**“There’s nothing classy about a drunk 40-year-old”: The role of ‘respectable’ femininity in the drinking biographies and sobriety stories of midlife women**

*This chapter explores midlife women’s shifting relationships with alcohol and sobriety across the lifecourse, drawing on data from a project involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-defined former ‘moderate to heavy’ female drinkers negotiating the first two years of sobriety. The chapter draws on the ‘sobriety stories’ of UK-based women in their late 30s, 40s and 50s to highlight some of the ways in which stopping drinking required them to (re)interpret their drinking biographies, histories and future relationships with alcohol through a lens of sobriety framed by considerations of gender and ageing. As this chapter shows, women may draw on notions of age-appropriate, respectable femininity and celebrate traditional markers of adulthood (such as motherhood) in their constructions of a ‘good’ sober self in midlife, highlighting the ways in which gender and age are entangled with women’s drinking – or non-drinking – biographies throughout the lifecourse.*

*Introduction*

The United Kingdom and other Western contexts can be recognised as cultures where heavy episodic drinking is expected, normalised (van Wersh and Walker 2009) and bound up with recreation and friendships (Niland et al 2013; Waitt and Clement 2016). Drinking and clubbing may also be conceptualised as practices of gendered identity formation (Nicholls 2019) or ways of portraying a ‘youthful’ identity that resists traditional transitions to adulthood (Smith 2013). A refusal to buy into these kinds of collective practices may be viewed with suspicion and disapproval, social exclusion (Advocat and Lindsay 2015) or harassment (Herman-Kinney and Kinney 2013). Sobriety or abstinence may also be met with judgement or stigma if it is assumed to be the result of ‘problem’ drinking or addiction (Scott et al. 2016), yet the experiences of those who give up alcohol remain neglected in academic literature. This chapter focuses specifically on the experiences of recently-sober women in their 30s, 40s and 50s who ‘came of age’ during a wider period of social change (including the development of the contemporary Night Time Economy and the increasing targeting of women as a consumer market by the alcohol industry). In this chapter, I examine this cohort’s shifting relationships with alcohol across the lifecourse to date, highlighting the ways in which women may draw on notions of age-appropriate, respectable femininity and successful transitions to adulthood to distance themselves from the drinking self, to contextualise their decision to stop drinking and to construct a ‘good’ sober self in midlife.

Declining drinking rates amongst young people in the UK and more widely (Herring et al. 2014; Pape et al. 2018) have been accompanied by new research on how young people actively construct positive sober identities when alcohol consumption is normalised. For example, Graber et al. suggest that non-drinking ‘may be experienced as a positive and proctive choice’ (2016: 79) for young people. Further research examines how university students (who tend to be predominantly young people in their late teens and early 20s) negotiate sobriety in contexts where heavy drinking may be seen as part of a ‘student identity’ (Herman-Kinney and Kinney 2013; Conroy and de Visser 2015). This research may include young people who have never drunk as well as those with relatively short drinking careers or brief periods of experimentation with alcohol. In this sense, participants may lack the more extensive drinking histories of those who stop drinking later in life, yet the experiences of those who fall within the latter category remain comparatively under-researched. Romo et al. describe former heavy drinkers as an ‘important, understudied group’ who have ‘changed a fundamental element of themselves’ (2016: 343) by giving up alcohol after possibly several years of drinking. Indeed, those who stop drinking in ‘midlife’ – broadly defined here as their mid-30s to mid-50s - may be required to (re)construct their sober identities more comprehensively than younger people, and to make sense of a potentially varied and lengthy previous relationship with alcohol. British women within this age range also represent a specific demographic who grew up in a period of social change, turning 18 between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s. This period saw the increasing targeting of women as a specific consumer market by the alcohol industry, the development – and according to some arguments ‘feminisation’ - of the contemporary Night Time Economy (Nicholls 2019), shifts in women’s social roles and the acceptability of their public drinking (Lyons and Willott 2008) and a growing ‘imperative to intoxication’ that normalises heavy drinking for men and women (Griffin et al. 2009). In this sense, the experiences of this cohort of women might be quite different to those of younger women who are growing up in a generation where abstinence is more common (Pape et al. 2018). Furthermore, whilst alcohol consumption *is* likely to decrease with age (Britton and Bell 2015), drinking can continue to have value for those in midlife and beyond (Ward et al. 2011), cultural expectations to drink prevail in the workplace and in social settings in adulthood (Romo et al. 2015) and the choice not to drink frequently requires justification and explanation (Emslie et al. 2012).

Any examination of drinking and sobriety during midlife also benefits from a consideration of intersections of age and gender, with gender defined in contrast to biological sex (Jackson and Scott 2010). The assumption here is that one’s ‘sex’ is biological and natural but one’s ‘gender’ is socially constructed, a kind of performance that is continually being negotiated in social settings and contexts (West and Zimmerman 1987). This performance requires the adoption of specific sets of practices and behaviours associated with ‘appropriate’ displays of masculinity or femininity in order for one’s body to be successfully read by others as male or female. Historically, so-called ‘appropriate’ or respectable femininity has been associated with a degree of passivity, restraint and control over one’s body and behaviour (Skeggs 1997). Appropriate femininity as women age is also associated with motherhood and the domestic sphere (Lyons and Willot 2008), desexualisation and invisibility (Vares 2009) and a ‘toning down’ of behaviour, dress and appearance (Twigg 2012).

Whilst previous research suggests that the freedom and potential for transgressive behaviour associated with heavy drinking may be a *positive* association of alcohol use for men (Thurnell-Read 2011), public alcohol consumption and drunkenness has historically been viewed as incompatible with feminine respectability (Day et al. 2004). Older women who are drinking heavily or visibly intoxicated may be particularly likely to be subjected to judgement or regarded as embarrassing or inappropriate (Lyons and Willot 2008). At the same time, women who *stop* drinking may face gendered judgement and stigma if they are assumed to have a ‘problem’ with alcohol (Hood, 2003). Excessive and ‘problem’ drinking remain traits associated with men and masculinity (Sanders 2019) and ‘the alcoholic woman has historically been a figure of pity, condemnation or disgust’ (Rolfe et al. 2009: 332). Staddon (2015) also notes that women’s under-representation in treatment services may be bound up with the shame of supposedly failing to live up to expected ideals of respectable femininity, including those around domesticity and motherhood.

The ways in which normative expectations around femininity and ageing are entangled with women’s relationships with alcohol as they age clearly demand further attention. As Barnes and Wilson (2015) note, previous research tends to focus on drinking in later life as a health risk or ‘problem’ or adopt a medicalised approach concerned with the impact of alcohol on ageing bodies. The work of Emslie et al. (2012; 2015) is a notable exception, highlighting how drinking provides an opportunity for ‘time out’ from everyday life and responsibility for middle-aged Scottish women, enabling them ‘to assert their identity beyond the roles and responsibilities often associated with being a woman in early midlife’ (2015: 437). This work is preceded by Killingsworth’s (2006) research demonstrating how mothers in Australia use alcohol to construct positive identities as both women *and* mothers. Considering wider trajectories of drinking, Fenton (2018) uses life history interviews to explore the ‘drinking biographies’ of different generations of women in North-West England across the lifecourse. Whilst youthful drinking was associated with ‘learning’ to drink and a transition to adulthood, midlife in many ways facilitated an ‘unlearning’ or ‘relearning’ as relationships with alcohol were reconfigured. Whilst drinking patterns might change during midlife, there was evidence of women continuing to value drinking as a reward for paid or unpaid work, or to maintain relationships with others. Yet those who *stop* drinking during this life-stage are no longer able to draw on such associations. They may even seek to reinterpret their drinking histories and selves through a new lens of sobriety, as this chapter will demonstrate. After introducing the ‘Sobriety Stories’ research project, I will highlight the ways in which considerations of ageing could be regarded by women as turning points in their relationship with alcohol that motivated them to stop drinking. The chapter will then consider the ways in which ideas around age, gender and adulthood/motherhood were drawn upon to contrast a former, unfeminine drinking self and a ‘good’ self in sobriety.

*The Sobriety Stories Project*

The ‘Sobriety Stories’ project was a small-scale research study conducted in 2018-2019 to explore how women who no longer drink frame their past drinking selves, reconcile these with present practices, relationships and identities and imagine their futures as longer-term non-drinkers. Following institutional ethical approval, 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (lasting on average 1 hour and 20 minutes) were conducted with self-defined former ‘moderate to heavy’ female drinkers in the UK who had been sober for between 5 months and just under 2 years at the time of interview, with an average sobriety length of 10 months. As Rose (1998) suggests, narratives about one’s past, present and future serve as a way to account for the events in our lives and craft identities, and the interview was explicitly designed to explore participants’ ‘journeys’ to sobriety, covering their ‘drinking past’, ‘sober present’ and ‘imagined futures’. In doing so, interviews provided insights into participants’ attempts to (re)construct coherent stories or narratives about their relationships with alcohol across their lifecourse so far. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis through processes of coding and identifying relevant themes *within* and then *across* interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). To preserve anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the discussion of findings below.

Participants were recruited primarily through the ‘Women who don’t drink’ (WWDD) Facebook community and two coaching days for women looking to change their relationships with alcohol conducted with research partner and coaching/support organisation ichange21. Whilst the majority were members of online support groups such as the WWDD group, none attended more traditional recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Most were White British and based in London and South-East England, with a small number based in the North-West and Scotland following recruitment at coaching days in Glasgow and Manchester. Participants came from a range of backgrounds and had diverse occupations, and several had children (and a few had grandchildren). Whilst sexuality was not explicitly discussed, the majority were in heterosexual marriages or relationships (or separated/divorced from male partners). The participants ranged in age from 24 to 58 years old. Whilst the three participants in their 20s or early 30s might be excluded from a definition of ‘midlife’, the remainder (aged 35 to 58) do fall broadly within this category, with two participants in their mid-late 30s, eight in their 40s and four in their 50s. ‘Midlife’ is conceptualised here not as a ‘fixed’ life-stage, but rather as a flexible category that broadly encompasses those in their mid-30s to mid-50s (who may nonetheless have quite diverse life experiences and attach different meanings to this life-stage)[[1]](#footnote-1). Whilst this cohort were born across a two-decade period between the 1960s and 1980s, previous research suggests that they are likely to experience some commonalities in their drinking biographies that mean their experiences can be considered collectively. For example, in her intergenerational research on drinking biographies (with three cohorts born in the 1940s/50s, 1960s/70s and 1980s/90s), Fenton (2018) observes that the drinking biographies of women born after 1960 shared similarities (for example humourous drinking stories, gaining access to pubs when underage, alcohol playing an important part in socialising or meeting partners) but were quite different to the biographies of those born in the first, immediately post-war, cohort. This may be explained by the fact that the second and third cohort in Fenton’s study both ‘came of age’ during a wider period of social change around the acceptability of women’s drinking and their access to drinking spaces, as discussed above.

The average age of participant was 43 and almost half were in their 40s. Whilst this could to an extent be a reflection of the demographic of the WWDD Facebook group, it may also tell us something about the kinds of life-stages or transition periods where women may be more likely to stop drinking, as I explore further below. All participants actively self-identified as ‘non-drinkers’ and described reaching a point where they felt their current drinking practices were having undesirable consequences and they wanted to change their relationships with alcohol (although most distanced themselves from the label ‘alcoholic’). Whilst the consequences of their drinking did range in severity (including hangovers, shame, straining relationships, memory loss, losing their jobs and losing access to their children), almost all saw their sobriety as a permanent decision and every participant felt extremely positive about the benefits they associated with stopping drinking. They described feeling happier and mentally and physically healthier, alongside other effects such as feeling productive, experiencing success at work and improving their relationships with partners, friends and family.

All participants in midlife had been drinking for several years before stopping and were thus required to produce a particular account that might reinterpret their drinking histories. Research with those involved in recovery communities such as AA highlights the ways in which former drinkers construct a particular narrative around their sobriety (typically describing a descent into addiction and a ‘rock bottom’ which acts as a turning point to initiate recovery) (Denzin 1993; McIntosh and McKeganey 2000). This practice is strongly encouraged within traditional communities where meetings – and ways of making sense of drinking and sobriety - may be guided by longstanding and possibly rigid structures, norms and practices (Humphreys 2000). But how do those who position themselves as outside of such communities make sense of and reinterpret their drinking histories, and how might this process be shaped by both gender and age?

*‘I’m turning 40, I’ve got to start looking after myself’: sobriety decisions in midlife*

Most of the participants described similar initiations into drinking cultures, particularly those who grew up in the UK. As illustrated in previous research, early drinking experiences (generally starting around age 14) were often characterised by erratic consumption, and associated with attempts to fit in, lose control or escape the mundane realities of everyday life (Wilkinson 2016). Alcohol was also associated with growing up and making a transition to adulthood, as identified in previous research (Fenton 2018). Most, although not all, described what they called a ‘normal’ relationship with alcohol in their youth. Some then described a more linear trajectory where their drinking continued to increase over the years, in contrast with the drinking patterns of friends whose drinking decreased or levelled out as they aged and took on more responsibilities. Others experienced fluctuations in their drinking across the lifecourse, linked to certain life events such as pregnancy, children growing older or relationship break-up (see Barnes and Ward 2015).

All participants described reaching a point where they began to feel concerned about their consumption as they were unable to drink ‘moderately’. This did not necessarily lead to participants stopping drinking immediately. Indeed, some grappled with their consumption levels for several years, perhaps with short ‘dry spells’ or with attempts to moderate. However, as discussed above, almost all framed *this* period of sobriety as something they hoped to be permanent[[2]](#footnote-2).

Interestingly, the initial questioning of one’s relationship with alcohol had commonly first occurred at some point during midlife, and the very things that might once have been seen as appealing about drinking – such as its ability to change behaviour or facilitate a loss of control and sense of escape - could be reframed as undesirable or inappropriate:

Alcohol makes me behave in ways that I would never dream of behaving in normal life. In the past, I've always seen that as a positive, but I don't quite know when the change has been. I think it's since I've been in my 40s, really, that it's been only a negative to me. (Anna, 46)

Here, Anna builds on comments made earlier in the interview about alcohol changing her behaviour and her identity to explain that whilst this was desirable during her youth (allowing her to be flirtatious and confident), this became an unwanted side effect of drinking in her 40s. Her drinking behaviour began to sit at odds with what she calls ‘normal life’ (i.e. the domestic, everyday life associated with adulthood and her roles as a wife, mother and teacher). Verity (41) and Karen (40) both described how their perspective towards drinking had started to change in the last year or so as they felt they needed to start taking their health ‘more seriously’ (Verity), with Karen describing turning 40 as a ‘tipping point’ where she told herself if she didn’t start looking after herself she could ‘end up in a coffin by the time you’re 55’. Liz (48) suggested she’d had a ‘midlife crisis’ where she had come to realise how short life is and felt she was ‘drinking [her] life away’. Other participants made comments around how they had ‘reached a certain age’ where time became ‘more precious’ to them (Catherine, 49). These ways of framing the decision to stop drinking could also be seen on the WWDD Facebook group, suggesting participants may have been adopting shared language from their participation in online communities, but this focus on health and making the most of mid and later life also ties into ideas of ‘ageing well’ that circulate in wider society (Peel et al. 2004). There was also a sense that one’s 40s might be a period of reflection and looking both forward and back:

I was just fat, overweight, and I was literally doing a job that I did at 20, and I wanted more. I couldn’t live like that, I felt really ashamed. So it was my rock bottom as in, “If I carry on like this I’ll be working here until I’m 65 and I won’t have shown my children anything. I’m not doing anything I want to do.” My rock bottom was fear of the blandness of life I suppose and actually wanting to do a lot more and reach my potential, which I wasn’t anywhere near. (Penny, 49)

Here, Penny positions the turning point in her relationship with alcohol as bound up with the lifecourse (including both the past and future self) in particular ways. The drinking self is characterised by a perceived failure to progress in her life and career and an anxiety around failing to be a positive role model for her children. In this sense, her ‘rock bottom’[[3]](#footnote-3) wasn’t necessarily a particular trigger or event, but a realisation that she felt she had not progressed career-wise or reached her wider potential (thus, arguably, failing to successfully achieve markers of adulthood). Her decision to stop drinking marks a way for her to disrupt her life trajectory to date but in a positive way, as she sees herself as able to break away from a ‘bland’ life and reach her potential in the future.

Notions of time, ageing and the lifecourse are central to these examples, and there is something significant about midlife that seems to initiate a period of reflection where participants felt compelled to take responsibility for health, make the most of time with families or refocus on their career and ‘reaching their potential’. These kinds of pressures may be gendered (for example through demands placed on women to manage their health, weight and bodies), and also echo findings of Barnes and Ward (2015) who, in research with older women drinkers, noted that participants reported pressure to maintain health and youthful looks in older age, with limiting alcohol use seen as a tool to minimise the embodied impacts of ageing. These kinds of decisions also reflect wider norms within a neoliberal, capitalist context that individualise responsibility for health and construct it as a moral imperative to attend to one’s health and wellbeing (Cederström and Spicer 2015) and to make the right choices to craft a successful and agentic self (Rose 1998).

*‘Look at the state of you’: femininity, respectability and age*

Intersections of gender and ageing were also apparent in the interviews. When participants stopped drinking, they were all required to disrupt a particular biography and history as a ‘drinker’ that had been part of their lives for many years and was for many a central part of their social lives and identity (several described being known as ‘fun’ or a ‘party girl’ amongst their friendship groups). Sobriety required not just a reconfiguration of the current (and future) self, but a reimagining of the past. Whilst the historical pleasures of drinking - particularly in youth - were not necessarily denied (as suggested by Anna above), drinking pasts still needed to be reconstituted through a new lens of sobriety and the drinking self was often associated with a perceived failure to ‘do’ femininity appropriately:

I used to wake up after drinking and thinking, “What did you do that for?” Or, “Here we go again… Look at the state of you. Look at the state of you in the mirror.” I could see what I looked like and I hated it. I hated myself for it. But I’d still go and do it again. Big baggy eyes or I’d thrown up somewhere. Something really disgusting. It was me. So yes, I like myself a lot better because I don’t do that anymore. (Catherine, 49)

Here, the idea of looking a ‘state’ or a mess is drawn upon to position the drinking self as unfeminine, unattractive and even disgusting. Vomiting in particular may be situated at the boundaries of feminine acceptability (MacLean et al. 2018) as – whilst some degree of messiness, transgression and loss of bodily control may be permitted or even encouraged for men when drinking (see Thurnell-Read’s (2011) work on ‘stag dos’) - the feminine body has historically been expected to be controlled, restrained and ladylike. ‘Throwing up somewhere’ elicits a reaction of disgust and self-loathing from Catherine, implying a potentially public loss of bodily control. The participants drew on a strategy similar to one used by non-drinkers in previous research, constructing the drunken body as abject through highlighting the undesirable, messy and smelly consequences of drinking (Nairn et al. 2006). Vomiting can also be regarded as a failure to act appropriately for one’s age. Whilst young people who are still discovering their limits around alcohol might be excused for these kinds of behaviours, as Emslie et al. suggest, there is a clear expectation that one should develop into a more ‘mature and responsible drinker’ (2012: 492) whose consumption is ‘age’ or ‘stage’ appropriate. As almost all of the participants described themselves as unable to moderate their drinking – for example suggesting they had ‘no off switch’ (Lisa, 53) or ‘couldn't just have one glass of wine’ (Lena, 44) – they were then able to argue that stopping entirely was the only feasible option as they were simply *unable* to drink in a way deemed appropriate for their gender and life-stage. Of course, this is not to say that midlife drinkers *do* necessarily only drink in these kinds of ways (see Rolfe et al. 2009), but this cultural expectation around what ‘respectable’ drinking looks like in midlife clearly shaped the ways in which these participants problematised their own drinking practices and framed their perceived ‘failure’ to show feminine self-restraint when drinking.

Drinking was also associated with being ‘messy’ or ‘out of control’ in other ways, particularly in terms of losing control over weight and appearance or over one’s domestic space. For example, Liz (48) described the intense shame she felt over the chaos and disorder of her living space, highlighting a perceived failure to successfully embrace markers of both adulthood and femininity such as being a good ‘homemaker’. Above, Catherine describes the ways in which she felt her physical appearance and attractiveness was undermined through drinking and others – such as Penny in the earlier extract - made reference to feeling ‘ashamed’ of being ‘fat’ and ‘overweight’ when still drinking. Weight gain or looking a ‘state’ may be associated with the unfeminine practice of ‘letting oneself go’ and may signify a supposed lack of discipline and bodily control and indicate an ‘unruly’ female body (Bordo 1993).

Drinking to excess in midlife could also be associated with a range of ‘unfeminine’ traits such as being rude and nasty (Penny, 49), obnoxious and boastful (Florence, 36) or resentful and argumentative (Crystal, 57). Other participants drew more explicitly on the notion that heavy drinking was unladylike:

There’s nothing classy about a drunk 40-year-old, I don’t think. It’s not how I want to be. It’s not how I want to be seen. I don’t want people to think of me like that. That image, I see how I was, I was just like, “It’s not who I want to be” (Karen, 40)

Whilst Karen does not mention gender explicitly here, her use of the term ‘classy’ carries loaded and gendered connotations that position intoxication as unladylike. The notion of ‘classiness’ brings together that which is feminine, age-appropriate and tasteful; to be classy is to embody the very ideals of respectable – and middle-class – femininity, in contrast to the positioning of working-class bodies as tasteless and excessive (Skeggs 1997). Karen moves beyond discussion of merely ‘getting drunk’ as a practice, to focus on the ‘drunk 40-year-old’ as a problematic – and far from ‘classy’ - identity, and this is further reinforced through her emphatic use of the phrase ‘it’s not who I want to be’. Likewise, Rose (58), who was the oldest participant, commented that she doesn’t want to be ‘that drunk pensioner’ in the future. Whilst previous research suggests *younger* people may position older women’s heavy drinking as embarrassing or even ‘slutty’ (Lyons and Willot 2008), we can see here that midlife women themselves may also engage in these kinds of practices as they work to distance themselves from the drunk, older woman.

Finally, drinking was bound up with understandings of motherhood in particular ways. Anna (46) described how alcohol had previously been her main focus, and she expressed regret for times such as family camping trips when she had prioritised sitting with a drink over playing with her children. Julia (40) also described the ‘shame’ of feeling like a bad mother when drinking whilst she had custody of her daughter, offering a moral judgement of her behaviour – ‘it is wrong’ – but also recognising the wider, gendered forms of ‘stigma’ that women – particularly mothers – who drink may face (Killingsworth 2006; Emslie et al. 2012; Staddon 2015).

It is clear that participants engaged in a range of practices to position their former drinking self as problematic and failing to live up to expectations that situate the respectably feminine woman as ‘classy’ or ‘in control’. This also allowed the women to realign themselves with more traditional understandings of age-appropriate femininity in early sobriety, as the next section will illustrate.

*‘I've properly accepted I'm a mum’: (re)constructing the respectable feminine self*

Sobriety was associated with a reconfiguration of values and priorities that were often focused around reclaiming control, both literally (in terms of avoiding the loss of control that came with drinking) but also in one’s life more widely. For example, sobriety was linked to intentions to gain control over the ‘unruly’ body, exercising discipline through the introduction of new exercise regimes or reclaiming control over domestic space (‘getting back the control over my flat’ (Liz, 48)). These examples link to earlier discussions around ideas of ‘ageing well’ through prioritising health, and to understandings of the successful, feminine and middle-class woman in adulthood (who is a good hostess and has a clean and desirable home) (Vaadal and Ravn 2021). The sober self was also aligned with traditional feminine values associated with caregiving such as being ‘compassionate’ (Florence, 36), ‘forgiving’ (Lena, 44) or a more committed mother:

I feel so much better about myself. I've properly accepted I'm a mum and the lifestyle that goes with that. I feel I've accepted that lifestyle, and I prioritise them [children] now, instead of still trying to live in my old lifestyle, which was alcohol-prioritised (Verity, 41)

Here, Verity clearly describes a shift away from the prioritisation of alcohol towards becoming a more dedicated or present mother (implying that the two kinds of lifestyles cannot comfortably co-exist). Whilst drinking and clubbing may be framed by revellers in their 30s and beyond as positive ways of *resisting* normative expectations around ageing and ‘a wilful rejection of staid, restrictive adulthood’ (Smith 2013: 1079), Verity describes a transition to a less ‘alcohol-prioritised’ type of lifestyle where traditional markers of adulthood such as parenthood become a new priority. Julia (40) also worked to distance herself from the drinking self by suggesting that ‘the stuff I did when I was drunk wasn’t me… and I know that I’m a good mum’. Julia positions herself as a ‘good mum’ in sobriety and distances herself from any shame associated with her drinking by claiming it ‘wasn’t me’ who did the ‘stuff’ she finds shameful. Whilst previous research by Perrier (2012) identifies some of the classed ways in which mothers may work to distance themselves from the ‘other’ of the ‘bad’ mother, here we see participants distancing themselves not from others but from the former, drinking self. Throughout, the language of morality (bad/good) is drawn upon to align oneself with normative standards and expectations about motherhood, caregiving and femininity.

Such findings are interesting as, whilst previous research recognises that motherhood may be associated with decreased consumption (MacLean et al. 2019), alcohol may nonetheless continue to play a significant role in the lives of mothers. Emslie et al. (2015) suggest that women’s drinking in midlife may facilitate transformations that are felt to be positive in terms of allowing women to adopt identities *beyond* that of ‘mother’, transporting them to a more carefree time of life and providing opportunities for respite from caring and domestic obligations. Similarly, Killingsworth suggests that new mothers may use alcohol as a tool to help establish positive identities ‘not reducible to their roles as mothers’ (2006: 374), whilst Rolfe et al. (2009) report that female heavy drinkers may describe alcohol as a form of self-medication that they believe helps them to perform their caregiver roles. In contrast, the participants here viewed these potentialities of alcohol as negative, as something distracting or preventing them from fully engaging with their identities as partners, wives or mothers. Taking ‘time out’ from caregiving to consume alcohol was seen as something to be regretted, aligning with more traditional representations that associate women’s drinking with a lack of femininity and a potential to neglect caregiving duties and responsibilities (Day et al. 2004) and associate ‘good’ mothering with spending ‘quality’ time with children (Perrier 2012).

As well as reframing relationships with children and family and their perceptions of parenting and motherhood, participants were also required to imagine the future without alcohol more widely:

Although I'm not doing anything particularly exciting in life – I'm not going off travelling, having babies or anything like that – it [the future] feels exciting because I'm experiencing things that I've been experiencing for many years, but in a different way (Anna, 46)

Although Anna (46) suggests that whilst she isn’t going to be doing ‘anything particularly exciting in life’ such as ‘travelling’ or ‘having babies’ (activities that might be associated with an earlier life stage), sobriety offers a new and exciting future where the things she had been experiencing already for many years were going to be experienced and lived ‘in a different way’. In this sense, some of the routines of midlife associated with appropriate femininity and adulthood (marriage, motherhood, domesticity) were recast as something exciting, with Anna suggesting she was experiencing life ‘in HD [High Definition]’ in sobriety. As I have discussed elsewhere (Nicholls 2021), several participants also explicitly linked sobriety with wider processes of self-development, including career changes or returning to studying. These ways of speaking about sobriety allow women to position themselves as productive or ‘enterprising’ selves (Rose 1998) in a neoliberal society and to distance themselves from the spoiled identity of addict through linking their choice to stop drinking to wider processes of growth and work on the self.

It is clear from the data that sobriety could be used to facilitate ‘more desirable lifestyles and identities’ (Carah et al. 2015: 216) that aligned with traditional understandings of femininity and successful markers of adulthood. In this sense, gender and age remained central to the ways in which the women discussed their sobriety, particularly in the ways in which they described regaining control over the unruly feminine body, returning to domestic femininity or becoming more engaged or present mothers.

*Conclusion*

As Emslie et al. (2015) argue, whilst there is much focus in recent research on young people and drinking, less attention has been paid to the drinking experiences and practices of those in midlife and beyond. Similarly, literature on sobriety and abstinence, which tends to predominantly focus on the experiences of young adults and the Night Time Economy, rarely considers changing relationships with alcohol across the broader lifecourse (Fenton 2018). The practices and accounts of university students and younger people simply cannot be generalised or assumed to reflect the experiences of older non-drinkers, particularly those with extensive drinking biographies who stop drinking later in life.

Drawing on data on the ‘sobriety stories’ of women in their mid-30s, 40s and 50s in the first two years of sobriety in the UK, this chapter addresses current gaps in the literature by highlighting some of the ways in which midlife women who stop drinking negotiate their sobriety, but also how a cohort who grew up as women’s drinking and clubbing were supposedly becoming increasingly ‘feminised’ and normalised (re)configure and position their drinking histories and biographies. A focus on biographies and the wider lifecourse is useful as women are likely to experience different and competing priorities across the lifecourse and this may quite obviously link to drinking patterns (Barnes and Ward 2015). In addition, women who stop drinking after potentially up to four decades of self-defining as drinkers may be required to reinterpret their drinking biographies and histories through a new lens of sobriety, particularly in the early stages of sobriety as they make a new and significant transition to a non-drinking identity. As with previous research, the transition to midlife might facilitate a process of ‘relearning’ or even ‘unlearning’ how to drink, with relationships with alcohol likely to be adjusted and reconfigured (Fenton 2018). For those who *stop* drinking during this life-stage, the process of ‘unlearning’ is particularly significant and likely to require effort, labour and a reinterpretation of one’s drinking past or history in ways that align with norms around gender, age and femininity but also wider expectations to maintain self-control and take responsibility for one’s health, ageing and life trajectory in a neoliberal context (Rose 1998).

This specific focus on the accounts of women in midlife has allowed for intersections of gender and age to be examined, particularly the ways in which these two factors intertwine to construct notions of ‘appropriate’ femininity in relation to alcohol consumption (or its refusal) during midlife. Participants drew upon notions of respectable and age-appropriate femininity to distance themselves from the potential stigma that may be experienced by women who stop drinking. For women, sobriety can facilitate the gendered embodiment of a form of ‘respectable middle age’ (Killingsworth 2006: 376) that celebrates the same markers of adulthood and ‘settling down’ – such as motherhood, self-growth or career development - that may be rejected, dismissed or felt to be unattainable by those whose hedonistic participation in drinking and clubbing cultures continues into midlife and beyond (Smith 2013).

However, carving out positive sober identities may remain difficult for a group of women who grew up around new and targeted forms of ‘aggressive’ alcohol marketing (Smith 2013: 1070) and continue to represent a key market for the industry, as evidenced in the increasingly common depictions of drinking as a ‘reward’ for the stresses and challenges of motherhood (Newman and Nelson 2021). Further research could usefully consider further the ways in which motherhood, drinking and sobriety intersect in midlife as women work to produce what Perrier terms ‘moral maternal selves’ (2012: 667).

These findings represent the voices of a small group of midlife women, and whilst the sample showed variation in terms of class and background, the majority of participants were White British. Furthermore, the self-selecting nature of the sample means it is likely that those who chose to take part were keen to share their positive experiences of sobriety, whilst recruiting primarily through a Facebook group means that more ‘hidden’ populations who are not accessing support in sobriety may not have been reached. It is also possible that participants were projecting a form of desired self in the interview, particularly as they knew they were speaking to another woman in early sobriety (I had been sober around a year when conducting the fieldwork).

Nonetheless, this chapter clearly brings to light the experiences of a group of recently sober women and considers their changing relationships with alcohol – and abstinence - across the lifecourse drawing on femininity, ageing and motherhood at a time when ‘very few studies have looked at the cultural, social and economic contexts in which older people drink or how these might be connected to transitions and changes related to ageing’ (Barnes and Ward 2015: 104). The accounts of these women may also serve as an ‘important counter-narrative’ (Nairn et al. 2006: 288) to the dominant drinking cultures amongst their peers. Indeed, those who are now in midlife represent the most likely to have drunk in the last week in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2018) so enhancing our understandings of the drinking – and non-drinking - practices of this demographic is likely to be of interest to policymakers. Those currently in midlife grew up during an era when women’s alcohol consumption was becoming increasingly normalised and they were gaining unprecedented access to drinking spaces, and the specific experiences of these women in the UK are likely to mark a significant departure from those growing up in the immediately post-war generation (born in the 1940s and 1950s) for whom alcohol was less accepted and normalised (Fenton 2018) and from those born more recently, who are coming of age at a time when drinking rates are declining (Pape et al. 2018). In cultures and amongst cohorts where alcohol consumption is normalised and expected, the choice to abstain could in some senses be read as ‘rebellious’ or counter-normative (Nicholls 2021), yet at the same time midlife women who stop drinking may also reify or value quite traditional expressions of femininity, respectability and motherhood, as this chapter clearly demonstrates.

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1. Emslie et al. (2015) have described this period as ‘early midlife’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Interviews were a ‘one-off’ occurrence and without follow-up contact with the participants, we cannot know whether sobriety was actually sustained longer-term [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As I have discussed elsewhere, participants both distanced themselves from traditional recovery communities such as AA and drew on some similar language and ways of framing sobriety (Nicholls 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)