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ARTICLE

Older women's constructions of equality over the lifecourse

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Abstract

Gender and age are central organising principles of social relations, with socially constructed gendered and age-based norms influencing patterns of social behaviour, power and inequality. Despite recent literature highlighting the importance of subjective measures of equality, including as a significant predictor of wellbeing, there is a gap in studies focused on subjective equality in research on ageing. Drawing on an equality ranking exercise and life herstory interviews with 20 older-aged women (65+) in Aotearoa New Zealand, this article focuses on the intersectionality of age and gender, analysing the ways in which participants constructed their experiences of equality over the lifecourse from their standpoint as older-aged women. The analysis reveals a significant rise in subjective equality from childhood to older age, with more varied responses in childhood and a convergence of responses from adolescence onwards. Participants' constructions of equality differed: age was the dominant construct of equality women ascribed to their childhood years, while gender inequality came to the fore during their teenage years. In early to mid-adulthood, women found ways to navigate gendered inequality in various life domains, while in older adulthood equality was constructed as freedom and life satisfaction. This trajectory suggests that the frames individuals use to make sense of equality and their personal experiences are not fixed; they are fluid and shift throughout the lifecourse.

Keywords: Aotearoa New Zealand; feminist gerontology; gender; lifecourse; subjective equality

Introduction

Social science literature on gender and ageing is well developed and there is widespread agreement that the 'problem' of age is culturally constructed, with different timelines and expectations for men and women (Grant 2011). Age establishes a particular age order, determining one's political location (Twigg 2013), and is one reason for discriminatory and oppressive practices (Calasanti 2009; Calasanti and Slevin 2006). Similarly, gender relations shape the possibilities open to people as gendered subjects (Nayak and Kehily 2008). In dominant Western narratives, older women occupy an ambivalent position. They may feel a sense of shame towards ageing, worrying about decay and

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decline and that they are no longer seen by some as women, and thus seek to remain youthful (Bouson, 2016), or they may embrace a discourse of freedom, and try out new forms of sexuality and agency in their relationships (Earhart 2019). While transformations in gender relations over the past 50 years – or, as Clisby and Holdsworth (2016, 23) note, the 'extent to which women have pushed at the glass ceilings, jumped off the sticky floors, and knocked down barriers to equality of opportunity' – may suggest that women have reached gender equality, patriarchal relations and power dynamics continue to influence family life, paid work and social constructions of what it means to be a gendered subject.

Theorisations of ageing as a socio-cultural (rather than a medical/biological) phenomenon have lagged significantly behind critical engagement with gender (see Twigg 2010; Woodward 1999, 2006). Conceptualisations of age as 'first', 'second', 'third' or 'fourth' age recognise that age is a conceptual continuum across the lifecourse, and these stages correlate directly not with the biological age of an individual but with personal characteristics and capacities (Barnes 2011; Laslett 1989). The neo-liberal discourse counterposes successful ageing, with its emphasis on the third age as a social imaginary of individual health underpinned by an active and socially engaged lifestyle, to a fourth age of frailty (Gilleard and Higgs 2013). Before 'successful ageing' came to prominence, with its focus on maintaining mid-life attributes, gerontological theory offered alternative foci for later life based in reflection and self-confrontation with the past that offer alternative visions for constructing identities in older age (Jones 2022; Tornstam 2005).

Throughout people's lives, age and gender, and other social markers of difference, may take on differing degrees of significance when defining one's identity and sense of (in)equality in relation to others. While it is important to understand these changing frames of comparison, research on the subjective construction of equality has lagged behind other approaches to studying equality/inequality that seek to measure equality, understand objective causes and design social policy interventions (Bottero 2020; Harris 2000, 2006). The rise of social constructionism in studies of social inequality in the early 2000s precipitated greater interest in subjective equality, although there is still a much greater understanding of changing patterns of inequality broadly, with a weaker sense of how people perceive equality and how these perceptions are shaped by everyday experiences and life events (Bottero 2020). Subjective constructions of equality matter because while people may employ familiar sociological themes (such as 'power' or 'sexism') to interpret and narrate events in their lives, they often employ less familiar themes and draw upon changing everyday experiences and social contexts to make sense of their situations (Harris 2006). Thus, by inquiring about what equality means and enabling people to narrate their sense of equality, researchers can gain a better understanding of equalities as they actually appear in men's and women's lived experiences across the lifecourse (Ferraro 2009).

Feminist gerontology is grounded in feminist theory and critical gerontology; it is a field focused on power relations and how intersecting oppressions shape people's sense of self (Calasanti 2009; Hooyman et al. 2002). Feminist gerontologists typically focus on constructions of gender equality in later life (*e.g.* Calasanti 2009; Repetti and Calasanti 2017); however, this study asked women to reflect on their sense of equality across their lives. This approach provides an opportunity for exploring shifting social roles

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and responsibilities by identifying key moments, transitions and events in a person's life (Dannefer 2003; Hooyman et al. 2002). The researchers were motivated by the question: *How do older women make biographical sense of their equality in relation to others over their lifecourse?* This approach enables an understanding of how older women's constructions of equality change over time, and how intersectional gender relations influence their constructions of equality.

This article draws on life history interviews (termed 'herstories' in the feminist tradition) with 20 women aged 65+ years in Aotearoa New Zealand.[1] These interviews enabled the participants to provide reflexive accounts of how they view their lives retrospectively and to make sense of equality through a life narrative. The semi-structured interviews evolved from a simple question: '*What is life like for you as a woman over the age of 65?*' Follow-up prompts included questioning how their current experiences compared to their earlier years. At the end of each interview, the women were invited to complete an equality ranking exercise, where they ranked (from 0 to 10) their sense of equality over each decade of their lives. The study specifically refrained from defining what equality meant in this context to allow participants to make sense of equality in their own terms. The findings revealed that participants' constructions of equality differed as they made sense of different phases of their lives: in childhood, age was the predominant comparison by which people constructed their sense of equality with others, whereas gender became dominant in adolescence, and remained so over the 20s–50s, becoming less prevalent in constructions of equality in older age. The richness of the interviews combined with a small quantitative data set enabled a detailed analysis of how older women reflexively construct and make sense of equality within different periods in their lives.

This paper makes three key research contributions. First, it adopts a broad conception of subjective equality that focuses on cultural contexts of growing old, thus contributing both to the concept of equality and to understanding women's gendered self-conception throughout their lives.

Second, it uses a novel retrospective herstory approach to understand subjective equality. Feminist research has been instrumental in the development of alternative methodologies in gerontology that give voice to participants, but more work is needed that brings together qualitative and quantitative approaches to life history in ways that empower participants (Jones 2022; Sörlin et al. 2011). This methodology supports participants' agency in the research process and is helpful for feminist gerontology researchers who seek to enable participants to be empowered through their research.

Finally, it examines these relationships in Aotearoa NZ, a country that has had less attention in the scholarship on feminist gerontology. Aotearoa NZ is an interesting case in part because it is often seen to have objectively high gender equality. In 1893, it was the first self-governed nation to give women the right to vote in parliamentary elections, and while women's political representation remained low until the liberation movements of the 1970s, women now make up almost half of elected members of parliament. Gender equality in other life domains, however, has not been as progressive. Until 1960, it was legal for men and women to be paid different wages for the same work. While pay discrimination on the basis of gender has been prohibited in the public and private sectors since the 1970s, the gender pay gap (GPG) remains,

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rising during a woman's working life to be worst in the 40s–50s age groups (Ministry for Women 2022). The cumulative wealth impact of the GPG is evident in inequality in property ownership, with 17.4 per cent of properties owned by a sole female compared with 19.2 per cent owned by a sole male (Owen 2021, 11). Women are also far more likely to experience non-partner sexual violence and intimate partner violence than men (Fanslow et al. 2022).

Aotearoa NZ is also one of the most ethnically diverse nations.[2] The self-selected participants in this study include people of European, Māori, Pacific and Asian ethnicities. The participants are broadly middle-class, and thus their experiences of older age also reflect relative class privilege of security in areas such as housing and food security that does not reflect the experiences of all older women in Aotearoa NZ. However, the group is heterogenous in ethnicity as well as disability and family formation, and their life trajectories have been diverse and certainly not uniformly privileged. Thus, this article does not make claims about how older women as a group construct inequality over the lifecourse, and it does not claim that a sense of equality uniformly increases in older age. Rather, the novel methodology sought to understand how women in later life look back on life phases and the relevant contexts of those times.

The following section situates the study within a discussion of the gender and age constructions of personhood over the lifecourse. A short profile of the participants and methodology is then provided, before the results from the equality ranking exercise are presented. These results are elaborated through the narratives women shared in their life herstory interviews. This discussion follows a lifecourse analysis (childhood, adolescence, early to mid-adulthood and older adulthood) and reveals how interviewees construct and narrate equality as they reflect back upon their lives.

Gendered and aged constructions of personhood over the lifecourse

A major theme within ageing research is how inequalities associated with racial, class and gendered identities affect individuals in their older years. Traditionally, lifecourse literature on social inequality conceptualised equality as a categorical, distributional or relational societal structure at a given time period, with cross-sectional measurement of objective indicators seen as the means to capture this empirically (Falkingham et al. 2020). This work tends to see social positions as a stable destination (such as pay equity or political representation). More recent work recognises the complexity of inequality, that is, the way people perceive equality changes over time, and that subjective experiences differ; therefore, equality is not a stable destination but rather a moving, complex construct (Kurzman et al. 2019). Subjective approaches, which focus on how people experience and personally evaluate aspects of equality, elucidate the ways in which constructs of equality may not match objective measurements (Kurzman et al. 2019). Researchers employing a lifecourse perspective use the concepts of 'cumulative advantage' and 'cumulative disadvantage' to highlight how socio-economic inequalities accumulate over the lifecourse (Dannefer 2003; O'Rand 1996). Other scholars argue for an approach that looks at gender and generation simultaneously (McDaniel 2001). However, there is little research that seeks to understand people's subjective construction of themselves in relation to others across their lives through the language of equality, although useful parallels can be made to research on the making

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of social identities, gender stereotyping, subjective satisfaction and wellbeing through the lifecourse.

Identity can be understood as a process of 'becoming'; people perform multiple identities and these are often contradictory and shifting (Hockey and James 2003). Conceiving identities as 'multiple' and 'becoming' highlights the interplay of structure and agency in the formation of identity. Thus, people negotiate their identities in the context of the discursive possibilities of the present cultural and historical moment (Parker 1992). What it means to be an older person is changing, shaped by shifts in gender roles, paid and unpaid work and population structures. What it means to be a person at any age is also changing, as identity is increasingly based on the individual project of living 'my life' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Discursive possibilities provide the resources older people use to represent themselves as a certain sort of person (Breheny and Stephens 2017).

One's sense of self can be ambivalent and sometimes contradictory. In Anderson's (2019) interviews with women of different ages, for example, the body was a significant feature of identity construction across the lifecourse, but people had ambivalent relationships with their bodies at different ages. Older women spoke about reaching 'the pinnacle' of their life in their 20s; middle-aged women expressed a fear of the ageing body; and some older people saw menopause as a sign of no longer being a woman and both desired to conform to cultural standards of youthful appearance and suggested that the acceptance of being 'a certain age' brought a liberation from the tyranny of appearance.

Other studies that focus on the intersection between age and gender in relation to gender discrimination suggest that women experience different forms of sexism across their lives and this shapes their sense of gendered equality (Granleese and Sayer 2006; Harnois, 2015). For young women, gendered stereotypes of women and young workers reinforce each other, with young women more likely than older women, or men of any age, to be viewed as immature, weak or naïve in the workplace (Duncan and Loretto 2004). Middle-aged women may be viewed as not fully committed to work, particularly if they have children, whereas older women are often stereotyped as grandmotherly and technologically incompetent, or are overlooked entirely (Rochon et al. 2021). Using general social survey data from the United States, Harnois (2015) finds that women perceive high rates of gender and age-based mistreatment at work across their working lives, with young women perceiving the highest rates of mistreatment and a reduction among those in their 30s–40s, although remaining high in comparison with men's ratings for the duration of their careers.

While the exploration of subjective equality is less developed than objective measures, feminist researchers use qualitative interviews to explore women's self-perceived sense of relational equality. For example, Bui et al. (2012) explored subjective equality in group interviews, choosing to not define equality or distinguish it from equity, but rather letting participants determine its meaning for themselves. While research on subjective equality through the lifecourse using retrospective interviews is less developed, there is a rich literature on subjective wellbeing through the lifecourse that has useful parallels (Plagnol 2010). The notion of a U shape in happiness – that wellbeing is highest for people in their 20s, decreases to its lowest point in mid-life and then rises into old age – has been found in multiple studies of subjective wellbeing and is often

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cited as evidence for a mid-life crisis (Galambos et al. 2020). However, recent work challenges the 'U shape', finding that this is culturally dependent and that, when asked to reflect on their lives, older adults tend to recall mid-life as one of the more positive periods (Galambos et al. 2020). Similar studies that ask participants to retrospectively rank their wellbeing and life satisfaction across their lifespan have been undertaken in Denmark (Mehlsen, Platz, & Fromholt, 2003), Switzerland (Freund and Ritte 2009) and the US (Field 1997) with mixed results.

Gendered patterns of subjective self-esteem across the lifecourse also offer a useful parallel to subjective equality because both are relational constructs. In a meta-analysis on self-esteem across the lifecourse, Zuckerman et al. (2016), for example, found no gender difference in self-esteem in childhood (under ten years), but differences emerged in adolescence, with girls having lower self-esteem than boys, before differences levelled out by the mid-20s. The authors posit that self-esteem emerges from a process of comparison that includes two key factors: what people think they can become and who they compare themselves with (Hoyle and Sheril 2006 cited in Zuckerman et al. 2016). In cultures where different genders share the same social worlds in schooling and play, for instance, and where children are told they can do anything no matter their gender, adolescence can bring a realisation that 'it seems as if women can reach goals that are as high as those of males, but in fact, they cannot' (Zuckerman et al. 2016, 45). These authors argue that from their mid-20s onwards, women may be settling into jobs and comparing themselves to other women (rather than to men) or entering marriage and motherhood and finding merit in these roles. In contexts where gender roles are fixed, there will be little gender difference in self-esteem because women are unlikely to compare themselves to men, while in contexts with less-rigid gender roles (such as where women are entering the labour market in larger numbers but are still paid less), women's self-esteem will be lower than that of men. Thus, subjective constructions of self-esteem are not fixed; the mechanisms of subjective constructions 'are bound to change in the life span' (Zuckerman et al. 2016, 46), dependent on the context-specific relational referents one compares oneself with.

Research on subjective perceptions of self-esteem and wellbeing has important parallels to research on subjective equality. It shows that subjective assessments vary not only across age, gender and cultural dimensions but also in relation to life events (such as work experiences, schooling and family formation). We also expect differences in the ways people narrate subjective equality from these other concepts. While subjective wellbeing is closely linked to physical and mental health (with older people who suffer health issues ranking lower in subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction) (Steptoe et al. 2015), equality is a relational construct rather than an internal evaluation, and therefore may be less closely linked to health or to specific life events. As a relational construct, like self-esteem, it is important to understand not only the subjective equality ratings but the referent groups participants are comparing themselves to when they rate their sense of equality, and the discourses they draw upon to make sense of their lives.

Finally, it is important to recognise that people's sense of equality is not simply received from their social environment (*i.e.* what others do to them). Interactional perspectives of age and gender as achieved or relational constructs – that is, age and gender as 'doing' – move beyond simple understandings of marginalisation as things that are

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done to one group by others. This framing demonstrates how inequalities are situationally and interactionally accomplished rather than being natural categories (Butler 1990; Krekula 2019). It also helps us to see how constructions of equality can change over time. Understanding gender and age as 'doing' thereby creates space for individuals to articulate how they respond to what they perceive as acts of discrimination towards them. For example, older women may use beauty work to respond to gendered ageism (Clarke and Griffin 2008) or they may turn to different images of womanhood, such as embracing various positive gender identities like wife, girlfriend or mother, to reject negative gender identities of old age as a time of decline (Krekula 2019; Wilińska 2016).

Methodology

This article draws on life story interviews with 20 women who fulfilled three criteria: self-identifying as a woman, aged 65 years or older and interested in telling their story.[3] The research team, made up of four cis-women feminist sociologists, aimed to provide older women with the opportunity to 'tell their story' of (in)equality. The interviews are termed 'herstory' interviews in the feminist tradition. Herstories are histories told through a female perspective and/or feminist standpoint and have been part of feminist methodological discourse and practice since the 1970s (Morgan 1970). As a research method, they centre women's narratives and everyday experiences, and seek to counteract the predominance of male-dominated constructions of history (Hoff-Sommers 1995). As a biographical approach, herstories focus on women's 'search for meaning and their attempt to make sense of their lives and identities' (Wilkinson 2000, 438). The life herstory interviews were loosely structured, evolving from a simple question: '*What is life like for you as a woman over the age of 65?*' Follow-up prompts included questioning how their current experiences compared to their earlier years. This provided participants an opportunity to share and reflect on what they perceived as the important moments in their lives, from the retrospective standpoint of an older-aged woman. Thus, the methodology moves from the person to the political in the classical feminist tradition (Jones 2022), inviting participants to reflect on their own specific experiences and to link these to wider issues and relationships.

At the end of each interview, a subjective equality ranking exercise was conducted. The purpose of the ranking exercise was to help facilitate the story-telling process. Participants were asked 'How equal did you feel in each decade of your life?', which provided participants with an opportunity to narrate how they had experienced equality in different life periods. The exercise was presented as a table, divided horizontally into decades and vertically into a scale of perceived equality (1 being least equal and 10 being most equal). A description or explanation of what equality meant in this context was deliberately not offered, to allow participants to freely construct their own understanding of equality as they reflected on their experiences. This better enabled the research team to understand how participants constructed equality in their narratives, particularly when reviewed in relation to the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the interview transcripts.

While no studies were located that have used a similar methodology to explore women's subjective conceptions of equality, this methodology is well developed in subjective wellbeing (see Galambos et al. 2020) and has been used in Sörlin et al.'s (2011)

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study of subjective equality where they asked participants to rank their level of gender equality through a likert scale. Sorlin et al. (2011) noted that the concept was exceedingly difficult to capture, as respondents exhibited ambiguity as to whether they experienced equality in their relationships. They argued for more exploration of how a quantitative subjective ranking like they performed relates to qualitative explorations of equality, and suggested that 'elaboration on the basis of in-depth interviews would be of great importance. This would enable a deeper understanding of respondents' ideas and perceptions of gender equality in their lives' (Sörlin et al. 2011, 10). Thus, this article aims to combine rich qualitative analysis of subjective equality with a quantitative subjective ranking to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which participants constructed equality.

The interviews and ranking exercise were completed from June 2020 to March 2021, and all but one took place in the participants' homes. The interviews lasted one to two hours, although extended time was often spent with the women – roaming their garden, sharing tea and cake, and talking further about life, love, politics and future possibilities. Purposive sampling of women in terms of indices of difference, such as ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability and so on, was deliberately avoided; rather, participants were those who responded to recruitment posters that were distributed around Auckland (Aotearoa NZ's largest city) or who had the details passed on to them by other women. Participants were aged between 65 and 88 years. Thus, this research does not claim to represent the views of any specific identity categories other than that of older-aged women. Income and wealth data were not collected as the research does not seek to make a class analysis, but from the life herstories it can be assessed that the women who chose to participate are broadly middle-class, based on a simple indicator: all the women either currently owned or had owned their own home. However, while the women all had been home-owners, they lived in diverse home environments (alone, with a partner, with extended family, in the long-term family home or in a retirement village). The interviews also revealed diversity among them, including varied experiences of motherhood, marital status, employment, self-employment or homemaking, cis- and transwomanhood, ethnicity, travel and migration (Table 1).

Results and discussion

Equality ranking exercise

Responses from the equality ranking exercise were analysed and collated into a box and whisker plot graph (Figure 1). A box and whisker plot provides a visualisation of a data set into quartiles. The box extends from the lower quartile to the upper quartile, with the median indicated by the line within each box. The whiskers indicate maximum and minimum values.

Looking at the results chronologically, childhood had the lowest median score of 4.5/10 and the widest spread in the interquartile range, indicating that rankings of equality for childhood were most divergent among participants. Results converge for the teenage years, coupled with a slight increase in the median (5.0/10). A third trend emerges as women enter early adulthood. The median spikes upwards to 7.0/10, suggesting that participants reported that their sense of equality increased in their 20s, and it remains at that point until their 40s when there is a further upwards shift through

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Table 1 Participant profiles

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Marital status	Motherhood [parent/grandparent]	Home ownership	Occupation	Employment status
Stella	65	Pākehā	Divorced/single	Parent	Yes	Desktop publisher/ systems engineer	University student
Debbie	67	Pākehā	Widowed/single	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Community advocate/ activist	Part-time activist/com-mittee work
Olivia	68	Canadian	Separated from 2nd marriage/dating	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Nutritionist	Part-time consultancy
Margaret	68	Pākehā	Married (3rd marriage)	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Office worker/massage therapist	Retired
Elizabeth	68	Pākehā	Separated (1st marriage)	No children	Yes	Self-employed life coach	Part-time/no retirement plans
Song	70	Chinese	Widowed/single	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Teacher/community advocate	Retired/volunteering & advocacy
May	71	Taiwanese/ Chinese	Married (1st marriage)	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Personal assis-tant/librarian	Full-time librarian
Miriam	73	Jewish	Married (2nd marriage)	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Self-employed advertising company	Retired/independent researcher
Patricia	75	Pākehā	Married (1st marriage)	No children	Yes	Business owner (houseware importing company)	Retired
Mary	75	Pākehā	Separated (3rd marriage)	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Office administrator	Retired/volunteering
Barbara	77	Māori/Scottish	Widowed/single	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Care worker	Retired
Nancy	77	Pākehā	Widowed/single	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Teacher	Part-time kindergarten teacher
Filo	79	Niuean	Divorced/single	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Care worker	Retired
Diane	80	British/Pākehā	Divorced/in a relationship	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Teacher/engineer	Retired

(*Continued*)

Table 1 (*Continued.*)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Marital status	Motherhood [parent/grandparent]	Home ownership	Occupation	Employment status
Mairi	83	Pākehā	Married (1st marriage)	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Teacher	Retired
Beverley	83	Pākehā	Married (2nd marriage)	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Self-employed ESOL teacher	Retired
Jane	84	Pākehā	Widowed/in a relationship	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Teacher/musician	Retired
Guinevere	87	Samoan	Widowed/single	Parent/grandparent	Not currently	Community advocate /activist	Retired
Skye	87	Pākehā	Widowed/single	No children	Yes	Sales assis-tant/account manager	Retired
Rose	88	Tongan/Pākehā	Widowed/single	Parent/grandparent	Yes	Teacher	Retired

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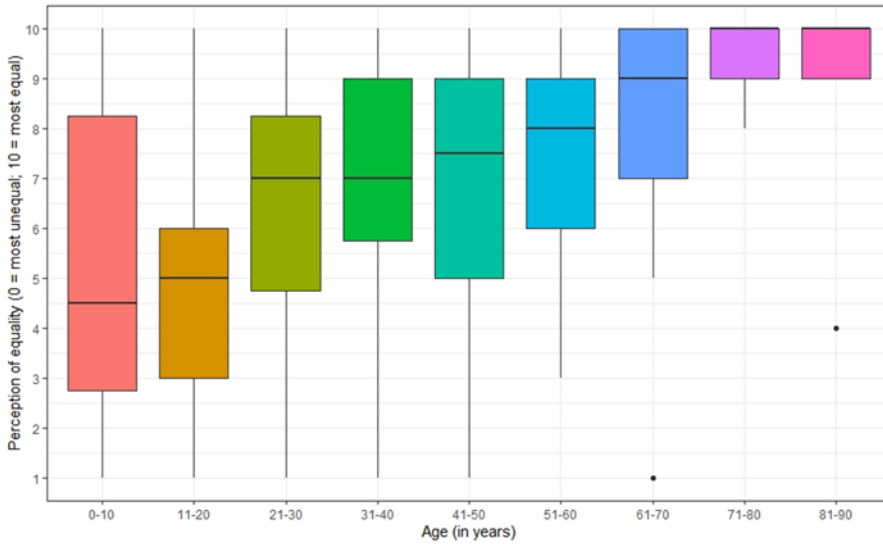


Figure 1. Participant responses to the equality ranking exercise over the lifecourse.

the mid-adult years. The final trend occurs when participants are in their 70s, where the median hits the highest ranking possible and remains there into their 80s.These results suggest, from this small cohort of participants, that the participants perceived their sense of equality to be greater in older adulthood than in their younger years.

In the following section, these trends in subjective equality are explained through thematic analysis of the life herstories that accompanied the equality ranking exercise. The discussion explores why there was a progressive upwards move in the equality rankings as participants reflected over their lifecourse and leaned on different frameworks of comparison to make sense of equality in different life phases.

Shifting experiences and understandings of gender (in)equality over the lifecourse

Differing understandings of equality in childhood

The childhood years had the lowest median ranking of inequality and also the greatest spread. Considering this spread alongside the stories shared in the life herstories also revealed the greatest diversity in the ways participants made sense of equality in this phase of their life. For example, Guinevere and Filo were both born and raised in the Pacific Islands before migrating to New Zealand as young adults, and they both spoke about being treated as equals in familial practices and expectations in childhood. However, their rankings were at the extreme ends (10 and 1, respectively). When Guinevere spoke about her childhood in Samoa, she reminisced: 'I was equal and so happy. I was so happy coming from that family of ten and we all do our things together … In the evening we say our prayer before we would go to bed at night, every night, and in the morning we do that before school … All happy, all happy.' For

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Guinevere, the act of praying together as a family – parents and children together irrespective of age or gender – gave her a sense of familial bonding and equality within the family unit. In contrast, when Filo reflected on her childhood growing up in Niue, being treated equally to other family members was an unhappy time: 'It was not a happy childhood for me. Well, growing up there, put it this way, childhood, there was no such thing at all. There [was no], "Oh you're a child, you have to play" … Just as soon as you are able to contribute, yeah, get on with it. Get on with life.' For Filo, being expected as a child to have the same responsibilities as other (older) members of the family robbed her of childhood freedom and what she now considers necessary for 'children … to establish their personality, to establish what they like'. In these narratives, both women are constructing a sense of equality by the degree of utility (happiness) it gave them. In Guinevere's experience, being treated as equals was a source of great happiness, while for Filo, equality in familial expectation prevented her from being free to be a child. From this, it can be understood that equality is not always a desirable position but is dependent on context and the dynamics between subjects.

Age relations rather than gender was the dominant construction of equality during childhood. Several participants discussed the lack of autonomy they had as children compared to the adults around them. Margaret, for example, ranked herself 1/10 (most unequal) during her childhood years, explaining: 'My life was dictated by my parents and society. So I had no say really. I had to do as I was told.' However, looking back at this period in her life, she recognised, 'Not that it was a bad thing at that time. It was all done very lovingly from my perspective.' Like Margaret, others similarly noted that a lack of autonomy, when conditioned by love, was acceptable and not a 'bad thing' – even if it did make them feel unequal and lacking in personal freedom.

While most participants constructed childhood equality through the veil of age rather than gender, Rose took an explicitly gendered lens. She reflected on childhood freedom and, like Filo, linked this to domestic responsibilities. Rose's equality ranking was in the 2nd quartile and she explained that in New Zealand in the 1930s and 40s 'boys had far more freedom than girls … There's no requirement for him to be home until tea-time … whereas a girl was required to help out and very often help out with little brothers and sisters.' Like Margaret, Rose didn't necessarily talk about this inequality critically; rather, she took a reflexive stance, acknowledging that gendered norms of the time meant that girls had more domestic responsibilities and fewer freedoms than boys. Skye, who ranked herself a 10, also constructed childhood equality through a gendered lens. She explained how 'We're at school. All kids together, boys and girls … you don't think that boys are better off than you.' However, as discussed next, during the adolescent years, school and peer socialisation became sites where gendered norms associated with different expectations and opportunities came to the fore.

Teenage years: growing awareness of gendered inequality

In contrast to childhood where age was an important construct in how participants made sense of equality, participants' reflections on the teenage years (11–20) showed a strong emphasis on gender as the defining construct for equality. Furthermore, rather than a focus on the family, participants spoke about dynamics at school, recreational opportunities, along with socialisation, sexuality and future employment.

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Miriam recounted how as boys and girls neared puberty, they were partially segregated in the school playground. This irritated her – not because she necessarily wanted to interact with the boys but because they had the 'best part of the playground and the girls weren't allowed into the boy's playground … That really annoyed me.' Miriam went on to attend an all-girls high school where she was 'given the mantra that girls can do anything and be whatever they want'. This affirmation of female empowerment sat in stark contrast to her experience of social relations among her male and female peers. She spent her teenage years in Sydney, Australia, and explained:

> When we went down to Bondi Beach, and thinking about how the boys behaved down the beach … I didn't feel all that empowered … [There was] just a sense that the boys called the tune and the girls sort of had to sit round obediently while the boys, let's say, went on the surfboards and the girls had to sit and admire them … The girls really weren't very independent.

Here, Miriam reflects on how girls were expected to be docile and admiring, whereas the teenage boys showed off their physicality and emerging manhood, and how these dynamics left her feeling disempowered.

Elizabeth also spoke about gendered social dynamics and the attention that adolescent boys were starting to give to the female body: 'In my teens, I felt very unequal because I mean, being five foot seven since I was twelve, and I was a really good athlete, but I was also really skinny and there was, oh, so many put-downs from others, well male students sort of thing. So I felt very unequal.' Elizabeth's quote speaks of a growing awareness to changing bodies and how the teenage female body was a site of the male gaze and gendered self-consciousness. Few participants spoke directly about sexuality in their teenage years, although Beverley did remark that female sexuality was an unspoken subject, 'a word that you only read about in a book'.

During their teenage years, participants reflected on how they were indoctrinated into what were considered gender-appropriate occupations, with unequal opportunities based on gendered norms and expectations. For example, Skye dreamt of becoming a zookeeper but explained how, as a teenager, she came to the realisation that

> When you're in [high] school you haven't got the opportunities that the boys have got or the expectations … Women were not looked on an equal class as men. I always loved animals … and when I was young I'd have liked to have been a zookeeper. But there was no chance of that because that was, as with many jobs, a male-dominated area and they only employed males.

This realisation that there were occupations not available to women was an important reason why Skye's equality ranking dropped from 10 in childhood to 5 for her teenage years. Similarly, other women spoke about gendered occupations and social expectations that meant their job choices were typically limited to nursing, teaching, typing or office administration. Gender inequality followed the women into adulthood; however, unlike the teenage years, they found ways to navigate and negotiate this.

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Early and mid-adulthood: navigating and negotiating gender inequality

Participants' emphasis on gender as the dominant construct of inequality in the teenage years flowed into their construct of early and mid-adulthood. New social roles, responsibilities, relationships and freedoms did not dissipate the gender inequality they had experienced as teenagers; rather, adulthood brought forth new forms of, and encounters with, gender inequality. Participants narrated experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, and of being told by employers, colleagues or men in their social circles that they were less competent and should be paid less – which many of them were. They talked about gender-based violence, unequal care responsibilities and structures that limited women's autonomy. On this last point Margaret, who 'can't abide unfairness', explained:

> You couldn't open your own bank account until your husband gave you his permission! … The same thing happened if you were in the hospital and needed an operation. Your husband or father or other male relative had to sign the consent forms. I remember feeling totally incensed by the unfairness of it all. I look back now and think how far we have come in that time … Gender issues were so unequal.

Mairi, who is 15 years older than Margaret, was also aware of gendered inequality. Rather than being 'incensed' about this, she reflected on its normalcy at the time, but also on how, looking back over her life, she had observed gradual change:

> We were of the generation where it was taken for granted that the men were in charge and did all of those sorts of things and told their wives what to do. And we've just gradually changed. I suppose when the children were born and we were looking after them, I think [my husband] was far more involved in that than either of our fathers ever were … So it's a gradual thing.

Despite ongoing experiences of gender inequality during early to mid-adulthood, over these decades the median equality ranking of participants progressively increased. They reflected on structural gender inequalities, such as stories of pay inequities and work opportunities, as well as moments of 'biographical disruption': not being able to conceive, losing children to suicide, and marriage breakdowns, for example. However, without exception, the women constructed their experiences with a sense of their own agency and inner strength. They told stories of asserting agency in their relationships as mothers, spouses and workers, from standing up to a boss for higher pay, or demanding that a partner did more of the unpaid domestic labour, to fighting off an attempted rapist and leaving an abusive domestic relationship. Participants talked of ranking themselves more equally as they took on new jobs, lived independently or travelled internationally, which allowed some, such as Mairi, to 'find out who I personally was'. Even when faced with negative or distressing experiences, the participants chose to focus on the agency that enabled them to navigate these moments. For example, Olivia described an assault by a taxi driver in the Indonesian jungle, where he attempted to beat and rape her, as a story of survival and spiritual enlightenment.

Beyond these transformational moments, many participants spoke of their agency navigating equality in the labour market. They emphasised the respect they received

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from colleagues and the sense of empowerment they felt in their work lives. Nancy, who trained in early childcare, became a headteacher in a kindergarten in just her fourth year of teaching. Rose spoke about her teaching career as a space outside her role as mother and wife where she found her 'unique self' (and feminism). Mairi, also a teacher, advanced up the professional ladder taking on important roles on school boards and in the industry union where she advocated for workplace equality. By mid-adulthood, Beverley, Elizabeth and Olivia had become self-employed in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teaching, life coaching and nutrition, respectively. These women ranked themselves higher in the equality exercise as they moved up in their professions, and as they felt in control of their careers and appreciated the challenges and rewards they presented.

Participants also talked about unpaid care labour as a further domain of gender inequality. Many were ambivalent about this aspect of their lives in relation to equality; narrating the gendered load of care labour for children, husbands and elderly family members, but also reflecting on the pride and sense of competency they felt with familial care work. Filo, who separated from her husband when their children were very young, assumed the primary responsibility to care for and financially support them. As a retired older adult, she spoke about her earlier 'single mother, working woman self' with respect and gratitude. In this way, participants drew on a conception of equality as something achieved rather than passive – they recognised broader structural changes that enabled (or constrained) equality, but also reframed difficult times and relationships as more equal through emphasising the agency that they took to change things.

Older adulthood: the age of a new 'freedom'

Participants' sense of equality in older adulthood was narrated as significantly higher than at earlier life stages. Participants constructed equality in later life as feelings of life satisfaction, self-fulfilment, happiness and, most notably, freedom: freedom in knowing who they were and what they wanted to do, and freedom from gendered responsibilities and inequality. Important for this sense of freedom for many participants was the financial security that they had built up through their working lives. Not only did this give them the resources needed to travel and engage in leisure activities but it also freed them from constant financial stress. They were also largely free from the care responsibilities they had taken on in their earlier adult years: parents had passed away, children had grown up and were making lives of their own and, if they were in an intimate relationship, their retired husbands or partners were contributing more to domestic responsibilities such as cooking meals. Guinevere was the only participant who dropped her ranking in her 70s–80s. She had been forced to retire at age 75 from a career as a community advocate that had formed a major part of her identity and was required to sell her car and move in with her children in a different city, leaving behind the life she had built over the previous decades.

For some women, this sense of freedom was related to the move from paid work to retirement. The official retirement age in New Zealand is 65 years and at this age, irrespective of whether an individual chooses to continue to work or not, retirees are entitled to a government pension as well as the 'Supergold Card', which, when

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presented to stores or service providers, offers discounts. Margaret said that receiving her Supergold Card was a pivotal moment:

> I guess all my life I've felt a great weight of responsibility … and duty, and I've always been the person that … picks up the pieces, is the peacemaker, brings people together, sorts out the problems, fixes the chaos. And it's exhausting! I feel like the moment I got my gold card, it was like, whoo-hoo! I'm free! [laughter] It was an extraordinary moment.

Margaret described the freedom that came from handing over responsibilities to the next generation: 'I feel free, unfettered. There's another generation or two below me now, I'm not the person that's responsible for everything.'

For Filo, retirement was also a turning point from responsibility to freedom in her life. She explained:

> When I retired from work, Hallelujah! Happy. Freedom! Freedom! … I am the age I am and I don't have any hang-ups … I control my destiny. You know, I do what I want to do, go visit my children overseas, hang around with my beautiful grandchildren here in New Zealand … My own time is my leisure time … My life today, blossoming!

Margaret's and Filo's sense of equality is not only about freedom from responsibilities and from paid and unpaid labour; it is also an internalised freedom and contentment to be oneself. Rose's adult life was filled with care responsibilities, yet she similarly felt that older adulthood allowed her to 'make your own choices, be your own person', while Mary, after all the 'bad stuff [of] three relationships and two marriages' was in the past, finally found 'the freedom of being by myself and actually finding me'.

Discussion

In a recent meta-review of sociology research on ageing, Anne Barrett (2022, 215) argues that research on age as a system of inequality remains 'peculiarly lacking'. She calls for more research on age-based inequalities and how these intersect with other social structures to privilege some groups over others. This article contributes to rectifying this gap, with a focus on understanding older women's subjective measures of inequality through a feminist gerontology lens, thus making a contribution both to the concept of equality and to understanding women's gendered self-conception throughout their lives.

This study's retrospective narrative approach furthers scholarship in feminist gerontology, which typically focuses on constructions of gender equality in later life (*e.g.* Calasanti 2009; Repetti and Calasanti 2017). This study asked women to reflect on their sense of equality across their lives, building on the feminist gerontology literature that incorporates a lifecourse approach and identifies key moments, transitions and events in a person's life (Dannefer 2003). By explicitly asking participants to discuss their sense of equality at different points in their lives, different kinds of events and moments come to the fore. Indeed, while lifecourse studies often focus on large life events – schooling, marriage, motherhood, major illnesses and so on – participants' narratives in this

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study are distinctive for what they focused on as well as what they did not, in ways that suggest important insights for lifecourse literature. While the biographical disruptions of large life events did feature, participants also narrated their shifting sense of subjective equality through reference to small ways they asserted themselves in the face of oppressive structures, and small moments such as an encounter on a beach or reading a book that transformed their outlook. This suggests, in the tradition of feminist research, that the everyday is just as important as large life events for making sense of life narratives.

The findings also contribute to the growing literature on subjective equality. This study shows that equality is a complex, shifting construct that takes on changing frames of comparison throughout people's lives, thus taking forward the literature on subjective equality, which has lagged behind objective measures of inequality (Bottero 2020). The study found that participants ranked themselves 'more equal' with others later in their lives, in ways that both conformed to and challenged the discourse of 'successful ageing'. Across the participants, there was a significant rise in subjective equality from childhood to older age, with more varied responses in childhood and a convergence of responses from adolescence onwards. When participants narrated their sense of equality at different ages, they drew upon the discourses available to them to retrospectively make sense of their experiences. Participants' construction of equality shifted as they narrated different life stages, with age taking on more salience in childhood and older age, and gender equality narrated as central to conceptions of equality in mid-life. Participants' narratives of childhood drew on common cultural discourses of childhood as a disempowered social group compared to the adults around them (Hockey and James, 2003). When reflecting on childhood, a gendered sense-making framework was less salient for participants in contrast to age. Many participants said that they experienced life primarily as children rather than as 'girls' in the ways they were treated at school and in the home; this for some brought freedom and a sense of being the same as the boys around them, while others compared themselves with the adults around them and focused on the lack of autonomy they had as children.

This parallels the ways participants constructed a sense of equality in older age. Silver (2003, 387) notes that 'in the third and fourth ages … [g]ender categorization becomes less salient than age as a way to self-define', as women are more likely to be degendered by language and perception. Similarly, many participants' construction of equality at older age drew less on gender and instead focused on freedom through the falling away of various gendered identities – being a parent and carer, an employee or business owner, or through body image or anxiety over social relationships and so forth. Thus, both childhood and older age were times when the responsibilities and obligations associated with performing the multiple roles of womanhood were less visible.

This connection between childhood and older age identity formation is recognised in work on social identities across the lifecourse, where the paradoxical similarities between children and older adults can be understood because of their 'dual marginalisation from the mainstream of adult life', seen through the innocence of children and the frailty of older age (Hockey and James, 2003: 14). What this study shows, however, is that while constructions of equality in both childhood and older age were framed through the prism of freedom from gendered social identities, the rankings for

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older age were significantly higher across participants, largely because they understood themselves to have agency in the act of freeing themselves from gendered constraints. The ranking exercise itself was thereby an opportunity for participants to assert that they are equal and they refuse to be anything else. If the 'I' that participants constructed through these exercises is considered to be particular versions of who they think they are or who they would like to become (Giddens 1991), the participants constructed an identity as older women that reclaimed the invisibility of being older women (in relation to the previous burdens and expectations of gender) as a freedom from social constraints. This didn't mean they thought of themselves as less feminine, however; they simultaneously constructed identities of lovers, grandmothers and friends, through their stories about love and dating, the agency they asserted in their relationships with partners, and their social relationships with other women as well as with family.

This assertion of agency in participants' responses can be understood as a counter-narrative to the frailty of older age, and an embracing of the 'third age' discourses of 'successful' and healthy ageing (Belgrave and Sayed, 2013). These concepts attribute agency to ageing individuals whereby individuals in their third age are called to age successfully by remaining youthful, healthy, productive and self-reliant (Laliberte Rudman 2012, 11). What is interesting, however, is that the participants were not ideal 'successful ageing' subjects, as they were experiencing various challenges, including health and mobility issues, the prospect of moving from their own homes to assisted living complexes, death of or separation from spouses, and financial constraints. However, they affirmed through their ranking and herstory interviews that they had never felt more equal.

The rankings and narrative construction the participants deployed to explain the intervening years of adulthood help to understand the very high ranking that they ascribed to their older adult years. Across participants, the teenage years were often described as the first time when they understood themselves as constrained due to their gender; that is, equality here was conceptualised through participants' relationships with social structures that they considered to offer different opportunities and barriers for them as women when compared with the young men around them. Crucially, the women talked about these realisations as roadblocks because they felt that, as young women, they could do nothing about it. This parallels the research on self-esteem across the lifecourse, which found that women compared themselves with men from adolescence, with the realisation that the stories they were told that 'girls can do anything' and be equal with men were not true due to structural barriers (Zuckerman et al. 2016).

In contrast to this lack of agency the women described during their teenage years, they ascribed higher perceptions of equality from their 20s to their 50s. This was primarily conceived in relation to their own enactments of equality: moments when they asserted agency over what they recognised as unequal relationships in the home and workplace. Alongside these personal narratives, interviewees also recognised the changing social and political currents that enabled new opportunities for both women and men, and new understandings of what it means to age. All the participants noted that, in many ways, things had changed for the better for women. Importantly, however, the moments participants drew upon to explain their changing perceptions of equality were primarily demonstrated through the assertion of agency. This came

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from a growing awareness of difference, and the cumulative effects of challenges and frustrations they experienced as women which enabled them to feel that they could speak (or act) out.

In this way, participants constructed equality as something that is relationally enacted; that is, through their rankings and narratives, they viewed themselves as agents of equality. Thus, it is important to recognise that high rankings for some participants did not mean that they felt fully equal, with no gendered constraints or discrimination. Rather, as they explained in their interviews, they gave themselves higher rankings when they saw themselves pushing against the gendered constraints they were subject to, often in gradual ways, as they enacted more agency in their various relationships. This assertion of equality can be seen as one way participants reconciled the contradiction of experiencing structurally unequal relationships and encounters throughout their lives and at times feeling powerless or complicit; in their construction of themselves as active women making a difference, the implicit referent comparison is to other women (or other versions of themselves) who did not act.

The freedom and the agency the women speak of also have an affective dimension; they relate not only to the reduction in labour burden (or labour obligation) but to the release from social expectations. The women's discussions of freedom to be themselves can be read not only in terms of caring for others but also in terms of their release from a need to conform to particular social expectations (Earhart 2019). The women's narratives provide a counterpoint to the narratives of bodily decline and 'looking back' to better youthful days found in some research on gendered ageing (Anderson 2019). When women constructed themselves in relation to others through the discussion of equality in our study, the body (in decline/decay) did not often enter their narratives, and even when it did (for example with participants experiencing mobility challenges), it was not the dominant theme in interviews. Rather, they spoke of no longer caring as much about what others thought, and of having the choice to do what they wanted free from the judgement of others. This is instructive for researchers working on subjective assessments, including not only subjective equality but also self-esteem and wellbeing, which similarly involve comparisons with others. While this study supports the assertion that people make subjective assessments based on their referent relationships (*i.e.* who they compare themselves with at different points of their lives) (Zuckerman et al. 2016), it also shows that the strength of those reference relationships matters, and that through their narratives the older women constructed old age as a time when they consciously rejected comparing themselves to others. To explain this conception of equality in older age, it is necessary to go beyond psychological understandings that inform much of the work in this area to recognise the sociological discourses that participants deploy to construct their identities through their narratives.

It is important to recognise that this study involved self-selected participants who can predominantly be described as middle-class. Thus, class differences that may shape more divergent rankings of subjective equality are not seen. Literature in feminist gerontology recognises that changing conceptions of old age can play into fears of old age decline and accentuate class differences in people's sense of equality (Calasanti 2009; Mansvelt et al. 2014). Neo-liberal public discourses of 'successful ageing' put responsibility on the individual to have 'productive hobbies' and maintain physical and financial health in ways that make any deviation from this a failure, so constraints

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on financial and social resources and health make the 'freedom' of older age and the ability to enact a 'healthy ageing' identity something that depends on class positioning (Calasanti 2009). The participants generally embraced the healthy ageing/third age identity of pursuing learning, relationships and new experiences, and the majority of them had the resources to do this.

The participants' sense of agency and inner strength, evident in their narratives, is not surprising given that neo-liberal subjectivity expects people to talk about their lives in ways that position them as active agents. However, the narratives can also be seen to depart from neo-liberal subjectivities of individuals choosing their own life paths. In many of their stories, participants were well aware of the structural forces shaping their lives. They focused on how they navigated structures, with the interviews giving them the opportunity to reframe difficult pasts. This can be seen as moving beyond the neo-liberal conception of 'successful ageing', to focus on evaluation and reflection. This suggests the possibility of 'gerotranscendence' (Tornstam 2005), that is, seeing older age as a time in which people shift their definition of reality from a materialistic and rational view to a more cosmic one, with an embrace of playfulness, a lessening of obsession with the body, and self-confrontation with both good and bad aspects of the past. This point is similar to that of Jones (2022), who found that older women in her study spoke around gerotranscendence in their reflections on reconciliation and finally having 'responsibility for myself' as opposed to responsibilities of parenthood and work. Expressions of both neo-liberal ageing discourses and gerotranscendence can be seen in the participants' narratives of high levels of equality in older age. When participants expressed care and gratitude for their younger self who struggled as a single parent, or reframed violent rape as a spiritual experience, they used their narratives to reconcile their current and younger selves, creating what Erikson (1959) termed ego integrity through accepting the life they have lived. The findings thus concur with Miller (2019), who notes that it is important not simply to ascribe participants' narratives to confirming to the discourse of successful ageing but also to recognise how they show a freedom from the feelings of/narration of the burdens of work and care, and a genuine ease in one's body and self, that is in part a reframing of the self, and a reckoning with 'what I have been and where I have come from' (Miller 2019, 390). In this way, the research points to the importance of embracing complexity in older people's narratives of ageing, opposing dominating notions of old age as purely a matter of loss, frailty and decline, or of narrow conceptions of successful ageing, without completely denying such aspects of later life (Barrett 2022).

Conclusion

Reflecting on the insights from this methodological approach suggests directions for future research. The retrospective herstory approach to understanding subjective equality is a novel contribution to methodologies in ageing research. While methods similar to the equality ranking exercise have been used in research on subjective wellbeing (Galambos et al. 2020), life satisfaction (Freund and Ritte 2009) and gender equality (Sörlin et al. 2011), the herstory approach in this study departs from these methods in the interpretation of the data and the construction of the broader research project as an explicitly feminist undertaking. Life herstory interviews provide

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reflexive accounts of how people view their lives retrospectively, rather than providing an objective assessment of the levels of inequality people have experienced. The data give information on how women make sense of equality through a life narrative. The ranking exercise only made sense as a method embedded within the larger narrative interview, providing a focal point for discussion. The process of assigning and narrating equality rankings gave some participants the opportunity to reframe traumatic or difficult experiences, retelling these in ways that brought out their own agency, even in small ways. This process helped foster self-compassion for their younger selves. Thus, this methodology does not give an objective view of people's sense of equality over their lives; the results cannot be directly compared with the results of scholars who interviewed people from across a range of ages to make claims about older women as a group being more equal, or of women now facing less inequality than in previous decades. Rather, the significance of the rankings is in the ways the women constructed equality differently as they reflected upon the courses of their lives.

Despite recent literature highlighting the importance of subjective inequality, including as a significant predictor of wellbeing (Weiss and Kunzmann 2020), subjective measures of inequality, status and wellbeing used in ageing research continue to be vaguely defined. A meta-analysis of research on subjective inequalities in later life found that terms are often used interchangeably, and there is a gap in research focusing explicitly on subjective inequality (Scharf and Shaw 2017). Indeed, in feminist gerontology, the construction of age and gender beyond chronology and biology is well established, but it is curious that this same treatment has not extended to concepts of equality. Thus, methodologies such as the approach used in this article that combine ranking and narrative interviews could enable more precise, contextually rich conceptual understandings. A similar methodology might be useful for concepts such as subjective wellbeing, self-esteem or happiness – other measures that involve a subjective comparative assessment. Often, it is assumed that the meanings people give to equality are static, but, as demonstrated in this article, equality is not a static construct but one that evolves based on individuals' life experiences and the socio-cultural discourses available to them. Furthermore, participants' narratives revealed that equality is not always seen to be a desirable position; this is dependent on relationships between subjects, and participants noted that a lack of autonomy, conditioned by love, was acceptable, even if it made them feel unequal. Future research could further develop this feminist intersectional analysis of inequalities, in line with a feminist lifecourse approach and critical feminist gerontology, that does not treat structures or categories of analysis as static and predefined, but interrogates how these are enacted in dynamic ways.

Finally, this study suggests future research directions for critical gerontology literature that seeks to understand complexity among multiple ageing experiences, including those of people from different nationalities and ethnicities. As Chazan (2020) notes, this may open possibilities of liveable and positive futures among those who do not identify with dominant images of ageing. This study examined older women's constructions of equality in Aotearoa NZ, a multicultural country that offers valuable insights into how cultural contexts influence constructions of equality. The small group of participants included Indigenous Māori and several migrant New Zealanders who were born in the Pacific Islands or Asia, and migrated to New Zealand as adults. The study

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found that some migrant women conceptualised equality with reference to growing up in contexts in which girls and boys were all expected to contribute to the family and community, in different ways from participants born in Aotearoa NZ. Future research with migrant diasporic communities could further examine how the cultural contexts of youth matter in the ways that the older women make sense of their life narratives and their construction of equality.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Ethical standards. Ethical approval was granted from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Notes

1. Throughout the article, the term 'Aotearoa New Zealand' (shortened to 'Aotearoa NZ') is used. Aotearoa is the contemporary Māori-language (Indigenous) name for New Zealand, and the article uses both the Māori and the English names to denote respect for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.
2. There are more than 200 ethnicities, the main groups being 70 per cent Pākehā (European ancestry), 16.5 per cent Indigenous Māori, 15 per cent Asian and 8 per cent Pacific ethnicities (Stats 2020).
3. Prior to commencement of recruitment and data collection, this research project underwent an in-house ethics peer-review. It was deemed to be low risk and was subsequently not required to undergo a full ethics approval. Considerable efforts were taken to ensure the minimisation of potential harm by regularly checking in on the comfortability of our participants, ensuring that they could pause or withdraw their engagement at any time, and completing the interviews at a time and space determined by them. Regular team meetings and reflections were also held to ensure the wellbeing of all team members, and the interviewing team member in particular.

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