly it presents a distinctly Western model of ageing which tend to marginalize cultural variation.

This linear developmental model of the life cycle does not allow for the subjective understandings of the passing of time that structure our understandings of life stages, indeed Hockey and James (2003) point to the fact that deep old age is often seen as a reversal of time as old people are perceived to enter their 'second childhood'. (Hockey and James 2003: 13). Similarly, Western cultural attitudes seek to slow down the ageing process with medical and cosmetic intervention. A life course approach on the other hand, focuses upon the social nature of life stages and thus allows for variation on a cultural, temporal, historical or individual basis (Hunt, 2005: 21). Added to this, a life course approach allows for the discontinuities of the life course and recognition of the complexity and contingency of individual experiences that informs the ageing process. Hunt defines the life course approach as,

> One which denotes a series of transitions from one social state to the next. Each status passage consisted of a negotiated process in which the properties of the passage and the awareness of each participant would vary (Hunt, 2005: 21).

Hareven (2000) argues that the life course approach moves away from the structural emphasis of the life cycle model and concentrates more upon the more complex and contradictory lived experience of individuals within each life stage. Hockey and

James (2003) draw on the work of Harris (1987) who saw the life course as, 'a process which is both unintended and the results of intentionality and in which earlier events condition later events' (Harris, 1987: 22 cited in Hockey and James, 2003: 96). This view allows for recognition of the *interaction between* both structure and agency upon the formation of the life course and acknowledges the contingency of the life course experience.

Feminism and ageing

Feminist writers have looked more specifically at the intersection of age and gender and how this impacts upon the experiences of ageing women (Sontag, 1972; Macdonald and Rich, 1984; Woodward, 1995; Calasanti and Slevin, 2006). Bernard (2001) charts the history of literature on women and ageing, suggesting that in the field of social and critical gerontology, there is an absence of literature dealing with the experiences of older or middle-aged women. What research does exist in this field tends to deal with white middle class experiences (Bernard, 2001: 340). Biggs (2004) argues that whilst critical gerontology has shared with feminism a concern for the marginalisation of ageing women at a macro level, there has been little exploration of the complexities of ageing at a micro level. There are some exceptions however. Freidan (1993), in her book, *The Fountain of Age* gives a personal account of how she comes to terms with her own ageing, arguing that old age should not be denied or undervalued. She points to the, 'developmental possibilities of age as a unique period of human life' and the qualities that are accrued as a result of life experience (Friedan, 2006: 49). Ray (2006) points out however that Friedan fails to hide her own fear of ageing by focussing her work on the lives of active and fairly affluent older women. In order to come to terms with ageing she ignores the, 'darker side' of deep old age and the possibilities for bodily frailty that accompany it (Ray, 2006: 41). A more positive picture of the lives of older women can be found in the work of Furman (1997) whose in-depth study of a group of older women using a beauty parlour provides valuable insight into how women use micro settings as places where dominant discourses of ageing can be collectively resisted. It seems, however, that the feminist movement cannot escape the charge of ageism,

> The concerns of midlife and older women were notable by their absence
> during much of first and second wave feminism...and it is really only since

the mid 1980's that women's ageing has begun to be overtly addressed from a feminist framework within academia (Bernard, 2001: 340).

Whilst Second Wave feminists explored differences between women in terms of race, class or ability, age it seems, has been relatively ignored. Andrews suggests that perhaps one reason for the supposed reticence of feminists to engage with ageing is because the topic is too close to home,

> Perhaps what sets ageism apart from sexism and racism is its potent element of self-hatred? People who behave in a racist or sexist manner will probably never be members of the group, which is the target of their discrimination (Andrews, 1999: 302).

Woodward (1995) argues that in order to overcome ageism within feminism, the relationship *between* successive generations of women needs to be theorized. She draws on the work of Macdonald (1984) in arguing that the very notion of sisterhood is implicitly dependent upon power relations, 'There would, in fact be no youth culture without the powerless older woman' (Macdonald, 1984: 39). Greer agrees that, 'women themselves suffer from youthism and contribute to the prejudice against themselves: they endure the never-ending jibes against menopausal women...against crones in general, without a word of protest' (Greer, 1991: 23).

A recent edited edition by Calasanti and Slevin (2006) seeks to bring ageing back into a feminist agenda. A range of authors explore the intersection of ageing and gender from a variety of angles centred around the premise that experiences of ageing are deeply gendered. The message of Calasanti and Slevin is a positive one but once again the issue of ageing is seen in terms of the study of old people rather than ageing as a process across the life course, or the study of intergenerational perspectives.

> We advance this volume in the hope that once feminists take old age into account they will work to imbue it with positive content- a content that reflects the diversity of old people, their lives and their varied contributions (Calasanti and Slevin (Eds.) 2006: 14).

Middle age: the awareness of ageing

Middle age is a life stage that is difficult to categorise precisely. From a historical perspective, middle age was indeed 'created' by the gradual increase in life expectancy. As a result it wasn't until the beginning of the twentieth century that people were aware of a 'middle' stage of the life course (Wahl and Kruse, 2005: 9). Wahl and Kruse provide a rare historical consideration of the middle years and how they have been understood as part of the life span. They highlight how fluid and contested the boundaries of middle age are, suggesting instead how the middle years are nevertheless understood, 'as a unique position in the life course, as a turning point between the rise and decline of the flow of life' (Wahl and Kruse, 2005: 7).

A recurring theme in the somewhat limited literature concerning middle age is a sudden awareness of the ageing process, brought about partly by physical signs of ageing apparent on the face and body (Hepworth and Featherstone, 1982: 1).

The awareness of ageing in the middle years can be an experience which is deeply gendered. Many feminist writers have drawn upon the cultural preoccupation with youth in Western society which provides a wider context for the double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972). Indeed Goodman suggests that society is saturated with images of youthful and perfect bodies that, 'deny women the right to age' (Goodman, 1994: 376). De Beauvoir draws attention to the link between sexuality and ageing, 'as men see it, a woman's purpose in life is to be an erotic object. When she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a *monstrum* that excites revulsion and even dread' (de Beauvoir, 1983: 184).

Greer (1991) points to the invisibility of female heroines that are over the age of forty, both in history and literature. She notes that women over the age of fifty make up 17% of the population and yet, she argues, their experiences have been silenced, 'If women themselves are not interested in mature women, if even mature women are not interested in mature women, we are faced with a fast and insidious problem' (Greer, 1991: 25). One explanation, however for the absence of middle aged heroines in historical literature is that many didn't survive past forty. Mary Wollstonecraft for example, died in childbirth at the age of thirty-eight. Nevertheless, Greer concludes, after an extensive search of historical literature, '…the utter invisibility of middle aged women in English literary culture is baffling' (Greer, 1991: 21). Andrews,

(2003) points however to the recent upsurge in popular culture of images of older women as sexually independent. The successful American television series, 'Sex in the City' for example centred around women in their thirties and forties who were single and not afraid to flaunt their sexuality. She suggests that this reveals that age identities are more fluid in contemporary society (Andrews, 2003: 397). Icons such as Joan Collins provide another example of an older women displaying her sexuality on film and yet arguably, Collins is as famous for her ability (and hard work?) to defy the visible signs of ageing as for her acting skills.

Psychoanalysis and middle age

Greer (1991) links middle age to the arrival of the menopause in women,

> Generally speaking, we can assume the climacteric to begin at about age forty-five and end at about fifty-five. Most women will traverse the difficult transition from reproductive animal to reflective animal, between those years, which we could call middle age (Greer, 1991: 26).

Although psychoanalytic writing has not dealt directly with the middle years of a woman's life, Freud's contemporaries did, however, consider the menopause. Their view of the menopause was based upon the medical model, which centres on dropping oestrogen levels in women and the associated physical symptoms,

> The medical model, which described menopause as the 'fatal touch of death itself', reinforced the view of menopausal women as useless and 'abject' having lost both reproductive power and sexual attractiveness (Silver, 2003: 119).

Greer sites the work of Deutsch who considered the menopause from a psychoanalytical perspective,

> Woman's last traumatic experience as a sexual being, the menopause, is under the aegis of an incurable narcissistic wound. In complete parallel to the physical process, this represents a retrogressive phase in the history of the libido, a regression to abandoned infantile libidinal positions...The libido,

now without the possibility of cathexis and with a diminished capacity for sublimation, has to go into reverse and seek out earlier positions, i.e. set out a path that is familiar to us from the formation of neurotic symptoms. (Deutsch, 1944: 56 cited in Greer, 1991: 275).

Deutsch links the menopause to a loss of narcissistic libido through object cathexis. Cathexis is removed from the genitals and back towards the clitoris. Interestingly she suggests that middle-aged women, who feel devalued as a result of (society's attitude to) the loss of their reproductive functioning, feel a stronger desire to be loved. She also suggests that this hunger to be loved is intensified as it is apparently harder to find a partner as she becomes 'less attractive' to the opposite sex,

> The impulse is provided by the progressive devaluation of the vagina in its significance as the organ of reproduction as well as failure in the outside world resulting from the greater difficulty of object finding, after which an increased libidinal hunger persists in the narcissistic desire to be desired and loved. The tragic-comic result is that the older and less attractive she becomes, the greater is her desire to be loved (Deutsch cited in Greer, 1991: 57-58).

Deutsch's account of the menopause is one of loss; that is loss of reproductive functioning and also loss of perceived 'attractiveness'. This negative view of the menopause persists today (Gannon, 1999; Ussher, 2006). Deutsch goes on to suggest that as the menopause approaches, middle-aged women begin to fantasize about incest; the prohibition that emerges from the Oedipal crisis begins to break down. She links this to the supposed attraction of younger men to the older woman. Deutsch's work appears to be based upon a number of assumptions: all women actually experience the menopause as a life changing experience; the menopause is bounded by time, with a beginning, middle and end; this life changing experience is very negative, being about loss and grieving for the lack of reproductive processes, the lack of sexual attractiveness and an awareness of devaluation in the social world. Woodward argues that the older woman is missing in Freudian psychoanalysis,

> In Freudian psychoanalysis a woman beyond childbearing age is old, dysfunctional in sexual (reproductive) term, a dysfunction that is written on

her body in folds and wrinkles for everyone to see. Such a woman, we might say cannot even be represented within the discourse of classical psychoanalysis. Within the parameters of psychoanalysis we can imagine a point when increasing age…intersects with female sexuality at the biological time bomb of the menopause-when female sexuality vanishes, leaving only gender behind. The dilemma, however, is this: Freudian psychoanalysis cannot contain the concept of gender as distinct from sexuality. Thus: the older woman cannot exist! (Cited In Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995: 86-87).

However Woodward goes on to point out that psychoanalytical theory can be used to explain the marginality of older women. First, the male fear of the omnipotent mother figure is heightened, as women grow older; second psychoanalysis claims attraction to the mother as forbidden and the older woman represents this figure (ibid.). She argues for the inclusion of a third generation of woman, beyond the Freudian emphasis upon mother and daughter, claiming that the mother is implicitly conceptualised as a mother of young children.

Ageing and the body

Laz (2003) stresses the centrality of the body for the consideration of ageing and identity. She charts the 'absent presence' of the body in social theory and current attempts to develop sociology of the body (Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1995). The body can be viewed from a foundationalist perspective as a biological organism, which forms the basis for understanding ageing. An alternative perspective however looks at the body from a social constructionist view, which emphasises the way the body is moulded and restrained by society as well as being a tool for the presentation of the social self. Current debates are attempting to synthesize the two positions, exploring how the body can be discursively produced and moulded whilst simultaneously be experienced as a biological entity which mediates in the daily experiences of individuals (Turner, 1995; Katz, 1999; Laz, 2001; Oberg and Tornstam, 2001; Powell and Longino, 2001).

Ageing is often described in terms of an increasing split or tension between the body which is showing signs of physical ageing, and the 'inner' self which remains the same, 'you only begin to discover the difference between what you really are, your

real self and your appearance when you get a bit older' (Lessing, 1973 cited in Greer, 1991: 60). Andrews takes up this point, 'We conceptualise the ageing process as one in which there is an increasing conflict between two camps; on the one side our corpus, which drags us inevitably into our dreaded old age, and on the other, our spirit which remains forever young' (Andrews, 1999: 301). Columnist Katherine Whitehorn sums up her feeling of alienation from her body, 'as we get older, we go on feeling the same inside. It's just that your body doesn't fit anymore, like clothes that have shrunk, no grown in the wash' (cited in Hepworth and Featherstone, 1983: 3).

Hepworth and Featherstone suggest that the negative evaluation of the self due to the ageing body can be seen as a kind of moral failure,

> A cultural context in which any tendency to accept the visible signs of ageing: the wrinkles, sagging flesh, middle-aged spread, thinning hair etc, runs the danger of being interpreted as an outer reflection of an unworthy self, signs of low self esteem and even moral weakness' (Hepworth and Featherstone, 1983: 6).

They highlight the role of the media which they argue help to maintain the 'moral climate' which states that the body's natural ageing process can be slowed down providing we put enough effort into it: i.e. our diet, lifestyle etc, 'The estimation of our worthiness as a person thus becomes more dependent on the visible signs of the effort we have put into maintaining our face and figure' (ibid.) Powell and Longino (2001) echo an acknowledgment of the influence of consumer society upon attitudes to the ageing body,

> Consumer culture so preoccupied with perfect bodies, spread throughout glamorised representations of advertising and the increased dominance of the visual image in Western Culture. Thus consumer culture marginalizes the identity of older people by emphasising youthfulness, the body beautiful (Powell and Longino, 2001: 204).

Shilling (1993) suggests that women in Western society are more likely to be defined by their bodies and are indeed under more pressure than men to disguise the physical

signs of ageing on the body. Feminists have often focussed upon the workings of patriarchal power that mould the physical body; Bordo, (1989, 1993) looked at the cultural moulding of women's bodies in terms of weight training and punishing exercise regimes, whilst Orbach 1998 and Chernin 1983 considered dieting and anorexia as similarly punishing regimes that act to restricted the space women's bodies inhabit. Yet few studies can be found considering the effects of the relationship between older women and their bodies. Whilst writers such as Bartky (1988) call for feminists to introduce a politics of the body and highlights how cultural discourses encourage women to see their body as inevitably imperfect or inferior, there is little mention of ageing as an integral part of such discourses.

Technology and the ageing body

Technological advances have led to a consideration of the possibilities for 'posthuman bodies' where the merging of machine and flesh suggests possibilities for resistance to ageing (Hayles, 1999). The post human body comes in many forms, from a computer generated ageless avatar in cyberspace to advances in cosmetic surgery and bodily invasive technology to replace body parts (Katz and Marshall, 2003: 6). Featherstone (1995) acknowledges the possibilities for overcoming the stigma of the ageing body in cyberspace, 'Within the confines of the virtual world, everyone can potentially look as youthful, fit and beautiful as everyone else' (Featherstone, 1995: 239) whilst Morohan-Martin, on the other hand, points to the fact that far from liberatory, avatars often model stereotypes of masculinity and femininity which carry gendered expectations into cyberspace (Mohoran-Martin, 2000: 688). Avatars don't, however, grow old. A discussion of the relationship between human and computer technology brings us to the second part of this review concerning the relationship of women to computers and interactions in cyberspace.

Part two

Computer-mediated communication

Early Internet studies tended to conceptualise the Internet as somewhat impersonal, as a technological tool for the transmission of information (Dubrovsky 1991). More recent research however, has centred on the rapid development of forms of social interaction online. Rheingold (1992) explored the concept of virtual communities and

noted the rising popularity of online communication. He predicted that new technology, which is constantly evolving, would provoke cultural changes in the ways in which people communicate and change fundamentally the way people think about communication. Waskul and Douglas (1997) take up the issue of selfhood online and highlight a number of questions that lie at the heart of literature in this area, 'Computer-mediated forms of interaction are posing new questions to old problems of human interaction and selfhood' (Waskul and Douglas, 1997: 376). They suggest that computer-mediated communication isn't simply a quick, convenient and neutral tool that conveys information or enables interaction between users, 'By dislocating the significance of time space and physical barriers to human interaction, online environments are transformed into new social situations that are simultaneously a medium and *an environment in and of itself*' (Waskul and Douglas, 1997: 379. My italics). Thus online interaction is introducing people to new social contexts where commonly understood rules of interaction need to be renegotiated.

If textual communication can be seen as a new way of carrying out social interaction, does this mean that there are no shared rules of interaction in cyberspace? Hardey (2002) suggests that a set of interaction rules *are* visible online. Widely shared norms appear to have emerged that include turn taking in the sending of emails, reciprocity in disclosing details and respecting other people's presentation of self, that mirror those characteristics of daily life (Hardey, 2002: 578).

Online interaction is commonly understood to take place in cyberspace, but what exactly is cyberspace? The term was first coined by Gibson in his novel, 'Neuromancer' in which he described cyberspace as a 'consensual hallucination' (Gibson, 1984: 67). Rheingold gives this definition,

> Cyberspace is the conceptual space where words and human relationships, data and wealth and power are manifested by people using CMC technology: virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspaces (Rheingold, 1992: 1).

Waskul and Douglas, (1997) however, stress the social nature of cyberspace which, although virtual, is perceived as a *'place'* where social interaction occurs,

Cyberspace is more than an electronic means of accessing information – it is simultaneously both a context and a medium for social interaction. The online world has emerged as a socially perceived place where persons can communicate (Waskul and Douglas, 1997: 378).

Interaction in cyberspace can take many forms including asynchronous email communication and synchronous communication in the form of Instant Relay chat. Online interaction can take place in different discrete areas of cyberspace such as: chat rooms; special interest user groups; bulletin boards; dating sites or Multi-User Domains. In 2003 the three dimensional virtual space of 'Second Life' was created which is a virtual world populated by avatars (a visual representation of the self online). Users run their online lives in tandem with offline existence. It now has a population of over eight million users from all over the globe (http://www.secondlife.com). There are also sites becoming increasingly popular themed around fantasy and gaming including, 'World of Warcraft' (www.worldofwarcraft.com) and 'Starcraft' (http://www.blizzard.com/). The popularity and rapid growth of online communities in a variety of forms has spawned literature across academic disciplines, which explore this new form of social interaction. Not only do people forge new relationships and social networks online, they also use online communication to keep up existing relationships; research by Garrett (2000) found that 58% of those surveyed felt the Internet helped them have closer family ties.

A central debate surrounding cyberspace and the social interactions within it, concerns the nature of the online/offline divide, or indeed whether such a divide exists at all. Linked to this is the question of whether online interaction/relationships are any less 'real' than offline face-to-face social interactions. To argue that online and offline worlds are two discrete spheres is to deny the presence of existing offline social relations in cyberspace. McGerty (2000) sees this distinction as unhelpful, stressing that Internet users are simultaneously both online and offline. Internet users must be recognised as situated within their social locations, which they take with them into cyberspace. Poster (1995), however draws a distinction between online and offline selves, arguing that cyberspace is a reality in its own right and not merely an

extension of offline experience. Miah (2000) takes up the issue of whether the online /offline divide can be conceptualised in terms of what is virtual or 'real'. He argues that cyberspace is experienced as real by its users,

> Distinguishing between the real and the non-real appears at best fallacious and at worst, distracting from the realness of online experience. It would be more accurate to argue that human existence-having always been mediated through the senses or some other media-has always been virtual and that cyberspace is another media through which we experience the real (Miah, 2000: 221).

Following on from this is another central issue in any discussion of textual communication; is online interaction merely another way of contacting others or is it an impoverished mode of communication in relation to face-to-face interaction? This issue has been taken up by Miah (2000) (http://www.sparks-online.com/april00/trends/miah.html) who suggests that some will see online interaction as an inferior mode of communication, lacking the richness of embodied meetings. His viewpoint centres, once again, around the question of how 'real' online communication feels to those interacting in cyberspace,

> Imagine if you have found someone online (yes a person despite the fact that you are gazing at a screen) and begin talking. The interaction is real. This is a real person saying real things, responding to your thoughts and words, and the reality of the situation is created through your mutual interaction. Your physical closeness is irrelevant: it is the meeting of minds that matters (ibid.)

Stone (1995) talks of narrow bandwidth media, such as textual communication online, which do not communicate bodily cues and other visual information. The Internet is a narrow bandwidth, as, unlike the telephone, you cannot even hear the intonation of the other's voice. The absence of such cues drives users to draw upon their interpretive skills, and imagination to form a picture of the person they are interacting with. Thus a minimum of information can trigger an active fantasy of the person within the interaction. Elliott (2000) stresses the significance of non-verbal cues in courtship and interaction in general, saying that the cues that signal attraction between two people

rest heavily upon body language such as gaze and posture which cannot be seen online. These signals, argues Elliott will tell an individual whether the person speaking is enjoying a conversation, disagreeing, looking bored, disengaging etc. In cyberspace, these cues are missing and meaning must be gleaned from text alone which can leave room for misinterpretation, (Elliott at: http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dabrent/380/webproj/elliott.html)

The absence of non-verbal cues online could suggest that emotional content within textual communication cannot be expressed effectively (Stoll, 1996; Elliott, 2000; Levine, 2000). Cyberspace users have developed, however, a set of emoticons to represent emotion or mood, such as the 'smiley' with a variety of expressions. Whilst an innovative method of overcoming the absence of bodily cues, are they adequate to replace a spontaneous emotional responses? Importantly the use of emoticons are an *intentional* indicator of mood or emotion whereas within in a face-to-face encounter, Goffman (1990) argues that bodily cues are often out of our control, giving an impression to others that is contrary to the performance of self that we are trying to achieve. So is textual communication emotionally sterile? Scharlott and Christ (1995) suggest that emotions are relatively easy to convey online and are indeed abundant within communication, using both emoticons and a more verbalised form of emotion expression,

> People not only express, share and communicate emotions, but also do this in a way that pleases them. We are able to give support, to express our dissatisfaction, to show our fears and to convey our love towards others, whether friends or strangers (Scharlotte and Christ, 1995: 200).

Loughlin (1993) disagrees, however, arguing that online textual communication cannot live up to the richness and immediacy of a face-to-face interaction,

> Without clues such as body language and vocal tonalities, clues so important for the totality of meaning, CMC becomes fraught with problems...the evolution of such low graphic gimmicks such as "smileys" helps a bit, but it's not like looking someone in the eye and listening to the sound of their voice. I find that writing how I feel is nothing compared to speaking how I feel.

Speaking has immediacy that writing simply cannot match (Loughlin, 1993: 6).

This view is shared by Fleck (2004) who suggests that whilst online communication has more immediacy than writing because you are responding to someone whose presence you can feel, even though they are not physically close, she sees textual communication as impoverished, suggesting that '...there is something that makes the dilation of the iris or the inflection of voice that says, 'I love you' better than anything on screen and that cannot be downloaded' (Fleck 2004: 1).

Culnan and Markus (1987) highlight in their 'cues filtered out' theory, how the computer filters out valuable non-verbal cues available within face-to-face communication such as vocal intonation, body language. In a similar vein, Sproull and Kieser (1986) argue that alongside the absence of non-verbal cues are an absence of 'social context cues' that also provide information concerning the identity and social context of an individual. But does this mean there are no social cues visible in cyberspace? Lea and Spears argue that people who are experienced at textual communication become, 'adept at using and interpreting textual signs and paralinguistic cues...even first-time users form impressions of other communicants disposition and personalities based in their 'communication style' (Lea and Spears, 1995: 217). They continue to suggest that the 'cues filtered out' theory is not useful for a consideration of relationships which are currently flourishing online and that a consideration of the lack of physical co-presence was over done. This view resonates with Baker (1998) who found within her research a wealth of successful relationships formed initially online. Added to this, the 'cues filtered out' theory has been criticized for overemphasising the role of the computer technology and thus underplaying the human interaction between users who, as Baker points out, can overcome the limitations of narrow band communication. Indeed Whitty and Gavin (2001) argue that the absence of social cues can be an advantage, 'Less can mean more...it is precisely the gaps in information as much as the information itself that gives mediated sex its allure' (Whitty and Gavin, 2001: 218).

Bird (2003) adopts a somewhat pessimistic position arguing that online interaction is more fleeting and superficial (see also Short et al., 1976; Slouka, 1995; Whitty and

Gavin, 1996). Drawing upon the work of Simmel who predicted that social interaction would become more instrumental and shallow in complex urban societies, he suggests, 'We might ask immediately if the Internet, for example, is the end product of this process, the ultimate prosthetic of a disembodied selfhood' (Bird, 1993: 122). Interestingly he points to a moral dimension to this argument, suggesting that as those interacting are not face-to-face, they can sidestep any moral obligation to the other person (see also Heim 1992). Hardey suggests that Internet use can be viewed in terms of Bauman's (1993) 'post-modern tourist',

> Individuals who utilise the technological possibilities available to them for increasing their experience and pleasure, yet who do so by protecting themselves from any sense of moral responsibility for the other (Hardey, 2002: 574).

Behaviour that may be encouraged by a supposed lack of moral obligation to others online is the extreme action of 'flaming' and harassment online (Barry, 1991; Dery, 1994).

The opposite viewpoint, however, suggests that the lack of physical proximity allows for the more radical and intense development of relationships that are not bound to the immediacy of physical attraction (Parks and Floyd, 1996). Thus relationships online can be just as fulfilling and intimate as offline, in fact, without the distractions of the physical body, people believe that are reaching straight for the mind, soul and heart of a person and can form a more genuine relationship (Donn and Sherman, 2002; 110). Similarly, people can be seen to be basing relationships upon shared interests rather than the immediacy of physical attraction. Hiltz and Turoff (1978) suggest that as online communication is more ordered and well thought out than face-to-face interactions, it is richer than natural conversation (Ibid). There is a tendency for online communication to foster a greater amount of disclosure between users (Ben-Ze've 2003), which is paradoxically due to the fact that anonymity allows for users to maintain an amount of privacy and therefore feel more secure. Whitty (2002) found that the propensity for disclosure online between partners raised the self-esteem of the receiver who is sharing 'secrets' with another online. McCown et al. (2001) however

suggested that Internet users were careful about protecting their anonymity despite their eagerness to form relationships online.

The argument that online relationships actually *surpass* levels of intimacy and emotional commitment seen in offline relationships is taken up by Walther (2006) who has labelled this, 'hyperpersonal communication'. He explains how the 'hyperpersonal effect' in online interaction is an important part of impression management: firstly, textual communication can be reflected upon and allows for time for reflection which is not available within face-to-face communication; secondly, the receiver of an email is likely to 'read between the lines' and imagine an idealised picture of the other due to limited information; thirdly relative anonymity protects the individual from 'involuntary cues' which can often be out of our control; fourthly, the nature of textual communication means all effort can be placed upon the written text rather than 'involuntary scanning' for bodily cues that takes place in face-to-face interactions (Walther, 2006: 2541).

Walther's argument suggests that online communication can be more intimate then offline interaction and yet he hints at the illusionary nature of this intimacy due to the lack of information between partners. Walther suggests however that online communication is a form of impression management, if a little different to that described by Goffman (1990). Basing this on the premise that in Goffman's view, we are the product of our performances then online interactions are performative of authentic selves and subsequently authentic relationships.

Disembodied selves?
Kolko suggests that academic and fictional works have tended to represent a liberatory picture of online interaction, 'Fictional depictions of electronic discourse in particular described the liberation of going online as one that has discarded the "meat" of the physical body and wandered placeless nets with cross dressing abandon' (Kolko, 1999: 177). Other literature focuses upon the fluidity of online identities and the differences between online and offline identity creation (Turkle, 1995; Kolko, 1999).Waskul and Douglas (1997) describe cyberspace as a space for the creation of multiple identities that are disembodied,

When online, one does not occupy fixed physical form. That is, in cyberspace, there is no such thing as a body, at least not in the sense that we inhabit a body. All that "exists" are fleeting electronic images loosely associated with a self-selected screen name...In this sense cyberselves are literally disembodied. The self is free form any physical form and thus challenges the traditionally perceived relationship between body and self (Waskul and Douglas, 1997: 388).

Haraway (1991) considers cyberspace and its impact upon a gendered identity. Her work heralds the existence of the cyborg, which is a merging of machine and human bodies,

The cyborg is a fusion between the organic human body and non-organic mechanical or electronic implants or prostheses, alternatively a transorganic personality construct where the human mind is preserved on computer software. This hybrid of machine and organism is a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction, where the boundary between 'real' and virtual is an illusion (Sunden, 2001: 216).

Haraway's cyborg is a symbol of her argument that society has become so dependent upon information technology that it is impossible to tell where the machinery ends and the human body begins. Spittle suggests, 'for Haraway, we have come to see our bodies as high-performance machines that must be monitored and added to by technological innovation' (Spittle, 1997: 5). Following on from this, Haraway suggests that because the boundaries of what are seen as 'natural' is in question then so are the gendered assumptions often labelled as 'natural'. The Cartesian dualism of mind and body is called into question. The cyborg has a 'polymorphous perversity', and is able to construct multiple identities at will with the help of technology. Haraway also warns against an overly utopian view of cyberspace as a site where traditional gender relations become invisible. She argues instead that cyberspace provides a fresh site of contestation and the expression of differences between genders. The Internet is not simply however, a blank screen upon which these contestations take place; 'Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make,

and it's inside us. We're living in a world of connections and it matters which get made and unmade' (Haraway, 1991 cited in Spittle, 1997: 8).

The fluidity of the cyborg body is no doubt a useful concept for the exploration and subversion of gender and the body. Wise (1996) suggests that the cyborg has much in common with being a woman,

> In Western modernity women were always virtually real, 'not quite there' or 'almost absolute'. As the lack against which the male presence was maintained, women's embodied presence was a fact but it was written over by an absence of autonomy. It did not constitute a presence from which culture or society was spoken about and understood (Wise, 1996: 1).

Stone sees identity formation online as disembodied and discusses how leaving the physical body behind allows for a range of identities to be explored,

> The body in question sits at a computer terminal somewhere, but the locus of sociality that would in an older dispensation be associated with this body goes on in a space which is quite irrelevant to it (Stone, 1995: 43).

Stone sees gender identity as something that can be subverted and explored in cyberspace. Stone points to the array of identities that can be constructed online, arguing that the subversion of gender can completely overturn the male/female binary. In fact the natural starting point for the construction of a gendered identity online is the transgendered body. Sunden (2001) wonders, however, how far the world of dichotomies such as male/female or mind/body can be overturned. If feminists seek to deconstruct the traditional order, leaving cyberspace as utterly fragmented, then how are voices to be heard and understood? There is no longer any shared meaning in interaction,

> The paradox seems to be that before these feminist theorists have even succeeded to occupy some ground from where they can be heard, they are on their way to deconstruct the very ground they are standing on (Sunden, 2001: 219).

What is important about Stone's work, however is that she explores how cyberspace provides an environment where the way the world is ordered can be challenged and subverted. Like Turkle, however, Stone seems to favour a model of online selves as separate from the physical body, providing alternative ways of constructing identity.

Hayles (1996) on the other hand argues that we are not completely detached from the body in cyberspace,

> Cyberspace we are often told is a *disembodied* medium…in a sense [this is] correct; the body remains in front of the screen rather than within it. In another sense however [this is] deeply misleading, for [it] obscure[s] the crucial role that the body plays in constructing cyberspace. In fact we are never disembodied…far from being left behind when we enter cyberspace, our bodies are no less actively involved in the construction of virtuality than in the construction of real life (Hayles, 1996: 1).

The distinction however between the 'real' body offline and the 'virtual body' is not necessarily a useful one. Sunden suggests that it implies that exploring technological spaces is apart from exploring the world we live in, that the virtual and real are separated. Surely, cyberspace encapsulates the real world in which it was created. Undoubtedly we leave the physical body on one side of the screen but nevertheless we describe and represent our bodies online as an integral part of identity. Sofoulis (1995) suggests that cyberspace can be a liberatory space for women without having to leave the body behind,

> The relative openness of the new media can enable new *feminist* subjectivities to come into being that still remain embodied: furthermore, these feminist presences are necessitated by the existing, and tenacious, gendered, and other 'marked' paradigms imported into cyberspace. Rather than seeing a necessarily hierarchical opposition whereby the body is regulated to 'meat' once again, the Other of a disembodied mind, Sofoulis and others argue for a rethinking of the body within the new technologies and for putting the 'guts' back into the machine (Brook, 1999: 136).

Women empowered in cyberspace?

There are two main strands of cyberfeminism. One strand, which considers the construction of self and body online and often tends to be at a rather abstract level. The other strand looks at the relationship between women and technology from within the experiences of women's everyday lives and considers the use of the Internet as a form of empowerment and a tool for political change for women. In other words, the cyborg is brought into the daily lives of women where issues of exclusion and power have real implications for the ability of many women to enter such discourses.

Nancy Paterson (1998) writes of a 'cyberfemme', which infiltrates cyberspace with powerful erotic images. These images occupy spaces that could be used by women who wish to define themselves. She points to the need for women to be able to use technology in their lives without adopting the patriarchal spaces that invade the Net. 'Unlike the dream of a genderless utopia, this position proceeds from a sensibility of the experiences of different women and their ability to empower themselves in this new electronic field' (Sunden, 2001: 222). Before women can define their cyborg identity they must have access to technology, which excludes a large percentage of the world's population; they need technical knowledge; linguistic competence and an understanding of online cultural codes (ibid.). Stabile (1994) points to the fact that much of the feminist literature on the construction of identity in cyberspace is elitist and Eurocentric. In fact in her critique of Donna Haraway she sees cyborg politics as being, '…predicated on a highly literate community with the skills, time and inclination to engage in textual analysis' (Stabile cited in Brook, 1999: 138). Thus the workings of power are made central and emphasis is placed upon the fact that, far from leaving the gendered, classed and raced body behind in cyberspace, individuals take with them the conditions of their material embodied lives. As technology is a product of a capitalist and patriarchal society, then these values will be clearly replicated in cyberspace. Does this give any hope of female resistance online? Some argue that inequalities are amplified online,

> Power is not distributed equally online, and women worldwide have been last to come online; these may amplify rather than diminish existing gender, social, political and economic inequities in the Digital Age (Morahan-Martin, 2000: 683).

Harcourt points to the psychological barrier to be overcome by women in mastering IT, suggesting that technophobia and an acceptance of the view that computers are inherently male territory hold women back from acquiring computer skills. (Harcourt, 2000: 696). Van Zoonen makes the point that whilst women now use the Internet in equal numbers to men, they are targeted mostly as consumers or online shoppers,

> We may be moving towards a situation then, in which "the digital divide" in the Western world does not express itself in terms of numbers of women and men having access to the Internet, but in terms of the uses to which the Internet is put by women and men. The political (new) economy of the Internet thus tends to reconstruct the common gendered distinction between consumption and production, between entertainment and information (van Zoonen, 2001: 68).

Sadie Plant (1998) overturns the view that technology is essentially male and points out that women have always been inextricably bound up with technology, the use of the telephone for example, and suggests that technology is essentially female. This is challenging the technology/male and organism/female binaries, 'If technology is essentially feminine, then the woman is the computer...In Plant, technology is less a question of good and more the possibility for an objective weakening of patriarchy' (Boudourides and Drakou, 2000: 3). Using the metaphor of the matrix, she suggests that the zeros and ones reflect the male/female binary, whereby the ones are male and the zeros are female, presented as absence. She then proceeds to rectify this absence by considering women's relationship to Information Technology and the role they played in its production. Not only have women's bodies provided historically the groundwork for the operation of technology but also she describes technology as being 'feminine', seeing women as having a symbiotic relationship to machines.

Wacjman (2004) explores the initial utopian vision of cyberspace as a freeing and levelling arena, which would eradicate all social divisions and inequalities. She suggests that Turkle's work epitomises this utopian vision. Turkle (1995) views cyberspace from a psychotherapeutic perspective, seeing cyberspace as a way of 'cycling' through many selves in order to produce a coherent sense of self. The opportunity to experiment online can be used to improve offline experiences. Turkle

celebrates the opportunity that cyberspace brings to explore a multitude of contradictory and varied identities. In order to be free to create radically differing identities the body must be left behind. This optimistic view is supported by Levine, who says,

> Online relationships can be a practice ground for learning and exploring sexuality and relationships and then taking and applying the knowledge offline. If a person takes the qualities he or she has discovered about him or herself online – wit, charm, way with words, - and applies them with confidence in his or her daily communications, then his or her social life is sure to take an upturn. People can use the Internet to discover what desire feels like and then recreate it in their day-to-day lives (Levine, 2000: 572).

Will such experimentation eventually destabilise the way gender categories have traditionally been constructed? (Boudourides and Drakou, 2000: 8). Boudourides argues to the contrary, despite the fact that multiple identities can be created online, a multiplicity of identities is still seen as problematic in 'real life' and only justified online as within the realm of fantasy and play. When we go online we take with us all the social cues and codes of gender etc that allow us to react meaningfully with others, thus, despite gender switching we still call upon the same characteristics in which to display gender. Thus gender will not be subverted and destabilized by online gender masking, it will simply reaffirm traditional gender stereotypes, 'Engraved social institutions, such as gender are more powerful than any game and amusing masquerade' (Bouderides and Drakou, 2000: 11).

Gendered stereotypes were eventually acknowledged as being not only taken into cyberspace but in some instances, exaggerated. Feminists moved away from portraying women as victims however, and focused upon empowerment in cyberspace. It appears there is a generational divide here however as it is predominantly younger generations of women who are using cyberspace with confidence (Wacjman, 2004: 75). Lea and Spears (1995) argue that from their research, cyberspace can provide a safe and empowering arena for women to express sexuality. The lack of physical proximity and relative anonymity is a positive attribute of online communication,

In the anonymity and safety of Net-space, women may feel free to be more directly and explicitly sexual, without fear of potential real-life consequences (e.g. pregnancy, forced sex, or STD's or the need to deal with men's more powerful presence) (Lea and Spears cited in Whitty and Gavin, 2001: 625).

Leiblum (2001) on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that vast numbers of women are using computers to access information about health/sexual health issues (issues that they may feel awkward discussing with their doctor). There are also online support groups for women in areas of health but, she warns, there is the danger of misinformation as there is no monitoring of information on the Net.

Kennedy researched the experiences of feminists who created websites online. She found that whilst women were often dismayed at the hostility they received, they were undoubtedly empowered in cyberspace, 'Women have constructed online communities which empower women and encourage them to continue online relationships' (Kennedy, 2000: 718). Kennedy points out however that there are women who are excluded from online communities due to geography or economic situation. Morahan-Martin (2000) agrees that the Internet opens up the promise of new opportunities for women who are safer to interact and express sexuality online but also points to its 'perils'; the prevalence of flaming and harassment, including the prevalence of pornography. Despite the claim that the Internet can enhance feminist activism via communication channels, Boudorides and Drakou (2000) point out that women are indeed able to contact each other but are still geographically at a distance. They explore the notion of activism at a distance and draw upon Escobar, who states,

We might give each woman of the world or each ecology group a computer and an Internet account and the world might remain the same. This means that the relationship between cyberculture and political change-and between cyber-activism and place based practice -is to be politically constructed (Escobar, 1999: 46-7).

Gendered language

Herring (1993) suggests that textual cues can be found in online text that can point to the gender of the user. She identifies female and male norms that can be identified in the text of users, 'The male style is characterised by strong assertions, self promotion, presuppositions, rhetorical questions...challenges to others, and humour/sarcasm' (cited in Savicki et al., 1999: 2). Female norms included Positive Politeness which encouraged support and consideration for others and Negative Politeness, which denoted a desire not to be constrained, 'The female style is characterized by attenuated assertions, apologies, explicit justifications, questions, personal orientation and support of others' (Savicki, 1999: 2). The gendered nature of textual communication was also highlighted by Soukup (1999) who looked at the gendered nature of discourse in both male and female dominated chat rooms. Male discourse was revealed as predominantly aggressive and power orientated whilst women looked for intimacy and relationships. Women's chat was often interrupted or overpowered by men within the chat rooms. Research by Herring, Johnson and Di Benedetto (1992) into online conversation in a mixed sex chat room which had some feminist influence, found that men commanded 70% of the conversation spaces. It seems that textual communication, although deemed as lacking in social cues, reveals gender differences in the way users write their responses online. The use of the Internet for interactions between the sexes brings us to the last part of the chapter, which deals specifically with the field of online dating.

Part Three

Internet dating

The use of Information Technology to find romance began in the 1960s in the USA and has since then rapidly gained popularity as an effective and convenient way of finding a partner. Sociological interest has burgeoned focussing specifically upon relationships formed online (Walther, 1998; Lea and Spears, 1995; Merkle and Richardson. 2000; Lieblum, 2001). Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) suggest that research into the dating site arena is interesting and unique in relation to other areas of cyberspace interaction due to the fact that users hope to meet offline (Merkle and Richardson, 2000: 1). Thus interaction between users involves a variety of media from online communication, to the telephone, to face-to-face meetings.

Jagger (2001) argues that the study of dating advertisements, whether online or in newspapers or magazines is fertile ground for an exploration of identity construction. She quotes Coupland, who says,

> Given that clear preferences emerge in the selection of demographic and social categories and then in the traits associated with categories, the advertisements provide insight into advertisers' idealisations of self-identities – for example in terms of physical attributes, age, personality and interests (Coupland, 1996: 118. cited in Jagger, 2001: 40).

She suggests, from her own research, that men and women who are advertising themselves are likely to conform to gender stereotypes when stressing certain attributes: men stressing financial resources and status whilst women accentuate physical attractiveness. Interestingly however she highlights a study by Koestner and Wheeler (1988) who appeared to find to the contrary; men were advertising themselves stressing traditionally feminine qualities and women were suggesting they were assertive and independent. The authors explain this apparent contradiction by saying that this could be a marketing ploy in that men, for example, could strategically stress their feminine qualities in an attempt to pre-empt what women are perceived to desire in a man. (Jagger, 2001: 41). Jagger built upon her earlier research (1998) to highlight that identities are not fixed but fluid and contested. Within the context of dating advertisements she found that changing social context allows men greater freedom to construct identities, whereas women's resources for reflexive self-fashioning were more rigid.

Photographs

Physical appearance is seen as important for romantic relationships (Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986; Brehm, 1992) and when posted online, the photograph can be an indicator of physical attractiveness to another. Part of the process of self-presentation online involves posting a photograph on a website or online dating profile. Miller and Arnold (2001) looked at the ways in which female academics constructed home pages online and identified the gender issues involved in picking the 'right photo'. They expressed anxiety over negative stereotypical assumptions being made from the

photo. (Miller and Arnold, 2001: 101). Levine points to misrepresentation that is caused by posting a certain photo taken in 'better times',

> Each person has to find a photo that represents him or herself, the way he or she wants to be seen, by the other. What happens all too often, however, is that the person's self-image is distorted and the pictures portray them at their peak - younger, thinner, with more hair, in better shape etc (Levine, 2000: 569).

Online relationships

Merkle and Richardson (2000) argue that the traditional development of a romantic relationship is inverted in cyberspace. Offline relationships are usually characterized by physical proximity, physical attraction being a predominantly early feature of a developing relationship. Following this is a period of gradual self-disclosure and a search for rapport and mutual interest. In contrast, online discussion and self-disclosure is the initial stage of the development of the relationship, leading to rapport. Physical attractiveness is backgrounded until an offline meeting takes place (Merkle and Richardson, 2000: 5). Scharlott and Christ (1995) suggest that the initial anonymity and asynchronicity of communication on online dating helps some overcome obstacles to the initiation of a relationship, namely; traditional sex roles; shyness; and lack of confidence in appearance (Charlotte and Christ 2005: 195). They point out that anonymity makes women feel safer and more likely to initiate contact with a man online, similarly they felt more confident and also therefore more likely to interact or flirt with men online than offline. They found that attraction online was less likely to be based upon physical attraction which again gave both men and women confidence to interact online.

Whitty and Gavin (2001) point out that due to the intimate and disclosive nature of Internet relationships, they can develop quickly and become very intense. They draw on the work of Cooper and Sportolari,

> Such an accelerated process of revelation may increase the chance that the relationship will feel exhilarating at first and become quickly eroticised, but then not be able to be sustained because the underlying trust and true

knowledge of the other are not there to support it (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997: 624).

Gwinnell (1998) suggest that the online lover is often idealised. Often an online lover is more patient, 'always waiting for the convenient moment, never interrupting something else important or demanding attention that is already split five ways' (Gwinnell, 1998: 78 cited in Ben-Ze'ev, 2003).

Misrepresentations online

Whilst all relationships arguably include a degree of misrepresentation, the anonymity of users in cyberspace provides a greater opportunity to misrepresent or exaggerate aspects of identity. Online, users are able to hide certain parts of their identity to enhance their own self-presentation using text or a photo. (Noonan, 1998; Cornwell and Lungren, 2001). The freedoms offered online for identity construction are considered by Reid (1998) from both a positive and a negative perspective. There can be destructive consequences of misrepresentations within online interactions. Whilst undoubtedly there is the opportunity for outright deception in the construction of identity online, this would appear to be counter productive within a dating site where the possible desired outcome would be a meeting in the flesh. McKenna (1998) however found that, in his research, users did tend to present a more idealised version of themselves online, more so than they would to friends/acquaintances offline. Hardey (2002) agrees with Reid that despite the opportunity for misrepresentation online, within the dating site, users are more likely to be truthful, with the likelihood of an offline meeting in mind. In view of this, Hardey suggests that within the arena of dating sites, users are working to 'close the gap' between offline embodied and online disembodied identity (Hardey, 2002: 57). Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) agree with Hardey that there needs to be some linearity between online claims to self-identity and offline identity. Unlike Hardey, however, they don't see users working towards 'closing the gap' between online and offline selves, they see individuals as torn between the desire to both reveal a true representation of self whilst simultaneously presenting an idealised picture of self.

Levine compares online and offline attraction, pointing out that without initial attraction, relationships wouldn't develop either online or offline (Levine, 2000: 566).

Breaking down what we mean by attraction, Levine suggests that attraction involves our perception of the person to whom we are attracted. Online, however, our perception depends upon what someone chooses to disclose about them, and until they meet in the flesh, there is no opportunity to marry this perception with someone's own observations of that person. Levine stresses the view that physical attractiveness is backgrounded when flirting online in favour of witty repartee. She suggests that this is of obvious advantage to those who do not fit the socially accepted model of beauty but also is an advantage to those considered beautiful as they can flirt with people who are not attracted to them for their physical appearance.

The perception of cyberspace as 'levelling ' and its impact on flirting online is considered by Levine who says,

> Online there are many new possibilities of people to whom you might be
> attracted - many more people than you would encounter in your day-to-day
> life, including some whom you might see day-to-day but not consider
> attractive, or consider them 'out of your league' in terms of dating. The
> Internet levels the playing field. Everyone is equal. That is until you begin to
> present yourself-otherwise known as flirting. Then the power of the written
> word takes over (Levine, 2000: 568).

Jacobson (1999) carried out research considering the impressions that are formed of individuals through textual information and whether these were confirmed as accurate if couples met offline. Why is there so often disappointment on meeting in the flesh? First, cyberspace is conducive to the idealisation of a person; second, cyberspace allows for a textual response to be carefully constructed and thus an enhanced image of self can be presented; people may stress or exaggerate their best features and play down or ignore less attractive traits. Interestingly, people were often seen as much 'chattier' online than off (Jacobson, 1999: 11). This was also found by Whitty and Gavin (2001) whose respondents were often disappointed at an offline dates verbal skills in relation to their eloquent and witty emails.

Hardey's research (2002), considers the impact of the offline meeting of online partners. Some respondents felt that despite photos and description, the person did

not look offline as they had imagined them online, which came as a shock. This was not necessarily due to wilful misrepresentation but the person didn't resemble the image constructed in the imagination of the other,

> She was not my type. Came as a bit of a shock as I thought I'd got to know her. It was just that I instantly realised that I would not fancy her. Not that she told me tales about her looks. Suppose I wanted her to look like my ideal woman (Respondent cited in Harvey, 2002: 578).

Jacobson's research found that whilst those interacting textually do use subtle cues to build up an impression of the other, they also use wider conceptual categories such as stereotyping to build up a picture (Jacobson, 1999: 206). Attraction is partly due to finding someone who we feel shares our values, interests etc. When someone meets a partner offline, however they can feel misled, feeling that the person has misrepresented themselves. This may not be deliberate as often someone can read between the lines of a textual communication, reading what he or she want to hear into the gaps in communication (Levine, 2000: 570).

McDowell (2001) draws on the work of Walther (1998) who has explored the progression in romantic relationships from online to offline, and has labelled the process, 'coming out of the electronic closet'. Throughout the process of 'coming out' couples begin to see the relationship between the 'true self' and the self presented online. Meeting in the flesh was regarded, in research by McDowell, however as the most significant turning point in the relationship. Greenfield (2000) saw both positive and negative aspects of online romance. Whilst on the one hand, the convenience and accessibility of the Internet allows a quick and efficient search for a potential partner with access to potentially thousands of profiles, there is a sense in which the process can create an illusion,

> This greater specificity and choice can run the risk of creating an illusion of endless opportunity and almost relentless perfectionism…This unending source of virtual partners can blur the boundaries between real time and virtual living, producing a love-life that can remain socially unconsummated. It is this absence of an actual physical connection that makes Internet dating less than

ideal. The experience is no longer a tool or a means to an end (a relationship) but rather an end unto itself (Greenfield 2000: 4).

Once again we return to the debate abut the impoverished nature of online relationships. Are friends and lovers online merely 'socially unconsummated' relationships as Greenfield believes? Or are they as real and rewarding as offline relationships? Interestingly, Turkle suggests that interaction online provides the ideal environment to foster projection of desires onto others. Within therapy, the analyst sits behind the patients, who becomes a disembodied voice, speaking into a void, 'The lack of information about the real person to whom one is talking, the silence into which one types, the absence of visual cues, all these encourage projection' (Turkle, 1995: 207).

This can lead to idealisation and a false sense of intimacy, 'I saw in her what I wanted to see. Real life gave me too much information' (Peter, quoted in Turkle, 1995: 207). Interestingly, Peter had a log of all his online conversations with the girl he had fallen in love with online. When he looked back over their conversations, however, he could find little evidence of the closeness and mutual support and intimacy he had felt for her, 'When everything is in the log and nothing is in the log, people are confronted with the degree to which they construct relationships in their own minds' (Turkle, 1995: 207).

Conclusion

This review has outlined a number of general debates in areas that underpin my own research. Part three has concentrated specifically on research into online dating and relationships, revealing that whilst social interaction has been considered in terms of gender, there is room for more research into the intersection of social interaction online and other variables such as class and age for example. The next chapter provides further context by way of a discussion of methodological issues that underpinned my research and is followed by a series of further chapters that describe and analyse the specific experiences of 'older woman' using online dating sites.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This is a journey through the research process. Here I seek to explore methodological and epistemological issues that provide a broad framework for my research whilst simultaneously linking more abstract theoretical issues to the practicalities and technicalities of method. My aim is not to produce a polished and yet partial story, which implies an unproblematic and straightforward path through the research. Stanley and Wise (1993) draw a distinction between, *'research as practised'*, which can be messy, and contradictory to, *'research as described'* which is research presented as orderly and clinical. They argue against research that glosses over the twists, turns and contractions encountered along the way, suggesting that the 'messiness' of the research process should be made apparent in order to give a more honest account of knowledge production. (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 153). This is an account of research as practised and thus becomes more of a discussion of methodological issues than a straightforward description of them.

Aims of research

My research is an exploration into how the use of online dating sites impacted upon the lives and identities of a group of thirty middle-aged women. The inductive, data driven nature of the research however, meant that women's accounts broadened the initial scope of the study to encompass significant and interconnected issues that informed and contextualised their understandings of using dating sites, in particular: an awareness of ageing across the life course; and changing attitudes to dating and relationships. One of my initial areas of interest within the scope of Internet dating was the role of the body in cyberspace. Despite trying to engage respondents in this area, however, it became clear that they did not see the subject of embodiment as central to their understandings of Internet use (even though embodiment is implicit to many of their experiences of using dating sites). Thus my research agenda shifted in line with the issues identified as significant to respondents.

My research is a qualitative study. Firstly, I carried out a period of participant observation to familiarize myself with the world of Internet dating and was subsequently in the field for approximately six months prior to interviews. Secondly, I held thirty semi-structured interviews with middle-aged women using the sites. Thirdly, I appropriated some aspects of narrative research to inform both theory and method. The use of qualitative research raises many epistemological and theoretical issues to which there are no easy answers. There is no 'cook book' approach to qualitative methods and as a result, I felt the need to highlight many of the debates in order to chart my own path through my research. The use of narrative as a research method in particular left me feeling uncomfortably vague about the ways in which it can be applied to my research. It seemed from initial reading that the mere act of asking respondents for 'stories' qualified researchers to use the term 'narrative research'. Whilst I would balk at a definitive blueprint for the application of a narrative approach, my exploration in this chapter allowed me to understand more clearly how I have integrated aspects of narrative into my own research.

Ontological and epistemological issues

The Introduction detailed Ricoeur's theory of narrativity, which is based upon the premise that the self and social reality are not only represented but actually constructed (and reconstructed) through the telling of stories. Ontological narrativity assumes a self that is storied; in other words, we become the stories that we tell. Thus social actors actively create and recreate their social world through narrative. My research draws upon Ricoeur's theory as an ontological position which sits alongside an intepretivist epistemology based upon the premise that what counts as knowledge is the world mediated though the interpretations of social actors. My research is also positioned as part of the *process* of narrative production and thus self-construction for respondents. Telling of stories of the self was central to respondents' experiences and pivotal in the process of self (re)construction after a time of trauma in their lives. The interview itself provided space within which women could (re)tell stories of their experiences on the sites and weave them into wider narratives of self across the life course. This highlights the 'unfinished ' nature of ontological narrativity, which conceptualises social realities as in a constant state of becoming.

Epistemology: Feminist informed research

My research is driven by my own feminist beliefs. As a feminist I seek to highlight the voices of women that have been traditionally left out of 'malestream' research. I do not purposefully however, seek to ignore the voices of men as if redressing the balance of the invisibility of women's experiences across previous decades of knowledge production. Implicit in the activity of searching for a partner online are the issues of heterosexuality and romantic relationships and so, in a sense, one half of the story is missing; the male perspective of online dating. I feel that further research into men's online experiences would provide a fuller understanding of the gendered nature of heterosexual relations and would be of greater benefit to feminist political knowledge.

Highlighting the voices of women does not imply one unified voice. This research moves away from a claim to a universal women's voice and is sensitive to differences and unequal power relations between women. My respondents, for example, were caught up in the politics of ageing as well as the politics of gender. They found themselves positioned in mid-life and many acknowledge a loss of power and respect from their younger sisters as well as the loss of sexual attractiveness in the eyes of men. Indeed the feminist movement in general has been charged with ageism. (Woodward,1995). My research seeks to problematize these differences and inequalities rather than seek a common platform from which to fight a universal feminist cause. '...Women come only in different classes, races and cultures: there is no 'woman' and no 'woman's experience' (Harding, 1987: 7).

There is debate as to whether a distinctly feminist research practice exists (Harding, 1987) but my own rationale for using methods preferred by many feminists is based upon my personal conviction as a feminist researcher that the following issues are central to the research process: The use of qualitative research methods to elicit respondents' stories from their own perspectives; reflexivity within the entire research process, including a consideration of my own part as researcher in knowledge production; the importance of an awareness of ethical concerns; the centrality of the consideration of power relations within the research process; and finally, a commitment to taking epistemic responsibility for my research which involves the

recognition of the fact that knowledge is always partial and located and that the entire research process should be made as transparent as possible to reflect this view.

Responsible knowledge

'We cannot know ourselves so how can we expect to be the absolute knower of others, although we can be vigilant, responsible and critical'' (Skeggs, 1997: 30). Skeggs suggests here the importance of responsible knowledge production as an integral part of feminist research, thus highlighting how epistemology and ethics are intertwined. An interpretivist epistemological standpoint tends to underpin feminist informed research, which arises mainly from feminist critiques of positivist claims of 'objective' and 'value-free' knowledge. A critique of positivist claims does not however, necessarily collapse into an entirely relativist viewpoint. Feminist informed research acknowledges that it is impossible to have value free research. Critical and honest engagement with those values makes for more responsible knowledge production. Harding (1987) and Haraway (1991) argue for 'strong objectivity' within research. In other words an acceptance that objective knowledge should include subjectivity, 'Objectivity becomes the means by which connection are made between different knowing subjects who are always located' (Skeggs, 1997: 33).

Integral to epistemic responsibility is an acknowledgement of the partiality of knowledge production within research as opposed to making false claims to universality and objectivity. Similarly knowledge must be clearly situated within a given context, its limitations made clear and its methodology made transparent within the final research production. Haraway argues that the relativist and positivist position,

> ...is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The 'equality' of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalisation in the ideologies of objectivity: both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective... Relativism and totalisation are both 'god tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally (Haraway, 1991: 191).

Feminist researchers place emphasis upon continuous reflexive evaluation of all stages of the research process. The researcher also needs, however, to be reflexive in terms of their own position within the research. Locating myself as researcher within the research and acknowledging the part I play in knowledge production is central to epistemic responsibility. Undoubtedly my own personal biography has informed the nature of the research: The initial idea for the research was spawned due to my own experiences of watching a close friend use dating sites; the research methods used and theoretical perspectives are informed by my feminist beliefs. I am located as a white, middle-aged (aspiring) academic with a range of theoretical, substantive and personal interests, which have undoubtedly influenced all areas of the research including my interaction within respondents. I do not stand outside of my research looking inwards; I am located within it in complex and contradictory ways and am an integral part of the thesis as a whole.

A significant proportion of feminist researchers have included in their research a personal biography. Whilst this is undoubtedly relevant to the production of responsible knowledge, I feel it is important not to overstate our own stories, or we run the risk of a tendency towards narcissistic self-exploration. Indeed Ribbens and Edwards (1998) suggest that researchers must be careful not to 'drown out' the voices of respondents by overstating personal biography.

Skeggs makes the point here, that as researchers (as with respondents) our location within the research shouldn't be seen as fixed but recognised as fluid and contradictory,

> Through reading numerous accounts (representations) of feminist research, I have learnt what it means to be a feminist researcher and position myself accordingly. This positioning process is not without contradiction. Researchers are positioned within institutions, by history, by disciplinary practices, by dominant paradigms, in theoretical fashions, in genre style, by funding arrangement and so on. All these positioning impact upon what research we do, when and how we do it. However there is no straightforward correspondence between our circumstances and how we think: we are positioned in but not determined by our locations (Skeggs, 1997: 18).

Researchers are also located within their research by what Skeggs refers to as, 'the relations of knowing' (Skeggs, 1997: 18) in that subjects are produced in relation to the object, the social location(s) of the researcher. Placing the respondents as 'other' raises questions of power, '...creating the illusion that such objects exist is precisely the anxious effort of groups who depend upon making these categories to shore up the fiction of their permeability' (Hart, 1994 cited in Skeggs, 1997: 19). This raises issues around my own relationship with the women I interviewed. Whilst I related to women in terms of sharing online experiences, had I not been online myself, I could have placed respondents as 'other' in terms of the negative stereotypes associated with online dating. Similarly, my respondents were all at least a few years older than myself, whilst some were more than ten years my senior. I was critically aware of the temptation to bracket off my respondents as 'older' (as in 'older than me') which in a sense reflects my own fear and prejudices around ageing. Indeed I was forced to acknowledge a feeling of comforting relief when respondents who were articulating a fear of being alone in old age, pointed out that I was, 'far to young to be worried about such things!' It can be disquieting to face up to ones own prejudices and preconceptions, but at the same time it is a valuable learning experience and central to the production of responsible knowledge.

Finally researchers should be acknowledged as emotional beings, 'We insist that the presence of the researcher, as an ordinarily human being with the usual complement of human attributes can't be avoided' (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 150). They argue that it is impossible for a researcher not to get emotionally involved during the research process ,'Emotions cannot be controlled by mere effort of will, nor can adherence to any set of techniques act as an emotional prophylactic' (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 161). My own emotions were undoubtedly invested within my research experience. I became emotionally involved with a man who contacted me online during my initial period of participant observation; I became friends with some of the respondents and had ambivalent feelings towards others; I have undoubtedly an emotional attachment to my thesis, which shifts from frustration to elation at various stages. Emotions needn't be seen as barrier to the work of a researcher, instead they should be embraced as part of the research process. A reflexive exploration of emotion throughout the research process allows the researcher to make clear her own

emotional responses, rather than giving the false impression that she has simply added a layer of logical interpretation to the words of respondents.

Grounded Theory

I used a Grounded Theory approach to the research process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). What is significant about this approach is that it is an emergent process, which seeks to find theory to explain the data rather than testing a pre-given hypothesis. This allowed my research to develop over time and allows for flexibility. Whilst this inductive approach is wholly relevant to the aims of my research, I stop short of suggesting that my thesis is entirely data driven. Some, 'harder' versions of Grounded Theory rest on the implicit assumption that the researcher begins with a blank page and that data is then generated to inform theory. This suggests some form of prior objectivity in which the researcher empties their mind of all preconceptions, values, and prejudices before entering the field. This of course is largely impossible and undesirable to achieve. Whilst I attempted to let data lead my research to a certain degree, I cannot claim that I entered the field with a blank slate. I took with me my own personal preconceptions surrounding Internet dating, my own experiences of being middle aged, my political agenda as well my own research design, all of which will shape the course of the research to some degree. Instead I would argue that I have used a grounded theory *approach* to research in which the *emphasis* is upon theory driven by data.

I used theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to gain my respondents, which allowed for a sample to be picked that maximized theoretical development. Mason gives a particularly clear description of the process,

> Theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position and analytical framework, your analytical practice, and …the explanation or account you are developing' (Mason, 1996: 94).

My sample was chosen within the parameters of certain criteria that fitted with my area of research but simultaneously I sought variety within those parameters in order to provide a richer picture of women's experiences. This was no easy task however

due to difficulty in gaining the trust of women I contacted online which made it difficult to gain willing interviewees (see below for a full discussion). Over time, however, I gradually acquired respondents and I continued to interview until theoretical saturation had been reached, in other words, until I felt that no new insights were being gained within interviews.

The women who agreed to be interviewed were between the ages of 48 and 62 and all defined themselves as middle-aged. They were all white British, heterosexual and were spread across a range of socio-economic groups. Most of the women lived in and around the town in which the study took place, apart from two women who were interviewed online and lived further afield. My sample, although not statistically representative of a wider population, did indeed broadly reflect the demographics (within this age cohort) of the two largest and well-known dating sites that I used to find respondents. Although my sample gave a broad range of respondents in terms of age and financial status, it had limitations. It didn't include any women of colour or disabled women, the reason being that I wasn't approached by any such women to be interviewed. The outcomes of my research therefore are grounded in the particular demographics of the sample of women who took part.

Observation

The first stage of my research was to register on several online dating sites to experience for myself the process of online dating. Similar to my respondents I was a middle-aged divorced woman using dating sites online for the first time. Having registered on several dating sites by constructing my own profile, I chatted online, browsed profiles and went on offline dates. I was surprised at how quickly I was drawn into the online dating environment and as a result have many colourful stories to tell, stories that were shared with respondents. My observation online gave me insight into the world of online dating, challenged many negative preconceptions and provided me with an empathetic ear within the interviews. On the other hand however, I was aware of the risk of allowing my own experiences online to drown out the voices of respondents. My experiences should allow me to contextualise women's stories without assuming their stories will resonate with my own.

Sample

I approached respondents via email through the dating sites directly. On receiving my email, women automatically saw my own online profile on the dating site. I felt this might strengthen their trust in my identity as a researcher and a single woman as they would see that I too was registered on several dating sites. It seems however that the issue of trust in computer-mediated-communication was a barrier to finding respondents. Despite the fact that I had given a contact number for the University to confirm my identity as a researcher, offered a Boots voucher as an incentive and provided personal details on a profile, many respondents admitted that they were initially suspicious. Some thought I was either a man in female researcher's clothing, or a woman contacting them to initiate a relationship. Studies into the nature of trust online suggest that online communication that is purely textual doesn't foster such a degree of trust as face-to-face video and audio communication (Bos et.al., 2000; Zeng et.al., 2002) and indeed a degree of rapport and trust was only built up when potential respondents spoke to me on the telephone. Interestingly, once verbal communication had been established not one respondent decided to check out my credentials as a university student before meeting me for an interview.

Interviews

As my interviewees were contacted online, I encouraged each respondent to contact me first by telephone so that I could deal with any concerns they may have about my validity as a researcher, about the research in general or concerns around the interview. This put women much more at ease and as a result the majority chose for me to visit their homes or vice versa. Three respondents however, decided they would prefer an interview online using MSN (Instant chat facility).

Having carried out three interviews online using MSN, I was able to compare the experience to face-to-face interviews. Literature in this area points in general terms to the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing online (Curasi 2000). Here however, I will detail my own observations. Firstly the pace of online interviews was much faster than in offline interaction. Replies from respondents were quicker, shorter and contained less detail. Online respondents took less time to think about a question and were more likely to elicit a fast, and often witty response. Interestingly I also felt under pressure to provide short and witty responses. One explanation for this could be

that a pause in textual communication is seen as a slight breakdown in the rules of online interaction. A pause within a face-to-face interview is more acceptable and understandable as the interviewer can see whether the respondent is pausing to think and still engaging with a topic or specific question. Online these cues are missing and a pause can be interpreted as someone who has either disengaged with the conversation or even left the computer altogether.

Linked to this is the desire to 'entertain' which I would argue is due to a desire to keep the engagement of the respondent in the absence of non verbal cues. A witty response can help to make the conversation enjoyable and encourage a response. The speed of the interviews often led to an overlap of turn taking in the order of questions and answers thus causing awkwardness, as we got out of synch. With hindsight I could have sent questions out earlier to give respondents time to reflect upon them, but this would have removed the interaction between researcher and researched and seemed more like an interrogation than a conversation. Also I was anxious for the experience of carrying out online interviews in order to reflect upon the use of textual communication as an interview medium.

In general terms, the lack of physical proximity between researcher and respondent meant there was an absence of bodily cues which undoubtedly impacted upon the rapport and understanding between individuals. An enormous amount of information can be gleaned about a person by reading bodily cues such as facial expression, bodily stance, tone of voice, dress etc (Walther, 1993; Ellis, 2001). In the absence of such cues, the researcher may, 'fill in the gaps' in information and build up a picture of a respondent that may or may not be accurate. The opportunities for misinterpretation or even causing offence are much greater via textual communication and my fear of this inevitably showed itself in my hesitant approach to online respondents.

Following on from this, there was a tendency to disclose less in the online interviews, which contradicts literature suggesting that online interaction encourages disclosure due to anonymity (Whitty and Gavin, 2001; Ben-Ze've 2003). I would suggest that my own part in the online interview contributed to this however as I found myself more hesitant to ask more personal questions due to a perceived lack of rapport between myself and the respondents online. I was unable to gauge from body

language or expression for example, how respondents were reacting to my questions, despite the fact I asked them to tell me if they felt uncomfortable about any issue within the interview. There are of course emoticons, which can convey textually, or visually an emotion or mood but they mask the subtleties of reading the face and body of another, for example a respondent putting on a brave face whilst telling an emotional tale of loss.

Finally from a personal perspective, my online interviews were less memorable and significant. Whilst writing up my research I could hear the voices of women I interviewed and see their faces as I transcribed their interviews. The online interviews seemed more anonymous and I felt a distinct lack of connection with online respondents. Indeed research by Walther (1993) suggests that online communication is experienced as more impersonal due to the absence of non-verbal cues. Their interviews were however, a greatly valued contribution to the research. One of the women that I interviewed online I later went on to meet, an experience which confirmed that an enormous amount of information about a person is gleaned from non-verbal information in a face-to-face interaction. We immediately built up a rapport that had not been present online and we both agreed that the interview would have been more successful offline.

Offline interviews were informal and relaxed. Women were interviewed mainly in my home or their own, whichever proved more convenient to them, or indeed made them feel more comfortable. Interestingly, I had read women's profiles online before meeting them in the flesh and could therefore compare the impression of them that I had gleaned from the profile to meeting them face-to-face. Indeed some respondents said that they had compared my profile to my offline persona. In general there were no surprises although online photographs did not seem to accurately reflect offline appearance (many respondents remarked that I looked older offline!).

The interviews lasted typically around two and a half hours, which included time spent before the interview began informally chatting. This informal time proved quite important in helping women relax before the interview, as some initially appeared quite nervous. Using a broad interview schedule I encouraged women to speak freely about their experiences online. I elected to tape the interviews as I felt it was easier to

build a rapport with respondents without being distracted by having to write copious notes. Whilst some respondents felt a little uneasy and dried up a little when the tape was switched on, they soon forgot the tape was there and relaxed into the interview. I assured my respondents anonymity and suggested they could destroy the tapes themselves if they chose to, once the research was complete. I also assured women that the tapes would be held securely and not listened to or transcribed by anyone other than myself. I gave control to respondents in that I advised them that the tape could be stopped at any point and speech could be erased if respondents had a change of heart after talking about a personal or sensitive issue.

Within the interviews I asked a series of open-ended questions to elicit women's own accounts of their experiences online. Reflexivity within the interview process led me to problematise relations between myself as researcher, and the interviewees, an issue that is central to feminist research (Opie, 1992). Oakley's assertion that interviews between women are more like a friendly chat than an interrogation resonates with my own experience of interviewing but I would argue that the empathetic understanding that arose between interviewees and myself was not simply due to gender alone. It was largely due to my own positioning as a single middle-aged woman who was also using dating sites. I had not realised at the beginning of my research, how invaluable my own experiences of Internet dating would be in contributing to the interview process, making them indeed a conversation rather than an interrogation. Ann Oakley's claim of, 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (Oakley, 1990: 49), seems as pertinent as ever within the interview setting. It was undoubtedly the case that respondents fostered a relationship of trust and reciprocity with myself as researcher due to my own sharing of personal dating stories. Some researchers have found however that respondents are not particularly interested in the stories of the researcher and quickly return to their own stories (Leanne et al., 2002). This was not the case here, which I would argue, is due to the context of dating site use. Many women had not talked openly about their online activities to anyone due to the stigma attached. Those that had, often received ridicule or disapproval. As a result, women were keen to share tales of online and offline activities with someone who had experience of the sites and would not be judgemental. Importantly, as online dating is a social process that is in essence carried out alone, women were eager to hear of my activities to contextualise and validate their own experiences.

I would also highlight the fact that rapport doesn't spontaneously arise between women *because* they are women. Of the thirty women I interviewed, some remained friends after the interview and some did not, whilst some interviews created greater rapport than others. The rapport that emerges from women interviewing women should not be taken as a given. Reinharz suggests that rapport amongst women should not be overstated, suggesting that women will not always achieve rapport and that the researcher should not feel a failure if she fails to achieve this successfully (Reinharz, 1992: 265). Kelly suggests the importance of women interviewing women when considering power and oppression, 'Feminist researchers are themselves women and they are therefore located within the group whose oppression they seek to document, understand and change' (Kelly, 1988: 4). This view however somewhat underplays differences and unequal power relations between women and overstates empathy based upon gender alone. Indeed, Puwar (1997) suggests in her study of female MPs that there is little consideration of unequal power relations in terms of women interviewees holding power over the researcher. Such a scenario is usually conceptualised in terms of women interviewing men. Within my own interviews it is important to acknowledge that I ultimately held the power of authorship and ownership and thus emphasis upon a 'friendly chat' should not be overstated.

Empowerment can be increased by returning transcripts to the respondent to check accuracy or to include respondents in the analysis process. There are a number of issues here discussed by Leane et al., (2002). Firstly, how can we expect respondents to be familiar with abstract academic concepts by which the researcher organise the data? Secondly, how much actual analysis do we expect the respondent to do? Are they just checking accuracy or spending time discussing data with the researcher? Will the respondent have the time, commitment or interest to invest such effort into the research? (Leane et al., 2002: 49). They suggest the usefulness of involving respondents in the analysis process as it allows them to see their narratives through the lens of feminist viewpoints, concepts, and theories. On the other hand, there could well be conflict in the interpretations made by respondent and researcher, which should be highlighted rather than glossed over (ibid). I gave respondents the choice to read over their transcripts and only four suggested they would like to. This was however to reflect upon their own interview rather than help the process of analysis!

Data Analysis

Within qualitative research, data analysis is not an activity that begins once all interviews have been completed, but rather an ongoing process that begins once the first interview has taken place. Throughout the research I moved back and forth from data to theory and vice versa, in a process of constant refinement. This process can be likened to a conversation between theory and data, which gradually shifts as more data is collected and more insights are gained. I used a thematic approach to the analysis of the interviews. I searched for common themes and issues that emerged from the accounts of respondents, noting in particular those themes that were being raised by respondents themselves as significant to them and similarly those themes I had raised at interview that women didn't recognise as central to their experiences. I was also looking for data that contradicted the main themes that were emerging but was surprised at the level of homogeneity within women's accounts of their online dating activities (See conclusion for full discussion). Having completed the interviews, a broad overview of the data revealed four themes which structured women's journey through the Internet dating process and it was these that formed the framework for the data chapters of the thesis.

The use of narrative as a research method

An interest in narrative within the social sciences as a theory, methodology and method has been relatively recent and is rooted in an Interpretivist tradition, which moves away from a positivist emphasis upon objective reality and towards the multiple meanings attributed to the social world by social actors. It has not always been so popular, being described in the 1930's as, 'A hodge podge of pretentious words, random observations, speculations, opinions' (Read Bain in Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 486). It seems that more recently however, the very criticisms levelled against narrative, have now been hailed as its strength, 'Narrativity has not so much been defended against the charges of particularity, ambiguity and imprecision as it has been celebrated for embodying precisely those qualities' (Ewick and Sibley, 1995: 198).

Narrative often seems to be used as if synonymous with biographical or life history methods, the emphasis being upon narrative as a life story told in the words of the respondent. My own research was not looking to elicit a life story but instead a more bounded story, which was set within a specific context and led by my own research

agenda. This led me to question whether my own research could be labelled 'narrative' at all. '... attention to narrative can be an extremely useful way of conceptualising the kinds of accounts people produce in qualitative interviews more generally' (Lawler, 2002: 243). Lawler goes on to suggest, 'Narratives do not have to be lengthy or full accounts of life' (Lawler, 2002: 254). Narratives can take the form of bounded stories that can be elicited from semi-structured interviews. Riessman (1986) points out however that people will make sense of an event in the present by recalling the past and thus stories cannot necessarily be bounded by time. But what constitutes a narrative?

Lawler uses the work of Ricoeur (1992) to suggest that a narrative must contain: transformation (change across time); characters that are included in the story who carry out actions of some kind; and a plot which holds together all the unrelated episodes and characters, moving towards a certain conclusion. The story must have a meaning, a point. This is stressed by White (1987) who says that a narrative is more than just a temporal ordering of past events; evaluation is an integral part of the narrative, '...a demand for ...moral meaning' (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 201).

The process of emplotment is central to Ricoeur's narrative identity and he identifies three forms of synthesis that together make up emplotment: Firstly, the synthesis of a number of events to make up one coherent story. The events contribute to and add meaning to the point of the story; secondly, the synthesis between discordance and concordance which highlights how disparate events are brought together to provide a kind of inevitability to the end point of the story; finally, the synthesis of two senses of time, as open and indefinite and closed and complete (Lawler, 2002: 245).

The women used narratives to make sense of their online activities, locating them within a wider narrative of the life course and self-identity. Time was used in creative ways to make sense of the present by recalling the past. The point of the story however was often linked to the production of emotions in that telling stories often boosted a sense of emotional well being and confidence. The importance of emotion has been somewhat overlooked in sociology, 'Within traditional epistemologies, emotions are perceived as disruptive and subversive of knowledge, as a wild zone, untameable to reason, and its scientific apparatus of investigation and control' (Bordo,

in Stanley and Wise, 1993: 193). Feminists such as Jaggar (1989) have challenged the reason/emotion dichotomy, seeing emotionality as a form of behaviour that is culturally inscribed and therefore open to analysis. The positioning of emotionality as less valued than the traditionally male attribute of rationality has also been challenged. Stanley and Wise suggest that emotions are often placed, '...as an obfuscating layer between social reality and reasoned understanding' (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 193). Feminist research often emphasises the impact of emotions upon how social actors interpret the social world.

Within narrative research it is perhaps easy to place respondents as rational actors, narrating their lives and constructing their self-identities in a self-interested and perhaps calculating way. People's stories can be far from rational, being driven by a chaotic mix of emotions. The instinct of the researcher will be to make some kind of order out of the narrative, which Skeggs (1997) acknowledges as a desire to achieve mastery though knowledge and suggests that this must be reflexively acknowledged and avoided if possible. Skeggs stresses the importance of recognising the desire to make order out of chaos and says of the women in her own research,

> I interpreted many of their actions as part of a cost-benefit approach to life. So that the choices they made were interpreted as a rational weighing up of pros and cons. This is, in retrospect, more a result of my desire to impose order than of their dispositions (Skeggs, 1997: 31).

Cohen points out that it is not always the therapeutic, comforting narratives that we tell, we can also construct self defeating, destructive narratives,

> These kind of orchestral manoeuvres in the dark should alert us to the fact that what we are talking about is a hidden curriculum vitae made up of largely unconscious scripts and that its principle author and narrator is not the conscious self, but much more shadowy figures like the ideal self and its negative companion, the internal saboteur. Especially when we feel that we have suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, these figures may be mobilized to either comforting fairy stories, or kick us when we are down,

by removing any last shred of hope, and turning the whole life story into a refrain of bitter regret (Cohen at: http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/cohen.doc).

Collins observed in his respondents how the telling and retelling of an unhappy or stressful event often began with the respondent tearful or anxious and as the story was told, the respondent became stronger and calmer (Collins, 1998: 9). Collins is flagging up an interesting element of narrative research; the performative function of narrating. The emplotment of a narrative can produce a range of feelings and emotions within an individual and also the potential audience of the narrator. Collins suggests that narrating has the therapeutic effect of helping the narrator make sense of and *feel better about* an unhappy and perhaps seemingly meaningless event in their lives Whilst this could well be the case, it is perhaps worth not overstating this outcome as once again, this suggests the rational narrator. Narrative emplotment won't always achieve this positive outcome. The narrator could indeed emplot a series of negative narratives, which could produce destructive feelings. The input of the person (s) hearing the narrative will also influence the emotional outcome. Within the interview situation, the respondent is talking to a relative stranger (discussed below) but the role of researcher as counsellor could well elicit such negative narratives. The researcher needs to consider reflexively how to respond in terms of sympathy, advice or the sharing of her own story. Ultimately this could contribute to the emotional mood of the interview and to the narratives produced.

As researcher I felt an ethical responsibility to protect respondents from any form of harm as a result of participation in the research. I did indeed take the role of counsellor, especially as many respondents recognised that I 'understood' their experiences as a dating site user myself. I was aware that my interviews could well lead to women telling me intensely personal stories of painful events in their lives. As a result I felt a responsibility to emotionally manage the interviews. I always finished the interview on an upbeat note and made sure that women were not left feeling tearful or vulnerable. Having told me personal stories, many wanted to keep in touch with me by email and I actively encouraged this. In this respect my research is in some respects, ongoing as I get frequent emails from women recounting recent dates and talking over past experiences. I also introduced a number of local women to each other (with their permission) and a form of 'self help' group was formed. The

'September Girls' was named by June, as it was representative of where they felt they were positioned within the life course, in the 'autumn' of their lives. This group served to act as support for each other and a social outlet for women keen to make female friends and socialise.

Within the interviews I was acutely aware of the emotional effects of stories I was told. Women's narratives employed a range of genres from, 'strong survivor' to 'victim', evoking feelings of pain and survival. Often their stories were told with humour, in particular when telling of an acutely painful experience, which sought to bury the pain to some degree. At the same time, women's stories were part of the narrative process of reconstructing their identities and lives in the face of upheaval and sudden change. Most women found this a therapeutic experience as they were given a space to re-evaluate the past. Interviews contained a lot of humour and low moments were quickly recovered. Women were keen it seems, to present a self as strong and independent, despite and indeed as a result of, 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Thus their stories of loss and change were told to incorporate disparate events into a progressional and coherent model of the life course. Not only were bad experiences made part of the progressional story, they were seen as part of a process of self-growth and understanding. Thus the point of the story, perhaps even the interview was the triumphant victor articulating a self who has emerged stronger and wiser.

Chapter One detailed Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and indeed this chapter has discussed methodological issues around narrative research. It is important to highlight however, to what *extent* this research is informed by narrative, both at the level of theory and method. Firstly Ricoeur's emphasis upon the temporal nature of self construction; continuity and change in the formation of identity (in particular his work on 'character'); and the telling of stories to construct and maintain self-identity form central themes to women's accounts and provide an explanatory framework from which to discuss these issues .

From a methodological perspective, I have used aspects of narrative research to inform the research process rather than using an entirely narrative approach. My interest in women's accounts drew upon a narrative approach in several ways: I was

interested in how respondents appropriated time within their stories; secondly I gave attention to the language used in women's accounts which were often indicative of wider power relations that served to deny vocabulary or even silence certain stories altogether; thirdly I saw as central a consideration of wider cultural and public narratives (and genres) that respondents drew upon in order to make sense of their stories within a shared framework of understanding; finally I was interested in the performative nature of stories told within the interview and online which were productive of emotions and the construction of selves. Whilst these issues draw upon a narrative approach, data analysis (detailed above) was thematic in nature from the perspective of a critical sociological eye as opposed to an in-depth exploration of the linguistic structure of respondents' narratives. Thus I would describe my research as a qualitative study that is informed by aspects of narrative.

Giving voice

The political rationales of consciousness raising and 'giving voice', whilst seen as potentially positive outcomes of doing feminist research, can be simultaneously problematised in terms of just how far these aim can be realistically achieved. In terms of consciousness raising, it is perhaps worth avoiding the presumption that respondents are completely ignorant of the ways in which they are tied into unequal power relations in society. Indeed, within my own research, women articulated understandings of ageism and sexism and how such discourses left them disempowered. They also revealed their own creative strategies for resistance. Their resistance however grew from their own individual lived experience of being middle aged rather than an appeal to a political collective consciousness.

Whilst undoubtedly I have a commitment to revealing women's voices and adding to a body of literature that allows those voices to be heard, I am cautious about being over zealous in the claims made about my research. The issue of empowerment is an important one as narrative research is often described as being emancipatory for the respondent, a way of 'giving voice' to previously unheard groups, 'When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the truths of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theory' (Anderson et al in Mc Carl Nielson, 1990: 95). As a feminist this idea is very appealing and yet I feel the researcher should not overstate this claim.

Qualitative research emphasizes the preservation of the respondent's words, which in itself can be seen as liberatory, as the respondent has the power to define herself rather than accepting definitions imposed by others. Beyond that, narrative research allows for the potential emergence of subversive narratives,

> By allowing the silenced to speak, by refusing the flattening and distorting effects of traditional logico-scientific methods and dissertative modes of representation, narrative scholarship participates in rewriting social life in ways that are, or can be liberatory (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 231).

Within my research, I was interested in whether scripts of ageing, gender and heterosexuality would be subverted by respondents. Heilbrun suggests,

> …it is perhaps in old age, certainly past fifty, that women can stop being female impersonators, can grasp the opportunity to reverse their most cherished principles of 'femininity' and revise their own life stories (Heilbrun, 1988: 126).

'The interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based upon women's lives and women's formulations' (Anderson and Jackson, 1991: 18). Feminist views of empowerment tend to focus on the positive aspects. As well as self-definition, competence is stressed, 'People are seen as growing, changing, learning and engaging in continuous interaction with their environments' (Morell 2002: 3). This emphasis is also suggested by Browne (1998),

> Power and empowerment… are reconceptualised by feminists as processes more than things, with a focus more on power as energy, potential, self definition and competence, rather than domination, coercion and competition (cited in Morell, 2002:3).

Narrative research can indeed enable empowerment as part of the process of telling stories. Thus empowerment and consciousness raising can be seen as a process that is carried out by the respondent themselves. Researchers can add to this process by

validating the stories of respondents and providing a safe environment for stories to be told. Whilst on the one hand, the researcher is giving the respondent the power to articulate what is important to them, ultimately, no matter how much freedom is given to the respondent to articulate their own narratives and no matter how uninterrupted their narratives are, further layers of interpretation will be made. Given that narrative research is premised on the view that there are multiple truths, the interpretation of the researcher can be fraught with difficulty,

> Given that humour, metaphors, language, choice and narrative style are usually mediated by time, place, gender, culture, class-and a host of other variables that researchers may not have in common with 'their informants'-'crossed-wires' or other forms of miscommunication are possible (Fraser, 2004: 194).

Skeggs supports this view that research should not be seen simply as, 'a conduit for the voices of others' (Skeggs, 1997: 116). It is essential to listen with a critical ear to the stories of respondents. Personal narratives told within the interview setting can challenge public and common sense understandings of life events (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998: 58). It is important therefore, when the researcher is listening to personal accounts, to see beyond wider public understandings and wider theoretical frameworks that may pre-inform research,

> There is a danger that the voices of particular groups, or particular forms of knowledge, may be drowned out, systematically silenced or misunderstood as researched and researchers engage with dominant academic and public concerns and discourses...routine public and disciplinary categories and procedures...insistently pull us towards conventional understandings that reshape in particular, women's voice and experience (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998: 2).

However, ultimately the researcher faces a dilemma, as inevitably the final stage in the research is to write it up for an academic audience,

Social researchers concerned with domestic and intimate issues are involved in the social construction and material construction of knowledge within the domain of public and academic discourse. Ambiguity thus arises when we seek simultaneously to serve an academic audience whilst also remaining faithful to forms of knowledge gained in domestic, personal and intimate settings (ibid).

Thus the narrative of the respondent will not be represented in its pure form and the researcher has ultimate power of authorship. (Standing,1998). The ultimate power of the researcher should not be underplayed but acknowledged as inevitable,

However equal our methods of access and interviewing are, the researcher holds the real power when we take women's words and thoughts into the academy. It is the researcher who holds the power of which words to use, how to interpret the words and how to interpret women's voices. It is our privilege and access to knowledge that enables us to interpret. To pretend otherwise is to misinterpret feminist research practice (Leane et al. 2002: 51).

Narrative and Language

Ricoeur suggests that we are socially produced selves who can only make sense of the world and our place within it through the lens of our wider cultural and social context. He doesn't explicitly acknowledge the power relations inherent within language itself, however which lead to some groups' narratives being silenced as they lack the vocabulary to express themselves. The work of Liz Kelly (1988), for example is useful here in her research into women and sexual violence. Kelly gave her female respondents a space to articulate what sexual violence meant to them in their daily lives and redefine sexual violence in their own vocabulary. In the case of my own research I was eager to see if respondents struggled with the vocabulary to articulate their experiences of dating in middle age, as this is an activity stereotypically associated with the young.

Power relations inherent within language may affect how a story is told. Ray (1998) points to gender relations which produce gendered 'scripts' as to how men and women will tell stories: men concentrating upon autonomy and personal

accomplishment whilst women stress relationships with others (Ray, 1998: 119). Drawing on the work of Heilbrun (1988), Ray suggests, 'Rarely found in women's life writing (particularly that of white middle class American women) is the language of wilfulness, agency, mobility, fearlessness, independence, criticism, anger, combativeness or outspokenness' (ibid.). Interestingly, Flax suggests that that repressed aspects of the self (which are silenced within narratives) are a result of wider gender relations,

> My clinical experience and reading convince me that the repressed is gendered in the sense that women in [Western] culture tend to repress aspects of the self, which are bound up with autonomy and aggression. One dimension of what is repressed is women's non-object related ambition and interest in exerting various sorts of mastery: interpersonal, intellectual or creative. Both men and women's sense of gender and self partially grow out of and are dependent upon the repression of women's desire and ambition. Both genders maintain an active interest in forestalling or prohibiting the return of this repressed material (Flax, 1987: 92).

Narrative as a dialogue

It is important to consider the part that the researcher plays in the creation of the respondent's narrative. Giving voice suggests a solitary production of a personal story by the respondent. This ignores, however that the story is being told to an audience (the researcher) and this will influence the story told. Narratives are an interactive process. This raises the issue of the narrative as a dialogue. The narrative process is complete when the narrative is heard and a further layer of interpretation is made. The narrative becomes an interaction within the interview process,

> Narratives are a means of exchange. People may remember the past and may verbalise their recollection but to become a story, what they say must achieve coherence and point which are the same for the hearer and the teller (Steedman, 1986: 132).

Collins (1998) reflects upon the part that the interviewer plays in the production of narratives within the interview. He concludes that the interviewer cannot take a passive role in the production of respondent's narratives,

> Interviewees, in telling stories about themselves in relation to others, reconstitute themselves. As the interviewer I am not, cannot be, merely a passive observer in all this, even though it is primarily the interviewee's life, which is under scrutiny. In encouraging the interviewee to tell me these stories and in asking me to develop a sub-plot here and a character there, I am encouraging them to construct and reconstruct themselves and contribute to this by telling stories of my own (Collins, 1998:7).

Collins goes on to list a number of roles he took within the interview setting: a sympathetic ear to sad narratives; confessor, counsellor, sounding board even acting as 'straight man' when a comical story is told. He details how respondents actively seek a response to their stories, a validation that they have been heard and understood (Collins, 1998: 9). So, is the interview itself conducive to respondent narratives? Should the researcher maintain a lofty silence or share her own experiences? Does this disrupt or subvert narratives told by the respondent? Undoubtedly the answer to this last question is 'yes' but this needn't be seen as problematic as long as the narrative is recognised as produced through dialogue. Chase (1995) argues that interviews within the social sciences tend to stifle respondents stories, but also argues that people will tell stories whether encouraged by the interviewer or not. It seems somewhat problematic to suggest that narratives are somehow restricted by the interview situation, as it suggests one particular narrative truth that is being sought and yet not fully heard.

'The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is fluid and changing but always co-constructed' (Collins, 1998; 5). Collins makes the important point that the co- production of narratives is inevitable and furthermore, should not be over-simplified. Narratives produced in the interview do not construct a single self-identity but multiple selves,

Each interview is an occasion for the elicitation of many selves...the interview, though it may appear a single, coherent social event, is not. To the extent that the selves of both interviewer an interviewee are variously and complexly defined the interview is a carnival of voices...Even to define the interview in terms of the co-presence of interviewer and interviewee might be an oversimplification. (Collins, 1998: 5).

Respondents are not merely in dialogue with the researcher, but also with themselves and other imaginary individuals from past (Steedman, 1986). There is also a temporal element here, as narrative voices contain traces of previous narratives of self and other, 'Utterances are 'furrowed ' with the traces and reverberations of earlier dialogues...The implication is that the interviewee might be addressing audiences other than the one immediately present' (Collins, 1998: 14).

A narrative approach reveals the complex and contradictory ways people construct and understand their self-identities within certain social contexts. Lawler points out that, although individuals may well draw upon wider cultural stories about being, for example, a woman and divorced at fifty, it is a mistake to assume that their own interpretation of their identity will be unproblematically and directly related to the wider social context (Lawler, 2002: 254). This point is also made by Steedman,

Personal interpretation of past time - the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture (Steedman, 1986: 6).

Lawler (2002) suggested that an integral part of a narrative was the point of the story. Ewick and Silby also stress this point, 'Narrators tell tales in order to achieve some goal or advance some interest...we tell stories to entertain or persuade, to exonerate or indict, to enlighten or instruct' (Ewick and Silby, 1995: 206). The point of the story is inevitably influenced by the audience. Within the interview situation, what effect does the interviewer have upon the narrative? No matter how relaxed and informal the interview situation and regardless of the rapport between respondent and researcher,

the narratives elicited will be influenced by the researcher's presence. Perhaps the respondent is trying to create a certain impression to the interviewer. In the context of my research, for example, respondents may have felt slightly 'in competition' with a fellow Internet dating site user and perhaps would be unwilling to admit that they'd failed to generate much interest in their profile. Respondents were not telling their stories in a vacuum, they were telling their stories to me as researcher and dating site user, which will have impacted upon the mood, point and nature of their stories in complex and contradictory ways.

Thus it is important to avoid getting too carried away with the idea of 'giving voice'. Whilst providing an opportunity for respondents to articulate their experiences may be empowering in that it can be pleasurable and perhaps therapeutic to take time out to explore certain issues in this way, the experience will not change their lives and thus empowerment should perhaps be considered in realistic terms. Leane et al. draw on the work of Opie (1992) to suggest a more realistic way to consider empowerment of the respondent,

> She [Opie] suggests that there are three ways that women may be empowered through their participation in a research project. First through their contribution in making a social issue visible. Secondly through the therapeutic effect of being able to reflect on and re-evaluate their experience as part of the process of being interviewed. Thirdly through the general subversive outcome that these other two may generate. It seems that serendipity may have a part to play in the possibility of becoming empowered (or not) (Leane et al, 2002: 43).

An honest acknowledgement of the aims and motivation of the researcher is also relevant here. A full explanation of the research including the motivation and goals of the research seemed an honest way of approaching the research with the respondents. This included discussing with respondents the possible audience for the finished thesis. It is important to recognise that the researcher does not have complete control over who will read the finished piece of research but broadly speaking I acknowledged the eventual dissemination of my research in academic journals.

Skeggs asks whether feminist research can produce legitimate knowledge. As researchers we make a commitment to bring to the public arena the voices and experiences of women whose voices have not been heard. Do we have the power, however to make such knowledge legitimate? Is feminist research positioned within academia as able to legitimise knowledge? Skeggs argues that feminist research sits on the margins of academia but she says that what researchers can legitimately claim to do is, 'challenge those who have the power to legitimate partial accounts as if representative of the whole of knowledge and to challenge the classificatory system which positions others as fixed' (Skeggs, 1997: 37).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed a range of issues and debates that formed an integral part of the research, in particular the underlying theoretical debate, the practicalities of method, and the ways that these two mutually informed each other. In outlining the complexities, contradictions and potential pitfalls of the research process, rather than present a 'tidied up' straightforward account, my intention was to highlight just how exciting and yet challenging qualitative research can be. The path of the researcher in the field is rarely smooth but a qualitative approach allows for reflexivity, reappraisal and readjustment at every stage of the research process.

From a discussion of how the research was carried out we move, in the following chapter, to the accounts of respondents as they embark upon online dating. Chapter Four considers women's experiences and understandings of identity in middle age. To conclude however, I wish to highlight the privilege of being able to carry out my research. As a female academic researcher, I have had the time and resources to explore the experiences of middle-aged women using online dating sites which will hopefully challenge the reader to question their own preconceptions of dating and indeed middle age in the same way that it has challenged my own. As Ramazanoglu and Holland point out however,

> For many women around the world, caught up in struggles to survive, cope with poverty, natural disasters, corrupt regimes or varieties of social exclusion, resources for thinking about thinking are irrelevant luxuries (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 169).

Chapter Four

Change and the Other: Identity Construction in Middle Age

> Shirley: Well, after two husbands, originally I think I was hoping to find a
> long-term relationship and a third sort of stage to my life.

This chapter explores the complex relationship between respondents' subjective understandings of the passing of time and the ageing self. It focuses upon on the ways in which women in mid life renegotiated their self-identity from a temporal perspective within the context of the life course as a whole. Cultural understandings of ageing in Western society often place the middle years as a symbolic watershed, beyond which the relationship between the self and the passing of time is brought into focus. Ageing begins to form a fundamental part of self-construction whilst simultaneously being placed as a destructive, albeit inevitable process, to be resisted denied or distanced from the self. Although the inevitable forward march of chronological time is implicit within the process of ageing, this chapter highlights women's subjective understandings of growing older and explores the creative ways in which time was appropriated in order to construct a meaningful story of the ageing self *over time*. This is not simply a story of selves remembered in the past however, the self in the present was understood via complex appropriations of past life events and relations with others. Drawing upon Ricoeur's emphasis upon subjective understandings of time for the construction of selves (Ricoeur, 1990), this chapter focuses upon respondents' temporal perspectives of the past, the present, the future and the integral relationship between all three for the construction of the self.

Whilst the middle years appear to be a point that heralds a concern with the passing of time, there are no clear cut boundaries surrounding what constitutes 'mid life'. Respondents all defined themselves as 'middle-aged' and yet, their ages spanned fourteen years, ranging from forty-eight to sixty-two. Despite belonging to a similar age cohort, women did not share one unified experience of middle age; they gave meaning to the middle years through the lens of their own particular life experiences and social contexts. They were, however, some commonalities between them: firstly they all suggested that they had reached a mid point in their lives, a time for

reflection, transition and change; secondly they had come out of a long-term relationship and found themselves unexpectedly having to negotiate an identity as a single woman. Associated with this was a shared experience of acknowledging the ageing process, which was brought into sharp focus as they entered the dating scene as single women alongside their younger counterparts. The often unexpected and turbulent events that preceded their online dating experiences exacerbated their sense of transition and self-evaluation in the middle years.

Recent dramatic changes in women's lives had caused a hiatus in what had previously been understood as a relatively stable and predictable life trajectory. The future was suddenly brought into question, leaving the women to reassess their pasts and contemplate future paths. Their accounts shed light on how unforeseen and sudden events could be given meaning in terms of the life course as a whole and how a sense of linear identity over time was restored. This chapter explores how women made their life story meaningful by using a particular narrative genre to structure the passing of time. Women's widespread use of a 'story book' approach (Cohen at. http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/cohen.doc) enabled the life course to be understood as divided into a number of self-defined, discrete and yet interlinked stages or chapters which enabled change to be incorporated into a linear life story in a way that papered over the cracks of discontinuity and restored the metanarrative of the life course as meaningful and progressional.

Finally this chapter explores how relationships with significant others were influenced by and simultaneously impacted upon a temporal segmentation of the life course into a number of discrete stages. The dialectical interplay of time and significant relationships with others both structured and gave meaning to the life course as a life story. Ricoeur's (1992) conceptualisation of narrative identity suggests a self that cannot be constructed outside of relations with others. Narratives of self do not stand in isolation but are intertwined with the lives of other selves and indeed, respondents revealed how their lives and identities were not only bound with the lives of significant others from the past and present, but those relationships also fundamentally structured their very understandings of the self over time. Women understood and articulated their pasts in terms of a series of significant relationships, the duration of each forming a discrete stage or chapter. At the same time however,

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women talked of the expectation of having a relationship to suit each life stage rather than one significant relationship over a lifetime. This segmented understanding of time across the life course led women to search for partners who they considered to be positioned in a similar life stage to themselves, a judgment that was not purely based upon chronological age, but instead informed by a number of complex and often gendered understandings of ageing beyond the middle years. Firstly, however, this chapter begins with an exploration of the impact of living in the middle years upon the lives and identities of respondents.

Identity in the middle years

Hepworth and Featherstone (1982) argue that it is in the middle years that the first signs of ageing are acknowledged, and this triggers a desire to evaluate the self in the light of years gone by. We are indeed ageing from the day we are born and yet, 'ageing' is a term applied in a negative sense to the middle years and beyond, when we are deemed to be 'getting old'. The middle years can be seen as heralding a change in the relationship between the self and the passing of time. The ageing self becomes problematic and yet simultaneously ageing becomes a significant aspect of self-identity by the mere fact of it being a problem. From childhood through to adulthood, the march of time is generally seen as progressional and positive. Once middle age has been reached however, cultural understandings of ageing are often framed in terms of decline; narratives of a progressional march through time are thrown into reverse. Being middle-aged means a renegotiation of the future, which can be framed in terms of loss; loss of youthfulness, loss of power and even, argues Gullette, loss of identity

> Identity stripping via ageing…requires the self to reject or consider inconsequential all the counter narratives that emphasises ageing into wisdom or maturity or any valued progress…. in the early crucial decades we learn without benefit of purchase, one way to see the life course as progress. Suddenly, not much further along through a kind of enforced progress march symbolized by relinquishing objects, we have to begin to unlearn that, and learn that it's a decline (Gullette, 1999: 50).

Gullette suggests that 'identity stripping' is a process involving the sudden realisation of ageing in terms of loss but contrary to this view, my research reveals that respondents' identities at mid life were not completely stripped or indeed severed from the 'younger' self. Continuity was not lost; identities were re-evaluated but were still understood in terms of past selves (see discussion below). Added to this, women's accounts of middle age, whilst often appealing to 'common sense' understandings of ageing in the middle years, simultaneously resisted negative discourses. This resistance was not necessarily driven by a political motivation to overcome ageism but simply an articulation of their daily lived experience of *being* middle-aged. Women's subjective experiences did not sit inevitably or comfortably within wider cultural understandings of middle age.

Sandra appealed to the Western ideal of youthfulness whilst simultaneously showing resistance to negative assumptions of loss of self-worth in middle age,

> Sandra: I don't feel my age but then I do work hard on it trying to keep fit and looking nice. I like me! And I reckon I am a brilliant catch for that lucky man out there. He just needs to get his act together and come looking for me!

Sandra suggests that she doesn't 'feel her age' which points less to a denial of chronological age than to her lack of identification with cultural stereotypes of the middle-aged woman. She demonstrates a feeling of optimism for the future and describes herself as a 'catch' in the dating market. Despite this positive approach however, Sandra's optimism is partly rooted in her 'hard work' at keeping herself looking youthful. Her self-esteem is validated and confirmed as much by her success at retaining a youthful body image as by her lived experience of being middle-aged. Isobel also has an optimistic outlook in the middle years but this involves distancing herself completely, not only from negative images of the middle-aged woman but also friends of a similar age,

> Isobel: I think unfortunately women in their fifties have a bad press (laughs) and most of the women I know of my age, you've got a picture in your mind's eye haven't you, of what they are like, and I ain't like that.

Isobel places women from the same age cohort as 'other' in order to maintain a positive self-image and, like Sandra suggests that she feels and acts 'younger' than her years. She goes on to suggest that it is down to individual responsibility to remain youthful in outlook and appearance, distancing herself from those that fail or refuse to work towards the maintenance of a youthful appearance,

> Isobel: People always think I look longer than I am, I'm not frumpy and middle-aged, and women who have sunk into that trap I just can't be bothered with. It's up to you really whether you let yourself go.

Isobel's harsh judgment of the those who fail to or choose not to put in the necessary effort in order to perform youthful femininity could be seen as a way of judging her own performance of femininity in comparison to others. Her words resonate with the accounts of respondents within Skeggs' (1997) research, which explores the relationship between class, femininity and respectability within a group of women in their late twenties. Some of her respondents also criticised those women deemed to have 'let themselves go' but Skeggs offers a further possible explanation for such criticism,

> To not invest at all in femininity is seen to jeopardise others' investments. It is also seen as a lack of collusion with the feminine. Those who do not bother make the others self-conscious of their investments. They are resented but also represent a state of being that some of the women desire (Skeggs, 1997: 109).

As middle-aged women, my respondents felt that ageing gave them an even greater imperative than Skeggs' younger respondents to carry out practices of femininity in order to claim proximity to the ideal of youthful beauty. Chapter Seven looks in more detail at how women negotiated discourses of femininity for the ageing woman, a process that, alongside a degree of pleasure, caused much anxiety and confusion. The anxieties associated with practices of femininity could be at the root of Isobel's harsh evaluation of those who resist aspiring to cultural ideals of femininity. There could be feelings of envy for those who spare themselves the anxiety and constant self-surveillance attached to achieving and maintaining displays of (youthful) femininity? Isobel sees those who fail to conform as 'falling into a trap', whilst paradoxically

feminists such as Bartky (2002) suggest that it is those who aspire to the goal of ideal femininity who are trapped within a system of power that encourages disciplinary practices upon the body. Disciplines of the body, argues Barky, 'drill the recruit to the disciplinary regimes of femininity in the proper techniques necessary to maintain the current norms of feminine embodiment' (Bartky, 2002: 17).

Vivien suggests that contrary to discourses of loss, the accumulation of life experience gives the older woman more confidence. Importantly she also sees the middle years as a time of personal freedom as her children have fled the nest,

> Vivien: Oh yes, I think I'm more confident now than when I was twenty, you know, a hell of a lot better looking. I've more money and more time, this is 'me-time' now, I'm done looking after others. I'm having a ball!

Shirley on the other hand, suggests that time and experience gradually form a set of relatively stable perspectives on life in the middle years. Instead of seeing this as positive aspect of ageing however, she draws upon stereotypes of the older woman and laughs at herself,

> Shirley: I think that you are...when you are young you are sort of quite easy, ready to bend and listen and do things different ways and this that and the other whereas if you've been doing them for forty years, like I have, it's a bit difficult (laughs) to suddenly about face and change the way that you feel about things and also um, and also I think as you get older, I don't know if you've seen that programme called 'Grumpy Old Women'? You do decidedly get that way. I sit there listening to it thinking, ' oh my goodness, am I really that bad?' They can say things exactly the way I say things and do things!

Both Vivien and Shirley draw upon discourses of progress, rather than loss to describe their positioning in the middle years, whilst Sandra exhibits enthusiasm for the future, rather than the dread of passing time. We can see here the friction between individual experiences of ageing and wider cultural norms and expectations. In this space between the individual and the general lies the key to how wider cultural narratives are subverted and reinterpreted. These spaces became a central theme to my

research as women both drew upon and challenged cultural norms of ageing within narratives of self,

> Subversive stories … do not oppose the general and collective as much as they seek to appropriate them…. subversive stories that employ the connection between the particular and the general by locating the individual within social organisation (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 220).

What Ewick and Silbey refer to as the, 'general and collective' however suggests a kind of wider consensus around the construction of cultural expectations of ageing beyond the middle years. Ussher points to the fact that not all cultural representations of ageing from the middle years are negative,

> Representations of older women in popular culture in the west, particularly in women's magazines, now emphasize that 'Life begins at 40' (or even 50) and present images of attractive, ordinary women at midlife …These representations both reflect and create the context for, women's experiences of transition and development at midlife (Ussher, 2006: 152).

Despite more positive images of ageing, midlife was however conceptualised by some respondents as heralding the onset of a gradual loss of power. Gullette says of the changes that occur,

> At first these may be read as piecemeal moments of random failure – the soliloquy of age anxiety works to hold on to this idea of randomness. But eventually the incidents are fit into a master narrative of ageing…one's worth has suddenly become shaky. We are aged by culture through a process of accepting "Time" as insuring losses to prior achieved identities (Gullette, 1995: 51).

A loss of 'worth' due to ageing was described by Ellie as a process of becoming invisible and she points out that it is other women, who place their older sisters as powerless,

Ellie: One of me mates was saying, she's over fifty, that she feels suddenly invisible, its like a loss of power, if you say something in a group, of women you know, no one will listen to what you say. They would rather listen to younger women. Devastating really, it's like you suddenly don't exist.

Here Ellie points to the older women's positioning as less powerful, in fact almost invisible in the eyes of younger women. There were others losses associated with the middle years; many women flagged up the menopause as a marker of middle age. Again, the menopause was commonly understood in terms of loss, the loss of a woman's reproductive functioning. Ussher (2006) discusses the association of the menopause with mid life pointing to the negative stereotypes associated with the older woman,

In Western society, the ageing reproductive body is the epitome of the abject…older women are all but invisible in both high and popular culture - with the post menopausal woman represented primarily as the crone, the hag or the dried up grandmother figure, her body covered and her sexuality long left behind. (Ussher, J, 2006: 126).

Ellie drew upon these negative stereotypes to inform her sense of being a woman in her fifties,

Ellie: When you get into your fifties and past the menopause, a woman's sparkliness kind of dribbles away doesn't it…sad really…(laughs) I've a lot to look forward to!

Ellie unproblematically links the menopause to the perceived decline in women's sexual attractiveness or 'sparkliness'. Ellie's remark suggests a gradual draining away, wrinkling, or drying up not only of the surface of the body, but of a woman's femininity and sexual identity. Medical models often present the menopause in terms of a disease or deficiency in a woman (see Ussher 2006), and yet women's experiences of living through the menopause can be at odds with this negative view. Some women did not frame the menopause in terms of loss and decay, seeing it instead as a positive experience. Indeed they saw the menopause as freeing, especially

in terms of the end of fertility, which allowed for an active sex life without the fear of pregnancy,

> Dot: I feel more in control of my life now, I can go out and date who I want. Now that I can't get pregnant, I don't need to worry...you know, it's very empowering!

Shirley also sees moving beyond the menopause as part of the freedom of the middle years,

> Shirley: I was a prude, a real prude! If anybody had ever told me I would have slept with so many men I would have laughed them out of court.
> Judy: So what do you think changed?
> Shirley: Probably the fact that I knew I couldn't get pregnant. Um, I think that is a very important part; secondly my children had grown up, so I had no more responsibility on a day-to-day basis. Um...thirdly I was on my own and surely it was up to me what I did with my body, I could choose what I did, I wasn't hurting anybody. The only person who was liable to be hurt was myself but it was entirely up to me what I did.

Whilst Shirley and Dot both drew upon the theme of empowerment to contradict the notion of powerlessness and decline, this is not say that women ignored wider understandings of expected roles and behaviour in the middle years which policed their activities. Being middle-aged can also be understood from a generational perspective as women found themselves sandwiched between younger and older generations. April felt guilt and anxiety about the perceived disapproval of her mum,

> April: I remember me mum at my age now; her life was so different to mine. If she was alive today, she would say, 'act your age girl'!

Conversely, the children of middle-aged women were moving into adulthood and women revealed anxiety surrounding the opinions of their children,

> June: And me daughter says, mum you can't go out in that! I hope you aren't going to make a show of yourself.

As single women in middle age, they had the opportunity to enter the dating scene as they had many years before. In view of this they felt they were to some extent living their teenage years again, at the same time as some of their children. Time had indeed gone full circle, allowing the middle-aged woman to revisit aspects of her teens. Women talked of time 'going full circle' in terms of being single again and having the freedom to socialise and date men. In the words of Isobel, 'I've got me twenties in me fifties'. Children often struggled with their mother dating and socialising and attempted to re-impose stereotypes of middle age upon their mums, concerned that she shouldn't display, what they consider as, 'inappropriate' behaviour or dress. So, sandwiched between generations, respondents revealed anxiety about the perceived attitudes of other family members. The policing of the middle-aged woman, it seems, comes from every generational direction.

Time and the middle years

Women were refusing narratives of decline in terms of ageing from the middle years, instead seeing the future as one of challenges and new beginnings. However, the feeling that life should be lived to the full wasn't entirely as a result of optimism for the future, it was also felt out of anxiety that time was 'slipping away'. Time, once taken for granted, had become a precious commodity that gave a sense of urgency to the lives of respondents. The desire to evade the stereotype of 'winding down' in middle age did not mean that the fear of ageing had diminished. On the contrary, it was a fear of gradual physical deterioration that drove respondents to live an active life whilst they were physically able to. Thus years ahead were judged by women in terms of expectations of physical decline that gave a sense of urgency to the 'able bodied' years. Those that wanted to live life to the full could not deny that whilst the mind might be willing, the body may eventually fail them. This is reflected in the words of Sarah,

> Sarah: I've just nursed my mother though a long illness and after she died I realised I wouldn't stay fit and healthy forever. This is why I travel such a lot. I intend to wear out my passport while I still can! Anyone who wants me will have to keep up with me pretty quick. I think, if I don't do it now, when I get into my sixties I wont want to do it so its important to find somebody who is compatible who can enjoy it with me, a man who can enjoy a bottle of

champagne on the beach or something, I need to find someone who can be just as impetuous.

Sarah's words express a feeling of urgency, that time is slipping away and must be made the most of whilst she is still able to. What is interesting here is that Sarah should be worrying about physical decline associated with deep old age, which could be as far as thirty years away. Sarah's desire to travel is fuelled by understandings of time in two respects: firstly, an awareness of her own mortality and the potential frailty of old age brought into focus as she cared for her mother. This brings to light the fact that the life course isn't infinite and deep old age can no longer be seen as something that can be bracketed off and ignored. Older parents can act as a buffer in this respect; ageing and death are phenomena to be faced by their generation, before our own. Once they are gone, however, old age becomes a reality too close to ignore; secondly, Sarah now has a lot of free time and wants to make the most of the perceived time she has left. She illustrates how she differs in her evaluation of time ahead and time gone by in her discussion of the relationship between her ex-husband and his new partner,

> Sarah: I was married for…twenty years, we had twenty good years and she's got all the rubbish now, she's going to have the downhill stretch she's got all the crap and so from that side again, a partner you meet in his fifties and sixties, we are both going to be heading downhill (laughs). I know this sounds awful but it's true.

Women's fear of frailty and illness associated with ageing was one motivation to find a partner. Helen was in her forties but her narrative does suggest an urgency in respect of the passing of time,

> Helen: Well I'm not getting any younger and I don't fancy being old and on me own like, so I'd like to find someone to settle down with in the long term. I'm alright at the minute, I've got all me faculties but it must be nice to have someone there when you are old and can't get out.

Change and the linear life story

A sense of time slipping away and reflection upon years already passed by, led women to conceptualising the self from the wider perspective of the life course. The middle years were a period in which to take stock of time and understand the self as fluid and yet linear across time. The loss of a marriage or long-term relationship further exacerbated a sense of change and transition in the middle years. The sudden breakdown of a relationship that was expected to last into old age made respondents think twice, not only about the nature of love and relationships but also about expectations of the life course as mapped out and predictable. The breakdown of a relationship was unexpected and thus difficult to incorporate into the theme of inevitability that had informed past narratives of the life span. Ricoeur (1986) argues that at a time of sudden crisis it is impossible to tell a story that incorporates the hiatus into the linear life story, thus identity comes into question. Ricoeur refers to this as a 'dark night of the soul ' moment, suggesting that our sense of identity breaks down at this point and it is only when we ask the question 'who am I?' and begin to tell stories to make sense of the hiatus that the process of reconstruction of self begins again. Alice recalls her, 'dark night of the soul' moment, which was filled with fear and confusion and revealed that her narrative of self had temporarily broken down,

> Alice: So I was sort of cast into the world at age forty-eight um, really not knowing, what I was going to, how to, how to handle life, how to be an adult on my own. It's a scary place to be, I was used to being part of a couple, I didn't know who I was anymore or what I was capable of.

Alice refers to the fact that once her relationship was over, she had to be 'an adult on her own', suggesting that her position within a heterosexual relationship acted as a kind of buffer between herself and the outside world. Her words are reminiscent of a child away from the protection of her parents for the first time, suggesting a certain vulnerability and helplessness. Langford (1999) points to the pervasiveness of the ideal of the heterosexual relationship, which could contribute to Alice, a successful professional woman, feeling vulnerable and afraid when a relationship ends,

> The concept of 'intimate' coupled has become the repository for an ever-increasing range of wishes. Existential security, personal identity, emotional

satisfaction, sexual fulfilment, companionship…In contrast life on the 'outside' is associated with insecurity, emptiness, frustration and loneliness' (Langford, 1999: 28).

Added to this however, Langford suggests that being on the 'outside 'can be experienced as a loss of self-worth, which can add to women's feelings of helplessness and a fear of not being able to cope in the world alone (ibid.). Alice's profound sense of loss, however, also led to a feeling of lost identity. Ricoeur (1992) stresses the intrinsically social nature of identity. Stories of the self are inevitably bound with the stories of others, both past and present. Alice's narrative of self over time broke down as familiar points of reference disappeared. Her sense of self was bound with that of being within a heterosexual relationship and the loss of her marriage meant she had to negotiate a new identity as a single woman. At the point of the hiatus in her life, however, she was unable to tell a story of the self. It is only over time, that, by telling stories of the self in terms of the hiatus, that she will restore a sense of self, a process that is triggered with the question, 'who am I?'.

Coupled with a fear of coping alone, many faced the disappointment of dashed expectations. Many talked of women of 'our generation' being brought up in an environment where expectations of the life course go hand in hand with getting married and 'living happily ever after'. Respondents drew upon taken for granted patterns of relationships from their parent's generation. June had taken on board the expectations of her parents that she too would be married for life and that this life stage would inevitably last into old age. June talks of being 'fed propaganda 'by her parents that has left her with a 'gaping hole',

> June: There's a gaping hole in your life…I think part of this gaping great void, you are conditioned, I was conditioned I think from childhood, that you grew up and you got married, you had children and you lived happily ever after. I think that is the biggest load of twaddle I've ever come across…and I think ladies of our age feel it because of the conditioning we got when we were young and because of the propaganda when we were young, it makes you feel inadequate if you haven't got somebody there.

Steedman (1986) raises the important point that the narratives we configure that make sense of our lives are not purely as a result of contemporary cultural and public narratives; there is also a historical and unconscious dimension. Indeed we can be held hostage by the past hopes, dreams and values of our parents, which can be internalised at an unconscious level. Our narratives of self and expectations of relationships with others can be partially informed by generations before our own. June had carried the perceived expectations of a previous generation into her own life story and felt angry and confused at her loss of identity as a married woman. Thus in this instance time is not understood as it is in the present or the past but in terms of expectations for the future, time not yet lived which can be informed by the perceived norms and expectations of generations before our own.

Coping with change: a life story in chapters

The breakdown of a long-term relationship in middle age was seen as a hiatus, a sudden shock and yet a turning point in the lives of respondents. After the initial trauma, women tended to make sense of the events surrounding the marriage break-up in terms of the closing of one stage or chapter of their life, followed by a period of transition and the eventual hope of an emerging new stage in the future. Instead of understanding their life course as a seamless predictable progression, women bracketed off their lives into a series of stages, based not upon entry into significant and generally recognised age cohorts but rather upon the duration of significant relationships. Each stage clearly demarcates the beginning and end of a relationship; a new relationship signalling the beginning of a new life stage and the symbolic bracketing away of the old one. Chapters or life stages did not necessarily run chronologically and could at times overlap. Many were facing the closure of two chapters of their life simultaneously: for example, the end of a marriage or significant relationship and the end of a period of caring for dependent children. Jen feels she is moving towards the closure of another chapter as her second child leaves home. Interestingly she suggests that the end of this particular life chapter is made more acute and painful as it can be linked to the closure of another chapter; her divorce,

> Jen: Because my second child is nearly ready to flee the nest, I feel as if I'm
> in a kind of transitional period. I feel very…its hard, when my eldest left, I had

terrible empty nest syndrome as out of the two of them she was the one who helped me through the divorce.

A life divided into stages or chapters, provides a flexible framework within which to incorporate change into a linear life story. One chapter can be linked to the one before and yet simultaneously herald change, a new beginning. Chapters can follow on from each other in a meaningful progression and yet provide flexibility for narratives of 'starting over', 'turning the page' etc. 'Life as a storybook periodised into chapters. The image at least points to the possibility of change; you can turn over a new leaf...' (Cohen at http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/cohen.doc). Ricoeur (1992) indeed argues that narrative identity appeals to both sameness and change over time. Narrative identity protects itself from a fear of discontinuity across the years by telling a progressional linear story of self which incorporates change.

The segmenting of the life course into stages is a process that entails an understanding of time that is read backwards. The retrospective nature of structuring life stages means that stages don't remain static in nature; a once significant relationship can appear a lot less so in the light of later ones. So whilst chapters or stages are used to structure the life course and give it meaning, these structures are fluid and open to constant renegotiation. Millie illustrates a negotiation of life stages in terms of relationships,

> Millie: I've forgotten about some of my old relationships with men, I thought I was in love with them all until I met me husband, and then they all just faded away! Funny isn't it and now he's gone too.

The significance of life stages in relation to each other will be continually reconstructed in accordance with the point of the narrative of self that is being told at a particular time. There is no fixed vantage point from where to understand past experiences however, the life course will be in a continual state of reappraisal; there is no ultimate, fixed story to be told. Cohen draws on the work of Kierkegaard who states that despite the desire to read time backwards to understand the present, time continues to move forward,

It is perfectly true that life must be understood backwards. But philosophers tend to forget that it must be lived forward and if one thinks over that proposition it becomes clear that at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it backwards (in Cohen at http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/cohen.doc).

Life stages characterised by relationships with others were more clearly demarcated than broader cultural stages of ageing such as middle age with a beginning and end linked specifically to a particular relationship span. Thus respondents were unclear as to precisely when they became middle-aged but were much more precise about the beginning and end of the last relationship. And yet, life stages were not presented simply as a series of discrete unconnected chapters. On the one hand, respondents talked of beginning a new life with new challenges whilst at the same time, reflecting upon their past experiences in order to understand the present. Attitudes to relationships and aspirations for the future were very much couched in terms of lessons learnt and fingers burnt in the past. These lessons inform future behaviour and told a progressional story of self. Life stage boundaries represented a new beginning whilst simultaneously being informed by the past. Jen illustrates this point by articulating what she wants from a new relationship in the light of what she saw as wrong with the last one,

> Jen: I'm a very strong person, I'm very independent but there are certain things in my life that I just don't want to do anymore, I mean I don't particularly enjoy cooking but I do it because I have to. If there's somebody here then I'm happy to cook for them that's fine but I won't lift and lay behind people, I've done that once before and I won't go back there, so it would need to be a very different relationship. I want it to be different next time...better!

Perhaps there is certain inevitability to respondents characterizing life stages in terms of relationships. The end of a long-term relationship often carried with it a number of other significant changes as a result of the break-up. Respondents experienced huge upheaval in their lives; losing their homes, loss of income, change of job and living as a single person, sometimes with dependent children. Social networks also changed as Internet dating widened horizons and respondents made new friends. Thus the

relationship break-up triggered a series of interconnected changes, which compounded feelings of the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. Jeanette tells how profound this feeling of change was for her,

> Jeanette: When me marriage ended, me life changed from that moment, I remember it like it was yesterday.

But could there be another reason for the bracketing off the life course into a series of life stages? The desire to make sense of their current situation was perhaps even more acute due to the suddenness and pain of their transition from married to being single. Most respondents acknowledged this struggle and produced accounts that interpreted current changes in a way that incorporated them meaningfully into their life course, but also interpreted these experiences in a positive light. The turmoil of recent events had triggered change, new challenges and hope for a new and exciting future. Thus narrative produced within the interview were performative in that they provided a form of comfort and hope for respondents, who in telling me their stories, were recreating the meaning of the event for themselves once again. They were taking the painful and often unexpected experiences of the past and in making sense of them, they were coming to terms with them emotionally. One way of doing this was to bracket off painful events, which were attached to specific relationships in their lives. Cohen argues,

> In these oral traditions we can thus find narrative models which provide a set of highly normative or stereotypical images of the life course...whilst this may be useful as structuring devices, they are essentially secondary elaborations.... these devices may often be mobilized as part of a strategy of censorship or disavowal, suppressing or denying painful, confused or rejected parts of ones life. They keep a good deal of the life hidden. They encourage 'philosophical attitudes' which are part resignation and part self-defence (Cohen at: http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/cohen.doc).

Cohen is suggesting that the life chapter genre allows for painful experiences to be metaphorically 'sealed away' in a previous life chapter, whilst a new chapter characterised by future hopes and survival is focused upon. This process can serve as

a form of defence mechanism in that the sealing off a particularly painful life event can be a way of distancing oneself or denying the pain of the past. The accounts of respondents often revealed their attempts to 'draw a line' under an event and simultaneously make sense of the event in the context of the life course as a whole from a positive perspective.

Sarah sums up a painful relationship break-up as a closed chapter and looks forward to a new phase of her life. She illustrates Cohen's 'philosophical attitude' in that she focuses on the good aspects of her last marriage rather than the pain of the break up and then looks to the future for a 'second chance',

> Sarah: Well I think independence em… freedom of choice em…really after twenty years of marriage I've got a second chance, you know I've had one life which I've enjoyed and right, I've now got a chance to have another life at my own agenda, my own pace. I can decide the rules and so if I get it wrong then it's my fault.

On the other hand, her later account drew upon the break up of her marriage and is far from a disavowal of the pain,

> Sarah: When my marriage ended I thought I will just stay in, draw the curtains, don't go out, don't leave yourself vulnerable, don't leave yourself open to be abused…and that's it the shutters come down, the barriers go up and you don't need anybody.

It seems that women did indeed tell stories of hope and survival but their accounts simultaneously acknowledged the pain of the past. Women did bracket off the past as a way of articulating a new beginning but also talked in detail about the painful experiences as a way of coming to terms with, and learning from what happened. Telling the story was part of the process of narrative closure. Kerby (1991) talks of how emotions are productive of, and produced as a result of narratives. Kerby argues that the telling of a story can produce a range of emotions depending upon the point to the story. The story must therefore be told many times and adjusted until we are satisfied that, 'this is how it was' (Kerby 1991: 50). Dot talked through how

reconciled herself to the end of her marriage. In doing so however, she acknowledged the pain that is still with her,

> Dot: I was a mess when it ended, you know…such a mess, but now I think it was for the best, Couldn't have put up with all that much longer something would have had to give…probably would have been me! Still hurts though, late at night and stuff, when you are on your own…terrible times really (sighs).

Cohen goes on to argue that,

> Life crisis stories may themselves be constructed in such a way as to disavow the pain involved in that struggle, by creating a split representation of the life itself. There is one life identity before and quite another after the crisis, and little apparent relation between the two…this punctuation, which amputates the past from the present, seals the trauma inside the subject but sadly it doesn't heal the wounds (Cohen at: http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/cohen.doc).

The bracketing off of a life trauma was apparent within the narratives of respondents and indeed, there was often a sense of a new beginnings as a result of changes brought about by the hiatus. Whilst the splitting off of a life stage enabled stories of change, however, respondents didn't articulate their *identities* in terms of two distinct selves separated by the hiatus that had occurred. The self after the hiatus still held traces of the self they were before, the continuity of self over time was still held. The self had 'grown' or learnt from past experiences, but was 'enriched' (or sometimes 'damaged') by these events rather than changed. Lives had changed in many ways as a result of trauma, but there were lessons to be learnt from the past. Respondents talked typically of their futures being better informed as a result of a 'rude awakening' but the present had grown out of the past rather than being divorced from it,

> Isobel: I've always been a strong woman, I was strong through my marriages and I'm even stronger now… bad times change you I suppose but I'm still me inside, if you know what I mean.

Isobel is talking of how experience has allowed her to learn from the past without losing a sense of 'who she is'. What is interesting about Isobel's account is that although she conceptualises growth as a change to the self, she goes on to suggest that she has grown *more like herself*. She has always been strong and now she's stronger, she has become the Isobel she always was, only more so. Kate also sees continuity in the self in the sense of returning to the self *she always was*.

> Kate: One of the things that I feel very strongly, I'm talking about a strong emotional feeling is that I am turning back into the person I used to be...I think before I met my husband I was incredibly independent and I did a lot of things...I didn't do a lot of things on my own because I always had lots of friends and I think that maybe the thing that changed was another person in my life ...so now I have more of a choice of what I do and I suppose life is busier because of that. I have not felt lonely at all.

Within Ricoeur's (1980) theory of narrative identity, time plays an integral part in the construction of the self. Within narratives, the beginning of the story is read into the end and likewise the end into the beginning, the self in the present is understood in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present, thus the self becomes, as was the case for Isobel and Kate, the self it always was,

> The end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential. The hero is *who he [sic] was* (Ricoeur, 1980: 186, original emphasis).

Some women did suggest that the pain of past experience had left the self damaged, which was conceptualised often as a permanent phenomenon. Nora suggests we can never return to the selves we were before, the self is permanently scarred and will subsequently understand and interpret the world in a different way,

> Nora: We are all damaged by our bad experiences and we never recover. This damages how we see the future...always scared shit will happen again.

The transitional stage

Most respondents saw themselves as in a transitional stage at the time of interview. The end of one life stage had not, it seems, automatically heralded the beginning of the next one. Respondents talked about the period immediately after a marriage/relationship break-up, not in terms of a new stage, but as a period of transition. A new life stage has connotations of a new beginning, a change of direction, a new significant relationship, and new aspirations for the future. The period after an unexpected hiatus however was characterised as one of confusion, pain, a lack of direction for the future, followed by growth, change and finally, another life stage begins. It seems this was a period where respondents struggled to understand and construct a narrative self, and make sense of sudden changes in their lives. This transitional period was also one where women embarked upon intensive dating site use, forming many casual relationships rather than look for a more long-term partner. Sarah reveals how she embraces a more fluid and unpredictable lifestyle,

> Sarah: I don't know, I would like a series of little flings or…just a series of relationships that might develop or one or two flings, well I have been on my own for a while, its great because I work part time, I have control over the remote control …the alarm clock hasn't got to be turned on, you know? So let's just be single for a while and do my own thing.

Ellie also felt a desire to 'play the field' after the end of her marriage and embraced the single life,

> Ellie: I divorced my husband because I'd been unhappy for years, um… then I found out he'd been seeing loads of other women and taking them out on my money type of thing, I been sitting here on a Saturday night by meself sort of thing, so I kind of ran wild for about three or four years. I think most women do…at our age.

The transitional period was a time when women reflected upon their sense of self in the light of change. This stage was characterised by fluidly rather than security or predictability. It was often conceptualised as a progressional journey through grief,

pain and confusion to renewed confidence and sense of self. Isobel highlights the fluidity of this period,

> Isobel: I feel as if I'm on a journey really and who I am and who I think I want keeps changing. I don't feel settled or sure about anything right now...I never really questioned it before the split.

After a period of confusion, respondents gradually made sense of this period as a time of change, which although enforced upon them could be interpreted as a positive experience. At the time of interview women were at varying points on their journey through the transitional stage. Some were piecing their lives back together, looking to the future, whilst others were still in the entanglements of a past relationship. What was central however was the emphasis upon reflection and reassessment of past life goals and assumptions which were until this point largely unproblematic. Sarah sums this up,

> Sarah: Well I think when you are younger you look into the future and everything is going to be forever and you think, 'right, that's going to be it for the next twenty, thirty or forty years' and you move towards that and then suddenly you come to the cliff and its, 'oh!' and it's a drop and so you alter your perspective and think, 'this is it for the next ten, fifteen years, what do I want out of the next ten, fifteen years?'

Thus the transitional stage was not defined in relation to a significant relationship, but a time for reflection, experimentation and change. In this respect it was not seen as a life stage in its own right, but the period of adjustment *between* life stages. Jen describes her own journey though transition,

> Jen: That was three and a half years and I can be that precise because it was at least two years before I got my head round things and it then took me another year and a half to build up me confidence again and really come to terms, get angry really. It's only now that I feel ready to enter a proper relationship again.

Importantly, it is significant that the 'transitional stage' was labelled so by women living through it at the time of interview. As previously stated, life stages are segmented and ordered with the benefit of hindsight, time is always read backwards and life stages are subject to constant renegotiation. In later years this turbulent but exciting time may well be reconfigured as a significant life stage in its own right.

Synchronizing life stages

The transitional life stage was also characterized by a re-evaluation of friends and social networks. Being alone meant that respondents were keen to socialize in order to meet men but also make female friendships. Long standing married friends tended to disappear as they were found to lack the understanding of the stage respondents found themselves in. Finding female friends was not about finding those of a similar chronological age; it was about synchronising life stages. Dot shared a desire for single female friends with whom to socialise,

> Dot: I find it difficult because I haven't got many friends em...all the friends I have got are all married and obviously em...most of them live down south and when we first split up, that was really difficult because nobody knew what to do with me.

Respondents understood their search for single women to socialise with in terms of them being at the same life stage as themselves; women who were single. Dot's experience was typical of other respondents who found themselves shunned by married friends. Being single placed them outside of couple culture and made them either a threat or a 'spare part'. Women were also looking for male companionship however and drew upon understandings of ageing as a series of life stages in order to choose a suitable partner. The ultimate aim being to synchronise life stages with a partner, stages which were characterised in a variety of ways. Kate links chronological age loosely to life stages, seeing a set of expectations associated with each stage. If a man is at a different stage, his expectations for the future may differ from her own,

> Kate: Well I think you go through stages in your life and I think em...age has a lot to do with that em...and I think that...options are different in these

different stages. Children for example, wanting children might be something someone in their early thirties might want...and I think as well if you are thinking about some kind of person that you are wanting to go out with on a regular basis, you have to have the same sort of time at your disposal.

Kate again draws upon the theme of time, suggesting that in her middle years she has time at her disposal, which a younger person may not have. Ellie also suggests that finding people at your own stage is linked to chronological age. She thinks that it is not just about being at the same stage but being able to share experiences from the past. Ricoeur argues that the self cannot be isolated in the present but is constructed by the appropriation of stories from the past. Thus for Ellie, the mutual recognition and understanding of past stories of selves between partners is beneficial to a successful relationship,

> Ellie: I think it's easier to be with people of your own age as you share the same experiences. You can go back and say, 'do you remember stuff like...Tom Baker' for example; you've got like mutual memories and such.

With the loss of belief in the 'propaganda' of love as everlasting, a new understanding of romantic relationships emerged from many of my respondents; the belief in a man for each life stage. Having abandoned the expectation of one 'true love' which would span the life course, respondents felt that relationships in the future could not be relied on to last forever. Isobel and June reflect this view,

> Isobel: Oh yeah, I think you em...I think in this day and age it [a long standing relationship] may be a little bit much to ask, I think you need a partner for different stages of your life.

> June: I think you can have lots of relationships in your lifetime but em...I think your soul mate is your partner who you are with at the time, I don't think marriage is forever any more, there are very few people that I know who are still married. It's the person you are close at a certain point in your life.

Whilst Isobel remarks that a relationship for life may be 'a little much to ask for', she tempers what could be seen as a tinge of regret by suggesting that it is fine to have a different relationship for each stage of your life. June's words resonate with Isobel's in providing a temporal dimension to the quality of relationships, which they evaluated in the present rather than by longevity over the years.

The desire for a man to suit each life stage sat alongside the belief that conversely, a new romantic partner triggered the new stage itself. It seems that whilst relationships were not seen as lasting forever, they were still placed as a significant part of women's lives. Thus the life stage is both a cause and effect of a significant relationship. Annette and Shirley both looked ahead to anticipate the arrival of a new partner and thus life stage,

> Annette: Well I think I will eventually find a new relationship and begin again, in a new stage of my life; you know, settle down a bit and start over with someone new.

> Shirley: After two husbands, originally I think I was hoping to find a long-term relationship and a third sort of stage to my life.

The accounts of respondents often suggested that they had abandoned the idea of a 'soul mate' for life The transitional stage of their lives after the relationship break up was characterised by a number of casual dates, which women enjoyed immensely. On the other hand, in describing life stages in terms of significant relationships with men, they were simultaneously highlighting the desire for and significance of a more permanent long-term relationship. Shirley and Annette were typical of other respondents who, alongside accounts of change, independence and self-growth, looked to the future beyond casual dating to the beginning of a new life stage in a more permanent relationship. The nature of a 'long-term' relationship, however, was no longer couched in terms of 'happy ever after' as women reframed their understandings of the future in terms of contingency rather than predictability. Thus, in line with Giddens' (1992) notion of the Pure Relationship, future relationships were more likely to be understood in terms of their satisfaction in the present, rather than future commitment.

Langford (1999) argues that our positioning within a marriage or long term relationship is seen as fundamental to our identity, happiness and sense of place in the world, thus the end of a relationship can be felt as catastrophic, 'If the relationship should end so, it seems does everything else, leaving us to pick up the pieces of our lives and start all over again' (Langford, 1999: 2). The model of the heterosexual ideal of being in a couple is so pervasive that often, the end of one relationship can herald an almost immediate search to replace it. The words of respondents revealed confusion in their accounts of independence and fulfilment at living the single life, which were told alongside the ultimate desire to find a new relationship and 'start afresh'. This transitional period of their lives was characterised as such because of the changes that had occurred in their lives, but also because women weren't in a significant relationship.

Whilst Annette and Shirley point to the promise of a new life stage triggered by the beginning of a new relationship, women simultaneously consider other more common cultural understandings of life stages in order to find a compatible partner. Sarah argues that although you may find a man at a similar stage to yourself, they might well have 'baggage' from previous stages that cannot be folded neatly away as a new stage begins. Thus as we progress through the life course, previous life stages may well spill over into the new one. Life stages are not discrete entities and will impact upon each other in complex ways. Women often described this as 'baggage', an unwanted but inevitable burden that encroaches upon future relationships,

> Mary: I'm not going out with any preconceived ideas now about how to carry on like I would in my twenties, I think when you get in your fifties, you've had a family and you don't want to start again, they want some freedom as well. But if you want to share your life with somebody you have to take on the baggage, you know? I mean Christmas and New Year you might be on your own because they have to do the family thing.

Alongside Mary's more practical considerations, Ellie suggests that there is often an emotional residue that lives on after a life stage has closed,

Ellie: But middle-aged men are …they are like boring and childish, especially if they have come out of a relationship all bitter and twisted.

Whilst women were looking for a man who roughly approximated their chronological age, women often categorized men by how old they *appeared* to be in terms of attitude and appearance. Some men looked young for their years and were much in demand,

Alice: I was with this guy fifty-seven, but I mean he didn't look fifty-seven at all, he was really dishy, I mean really dishy.

Alice reveals in her choice of partner, a fear of her own ageing,

Alice: I think forty-two is a bit young coz I'm not particularly young looking and er, sixty just freaks me out… I always prefer someone the same age as me, yeah, that's my choice really um I just think that when I think about a fifty seven year old, I mean the guy I was with last year was fifty-five I think, 'god he's ancient' and the idea of someone being sixty, oh dear I couldn't conceive of the idea of being sixty!

Interestingly, Alice compares her own 'appearance of age' with that of a man, pointing perhaps to a desire not to meet someone who looks and acts younger than her in case she is rejected. Many respondents, on the other hand, revealed in their accounts, that their rejection of the older man (often this was synonymous with men the same age as themselves) was more to do with coming to terms with their own ageing. Sadie reveals her own fear of ageing by comparing herself to men of a similar age,

Sadie: This chap, I got talking to… On his profile [on the dating site] he was quite a presentable kind of chap, you know? And then when he went on messenger and I clicked and he's got his little picture, you know, and I went, 'oh my God, you are so old! D'ya know!' and then I think, 'he's the same age' … you know, you know I mean, this bloke was the same age as me and I thought, 'oh my god! Do I look like that? No wonder I can't get a man!'

Featherstone and Hepworth (1996) in their discussion of 'the mask of ageing' stress the discrepancy in self-perception in terms of the inner self and the ageing physical body with all the negative cultural meanings that are attached to it. Sadie could see a potential date of similar age mirroring back an image of her own ageing body and reacted with shock and disbelief.

Diane also shows a sense of denial at her own ageing by ruling out a man on the dating sites who was of similar age but talking of retirement. Women talked of their fear of the man, who was 'winding down' suggesting a slow withdrawal from the activities of middle age towards gradual decline and old age,

> Diane: A lot of the people who have contacted me are actually winding down in terms of their businesses and things like that, they're winding down to early retirement and I don't see myself as retiring early in fact I get spooked out by the thought of retiring, my work structures my life for me.

There were other perceived problems with the older man. Some women felt that he may have some more traditional and old-fashioned views about the role of women in relationships,

> Nancy: I must admit… what I'm very wary of is meeting an older man who em…well this seems a bit extreme to say wants a captive partner, you know what I mean? A woman they can control and regards roles as very sharply defined.

One of the ways of denying the ageing process is to have a partner who is either chronologically younger or youthful in looks and outlook. Indeed Freud (1961) argues that both sexes may desire a younger partner due to a narcissistic urge to recapture lost youth, the person they once were. Freud suggests that we are driven by the unconscious drive of our ego ideal to achieve a level of perfection, the person we wish we were. We will never achieve perfection, however, leaving us with feelings of inadequacy and regret. This may influence our choice of love object in that we may be attracted to a person who has attributes we don't possess in ourselves which may be

seen to compensate for our own perceived inadequacies. A younger partner reflects a desire to recapture our youth,

> The sexual ideal may enter into an interesting relation to the ego ideal. It may be used for substitute satisfaction where narcissistic satisfaction encounters real hindrances. In that case a person will love what he once was and no longer is, or else what possesses the excellence which he never had at all (Freud, 1961: 101).

Gender and ageing: the younger man:

Whilst respondents showed that a man of a similar age did not necessarily make the most compatible partners and most preferred a younger man or one who was 'young at heart', respondents pointed to a clear double standard in society which made the coupling of older men with younger women acceptable,

> Hannah: Err... there is an age thing for a man but I think it's an older age, I think probably, oooh...over fifty-five-ish for a man. If a man is approaching sixty, a woman would think, 'ah, he's getting on, he's gettin' old' (laughs), but for a woman it's, the forties, a man thinks a woman is older in her forties.

Itzin (1990) describes the double standard of ageing as based in the differing set of assumptions of behaviour and social roles of men and women in society, which she calls male and female chronology, which is sanctioned, penalized and regulated by wider societal values and beliefs. Whilst male chronology is based upon economic productivity and wealth, a woman's chronology is based upon her reproductive cycle and therefore her sexual attractiveness to men. Thus men are able to age gracefully and can be viewed positively by appearance in later years. A woman, on the other hand has to maintain a youthful attractiveness in order to maintain this positive regard. Itzin draws upon the words of a member of the Older Women's Group in Britain, 'A man in his fifties is in his prime, but a woman of forty five upwards, well, she's had it. I meet it every day, not only in marriage and love and sex but work as well' (Itzin, 1990: 107 cited in Ginn and Arber 1993: 42). April is fully aware of the double standard, acknowledging that women are indeed 'aged by culture' more harshly than men,

April: Its amazing how many times I see 'younger women wanted' and then if the man is say a fifty year old, twenty-seven to forty, who are you kidding pal? I think its still probably looked as, well you see stories in the tabloids about toy boys but there is no sort of horror when Peter Stringfellow knocks off a twenty-four year old whereas if the reverse was true it just isn't okay. We still have double standards in that sense.

April raises a view held by many respondents, that many men have a more accepting attitude towards their own ageing and ease into old age much more comfortably than women. This seems linked to the view that men 'age' more quickly than women in terms of attitude and way of life. Thus men who are at the same life stage as women in terms of chronological age and relationships did not match women's expectations in terms of 'attitude' to ageing,

Ellie: They are grumpy old men, they are absolutely grumpy old men, they are, you see them on TV, they are cardy and socks and pipe and slippers

Vivien supports this view,

Vivien: They talk about their blood pressure tablets and you know their aches and pains. And you know it's a man thing, its not women, you've not once complained about any aches and pains, they are just old.

Respondents did not offer any explanation for the apparent ease with which they perceive men to 'age', but this could be linked to the double standard of ageing which arguably places less pressure upon men to remain youthful. As a man may be judged more by status and wealth than looks, then he may feel more at ease with his ageing self than a woman of similar age, feeling less of a discrepancy between the inner self and the ageing body. As Ellie revealed above, many men were seen to be searching for younger women online thus perhaps some men weren't quite so at ease with the ageing of their female partners.

Having said that, Ellie enjoyed the company of younger men,

Ellie: I've been out with younger men before... great! I don't know, because they are more interesting, they have a bit of life about them and they are sparky, um and they are more up for doing things, for getting out and about and that than older guys are.

One way to attract the younger man was to lie about age on a dating site personal profile. Vivien used this strategy alongside many others who sought younger company,

Vivien: I'm sixty I am, yeah. But you never put that because you get all the old, really old ones (laughs)... oh, online, I'm fifty-five I think.

Interestingly, narratives of a sexual liaison with a younger man intertwined two opposite themes: pride at managing to attract a young man, but also guilt. Dot felt that a younger man gave validation to her identity as a sexually attractive woman after the break up of her marriage,

Dot: When I say, 'rejected because of my age', obviously the girl he's gone out with and had the affair with is eleven years younger than me and so you think it has to be your age, do you know what I mean? I don't know if it's because of me age or not but... but the point is that's how I felt about it... I wanted to prove that I could still be attractive. I met a bloke for one night... he was twenty-nine... and he was absolutely gorgeous. I think people would think it's appalling (laughs). He was the same age as my son for one thing!

Contradictions, guilt and confusion surrounding the younger man were often dealt with using humour. Rosie, for example, felt flattered by the attention of a younger man and yet fears ridicule from others. So she turns humour towards herself to laugh at her situation,

Rosie: I was chatted up by this young bloke, he was so cute but I said to him, 'I've got diaries older than you son!' I mean, honestly, why was he bothering with me?

Whilst Freud suggests that choosing a younger partner helps both sexes to boost our narcissistic desire to recapture our youthful selves (and avoid dealing with our ageing selves) he does counter his arguments by recognizing the role of social forces, '...determinants of women's choice of object are often made unrecognisable by social conditions.' (Freud, 1961: 134). Thus love object choices can be moulded by many social factors from current cultural images of beauty and sexual attractiveness to a desire for a partner with wealth or power. Freud argues that both sexes may desire a younger partner due to a narcissistic urge to recapture lost youth in themselves, and yet in contemporary society, it could be argued that it is still more socially accepted for an older male to attract a young female partner. Whilst, not unknown, it is less common for an older women to have a much younger male partner. Underpinning this phenomenon are cultural attitudes which still judge ageing in women more harshly than men, thus women lose their physical capital more quickly than men when they age and are deemed less able to attract a younger mate.

Conclusion

This exploration of respondents' understandings of the ageing self in the middle years, gives context and background to the following chapters. Being middle-aged was a significant issue for women, which couldn't be divorced from their experiences of interacting on the dating sites and subsequent choice of partners. Broader understandings of the ageing self across the life course led women to draw upon a narrative genre of time divided into stages, allowing for new beginnings whilst simultaneously retaining linearity across time. It was the beginning of a new romantic relationship that heralded the beginning of a new life stage and vice versa and yet women's choice of partner was informed by a more complex understanding of life stages and ageing in general. Many described themselves as in a transitional stage at the time of interview which was characterised by a period of intensive dating, enabled by online dating site use. Importantly however, a new life stage was seen in terms of a more permanent relationship, thus it seems, despite the disappointments of the past, the pervasiveness of the heterosexual ideal drove women to find another relationship in order to move forward in their lives.

Thus understandings of the life course and the ageing process for respondents was about making order out of chaos, linearity out of discontinuity, a path for the future out of a sudden life hiatus. The creative appropriation of disparate events and time within narratives restored a sense of progression into the lives of respondents. It was the *narrative process*, however, that restored equilibrium. The process of telling and retelling stories of the past also served to provide some emotional resolution for past pain. The next chapter explores how women took positive steps to regain control of their lives and how they used IT as a tool to enable change. The final word for this chapter goes to Alice who reflects the words of many respondents as she assesses her self-identity in middle age,

> Alice: I see myself as sort of middle-aged, middle-aged, ready to um start a new phase of my life, with my children grown up, my marriage over, long marriage, really, with another fifty, probably not fifty years (laughs), another thirty years still to go and that seems like a long time to me. I suppose I don't want to be single for the next thirty years and um that's not to say that I um would settle for the first guy who was interested in me, I definitely wouldn't and that obviously is based upon my past experience…but I want to have a happy life.

Chapter Five

Women Online and Taking Control

> Isobel: I'm a great believer in being pro-active. If you want something in life you gotta go out there and look for it. I thought, 'right, you have to change what you've always done'. The Internet was my way of changing what I've always done.

This chapter considers the ways in which respondents acquired and appropriated IT skills in order to make positive changes and take control of their lives. In the aftermath of a relationship break-up, many respondents found that old friendship networks had waned and were eager to make new (single) friends and begin dating again. In order to forge new social networks and take those first tentative steps back into the dating scene, women turned to technology to enable change; they bought a computer into the home and began using online dating sites. Feminist literature has not always painted a positive picture of women's relationship with technology (Cockburn, 1983), suggesting that women are disadvantaged in a male-dominated environment. The words and experiences of respondents however, echo the work of 'cyberfeminists' such as Wajcman (2004) who espouses the more recent feminist message that the relationship between women and technology is becoming more positive and liberatory. She links this movement, however, to younger women,

> Cyberfeminism is particularly appealing to a new young generation who have grown up with computer and pop culture, with their themes of, 'grrrl power' and 'wired worlds' (Wajcman, 2004: 63).

Although relatively inexperienced in computer use and largely unfamiliar with the 'grrrl power' rhetoric, women brought a computer into the home and mastered basic IT skills with comparative ease as the first step towards making changes in their lives. Having familiarised themselves with the technology, women surfed boldly into cyberspace and relished their newfound sense of empowerment and adventure in the virtual horizons beyond the screen. The overarching theme of the chapter arises from

the accounts of respondents who saw the Internet as a new and exciting way of making changes and taking control; in the words of Isobel (above), '*The Internet was my way of changing what I'd always done*'. Women's accounts of 'taking control' also revealed initial anxiety and lack of confidence in entering the singles scene after many years in a long-term relationship. Exploration of online dating sites was seen as a 'stepping stone', a way of dipping a toe back into the dating arena from the safety of their own home. Interacting with men in cyberspace acted as a kind of buffer that shielded respondents from their insecurities around meeting men in the flesh and the consequent possibilities for awkwardness and embarrassment within face-to-face interactions.

It is perhaps important to note that the use of the phrase; 'women's relationship with technology' should not imply a single field of a study. The intersection of gender and technology can be approached from a variety of interlinked perspectives including: women's involvement in technological innovation; the impact of technology upon gendered social relations; women and the use of technology; or gendered relations in cyberspace. Similarly, technology takes many different forms; women's relationship to domestic technology, for example, may differ from other forms of technological innovation used in the public sphere. The accounts of respondents in this chapter highlight women's relationship with technology from two perspectives: firstly it explores women's relationship with the computer as a technological tool, in terms of learning IT skills and appropriating those skills to the their own needs; secondly, it highlights women's experiences on the other side of the screen. Most respondents were entering cyberspace for the first time, which proved a useful vantage point from which to explore their understandings of cyberspace as a medium of communication.

Using Internet dating sites empowered respondents in a number of ways. Not only were they acquiring a new set of skills, their confidence and self-esteem were perceived to be significantly increased with repeated Internet use. Women felt much more confident and in control of their interactions with men due to the relative anonymity and perceived safety of interaction in cyberspace. Women also gained in confidence online due to the nature of textual communication in itself. Asynchronous communication such as email gave women time and space to reflect upon and carefully construct replies to other users, which effectively removed the awkward

pauses, blushes, stammers or social blunders associated with offline dates. Self-esteem was also boosted as women received admiring emails from men on the sites. Interaction with men in cyberspace eventually gave women the confidence to venture out of the home to meet potential dates offline. Finally, using the dating sites and interaction in cyberspace more generally led to many new adventures for women; from befriending people on the other side of the world to experiencing cybersex. All respondents stressed the enormity of the impact of Internet dating site use upon their daily lives and all were eager to talk about their experiences.

Taking control of technology: learning the skills
Firstly, this chapter explores the feelings of respondents towards their computer and how they mastered IT skills. Nearly all women were new to computer use and yet they taught themselves the necessary skills over time to allow them to negotiate the dating sites effectively. Their accounts suggested that they conceptualised their relationships with their computer as a companion or friend rather than an inanimate object. The computer was afforded agency and was perceived to have human qualities which led women to feel that they were *interacting* with their computer rather than merely using it as a technological tool. Their relationship with the computer fluctuated in both intensity and nature over time. On the one hand it became a comforting friend who helped them to pass their lonely hours, whilst on the other hand, it was often conceptualised as a force in its own right which worked against them, ate up their time and impacted dramatically upon their offline behaviour (see Chapter Seven for a full discussion). Thus women developed an ambivalent relationship with their computer; whilst it had enabled them to take control of their lives, it was also perceived at times, to have the capacity to take control of theirs.

All respondents owned a computer, having overcome financial restraints by acquiring one second hand, or by buying themselves a new but cheap and basic model. They reasoned that if the computer was going to provide them with an online /offline social life, it would be an investment in the long run as it was cheaper than having to go out of the home to meet men,

Maeve: The young ones at work are out all the time, but I simply can't afford it what with meals out, drink and taxis. It all adds up in the end so I stay home with my computer!

The acquisition of a computer often followed shortly after the break up of a relationship and subsequent adjustment to living alone. It was often children who encouraged their mums to bring a computer into the home,

Shirley: My daughter said, 'there's the computer, get on with it'...she said, 'you can't ruin it, click on it and close it, you can always just shut it down if you don't like what you're getting into'.

Sandra: It was a big push on my daughter's behalf. She doesn't like the idea of me being on my own.

The majority of respondents had no experience of computer use, but managed to gradually teach themselves the basic skills needed to use chat facilities, email and the dating sites. This was very much a process of trial and error and many felt quite intimidated at the start. Angie's experience was typical of most respondents,

Angie: Couldn't even turn the damn thing on...I thought, 'this is a good start'.

Women were not afraid to explore computer functionality themselves and gradually picked up what they needed to know. They gave upbeat and humorous accounts of learning, happy to tell of their mistakes along the way. Angie's account of how she learnt IT skills and negotiated the dating sites, focuses more on her mistakes than her successes,

Angie: I just sit there and fiddle around with it. I make loads of mistakes but the thing has never blown up or anything. Gradually I found email and worked out how to use the dating site. I can't attach a photo to my profile as I don't know how to. I made a massive mistake when filling in my profile online [on the dating site], ended up putting myself down as two foot eleven inches tall!

No wonder I didn't get any replies! You get better with practice, I get by you know.

Most respondents agreed with Angie that they had reached a level whereby they felt they could 'get by'. They had all mastered technology to the degree of making it useful and relevant to their lives. Women were delighted with the new horizons they had discovered online and began talking to people in chat rooms and dating sites immediately,

> Sadie: I was just sittin' thinking, 'oh God, there's got to be more to this than just email' and I just started to mess about with it until chat...people in chat and I just clicked on it and I was away, wow!

As in the case of Angie (above), when asked to evaluate their skills, women generally underplayed their achievements. They felt they had only harnessed a small amount of the computer's capability but were satisfied just to limit themselves to the functions they required. Many admitted that they were mystified as to how the computer actually *'worked,'* but didn't see this as particularly relevant to acquiring the skills to use the computer effectively. Women did not, however, see themselves as computer-proficient and spoke as if they had just 'dipped a toe' into the complex world of IT. Their attitude to mastering technology resonates with research by Kantrowitz (1994) who suggests that whilst men will be seduced by the technology behind the computer, women recognise the computer as a useful tool and will simply learn the necessary skills in order to utilize the computer for their own needs. Nevertheless, instead of boasting that they had mastered technology sufficiently for their own needs, respondent's general tone was apologetic. Rosie was quick to emphasize her perceived lack of proficiency,

> Rosie: Have had Computer 4 years and am still an airhead on it
> Judy: Likewise
> Rosie: Last week was mucking around and killed the whole thing had to get my Daughter's friend to fix it
> Judy: Oh god, how awful

Rosie: Felt a complete idiot![2]

Alice retains the apologetic tone even though she has an IT qualification,

Alice: Well, I had me a qualification, I have got a qualification in IT at a very, very low level.

June tells how she has taught herself to negotiate the dating sites and then immediately plays this down,

Judy: How would you describe your IT skills?

June: (Laughs)...well, I can get on, I can send emails and I can go on chat lines, chat rooms. I'm not really very good.

Judy: But you can negotiate all of that?

June: Yeah.

Judy: And are you self-taught?

June: Oh yeah, self-taught, yeah, I just picked it up as I went along, I do a bit of IT at work with the children, I mean I'm quite confident to go on, I wouldn't say I was terribly competent.

June suggests that whilst she is confident in what she has learnt, she is far from *competent* in computer skills. It seems that despite the fact that women were negotiating the computer effectively, there was a general perception that compared to others, they were mere novices. There was a sense of some perceived general standard of computer use in women's accounts which was always much higher than their own,

Kim: Honestly you would laugh if you saw me using the computer, I keep having to ask the kids for help!

Judy: But you can send emails and use the sites?

Kim: Oh yeah.

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[2] Rosie's interview was carried out on MSN and sections quoted are presented as they were originally written.

Interestingly, nobody suggested that their gender hindered them in any way in learning IT skills or, just as importantly, interacting in cyberspace. Whilst women did not see gender as a barrier to technology, it is also significant that they didn't feel that being a woman enhanced in any way their experiences of learning IT skills or interacting in cyberspace either. Their accounts sit in contrast to literature suggesting that computers are commonly seen as a predominantly male domain on both sides of the screen (Spender, 1995). The world of Information Technology is often described as a 'boys club' that closes ranks to keep women out. The use of technology has its roots in the military and is therefore traditionally seen as a male territory (Wakeford, 1999: 53). Plant (1998) argues however, that feminists who have espoused this somewhat pessimistic view are indeed only encouraging technophobic attitudes to women's computer use. Plant endeavours to challenge the widely held view that technology was created by men for men, pointing out that women have historically been involved with the development of technology in a fundamental way,

> Women have not merely had a minor part to play in the emergence of the
> digital machines…They have not made some trifling contribution to an
> otherwise man-made tale…women have been the simulators, assemblers and
> programmers of the digital machine (Plant, 1998: 37).

Further than this, Plant argues that technology has become an emergent process in itself rather than simply a tool for human use. It has the power to move in unexpected ways, take unforeseen paths and is subsequently outside of human control. This dispels the myth that technology is controlled exclusively by men and suggests that it has the potential to be appropriated by women too. Plant sees women as having an affinity to technology, in the light of a number of traditionally feminine attributes such as networking skills, dexterity, and the ability to multitask and flourish in a fluid and changing environment. She distances herself from any claim to essentialism, however,

> I think it's [technology] more attuned to how women have always operated
> historically; though for a lot of, for example, French feminist theorists, there
> has been a tendency to be too quick, and probably too essentialist about saying
> that there is something *fundamentally* fragmented about the female condition.

It just so happens that, for the worst of reasons, women have had very different experiences of identity and subjectivity and the whole notion of the self. This applies even in the most ordinary everyday circumstances; women have always had to do several different things at once, to be far more malleable.

(Plant at: http://www.penelopes.org/archives/pages/ntic/newmed/sadie.htm).

Respondents did not illustrate in their accounts any feelings of 'affinity' with their keyboard as a result of being a woman; neither did they explicitly state any essentialist argument regarding womanhood and cyberspace. Implicitly, however, their accounts of modes of computer use drew upon women's supposed propensity to network and indeed communicate more effectively than men. This is highlighted by Spender who suggests this perceived gender division as a reason for drawing women to the computer,

Women will be drawn in through an emphasis on the communication potential of the computer. Once women can see that it is dead easy to natter on the net - to reach people all around the world, to consult bulletin boards, to 'meet' in cafes and houses and art galleries without leaving home- there will be no stopping them...Computers are for nattering on the net (Spender, 1995: 193).

Vivien and Sandi's words resonate with Spender's view,

Vivien: Women love to talk don't they! Men never talk to each other like women do!

Sandi: Men's emails make me laugh, they just give information, not much chat, you know? Short, abrupt and to the point and they can seem a bit rude, I think. Women's are much more...you know, chatty and friendly.

Women's perceived 'natural' skills at networking certainly underpinned respondents' narratives in terms of their use of computer as a tool for relating to others. Their celebration of cyberspace was not framed in terms of booking holidays or theatre tickets, organising daily affairs, or even shopping online, it was the computer's

capability to put them in touch with others that caused their celebration. How can we understand women's use of the computer as a networking resource without slipping into essentialist arguments around women's natural networking skills? Livingstone (1994) highlights the traditional view of the telephone as a 'feminine technology', which facilitates social networking. Her research explores the gendered nature of relations to the telephone, finding that men show 'hostility' and 'irritation' towards (long) telephone conversations (Livingstone, 1994: 122). Moyal (1990) suggests that women's networking skills and indeed, their desire to network can be linked to their traditional social role within the family as 'kin-keeper'. Women's role of keeping in sustained contact with family members and close friends perpetuates the common sense assumption that women are naturally more communicative (Moyal, in Livingstone 1994: 122).

Studies of computer use within the home often suggest that the male in the household dominates computer use whilst women tend to remain willingly alienated from their machine, seeing it as of no relevance to their daily lives (Wheelock, 1992: 109). In contrast to this view, those respondents who had children at home, however, said that whilst they had to share computer use, they were keen to acquire skills and often asked sons and daughters for help,

> Vivien: My son helps me if I'm stuck but I like to know what he's done so as I can do it next time, if you know what I mean. Don't want him to do it for me; I want to learn it for myself.

Importantly, women had found the computer useful and relevant to their daily lives, which provided an impetus to use the computer to broaden their horizons. In a sense the computer was replacing other household members in relieving feelings of loneliness and boredom. In most cases, women felt lonely not just because of the loss of a partner but they were simultaneously at a stage when children were growing up and leaving home. June, on the other hand has two teenage children at home but still feels lonely,

> June: No, I'm not on my own, but I'm just a body that floats around the house and has got nobody to talk to. My daughter has just got engaged and is doing

her A levels, she's constantly in the face of her boyfriend in one room. My son is on the phone talking to his girlfriend and I'm like cabbage between the two of them.... that's one of the reasons I go online.

Respondents' comparative ease at acquiring IT skills is at odds with studies that suggest that learning for the 'older' computer user is fraught with barriers. Geddes (2006) gives a review of issues involved in teaching 'older adults' (although he fails to define age boundaries for this category) and it makes for depressing reading for those of us in middle age and above. Geddes is quick to suggest that older learners *can* pick up the necessary skills but simultaneously suggests that ageing provides barriers to the learning process. He draws upon Meyer and Talbot (1998) who suggest that there is, 'a mountain of evidence that the ageing process leaves us with declining abilities and as the complexity of tasks increases the decline with ageing increases' (In Geddes, 2005: 48). Various maladies are listed in illustration of the 'condition' of getting older including: declining eyesight; inability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information; and a decline in the ability to think and reason. Thus the older learner is placed as having inevitable physical and mental deficiencies that will hinder the acquisition of computer skills. This approach to the older learner is unhelpful and inaccurate in a number of ways: firstly, it homogenises all 'older users' within a group whose members could, in reality, stretch in age from forty to ninety and older; secondly it universalises the process of 'ageing', implying that everyone ages in a uniform manner and faces a collective experience of physical decline; thirdly, there is an emphasis upon physical decline as a process that is inevitable and which cannot be overcome or alleviated.

Geddes does however seek to dispel the common myth that older adult learners are more resistance to acquiring new skills but adds, '...there is increasing evidence that the spirit is willing but of course the flesh may be weak' (Geddes, 1995: 53). It is perhaps fortuitous that nearly all respondents taught themselves IT and therefore missed the opportunity of being made aware of their physiological shortcomings! Shearing (1992)however, argues against age as a model of decline, calling it the 'maleficient myth' (ibid.) whilst Russell (2004) argues we should regard ageing as 'a process and not a condition' (cited in Geddes, 2005: 52). None of my respondents

drew upon discourses of age or gender as a barrier to learning IT skills. The only mention of age came in the form of regret,

> Sadie: I should have done this years ago!

Women's relationship with the computer

The computer was quickly integrated into the home and respondents came to see it as a significant part of their daily lives. Respondents saw their relationship with the computer in a variety of ways but all shared an intense emotional response to it. The computer was not merely seen as an inanimate object; instead it took on an almost human quality. It was a source of comfort on a lonely evening,

> Sadie: When I'm lonely on a night I go and log on, the computer is me comfort blanket, me friend really.

> June: When I'm feeling down, it's nice to go and sit down in front of the computer. Unlike men, its always there and doesn't let you down!

But it was also perceived as a force that often resisted the actions of its user. The computer was perceived as having a mind of its own,

> Millie: It's a battle of wills sometimes between me and me computer. I want to do one thing but somehow something else happens. It's a stubborn bugger, but then again, so am I.

Lee's (1970) research into the attitudes of individuals to their computers highlighted the belief that the computer was an autonomous entity. He found, not unsurprisingly, that those who were cautious or inexperienced users were more likely to view the computer as autonomous. My own research suggests that women's understanding of the computer operating as an autonomous entity is partially linked to their feeling that they weren't in control of all the computer's capabilities. This added an element of the unexpected to the computer's response to certain commands and made respondents feel that it was being 'awkward' or deliberately obstructive. The sense that the computer was 'answering back' or obstructing their tasks added to the feeling that

they were *interacting with* and not simply *using* the computer, thus it became an autonomous entity.

Interestingly, respondents didn't see the perceived autonomy of the computer in a negative or threatening light. Indeed Millie's tale of her 'stubborn' computer was told with humour. This could be linked to women's apparent loneliness in the home, which led them to anthropomorphise the computer, allowing it to fulfil their need for companionship and comfort. The computer was seen as reliable friend (as June remarks above, 'unlike men, it is always there') and indeed women often talked about their computer in a sentimental, even affectionate way. Beyond this, it was through the computer that they made contact with others outside of the home and many women attributed this to the agency of the computer rather than their own use of the computer as a tool. It had been brought into the home and offered the gateway to a new world, which excited women and at times, consumed their lives. As a result, they also felt an overwhelming debt of gratitude and affection for their computer,

> Sadie: Eeh its just great, I love it to bits, me life is completely different thanks to me computer. I love it, love it, love it!

Women's relationship with the computer will be explored further below where it is described as a seducer, which lured them into an addictive relationship with their computer and ate up their time. It seems that love it or hate it, the computer was not to be ignored, and indeed it simply demanded attention that respondents became powerless to resist. I was able to empathise in that I had developed an intense relationship with my own computer, feeling that bringing a computer into the home was more like taking in a lodger than bringing home a piece of technology. I had indeed animated my computer. Margaret Morse (1998) takes up the theme of animation and technology,

> Machine-human relations are not restricted to the space of the monitor, for a material artefact can be 'cyberized' or granted agency by programming it to simulate some form of human interaction, in the process lending it uncanny qualities associated with human personality (Morse, 1998: 7).

Bolter points to the fact that the interaction between machine and human could relieve feelings of loneliness,

> Artificial intelligence leads almost inexorably to a kind of animism, in which every technological device writes and in which everything that reads and writes also has a mind. One futuristic vision of the personified or 'smart' home proclaims, "Once your house can talk to you, you need never feel alone again" (Bolter in Morse, 1998: 7).

Thus the computer was perceived as autonomous, partly because women lacked a complete understanding of the technology but also because they felt lonely and isolated and viewing the computer as a reliable friend gave them a sense of comfort.

Having learnt basic skills, women made use of their computer in order to enhance their lives in terms of forging social networks and meeting men online. Their motivation for computer use was to fulfil certain needs in their lives at that time and one of those needs was to overcome isolation and loneliness. Loneliness in the home was certainly one of the main reasons why respondents gravitated to their computers. This was not necessarily to contact and arrange dates with men but merely to chat to someone online, to relieve feelings of isolation. It was something to do in the evenings, when the working day was over. This was the time when respondents missed the company of having someone in the house and turned to their computers. Quite often it was just to feel as if there was someone 'out there' to talk to,

> Sue: Most of my Internet things I've done when I've had a bottle of wine, I'm feeling lonely and I decide, 'right, I'm going on the Internet!'

Maggie tells of how quickly she became reliant on her computer,

> Maggie: Initially I got the computer because of my medical problems and for something to do because I wasn't able to work, because I was home all day, my relationship had broken up with my partner, and he walked out on me through all this health thing as well and we've been through some terrible times em…it was my son, again, 'oh get a computer, get a computer' and so I

got this laptop, it's a laptop so its lovely its not a thing taking up half the room er...I used the computer to look up my medical condition initially and it went from there...couldn't be without it now, its amazing how its become such a big part of my life...at times it IS my life...I've made so many friends.

Maggie reveals how her computer helped her in the months after her relationship break-up, highlighting the full impact of the computer, *'at times, it IS my life'*. Shirley also reflects on those early days after the break up of her marriage and suggests that the computer helped her fill 'empty spaces' in her life,

> Shirley: Yes, it was a wonderful way to meet people, to get to know people in the first place, yes I did enjoy it, and it filled up a lot of empty spaces that I had in my life. I was so lonely and the evenings seemed so long.

Rosie also saw the computer as a way of filling in time, pointing to an important aspect of computer use: it is so easy to access and form social networks in cyberspace without leaving the home and the results are instantaneous,

> Rosie: Just seemed an easy option and was some thing to do at night. People to talk to at the click of a mouse. Fantastic!

Time and computer use

Rosie points to a central function of the computer for respondents; filling in time. The computer was celebrated as a way of passing 'spare' time, especially in the early stages of a relationship break-up when women were adapting to living alone. Chapter Four discussed the significance of the subjective and multiple understandings of time to respondents as they experienced the middle years of the life course. Within the context of the life course, women often drew upon narratives of time as a precious commodity, as they reflected upon time already passed and considered how to make effective use of time in the future. Respondents spoke of living for every moment, making the most of the time they 'had left'. Many respondents referred to the feeling that time passed by more quickly as they got older,

Nancy: Where does the time go? My god since I hit forty, the years have just whizzed by, its frightening isn't it? The years go by faster and em, faster, it feels as if I will be seventy before I have a chance to turn around... there's so much I want to do...depressing really, makes you feel panicky.

Paradoxically, at a micro, day-to-day level, loneliness associated with having to live alone often made women feel that they had *too much* time on their hands. Women's understandings of time became even more complex as living alone created unwanted 'spare' time, which seemed to move very slowly indeed. Time seemed to stretch out before them and the computer was a welcome activity to fill these unwanted hours. Time was also perceived in terms of *quality*; understandings of perceived productive time and unwanted 'spare time'. Shirley's *'empty spaces'* in her life (see above) in terms of living alone without a partner not only gave her more time to herself but also made that time seem 'spare' or problematic. Indeed many respondents highlighted the difference between having time to themselves and time spent living alone, which was unwelcome and forced upon them. Time spent this way was often dreaded as time stretched seemingly endlessly ahead and a day or night could last forever,

June: I dread weekends when I've nothing organised, Sundays in particular, it's like a dead day when all your friends are busy. I'm fine during the week when I'm at work but bloody Sundays. Sometimes I long for bedtime so I can just go to sleep and put it behind me. Christ those days can last a lifetime, do you know what I mean?

Computer use made time spent alone more meaningful and positive for women as they were able to use this time to relate to others in cyberspace. This can be seen in the context of traditional gendered expectation of time. Odih (1990) argues that 'female time' is traditionally orientated around relationships with others,

Shared rather than personal and thus sensitive to the contextuality and particularity of interpersonal relations... Bereft of boundaries or limits with no clear beginning or end point with no guaranteed space for leisure (Odih, 1990, in Hislop and Arber 2006: 228).

Space for leisure away from the demands of caring or paid work is not traditionally seen as 'women's time', especially if that time is spent alone. The computer reinstates the relational aspect of 'spare time' where women can be in contact with others and carry out 'emotional work' (Hochschild, 1983) online by supporting and encouraging others. Millie talks of a male friend she chats to online and suggests that she offers him emotional support,

> Millie: I chat to him and keep him ticking over. I think he drinks a lot you know, his moods are all over the place. I won't meet him but he seems to rely on my messages. There are some sad and lonely people in the world.

'Addicted' to the computer?

Vivien tells of how the computer fitted into her daily life. Spending time online was integrated into the daily routine and once again we see the computer perceived as a friend. But as she mentions here, computer use can move beyond passing spare time to eating up too much time,

> Vivien: Yes, it's a way of life, it's something you do, every day you go in and see if anyone's around and answer any emails, not that I get that many, but you know, its like a friend isn't it, the Internet? Yes oh yes... because some nights you know, you watch a bit of TV then you think, ' let's go online and see if there's anyone to chat to'. I've had a lot of fun on the Internet and I've done a lot of wicked things on the Internet...but you know, you have to be careful as it can eat up your time.

Respondents went online to chat to others, to check emails and to browse profiles[3]. In most cases this was a daily activity and respondents developed their own individual patterns of use around other commitments. Many respondents however, gradually found that the easily accessible seductions of the Internet were hard to resist. The computer began to eat away at their time each day, in fact they began to organise their lives around computer use rather than vice versa. Women wrestled with the question of *how much* time was appropriate to spend online as their activities online became, at

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[3] See Chapter Six for a full explanation of posting a profile on a dating site.

times, described as an addiction. What had been seen initially as the computer filling time became a fear of the computer stealing time, threatening to engulf their offline lives. Indeed Turkle (1984) highlights the 'holding power' of computers, which she describes as the degree to which computers have, 'the ability to fascinate-to hold or command users' attention for long periods-to involve him or her personally' (Turkle, 1984: 4). Anxiety over levels of dating site use were heightened as interaction in cyberspace is essentially an activity that is carried out alone. Women were therefore unaware of the amount of time others were spending online. They lacked knowledge of the experiences of other women on the sites that may have given a perspective upon their own patterns of use. There was often a desire from respondents to know if other interviewees had had the same experiences as them,

> Isobel: I think, it's really quite obsessive. I mean I'm quite pleased with myself this morning; I didn't go on before I came out to work. Last week I was off work, I was checking three or four times a day!
> Judy: This seems to be quite common!
> Isobel: Oh, I'm glad it's not just me! I thought I was the saddest person on the planet.

In fact many respondents talked of being 'addicted' to the sites, checking the computer for messages compulsively several times a day, but why did they describe Internet use in this way? Griffiths (1998) explores whether the notion of Internet addiction actually exists, and suggests that addiction to human- computer interaction can be likened to a behavioural addiction that includes common features of addictive behaviour such as: feeling unable to control the amount of computer use; experiencing a 'buzz' or high from using the computer which can be seen as an escape from reality; and withdrawal symptoms if the activity is stopped (Griffiths, 1998: 1). Women's use of the powerful word 'addiction' conveys their level of concern at their apparent weakness in controlling the amount of time spent on the dating sites.

The accounts of women below suggest a number of reasons which interlink to form an understanding of the Internet as an addictive force: firstly, one of the key factors for respondents was confusion around the point at which a pleasurable activity becomes an unhealthy addiction. This was a matter of concern for respondents who were using

the Internet often for the first time and were unsure as to how it should be integrated into their daily lives. Was it unhealthy to sit at the computer all night? Or was it just a convenient and enjoyable way of spending time talking to others? Secondly, the premise that computer-mediated communication is somehow impoverished in comparison to face-to-face communication led to concern that the amount of time they spent online meant they were subsequently 'withdrawing' from 'real life' and becoming more isolated. Linked to this was the fact that there is often seen to be a stigma associated with dating site use (see below). This negative perception of using computer dating sites added to respondents' uneasiness at the amount of time spent online. As this was an activity carried out in private, dating site use took on an almost furtive nature and indeed women often kept details of their dating activities to themselves; lastly, the ease of accessibility to the computer led women to feel 'out of control' in terms of computer use, they simply couldn't resist the instant fix of talking to someone online when feeling lonely. In other words, the computer gave women a quick and convenient avenue of escape as suggested by Griffiths above, when they felt alone. The Internet provided a 'fix' at great speed with little effort involved,

> Angie: It's like taking a painkiller for a headache really. As soon as I get low
> I head for the computer, I just can't resist it…and I can be talking to someone
> in minutes. You know what it's like when you're left alone with your own
> head and things start churning around and you get all sad…I just find someone
> to talk too and whoosh, the headache goes!

There appeared to be a relationship, however, between intensive Internet use and offline way of life. The computer was used more when respondents were at a loose end or feeling unhappy and therefore a period of intensive dating site use was generally a phase of Internet use rather than a long-term phenomenon (as Isobel mentions above, she used the sites more intensively when on holiday from work). Jen links intensive computer use to certain phases of her life.

> Jen: You know I have been through phases where I have sat and trawled
> through and seen who was online, 'oh they're on again' 'oh, I wonder who
> they are talking to?' and all of that but sometimes there're so many other
> things happening in my life. It tends to get like that when my life isn't that

busy. I mean I used to and I mean I would go on every night. I did go on every night.

The stigma attached to Internet dating often led to a defensive tone from respondents when asked about the length of time they spent online. Accounts of computer use often contained an under-estimation of time spent online, as in the case of Hannah,

> Hannah: Not as much as I used to. Probably a couple of hours a night and through the day if I'm at home, maybe one or two hours through the day. Err... through the day its em... if I'm on a day off from work it's usually...I'm getting this wrong, I always check my emails whilst I'm having a cup of coffee before I go to work, so perhaps I've said that wrong. On an evening, usually after about ten o'clock. When I've done things at home and usually if I'm at home through the day, which isn't very often, also at lunchtime.

Other respondents accepted that they had become very dependent upon the computer and this was a source of concern for them,

> Judy: So what would you say if I said I was going to take your computer away from you?

> Maeve: Oh god! I wouldn't know what to do with myself!

Maggie saw heavy Internet use as a bad thing and was quick to explain that she was no longer using the computer intensively,

> Maggie: I've stepped back from it a lot now. It was really from Christmas till I met Carl, it got me through but then I thought if I carry on I will get engrossed in this machine and I won't have anything else. I'm in the house full stop and I need to get out of these four walls.

Anxiety was further heightened by the stigma some women saw as attached to using Internet dating sites, which can be typecast as a last resort activity for those without

the social skills to go out and meet people. From this perspective, time spent online
was seen as even more unhealthy and antisocial. Maggie acknowledges the stigma
attached to online dating,

> Judy: Do you think there's a stigma?
>
> Maggie: Oh god, definitely, 'losers, saddos'. I'm not sure if that's what they
> think or that's what I think they think…it might have something to do with the
> attitude people have to computer people…but they aren't looking at it from a
> social point of view, they just see these people sitting in front of the computer,
> 'they cant socialise, they haven't got the social graces to get out and meet
> people'.

The computer 'took over' at all times of the day and night. Sadie tells of how
computer use disrupted her sleep,

> Sadie: I suppose at one time I was addicted to it [the computer]. I would get in
> from work, the first thing I did was turn it on… I've seen me through the night
> being online. Saturday night I was on half past seven till eleven coz I was
> pissed.

Computer use was impacting upon life outside of the home too. Sarah tells how it
affected her work,

> Sarah: I must admit in the early days, I took a sickie from work so I could
> check if I had a reply from this bloke I was really interested in.

Respondents struggled with the complex question of whether they were spending too
much of their time online. On the one hand their lives and routines had changed after
a marriage break up and they were adjusting to living alone. In this respect the
computer was to be celebrated as helping them overcome loneliness. On the other
hand, computer use had become compulsive and was replacing offline time. Anxiety
arose when computer use was becoming too intrusive in their daily lives and was
using up too much time (although respondents were unclear about just when the
balance between online and offline time became 'unhealthy'). This suggests that

despite the fact that the dating sites were celebrated as a quick, convenient and cheap way to make contact with potential dates and friendships, the fact that the interactions were carried out in the words of Maggie, 'in these four walls' made their interactions seem impoverished in favour of face-to face communication.

Research into levels of computer use gives conflicting results. Kraut, Patterson and Lundmark et al. (1998) found that Internet use did increase offline social isolation and depression, whilst Shaw and Grant (2002) found that to the contrary, Internet use decreased feelings of social isolation and could be seen as a healthy activity. Sleek (1998), however, warns that increased Internet use can become 'addictive' and can compound feelings of isolation rather than relieve them. Implicit in this article, is the view that interaction online should be viewed as a poor relation to face-to-face interaction rather than simply an alternative way of communicating (see Chapter Three for full discussion),

> The technology that has allowed people to keep closer touch with distant family members and friends and develop friends from around the world, is also replacing vital day-to-day human interactions. A computer monitor can't give you a hug or laugh at your jokes...some psychologists worry that the internet's widening popularity will lead to further isolation amongst a population that, although gravitating toward virtual communities in cyberspace, seem to have lost a genuine sense of belonging and connection (Sleek, at http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep98/isolat.html pg 1).

Sleek's article is based upon several assumptions: first, that people have others around to give them a hug or laugh at their jokes. Respondents went online simply for that reason, to fill a gap in their lives at that time. In the absence of offline social networks the computer is an extremely efficient way of finding new ones. Internet use allowed women to make local as well as global friends that they could socialise with online and outside of the home. Similarly for those who were hurt and upset after a relationship break up, the Internet gave them confidence to interact with people in cyberspace within the safety of their own home. It is also important to note that once offline relationships had been established, respondents abandoned computer use with comparative ease, only to return once again when feeling lonely at a later date.

The second assumption is that online communication does not bring about a 'genuine sense of belonging and connection'. Respondents told in great detail how close and intimate relationships grew online (see below). Geographical distance was not seen as a barrier to intimacy and self-disclosure online. Great friendships were forged online that lasted for many years and were experienced as very real indeed to those involved in them. It seems that for respondents, when they needed help and support, those online friendships and networks were worth their weight in gold. Sleek concludes by prescribing a 'healthy balance' between online and offline networks but fails to suggest what that balance might be. Thus the ambiguity remains around the point where 'healthy' computer use becomes an, 'unhealthy' addiction. Respondents' accounts often illustrated this ambiguity, highlighting feelings of both guilt and delight at their time spent online,

> Andrea: Well I think it's addictive, it really is. I'm going back constantly to see if there's a message there. I'm beginning to think that I am going to have to limit my time on here. I've got studies to finish you know…but it's just wonderful!

Andrea accepts that the computer has become a big part of her life and yet instead of celebrating the opportunities to meet others online, feels she must 'justify' going online in a way reminiscent of an alcoholic justifying having another drink,

> Andrea: I'm always reading the diaries pages, I never leave them alone. I never write into them, never take part but I read them all the time and so many people have come up with the same sort of thing that I actually worked out in my own head…because I don't go out at night, because I don't go to the night clubs, because I don't go to the pub, where do you go to meet people? You don't know somebody if you meet them if you are out and I've done all that before anyway… so in my own way I can justify being online.

Another seductive element to using the Internet is that it can be a space for fantasy and play, an escape from reality (Griffiths, 1998). What is important here is that using the dating sites often became a pleasurable activity *in its own right* rather than a

medium for arranging offline dates. Sherry Turkle (1995) suggests that online we can fall in love with ourselves as our online self can be more confident, successful, and younger,

> In a new variant of the story of narcissus, people are able to fall in love with the artificial worlds that they have created or that have been built for them by others. People are able to see themselves in the computer (Turkle, 1995: 30).

In the context of the dating site, the online, 'idealised self' (see Chapter One for full discussion) can be viewed in the form of flattering text and photograph. Added to this, respondents could bask in the compliments received from men who have been browsing and sent a message expressing interest. Having an inbox full of flattering emails boosted damaged egos and often it mattered little who the message was from. Thus respondents were in a sense, falling in love with themselves online, a process that was very seductive indeed,

> June: Basically my ego was so battered as my husband had spent the last two years telling me how ugly I was and how I didn't do anything right and everything else and I started with these chat things. I came across this chat line by accident I think it was, and began chatting. It's great when blokes are interested in you.

This ego boost gained from Internet use is discussed by Greenfield (2004) who suggests,

> Having hundreds of potential cyber-suitors can be quite seductive. It can begin to feel as if you are already dating, when in fact you may simply be engaging in an almost narcissistic process of reflected adoration (Greenfield at: http://www.virtual-addiction.com/a_digitaldating.htm.).

This is echoed in the words of women who argued that they enjoyed the 'buzz' of knowing they had mail from a man. Finding emails from potential suitors in the inbox boosted their egos, made them feel noticed as well as validating their sexual attractiveness to the other sex. Jen and fellow respondents were typical in their views.

Jen also points to the excitement of actually receiving the email, which heightens anticipation in much the same way as the love letter did before the advent of email Her reference to emails feeling 'illicit' brings us back to the notion of computer use as 'addictive',

> Jen: I think it's kind of great when it [an email] pops up. 'You have a message' and you think 'oooh!' It's exciting and then sometimes you open it up and you think, 'naaa' what a pity (Laughs). I suppose you always have that 'oh' intrigue, it's always that one that I open before anything else...its like passing notes to each other at school, the anticipation and it feels slightly illicit!

> Shirley; Quite flattering, it's quite flattering, it boosts your ego a bit, particularly when you are, as I was, in a fairly low state.

> Andrea: It depends how I'm feeling at the end of the day. If I'm feeling down then anybody will do, you know.

What is crucial here is that although women defined their 'addiction' in terms of computer use, it was implicit in their accounts that it was their desire to make contact and chat to men that was so compelling. The 'buzz' from receiving emails from potential partners was at the root of their perceived 'addiction' rather than the computer itself. So why did women attribute their 'addiction' to the computer? It could be linked to the fact that women felt uneasy about the sheer number and nature of their online interactions with men (see below) and pointing to the computer as the root of their addiction shifted responsibility for their behaviour from themselves onto the computer itself. Indeed the view that the computer was 'taking over' or making women act 'out of character' is discussed again in Chapter Seven in the light of multiple offline dating activities.

Interestingly, the fact that women were spending so much time looking for men online was not questioned at all by respondents. There could be two reasons for this: it may be that women normalised the desire to meet men and thus failed to articulate it explicitly, or secondly; women felt guilt and confusion as to why they were spending

so much time and energy looking for a man. Their almost compulsive desire to contact and chat to men online seemed to directly contradict their stories of empowerment and independence as single women. It seems that the pervasiveness of the heterosexual ideal drove women to begin searching for male company almost as soon as their previous relationship ended. Importantly women viewed this 'transitional stage' of their lives as a time to enjoy causal relationships with men, which is less likely to challenge their freedom as single women, but nevertheless, male company was seen as a significant part of their lives. The almost compulsive nature of their dating activities could however, be exacerbated by the computer itself which provided women with a great deal of choice and thus raised their expectations for male partners in the future.

Another reason for the compelling nature of the sites was the eternal hope that at the next click of the mouse, a perfect match would be found. Dating sites were a way of keeping that dream alive and allowing a little fantasy to spice up the day-to-dayness of women's lives,

> Nora: I would miss the dating sites if I came off them because there's just that hope or chance that the man of my dreams is just round the corner, more chance of winning the lottery I think to be truthful.

Ben-Ze've (2004) argues that the degree of fantasy that is an integral part of interaction in cyberspace allows people to fantasise about finding their ideal partner, a dream that can, as Nora suggests, draw you repeatedly back to the sites. He says that in this respect 'cyberspace does not merely satisfy needs but creates novel needs that often cannot be met' which means that the user runs the risk of, 'being captured by their own desire' (Ben-Ze've, 2004: 21-22). Despite recognition that finding an ideal match isn't easy, Nora doesn't let go of her dream that her perfect man is out there. Shirley had been on a dating site for eight years without success, but continues to be optimistic that someone special is round the corner. At the interview she told me of the latest man to contact her and reveals her optimism in the phrase, *'here's hoping'*,

> Shirley: It's still there. I think, you've got to be an optimist, you've got to be an optimist to survive this life so you keep…I've had a thing from somebody

yesterday, you know and I thought, 'oh well, he doesn't look too bad, maybe this time' you know that sort of little hope is still there even at my age and I told him about my leg[4] and he was fine, so here's hoping!

Empowered online: making friends

Alongside the 'buzz' of receiving admiring emails from potential dates, interaction online can provide a degree of intimacy that may be missing in women's lives. Despite the geographical distance between users, relationships built up online tend to become intense quickly and contain a high level of disclosure. Women were often essentially interacting with strangers, which in itself can make it easier to unload problems and personal issues. This process can be likened in some ways to a therapy session and can be a very cathartic experience if feeling lonely and upset. Thus intimacy at a distance (Walther, 1993) can be quite compelling,

> Millie: Online is the stranger you can talk to so easily. You just start coming out with stuff and it doesn't matter coz they can't see you. You learn loads about a bloke online that it would take months to find out in real life.

This level of disclosure can give the feeling of an intense bond between 'strangers' online,

> Anne: He's my best friend ever, he's told me things that were very personal to him, he had had some problems, em...he told me things that lots of people would be too ashamed to talk about. I've told him things that nobody else has known. He knows me really well and if I'm upset, I can talk to him.

Alongside arranging dates, online dating sites often lead to the development of online friendships with men. These would never develop into romance or indeed result in an offline meeting. They were often very close and meaningful friendships and when feeling low or lonely, cyber-friends were extremely important to respondents. Receiving their emails became a regular part of each day,

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[4] Shirley has a medical problem with her leg that limits her mobility. She worries that this may put potential dates off meeting her.

Shirley: Oh I'll never meet Frank; I mean he's happily married and everything and children and everything. He was just a nice man, you know, there was someone going to be online at half past nine and if you fancied a chat you could go in and talk. You know?

Ellie talks of an online friend she has regular contact with. What makes this friendship so compelling for Ellie is that it is with someone from another country, which makes their experiences so interesting; and secondly the Internet gives an illusion of closeness and intimacy at a distance,

Ellie: This is a friend who's a pen pal in the United States and I love getting his emails because you know he comes from Ohio and he's a guy who likes to have a drink and go out and be wild and that. He's always leaving me little messages about what the local people have been doing. They are very interesting, I just can't compete with it, you know, I mean I have a lot of em, e-pen pals, I've got more out of them than I have out of the dating agencies and in a sense I feel more fulfilled if you like.

Online friendships also provided support at a distance which was something women regarded as very valuable at a time when they often felt quite vulnerable,

Sadie: Yeah well I mean when I left me husband and got the house…eeh it was a tip, the roof was leaking and everything. I mean I was lying in bed and I could hear this 'drip, drip, drip' and I'm online to one of me mates and he says you've got a leak. I mean I will never meet Sam but he was emailing us and saying, 'is your roof fixed yet?' For all he lived so far away, he was a godsend I must be honest.

Despite the importance of these online friendships and relationships, women often realised that there is a tendency to 'idealise' relationships online and many admitted that at times they were loath to meet a man offline after a lengthy online relationship as it would shatter the idealised picture they held in their imagination. The dangers of textual communication are such that the lack of information received about a person can be enhanced by the imagination, which 'fills the gaps' in 'narrow band

communication' (Stone, 1995). This can lead to the idealisation of the other, which frequently led to disappointment upon meeting in the flesh. Jen talks of such an experience,

> Jen: I mean the conversations we had before we met offline were so good and I was having so much fun. It was a bit risqué and you know some of the things that we said to one another had a very double-edged kind of meaning. Absolutely great, I really enjoyed it but I thought 'I just know I'm going to be disappointed if we meet'. This guy sounds too good to be true and no this aint going to work out. I ended up jumping in with both feet and spending a weekend with him!
>
> Judy: And what happened?
>
> Jen: Had a good time but he was totally wrapped up in himself, kept talking about all the money he earns. Not for me at all. He wasn't what I'd imagined

One of the most common reasons given by respondents for enjoying online textual communication was the amount of perceived control they felt over the encounter in cyberspace. Sadie used Internet chat rooms and describes at length a conversation she had online, in view of many others. Sadie (using MSN) openly flirts with a man who she has no intention of meeting. She stresses that she is in complete control,

> Sadie: Ah like, he was, he said he was a Glasgow man and I said,' ah shame I'm at the other end of the country', you know and what he said was, 'have car will travel', and me friend says, 'he thinks you're serious' and I say, 'it's a chat room, what can you do?' There's all these people, you know, there's like, eighty odd people looking whilst I write, you know. I said, 'the right words aren't on your profile', he says, 'you've got to read between the lines' and he kept going on, I says, 'it says married on your profile and there's no lines between married!' (Laughs) You know and like I had me whispers open [a facility for private one-to-one chat] and he came in later and said, 'you don't know what you are missing, what you've missed out on' and I went, 'get real. I haven't missed out on anything because I wasn't really expecting anything' and he went, 'well that's a pretty sensible answer' and I said, 'do you think I'm a bimbo just because I use a chat room?'

Isobel too illustrates that she has total control of her interactions online,

> Isobel: I will do exactly what I want to do and if I've emails from men who
> say, 'if you do not find me interesting, I would appreciate the courtesy of a
> reply' and I think, 'fuck off you aren't going to tell me what to do'.

Email in particular gave women a feeling of control when talking to men. Spender
points to the 'men's rules' of interaction which keep women 'in their linguistic place'
(Spender 1995: 193). She suggests that men assert power and dominance in
conversations through interruption of women's talk, often with a correction of the
woman's remark. Women's talk is often characterised as being more cooperative in
terms of keeping a conversation alive rather than asserting statements. An email
cannot be interrupted and provides women with the time and place to articulate what
they want to say. An added advantage of email was that typing speeds often hindered
respondents in real time chat situations, as they didn't have long enough to type a
reply,

> Sarah: Oh no, I don't use MSN, my typing is crap and it ended up full of
> typos, I looked a complete idiot.

Women also stated that the relative anonymity of cyberspace was empowering for
them as they could more easily manage textual interactions with men. They also felt
more confident in themselves as they could 'hide' behind the screen and disappear at
the click of the mouse if they so desired. The safety felt by women due to anonymity
often made them feel more relaxed and thus they, 'let down their guard' when
chatting to others. Shirley tells of how she feels more confident online,

> Shirley: Somehow or other your inhibitions are swept away a bit by the
> technology, I think you just feel safe coz your just at the other end...you're in
> your own home, a safe environment and you can always switch 'em off if you
> decide you don't like them.
> Judy: That's interesting coz you wouldn't do that if you met somebody

Shirley: Oh, if I met somebody out, I'd probably be extremely shy, and I wouldn't have the guts to even talk (laughs).

Helen points out another one of the benefits of online textual communication; you can actually print off a conversation on MSN or emails and read them back,

Helen: Er, sometimes I think, 'what does this mean?' But sometimes it will be different the next day. Somebody may say something online one night and you might read it and wonder. Then you literally, you wake up the next day and you read it through and you think, 'It's not really that bad, what was I so worried about last night?

Another reason for women feeling more in control and confident online is that they are in a sense, 'disembodied'. Women are traditionally defined and evaluated by their bodies and the ageing process can cause further anxiety for women who are measuring themselves against the Western ideal of youthfulness. In the context of the dating site, physical appearance is undoubtedly an issue. Photos must be carefully chosen to show a youthful and attractive appearance but within the context of textual interaction such as email or MSN, women often felt that the quality of interaction was much improved without the immediacy of face-to-face embodied interactions. Online, the body is 'hidden' which made women feel more powerful and in control. Vivien and Jen tell how they feel more relaxed within a 'disembodied interaction',

Vivien: Coz I mean you can be talking to a guy and you can be sitting with your rollers in can't you, with your nightie on. It doesn't matter does it! And you can say, 'ooh I've got my silk nightie on' and you know you can have a hair net on or whatever you want to! (laughs).

Jen: So many men will judge you from the outside…if I choose to be at home chatting to blokes in my dressing gown then that's fine. I don't need to dress up and try and flaunt my good features!

Wajcman celebrates the 'disembodied ' nature of cyberspace as empowering for women,

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The message [of cyberfeminism] is that young women in particular are colonising cyberspace, where gender inequality, like gravity, is suspended. In cyberspace all physical bodily cues are removed from communication. As a result our interactions are fundamentally different, because they are not subject to judgements based on sex, age, race, voice, accent or appearance, but are based only on textual exchanges (Wajcman, 2004:66).

The issue of embodiment or rather disembodiment online is perhaps more complex than Wajcman suggests and is discussed more fully in Chapter Three. Wajcman's optimistic view however, is echoed to a large extent by my respondents. Once again the experiences of older women can add to the voices of their younger counterparts.

Respondents felt overwhelmingly empowered online yet this is not to underplay some of the less savoury experiences women had experienced online. Jen had a bad experience online and yet stresses her control over the situation,

Jen: I had a chap who was exceedingly rude. He was being a pest, he kept sending emails and I had decided that I didn't like the profile particularly and I sent him a very nice, you know, matter of fact email saying that I didn't really want to hear from him again. I could have just blocked him but I didn't want to do that I just wanted him to realise that I didn't want to go any further. I received a very rude...some of the things he said were quite obscene, so handed the matter over to the site and they dealt with it. I think I must have sent what I had written, I can't really remember it was a long time ago and I had no more trouble after that

Judy: How did you feel when that happened? Did you feel in control or threatened?

Jen: Oh I was absolutely in control, because I mean I was anonymous really and I was angry that this silly little person, you know he was spitting out his dummy because he'd been rejected. It was silly, really daft but I was totally in control and didn't feel threatened.

Not all women felt empowered in all areas of cyberspace, however, June went into a chat room and describes the experience,

> June: I went into the chat rooms on AOL when I first started, they are absolutely horrendous. Some of the rooms are very threatening. There's a clique of women in it and a clique of men who talk to these women and you are on the peripheral...its almost like you are a ghost in the room.... some of the women were very aggressive!

June's unhappy experience in a chat room shows that women too can be hostile to other women in cyberspace in a display of heterosexual competitiveness. Women's experiences of rude or sexually explicit messages from men online sat, however, alongside an acknowledgement that their own online behaviour had often taken respondents by surprise. Within the context of the dating sites, women felt more comfortable and confident to approach men directly. Online it seems that whilst gendered expectations were indeed taken into cyberspace, traditional gendered roles within dating had been shelved in favour of less traditional courtship behaviour. The mere fact that the women (and men) were registered on the site gave the implicit message that they were looking for a date and therefore approaching a member of the other sex became easier. In terms of gender, for some women the stereotype of a man 'hunting' and a woman 'being chased' still held true but for the majority of respondents they felt they could take control and approach a man directly on the site,

> Jen: God if I sat around and waited I'd be sitting there forever...I've contacted loads of men.

Having contacted men online and begun chatting to them, women were often surprised at the raunchy nature of their textual encounters but were happy to be involved in this. Women's accounts revealed that they often felt that they were interacting with men in a more assertive, confident and overtly sexual way,

> Jen: I mean, some of my friends, I mean their toes would curl if they could see some of the conversations I've held, where the banter can lead.

Anne: Sometimes a man comes on and he begins to talk dirty, I can give as good as I get...well we can all talk dirty can't we?

Overtly sexual behaviour did not stop at text however and several women were drawn into cybersex encounters,

Shirley: It was quite fun...I think as long as you don't take yourself too seriously you are alright...I've had a great time, lots of sex offline as well...I used to be a prude, a real prude!

Here we can see women using dating sites as a site of resistance to the gendered norms of courtship which have traditionally placed the woman as being passively 'hunted' by the male. Women's sense of control and the relative anonymity provided online allowed them, not only to contact men, but also make overtly sexual advances. Maeve illustrates here women's more active role in contacting men by talking of her 'addiction' to 'the thrill of the chase',

Maeve: Oh yes, it becomes addictive! Really it does! Em...I suppose it's the thrill of the chase isn't it! (Laughs) yes it is, it's nice to meet new people even if it is only online, you're not going to meet them, but I enjoy contacting men and seeing if they reply!

Women seemed astonished at their behaviour which was carried out within their own home, thus circumventing the perceived disapproval of others. Interestingly nobody suggested that men perceived their overt approaches online in negative terms and women enjoyed this sense of freedom a great deal. Chapter Seven reveals however, that when gendered norms of courtship were challenged offline, it was much harder for women to circumvent the wider public gaze, which caused them anxiety around their 'disgraceful' behaviour.

Conclusion

This chapter explored women's relationships with the computer from both sides of the computer screen, from acquiring IT skills to interacting in cyberspace. Women saw their computers, not as an inanimate machine but rather a companion, a friend, a

therapist, a stubborn and obstructive force, and at times a seducer, which drew women into spending time online. The overall themes of women's experiences of the computer however were ones of empowerment and control. Women felt confident and in control using computer-mediated communication which was perceived to be actually changing the nature of their interactions with men online. The theme of change enabled by technology is continued in Chapter Seven where women's offline dating activities are explored. Countering the themes of empowerment and control however, was a sense that, at times, the computer was indeed taking control of its users, which often caused anxiety and confusion. Women had ambivalent relationships with their computers but all were unanimous in their astonishment at the degree to which it had impacted upon their lives. The following chapter continues the theme of women's experiences in cyberspace but looks more specifically at how women learnt to negotiate online dating sites and subsequently used them in creative ways to maximise their chances of finding a mate. Part of this learning process was acquiring the necessary skill to 'market' the self effectively to others online.

Chapter Six

Marketing the Self in Cyberspace

Judy: So what would you say are the advantages of online dating?

Alice: The vast numbers of people that you can market yourself to!

The focus of women's online activities was the use of Internet dating sites and this chapter explores in more detail women's experiences of using the sites and the ways in which they creatively presented the self to others via computer-mediated communication. Internet dating was a new venture for women, who were faced with the task of learning how to negotiate the user interface of the sites alongside a consideration of how to present themselves to male users in order to attract their attention. Chapter One discussed the potential freedom to experiment with self-construction in cyberspace, enabled by the relative anonymity of online interaction. Goffman's (1990) work on impression management provided a basis from which to explore how online interaction enables the self to be presented in an idealised fashion and the implications of using text to present the self to others in cyberspace. This chapter builds upon these themes by exploring the presentation of self within the specific context of online dating sites.

Playful experimentation with self-presentation online often became, in the arena of a dating site, a directed and purposeful activity that respondents often referred to as 'marketing' the self. The self became a commodity to be marketed to others and this chapter explores how respondents developed marketing strategies in order to 'advertise' themselves effectively to potential dates. The aim of self-marketing was twofold: firstly respondents wanted to be noticed by men browsing the sites in order to make them stop and take a closer look; secondly, respondents wanted to hold the attention of potential dates with subsequent email interaction which would hopefully lead to an offline meeting. Marketing the self was a complex and continuous process which involved trial and error, a skill that was gradually honed with repeated Internet dating site use.

Goffman (1990) argues that the self is produced as a result of numerous (face-to-face) interactions with others but his dramaturgical approach, which is based on the analogy of a stage performance, has led to criticism that his view of impression management overstates the role of the social actor as a cynical manipulator of the 'audience' for her own ends (Gouldner, 1971). Of course, not all interactions are driven by the desire to manipulate a situation and indeed many of our 'performances' will seem spontaneous to us, perhaps habitually or unconsciously performed. In the context of the dating sites however, marketing the self was an activity that was consciously monitored, reflexively controlled and incorporated a strategic consideration of the behaviour of others in relation to oneself. This chapter will argue that marketing the self was a form of impression management, which involved a high degree of strategic planning. Self-marketing was an activity that had been enabled by the specific nature of computer-mediated communication, which allows for the relative anonymity of online interaction and more reflexive control of self-presentation as a result of the asynchronicity of online interaction.

Marketing the self online needs to be understood within the wider context of a booming capitalist business venture; the comodification of romantic relationships. Online dating sites offer the consumer the promise of speed and efficiency in bringing potential partners together. The art of finding a mate is no longer left to that fateful chance encounter. Dating sites encourage users to give fate a helping hand, by taking strategic action to improve their chances of finding partners. Respondents' accounts reveal that whilst they adopted a rational and proactive approach to finding a man by using the sites, they simultaneously drew upon common cultural narratives of romance which stress that fateful chance encounter that brings lovers together; the inevitable meeting of 'soul mates'. As a result their accounts revealed a merging of narratives of romance and rationality; placing a profile on a dating site increased the probability of that 'fateful' encounter occurring. Women had not abandoned all faith in the mystical work of fate in finding their soul mate, but used the sites as a way of giving fate a helping hand. Alongside this, the romantic vision of a 'soul mate' is also given a more rational interpretation. Dating site use encouraged women to reflect upon and select the desirable attributes of a potential 'soul mate' rather than wait passively to see what fate threw their way. Added to this, the perceived endless supply

of potential dates online often encouraged women to move away from the notion of one preordained soul mate to consider many possible partners.

Once registered on the sites, women were actively driven to market the self to stay ahead of competition from numerous other women on the sites. They entered the virtual arena of the dating site and gradually learnt the 'rules of the game' from observing others already participating on the sites. Women negotiated the rules that structured the sites and the informal social rules of interaction that made using dating sites meaningful to them and other users. Andrea highlights her experience,

> Andrea: This has opened up a whole new world to me. It all seemed so scary at first but I'm getting the hang of it now. You have to learn, you know, how to go on, how others behave.

I will argue that the activity of marketing the self evolved as a response to being positioned in the online dating site environment; firstly in terms of constructing the self in cyberspace and secondly competing with others for the attention of men on the dating sites. The presentation of self on the sites triggered a reflexive awareness of how the self could be marketed to others. The initial construction of a profile encouraged respondents to reflect upon their sense of self, but importantly it was their awareness and evaluation of the profiles and action of others that drove the imperative to market the self and get ahead of competition. Drawing upon Goffman's essay, 'Strategic Interaction' (1969), I will highlight how online interaction on the sites can be understood in terms of game playing which involves types of strategic action with regard to an ultimate goal and in relation to the behaviour of others in the game. A critical part of strategic action involves a constant evaluation of the strategies of others in relation to ones own. The strategic activity of marketing the self was understood within the 'primary framework' of the dating site,

> Primary frameworks of organisation vary in degree of organisation...whatever the degree of organisation, however, each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms (Goffman, 1986: 21).

Whilst respondents creatively marketed the self within the framework of the sites, it is perhaps important not to overstate the freedom women had to experiment with their presentation of self. Women had little choice but to learn the rules and play the game accordingly, both in terms of the structural rules laid down by the sites themselves and the informal norms of interaction that were adhered to by users. Marketing the self online enabled a degree of choice in how the self would be presented but at the same time women were limited as to the courses of action they could take to attract a date. Indeed Goffman draws attention to the fact that within a game situation, a player's choices of possible courses of action are limited and her overall position in the game is structured (Goffman, 1969: 114). Women were further constrained in their interactions on the sites by social norms and expectations that they carried in to cyberspace from their offline social environments. Gendered expectations of what men found attractive in a woman, for example, informed the ways in which women interacted with men online (see below).

The construction of self on the dating site

Before exploring the creative ways in which respondents strategically marketed themselves online, it is perhaps important to look more closely at the textual formats that are used to present the self on the dating sites. In order to register on a dating site, a profile and optional photo must be posted on the site for others to browse. A profile is constructed in a standardised format (although this may vary a little between sites) and requires the user to give a range of details about themselves by responding to a series of questions. Users provide information such as physical characteristics, religion, marital status, income level, age, hobbies and hopes for a future partner. The user rounds this off by choosing a username or nickname, which heads the profile. Once registered on the site, it is possible to browse potential dates by using a search engine which allows for specific features to be factored in to tailor the search, for example: people who live in the locality; over a certain height or within a certain income bracket. Once the search has been run, the site will provide a list of profiles that fit the selected criteria. These can be browsed by the user and subsequently contacted via the site's own messaging system. This allows users to chat online or arrange to meet offline. Subsequent online interaction offers further opportunity for the presentation of self over time via email or real time chat.

Time and the self online

The construction of a profile can be seen as a snapshot of the self in the present; at a given point when the person registers on the site. Closer inspection however reveals that the profile as a textual statement of the self by way of introduction to others, cannot be bounded by time. Profiles often contain aspirations for the future and past regrets and successes. Many profiles touch on previous relationships or life experiences that are seen as significant in order to illustrate who they are in the present. Other profiles draw upon the genre of life storybook (see Chapter Four) highlighting significant stages in their lives in relation to the present. Although the profile is a statement of how the self is interpreted by the user and presented to others at a specific point and time, it could be altered at will and indeed many respondents went back to their profiles and tinkered with them several times over. This was not necessarily just to try out a new 'marketing strategy' but as a result of a sense of change in themselves over time. This is summed up by Kate, who felt that since her split from her husband, she felt she was constantly changing and re-evaluating her self-identity and the type of relationship she was looking for. She sees her self-identity as a *process* over time. Interestingly, Kate also flags up how experience of Internet dating sites has shown her what men would find attractive about her, Thus her self-discovery is tied to her understanding of how she is perceived by others,

> Kate: I don't find it easy to write about myself but I think maybe em…everything is a process isn't it and you are only at the stage that you're at. You can't, you can't sort of throw yourself into the future, you can only gradually develop. Actually the people I've met, as time has gone on, I have become more and more confident about what I want, about what is likely to be attractive to other people about myself and I now have a much clearer idea of what people might like about me and that's maybe why I would go back and play on that more.

Isobel too acknowledged the self as constantly changing and reflected this by updating her profile,

> Isobel: Yes, I think it's me; absolutely to a tee …I change it [the profile]
> Judy: You tinker with it? What do you tinker with and why?

Isobel: Just the way I put things um…just, I think, 'oh that was ok for a few months ago but I'm not quite like that now, I'm a little bit different to that now I think I have changed', I think I'm on a huge journey, I really do and when my ex husband, my second husband left I went to see a counsellor because I was all over the place um…I'd been to see her previously and she'd said, ' I think Isobel, you are on a journey' and she said my second husband has been only part of that journey.

Isobel's sense of the self as a journey places emphasis upon the self as being continuously moulded by the accumulation of life events and yet hints at an end point to the journey, which will result in self-growth and realisation. Narratives of life as a journey (or many journeys) suggest a sense of transience, the self as a process, which sits within the framework of the life storybook genre. The end of the journey being the end of one life chapter and the beginning of a new one. Similarly, the accumulation of life chapters form an overarching narrative of self across the life course as a whole. The point of the journey can only be found retrospectively and indeed Ricoeur (1992) argues that narratives of self draw upon the past in order to make sense of the present. Isobel's counsellor suggests that her second husband was 'only part' of her journey, suggesting perhaps that her final resting point will be within a new relationship and from this position, the point of her journey will become clear. This is, of course, only a temporary resting place, as, when Isobel's journey is perceived to end, a new one will begin.

Some respondents changed their photos to reflect change over time. Jen stresses here that a change in appearance is experienced as a change to the self. She says that a change of hairstyle, 'sort of changes me',

Judy: Do you change the photos?
Jen: Yes I do
Judy: Why?
Jen: Just to update them because I change so much, I mean because I've always been like that, I mean my weight has always been my top thing that changes. I mean I change my hair colour, my hairstyle is different very often, I

think I just like to do, em if I had chosen to colour my hair in a different way and I have it in a different hairstyle, that sort of changes me, whether I'm heavy or not you know, and I just feel that I like to keep things up to date.

Finally, subsequent email interactions also involve a construction of the self that cannot be divorced from understandings of the linear self over time. Online communication after initial contact has been established with a potential partner, inevitably took the form of stories of the self as a way of getting to know each other. In fact dating sites are awash with stories of the self as interactions with strangers encourage people to reflect upon their lives and self-identity. Maeve explains how she gave a user advice on what to talk about in emails,

> Maeve: He said, 'I just don't know what to say' and I told him to just tell me about himself, what he liked and didn't like, what his job was, his hobbies, his family, stuff like that. It's a way of building up a picture of someone in your mind.

Ricoeur's (1992) work on narrative identity centres on the telling of stories of self to others and how the self is constantly evolving as a result of stories told over time. Goffman's focus upon the self emerging from the immediacy of face-to-face interactions however could imply a lack of emphasis on a temporal, linear dimension to self-identity. Goffman states however,

> It is a basic assumption of any particular role performance that the performer has a continuing biography, a single continuing personal identity, beyond that performance, albeit one which is comparable and consistent with the role in question (Goffman 1974: 286).

Goffman's assertion that the linear biography of the self is constructed in terms of the current performance resonates with Ricoeur's work on narrative identity. Time is therefore recognised as an integral part of the construction of a fluid and always-unfinished self-identity within the work of both Ricoeur and Goffman.

Choosing a dating site

Goffman (1969) places as a point of departure to his work on strategic interaction, the assumption that an individual is capable of rational decision-making,

> Individuals typically make observations of their situation in order to assess what is relevantly happening around them and what is likely to occur. Once this is done, they often go on to exercise another capacity of human intelligence, that of making a choice from among a set of possible lines of response. Here some sort of maximisation of gain will often be involved. This provides one sense in which an actor is said to be 'rational' (Goffman, 1969: 86).

Indeed rational choices were made by respondents in terms of whether to join a dating site and also which sites to join. When weighing up the advantages of using an online dating site, respondents used a variety of criteria to inform their choices. Shirley suggests that online dating puts her in contact with men outside of her own locality, as she puts it, it gives her, 'a wider catchment area',

> Shirley: It's very difficult and particularly I live in this closed community and I would say that I know...ninety percent of the people who would be eligible em, through the children and through the clubs and things that I belong to in Risebridge. It's not a very big town; it's not like a city when you don't know people. When you go out you know that they are married to so-and-so and they are such and such's brother and this that and the other and the rest of it and it makes it difficult and so the Internet was definitely giving me... a much wider catchment area (laughs).

Kim echoed the words of Alice making a choice to join the sites based upon the sheer numbers of men who can be contacted or indeed, may contact her, giving her more choice over potential dates,

> Kim: You can trawl through a good fifty, sixty people, you can't do that at a normal place...and of course these people have put themselves up on the sites... you are not approaching someone who doesn't want to be approached.

They've said, you know, 'this is me, I'm available, come and get me' and you do have a lot more choice.

There are many sites to choose from and women had to make choices as to which site(s) to join. Interestingly all respondents had chosen general, well known sites for all ages and sexualities, none had considered a site specifically for older women. There were many factors involved in their choice of sites. Sarah describes the rationale for her own choice,

> Sarah: …probably, em…how long you could join for, how much money and also the categories you know, I mean if the website allowed pictures of men with all their gear hanging out then I wouldn't really want to be on that site. Another thing was there were very few people from this area on the site…and Cumbria, I mean I did have connections over in Cumbria with relatives living there… there were about five people! That's not a lot of choice…perhaps they are just backwards in coming forward or they don't have computers I don't know!

Respondents also felt the sites provided a cost effective way of finding a mate. Whilst most sites required a fee, there were ways round this and most women developed cheap ways of using sites. Respondents showed that alongside learning how to negotiate the sites, they also gradually came across loopholes that allowed them to beat the system. As consumers it seems they were delighted with the choice and opportunity provided by the sites but were generally reluctant to pay excessively for them. Dating sites create revenue by charging for their services. Rates vary enormously from site to site and within any particular site there can be different rates for membership for different levels of use. Most commonly, searching for profiles is free but if the user wants to move to the next 'level' in order to actually contact other people, they must pay a monthly fee. Respondents often avoided paying for membership by taking advantage of the free or cheap introductory offers which usually last about three days. Alice illustrates how she makes best 'economic use' of the dating sites although she suggests that this strategy doesn't necessarily translate into successful dates,

Alice: I make the best economic use of the computer (laughs) so for example I got an email from somebody and when I replied to it, I ensured I had sufficient time [within a three day free introductory offer] to scan the latest people and just sent a batch of emails off, sent ten to fifteen emails. It hasn't done me any good at all but that's what I would do...sometimes I think, 'oh he's quite nice' and I pay my five pounds or something for three days and um sometimes I've sent you know, twenty emails to people.

Millie explains how she got round the problem of paying to contact men by incorporating her personal email address in the profile. This means people can sidestep the site messaging option and contact her directly,

Millie: Well it has to be kind of hidden, you can't just put in your email address or the site will catch you. I just write it all in words, like, 'millie dot smith at the blue place faraway' or something like that. It works, I suppose I should pay but other people do it!

Hannah discovered there was an added bonus in joining many sites at once to make the most of introductory offers. Joining a site for the first time usually triggers interest in the newcomer,

Hannah: Yes, it is because er, when you join these dating sites er... you're a new kid on the block sort of thing and you get swamped with offers and messages, because you are a new face and then you have to start weeding out the chaff...what's the expression? (Laughs).

This strategic behaviour could be described as 'a game within a game' in that women were strategically acting to work around the rules of the site (or game) alongside working strategically within them. Goffman suggests that strategic game playing often involves the option of participation in other games, designed to challenge or circumvent the structured environment of the situation (Goffman, 1969: 118).

Marketing strategies

Having joined the sites, respondents learnt quickly that in order to be noticed in a seemingly endless display of profiles on the screen, marketing strategies had to be learnt. Reflexive consideration had to be given to issues such as: the ways in which the self was to be 'packaged' for maximum effect; the overall impression that was to be fostered; the eye-catching strategies that could be used to attract attention; and the 'niche market' that was being targeted. Respondents realised that whilst there were many men online to be browsed, there were many other women on the sites too and so learning and experimenting with marketing strategies to stay ahead of the 'competition', was imperative. Referring once again to Goffman's consideration of a gaming metaphor for social interaction, we can see here, respondents acting in accordance with the overall strategy of game playing which Goffman identifies in four parts. Firstly, *assessment;* women assessed the competition from others, their own resources and the overall rules of the dating sites. Secondly, *decision-making*; women decided upon a strategic course of action. Thirdly, *initiating a course of action;* they sent messages to men or (re) constructed their profiles. Finally, *payoff;* at this point women can judge the effectiveness of their strategies in the light of responses from men (Goffman, 1969: 120). This overall strategy and more specific strategies can be seen in the actions of women detailed below.

Respondents' strategies were not learnt from marketing textbooks but from watching the behaviour of others on the sites. This process involved not simply emulating the actions of others but also learning from the perceived failure of the marketing strategies of other users. Women could gauge the success of their own marketing strategy by the numbers and calibre of men who contacted them and by comparing their profiles to those of other women on the sites. Sue describes the process,

> Sue: It's like selling yourself in a catalogue. It seems weird at first but you get used to it.

Such purposeful and aggressive self-marketing was enabled by computer-mediated communication, which allowed respondents to experiment with marketing strategies at will with fewer social consequences if the performance fails. Whilst the user is marketing themselves to a potentially huge audience, they are effectively hidden

behind the screen, which ultimately protects anonymity and spares them the pain of embarrassment or awkwardness of face-to-face interactions,

> Nancy: It doesn't really matter if you mess up, you can just disappear. I feel much braver online coz you can't see their faces. It feels a really safe place to be and also you can think about replies on email, you aren't rushed into anything. Definitely much more control.

Nancy draws upon another important aspect of online interaction that enables the self to be marketed effectively; control over presentation. Whilst Goffman suggests that face-to-face interactions are bound in the immediacy of time and place, online interaction can be asynchronous which allows for time to be spent at will reflecting upon and honing a performance. An email can be reflected upon and redrafted several times before being sent.

The fact that interactions take place in cyberspace prompted some respondents to liken dating site use to playing a game, suggesting that online, activity felt a little less 'real' than offline activity in that it involved a degree of fantasy and play. Thus women felt braver in their self-marketing, seeing the process as a game with less serious social consequences,

> Shirley: It's not as real as everyday life. Its fantasyland isn't it an awful lot of the time!

Ellie also likens dating site use to playing a game but, unlike Shirley, talks in terms of competition against other women, displaying a more serious attitude than Shirley's towards dating site use,

> Ellie: It's a stupid game really, this dating thing. If a man contacts me I think, 'ooh, one for me'…I've scored a point in this game I'm playing and I can move on to someone else now'.

The difference in attitude between Ellie and Shirley draws attention to the fact that games can be viewed from different perspectives, from a sense of playfulness and

fantasy to a more serious game with serious consequences. This point is raised by Waskul and Douglas (1997) who argue that whilst dating site use can be seen as a playful activity, it can also have more serious outcomes and motives,

> To interact with others in the online chat environments is to translate oneself into the conventions of the medium-such conventions are *like* rules to a game and participants often 'play' with them. However such playfulness does not imply that all is 'fun and games'. Persons can (and do) form deeply meaningful interpersonal relationships in the course of playful encounters (Waskul and Douglas, 1997: 390).

They suggest that the play/serious binary is unhelpful when thinking about online interaction in terms of a game, seeing the process as a merging of both perspectives, '"Serious play" is the prevailing standard of gaming activity' (Waskul and Douglas, 1997: 391).

Goffman (1969) outlines how players must make assessments about courses of action during the process of the game and argues that social actors behave in a similar fashion within social interactions. Goffman was of course talking about face-to-face interactions but he did acknowledge the application of game theory to interactions which were mediated, 'Important applications of strategic interaction involve participants who are not present to each other and sequences of moves which are not closely bound by time' (Goffman, 1967: 140). Notably Goffman draws attention to one of the features that enhances the capacity to market the self effectively online, the fact that interactions are spread across time, which allows space for reflection upon strategies and the opportunity to construct replies carefully to potential dates.

Goffman lists more specific strategies the players should employ in order to participate effectively and several resonate with participation on the dating sites. These include: keeping a close eye on opponents' moves in relation to one's own and gauging their perceived evaluation of your strategy; assessing the resources or attributes that the opponent possesses in relation to one's own and importantly what attributes are deemed valuable in the context of the game; assessing information that players have about each other; identifying players 'style of play' and thoroughly

mastering the rules of the game in order to participate effectively (Goffman, 1969: 95-96).

The subtle art of self-marketing

Marketing the self was a calculated process, which took time to learn. Self-promotion needed to be subtle and respondents learnt quickly that it is not purely a matter of 'blowing your own trumpet'. Over-aggressive marketing can be counter productive as it seems there is a thin line between advertising one's good points and sounding conceited which can be interpreted as an unattractive character trait. Women felt that self-promotion was difficult in that they wanted to sell themselves without sounding vain or self-obsessed. Interestingly this aspect of marketing was learnt often from their own responses to profiles of men on the sites. Thus their marketing strategy was evaluated in the light of the actions of others on the sites and the norms of presentation that were in place in the dating site arena. Some women began to realise that they were put off by an overdose of self-congratulation,

> Annette: If they post a load of photos it seems as if they really fancy themselves. One should be just enough…more subtle, leave the rest to the imagination!

Many remarked that self-promotion was not something that came easily to them and many felt uncomfortable with the process. Helen acknowledges the fine line in marketing the self between advertising your good qualities and sounding 'big-headed',

> Helen: Em…trying to describe your personality is very hard without sounding em, conceited or bigheaded. You want to say that you are a nice, lovely person, em… but I'm sure there are lots of people who think you aren't a nice, lovely person! But that's how you want to come across, you've gotta put yourself in the best light. You've got to sell yourself.

Interestingly, Sarah Lyall, of the New York Times acknowledges a geographical dimension to the marketing of the self on dating sites and personal ads. It seems that within British culture, it is deemed much more acceptable and indeed attractive to

show self-deprecation, whilst in the USA self-promotion is much more aggressive. She writes of, '...The English obsession with self depreciation...this is a country where open bragging is considered rude and unironic sentiment makes people cringle with embarrassment.' She goes on to suggest how this manifests itself in self-marketing in which she suggests that British dating advertisements go beyond self-deprecation towards actually highlighting their weaknesses,

> They have announced they are suffering from liver disease, from drug addiction, from asthma, from compulsive gambling, from unclassified skin complaints and from reduced sperm counts...The subtlety of these courtship techniques might well be lost on people used to American-model personal ads, in which stunning, good sense of humoured characters seek soul mates for walks in the rain... (Lyall, New York Times. 20/11/06).

The cultural differences highlighted here can be likened to the game player's attention to the 'style of play' of others in the game. Goffman suggests that individuals may have different styles of performance based upon cultural or social difference. In this case, cultural differences are perceived to present differences in the way North American and British users market themselves and the way in which those strategies are received. The highlighting of one's less attractive features on a profile can also be used as an ironic style of marketing strategy to catch the eye, but in general respondents preferred a profile with an air of humility,

> Andrea: He started off by saying, 'no oil painting' and I thought straight away, 'this man hasn't got a big ego'. So you know, that's what drew me to him.

The gendered nature of marketing
Respondents felt that there was a gendered dynamic to marketing of the self, which points once more to the game player's attention to 'styles of play'. Men, in general, respondents commented, were likely to sell themselves more aggressively than women. Nora and Sarah talk about their own observations,

Nora: I do know of many women who have met men on the sites and found that his picture was when he was ten years younger and when he said he was cuddly he really meant he had been eating the pie factory. Men are very egotistical.

Sarah: Actually I think guys are funny when they write emails in that they are more matter of fact and their profiles are fantasyland I really do!
Judy: In what respect do you think they are fantasyland?
Sarah: Sometimes it's what they would like to be, for example some would say, 'I've still got my dress uniform'.
Judy: And do you think women are less likely to do that?
Sarah: Yes definitely!

Whilst women suggested that men were more likely to aggressively market themselves online, women thought that they were more realistic when marketing themselves. They acknowledged that some women posted professional photos of themselves but in general this was seen as a failed marketing strategy,

Ellie: Some blokes are going to get a hell of a shock when they meet them in the flesh, without the professional makeover... the pollyfilla!

Importantly, the ridicule and criticism of the profiles of both men and women was an integral part of respondents' own marketing strategy. They were recognizing the perceived failed performances of others and respondents took note in order to prevent making the same marketing gaffes themselves. Looking at the profiles of others allowed women to assess what marketing skills worked in terms of attracting attention and making them aware that the same critical eye will be cast over theirs. Women also tailored profiles in response to negative feedback on their own profiles. Goffman argues that the basis of strategic interaction is a preoccupation with the actions of others and importantly how others perceive your actions,

Courses of action or moves will ...be made in the light of one's thoughts about the others' thoughts about oneself. An exchange of moves made on the basis

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of this kind of orientation to self and other can be called strategic interaction (Goffman, 1969: 101).

Another strategic consideration here, highlighted by Ellie (above) is that generally, the ultimate goal for these women was to meet men offline. Successful self-marketing involves a number of stages: attracting attention in the first place, holding a man's attention through email interaction and subsequently meeting offline. When marketing the self online, the fact that an offline meeting is a goal must be kept in mind. This led to women actually adopting an almost apologetic tone in order to avoid the accusation of misrepresentation or disappointment when meeting offline. Women were afraid that over-marketing could lead to an idealized impression that they couldn't live up to offline,

> Vivien: I try to be very honest coz I'm overweight as well and I will always put that down. I know people who will put photographs that are ten years old, or put 'I'm eight stone' you know, when its possibly eight stone I need to lose, well, maybe not literally, no, only joking (laughs). But no I try and be as honest and I am with the guys as well, I will say to them, 'you do realize that I am overweight...don't expect some little dolly bird because you aint gonna get one'.

This strategy was often based upon women's own disappointing offline meetings. There was an important lesson to be learnt for respondents in that, whilst they were marketing themselves to others, men were indeed also marketing themselves to women. Thus men's profiles should be read with this fact in mind. Shirley highlights the pitfalls of not approaching the information on a profile with a cautious, if not cynical eye,

> Shirley: The funniest one, who was one of the early ones I met who threw a bit of scepticism into the whole thing. He said that he was medium height and slightly overweight. That was what he said online, now he was coming to my home to meet me and he was five foot nothing and must have been about twenty stone. Now if you were going to meet somebody would you not even

fess up before you actually went, even if you had been spinning a few porkies beforehand? (Laughs)

Why did women feel such an acute awareness of a gender divide in marketing strategies? The key lies in the words of Vivien, 'don't expect some dolly bird because you aint going to get one'. As respondents are older women they fall prey to the double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972) whereby the ageing process for women is judged more harshly than it is for a man. Added to this women are more likely to be judged in terms of bodily appearance, indeed Jagger (1998) found in her research into newspaper dating advertisements that women tend to market themselves in terms of physical attractiveness, whilst men stress income and status. Online, middle aged men were perceived to be searching for younger women, thus the age of respondents was seen as a negative aspect of self. The double standard forces women to either make clear the fact that they aren't a 'dolly bird' or appeal to this standard. Profiles could often be found of older women saying, *'I scrub up well for my age'* or *'my friends say I look younger than my years'.*

Humour was another strategy used in their profiles, such as, *'One previous owner, been round the block a few times but in good nick'.* Thus the marketing of the self is informed by wider societal values which, due to gendered understandings of ageing, denies the middle-aged women the right to market the self aggressively. This brings us back to Goffman's rules of strategic interaction; the strategy of working out what attributes are deemed valuable within a given context and evaluating your own resources and attributes against other 'players' in the game. Within the context of the dating site, respondents learnt from responses and the profiles of men that youthfulness, or the appearance of such, was a valuable resource in the dating game.

Tailoring the self to the needs of the market

Profiles were constructed with the needs of the market in mind. As marketing the self was driven by the desire to catch a man's eye, women tried to fathom what attributes were indeed seen as attractive and desirable in a woman from a man's perspective. Respondents scoured male profiles in order to assess what personal attributes men would see as favourable. Maeve's perception was typical of a lot of women,

Maeve: Men want arm candy. Someone to hang on their arm and look glam.

Maeve was reflecting the view of many respondents who felt that men focussed on physical appearance and wanted a glamorous woman. Many women equated this with men wanting younger women,

> Mary: What does a bloke in his fifties want with a girl of twenty odd? He will have nowt in common with her, no conversation. He just wants his ego boosted with a young lass on his arm.

Isobel on the other hand, suggests an attribute that she thinks puts men off; 'the strong woman'. A woman with a strong independent personality or a high achiever, she argues, can scare men off in favour of someone less assertive and successful who is more likely to look up to them. Strategically she has two options here: to play down this aspect of her character, or appeal to the type of man she perceives will value this quality. She decides to target a type of man who she feels won't be threatened by her dominant personality,

> Isobel: At work I'm seen as a scary lady. I put men off; I intimidate them I really do. That's why I go for high earners on the sites who are more secure in themselves. Men who are insecure will just feel threatened by someone like me!

Marketing the self-online becomes a strategy concerned with selecting which attributes to stress in a profile that will resonate with the perceived qualities generally admired in a woman by men. Women were second-guessing the perceived likes and dislikes of the male 'audience' and keeping this in mind when constructing their profile. Thus their actions couldn't be strategically planned without an understanding of possible strategies of others in the game, strategies that were predicted in general terms from observing previous moves of others.

Keeping ahead of the game

Respondents quickly learnt that marketing the self was about more than posting a profile and then sitting and waiting to be contacted.[5] Respondents were generally keen to contact possible dates directly through the site rather than wait for men to contact them. This way they were bringing themselves to the attention of potential partners, which gave them a short-term advantage over other women. Strategically this can be seen as a way of assessing opponents' moves in relations to ones own and attempting to move ahead of them to gain the advantage. Alice originally sat and waited for men to contact her. She then changed her marketing strategy and became more active,

> Alice: Yes, I well basically, last March um...I'd updated my profile, I'd been online for a bit, I came back from holiday, it had been a fortnight and there was virtually nothing there (laughs) and I thought well, 'never mind this for a game of soldiers' so basically I set out to find somebody.

There is a downside to active marketing in that it can place women as vulnerable to rejection. Nora points out however, that if you are actively marketing, you have to be able to take rejection on the chin. Marketing the self effectively means being able to take rejection and disappointment and move on.

> Nora: I do search for potential partners online and don't wait for men to contact me. They rarely respond to my communications and many women I talk to say the same. It can be demoralising and we have to be thick skinned.

Despite a general insistence that respondents developed a thick skin to rejection online, they were acknowledging that marketing the self cannot be divorced from the subjective experience of being that self. The product being marketed is not an objective 'product' but the self who is doing the marketing. Hence the self is simultaneously placed in an advantageous and yet vulnerable position. Rejection comes as a blow to the ego, a narcissistic wound that goes well beneath rational explanation of market forces to the depth of the psyche. Some respondents

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[5] Interestingly women often drew upon a fishing analogy to describe the process of attracting men to their profile. They talked in terms of 'reeling men in' and the profile was seen in the light of 'casting a line and waiting for someone to bite'.

acknowledged this pain and, as a result, acknowledge the impact of rejection upon others,

> Kath: And I would try, I try very hard not to hurt people. I tend to skirt round things like, 'can we meet?' you know and I will sort of say, 'well I can't tonight'.

The niche market

Alongside tailoring profiles to suit a more generalised picture of what men are stereotypically perceived to admire in women, women further tailored their profiles to attract a certain 'type' of man. The dating sites provide a platform for the marketing of the self to vast numbers of singles but once on the sites, respondents realised that not just any man will do, they wanted to appeal to a man with certain characteristics. Thus marketing had to be tailored to a niche market. Women learnt quickly to look for clues in the text of a profile as to the unspoken, or rather unwritten, characteristics of a man and then turned this process reflexively towards their own profile. Further information, respondents argued, could be gleaned by 'reading between the lines' of text, which may, intentionally or unintentionally hint at additional information. A popular clue was the newspaper a man read for example which gave an idea of how educated he was and also perhaps his political persuasion. Isobel regards herself as experienced in this field and is looking for a wealthy man,

> Isobel: Well have a real good look on it [the profile]. Sometimes what I look for is 'self employed', I'm quite a student of this. I look through his education and I prefer university, I have to say em…I would consider secondary school if they are self employed.

Not everybody gets it right first time. Alice had to 'tinker' with her profile to attract the 'right kind' of man. The process of marketing the self can indeed have unintended consequences which will not be realised until responses are received online. Alice explains how marketing strategies can involve not just a consideration of what information you do give, but what is strategically left out,

Judy: Do you think that when you are thinking about tinkering with this profile, in the back of your mind, is a kind of man, a kind of niche market if you like (laughs)?

Alice: Well it is a niche market! I think possibly the new profile is because it talks about singing, it talks about yoga and gardening, um and it's very specific, it basically and I thought maybe the yoga was putting them off so I thought I'd remove that!

Another strategy employed by many of the women was to search for the new arrivals in case anyone catches your eye and then contact them hopefully before they have been spotted by others,

Sandi: Every week I look for the new ones, the new faces…the new kids on the block are always popular at first. Often you get sick of the rest, the same old faces.

Isobel's strategy
Isobel had developed a number of clear, rational strategies for maximizing her opportunities for meeting potential dates. She talks about the process of constructing her profile and whilst on the one hand she says, 'its absolutely me to a tee' (see above) she simultaneously talks of the marketing strategies she has used to make it eye-catching,

Isobel: My current profile, I think it is very witty and I do get a lot of comments about what I've put…. what did I put?…um… 'I'm a bundle of contradictions I love', I know this sounds pretentious really, 'I love old buildings and beautiful new ones. I love the peace of the countryside but the bustle of city life and I cant wait for my children to come home from university and then I can't wait for them to go back again…em. And I love wine but hate being drunk…I was born brunette and now I'm blonde' and stuff like that. People read it because it's unusual. It attracts people, there's none of this, 'I've been hurt in the past' baggage, baggage, baggage. I hate men who write that!

Isobel's strategy for marketing the self online suggest that she is presenting herself in her profile but using a high degree of strategic marketing in order to portray herself in an eye catchingly creative way. Isobel recognises that just presenting your good points is not enough, she needs to be noticed above other profiles on the site and it is obvious that she puts a great deal of effort into this. But how do we understand the relationship between the marketed self, which is strategically packaged to attract the 'consumer' and the presentation of an authentic sincere self? Is the marketed self synonymous with a distorted or unauthentic presentation of self? Manipulating an interaction for a particular end is not placed by Goffman as the antithesis of the performance of a sincere presentation of self. Goffman suggests that whilst we seek to portray a self, that lives up to the expectations of the audience as a moral and sincere person, we simultaneously manipulate performances in order to give the most effective performance to illustrate the fact (Goffman, 1990: 243). Thus Goffman renders questions of authenticity and sincerity as irrelevant. The critical question concerns what can be classified as an effective and persuasive performance,

> In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged.... But qua performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realising those standards but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression, that these standards are being realised...as performers then we are merchants of morality (Goffman, 1990: 243).

Secondly, Goffman suggests that self-identity is the effect of the performance and not the cause of it and therefore, a performance is productive of who we are. (Goffman, 1990: 252). He argues that performances are inevitably productive of selves whether consciously manipulated or habitually performed,

> Goffman emphasises that the self-as-performer is not the same as the self as such, but rather is the basic motivational core which motivates us to engage in the performances with which we achieve selfhood.... it is the socialised self or the character performed, not the self as performer which is equated with self in our society (Branaman, 2000: xlix).

Unlike Goffmans face-to-face interactions, online communication allows for differing presentations of self to exist simultaneously. Alice talks of a man she dates who is currently registered on two dating sites,

> Alice: I'm also seeing somebody at the moment who has two completely
> contrasting profiles on two different sites, completely different (laughs). I've
> been seeing him since November!
> Judy: So was one profile very like him and the other one not or were neither
> like him or both like him?
> Alice: They are both like him. I mean well one of them said he was vegetarian
> and the other he didn't. On of them said he was Buddhist and the other left
> that out, em…you know, stuff like that. They say different things and yet both
> are very much like him!

Whilst Goffman (1990) suggests that performances can be reflected upon after the event in the light of the audience response, the Internet allows for different performances to be carried out simultaneously by a single player. Alice's friend has strategically posted two profiles on two different dating sites to evaluate which is the most successful in terms of numbers of women who respond and the calibre of those women. The credibility of performances, argues Goffman can be enhanced by keeping a distance between yourself and the audience, a process he calls, 'mystification' (Goffman, 1990: 74). In this case, using two different sites can be a way of ensuring that discrepancies aren't found in the two simultaneous performances, although he runs the risk of being spotted by someone else who uses more than one site! From a gaming perspective, he has in a sense become his own opponent, although paradoxically this places him in a 'win, win' situation as he has full control over and access to the strategies that drive both courses of action.

Giving fate a helping hand
The aim of the dating site is to facilitate the meeting of potential dates who may or may not move on to become serious relationships. Narratives of romance in contemporary Western society provide common frameworks of understanding of what it means to meet and fall in love. Jackson points out however, that this is not assume that romance narratives are passively appropriated, but rather actively worked upon in

order to merge wider understandings of love and romance that pre-exist us, with our own biographies and daily experiences (Jackson, 1999: 106). One such narrative centres on the 'fateful' encounter, where eyes meet across a crowded room and a powerful mystical connection is made between two lovers. Such narratives suggest a certain inevitability to the meeting; both partners were 'meant' to meet as if preordained by a mystical force. This is linked to another romantic notion of the meeting of 'soul mates'; two people who were bound from birth to meet and fall in love.

Women using the dating sites were proud of the fact that they were 'taking control' and being proactive in finding a man. The sites were an efficient way of placing yourself in the view of many potential dates. This rational approach tends to suggest an abandonment of the narrative of the 'fateful meeting' of lovers and also a lack of belief that such meetings were indeed inevitable and preordained. The words of respondents reveal that this was not the case and many merged narratives of fate into accounts of using the dating sites, seeing the Internet as a way of giving fate a 'helping hand'. April illustrates the merging of narratives by suggesting that she has a greater chance of meeting someone due to the numbers using the sites and yet appeals to the desire for a soul mate by suggesting that whilst she is taking steps to improve her chances, she still believes she may, 'stumble across ' her soul mate,

> April: There are so many sites; there are so many people. There are twenty-four hours in the day, the sites must improve the chance that you might get lucky and stumble across your soul mate.

Interstingly the strategic activity of marketing the self often changed women's approach to actually finding a match. Respondents found themselves being more reflexive and rational in considering what they want from a partner, rather than waiting for fate to intervene. Andrea reflects this view,

> Andrea: I've never thought of looking for someone this way before I joined the site...it's weird really, you kinda start organising your thoughts and what you want. Being online makes you sit up and take stock of things, you don't feel you can kind of float around aimlessly! Sounds like I'm buying a sofa!

Isobel also highlights how her rational approach to finding a mate has not replaced her belief in finding love when you least expect it. She acknowledges that despite all her strategic planning (see below) she may find love with someone who would not fit her preferred criteria. She has however developed a strategy which enables her to formalise what kind of partner would be most suitable for her. She keeps a general eye on what the market has to offer before narrowing the search to a particular 'type',

> Isobel: And until you sample the goods that are out there, you don't know
> what you want. I know what I'm looking for but... I'm a great believer in self-
> help books. I read a book and it said, 'you need eight months of dating, just
> date lots of different men so you can formalise in your head what you want'.
> The only way, in reality to meet, anybody, I don't care if you are Cindy
> Crawford, you are only going to be able to do that via the Internet. I ...I think
> the number of men that I've been out with have...its sort of refined things
> down and the problem is it's continuing to refine things down and so really,
> probably what I'm looking for, really doesn't exist and I don't know in two
> years time I could be with a bin man or something like that, you know and
> marry a big fat horrible greasy person who makes me laugh!

Andrea's account of meeting a man online illustrates that she uses the narrative of 'fate' to suggest that whilst she was actively searching for a man, she was mysteriously driven to look twice at a man's profile,

> Andrea: Well I kept on clicking back on to this picture and em, right from the
> beginning and then ignoring it and then looking at others and suddenly I
> would click on it again and there it would be again, but not actually
> consciously clicking on it because I knew what was going to be there...the
> name and the picture gradually dawned on me but then I realised. He looked
> so much like my first love all those years ago. so I contacted him and we've a
> date next week.

Dating sites can give an illusion of seemingly endless choice as, once logged onto the sites, you can view many hundreds of men with the click of a mouse. This illusion of limitless choice was further compounded for women who had joined many sites

simultaneously. As a result, the art of 'refining' referred to by Isobel can be taken to extremes. In the words of Ellie,

Ellie: Why settle for Mr Okay if you can hang out for Mr Perfect?

It seems however that giving fate a helping hand also raised expectations in terms of how many men were realistically attainable. The illusion of choice online made many women feel like, 'a kid in a sweet shop' and this encouraged women to keep in touch with several men simultaneously,

Kath: Oh I chat to loads of guys, it's like being in a sweet shop (laughs) I want one out of that jar and out of that jar, no, no I do that yes.

Once again women were using the sites to maximise efficiency and get the most from the services offered by the sites themselves. They had learnt the rules of the game and were also learning how to manipulate them to their own advantage. Marketing strategies cannot be separated by a reflexive consideration of the 'moves' of others on the sites. Thus women realised that their activity of 'keeping a spare ' was also one adopted by men,

Nora: Initially I felt that communicating with more than one man at a time was the wrong way to go about online dating. I prefer to concentrate on just one but men don't work that way so I am finally getting the hang of this. But I am open and do say that I am meeting others. I find that the ones I have met are still checking their mailbox looking for something better to come along.

Whilst on the one hand, using the dating sites was viewed as a process which increases the possibilities for women in finding dates, there were outcomes of using the sites which led them to feeling swamped by the sheer numbers online and that they were reduced to just one of numerous profiles displayed on the screen. It seems that strategic action doesn't always produce the intended outcome and players aren't always in control of the game. The focus of online activity is describing, maintaining and marketing the self, which was often referred to by respondents as an intensely personal experience. It was a time to reflect upon the self and decide how the self will

be presented to others in cyberspace in terms of what is unique to an individual and what that person has to offer a potential partner. Paradoxically, despite the preoccupation with self that drives the online interaction, once a profile has been posted online, some respondents felt invisible,

> Kim: I thought I'd done this great profile and then when I looked at all the others I thought, 'oh gawd, no one will look at mine, it's so…unremarkable and boring'. I feel kind of invisible.

Everyone who constructs a profile is 'packaged' the same way in terms of format since the sites leave little room for originality. The sites provide a set standard template for the production of a profile, which guides a user through the process. Apart from small windows left for free text, the rest of the profile is simply the response to preset questions. Alongside the standard presentation profile box, which comes up on the screen, the text is also standardised as everyone answers the same questions. As a result respondents felt they have to present and market themselves even more aggressively in order to restore that sense of being unique,

> Sara: After all you're just another face in an endless parade of women. I think I have loads to offer a man but how do I get him to stop and look at me…em…let alone read all about me…a naked photo perhaps!

Small pockets of free text allow for some originality to inject individuality into a profile to make it stand out from another and yet paradoxically even free text can come to be seen as further standardisation of users. Users themselves often tend to draw upon common phrases or genres in order to express themselves. For example users often draw upon romantic genres when talking of what they enjoy doing with a partner. When presenting the self by text online, it seems that individuality can be a struggle to assert, as Millie points out,

> Millie: How many men want to walk along a secluded beach hand in hand? The beaches must be littered with them!

In order to present themselves in an eye catching way, women used snappy phrases, humour, irony or poetry, but importantly, they also considered the profile in its totality; what kind of *impression* of self was coming across? They therefore attempted to assess their marketing strategy from the viewpoint of men, who would read their profile,

> June: You have to think very carefully about what you put and how you put it, because you don't want to come across as desperate… you don't want to come across as more than you really are but at the same time you want to come across as if you are a nice person, in that, you know, you have a lot to give, I mean I don't know whether I've achieved that or not.

Sometimes a certain impression was given unintentionally and it wasn't until the respondent began to get responses from men that this was realised. Unintended presentations of self were realised in the light of responses received and also from an impression women gleaned that a certain 'type' of man was being attracted.

> Nora: Yes, I do change my profile. Sometimes I think I tell people too much, I can be too open but I generally change it if I have attracted someone really bad. Initially all the guys who were responding were typical 'mummy's boys', the ones who wanted mothering and looking after. I have done so much of that in my lifetime, being the carer in a relationship and now I want someone to care for me. So yes, when I realized I was attracting someone who wanted looking after I changed the profile. The guys who were responding to me weren't disabled through illness but mainly emotionally.

Nora has found through trial and error that profile writing can be as much about what you leave out as the information you offer. Nora went on to suggest that she was inadvertently coming across as 'a mousy shy little thing' according to the interpretation of one of her offline dates,

> Nora: One man told me he was surprised that I had a much stronger character when he met me than he thought I would have. My emails and profile implied

that I might be a mousy shy little thing who just went with the flow. So I was impressed - and so was he... for ten seconds[6].

Trial and error was involved in successful marketing and thus the marketing of the self was an ongoing process. Some enlisted the help of others to do the job. Jen explains how she got a man friend to look at hers to make her profile more 'upbeat and sexy'

> Jen: Because my web dating best friend, who put me onto this, her ex partner revised my original profile from a man's perspective
>
> Judy: And was it very different?
>
> Jen: Yes, it was very, very different. It was much more em...I mean I didn't have myself down as...I mean he knew my personality by that time and he was saying, 'you're not selling this personality of yours girl' and you know he kept saying, 'you're bloody gorgeous' he kept saying. So he was trying to get me to get much more of the personality I had across and I thought I had...and at one bit...I cant remember what the wording was he put, 'voluptuous' rather than cuddly
>
> Judy: Do you think it's more upbeat and positive?
>
> Jen: ...In some respects yes and in some respects no, in some respects I didn't like it because it was putting me out there saying, 'I'm up for grabs' and that wasn't what I wanted. It was, 'come on boys, come on now, here she is' and that's not what I wanted to say. And he said, 'you are up for having a good time' so I said I'm not going to have those words on my profile, that's cheap and nasty and I'm not going there but he said, 'I don't mean it in that way' that's the way it became and the way it would be read and I thought, 'I'm not having that'.

Jen's profile was written in a more aggressive marketing style which can indeed be an effective marketing ploy, Jen points to the pitfalls, however of an unintended impression being given, suggesting that the overall message of the profile hinted at sexual availability which was not an impression she wanted to give.

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[6] Nora's date was not 'impressed' enough to ask her out on another date.

Marketing the self through online interaction

Having attracted someone's attention, subsequent email interaction has to build on the marketed self as portrayed in the profile, skilfully holding the attention and interest of the other whilst simultaneously assessing his potential. Online, it is easier to sound witty or confident without fear of our body betraying our nerves or awkwardness. Similarly it is easier to construct a witty or interesting response via email when we have time to reflect on what we want to say and what impression we is trying to get across. Online textual communication enabled the reflexive marketing of the self. Strategies were applied by respondents to keep the marketing momentum going. Hannah and Nora both suggest a softy-softly approach to keep men interested,

> Hannah: Once contact is made, you mustn't overdo the emails in the early stages...you don't want to appear too keen. Same with photos...drip-feed him with the odd picture to keep his interest. Don't make it seem as if you have no life and are just sitting at the computer waiting for his email! (laughs)

> Nora: Never contact a man unless it's your turn. I always wait for a reply and I never suggest meeting, I always let the man do that...sometimes they take ages to get round to it and I think, 'oh hurry up you stupid man!'.

The ongoing marketing process through subsequent email interaction was also informed by marketing 'gaffes' which were often interpreted as subtle cues as to personality, education levels etc. Many respondents religiously checked grammar and spelling in emails,

> Diane: Oh God it [bad spelling] just puts you right off, I mean, does that mean he's not educated to even a basic level? The teacher in me comes out. I want to send it back with all the mistakes underlined in red!

Conversely women talked of being easily seduced by the man with an eloquent turn of phrase,

> Shirley: If they've got a descriptive turn of writing em, if they don't just put, 'u' for 'you'. A lot of these shortened things which I know are quite clever and

they do save time and all the rest of it, but if somebody is talking to you and they are talking in bad English on the computer, you tend to think they are going to talk in bad English when they are not on the computer, you know. So somebody who is sort of like, says something like, 'I've got some gorgeous roses in my garden, the petals have got the dew on them' sort of thing and the rest of it, then I'm far more likely to sort of keep chatting to that person than I am somebody who just enquires what colour knickers I've got on (both laugh) which happens!

Alice explains that men used a variety of techniques when sending emails, from jokes to poetry,

> Alice: I've had a number of blokes who have emailed me and sent me things, they send me silly games or they send me um things that other people have passed on to them about all sorts of things you know. Others are saying very profound things; I mean somebody sent a long poem that had been given to him about 'God wanted you to meet somebody else before you actually met somebody better' or something like that. I was sent that, I was sent American stuff about smiling, all variety of things. I've had poems written for me...I've had poems sent to me that people have written and you know, I've had one from a guy that was actually sixty and I found it today, by chance this morning, but he wrote a poem to me, it was emailed to me on the site.

Whilst marketing the self was a calculated process, there was no way of predicting how the audience would read the performance. Women found that often they misread the impressions given by fellow users in email communication, which led to disappointment when meeting offline. As a result another strategy was suggested by several respondents for making site use more efficient. They argued that it is best to use the site to make contact with a man and then move offline as fast as possible. Respondents unanimously agreed that the 'narrow band communication' (Stone, 1995) of email allowed for a reading between the lines, which gave an often distorted picture of someone. Meeting in the flesh was often disappointing and some bemoaned the time and effort they had put into online communication,

Isobel: I mean that guy I mentioned earlier, I emailed him for ages and when I met him I thought he was right donkey. That's a lesson to you, you know...I thought we had the same interests, everything was the same and then when I met him I thought, 'you are the most boring bastard on the planet'... I think it is really important that you meet, very, very quickly because you can get such a wrong impression, you can just get such a wrong impression of somebody.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that respondents described their activities on the dating sites as marketing or selling the self to others as a product. The strategic manipulation of online presentation of self could be seen as a distinct form of impression management that arose out of the dating site context and was enabled by computer-mediated communication. Women employed a range of gamesman-like strategies to participate on the sites, which centred upon an assessment of their own strategies and actions in the light of others, and conversely others' perceived assessment of themselves. They used the sites creatively by manipulating the rules of the game to make the sites work more efficiently for them and became adept at employing and evaluating marketing strategies. Having honed their marketing skills online, women reaped the benefit in terms of acquiring offline dates. The previous chapter revealed that whilst women felt they had taken control of technology to enhance their lives, they simultaneously felt that, at times, their online behaviour changed as a result of online interaction. Indeed the process of marketing the self for the first time added to this sense that they were changing their behaviour, changes that were perceived as driven by technology. The following chapter continues the theme of change by moving to the final stage of respondents' journey; meeting men for offline dates. It will reveal how using dating sites impacted upon women's offline behaviour and led them to behave 'disgracefully'.

Chapter Seven

Women Offline: Behaving Disgracefully

> Isobel: The Internet is my city pub scene, you know? I've behaved
> disgracefully and it feels fabulous!

This chapter follows respondents into the final stage of their online dating experiences; meeting men for offline dates. Chapter Six explored how women marketed themselves and interacted with men online which enabled them to make new friends and dip a cautious toe back into the dating scene. Chatting online was perceived as a 'safe' way of meeting men, which spared them the awkwardness and anxiety associated with face-to-face encounters. Gradually, as a result of their online interactions, women gained in confidence and wanted to move beyond online chat to meet men face-to-face. Women's first tentative steps towards arranging offline dates often heralded a period of intensive multiple dating, during which time, women met a variety of men and as a result, had many new 'adventures'. This chapter explores respondents' offline dating experiences and reveals how using online dating sites actually altered their objective for using the sites; as a result of intensive dating, enabled by the seemingly endless choice of potential partners online, respondents began to enjoy dating *for its own sake*, rather than searching for a more permanent, long-term relationship. Women not only enjoyed the opportunity to meet men, they relished the dating experience in itself, which often widened respondents' horizons in terms of travelling to other cities or even countries, as well as providing them with a succession of enjoyable nights out.

Women had considered a variety of ways to meet single men before turning to online dating sites and a unanimous cry from them was their dismay at the lack of social outlets for the older women to socialise and meet men. Many pubs and clubs were seen by respondents as spaces exclusively for the young. Not only did they feel they were 'out of place' in certain social settings that they perceived as solely for the young, but they felt that their behaviour within these spaces was closely scrutinized and regulated. Respondents feared that 'inappropriate' displays of sexuality and

femininity would leave them with the label, 'sad and desperate'. The subtle workings of power that informally regulated older women's behaviour within certain social spaces can be explored within the framework of Foucault's (1998) model of power as invisible and productive of pleasure, rather than overtly prohibitive. This chapter explores how women positioned themselves and were positioned by others within competing discourses surrounding femininity, sexuality and ageing and how this impacted upon their use of social space.

Whilst respondents felt that their social activities were restricted offline, cyberspace was seen as a site of resistance, a space without geographical or physical boundaries within which women were enabled to contact men and express themselves as sexual beings without fear of the ridicule or disgust of others. Interaction in cyberspace was an activity that took place behind closed doors and as a result, women were able to circumvent the regulatory gaze of others. This is not to say however, that gendered and ageist assumptions are absent in cyberspace. Indeed Hannah gives an example of ageism online,

> Hannah: Em, on one site which I was on, which I came off, er, was a young lad, I think he was just about eighteen or nineteen, sent me a lot of bad language and, saying that why was somebody of my age on that site. That's what it was aimed at and er, it was very, very unpleasant and I reported him to the site and they were very good, they emailed me back straight away and said they had looked into it and he was suspended.

Whilst undoubtedly social relations were carried into cyberspace, respondents felt a sense of freedom from social norms and expectations for two reasons: firstly, the relative anonymity of cyberspace meant that women were spared the possible social consequences of their more confident and direct advances to men online. An embarrassing or upsetting interaction, like Hannah's above, can be terminated at the click of a mouse; secondly, it is implicitly assumed that each person on the site is 'available' and looking for dates. As a result, women were spared the need to make sexual or flirtatious advances to men in a social setting,

Angie: Everyone knows what you are there for; if blokes don't reply then it doesn't really matter. You don't have to do all the stuff you do in pubs where you smile at the bloke, he smiles back…online its refreshing, you just get straight down to business.

Once offline dating commenced however, respondents found themselves in the public eye once more. The construction of the middle-aged woman as socially invisible and beyond her sexual prime caused anxiety and confusion for women who were keen to embrace the freedom associated with their new identities as single women. Despite developing strategies to hide their dating activities from others, women internalised the judgements of friends and family and, as a result, had to deal with their own ambivalent feelings towards their dating behaviour. This chapter looks more closely at how women made sense of their desire to socialise and date men whilst simultaneously expressing guilt and confusion at their 'disgraceful' behaviour.

A common theme from the accounts of respondents was the significant impact of online dating site use upon their offline behaviour. Chapter Five highlighted how the nature of online behaviour surprised women who attributed their more confident and overtly sexual approach to men, directly to computer use. Not only was the computer enabling them to make changes in their lives, it was perceived to be actually *changing* their behaviour. Similarly, women saw the computer as a force that lured them into 'addictive' patterns of computer use; once again the computer was perceived to be changing their behaviour. Once respondents began offline dating however, the perceived influence that the computer was having upon their behaviour was felt even more strongly. Sudden and fundamental change was experienced in a number of ways: women were dating and enjoying the company of a variety of men, often after many years in a long term relationship; their sexual activity increased dramatically, with women often having many sexual partners; finally, their intensive dating activities led to many new experiences. As a result women were faced with many new forms of risk, which instead of being acknowledged and evaluated, were often underplayed or dismissed.

On the one hand women were enjoying their new freedom to explore a variety of relationships with men, but on the other, they felt confused as to why their behaviour

felt so, 'out of character'. This chapter will argue that respondents' common feeling of 'acting out of character' was fundamental to their understanding of the computer as a force that was 'taking over' their lives and impacting upon their subjectivities. Respondents felt that their dating activities challenged their sense of 'character' over time so fundamentally that they felt they were no longer the same person; the computer was perceived to be causing them to act contrary to their sense of *who they always had been*'.

Chapter one discussed how Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity incorporates both a sense of sameness and change into the construction of self-identity. Stories of the self are told in order to incorporate change into a linear sense of self over time. Ricoeur (1992) suggests that 'character' is generally seen as a stable and unchanging core to the self, which is often used in narratives of self to provide a relatively static and familiar explanatory framework within which to explain how an individual approaches the world around them; how they understand and act in the social world. Against this, Ricoeur argues that this static sense of character is an illusion as change can be incorporated in our sense of character via a process of sedimentation, which occurs over time (see below for full discussion). Respondents appealed, however, to the common sense view of character as stable across time and, as a result, were unable to tell stories of multiple dating, sexual activity and risk taking within their familiar framework of character to explain their actions. As a result women felt a sense of their agency being taken from them; their dating activities were driven by a new sense of self. How respondents understood these perceived changes in behaviour in terms of *not being themselves* will be explored in this chapter drawing on Ricoeur's work on 'character' as part of narrative identity.

Respondents' feelings that their lives, indeed selves, were being 'taken over' was compounded by their subjective understanding of time as 'speeding up' during a period of offline dating. The 'whirlwind' that Hannah (below) describes highlights the speed and intensity of the online dating experience that left women feeling that life was 'running out of control'. Women's dating schedules were so full, they barely had time to reflect on their behaviour or evaluate risks until after the event. This chapter follows the theme of previous chapters by exploring women's subjective

understandings of time and how this informed the final stage of dating site use and the relationship between women and their computer.

All dressed up and nowhere to go

Before joining online dating sites, many respondents had tried other ways of meeting single men. Respondents struggled however, to find places where single older women could to socialise and meet men. They often harked back to their teenage years when going to pubs and clubs was commonplace and socialising in this environment was taken for granted. At middle age, many had been out of the dating scene for a long period and felt nervous about dating and ignorant of where to go. The night time economy seemed to cater only for the young. Millie did venture into pubs but felt they were social spaces for the young,

> Millie: The music was too loud to speak and they cater for the young ones really.

Kim felt that it wasn't appropriate to visit pubs on your own 'at a certain age',

> Kim: Where do you go? When you are of a certain age you can't go places on your own or you just get picked up whereas I want to meet somebody interesting and intelligent.

Women entering mid life assumed the collective identity (ies) of middle age and internalised the normative expectations of that age cohort. When the unexpected happened, the end of a relationship or marriage, those normative expectations were suddenly thrown into confusion as respondents renegotiated identities as single women. The informal regulation of middle-aged women became apparent when respondents explored social outlets and opportunities to meet and date single men. They discovered that their social space was limited, as was their behaviour within certain spaces. These limitations were imposed within a pervasive heterosexual framework, which enforces normative expectations of femininity and sexuality for the older woman.

Foucault's (1998) model of power as subtle and pervasive, rather than overtly prohibitive is a useful framework within which to understand how women, who were not prohibited from entering pubs for younger people, felt nevertheless that they should not inhabit these spaces. Foucault's model differs from common understandings of power as top-down and emanating from a specific and visible locus of power. Instead he sees power as invisible and multidirectional,

> Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix – no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body (Foucault, 1998: 94).

Foucault argues that power serves to regulate and encourage the self-regulation of bodies within populations in subtle and seemingly invisible ways. He suggests that individuals do not possess power, 'Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds onto or allows to slip away' (Foucault, 1998: 94). Instead power is conceptualised as working through the individual in two ways: firstly power is linked to knowledge in that 'discourses' (ways of understanding and knowing social phenomena) inform the way individuals understand and position themselves as subjects. At the same time, subjects are the embodiment of those discourses. Some feminists (Fraser, 1989; Hartsock, 1990) have questioned Foucault's conceptualisation of power, asking whether it is useful for an exploration of women's resistance to patriarchal power. Fraser (1989) points to the fact that if Foucault is arguing that individuals are simply a result of the effects of power, then they are reduced to docile bodies, with no agency or resources for resistance (Fraser, 1989: 29). Foucault's later work on *Technologies of the Self* (1988) does give a greater sense of agency to the subject. Nevertheless, Foucault's work is useful here in that he moves away from macro understandings of power and allows for a closer exploration of the complexities of the relationship between subject and power at a micro day-to-day level, both in terms of regulation and resistance.

The category of middle-aged woman is informed by many competing discourses of gender and age and indeed women positioned themselves at differing points within

these discourses, driven by the desire to be 'normal' and to conform to wider social and cultural norms. Foucault stresses the fluidity of discourses,

> We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse or between the dominant discourse or the dominated one: but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies (Foucault, 1998: 100).

The desire to be 'normal' and fit into social categories defined by discourse illustrates the subtlety of power relations, in that achieving the norm can be a pleasurable and productive experience. This chapter reveals how women reflexively self-monitored their appearance and behaviour in order to stay within the discourse of 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997). Rather than experiencing self-monitoring in terms of restriction, many found pleasure in the practices of femininity such as dressing for a date for example. As women were placed within competing discourses of ageing, femininity and sexuality, however, there was also considerable confusion and anxiety attached to self-monitoring. This was revealed in the words of respondents who simultaneously enjoyed their social activities and yet struggled at times to justify the extent of their dating behaviour and sexual activity even to themselves.

Whilst respondents drew upon a variety of discourses of ageing and gender to understand themselves as subjects, they simultaneously resisted, finding pleasure as well as anxiety in both resisting and colluding with the workings of power. Importantly Foucault argues that resistance does not lie outside of power relations,

> Where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relations of power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power (Foucault, 1998: 95).

This chapter reveals the acknowledgement and resistance of women to the gendered double standard of ageing and sexuality but at the same time highlights how complex the process of resistance can be. Respondents felt that such discourses were part of their subjectivities, part of *who they are*, and as a result, resistance was often experienced as a fundamental change to the self (see below). Discourses are multiple,

fluid and contradictory and women in their accounts revealed confusion in finding a coherent discourse of respectability for the middle-aged woman to form resistance against. Their accounts highlighted the complex nature of power and how it works through discourse to regulate the social space and behaviour of women. Importantly, however, their words reveal how power relations were negotiated and played out within the context of their everyday lives.

Bartky (1988) suggests that Foucault has understated the gendered nature of power, which often regulates women's lives to a greater extent than men. This becomes clear in the words of respondents who constantly referred to a double standard in terms of the regulation of their own sexual behaviour in contrast to the regulation of their male counterparts' behaviour and occupation of social space. Maeve echoed the words of many women in the view that whilst it is largely seen as socially unacceptable for an older woman to go out alone into pubs and clubs, middle-aged men could enter these spaces without appearing 'out of place'. Thus the informal rules that limit and police the social spaces of the middle- aged are gendered,

> Maeve: Well I wouldn't go out for a meal on my own and I wouldn't even go out for a drink on my own but I think men could do that.

Dot argues that the single woman can be perceived as a 'spare part', or even a problem in a social setting,

> Dot: Yeah coz it was like, I remember the first presentation dinner I went to by myself and I was sat next to this bloke whose wife was ill coz she couldn't come and I knew the bloke really well but I felt they had sat me there coz his wife was ill...yeah it was a bit like, yeah a spare part, 'what are we going to do with her? She's come in by herself!'

It seems that respondents' problematic occupation of social space as a single woman can be partly attributed to a 'couple culture'. The pervasiveness of the (heterosexual) norm of being in a couple, makes socialising for the single woman of any age problematic, indeed Skeggs (1997) points out that couple culture puts pressure on

single women to find partners and limits the social space they can acceptably inhabit (Skeggs, 1997: 115).

> Ellie: I think everyone thinks that they should be with somebody; it's an accepted thing isn't it? If you are on your own, you know, people say, 'Why can't you find somebody? What's the matter with you?' It would be nice to have somebody, you know, when you get these wedding invitations that say, 'and friend', somebody to fulfil the 'and friend' bit!

Ellie's view of the single woman as not only positioned as a 'spare part' but also as somehow inadequate or incomplete in a social setting, resonates with the work of Skeggs whose female respondents felt that '...to be without a man is seen to be inadequate and undesirable' (Skeggs, 1997: 114). It seems from the accounts of women, however, that they see men as positioned differently within couple culture. A single man is perceived to be more readily accepted in a social setting and any flirtatious advances to women do not place him at the same risk of being labelled 'sad and desperate'. In fact Alice points out that it is socially acceptable for older men to approach young women,

> Alice: Because basically I think that er, men can still get out there on their own and chat people up and things like that at any age coz many of them are looking for younger women anyway.

It seems then that respondents felt they were in the wrong space when attempting to occupy social settings they saw as the territory of the young. In other social spaces the pervasiveness of couple culture left them feeling not that they were occupying the *wrong* space but that they were inhabiting that space problematically as a single woman. Indeed Dot positions herself as a 'spare part' at the dinner, seeing herself as somehow 'extra' or outside of heterosexual couple culture. The fact that she felt, 'no one knew what to do with me' reveals how she felt she had fallen outside of heterosexual etiquette by coming to a dinner alone.

De Beauvoir (1983) suggests that there is pressure on middle-aged women to become inconspicuous in certain settings, and this pressure can be from younger women.

Here, it is not that older women occupy the wrong space, or that they occupy it alone; it is their behaviour within it that is seen problematic and in need of regulation,

> Young women have an acute sense of what should and should not be done when one is no longer young. 'I don't understand' they say, 'how a woman of forty can bleach her hair; how she can make an exhibition of herself in a bikini; how she can flirt with men. The day I'm her age...' The day comes; they wear bikinis and smile at men (de Beauvior, 1983: 291).

Lessing also stresses the harsh regulation of the behaviour of older women in a social setting, arguing that it is sexual behaviour that is the focus of intense regulation, 'Most men and more women-young women afraid for themselves -punish older women with derision, punish them with cruelty, when they show inappropriate signs of sexuality' (Lessing, 1997: 129). Respondents were well aware of such ageist attitudes. Maeve flags up the attitude of the young to her own sexuality as an older woman,

> Maeve: It's like Ken and Deirdre kissing on Coronation Street. The young in particular just think, 'Yuk'.

The regulation of the sexuality and social space of the older women can been linked to her positioning as an object of inadequacy or pity in that, as an older single woman, not only is she excluded from spaces designated for the young, she is perceived as failing to attain the heterosexual ideal of being in a couple and falls outside the norms of heterosexual etiquette in a social setting. Ussher, however links women's social regulation to a fear in Western Society of the sexuality of older women. The overtly sexual older woman has traditionally been represented as being predatory and powerful,

> Older women are all but invisible within both high and low culture – with the post-menopausal woman primarily as the crone, the hag or the dried up grandmother, her body covered and her sexuality long left behind. If the older woman is depicted as alive, as sexual, this in itself makes her an object of fascination (or disgust), threatening to evoke the fear of the feminine, of the

devouring, powerful medusa that is sexually outside the control of men (Ussher, 2006: 126).

In contrast, Valerie Gibson (2002) in her book, *Cougars* celebrates the liberated middle-aged women who actively express their sexuality by chasing younger men. Her imagery, however, simultaneously draws upon the cultural representation of the middle-aged woman as the dangerous and powerful sexual predator,

> It's an irresistible combination for younger men who are more-than-willing prey for these sleek and sexy predators. So, if you're a cougar get ready to find out how to prowl, stalk, catch and enjoy the perfect younger man and make them, and you, purr with pleasure (http://valeriegibson.com/book.htm).

Shirley reflects this view as she explains how she thinks others will perceive her if she dines out alone,

> Shirley: I mean I can't sit in a restaurant and have a meal with everyone thinking, 'she's here eyeing up all the local talent'. People wont think I'm out for just a meal, they think I'm after a man, the waiter perhaps!

Respondents felt that there are few social spaces that older women could 'respectably' inhabit. Some respondents joined health clubs or special interest groups for company but also to see if they might find some unattached males. Special interest groups were perceived as places where it was acceptable for older women to visit alone and meet others without feeling 'a spare part' or 'out of place',

> Sandra: I have joined a walking group and other activities thinking maybe there are a chance to meet someone unattached but no luck so far.

Sarah joined a sports club and felt accepted in that environment as a woman on her own,

> Sarah: I joined the leisure centre and ...basically to get out of the house but also to meet other people both male and female...and it's worked! There are

three or four girls I can sit and have a drink and a chat with when I go there, you know, so that bit has worked and...if I'm on my own someone will come up and say 'hi' you know, its taken a while to be accepted. I enjoy it and I still go because I can walk in on my own with my bag over my shoulder and have my swim and come out afterwards and I don't feel as if I'm walking into a pub (laughs).

So it appears there are some venues where middle-aged women feel comfortable socialising and others where they feel their presence will provoke disapproval, perhaps even ridicule. From the words of respondents it became clear that it was pubs and nightclubs that caused anxiety, these being social spaces inhabited by the young and where the behaviour of older women is scrutinized more acutely. Entering a health club did not signal overtly women's aim of meeting men socially. Sarah's reference to, 'walking in with a bag over her shoulder' is significant in that it signalled her reason for entering the club, which was to have a swim. Walking into a pub however as a single woman signals that they may be searching for some male company. It seems the older woman faces a paradoxical situation where she is placed as 'lacking' as a single woman without a man and yet her efforts to socialise and attract men run the risk of being labelled 'sad and desperate.

Some respondents did, however venture into pubs,

June: Well I went out to the pub for a while but I just ended up getting drunk on a Friday night and chatting to married men and I just thought, 'stop it girl' it's ridiculous at my age... Oh It's an age thing definitely, you don't want...I mean I've never, because I've been married twice quite close together and I've had the children, I haven't really been on the drinking scene, if you know what I mean.

June explains how she reflexively evaluated and regulated her behaviour for fear of becoming an object of ridicule or disgust. Getting drunk and chatting to married men in the pub was not 'respectable' behaviour for the older woman. Skeggs' (1997) work on respectability in terms of sexuality and class resonates with the accounts of respondents bound by the norms of respectability in the middle years for the older

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woman. Respectability was seen by women as being concerned with the avoidance of pity or ridicule, fears of being labelled as 'sad and desperate' were commonplace. Within the dating game, older women's capital in terms of physical attractiveness is experienced as loss as they get older and as a result, they have less capital to exchange within the relationship market than their younger counterparts. This places them, as June sees it, as appearing grateful for any male attention at all. At the same time, however, to actually appear 'desperate' must be avoided at all costs. June goes on to show her own disapproval at women within her own age cohort acting and dressing unrespectably. Her criticism reflects her own anxieties around respectability in terms of dress and behaviour in certain spaces,

> June: You see these women out on a weekend in the pubs, all dressed up but you know that the young lads will only chat to them to get their drinks bought for them and quick shag. The blokes think they are easy and they are lucky to have anyone. It makes me cringe for them, it really does.

Using the Internet however, was seen as liberatory as the dating sites allowed women to talk to men and behave 'disgracefully' away from the public gaze. Cyberspace provided a site of resistance where women could chat to men, organise dates and meet them offline without having to go to the pub or club to attract a mate. Respondents relished the sense of freedom that was enabled by the sites and yet revealed guilt and confusion over their behaviour. What is significant however is that their guilt did not stop them behaving 'disgracefully'. Those who more openly challenged norms of respectability, however often found they faced a moralistic tone from friends,

> Jen: There are only certain friends who I can talk to about this [Internet dating]. Those that are married can be very judgemental. They would just see me as a tart, and a middle-aged one at that. I have a couple that I can talk to, it is great to talk to you about this because it is comforting to know other women behave the same way! … Em, my friends' approval is a barrier, they don't approve at all, out of all of my friends there are only three that I share the absolute truth with.

Jen draws attention to the policing of the social behaviour and social space of the middle-aged women by older women themselves in the advice given by friends as to where it *isn't* appropriate for her to be seen. She also illustrates the point that this advice is heavily gendered,

> Jen: Nobody has yet come up with the right solution for me, you know, they talk about well you know, 'you maybe shouldn't really be going and doing pubs and clubs' a lot of them will see me as being too old for that em. Or looking desperate or…and in a way, well…I suppose I am but it is okay for the blokes isn't it?

Jen's comments here reveal that despite her efforts to resist the accepted roles for middle-aged women in society that are reaffirmed here by her friends' advice, she herself has internalised these opinions; she states that her friends fear she may appear 'desperate' if she behaves in certain ways, in certain places and yet she adds, '…and in a way I suppose I am'. It is significant that Jen suggests she may be labelled, 'a tart and a middle aged one at that'. It seemed to Jen that the middle-aged woman's sexual activity is regulated more than it is for the younger woman.

Chatting to men online was an activity that could be carried out behind closed doors. Multiple dating offline could not easily be done so discreetly and women took steps to hide the sheer numbers of dates from others by withholding information from friends, family or work colleagues and secondly making sure the venues for dates were varied. Being in the same local pub with a variety of Internet dates was avoided if possible,

> Alice: You have to make sure you go to lots of places; you don't want to be seen by your friends, especially if your date isn't up to much! (Laughs) You get a name for yourself if you are seen with loads of different blokes.

> Maeve: At work they asked me where I met him but I don't tell them the truth, I just say, 'oh it's a long story'.

So whilst women felt empowered by the dating sites to sidestep the regulatory gaze of others and enjoy dating and socialising both online and offline, they had to manage

the risk of the disapproval of others. Dot talks of avoiding the disapproval of her children,

> Dot: I just brought him home and we spent the night together. It felt fantastic
> but I wouldn't tell just anybody about this
> Judy: Why not?
> Dot: Some would find it appalling; I certainly wouldn't tell the kids

On the other hand, some respondents who openly told others about their dating experiences sensed an air of envy in the reactions of their friends. It seems that some friends didn't adopt a moralistic tone, instead recognising the pleasures to be had in resisting social norms of respectability. Interestingly, one of Kate's friends likens her behaviour to that of a younger woman, for whom multiple dating is seen as more acceptable,

> Kate: Actually one of the things that make it [Internet dating] exciting is that I
> become the centre of attention and afterwards I must have had at least ten
> phone calls asking how it went. One friend said, 'you sound like a teenager,
> you are having so much fun!'

Competing feelings of anxiety and pleasure drove respondents to reflexively explore why they held such ambivalent feelings towards their dating activities. They sought to make sense of and to justify their actions both to themselves and to significant others. The feelings of shame which women felt at not aspiring to the roles and behaviour attributed to their gender and age cohort, sat in opposition to their desire *not* to conform. This paradox was a theme that ran through the accounts of respondents who felt at times, very confused about how to evaluate their actions and themselves. This confusion led respondents to attribute the often-dramatic change in their behaviour to the fact that they were acting 'out of character'. Jen and Dot's remarks are typical of many respondents,

> Jen: I mean, this is just not the way I would normally behave, it feels as if I've
> been taken over by an invisible force. I ask myself, 'what the hell are you
> doing?' and then I say, 'but you are having so much fun!'

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Dot: This is so out of character for me. Sometimes I stop and think, 'crumbs, did I really just do that?'

Jen's remark highlights the internal struggle that respondents experienced in their effort to both justify and make sense of their activities. This feeling of being, 'out of control' and behaving, 'out of character' often led respondents to point to their computer as the root cause of their behaviour. This theme of feeling 'out of control' follows on from Chapter Five which explored how the computer was perceived to be controlling the behaviour of women, enticing them to become 'addicted' to searching for and chatting to men on dating sites. The computer was seen therefore to encourage, indeed force respondents into uncharacteristic behaviour, both online and offline. It is interesting that instead of hailing the computer as a tool that enabled respondents to find men to date, they perceived the computer to have removed their agency, it was acting through them rather than enabling them to act for themselves. It seemed to respondents that using the computer had impacted upon their subjectivities, actually changed the self.

The accounts of respondents during the interviews revealed how they sought to make sense of the often sudden and fundamental changes in their lives by telling stories of the self in terms of life experiences leading to the growth and progression of the self over time. Chapter Four describes how respondents adopted the 'life story book' approach to understand their life in terms of change (the beginning of a new chapter) and linearity (building upon the chapters that went before). Throughout their stories was the theme of how they survived the misfortunes life threw at them. They had experienced self-growth as a result of change, but felt that a central core of the self remained. Dating offline heralded a transitional stage but one that could not easily be assimilated into a story of self-growth over time. Respondents were acting contrary to long-held ideals involving sexual behaviour and femininity that were an integral part of their subjectivities. Further than this, their dating activities were placing them at risk of the disapproval of others and importantly disapproval of themselves. As a result, they felt as if they had been 'taken over' or become 'another self', a view often enforced by friends,

Jen: One of my friends said to me, 'wow you have changed so much, the old Jen wouldn't have done all these things!'

Respondents struggled to make sense of behaviour which threatened their sense of respectability and self-worth both for themselves and significant others. They therefore appeared to be acting contrary to *themselves*. This sense of behaving contrary to the way they always were not only challenges a linear narrative of a progressional self but also adds a moral dimension in that women were questioning their own respectability. Due to ambivalent feelings of shame and pleasure, respondents were confused as to how they could 'allow themselves' to behave this way. Women's apportioning of blame upon the computer as the root cause of their behaviour can also be linked to their desire to distance themselves from feelings of guilt and shame. To shift the focus of guilt onto the computer is to avoid moral responsibility for their own behaviour.

Ricoeur (1992) suggests that character is often understood as an inherently stable core of the self that stays broadly the same throughout our lives. He states however that character is not stable and unchanging but is the culmination of stories of the self, which stress certain traits particular to the subject. These traits are sedimented over the years but believed to have always been part of the defining character of the self. Character is made up of *habits*, which can be understood as traits we have held all of our lives. Ricoeur argues however that habits are actually acquired gradually across our lives, thus allowing for change. *Identifications* form the second aspect of character. This refers to how our sense of self is tied to our identifications with others, thus identifications with many different people across time also allows for the possibility of change. Character is not a fixed unique possession of the individual but is socially produced, fluid and malleable. As women's narratives of self using a familiar explanatory framework of character, faltered, they were unable to understand or make sense of their dating behaviour. Previous understandings of character were brought into question as a result of their 'disgraceful' behaviour, which risked losing respectability in their own eyes and the eyes of others. It seemed to respondents that their agency to act in the world had been removed and they had been taken over. Their behaviour was not their own and they were indeed acting 'out of character'.

Time and offline dating

Another reason which compounded women's feelings of being 'taken over' by the computer was their understanding of time as, 'speeded up' as a result of offline dating. Respondents talked of the 'whirlwind' of offline dating which led them to experience time as 'running away' with them. (see below). As women gradually became accustomed to offline dating, the amount of time they spent online began to wane. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, as mentioned in the previous chapter, online communication leaves a lot to the imagination, which can lead to an idealisation of a potential partner. This led to numerous disappointments upon meeting offline and so women began instead to use the computer less for getting to know someone and more as a tool for arranging dates; secondly, as they entered the stage of dating offline, computer use was no longer needed to fill, 'spare time', although some women still kept in touch via email and MSN with friends and lovers they had met online. The computer now became a way of saving time and organising quickly and efficiently often a large number of dates. Computer use was now fitted into their dating schedules and their dependency on it as a source of comfort and friendship had to a large extent ended. This is not to say however that respondents abandoned their computers completely. The dating sites were the source of potentially endless supplies of dates and women returned to the sites over and over again to organise their next offline encounter, It seemed as if offline activity had, 'speeded up' time for respondents who admitted that they carried out a fast and furious pace of offline dating,

> Isobel: I'm a busy lady. I don't want to faff about. I just say, 'I'm not looking for a pen pal mate, so here's me phone number'…and if a date doesn't work out, its on to the next one…I don't mope about, I just say, 'next!'

Time became an issue for respondents who wanted to keep the dating momentum going in order to avoid lulls in dating activity. Many developed strategies for saving time, as with so many men to choose from, there was no time to waste. One way of saving time was to keep chatting online to several men at a time so that if it didn't work out with one man, there were others waiting in the wings,

Alice: I think the Internet sites make it much easier to two-time, very much easier to two-time. I went out with two men, one night after another, and Saturday night worked out you know?

Another significant way in which time had speeded up for respondents concerned the duration and intensity of relationships formed online which respondents often found were formed quickly, became intense immediately and fizzled out very suddenly. This common aspect of online relationships is explained by McDowell,

Online relationships are vulnerable to a 'boom and bust' scenario. While Internet romances may feel exhilarating at first, it is reasoned that this intensity cannot be sustained because the underlying trust and true knowledge of the other are not there to support it. At this point either the growth in relational closeness might either slow down gradually or, the relationship may 'bust' (McDowell, 2001 at http://internetromance.org/thesis8.htm).

The Internet enables people to meet quickly and easily and if it doesn't work out, there is little investment in the relationship and one partner is simply replaced by another. After all, there are plenty more to choose from. The sheer intensity of many Internet romances, although short term, took up a lot of respondents' daily life. They were often left with a feeling that time was speeded up by the nature of online relationships to the point where it simply passed them by,

Hannah: He just bombarded me with texts, he was never off the phone, really paid me a lot of attention, it was a whirlwind, then suddenly it was over. Just like that.

Ellie had a similar experience,

Ellie: He inundated me with presents and phone calls and so on and so on for about six weeks and then vanished off the face of the earth! I thought, 'whoa, where did that come from', you know?

The speed of offline dating and the intensity and speed of the relationships themselves could well give women a sense of being out of control of their lives. Women were enjoying a variety of new social situations and adventures at a fast and furious pace, which left little time for reflection until after the event. Offline dating had become an exhilarating and exciting past time for respondents who were keen to fill their time with as many dates as possible and so, to some extent, a fast pace was instigated by women themselves. Thus time became a precious commodity to be strategically organised in order to fit in as much time for socialising as possible.

Adventures

As time progressed, respondents became more confident with their dating activities and identities as single women. Many respondents revealed that they originally went online to find a long-term partner but began to enjoy dating for experience in itself. Respondents talked of their dating experiences as an 'adventure' and saw the sheer numbers of men they had dated as colourful experiences rather than in terms of their lack of success in finding Mr Right,

> Alice: I basically have enjoyed the dates I've had, lots of new adventures; I've learned a lot of different things. I mean I've been out with a bus driver, I've been with an oil rigger, I've gone out with a teacher, I've been out with a vicar…went on holiday with a doctor from Dover, all experiences I wouldn't have had without the dating sites.

Dating became a hobby that was enabled by the sheer numbers and choice of men online,

> Isobel: I was looking to replace a body and I replaced many bodies with many bodies! (Laughs).

> Sadie: It gives you variety; you know I mean, you've got a variety of people. You can make your own choices and you can have like, five men, talk to five people and decide which one, you know, that you would actually like to meet. You could go for the whole five days and make a week of it! And every night go out, you know what I mean?

Due to the sheer number of dates women were having, women had many colourful experiences. Some dates turned out to be disappointing but still tended to be viewed as an adventure,

> June: The first date I had…I walked along the road to the pub near where I live…funnily enough I got in his car and I mean I had no picture of him at all. He turned round to smile at me and he had most of his teeth missing. He had a dirty sort of jerkin thing on and trainer pants with elastic on the bottom. Turns out he has only dating coz his wife goes to California in the winter. I said, 'I don't go out with married men, please take me home'…Date lasted eight minutes! I thought, 'oh well, it's been a little adventure, the next one must be better!'

Some respondents had adventures, which took them further afield. Several ventured abroad to meet men they had contacted online. Hannah for example went to Australia to meet a man she had talked to online for four months and tells how, with hindsight, she finds it hard to make sense of her actions,

> Hannah: I must admit I thought to myself as the plane landed, 'what the hell are you doing?' But I had a wonderful time, I will never forget it. I can't believe I did it now, don't know what came over me!

Again we see the reference to the fact that Hannah feels she has been, 'taken over' although she doesn't explicitly attribute this feeling to the computer. With hindsight Hannah acknowledges the risks of travelling half way round the world to meet a stranger and suggests that she was acting contrary to the way she would normally behave. Sadie travelled a little closer to home and yet describes her experience as an adventure,

> Sadie: Mick invited us down to Leeds and I said, 'I can't afford the fares' and he said, 'I'll pay your expenses'. We stayed in a lovely posh hotel and we went out on the night-time and I felt like a prostitute when he gave me the fares (laughs). It was all quite respectable though. He went, 'Sadie I've really enjoyed meself' and I thought, 'not as much as I have'! I won't go back again

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but it was such an adventure at the time. I've never ever dreamed of doing anything like that before I went online!

Sadie's experience in Leeds challenges the boundaries of, 'respectable behaviour' for the middle-aged woman and she points to some confusion over her behaviour when she suggests, 'I felt like a prostitute' and simultaneously, 'it was all quite respectable though'. Sadie was challenging her own preconceptions of what was acceptable behaviour and her anxiety around a man paying for her stay in a hotel. As Skeggs says, 'respectability is usually a concern for those who are seen not to have it' (Skeggs,1997: 1). Indeed Sadie's concern with respectability lies in her fear of losing it as a result of her behaviour, both in the eyes of others and in her own evaluation of herself.

Undoubtedly, dating site use was enabling women to have many new experiences and indeed a central theme of the research is women's sense of change and independence as a result of Internet dating. Importantly, however, new adventures and having fun were linked to having male company. Women's accounts of their lives being 'out of control' once again suggest a kind of compulsion in terms of women's dating activities. It seems that fun was once again, linked to having male attention and the Internet sites provided women with more choice than they could have imagined. Despite past disappointments and a general abandonment of the romantic narrative of 'happy ever after', women needed to fill their lives with male companionship, a fact that was questioned by Nora,

> Nora: I know by now that I don't need a man to make me happy, so why am I looking?

Langford's (1999) research points to, 'single dissatisfaction', suggesting that whilst women did feel on the one hand that it was possible to live a fulfilling and happy single life, they simultaneously expressed dissatisfaction at being single themselves. One possible reason for this is linked to lack of self-worth (Langford, 1999: 28). My respondents were single again after a painful relationship break up and indeed many felt a sense of failure and loss of self-esteem as a result. Feelings of being unattractive and unloved drove them to seek male company to increase their self- esteem and also

to validate their attractiveness to the other sex. These feelings were compounded by their positioning as middle-aged women which added further anxiety around their ability to attract a man. Importantly it was often the sheer numbers of men contacting them online that helped to boost self-esteem, rather than the desire to find Mr Right (see Chapter Five). To repeat the words of Dot who illustrates how multiple dating increased her self-worth,

> Dot: When I say, 'rejected because of my age', obviously the girl he's gone out with and had the affair with is eleven years younger than me and so you think it has to be your age, do you know what I mean? I don't know if it's because of me age or not but... but the point is that's how I felt about it...I wanted to prove that I could still be attractive.

Women sleeping around

Another significant change in the behaviour of respondents came in the form of a change in sexual behaviour. Respondents talked of having spent many years with the same man and only ever knowing one sexual partner. Internet dating had led to a change in sexual behaviour in that they found themselves sleeping with many partners and enjoying every minute of it.

> Millie: I'd only ever slept with one man and I thought, well I'm going to put that right!

Having multiple sexual partners was a new and exciting prospect for nearly all respondents and once again, the Internet enabled such sexual encounters by opening up opportunities for many encounters. Whilst on the one hand celebrating new sexual experiences and a new overall feeling of sexual freedom, the internalised normative values of wider society caused women to hide their activities from others for fear of disapproval. In terms of having numerous sexual encounters their anxieties were linked to the gendered nature of sexual behaviour, which is further compounded by age. Anne illustrates clearly her own confusion around issues of sexuality. She has found a great deal of sexual freedom and yet was reticent to talk about this at the interview for fear of disapproval,

Anne: If a woman starts having a fling, she will get a name for herself, the man doesn't get a name for himself. If I did it tonight and went out again and did it again next week with someone else, I would feel a bit, you know, I would feel a bit of a tart, a slapper.

Judy: But if you met a bloke and he was sleeping around what would you say?

Anne: Good for him! But it should be the same for a woman; I mean men and women are the same really.

Judy: There is a double standard isn't there? It shouldn't be any different for a man or a woman to sleep with who they want.

Anne: Well in that case I will tell you now…I slept with the businessman; in fact I've slept with quite a few. The sites make it all so easy to do.

Whilst Alice brags about her sexual encounters, she tempers this with a defensive tone,

Alice: I've been out with more men than I've had hot dinners in the last year. Oh god you must think I'm a right tart!

Respondents found that the interview was indeed a space where they could freely express their pleasure at having many sexual relationships. Once they had 'tested the water' in terms of my own reaction to their accounts, they relaxed, discussing their experiences with humour,

Dot: My sister is online and she ended up having sex in a field! We were bad laughing about it afterwards!

Isobel: I had sex in the grounds of a stately home on Sunday afternoon. Just imagine if we had been caught!

June shows how the double standard of sexual behaviour is internalised by women. This double standard is further compounded by age, which places the middle-aged woman as 'desperate'. Her account revealed a double bind of enjoying sexual

experiences but simultaneously feeling disempowered as dating sites were, in her view, a way for men to take advantage of lonely middle-aged women,

> June: I think a lot of men go on these sites...they are looking for lonely vulnerable women who they can shag basically...they are looking because they think you are desperate...women are just bed fodder.

Her feeling of disempowerment, however, sits alongside Isobel's feelings of being in control,

> Isobel: There was this man I was seeing a few weeks ago and he said to me on the phone, ' I hope you are being pure for me Isobel' and I said, ' I beg your pardon I find that offensive, what I do with my body is my business, its nothing to do with you pal'.

Women's ambivalence to their increased sexual activity reveals the complexity of resistance to wider cultural norms at a micro level. Women showed their resistance by continuing their 'disgraceful behaviour' and yet resistance often took the form of avoiding the wider regulatory gaze, rather than overtly challenging it. Women tended to keep their sexual activities hidden in order to retain respectability in the eyes of others, yet their ambivalence and confusion shows how they continued to have an internal battle with themselves as to how to make sense of their behaviour. Normalising discourses surrounding the sexuality of older women felt part of their subjectivites, part of *who they were* . Gendered understandings of sexuality were acknowledged by Anne and resisted by sidestepping the risk of the disapproval of others, yet she still expressed guilt and insecurity around her actions. June, on the other hand, places women as vulnerable to sexual exploitation on the sites which directly contradicts the wider theme of respondents, which stressed independence and the freedom to have causal sexual relationships with men.

Dressing up for a date

Multiple dating also led respondents to reassess their appearance as they contemplated the process of dressing for a date. June talks of how she reflexively considered her appearance in the light of her dating activities and reveals the anxiety around how she

should dress 'appropriately' for her age. The evaluation of her dress and performance of femininity was informed here, firstly by her own opinion, then her daughters and finally her thoughts on the performance of other women within her age cohort,

> June: I actually had to revamp my image a bit because I was getting quite old and middle-aged and em…big cardigans and t-shirts…sometimes I think I dress too young for my age…oh but I mean, do I go out in jeans and a top at my age?
>
> Judy: You look great in jeans!
>
> June: Thank you, but my seventeen-year-old daughter will say, 'you're not going out in that!' It's about being feminine without being silly. I see a lot of women when I'm out drinking, women of my age who look ridiculous, dressed far too young for their age. They look desperate. Once you are over thirty-five you have to be careful, the neck and arms go…and then the beard comes! (Laughs)

June's confusion around age-appropriate dress is highlighted clearly in her initial remarks where she simultaneously describes herself as dressing 'old and middle-aged' and 'too young' for her age. What is interesting from her account is that she has effectively ruled out a space for herself and other middle-aged women to inhabit in terms of appropriate dress. She is a middle-aged woman, but she sees dressing 'middle-aged' in a negative light, linking it with being seen as 'old'. The other option is to dress younger but that too is seen as inappropriate and risky in terms of respectability. Whereas June has anxieties about the way she shouldn't dress, she doesn't articulate in a positive way, how she feels her age cohort should dress. Once again we see the theme of invisibility for the older woman in social settings, which appears from the account of June, as the only safe option.

Respondents did indeed reveal pleasure in breaking the normalising discourses that lead to the scrutiny and regulation of middle-aged women and yet Foucault (1998) argues that power itself can be experienced as pleasurable and productive. Respondents' accounts revealed pleasure in breaking the rules but paradoxically pleasure was also found in complying with them. Dressing for a date was one area where accounts of newfound independence and freedom sat alongside the desire to be,

'feminine' and comply with the normative expectations of female beauty. This was a complex process; as June points out, the desire to dress in a fashionable style must be carefully considered as she worried about, 'dressing too young for her age' or indeed too 'frumpy and middle aged'. The tightrope between looking 'silly' or 'feminine' was often a difficult one to tread. June displays a common theme of respondents; dismay at their realisation that due to advancing years, they are excluded from certain fashions that they saw as not age appropriate,

> June: I was shopping the other day and saw some lovely clothes, pretty tops and skirts and I would have loved to have worn them…but I think I'm too old for them now; it's such a shame.

'To become respectable means displaying femininity through appearance and conduct' (Skeggs, 1997: 102). As older women, respondents trod a perilous line between attempting to pass as younger than their years by wearing more fashionable clothes or failing the performance and becoming labelled 'frumpy' or indeed 'sad and desperate'. Women's repeated use of this phrase highlights their fear of feeling the shame of a person pitied or ridiculed by others. Indeed Skeggs points out that those who lack respectability 'have little social value or legitimacy' (Skeggs, 1997: 3). Bartky (2002) asks why women take so much pleasure in colluding to a large extent in practices such as dressing up for the approval of men, which ultimately can be viewed as an activity which places women as taking part in their own oppression within heterosexual relations. The process of bodily surveillance and the rituals of producing femininity were undoubtedly pleasurable to respondents. Respondents' accounts suggested that whilst they enjoyed dressing up and 'looking good', the ultimate pleasure came in having their performance of femininity validated by a man. Whilst a woman can evaluate their appearance in relation to the dress and opinions of others, it is ultimately a man, who gives legitimacy to her efforts,

> Sadie: It's nice to be tret special by a bloke and feel all dressed up like the bees' knees. It gives you a lift!

> Sarah: He told me how nice I looked and it felt great!

Bartky, however sees the rituals of dressing up and the subsequent admiration of a man as a form of power, albeit fleeting,

> What pleasure there is in drawing upon oneself the gaze of admiration or desire! The power of allure changes the odds in the battle of the sexes, albeit temporarily. This may be the most power a woman will ever exert, at least in her dealings with men, no wonder that this moment, the moment in which she attracts or fascinates is repeated over and over again in the romance novel. (Bartky, 2002: 24).

It seems that whilst women on occasion experienced the pleasure of male admiration, in more general terms women were acutely aware of their loss of physical capital in terms of attractiveness due to ageing, which caused anxiety when meeting men offline. Chapter Six highlighted how women often adopted an apologetic tone when marketing the self online, fearing that they couldn't live up to their advertised self when face-to-face with a man. This tone was also used when describing first meetings with men,

> June: He was looking for a dolly bird; you could tell he was disappointed when he saw me.

> Nora: Men are looking for blonde, busty dolly birds. As an old boiling fowl, I don't think I have much chance really.

Nora acknowledges here what she perceives to be her own lack of capital in the dating market and the use of the phrase 'old boiling fowl' expresses quite vividly just how negatively she places herself in relation to her younger counterparts. Nora's response could on the other hand also be a defence strategy to avoid the criticism of others, by using a degree of humour against herself.

Risky behaviour

Alongside so many new experiences came new forms of risk for respondents, especially in terms of personal safety. The risks associated with multiple dating were, underplayed in their accounts. Often it was after a prompting within the interview that

the issue of risk was raised and in most cases it was treated with humour or denied altogether. The reasons behind this were initially puzzling. When risk was acknowledged, it tended to be downplayed and respondents often added that the excitement and pleasure they gained from online dating, outweighed the risks attached. In general it seems that, if risk was acknowledged at all, it was after the event,

> Alice: I just got in his car and drove off into the country with him. Never seen him before in my life! Afterwards I thought, 'my god, that was a risk'...but he was harmless!

> Sadie: I mean, when I met Bob, he was from chat and I took a big risk with him coz I mean, I was drunk and online and he was just messing about in the chat room. He came into whisper [private chat] and he said, 'do you want us to come across and see you?' and I went, 'eeh, do you want to?' He got a taxi over...aye, he just came over for the night, and it was after eleven.

Alice and Sadie both acknowledge that getting into a strangers car and inviting a stranger to the house late at night, were risks and yet they appear to not have recognised this as such at the time. Dot at first denied that any risk had been taken when she met a date for the first time. Having accepted the potential risk in her behaviour she then laughs it off,

> Judy: Did you feel you knew the man well enough to bring him back to your house?
> Dot: Well I did drive out and meet him first.
> Judy: But were you sure what you were doing was safe?
> Dot: Mm...probably not! When you put it like that, probably not, no!'

Women celebrated the removal of the risk of pregnancy, which gave them more freedom to enjoy sexual encounters. The risks associated with unprotected sex, however, were drastically underplayed,

> Anne: Well I met a man...he lives down south... and he texts me three times a
> week, but he's married and I don't use nothing. I can't get pregnant; I've been
> sterilized for over twenty years so...(Laughs). I think if I'm going to have a
> fling I would pick on a married man, you know they are going to be safe
> because the single ones put it about.

Anne has a cavalier attitude to sleeping with a married man and her belief that it is 'safe' to do so. How can we account for the downplaying of risk in this way? There were several factors involved: firstly, respondents found themselves suddenly plunged into a period of dating and the sheer speed and intensity of their activities meant there was little time to sit back and reflect upon their action until after the event; secondly, many women hid their dating activities from friends and family and therefore often had no-one to talk about and evaluate risk with or indeed anyone to regulate their behaviour. Many respondents pointed out that, with hindsight, they would be horrified if their daughters behaved in the same way; thirdly, women were plunged into new social situations, of which they had no previous experience. Indeed some respondents had little dating experience from their teenage years to call upon and felt they were learning the ropes as they went along; finally, a denial of risk helped respondents to validate their dating experiences. Despite the fact that women held ambivalent feelings towards their dating behaviour, nobody suggested that they felt their behaviour should stop. Women were having new experiences and having fun and an acceptance of risk would threaten their own reasons for carrying on dating.

One would perhaps assumed from this that as women became more experienced in dating, they would evaluate risk more carefully, or indeed learn from their mistakes. But most respondents said that any initial concerns of risk evaporated quite quickly once dating had begun and in some respects they became even more cavalier in their attitude to them,

> Dot: I used to tell my sister where I was, leave my mobile number, get her to
> ring and stuff, I don't bother anymore!

It seems that as dating became more commonplace in the lives of respondents, they simply pushed a consideration of risk out of their mind and enjoyed their experiences.

Women did, however, deal with some risks more effectively. The risk of meeting the married man is quite a large one according to respondents, but they had developed their own creative ways of 'sussing them out,'

> Jen: Well I mean I sussed him out quite quickly. He didn't have a landline and you could only contact him by mobile and it was rare that his mobile was on; you could only catch him really by email. That was the bit that really ripped him up because he would say one thing in one email and something different in another. And I phoned him a couple of times and couldn't get him…and I phoned him and his mobile was on and as soon as he picked it up he didn't want to talk…hmm!

Misrepresentation was a significant risk for those using dating sites. Shirley tells of a 'lucky escape' she had with a man from the Internet who attempted to con her out of money. Despite the potential risk here it is important to note that it didn't put her off having more dates. Her response to this tale is to label herself a 'silly old woman', suggesting that she was to blame for being so gullible,

> Shirley: Um, he was an American bloke who had twisted loads of money out of old women.… said he was a biologist from Cambridge university, turns out he lived in a caravan outside Hull. He came to stay with me, he was wearing the most exquisite hand made shoes…I always look at people's shoes…you can tell a lot about a man from his shoes, whether they are down at heel etc…I was quite taken with him, didn't sleep with him as it happens. Anyway I found an email on the site warning women about him. He was very plausible, very attractive but he got all these old women to hand over money. He was banned from the Net.
>
> Judy: How did you feel about that?
>
> Shirley: I thought 'silly old woman' I was surprised how swept away I was with him, but not all men are like him (laughs).

Shirley's dismissive approach to her 'near miss' suggests she feels a degree of guilt and embarrassment at being almost caught out in this way. The fact that she calls her self a 'silly old woman' places her in a position of ridicule, rather than someone to be

commiserated with. Turning the tables and blaming herself avoids others placing the blame on her for using the sites 'at her age' in the first place. Shirley's evaluation of the situation is further confused by the commonly held view that 'age brings with it experience'. Shirley sees herself as an object of ridicule as she is 'old enough to know better'. Sadie who was attacked by an Internet date also illustrates this confusion,

> Sadie: Two hours I spent talking to him. I mean I'd spoken to him on the Internet, I spoke to him on the phone and I met him in town and I thought 'oh well, middle of the day, coffee'...he was really, really nice, a real gentleman to us and everything...it was raining and he said, 'I'll run you home'...he pulled into the park.... I went 'this isn't the way home'...he went, 'I just thought we could have'.... he pulled up and he was in this Range Rover thing and he kept putting his hand and I went, 'will you get off us'...I was just kicking the door...managed to get out of the car and just done a runner.

Sadie didn't go to the police about her ordeal as she felt she would be blamed for being so naïve,

> Sadie: I thought me judgment was well out of order...I was really angry at meself. I'd spoken to him online and on the phone and two hours over coffee and no inkling you know? It brought me up sharp at the time. I mean I wasn't abducted; I got in the car meself.

Sadie couldn't understand how her judgment could be so wrong but avoided going to the police as she felt she was to blame for getting into the car in the first place. She felt that she too should have known better and shows anger at herself rather than her attacker. Interestingly Sadie suggested that she felt safer during the day and it is indeed a common assumption that the rapist comes out under the cover of darkness. Nevertheless Sadie went on to meet another Internet man and after one date, got into his car,

> Sadie: You think like that through the day you are safe...I met Keith and he offered us a lift, I said no at first but then decided it would be okay.

Behaving disgracefully together

Whilst the dating sites provided a wealth of opportunity in terms of meeting men, respondents often said that they wished they could contact women online for offline friendship. Many respondents who felt lonely and lacked the company of other single women to talk to, told how empowered they felt in women's company and wished they could use the sites to contact other women. Their were two main barriers associated with doing this; firstly the search engines on some of the sites were set up in such a way as to block women from contacting other women; secondly when the site allowed such contact, respondents feared that contacting women would be seen as a sexual advance. Vivien stressed the importance of female friends,

> Vivien: My hairdresser said to me, 'you know Vivien I'm a lesbian' and I said 'right okay', you know and she said, 'I wouldn't have sex with a woman but I like women's company and that's how I feel in so many ways'. Your female friends are so important.

Listening to the words of respondents encouraged me, with their permission, to put several of them in touch with each other. The result was very positive and a group of around twelve women was formed. Alongside the odd lunchtime meeting of 'the September Girls' some women formed specific friendships with each other and met up to use sports clubs or go to the cinema. It gave women a chance to talk to each other about their experiences online and of course, have a lot of fun. Lunches are full of laughter as women exchange stories of 'disastrous' Internet dates and exchange advice and information. The group space allows for women to talk openly about their 'disgraceful' behaviour and validate their own experiences. The September Girls provided a space of resistance to the policing and surveillance of the behaviour of respondents. Within this space women not only talked openly about sexual encounters and adventures but also bragged about them; in fact the most disgraceful story is always the centre of attention! Bartky describes a similar group of elderly women who met to support each other and says, 'What these women have done, quite subversively...is to create an approving and appreciative collective gaze with whom they affirm one another' (Bartky, 2002: 104). The success of the group highlights clearly how isolating Internet use can become. Despite the fact that women were

meeting many men, they were in fact quite isolated in other respects as they hid their activities from friends and family.

Respondents could evaluate their behaviour alongside the behaviour of other women on the sites and no longer needed to hide or apologise for their dating activities. Respectability was redefined in this mutually supportive environment in terms of those with the most interesting or amusing dating stories. In fact respectability was turned on its head as women within the group resisted being placed as 'sad and boring' by not dating enough men. As the group developed over time, women discovered that they shared similar painful stories of the break-up of relationships and were able to talk about these in a supportive environment. Women also shared concerns over dress, sexual behaviour and risk. In this micro social setting women were claiming their right to be 'disgraceful' and rejoicing in the pleasures to be had in the process.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the experiences of women who wanted to move on from online interaction and meet men for offline dates. As a result of multiple dating they began to enjoy dating for its own sake, in terms of meeting a wide variety of men and having many new adventures. The speed and intensity of online dating took many respondents by surprise and they struggled to take control in an environment which brought them into many different social settings and introduced them to many new forms of risk. Despite their general dismissal of risk, one risk they feared a great deal was being positioned as unrespectable in the eyes of others, which would give them the label 'sad and desperate'. Respondents struggled to both conform to and resist traditional discourses surrounding respectable behaviour and the middle-aged woman. As a result their attitude to their own behaviour was ambivalent. What is clear however from the accounts of respondents is the huge impact offline dating had upon their daily lives. Lastly, Isobel expresses her debt of gratitude to the Internet dating sites and highlights once again the perception that the Internet has impacted upon her subjectivity and enabled her to behave 'disgracefully',

> Isobel: I am what I am today because of the Internet, Internet dating I think
> without the Internet now, I would be several stones heavier, um. My hair

would still be the non-descript colour that it was and I don't know what I would be doing, I think I would be seriously depressed!

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have charted respondents' experiences of online dating in the form of a journey; beginning with the loss of a significant relationship and ending with women rebuilding their lives with the help of technology and enjoying many offline adventures. The chapters order their accounts into four chronological stages of their journey, stages that were articulated by the women themselves as a way of giving structure and meaning to their experiences. This conclusion draws together and reflects upon women's accounts within an alternative framework, using three broader themes that cross cut all of the chapters and underpinned women's experiences of dating and understandings of self identity, namely: *Change*, as anticipated, unforeseen and initiated; *Time*, with an emphasis upon women's complex subjective understands of the passing of time, and finally; *Resistance*, a reflection on the way in which women negotiated and understood wider power relations.

The themes of Change, time and resistance emerged clearly from women's accounts, possibly due in part, to the relative homogeneity of women's experiences. During the process of analysing women's accounts, it became clear that the major themes that were emerging were indeed common to nearly all respondents. Not all research reveals such a 'tidy' account and so explanations for this need to be considered. There are four possible reasons for such homogeneity. Firstly, all respondents had come out of a long term relationship and were therefore dealing with fundamental change and turmoil in their lives when they approached Internet dating; had the sample of women included those who had been single for many years prior to Internet dating, this may have impacted upon their understandings of dating and self-identity in different ways. Secondly, all women were using Internet dating sites which perhaps inevitably led to a standardisation of experience as all sites operate within a similar framework. Thirdly all women were using the sites with a similar goal in mind-to find heterosexual relationships; had the sample of women included those seeking same-sex relationships, this could have produced a broader range of experience. Finally larger cultural variation within the group could well have provided different perspectives on

aspirations of dating, heterosexual relationships and identity more generally. Whilst this research does indeed point to the relative homogeneity of women's experiences, despite the wide range in women's backgrounds, difference *is* revealed in the form of contradiction and discontinuity *within* women's accounts of their experiences. The themes of time, change and resistance were all central to women's understandings of identity and yet their understandings of and responses to these, often perceived as problematic themes, was often varied, piecemeal and contradictory.

Change

Change in a variety of forms emerged as perhaps the most fundamental underlying theme that underpinned women's stories. Women came to use dating sites at a time of great change, which not only impacted upon their everyday lives, but also was often perceived at times to be a threat to their self-identities. Women experienced change in three forms: firstly, as unforeseen change, which was perceived as beyond their control. Unexpected changes could only be reflected upon, and made sense of by looking back over time; secondly, anticipated changes which were understood as events that are likely to occur in certain life stages; and thirdly, change initiated by women themselves that was characterised as positive change and interlinked with accounts of 'taking control.'

Within women's understanding of the life course, anticipated life changes were relatively easily integrated into a progressional story of the self over time. Some women for example, were experiencing a sense of loss as their children left home, perhaps for university. Whilst this was seen as a significant and often painful experience, it was understood as a life event that was common to many within the middle years. As this was understood as an anticipated event, women did not articulate this as being a hiatus in their sense of self over time. They drew upon an understanding of the life course characterised within a 'life cycle' model, which orders the life course into a series of life events particular to each age cohort (Hunt, 2005: 20). For the middle-aged, children leaving home and perhaps the death of parents, another issue raised by some respondents, are associated with anticipated traumas or changes that one would be expected to endure in the middle years.

Women's stories, however, focussed upon unexpected and sudden change associated with the end of a long-term relationship. This fundamental change was often the catalyst for further changes, such as the loss of social networks, loss of financial security and in some cases, loss of the family home. Their accounts of painful and unexpected change that was beyond their control drew them to an acknowledgment of the contingency and synchronicity of life events. Women did not expect to find themselves single in middle age, an event which wasn't culturally prescribed as an integral event associated with mid life. A sense of change was further exacerbated as they reflexively explored their positioning as middle-aged women. The middle years are often characterised by fluidity and change, being perceived as a time for reflection on the past and a reassessment of future paths, 'popular perceptions have been forged by the view that midlife is some halfway stage and this invariably includes a process of intensive transition of the self' (Hunt, 2005: 174). Respondents' accounts undoubtedly revealed this sense of self-reflection, a process that was made even more acute in the face of unexpected life changes.

Women's stories of unexpected change resonated with Ricoeur's (1986) description of the 'dark night of the soul' moment, which occurs at a time of sudden trauma or change. At the time of the event, change cannot be integrated into an understanding of the self over time and a coherent story of the self breaks down. It is only when the subject asks the question, 'who am I?' that the process of narrative self-construction begins again. Unexpected life changes could only be made sense of in hindsight and indeed women gradually repaired the hiatus and restored linearity of self by reflecting back on the event and integrating it within a wider life story. Women's stories were not passive in the face of unexpected and painful changes however, and their accounts reveal how they rebuilt their lives gradually over time. Indeed it was also the process of *telling* stories of change that aided them in coming to terms with what had happened. Their accounts included the theme of initiating change in order to improve their lives in the future and revealed a strong desire to be 'back in control' of their lives.

The narrative process was a way of reconciling with the past, understanding change within a wider life story and looking to the future. The interviews provided women with a space within which they could tell such stories and was therefore a part of their

healing process. Whilst women talked of the practical steps they took to rebuild their lives, their stories also revealed anxiety as to how change had impacted upon their sense of self. As a way of reinstating a linear self over time, women often drew upon therapeutic discourses of self-identity, using understandings of the self as 'growing', or 'becoming stronger' as a result of a time of pain and challenge. Women's self-exploration led them to feel more' in touch' with themselves and in some cases they suggested that they felt 'more like themselves' than they were before the changes.

Change, which was initially seen as a threat to the self, was reinterpreted over time as having a positive effect upon self-development. At the same time however, the self was never cut loose from the origins of the self that existed before the hiatus. It was a self that had been affected by change but retained its linearity over time. The rhetoric of postmodernism centres on the theme of change and fragmentation that occurs within contemporary lifespan, yet this research reveals that women worked to restore a linear sense of self. Despite the opportunities for self-construction in cyberspace and the possible opportunities for reinvention triggered by fragmented and unpredictable life experiences, women did not embrace the notion of a 'new self' or indeed the concept of multiple selves.

Change that was initiated by respondents was framed in positive terms. Internet dating sites were seen as a significant way of enabling changes in terms of forging new social networks and meeting men. The interlinked themes of change and control were used frequently as women talked of how they acquired IT skills and brought a computer into the home. Having learnt basic skills, women surfed confidently into cyberspace where they experienced new virtual horizons that also triggered a whole range of new experiences. In general terms, women experienced their online interactions as a positive experience that impacted in a beneficial way upon their offline identities. An increase in self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of chatting to men online from the safety of their own home, left women with a sense of how the computer had not only enabled change in their daily lives but had impacted upon their sense of self. Similarly, the relative anonymity of cyberspace encouraged women to contact and interact with men online in a much more direct and overtly sexual way, again leading women to perceive the computer to be 'taking over' the self, in ways beyond their control.

Women faced online, fundamental changes in their understandings of social interaction, which overcame the boundaries of time and space, and also in the nature of self-construction. They found themselves having to negotiate self-presentation to others using text, leaving behind the physical body as an aid to self-presentation. For most women this was a new experience but they showed little hesitance in learning the necessary skills. Within the specific context of the dating sites however, presentation of self became an altogether more strategic activity. The necessity of 'marketing' the self was quickly acknowledged by women in order to gain the attention of male users. The activity of strategic self-marketing highlights how a change of social environment impacts upon self-construction and maintenance. The construction of self in the virtual environment of the dating sites involved the reflexive consideration of the behaviour of others in relation to one's own and an awareness of the social norms that structured their self-construction and interactions with others. Women learnt the formal and informal rules that governed the sites simply by observing others and many became extremely skilled in the highly reflexive and strategic art of self-marketing.

Women's perception of the computer taking control and changing the self was most marked in terms of their offline dating experiences. Women had embarked upon online dating in order to meet men for dates. This often led to a period of intensive multiple dating, enabled by the dating sites. Change was perceived to have enveloped them at such speed and to such a degree that they began to feel 'out of control'. Their dating behaviour, which included increased sexual activity, was perceived to be fundamentally challenging understandings of heterosexuality and femininity that they felt as part of their subjectivities. As a result they felt they were acting 'out of character' and this was often attributed directly to computer use.

Change brings with it new forms of risk. Internet dating often took women into new social situations and many talked of having a number of new 'adventures.' Whilst expressing delight in being able to have so many new experiences, their accounts revealed confusion in that they had to react to new situations without necessarily having the experience or knowledge to evaluate them effectively. Respondents found their intensive dating behaviour so fundamentally different from other life experiences

that they struggled to make sense of them in terms of risk and safety As a result they often played down or denied the possibilities for risk.

Beck (1998) suggests that in contemporary society individuals have to acknowledge and evaluate new forms of risk and yet tend to place an emphasis upon macro concerns at a global level. This research has highlighted the complexity of responses to risk at a micro day-to-day level. Women were indeed faced with new forms of risk as a result of Internet dating and yet did not reveal any rational or coherent evaluation or risk assessment in their accounts. It seemed that their response to risk was influenced by competing discourses surrounding 'respectable' behaviour in the middle years. Indeed Sadie's response to being attacked, and her subsequent reluctance to go to the police to report the crime, suggests that her fear of being an object of ridicule or being placed as 'unrespectable' was greater than her desire to bring her attacker to justice. It seems that risk comes in many different forms and women appeared to evaluate risk in complex and contradictory ways.

Added to this was a perceived lack of competency in risk assessment. Sadie felt that voluntarily getting into a stranger's car meant she should take responsibility for what happened. Guilt and self-blame were a common theme amongst respondents who felt they had put themselves in a position of risk and therefore deserved the possible consequences. Risk assessment was often less about their likelihood of placing themselves within potentially 'risky' situations, than an evaluation of the pleasures to be had from Internet dating and whether they outweighed the potential risks. It appears that for most women, the pleasures *did* outweigh the potential for risk, indeed Sadie returned to Internet dating after her attack and subsequently took a similar risk by getting into a stranger's car.

Time

'There is no single time, only a multitude of times which interpenetrate and permeate our daily lives' (Adams, 1995: 12). Time emerged as another integral theme that underpinned women's accounts. Many differing, often competing subjective understandings of time informed women's construction of their lives and identities. The passing of time was seen as a crucial element to women's understandings of occupying the middle years of the life course and was perceived to be an integral part

of self-construction. Ageing beyond middle age is often framed in terms of a desire to halt or at least slow down the passing of time. The relationship between the self and the passing of time becomes problematic in the middle years as cultural understandings of ageing halt the progressional model of self over the life course and replace it with one of gradual decline and loss (Gullette, 1999).

The relationship between subjective understandings of time and self was a crucial issue to women's accounts. Time was not perceived as simply a chronological march from birth to death. Women talked of a reappraisal of the value of time in the middle years, understanding time as an altogether more precious commodity than they had done in their youth. Similarly women spoke of time as not only precious but as a limited resource. As a result, they often expressed a somewhat urgent desire to make the most of every moment and enjoy the time they 'had left'. This was less an acknowledgment of their own mortality and more an evaluation of perceived quality of time. Women judged the quality of time' in terms of being able bodied. Time heading into deep old age, tended to be seen in terms of unwelcome time. Women often articulated the fact that time seemed to be playing a cruel trick; at a point in their lives when they had discovered the value of time, it suddenly seemed to pass more quickly, slipping though their fingers like sand in an hourglass.

At a micro, day-to-day level women articulated yet another understanding of time which contradicted their accounts of time slipping away. As most women lived alone, they were prone to periods of loneliness and such occasions were often experienced as time slowing down. Evenings and weekends that seemed to last forever were the outcome of having unwanted or spare time on their hands. It was at this point that women turned to their computers to pass the time by chatting to others. Interestingly women unanimously pointed to the way the computer appeared to eat up time, suggesting that once they had logged on to their computer, time began to fly by. This highlights the relational nature of time. It seems that unwanted time in the eyes of many respondents was characterised as time spent alone. Time spent in the company of others, either online or offline was perceived as time well spent.

Time became a predominant issue once more in terms of computer use as anxiety was expressed as to the proportion of daily time spent online that was deemed 'healthy'.

On the one hand, the computer was hailed as a quick, convenient and enjoyable way to pass time, whilst on the other it was perceived to be luring women away from their daily routines. The point at which time spent online became an unhealthy 'addiction' was difficult for women to define. This led to guilt and confusion around patterns of time spent at the computer. The computer also impacted upon offline understandings of the passing of time. Once women began dating offline, time was perceived to speed up. The intensity of their offline dating activities and the novelty of many new adventures left respondents breathlessly declaring that time was running away with them, leaving them little time to evaluate or reflect upon their activities.

Understandings and appropriation of time was used in order to produce an understanding of the self across the life course as a whole. Changes in women's lives were unexpected, out of their control and therefore difficult to assimilate into a progressional model of the self over time. Women felt a loss of a sense of predictability in future time, due to sudden and often painful change. In order to understand this sense of contingency, women's stories often segmented the life course into a series of interlinked but distinct chapters or stages, which allowed for change and new beginnings whilst retaining a sense of linearity across time.

The life story genre (Cohen, no date) accommodated change into a wider life story but more fundamentally highlights the underlying desire of respondents to maintain a linear sense of self by assimilating change to 'paper over the cracks' of discontinuity, a self that is constructed across time; that has past, present and future that all intertwine to make the life story coherent. This links to the above themes of change and control to an understanding of the passing of time. By constructing stories of the life course that are segmented into stages or chapters, women were reinstating the agency of the self in two ways: firstly; the construction of the life narrative and the appropriation of time in itself is the work of the social actor and reveals creativity in its very construction; secondly, in closing off a painful or turbulent life chapter, a new chapter brings a new beginning and sense of control back to the subject. In other words, respondents, whilst accommodating the contingency of life events and the uncertainty of future time, were refusing to position the self as a leaf in the wind, being passively buffeted from one set of circumstances to another.

Women fought to construct a narrative of a life 'in control' and talked in terms of future plans beyond the immediate reconstruction of self after a hiatus. In stressing the agency of the self to act in the world and shape the life course alongside suffering unexpected misfortune, they were reasserting the self as a coherent entity across time. To return to Ricoeur's (1992) conceptualisation of character, respondents were asserting this sense of character as a fixed entity over time that provided a familiar framework of explanation for how they acted and understood the social world. Thus the life storybook genre allows for the interplay of social forces and circumstances with the agency of the self in the construction of the self over time.

Interestingly however, the segmentation of time was ordered around relations with others. Thus the beginning of a significant relationship heralded the beginning of a new life stage. The ordering of time was closely bound to the significance of heterosexual relationships in their lives. Women were keen to 'synchronise' life stages with others both in terms of female friends and heterosexual relationships. Synchronisation was not necessarily linked to chronological age but a range of social factors. Women's understandings of the passing of time in terms of ageing revealed a gendered dimension in that women often perceived men to be generally more comfortable with the passing of time than themselves. What is particularly interesting here is that nobody linked this perception to gendered understandings of ageing that arguably leads to women being more harshly judged than men. Women interpreted this observation as just 'the way things are' and tried to overcome what they saw as a lamentable fact, by looking for younger men.

An acceptance of the contingency of life events led women, however to renegotiate their understandings and expectations of heterosexual relationships. Whilst searching hard to find new relationships, the often sudden and painful end of a previous long term relationship led women to define the quality of relationships in the 'here and now,' rejecting the expectation of living 'happily ever after'. Thus whilst a more established relationship was significant in that it heralded the beginning of a new life stage, women had few expectations of it lasting forever.

Here we can see how technology was used as a tool to help women find heterosexual relationships and as a result, ultimately enabled a change in women's understandings

of heterosexual relations. By offering women choice and availability of potential dates, women were given the opportunity to meet a wide variety of men and broaden their horizons in terms of meeting men, often after only experiencing one partner. This gave women the opportunity to reassess the quality and nature of the kind of relationship they would like in the future. This proactive and reflective approach to finding a mate encouraged by dating site use, led women to put more thought into their choice of future partners, rather than waiting for cupid's arrow to strike. Similarly, online dating sites offered so much choice that women realised that if a relationship didn't work out, there were 'plenty more where he came from'. This reassessment of the temporal nature of heterosexual relations was part of a wider understanding of the life course as unpredictable; a life story with many (interlinked) endings and new beginnings.

Time was not always understood chronologically however. Ricoeur (1990) talks of how the narratives are constructed using the selective appropriation of time from the present and the past. An event such as a major life crisis is made sense of in terms of selected events from the past. The telling and retelling of such narratives give the teller a sense of restored continuity of the life course and the passing of time. The selective appropriation of events are not necessarily arranged chronologically and thus time is used in creative ways, the central issue not being the accuracy of memory in recalling past events, but how they contribute to the overall point of the story. The past, the present and the future are therefore interlinked in complex ways that move beyond the unidirectional march of chronological time. Adams points to the fact that time cannot be reversed, 'the arrow of time reigns supreme' but suggests that individuals can appropriate time to make sense of their experiences, 'it is within the power of the human mind to visit past events, to reinvent them, create alternative versions and plan a multitude of futures' (Adams, 1995: 18).

Stories of the self cannot be bound by time. The initial focus of my research was to explore women's accounts of Internet dating in the present, but within the interviews women were telling stories of the past to give context and meaning to their present experiences. Similarly, stories of self told online to others were stories of past experiences and future hopes and aspirations. Respondents did indeed appropriate past events in order to make sense of their current situation. Within narrative identity the

self never reaches a point and time when identity is fixed, it is always in a state of becoming. By focusing upon a temporal perspective of self-identity, this research has revealed how central multiple understandings of time are to the construction of self-identity as a dynamic and fluid entity. Further than this, it highlights how the relationship between subjective understandings of time and self-identity changes in nature at different points within the life course. The relationship between the self and the passing of time is understood through a wider cultural lens, which defines the ageing self. We are, indeed as Gullette points out, 'aged by culture' (Gullette, 1997: 3).

Resistance

Resistance is the third theme that underpinned women's accounts of Internet dating. This thesis is a story of resistance rather than passivity in the face of wider power relations that sought to regulate and restrict the behaviour and social space of single middle-aged women. Importantly, however women's resistance reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in negotiating wider power relations in the context of living everyday life. Indeed respondents were not articulating overtly feminist or anti-ageist political messages, but rather showing resistance in an individual, piecemeal and fragmented fashion within the context of their everyday lives. Women acknowledged and questioned some perceived inequalities whilst accepting others as 'the way things are'.

Resistance was revealed to be a complex process that often invited, not an outright rejection of common sense understandings of social relations but often the appropriation of existing discourses as an integral part of resistance. Dressing for a date for example, saw women acknowledging the anxiety of appearing inappropriately dressed for their age and yet their negotiation of this process was complex. Respondents didn't display an outright rejection of normalising discourses of 'respectable' dress for the middle-aged women; neither did they passively accept them. Instead they actively evaluated a range of competing discourses and negotiated their own understandings of respectability, drawing upon evaluations of others of a similar age or the views of friends and family. Their resistance was further complicated by their apparent compliance to the practices of femininity'. Bartky (2002) highlights how gendered power relations drive women to spend daily time

working towards the ideal of male-defined femininity, and yet respondents revealed the pleasure they gained in dressing up and gaining male admiration. Foucault's (1998) work on the subtle working of power that is productive of pleasure is useful here in understanding how women seemed to gain both pleasure and pain from self-surveillance of behaviour and dress. Jackson (1999) however, raises the important point that Foucault's model of power does not explain the sheer pervasiveness of patriarchal power and the ways in which sexuality is framed within a gender hierarchy. She points out,

> Foucault (1980) sees the concept of discourse as antithetical to ideology, but I would argue that we should view discourses as ideological in their effects – in that discursive constructions of sexuality have produced very particular 'truths' defining hierarchically ordered heterosexual relations as natural and inevitable. Discourses do not therefore float free from the structural inequalities characterising the societies in which they are produced (Jackson, 1999: 21).

Foucault (1998) does however, highlight that there is no central locus of power, which takes a consideration of power relations (and resistance to them) away from a broader focus on the State or institutions of power to an exploration of the impact of power on a micro level. My research has revealed how understandings of power for respondents were grounded in their daily-lived experiences, rather than an appeal to broader political movements. Their resistance was understood on an individual level. One area where resistance was a collective process, however, was within the ranks of the 'September Girls'. Within this setting women became much more proud and certain of their resistance, winning the validating praise of others in the group. Here women reinterpreted understandings of respectability, which directly challenged wider social norms without fear of the disgust or ridicule of others.

Women articulated their intensive dating behaviour in terms of a tension between guilt and fear on the one hand by their fear of disapproval by others, and delight on the other, because they were having new experiences and having a great deal of fun. Women often overcame the risk of the disapproving gaze of others by negotiating carefully their use of social space. They avoided going to the same pub with more

than one Internet date for fear of being labelled a 'tart' for example. Similarly they avoided meeting dates in pubs and clubs frequented by younger women. Rather than overt resistance, women found creative ways of bypassing the regulatory public gaze. Importantly, women saw cyberspace as a way of contacting men outside of the public gaze due to the anonymity it provided. Whilst cyberspace is a social arena in its own right, women's resistance to gendered and ageist norms of sexual and dating behaviour could be challenged more overtly. Online there are fewer social consequences as resistance can be played out behind a cloak of anonymity. Their stories revealed however that eliminating the wider public gaze didn't banish the internal battle with the self, as wider discourses became internalised and felt at a subjective level to be part of women's sense of self-identity.

Resistance also took another form as respondents drew upon existing cultural discourses and then merged them with their everyday experiences. The romantic genre of the fateful meeting of 'soul mates', for example, was given a more rational and proactive interpretation by women who acknowledged that in using the dating sites they were indeed giving fate a helping hand. Women didn't abandon the notion of meeting a partner as a mystical and fateful event altogether. Instead merging the romantic narrative of the fateful meeting soul mates with the more rational approach of making that meeting more likely to happen. My research reveals that resistance was a complex and contradictory process. Gendered inequalities were recognised, negotiated and understood differently within different social spaces. Resistance was easier within the relative anonymity of cyberspace whilst harder to negotiate within the proximity of friends and family. Similarly, resistance must be understood at both a macro and micro level. At a micro level individual resistance is piecemeal and contradictory, individuals may simultaneously comply with and resist forms of power.

Nowhere was the contradictory nature of resistance illustrated more clearly than in women's accounts of their lives and identities as single women. Their accounts focussed on the disappointment of past relationships and their feelings of empowerment as they settled into their new way of life as single independent women. This is perhaps the pivotal theme within women's stories and yet, counter to this, women talked of being 'addicted' to computer use, or more precisely contacting men online, and subsequently embarking upon a period of intensive dating. Women's

emphasis on having fun was fundamentally linked to going on dates with men, in fact this became an activity that at times threatened to take over their lives. Whilst women expressed resistance to the heterosexual ideal in terms of the romantic narrative of 'happily ever after', they nevertheless went to considerable effort to find male company.

The obvious desire to find a new relationship, albeit casual, was driven by a range of factors including: a fear of coping alone (which was usually overcome once women settled into living alone); feeling 'out of place' at social gatherings where the norm of couple culture prevails; the need to have their sexual attractiveness validated by men. To be truly feminine and thus a completed self, it seemed women still felt the need to have the validation of a man; a desire to enjoy nights out; and finally loneliness within the home. These two contradictory themes of enjoying the freedoms of the single life and spending a great deal of time and effort looking for male company, highlight the pervasiveness of a heterosexual framework of understanding within which lies the taken-for-granted assumption that to be in a heterosexual couple is both the norm and the ideal. Indeed out of thirty respondents, only Nora (above) questioned her desire to search for a mate, whilst the others saw no particular tension between themes of empowerment and control on the one hand and searching almost compulsively for male company on the other.

Yet there were also signs of resistance to gendered inequalities that are framed within a wider understanding of heterosexual relations. Women were talking about enjoying a range of sexual partners, for example, framing men in the context of sexual pleasure rather than emotional fulfilment. Sexual relations with a variety of (often younger) men did cause women a degree of confusion and anxiety as they struggled to understand their behaviour outside of the gendered double standard of sexual behaviour. Nevertheless what is important here is that their confusion and anxiety did not halt their 'disgraceful' behaviour.

Contributions of the thesis to wider academic debates

This thesis spans a number of areas of sociological interest and also crosses disciplinary boundaries. The overarching theme that runs through the research is one of identity construction and maintenance in middle age. My research contributes to

both the study of gender and ageing (and the intersection of both) in focussing upon the complex interplay of gendered and ageist assumptions that inform women's identity in the middle years. Middle age is a neglected area of ageing studies that is commonly characterised as a life stage without precise definition or age boundaries and largely dismissed, or defined in negative terms as the onset of gradual decline. My research has highlighted this stage of life as one of transition, positive change and new beginnings, which makes it an exciting area to study. Added to this, the research focuses on the daily-lived experience of being middle-aged and how this is often at odds to wider stereotypes associated with midlife.

The thesis also contributes to another under-theorized area within sociology; the formation of intimate relationships in middle age. The shifting demographics of contemporary society suggest that a growing number of men and women now find themselves single in the middle years. My research highlights the aspirations of middle-aged women for future relationships after the breakdown of a long-term relationship and reveals how middle-aged women are challenging gendered norms of dating behaviour and heterosexual relationships more generally.

Finally, Internet dating and social networking sites are moving fast to fill what can be seen as a lucrative niche market; the older user. More recently, social networking sites have emerged to cater specifically for the older portion of the population, for example, 'Saga Zone'. My research highlights attitudes of middle-aged women to the sites themselves, challenging the assumption that older people are technophobes by revealing the great enthusiasm with which they appropriated IT skills and enjoyed socials networking (activities associated perhaps with the younger portions of the population). This research sets the scene for a closer examination of the middle-aged and their interaction with the computer in terms of social networking online and what they actually want from sites that claim to cater especially for the needs of older users.

Looking to the future

The focus of this research upon women's experiences of online dating has raised issues around the pervasiveness of the heterosexual norms that framed their understandings of femininity and courtship. Whilst this undoubtedly contributes to a greater understanding of the complex and contradictory ways in which women both

resisted and were informed by a heterosexual framework of understanding, there is a sense in which this only tells half the story. Further research exploring the use of dating sites by middle-aged men would complement this research as well as providing a fascinating comparison. Whilst women showed an acknowledgment of the gendered double standards in terms of sexual behaviour and ageing, they saw the dating sites as a site of resistance to such inequalities, but how do their male counterparts understand women's resistance? Further research would explore men's accounts of using the sites and reveal their own understandings of dating site use alongside their identities as middle-aged men.

Due to the word restrictions inherent in this thesis, the issue of love remains largely undeveloped. This may seem surprising when dealing with research into online dating within which love could be anticipated as a central preoccupation. An overview of women's accounts as a whole suggested that love was not a central issue and has therefore been omitted in favour of more significant issues. A further exploration of the impact of dating site use upon understandings of love and romantic attraction would prove a fruitful area of study, in particular the impact of computer-mediated communication upon common sense understandings of falling in love and romantic attraction.

Conclusion

In a sense my research is still ongoing. I enjoy meeting up with members of the 'September Girls' and am still receiving updates from many women regarding their dating activities. Hannah for example, met a man online and is getting married later this year. For her another life stage is about to begin. Anne has also found a more permanent relationship and moved in with her partner this summer. The others however, continue to enjoy their dating activities and despite their anxieties concerning respectable behaviour for middle-aged women, their ultimate resistance is highlighted in the fact that they continue to behave 'disgracefully'. I am indebted to all the women who took part in this research for bringing it alive with their personal tales of courage, pain and hope for the future. Without them this research would not have been possible. I end therefore with the words of Shirley, who reflects upon her own dating experience and offers advice to those women contemplating logging onto a dating site in the future,

Shirley: Online dating is a hobby, fun. I think there are very few people who are on there who are really looking for serious relationships and I've met about fifty, so I have got plenty of experience! I've had some jolly good times (laughs). I thoroughly enjoyed meeting lots of men and I've been out for dinner at some spectacular places. I would encourage other women to give it a go as it opens up a Pandora's box of experiences. Everyone should get out there and live a little and dating sites give you the opportunity. I can't imagine what I would have done without the dating sites...they are amazing!

Contextual Information about Respondents

My research would not have been possible without the time and shared experiences of the thirty women who took part. Below is a list of all respondents and some brief biographical details that provide a degree of context to their accounts within the thesis. All women were white British and tended to locate themselves in terms of occupation rather than by class. Please note that names and other identifying features have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Isobel (54) describes herself as a 'career girl'. She works in a professional capacity, having had a career change in her forties and is ambitious for the future. She has been married twice and after two painful divorces is enjoying a spell of multiple dating with 'no strings attached'. With two children at university, she lives alone and relishes the freedom that the single life offers. She has been online dating for three years.

Barbara (56) has been married twice, embarking on her first marriage at the age of eighteen. She has three children, two of whom live at home with her. Barbara works in a hospital and has struggled to support her family financially since her second marriage broke up. She enjoys online dating and feels that it has boosted her self-esteem after the break-up of her marriages. She says she is restricted in living the 'single life' due to having children at home and financial restraints. She has been online for four years and would like to find a long-term partner.

Shirley (62) worked as a teacher until she retired due to ill health. Shirley has been married twice and was widowed ten years ago. She lives alone but has three grown-up children who live nearby. She has been online dating for eight years and has had many colourful experiences. She remains optimistic that she will find someone special in the future but sees her ill heath as a possible barrier to finding a partner.

Andrea (55) cares full-time for a child with special needs. She has two other children away at university. She has lived apart from her husband for three years and is currently in the process of a divorce. She had just completed a further education course and is hoping to continue her studies in the future. Andrea described herself as

'shy and retiring' but enjoys chatting online to men where she feels more confident. She has met men on offline dates however, which she has found disappointing so far. She regards financial restraints and shyness as the main reasons why she doesn't use the sites as much as she would like.

Dot (54) has been separated from her husband for three years. She works full time at a local shop and lives with her sister. She has two children who live away from home. She is enjoying dating enormously but is nervous about a long-term committed relationship. She feels that the breakdown of her marriage has changed her views on relationships and she is reluctant to give up her newfound independence.

Sadie (49) has lived alone for two years after her divorce. She works in a shop and is very enthusiastic about her dating activities. She describes her computer as, 'the best thing ever!' and has met many friends and lovers online. Alongside using dating sites she goes into chat rooms where online friends meet up offline for 'meets' all over the country. She enjoys the single life and can't imagine giving it up in the near future.

Maeve (59) is divorced after an unhappy marriage. She has three children, one of which lives at home. She has recently moved into a new home with her daughter and is enjoying meeting men for friendship, romance and just to have, 'new experiences and go to new places.' She would eventually like to find love again but for time being is enjoying dating.

Vivien (60) has lived alone for twelve years and has three married sons who live locally. She works as a secretary and is keen to make male and female friends to socialize with outside of work hours. She has been Internet dating for six years and enjoys chatting to men online when she feels lonely. Vivien has also been on many offline dates and regards herself as 'quite an expert' in the dating game!

Jen (48) describes herself as, 'outgoing and gobby'. She is a social worker and enjoys her work enormously. She lives with her youngest daughter, who is about to go to university. Jen was divorced ten years ago and has been Internet dating for about four years. She has had some disappointing dates and is sceptical about the chances of

meeting someone special online. She enjoys chatting online as well as dating offline and feels the Internet has enhanced her social life.

Millie (61) lives with her daughter. She works full time, which she enjoys as it, 'gets her out of the house'. She was divorced 14 years ago and has been Internet dating for three years. She cares for her elderly mother and finds that she has a lack of time to socialize. She is looking for long or short-term relationships and says that the Internet has given her a lot more opportunity to meet men, as it is so quick and convenient.

Kate (48) works as an accountant. She has two children at university who are with her out of term time. Kate has been divorced for a year after a long and unhappy marriage. Since then she has made a large circle of friends and uses the dating sites as a way of contacting men for offline dating. She has a busy life and doesn't use dating sites as regularly as some of the other respondents.

Helen (48) has been single for almost twenty years after a brief marriage in her twenties. She works in a building society and uses the Internet sites to chat to men online in the evenings. Having been online for six years, she has enjoyed many dates and has travelled the world in order to meet online friends.

Anne (51) was married and living with her spouse at the time of interview. She uses dating sites to contact men for friendship. She has three children who are all married but live locally. When not working at the local cinema, she often cares for grandchildren. She enjoys chatting to men online and has formed many friendships.

Angie (54) left an abusive relationship four years ago. She has two children who live away from home and lives alone with her two dogs. Angie works full time as a civil servant. She is quite new to the dating sites but has been on a few dates. She feels as if she is just, ' learning the ropes' at the moment but hopes to meet men for friendship and nights out.

Kim (51) has been divorced for seven years. She lives alone as her two children are both married. She enjoys living alone a great deal and feels she doesn't want to share her home with a man at the moment. She works full time as a secretary and has many

work related friends. She uses dating sites to find casual relationships with men for the 'odd night out'.

Bethany (48) lives with her nine-year-old daughter. She has been divorced for three years and cannot work due to health problems. She has only begun dating online and is wary of being hurt in a new relationship. She doesn't enjoy chatting online and only uses the sites to meet men for offline dating. Bethany is looking for friendship rather than a relationship.

Sandi (62) was widowed six years ago. She lives alone and would like to find another long-term relationship. She is retired and has a lot of time on her hands, which makes her feel lonely. She has two children who live away from home. She found the sites, 'scary' at first but has met some interesting men since she registered four years ago.

Ellie (50) is a probation officer who is recovering from a serious illness. She was divorced ten years ago and lives at home with her children, who are both in their teens. She uses dating sites as a way of widening her circle of male friends and enjoys dating. She has been using the sites for four years but often takes a 'rest' from the dating scene. Using the sites has helped her restore her self-esteem after her illness and divorce although she is sceptical about the possibility of meeting someone special.

Hannah (54) works full time for the local council. She has two children, one of which lives at home. She has been divorced for eight years and has been online dating for seven. A self-confessed 'incurable romantic', she has fallen in love many times online. Since the interview, she has had a long-term relationship with a man she met online and they are due to be married in October.

Maggie (57) is retired from work on health grounds. She has three children but has lived alone since her divorce for three years. She has been married twice and is currently enjoying being a single woman. She gets lonely however and the Internet dating sites are a way of filling in time, both chatting online and meeting men offline.

Sarah (56) works as a dental nurse. She has been divorced for two years and has no children. She loves to travel and is looking for men online who share her passion for travelling the world. She is against the idea of 'settling down' and wants 'to live a little' as she has no ties and is financially secure.

Kath (60) and is a postoperative transsexual. She works as a computer programmer and has been married twice. She lives on her own and is using dating sites to make friends and find a romantic partner. She has made many friends online who live all over the country and is currently with a partner that she met online.

Annette (48) has cared for her elderly mother for many years. She was single at the time of interview and used dating sites as a way of making contact with men for dates. She has had two long-term relationships as a result of using the sites but has now met a man who she will marry later this year.

Nora (49) was widowed two years ago after nursing her husband through a long illness. She works full time as an administrator but found she was lonely in the evenings and went online to find people with whom to chat. She has been on several dates and is enjoying her experiences. She would, however, like to meet someone special one day.

Rosie (60) has six children, none of whom live at home. She works full time as a teacher but feels she lacks a social life. The Internet dating sites have provided company both online and offline, although she is cautious about her online contacts after almost being caught up in a money laundering scam. She says she will choose more carefully who she chats to online in future.

April (48) was suddenly widowed two years ago. She works as a secretary and has two children living at home. She would like to meet a man online for a new relationship but so far her dates have been disappointing. She vows to keep trying and hopes to find someone special in the future.

Diane (59) has lived alone for ten years after her divorce. She works part-time as a receptionist, has many friends and an active social life. She has used online dating

sites as a way of increasing her circle of male friends. She enjoys the freedom of living alone and is reluctant to settle down with a man in the near future.

Nancy (57) is recently divorced. She has two children who are both married and live nearby. She is retired but describes herself as, 'not short of a bob or two'. Nancy went online in order to meet men for companionship but is unsure as to whether she would enter a relationship at this stage. She has not been single for long and would like to have some new experiences before settling down again.

Sue (51) shares a house with her elderly mother. She has had two long-term relationships and has been single for four years. She works as an academic and enjoys her work enormously. Sue joined an online dating site to meet single men as, 'all the best ones are taken'. She has been on many dates in the past two years and had a lot of fun along the way.

Mary (56) has been divorced for ten years. She lived alone and worked running a café. She was new to dating sites, having only been registered a few months. She has dated several men but decided that Internet dating wasn't for her. She came off the sites not long after interview.

Appendix Two

Interview Question Schedule

Please note: This was my original interview schedule. This schedule provided a loose structure for the interviews rather than a definitive list of questions to ask respondents. As I moved through the interviews, I gradually added questions to reflect the themes that were being raised by respondents themselves.

Face Sheet Information

Name.

Age.

Status. (single/married/divorced/separated)

Ethnicity.

Occupation.

Family. (Children-ages, dependents)

Other details.

Love and Romance

- How long have you been single/ unattached?
- What made you decide to begin searching for a romantic partner?
- How important is it for you to find a romantic partner? Why?
- What do you think are the advantages of having a partner?
- What are the advantages of being single?
- What kind of relationship are you looking for? (Casual, long term, marriage)
- What is your definition of 'love'?

- Are you searching for one 'soul mate'? Or do you believe that there are potentially many men who may be suitable partners?

- In what ways (if any) has your perception of love and romance changed as a result of age/ life experiences?

- What issues, for you personally, (if any) could be seen as potential barriers to finding love?

Middle Age/Ageing

- You have described yourself as 'middle-aged'. What does being middle-aged mean to you?

- How do you feel about your identity, your sense of 'who you are' at this point in your life?

Motivation for going online

- Why did you decide to join an online dating site?

- Before joining an online dating site, had you tried other ways of meeting potential partners? If yes, tell me about your experience of these?

- How did you decide which sites to join?

- How many sites have you joined?

- How long have you been using dating sites?

Learning IT skills/ using dating sites

- Do you have a computer at home? If not, where can you access a computer?

- How long have you owned a computer?

- Why did you get a computer?

- How would you describe your IT skills?

- How did you learn IT skills?

- Other than dating sites, what do you use the computer for?

- How much time do you spend on the sites? What time(s) of day?

- Would you miss the dating sites if you came off them all today? Why?

- Do you enjoy interacting online by email or MSN, or do you use the site in order to meet men offline?

- What are the advantages of using the sites purely for online communication? How does online communication compare to meeting men offline?

- Have you had any unpleasant experiences online? Tell me about these. How did you deal with these situations?

Profile (Identity)

- If I asked you to give a brief description of yourself, how would you describe yourself?

- How does this compare with your description on your profile(s)?

- Where there any details that you accentuated/ left out of your profile? What were these and why?

- What do you feel are the most important parts of your profile?

- Have you gone back after a period of time and changed a profile? If 'yes'- what did you change and why?

- When you look at your online profile, do you feel in anyway, 'a different person' to who you are offline? If 'yes'-in what ways?

Photo (The Body)

- How important do you think physical appearance is to attracting a romantic partner?

- Do you have a photo posted online? If 'no' why not?

- If 'yes'-how did you decide which photo to use?

- What do you particularly like about this photo?

- How important is physical appearance to you when considering a potential partner?

- How would you feel about contacting a man who seemed nice in his profile but not attractive in his photo?

- What do you think you can learn from looking at photos of potential partners?

- How would you feel about meeting a man offline without first seeing his photograph?
- Would you agree that online dating is more a 'meeting of minds' and that physical attributes are not seen as so important? If not, why not?

Contacting partners/online interaction

- How do you feel about contacting men on the sites? Do you prefer men to contact you first? Why?
- In what ways does contacting men online differ from meeting men offline? (In a pub for example).
- What attributes do you look for in a potentially suitable partner?
- What do you think, in general terms, men look for when searching for a (female) partner?
- How does it feel to be contacted by men online?
- How many men do you interact with online at one time?
- Do you feel that this is being in anyway 'unfaithful', if you interact with more than one man at one time? Why?
- Have you ever felt a 'chemistry' developing between you and an online partner? Tell me about this.

Meeting offline

- Have you ever met someone from a dating site offline? If NO: Why not? If YES:

- Can you think of a recent offline date that you had?
- What made you decide to meet this man offline?
- Did you ask him for more photographs before you met? If yes, why?
- Did you send more photos of yourself? Describe the photos you picked to send.
- How long had you been communicating online before you met?

- How well did you feel you knew him before meeting?
- How would you describe your online relationship?
- Did you speak on the phone before meeting? How did you find this experience?
- What concerns (if any) did you have about the risks associated with meeting a man from the Internet?
- Did you feel threatened or in danger at any time during the date? If so, why?
- What precautions did you take to ensure your safety?
- In what ways (if any) did your date differ from how you had imagined him to be online? (Physically? Personality?)
- In what ways did your date's perception of you online differ from your offline personality/physical appearance?
- How did you feel on your date? Did you feel awkward as if you were with a stranger or did you feel you were just carrying on the relationship from online?
- In what ways did chatting face- to- face with your date, differ from chatting online?
- If there was online chemistry, was this the same offline?
- What was the outcome of the date? Did you meet again?
- If the date was unsuccessful, why was this? How did you tell him that you didn't want to meet again?
- If the date was successful, did you continue to communicate online as well as offline? Did online and offline communication differ in any way?

To Conclude

- How many potential partners from dating sites have you met in the flesh?
- How would you feel about meeting a man who lived along way away geographically?
- In general terms, how would you describe your experiences of using the dating sites?
- Have you any 'tips' for newcomers to the dating site environment?

- Would you encourage others to use the sites? Why? Why not?
- Have you found a partner? If not, good luck for the future!

Thank you.

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