

‘Becoming more of myself’: midlife and the co-production of femininity, heterosexuality and the salsa space.

Sarah Milton

Department of Health Services Research & Policy, Faculty of Public Health & Policy,
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H
9SH.

Email address: sarah.milton@lshtm.ac.uk.

Note: this is a personal version, created by Sarah Milton, of the text of the accepted journal article. It reflects all changes made in the peer review process, but does not incorporate any minor modifications made at the proof stage.

Copyright © and Moral Rights for this paper are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners.

‘Becoming more of myself’: safe sensuality, salsa and aging

Abstract

Ageing bodies are too often associated with invisibility or ‘active’ and ‘successful ageing’ discourses. Little research has explored the daily practices of ageing, gender and sexuality in midlife. Based on ethnographic research in salsa classes with women in their fifties, this paper explores the intersections and coproduction of ageing, femininity and heterosexualities within particular spaces. Single women in midlife initially felt unsure of the ‘rules of the road’, out of place in social space. Salsa class spaces were produced as safe, alongside a ‘safe sensuality’ – which included embodying a glamorous salsa outfit but remaining respectfully feminine in ‘age appropriate’ ways. Participants navigated a way to become ‘more’ rather than ‘less’ of themselves with age, enjoying a ‘second chance’ which had not been afforded to the women of the generations before them. This paper extends queer studies of space to account for ageing and for the (spatial) hierarchies embodied within heteronormativities.

Key words: ageing; femininity; heterosexuality; Bourdieu; space; midlife

‘Becoming more of myself’: safe sensuality, salsa and aging

Introduction

What’s common about the over fifty, if I can summarise, it would be insecurity about the new rules of the road, um, self-confidence you know, I don’t look as good as I used to...

(Judith)

... you put your outfit on, you’re there, you know who you are and it’s good, it’s great!

(Jemima)

In the first quote Judith, who referred to herself professionally as a ‘dating coach for the fifty plus’, described the trickiness of becoming a single woman again in midlife. During a discussion about her experiences of salsa dancing, the second quote shows Jemima, a single woman in her fifties, summarising her experience of becoming more confident during the classes. Jemima spoke of a juncture in her life following her divorce and her children leaving home. Attending the salsa classes and learning to dance was part of a wider push to be more social in her life, and to start thinking about herself instead of others. For Jemima, the confidence encouraged by attending the salsa classes had had a positive and wider reaching effect on her life outside of the classes. From a position of uncertainty about the ‘rules of the road’, as the dating coach had described it, the space that the salsa classes provided, and the process of (re)learning how to move and dress in certain ways, was intricately linked in Jemima’s narrative with a process of ‘finding out who she was’, as a single woman in midlife.

Literature surrounding femininity and ageing into middle and old age tends to either bemoan the invisibility of older¹ women across different public sites, e.g. tv, film, academic research, especially when it comes to their sexualities (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012a), or dissect the increasing obligations of older women (and men) to remain ‘forever functional’, forever ‘sexy oldies’ (Gott, 2005, Katz and Marshall, 2003, Katz and Marshall, 2004, Marshall and Katz, 2002). Little research has focused on the daily and lived experiences of ageing into and past the middle years, particularly when it comes to positive or more nuanced experiences ageing, sexuality and femininity, and their intersections. This paper is based upon an ethnographic exploration of ageing, heterosexuality and femininity amongst white, middle class women in midlife, within a salsa scene in England – and uses a theoretical understanding of heterosexualities and femininity based upon spatial practices. Whilst theoretical literature on sexualities and space rarely accounts for age and ageing (particularly into older ages, with a silent, predominant and unexamined focus upon youth), literature on the experiences of ageing into older ages – such as from the field of social gerontology – rarely approaches the topic ethnographically, and has been criticised for not fully accounting for, or theorising, gender, sexuality and spatial and contextual factors (Twigg, 2004, Twigg, 2013).

Negotiating the ‘pain of ageing’

Historically, ageing past the middle years in many euro-american cultures has been viewed as a process of desexualisation (Marshall, 2006), and active sexuality has been associated with youth. As

¹ I recognize here that the term ‘older’ is problematic, and works to reproduce ‘youth’ as a silent and pervasive norm to be compared to. Woodward (1991) points out that modern cultural categories surrounding age are essentially reducible to two: youth and age, hierarchically arranged, so that we are not judged by how old we are, but how young we are not. On this note, Twigg (2004) goes further and specifies that often literature around old age, identity and the body primarily refers to the late middle years (i.e. rather than to deep old age, approximately 75+), most often to the fifties to seventies, yet the distinction between the Third and Fourth Age is qualitative not chronological.

Gulette 2004 has argued that age scholars should work to address this silent ageism in the way language is used, but at the same time recognizes that ‘we are abandoned to ideology for lack of language’. I have been as specific as I can throughout the text to the age and lifestage that I refer to.

has been recognised in the vast literature on femininity and beauty, the '*youthful, healthy, beautiful body*' (Gott, 2005: 7) is often the norm by which in many ways other bodies are measured and marginalized (Lock, 1994); with dominant cultural representations of feminine beauty demanding youth, slenderness and agility (Bordo, 1993; 2003, Seid, 1989). The ageing female body, as Vares (2009) has argued, is confronted with a deep conflict with these cultural representations of beauty; '*as the accomplishment of femininity in western culture continues to be measured in terms of youthful physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, the physical changes associated with ageing can constitute a failure of sorts*' (Vares, 2009: 514).

Due to the various ways in which youth is reinforced as beauty, ageing has been described as a process of transformation whereby women become socially invisible (Vares, 2009), and this is reflected in many ways from absence in national surveys about sex, to being excluded from roles such as TV presenting (Grant and Ragsdale, 2008, Meah et al., 2011), and in advertising (Williams et al., 2007). Others have argued that this invisibility is also reflected in academic scholarship where often, '[the] *only bodies of interest to the theoretical gaze are young bodies*' (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012b:vii).

Sociological studies have sought to understand the ways in which these, mostly negative, age related norms are experienced and understood by those in mid and later life themselves. Classic, and still well cited studies employ the metaphor of a mask, and within these masking theories ageing is conceptualised as a process that dislocates the self from the body; individuals have to act strategically to protect the 'inner self' from an ageist environment. For Featherstone and Hepworth, the ageing body becomes inconsistent with what they conceptualise as a consistent inner and essentially youthful self, which leads towards a fracture between the body and the mind; the ageing body is experienced as an increasingly oppressive 'iron cage of age', or mask (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991). People therefore end up 'acting old' to fit with the changes in the body that signify age.

Others argue that instead of acting old, individuals 'put on youth' as a key way to negotiate ageist social pressure, for example Biggs' (1997) strategic 'persona', or Woodward's (1999) 'masquerade'.

Both masking hypotheses conceptualise ageing as a threat to ‘true’ or ‘essential identities’, that need to be protected against ageist environments. These approaches to understanding the experience of ageing often draw upon Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory of performance, but have been criticised for their (mis)understanding of the relationship between the mind or self and the body.

Whilst these theories often describe the mask, or persona, as a performance separated from the ‘true self’, Tseelon argues that the disjuncture between the performance of the private self (off-stage) and the public self (on-stage) is not to be taken literally; Goffman’s actor has no interior and or exterior, instead just many ‘faces’ utilised for different audiences, (Tseëlon, 1992).

Furman (1997) in her ethnography of beauty salons, found that whether a woman thinks she looks her age or not, she tends to *feel* younger than her chronological years. Pervasive cultural associations of aging with decline, and old age with stigma, frequently led to women fearing, denying or covering up their bodily manifestations of aging in an ongoing effort to look younger and hence better. Furman argues that the dichotomy *created* or constructed between bodies and selves in the experience of ageing was a form of cultural resistance; *‘her real self is internally situated, and must in some profound way be private, visually inaccessible to the world; she negates the body she presents to the world by saying, ‘it isn’t me’*’ (Furman, 1997: 106).

Situating selves, gender and sexuality in practice and space

Studies of ageing rarely take an ethnographic approach, and as above, most studies describe negative experiences of ageing against a backdrop of (gendered) ageist environments. This paper explores the specificities of heterosexuality and femininity ethnographically, amongst a group of women in midlife. Taking an ethnographic approach that pays attention to not only what people say but what bodies do, how they move, how and who they touch, this paper is based upon an understanding that the self is gendered, sexualised and reproduced through everyday practices – collapsing the distinction

between the mind and the body. The 'self', rather than a true and inner self, or solely constituted discursively, then is reproduced and known through everyday bodily practices.

This theoretical understanding draws upon Bourdieu's social practice theory, especially the concept of the habitus, and more recently how geographers of sexuality and queer phenomenologists have understood the coproduction of sexuality and space. Although Bourdieu has been criticised for not paying enough attention to gender until relatively late in his career, gender is one facet of social life that the habitus helps to understand, and has been developed and operationalised as such by feminist theorists (Adkins 2004). The habitus as conceptualised by Bourdieu, is the mostly unconscious result of a lifetime of daily physical repetition, that shapes our bodies, tastes and knowledges in context (Bourdieu, 1990). The habitus is formed of characteristic dispositions, indicated in the bearing of the body and in deeply ingrained habits of behaviour, feeling and thought; *'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history'* (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). Lovell has referred to this as a 'feel for the game', not consciously learnt or ideologically imposed, but acquired through practice over time, and dependent on cultural and historical circumstances (Szreter and Fisher, 2010). In this way gender can be seen as unconscious habitualized body language with which we enact masculinity and femininity (Wade, 2011). Gender then is a lived social relation and embodied, *'...laid down in the form of permanent stances, gaits and postures'* (Bourdieu, 2001:27).

In similar ways to how Bourdieu understood the body as internalising social hierarchies, particularly class distinctions and later gender, some geographers of sexuality (see for example Bell and Valentine, 1995, Hubbard, 2000) and queer theorists (see Ahmed, 2006) argue the importance of accounting for space in the coproduction of sexualities. Focusing mostly on the marginalization of queer identities in heteronormative space, it is argued that as one moves through space, hierarchies surrounding sexuality are experienced and embodied (which in turn then reproduces the space as sexualised). Social spaces are sexed and gendered, and space and sexuality – rather than just interacting or reflecting each other – mutually constitute each other (Johnston and Longhurst, 2009). Sexuality has a profound effect on the way people live in, and interact with, space and place. In turn,

space and place affect people's sexuality (Ahmed, 2006). This paper explores the coproduction of femininity, heterosexuality and space in midlife, in an environment where it is often assumed that sexuality is associated with youth.

The study

This paper draws upon material produced by a larger ethnographic project that sought to explore the lived experiences of ageing, femininity and heterosexuality amongst women in midlife who were deciding to, or were dating again after biographical disruption such as divorce. Salsa classes were used as ethnographic spaces for participant observation and as a 'way in' to meet, informally discuss and interview participants. Salsa classes have become increasingly popular in the UK and beyond - spanning local classes to national and international networks that organise workshops, holidays and even 'salsa cruises'. The salsa genre has a complicated historiography, with origin claims arising from different parts of the world, such as Cuba, the diaspora community in New York, Venezuela and Colombia (McMains 2009). It however has been transnational since the 1980s, popular throughout the Americas as well as in other parts of the world such as Europe, Africa and Japan (Waxer 2002). For some salsa may be synonymous with the imagination of a 'Latin' identity, and for some this is further associated with a politicised position, for others, (as we will see with most of my participants), the complicated history of the genre is actually not visible at all, and the music and the dance means something very different to where and why it might have originated (similar to Urquia's (2005) findings)

Participants of this study were involved in the salsa networks to varying degrees, but for the many ways that I will explain, the classes suited their age and life stage – the classes I attended were mostly populated by men and women above the age of 40. There were slightly more women than men in the classes. Interestingly, within the more advanced classes, the number of men increased so that the numbers of men and women were largely equal, and the teachers were also more likely to be men - a (unfortunately) familiar gendered patterning. The larger study sought to contextualise these salsa

classes within the participants' lifecourse and broader contexts, exploring these further in interviews and by following avenues suggested by the participants and the analysis, such as for example internet dating experiences. This paper focuses on some of what was found in the salsa classes.

The ethnography took place between 2011 - 2013, and included attending classes, getting to know people, and learning the dance myself. Data then included fieldnotes on my experiences, observations, and informal discussions within the salsa classes, as well as fieldnotes on interview participants and later analytical fieldnotes. It also included interview transcripts with salsa class attendees and salsa teachers, and documents referred to or given to me by the participants, for example the salsa class websites, promotion materials, salsa online forums (when related to the research questions, and also to provide contextual information).

20 were interviewed more formally, purposively chosen to include age, life stage, experience of life stage. All of the participants, formal interviewees and more informal contacts, except one were in their fifties, born in the 1950s, and interviewed in 2011-12. All of the participants were heterosexual, single, or dating, or in relatively new relationships except one who was married. Whilst not deliberate, all of the interviewees identified as white British². During the interviews I used a loose topic guide, generally starting discussions with experiences and stories about salsa or internet dating and then leading into producing a life history. A few of the interviews were repeated at a later date. The interviews were audio recorded, with consent taken, and pseudonyms have been used when they have been quoted. The analysis that has informed this paper was an iterative process, which took place from the early stages of, and throughout the data collection process, informing for example who was chosen for further interviews.

Out of place, in heteronormative sexual space

² Whilst the participants of this study, attendees of the salsa classes, identified as White British, it is interesting to note that the majority of the teachers of the classes that I attended for this study identified as Black British, and were men. Unfortunately there is not scope in this paper to explore this further.

Many of the participants, either retrospectively or when discussing present experiences, spoke of experiencing an uncertainty when describing how it felt to be newly single in midlife, often accompanied by stories of loneliness and feeling unusual amongst their friends and peers. Often, when talking about current experiences of dating, narratives would begin with descriptions of having initially felt 'out of place' in social space as single women in midlife. The social spaces taken for granted as associated with their age group and peers were described as family and couple orientated, whereas spaces for meeting new people and meeting men, such as pubs and clubs, were associated with young people, or memories of their own youth;

Now your support groups when you're older are all like other married couples with their kids ... I went out last night ... there was two couples with their girlfriends. And then there was another couple that brought in two kids along. It's like it's just so family affair. And ah, I'm like I'm not gonna meet anyone in this room ... although I had a great time, but you know I went home alone. (Maureen)

I thought about [ending my marriage] in such detail into the point where I thought, 'where am I going to go?', what am I going to do, coz I thought, well, I'm going to be a fifty five year old single woman, I don't have single friends, all my friends are married with children or they are at university, their husbands retiring, they are doing their thing, I don't really have a social life. I have lots of friends, but they have partners! So they don't go out on Saturday night or anything like that. (Sally Ann)

The stories told were replete with descriptions of managing a new, or renewed, type of identity, i.e. singledom, and of the difficulties with negotiating a new, or renewed type of sociality i.e. being single/unpartnered amongst their (mostly partnered) friends. Many of the participants felt that they had to learn, or relearn, how to behave and to find new spaces in which to socialise. It seemed to be

taken for granted that the 'normal' social spaces for people of their age were couple- and family-orientated which was then experienced as especially tricky when looking to meet a new partner, and to be social in a way that allowed you to meet new single people; *'as far as single people go now, I don't have single friends ... If you've got a couple of girlfriends you can go out with, yeah it makes all the difference.'* (Sally Ann). The social spaces associated with meeting new people were associated with younger people today, or memories of their own youth; *'it's kinda tricky because um, the thing is, the situation that gets you dating when you're younger doesn't exist when you're older'* (Maureen).

Being single in midlife was experienced (especially in the early stages of being single) somewhat as an anomaly, and it was experienced as difficult initially to 'place' sexuality at their age and life stage. Young people were dominant in social spaces associated with a sexuality that searches for partners. The experience of social space then had changed over the lifecourse for the participants; social spaces subtly but powerfully shaped and were shaped by expectations surrounding sociality and sexuality. This was intimately linked with what was expected at different ages.

Producing the safe salsa space

Within this context it was striking how the salsa classes in which I joined these women were so often described as 'safe spaces'; *'safe, comfy and bubble like'* (Jemima). As opposed to public 'sexual spaces', such as pubs and clubs, salsa classes provided a 'safe space', which seemed to suit the women's age and life stage, and provided important spaces for them to socialise.

Salsa classes across the UK normally take place in a room or a hall, that the teacher of the class or organisation hires for certain evenings during the week. The salsa classes I visited were either in hired spaces, for example in rooms above pubs, in available club spaces and or in village or church halls. The teacher or group of teachers often hire different spaces for different classes on different nights of the week and therefore the classes have a temporal, impermanent and mobile nature; salsa nights often cease periodically and then spring up again elsewhere. This impermanence is quite common; the class that I joined most had moved to its current location a couple of months earlier..

The classes were also time limited i.e. from 7 – 10pm, once a week. The temporal nature of the classes mirrored the perception of the class, and the dance, in their lives – the experience was for one night, sometimes for the one dance to the one song, and this was something that brought joy and pleasure. Breaking from the normal routine of life, and sharing with people that have limited knowledge about who you are outside of the class environment, allowed a space for the participants to experiment – a ‘bubble like’ environment allowed novel ways of socialising for this age group and potentially a space in which they could experiment with new, or renewed ways of interacting.

An important aspect of the space that added to its association with ‘safety’, and why the space particularly suited my participants, was the perception that the normal social markers that might dictate who you interact with and how outside of the class, did not hold sway within the class boundaries. As described earlier, social spaces are often experienced as age-demarcated; with notions of ‘age appropriateness’ and limited age mixing. However as Ruth who was in her 60s described,

What I’ve liked about salsa is um I’ve made friends with so many different you know all different backgrounds, different colours, ages... I used to one time go out with some of the girls that were just in their 20s, I was old enough to be their mum but you can just go out and not, you know, I never felt that was the case... (Ruth)

This is noticeably different to how ‘pubs and clubs’ were described. As one of the salsa teachers told me, ‘*whilst you’re in the class you’re all the same level, it becomes a levelling field, for all walks of life*’ (Russell). The salsa class was perceived then as a space where people of different ages and occupations could socialise.

However when it came to gendered interaction, strict, structured and often exaggerated rules were established and maintained. The salsa class space was very gendered, set up for the male and female partnership in dance, and also for more informal social interactions between men and women in many ways. All of the instructions and interactions were based upon the foundation of the male and female partnering and the feminine and masculine roles were explicitly differentiated and explicitly reinforced throughout the class.

Considerable social work was undertaken to ensure the safety of the space, from explicit rules often referred to as the ‘salsa etiquette’ of dancing one dance, to one tune, per person, ‘...*in salsa you don’t say no, it’s all part of the etiquette, you don’t turn people down*’ (Ruth) – to more informal reproductions of safety through particular practices, taught and reinforced by the teachers, such as maintaining eye contact. The space was temporal, but structured and predictable. It was produced as strictly gendered but where age did not seem to matter. There was a sense that learning the rules of the dance, and rules surrounding acceptable interactions within the space, provided tools to negotiate what seemed difficult outside of the salsa space.

Producing the safe salsa space and a safe sensuality

The physicality, the closeness and way of touching, with strangers during salsa dancing was a novel experience for many of the women that I spoke to. Interestingly, despite being open with me during interviews about their experiences of dating, it often seemed very important to the women to not be seen as explicitly looking for sexual partners. The pleasure of close contact with male partners then had to be managed, and ‘safety’ meant just this – that they were not inviting sexual advance through the practice of the dance.

The ways in which participants talked about the closeness of the dance signified the social work undertaken in order to ‘desexualise’ the movement and touch between bodies whilst salsa dancing. Molly, who was just beginning the dance classes at the time of our interview, described how she found it difficult to negotiate the closeness of the dance, ‘*it’s like a lover’s dance going on and you’re like woooo!*’, with the fact that she was single. She described finding it strange to dance with other peoples’ partners, ‘*I feel funny dancing with their partners because they’ve got a girlfriend there*’, and had begun to work on desexualising the dance;

I just try not to think, I’m just here to learn the dance and I try and kind of, blank out the emotions, well not that it’s emotional, there’s no feelings there, it’s just a man and

a woman learning some moves and dancing, going through the motions, I try and think about it in a more technical way as in learning the steps ... I like to think that they're all gay in my head ...

It was not just the closeness that was experienced as strange, but also the pleasure experienced when the dance went well with a partner; when a connection in the movement was experienced. Jemima explicitly described this as 'orgasmic' and her quote below shows the social work taking place to make this acceptable;

if you get the right tune and you can follow the right dance partner it can be orgasmic ... it's like such a really special moment, but it's passing, it's that one dance and you understand it's not more than that. Although when you first start you think that was so fantastic I must have a connection with this person ...

Learning to touch and move in certain ways, by attending to the rules of the space, encouraged a transition towards a 'safe sensuality'; allowing a sensuality, sensual movement and interaction but not explicit sexuality or inviting sexual advance. The participants worked hard to ensure that the touch and movement was not 'misinterpreted', working to embody new ways of touching and moving; a new way of moving was developed which was 'sensual' and not 'sexual', and therefore acceptable.

This allowed the embodiment of heterosexual femininity that felt, for them, acceptable and 'appropriate' for their age. The expression of/identification with sexuality and or desire, or with being available, did not seem appropriate for these women; the boundaries of sexuality in midlife were very much policed and guarded. Safety was found in non-sexual encounters, and through the embodiment of an 'appropriate' sensuality, practiced within an appropriately safe space.

Another way in which the safety of the space and its associated sensuality was produced was to talk about the threat of dangerous 'outsiders', and a dangerous and sexual 'outside'; and in doing so, drawing a boundary around the safe space and safe sensuality – an important way of practising

heterosexual femininity. This was seen when ‘outsiders’ attended the classes and in the ways in which participants differentiated the salsa club from the salsa class,. In their reactions to explicitly sexual encounters or attitudes, participants further produced themselves as appropriate feminine, distancing themselves again from explicit sexuality, and again in a way that was co-produced alongside the experience of different spaces. The perception of the ‘safe sensuality’ was difficult to manage and fragile and threatened.

Once possible sexual/social spaces had been identified that were deemed ‘age-appropriate’, participants undertook considerable social work to mystify the sexuality of the space. Having gone through the process of negotiating the sociosexual terrain, and having found spaces where it felt comfortable, acceptable and age appropriate to be unpartnered, they then worked to distance themselves from being seen as desiring subjects. In experiencing the salsa space as ‘safe’, alongside developing a ‘safe sensuality’ which allowed close movement and touch in acceptable ways and placing explicit sexuality outside of the class, the participants embodied a femininity that was ‘appropriate’, and also specifically appropriate for their age.

Learning to embody ‘more of myself’

The safe sensuality and process of learning to touch and move in certain ways was closely tied to the slow and increasing adoption of a ‘salsa outfit’ within the classes. There was often a visible difference in the clothing worn by beginners and those in the more advanced classes; wearing the salsa outfit was encouraged amongst the women, again similar to the movement and touch - indirectly by becoming accustomed to the rules and norms of the space, and also often directly by the salsa teachers. Learning how to dress was an integral part of learning the dance, and indicated a level of skill and proficiency and comfort and ease in the class space. In a similar way to how the touch and closeness of the dance slowly became ‘normal’, adopting the salsa outfit was also something slowly acclimatised to; working

through an initial discomfort and embarrassment, towards embracing and embodying the new image with pleasure.

Ruth for example, an advanced dancer in her sixties, who sometimes taught and was often used as a demonstration partner by the teacher, told me that in salsa dancing she felt she could wear things otherwise would have been wary of because of her age. The change in clothing for salsa had allowed her to wear things she would have been wary of wearing previously because of her age,

... before I did salsa, I would never wear anything strappy and show my shoulders or, I used to always buy t-shirts that had sleeves whereas now I don't care really, I mean I probably could do with covering them up, they're a bit wrinkly...

Ruth described a past where she was shy, hesitant and how this had now changed. She now did things she would never have thought of doing when she was younger, for example socialising alone. Age was no longer an inhibitor to her in this context, and in fact she felt more confident than in her youth – in what she wore and who socialised with. Ruth mentioned that this change had turned her relationship with children upside down, *'I'm out six nights a week... they have to book an appointment!'*

In a way that drew together many of the issues I observed and discussed with people regarding the salsa classes, Jemima spoke at length about the change, transformation and pleasure that salsa dancing had brought to her life; in terms of sociality, friendship groups, physical exercise, contact with men, the way she dressed and the way she felt about her body. The time at which she started salsa dancing coincided with the time that she started dating men again, after a long time of not having time, or being interested in doing so;

It's been really important, its changed how I buy clothes, its changed my shape you know, it's changed my fitness level, its, I've started meeting people again. It's an

opportunity of learning like that, how to meet people and um what happens, and the rules and you know what touching means, what it means when people say certain things, how they look at you, it's been yeah it's been its all that...

In her interview, Jemima described the changes in her lifecourse in terms of sociality inside and outside of the house, and associated the changes in sociality in different life stages with different ways of dressing. Jemima had been divorced for around twenty years at the time of the interview, and described having spent many of those years focused on bringing up and looking after her three daughters as a single mother. Whilst reflecting on the changes that the salsa classes had had on her life, she described this time at home with her children,

I think for a number of years I hid myself, I hid under big baggy clothes, I used to wear the baggiest things. I was still me under there but I was, I guess I was more like dealing with young children and um, not, and withdrawn really from the social life.

‘Hiding herself under baggy clothes’ was linked by Jemima with being withdrawn from the sociality; with spending most of her time inside the house space as a mother. Joining the salsa classes for Jemima was part of becoming more social, linked with becoming more interested in clothes again, and particularly ‘fitted’ clothes – which she associated with becoming more ‘feminine’,

I moved into more fitted clothes and became, I guess a bit more feminine rather than non [feminine].

Jemima’s experience of changes in life stages was conceptualised therefore in terms of her body and clothing. Being ‘*withdrawn*’ from the social life was accompanied by ‘*hiding herself*’ under big and baggy clothes, which hid her body and which were by extension, she felt, associated with hiding her femininity and sociality. She described it the changes with much enthusiasm;

... it was like emerging again, and it was like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, and it was just lovely. (Jemima)

Part of Jemima's pleasure was in sharing this experience with other women who were also in a similar life stage of 'relearning'. The salsa class was described as a kind of hub of renewal, a safe place to practice and to negotiate new or renewed ways of being; *'because of where we are at in our lives, sometimes people go to salsa just to dance ... for us as a group it was like developing or finding out who you are at this stage in your life'*. Adopting this particular outfit, often glamorous, within this space negotiated negative connotations with 'older' ages, and allowed a reconnection to an imagined younger time,. Jemima provided a vivid account of an embodied lifecourse, whereby the clothes she wore, linked to her lifestyle at different times, were linked to different life stages. She described a process amongst her and the group of friends she met through salsa dancing, of finding out 'who they were' at this particular time of their lives. She described becoming 'more feminine' – and for Jemima and many of the others, by extension this seemed to mean they felt they had become 'more me'.

From a position of uncertainty, participants had found, perhaps temporarily, a space that suited their age and life stage. The salsa space allowed them to (re)learn new or renewed ways of being, which included ways to move, dress and behave. This 'second chance' that many referred to was acknowledged as something that had not been afforded to the generations of women before them; their mothers had aged differently, which also meant there was a lack of role models to guide them how to be single in midlife. They found a way to negotiate certain aspects associated with ageing, yet embodied a policed femininity that was not actively desirous, at least explicitly and that was glamorous.

Discussion

As the women described in this paper dwelled in different spaces and danced in the salsa spaces, heteronorms surrounding ageing and femininity were felt, experienced and embodied. Experiencing discomfort within particular spaces as single women, and looking for new spaces to socialise, were ways of experiencing and exploring their new or renewed sexual subjectivities, intimately linked to

the spaces they inhabited due to their age. As in studies of queerness and heteronormativity (Johnston and Longhurst, 2009; Hubbard 2000), there was an intimate link between different spaces and the production of appropriate sexualities. As single women in midlife, discomfort was felt in the family and couple orientated spaces often associated with their age, and the youth associated social spaces where people met others such as pubs and clubs. Hubbard (2000) notes that whilst displays of heterosexual affection, friendship and desire are regarded as acceptable or 'normal' in most spaces, gay men and women are often forced to deny or disguise their sexual orientations, except in specific and often marginal spaces. Extending the studies of queerness and space to account for ageing, this study shows being a heterosexual single woman in midlife felt uncomfortable within normative heterosexual space. Within a hierarchy of heterosexual femininities, ageing into mid and old ages was troubling especially when associated with non-normative (i.e. non-coupled) identities.

For women navigating a new social scene, without templates to follow, having experienced the liminality of their positions as women in midlife looking to meet new partners, the salsa space was welcoming and provided structure for their experiences. In the ways in which I described, learning to touch and move in certain ways, by attending to the rules of the space, produced a 'safe space' and encouraged a transition towards a 'safe sensuality'. Movement and interaction were managed so that a sensuality was produced that was distanced from explicit sexuality or the invitation of sexual advance. Considerable social work was undertaken to ensure that the new ways of touching and moving were sensual and not sexual, and therefore acceptable, allowing the embodiment of heterosexual femininity that felt for them acceptable and appropriate for their age. The boundaries of sexuality in midlife were policed and guarded – safety was found in nonsexual encounters, and through the embodiment of an 'appropriate' and safe sensuality, practiced within an appropriately safe space.

An interesting comparison here is Dolan's auto-ethnographic, Foucauldian analysis of a 'Festival of Ageing' in the UK. Dolan provides a detailed analysis of the materiality of the space produced for the festival - the room, types of cups used, the lack of alcohol and the substituted tea and cake, and slow music, which worked to produce the image of docile and vulnerable bodies, aging into old age

unsuccessfully. The salsa spaces of this study were almost the opposite – allowing access to a particular type of bodily movement and dress that was embraced with pleasure, brought confidence and joy, and seemed to override any negative connotations held in relation to ageing.

Studies of ageing have used different approaches to understand how and why ageing femininities have often been associated with the concept of an ‘inner self’ – used as a coping mechanism to deal with spoiled identities; to differentiate authentic selves from ageing bodies, which are seen as negative and undesirable (Biggs 1997; Woodward 1999). In this study however, adopting a glamorous, sensual but respectable image worked to override some of the changes that come with age. Instead of talking about an ‘inner self’ differentiated from their bodies, the ageing bodies, performing successfully, represented ‘*who they really were*’. Rather than experiencing the ageing body as negative and undesirable, ultimately a painful experience, here adopting a glamorous body worked to override some of these changes that came with ageing. Through embodying this type femininity they could become ‘more me’; a better more successful version of themselves. As described above, Biggs and Woodward may interpret this as a ‘youthful façade’; the participants performed youth. However, the independence that was intimately linked with other changes such as glamour, and active lifestyles, was described as something that had come with age – some aspects of who they were now were conceptualised as better than when they were younger.

Whilst other studies of (hyper)femininity in different contexts might understand such findings as purely performative (Stuart, 1996), I interpret these narratives as indicating a culturally and historically contingent way of doing gender. Initially their habitus, as single women in midlife, did not fit with the spaces they were used to inhabiting; they felt there was ‘no space’ for them. The women in this paper (re)learnt a particular way of doing femininity that was successful for the time being. This was learnt in the salsa classes, a space that suited this kind of experimentation of new or renewed identities. During this ‘second chance’ they had to carve out their own way – to find a ‘new’ way of doing femininity at their age, different for example to the femininity done by their mothers at similar ages.

Although embodying a sensual, glamorous, independent and socially active femininity challenged age-based assumptions about inactivity and social retirement, it reinforced norms and expectations surrounding gender and appearance i.e. that wearing fitted clothes and baring more skin was a 'successful' way of doing femininity. Alongside the glamorous femininity, was a pervasive importance of doing femininity in 'age appropriate' and respectable ways e.g. not inviting sexual advance. Sadie Wearing (2007) found similar in her analysis of the popular British 'makeover' TV shows; which promise a rejuvenation and deliverance from the paradigms of age but also reproduce 'appropriate', generationally suitable, sexualities through 'chronological decorum' (2007:298). There was a constant negotiation between differing and sometimes contradictory understandings of femininity and what it means to be a woman, particularly when it comes to the desire to be attractive, and often participants drew upon different forms of femininity depending on the circumstances they were referring to. Although liberating to some extent, a particular version of femininity was reinforced alongside heteronorms surrounding beauty and attractiveness.. Feeling uncertain at a time of change in their lives did not reflect a reality in which there were a neverending variety of choices from which to construct their new lifestyles and identities. Instead the habitus, their gendered and classed subjectivity, both shaped the discourses and resources that were available for them to choose from, and determined their success in their negotiation of them. The participants learnt how to embody and perform a particular kind of femininity, through demeanour, posture, body language and dress – the options for which were shaped by and which then shaped particular spaces. Within a hierarchy of heterosexual femininities, that ageing troubled, embodying a particular image of glamorous but 'respectable' femininity was powerful.

References

- ADKINS, L. 2004. Introduction: feminism, Bourdieu and after. In *Feminism After Bourdieu*. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford.
- AHMED, S. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham & London, Duke University Press.
- ARBER, S. & GINN, J. 1995. *Connecting gender and ageing: A sociological approach*, Buckingham, Open University Press
- BELL, D. & VALENTINE, G. 1995. *Mapping desire: Geographies of sexualities*, Oxford, Routledge.
- BIGGS, S. 1997. Choosing Not To Be Old? Masks, Bodies and Identity Management in Later Life. *Ageing & Society*, 17, 553-570.
- BORDO, S. 1993; 2003. *Unbearable weight: feminism, western culture and the body.*, Berkeley, L.A, London, University of California Press.
- BOURDIEU, P. 1990. *The logic of practice*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press.
- BOURDIEU, P. 2001. *Masculine domination*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- CONWAY, S. & HOCKEY, J. 1998. Resisting the 'mask' of old age?: the social meaning of lay health beliefs in later life. *Ageing & Society*, 18, 469-494.
- COUPLAND, J. 2000. Past the 'perfect kind of age'? Styling selves and relationships in over-50s dating advertisements. *Journal of Communication*, 50, 9-30.
- DOLAN, J. & TINCKNELL, E. 2012a. *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- DOLAN, J. M. & TINCKNELL, E. 2012b. *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- FEATHERSTONE, M. & HEPWORTH, M. 1991. The mask of ageing and the postmodern lifecourse. In: TURNER, B., M. HEPWORTH & M. FEATHERSTONE (ed.) *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage.

- FURMAN, F. 1997. *Facing the Mirror: Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture*, Oxford, Taylor & Francis.
- GOFFMAN, E. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*, New York, Doubleday.
- GOFFMAN, E. 2009. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, New York, Touchstone.
- GOTT, M. 2005. *Sexuality, sexual health and ageing*.
- GRANT, K. & RAGSDALE, K. 2008. Sex and the 'recently single': perceptions of sexuality and HIV risk among mature women and primary care physicians. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10, 495 - 511.
- HUBBARD, P. 2000. Desire/disgust: mapping the moral contours of heterosexuality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 24, 191-217.
- JOHNSTON, L. & LONGHURST, R. 2009. *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities*, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- KATZ, S. & MARSHALL, B. 2003. New sex for old: lifestyle, consumerism, and the ethics of aging well. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 17, 3-16.
- KATZ, S. & MARSHALL, B. L. 2004. Is the functional 'normal'? Aging, sexuality and the bio-marking of successful living. *History of the human sciences*, 17, 53.
- LOCK, M. 1994. *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America*, Berkeley, L.A, London, University of California Press.
- MARSHALL, B. L. 2006. The New Virility: Viagra, Male Aging and Sexual Function. *Sexualities*, 9, 345-362.
- MARSHALL, B. L. & KATZ, S. 2002. Forever Functional: Sexual Fitness and the Ageing Male Body. *Body & Society*, 8, 43-70.
- McMAINS, J. 2008: Dancing Latin/Latin dancing: salsa and dancesport. In: MALNIG, J (ed.) *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*. Indianapolis: University of Illinois Press.

- MEAH, A., HOCKEY, J. & ROBINSON, V. 2011. 'I'M A SEX KITTEN, AREN'T I ...'. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 26, 57-71.
- SEID, R. P. 1989. *Never too thin: why women are at war with their bodies*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall Press.
- SZRETER, S. & FISHER, K. 2010. *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- TSEËLON, E. 1992. Is the Presented Self Sincere? Goffman, Impression Management and the Postmodern Self. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 9, 115-128.
- TWIGG, J. 2004. The body, gender, and age: Feminist insights in social gerontology. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18, 59-73.
- TWIGG, J. 2010. How Does Vogue Negotiate Age?: Fashion, the Body, and the Older Woman. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 14, 471-490.
- TWIGG, J. 2013. *Fashion and Age: Dress, the Body and Later Life*, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- VARES, T. 2009. Reading the 'Sexy Oldie': Gender, Age(ing) and Embodiment. *Sexualities*, 12, 503-524.
- WADE, L. 2011. The emancipatory promise of the habitus: Lindy hop, the body, and social change. *Ethnography*, 12, 224-246.
- WAXER, L. 2002. *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meanings in Latin Popular Music*. Routledge: London.
- WILLIAMS, A., YLÄNNE, V. & WADLEIGH, P. M. 2007. Selling the 'Elixir of Life': Images of the elderly in an Olivio advertising campaign. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 21, 1-21.
- WOODWARD, K. 1999. *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.