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ARTICLE

The (im)mobilities of COVID-19 in later life: burning and building generational bridges

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic foregrounded a numerical conception of age. Many of the targets of proposals to introduce age-specific restrictions are members of the 'baby boomer' generation, a generation that is widely recognised as having a youthful approach to ageing. Attending to arguments that baby boomers are a 'bridging' generation – *i.e.* they share cultural orientations with both preceding and succeeding generations – we argue that 'bridging' is a dynamic practice. Drawing on repeat interviews with 45 'war baby' and baby boomer women conducted prior to the pandemic and shortly after the first national lockdown, the paper demonstrates how lockdown restrictions brought to light older women's relationships to, and investments in, spatial mobilities. We focus on how they experienced and understood (im)mobilities in three realms: home life, going places and social connection. Pre-pandemic, mobilities in each of these realms had been important to how the women established youthfulness and resisted being seen as 'old'; mobilities helped older women 'bridge' with younger adult generations. This bridging was undermined practically, symbolically and discursively by their experiences of the lockdown, with profound consequences for perceptions of their ageing. Restrictions on spatial mobilities created conditions for older women to reassess and narrate the social world in generational terms. Their narratives provide an illuminating case study of the complex ways that generational cohort shapes experiences and self-understandings. We argue that the capacity of baby boomers to 'bridge' dynamically is a legacy of their youth.

Keywords: mobility; COVID-19; lockdown; generational bridging; baby boomers; self-determination

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the spatial mobilities of older women because, like everyone, they experienced the restrictions of national lockdowns in the United Kingdom (UK). Moreover, like older men, they were subjected to discriminatory advice based on a numerical conception of 'old age' and became the

focus of public debate about proposals to introduce age-specific spatial restrictions. While these were discriminatory measures intended to protect elderly people who were disproportionally suffering the negative (biological) impact of COVID-19, they also reflected and reinforced already-existing ageist conceptions, a clear example of how good intentions produced negative outcomes. Many of those who are now in later life and were thus the targets of discriminatory advice are members of the 'baby boomer' generation.

Exploring how baby boomer women experienced the COVID-pandemic, this article is concerned with generational belonging but also with perceptions of age. In the literature, the terms 'age' and 'generation' are sometimes used interchangeably as there are obvious overlaps between them, however, the difference between the two categories is relevant. Arber and Ginn (1995: 5–12) identify three meanings of age: chronological refers to age in years, and is often used as an organisational category with implications for socio-economic position and legal status within a society; physiological age is based on medical constructs referring to the physical ageing of a body over the lifecourse; and social age includes attitudes and behaviours judged appropriate for a person of a particular chronological age, also subjective perceptions of how old one feels. Responses to COVID-19 foregrounded the social meanings of age, including ageist social norms and expectations based on a 'deficit' view of older people and ageing (O'Dare *et al.*, 2019: 68). Baby boomers navigated these ageist social meanings, including 'internalised' (Levy, 2001) versions. The term 'generation' provides different lenses through which to think about people. It is commonly used to refer to a particular age group (O'Donnell, 1985), or to the cultural distance, or 'social time' (Corsten, 1999: 252), between parents and their offspring. It is also employed as an analytical category often associated with broader cultural and socio-economic contexts. The label 'baby boomers' refers both to a particular age group and to ways of describing and understanding this group on the basis of their shared location in history. In line with others who point to how variables such as class, gender, geographies and education makes age groups highly heterogenous, we problematise the category of 'baby boomer' (*e.g.* Leach *et al.*, 2013) while using it as an analytical tool to help us understand commonalities in responses to the COVID-pandemic in later life.

The baby boom generation is associated with the period immediately after the Second World War. Because of the particularities of that period, the socio-economic context of some industrialised countries was characterised by an increased birth rate, subsidised health and education, and mass consumption (Leach *et al.*, 2013), hence the tendency to refer to that age group as a particular generation (Vincent, 2005). Popular and academic analyses often mobilise a narrow characterisation of the youth experiences of baby boomers in the UK, highlighting novelty and change. Baby boomers are widely characterised as 'youthful' in their outlook, as breaking with the values and orientations of their parents' generation, and as having more in common with younger adult generations than with older ones. However, according to Leach *et al.* (2013), they are best understood as a 'bridging' generation, *i.e.* as occupying a unique generational space because they share values and orientations with *both* preceding and succeeding generations, and thus mediate the gap between what are widely characterised as

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radically distinct historical eras in British society and culture.[1] They are understood as a point of connection between the version of British society that existed before the social and cultural transformations associated with the 'long sixties' (Marwick, 1998: 7) – 1958–1974 – and the society that emerged in the years that followed.

Existing work on generational bridging focuses on the role of consumption in the construction and expression of baby boomers' unique capacity to straddle generational divides (Biggs *et al.*, 2007; Leach *et al.*, 2013). Drawing on repeat interviews with 45 'war baby' and baby boomer women conducted prior to the pandemic and after the first national lockdown, in this paper we explore how spatial mobilities are also key to bridging, as well as being valuable to understanding generational practices in later life. We argue that age discriminatory advice and lockdown restrictions brought to light older women's relationships to, and investments in, spatial mobilities. Restrictions on spatial mobilities created conditions for older women to reassess and narrate the social world in generational terms. Older women's narratives provide an illuminating case study of the complex ways that generational cohort shapes experiences and self-understandings, and how what it means to belong to a generation fluctuates in line with wider conditions, re-assuming particular meanings and associations when everyday life is radically disrupted.

After outlining existing approaches to generational bridging and introducing our approach, we address the study's methodology. We then draw on the voices of war baby and baby boomer women, to show how they experienced and understood im/mobilities in three realms: home life, going places and social connection. Pre-COVID, mobilities in each of these realms had been important means by which the women established youthfulness and resisted being seen as 'old'; mobilities helped older women 'bridge' with younger adult generations. Amongst our cohort, this bridging is not restricted to kin as many participants engaged with people of all ages in non-kin intergenerational networks. This bridging with younger generations was undermined actually, symbolically and discursively by women's experiences of the lockdown, with profound consequences for perceptions of their ageing. We demonstrate how women responded and argue that generational bridging is a dynamic practice underpinned by a desire for self-determination. This desire is common to both war baby and baby boomer women: it is a legacy of common experiences in their early decades that are made visible when older women are treated as historical subjects.

Interviewing baby boomers and war babies in 2018–2020 and again just after the first lockdown, our study explores the salience and characteristics of generational bridging for women in later life: baby boomers are now in their late sixties and seventies; war babies are a few years older and include women in their early eighties. We ask:

- Are baby boomers still bridging both backwards and forwards?
- Is this distinctive to baby boomers?
- How do women respond when bridging practices are threatened, as they were during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what does this reveal about women who grew up in the post-war decades?

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Generation, baby boomers and generational bridging

In social science research, generation is used in three main ways: kinship and family relations, cohort (*i.e.* a group of people born at the same time who live through the same set of historical conditions), and belonging and collective identity (Pilcher, 1995). Members of a generational cohort share exposure to certain experiences and opportunities and are excluded from others, which shapes their orientations and practices. Generational identities are usually traced to youth (Mannheim, 1952; Pilcher, 1995; Eyerman and Turner, 1998), but they can be a response to experiences at other points in the lifecourse (Blaikie, 1999; Corsten, 1999). The use of generational labels is widespread in popular and academic discourse but also contentious (*see* White, 2013; Martin and Roberts, 2021). There is the practical issue of delineating a specific generation, including identification of its start and cut-off points, and of its defining features. Moreover, generational labels are often used to make sweeping claims about a group of people based on chronological age even though, as noted earlier, age cohorts are not homogenous. Here, inequalities within generations, and constructive relations between members of different generations, are overlooked in favour of caricatures of intergenerational difference, rivalry, even hostility.

Debates about the cultural life of generations in later life have typically focused on post-war baby boomers (1946–1954) because of the size of the cohort and its seeming distinctiveness arising from the historical context of their lives, particularly their youth. Born in the late 1940s to early 1950s, baby boomers were the first cohort to grow up amidst the radical social, economic and cultural changes that occurred after the Second World War, including the rise of mass consumption, and were the first beneficiaries of the expansion of the welfare state. They became teenagers in a period of almost full youth employment and relative affluence. They have since benefited from further changes: shifting gender relations and access to reliable contraception have been particularly significant for women (Lewis, 1992). Over time, many have consolidated the economic, social and welfare gains of their young adulthood, including accessible home ownership (Leach *et al.*, 2013).

Boomers are also seen as culturally distinctive: they have 'achieved an iconic cultural status as a radical, liberal and above all "youthful generation"' (Biggs *et al.*, 2007: 32). Boomers matured in a period characterised by increased social permissiveness and liberalisation (reforms relating to divorce, abortion, homosexuality, also the reduction of age of majority from 21 to 18 years), as well as an 'expressive revolution' involving the 'rise of individualism, secularisation, a range of countercultural values and lifestyles' (Abrams, 2019: 206). Arising from the cultural context of their youth, boomers are often argued to have distinctive values and orientations that have persisted throughout their lives (*e.g.* Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989; Gilleard and Higgs, 2002, 2007; Harking and Huber, 2004). Gilleard and Higgs (2007: 26, 19) describe boomers as having imbibed an 'ideology of youthfulness symbolised by the consumer quartet of virtues – choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure' which has spurred them to challenge traditional (often ageist) ideas about chronological age, the lifecourse and retirement.

In popular and academic discourse, boomers are often characterised in terms of disidentification with previous generations and identification with younger ones

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(*see* Biggs *et al.*, 2007: 34). However, Leach *et al.* (2013: 107) challenge this. Their empirical study of mid-life boomers revealed that 'rather than boomers being detached from older or younger generations, in reality they may be better viewed as a "bridging generation" spanning generations below as well as those above'. Consistent with wider literature on boomers (*e.g.* Blaikie, 1999; Edmunds and Turner, 2002, 2005; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005; Biggs *et al.*, 2007), Leach *et al.* (2013) focus on consumption in their analysis of generational bridging. The recurring emphasis on consumption in the literature on boomers stems from the fact that they grew up in a period marked by the ascendancy of consumer society and mass youth culture. Since then, consumption has become a key feature of identity and lifestyle for almost all social groups; this extends into retirement as consumption has become increasingly significant for self-definition (Blaikie, 1999).

Introducing spatial mobilities to generational bridging

In this paper, we draw on work on im/mobilities as a conceptual lens.[2] We focus on what John Urry (2007: 47) calls the 'corporeal', which includes 'travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration, and escape', as it is central to women's accounts of the pandemic. We argue that im/mobilities are as productive as consumption for understanding generational bridging. Like consumption, the significance of im/mobilities for understanding generation stems from changes since the 1960s in actual mobilities and the cultural associations of being mobile that constituted the context in which baby boomers grew to maturity (Tinkler, 2021), and which have remained key to social and cultural life and identity in late-modern times (Urry, 2007). The mobilities of baby boomers have changed since they were in midlife: an increasing number now experience restricted mobilities as a result of health issues. Amongst those who are mobile, some participants are still providing care for grandchildren, partners, elderly relatives or community members, and a few do occasional work to complement their pensions. That said, a large number are more mobile than in midlife because on retiring they have been freed from the constraints of paid work and have fewer care responsibilities.

Cresswell (2006) posits that mobility is 'movement plus meaning', which resonates with the idea of being 'animated'. Derived from the Latin, the word 'anima' has semantic permeations in Latin and Germanic languages, and refers to a vital force that animates bodies. Of interest here is the way the root term connotes something in movement. This overlap of breath and movement is fruitful for understanding the desire to keep on moving in order to remain young. As we show below, pandemic conditions brought into sharp focus the importance of keeping bodies animated, and the risk involved in relinquishing anima in later life. This was likely informed by popularised gerontological discourse on 'active' and 'successful' ageing, which stress the personal benefits of mobilities outside the home (for an overview, *see* Hitchings *et al.*, 2018).

Our approach to generational bridging

Although corporeal mobilities often relate to consumption (*e.g.* purchasing holidays, access to transport), they are nevertheless distinctive. As explained below, lockdown was fundamentally about mobilities and their restriction. Crucially, it

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was the lens of im/mobilities that brought into sharp focus how older women understood themselves, including in relation to other generations. Acknowledging criticism of approaches that ignore intragenerational heterogeneity and the complexity of intergenerational connections (*e.g.* Abrams, 1982; Leach *et al.*, 2013; White, 2013; Martin and Roberts, 2021), we adopt and develop perspectives that explore intergenerational connections (Biggs *et al.*, 2007; Leach *et al.*, 2013). Building on the work of Leach *et al.* (2013) on the 'blurring of boundaries' between generations, we explore how bridging can work forwards, connecting boomers to younger generations, or backwards, aligning boomers with older generations.

The concept of 'bridging' is core to our interpretation of how women born 1939–1952 narrated their experiences of lockdown. We consider two types of bridging: 'bridge building' which occurs when connections between younger and/or older generations are established and consolidated; and 'bridge burning' where connections to younger and/or older generations are undermined, threatened and sometimes destroyed temporarily or permanently. Nearly 20 years after Leach *et al.* (2013) conducted their study, we extend understanding of generational bridging, exploring its contours and significance in later life. Further, the unique conditions created by the lockdown have facilitated exploration of the dynamics of bridging as a practice. Mirroring arguments about 'generation' as a discursive device that can be re-worked and re-interpreted over time (Elliott, 2013; Timonen and Conlon, 2015), we establish generational bridging as a dynamic practice.

Our approach to intergenerational bridging is sharpened by considering baby boomers alongside war babies. War babies (1939–1945) are not a large cohort and they are rarely singled out for academic scrutiny. Nevertheless, they help pinpoint whether boomers' responses to lockdown are distinctive, and the implications of this for addressing questions about generations. Sociological, including gerontological, studies of older people's current lives tend not to approach them as historical subjects; at best, they mobilise a typification of past experiences presuming the cohort's distinctiveness. We employ a social-historical approach that goes beyond stereotypes of the youth of older women – boomers and war babies – and which is sensitive to diversity within, and commonality across, cohorts. Generational cohorts of women born roughly 1939–1952 share historical characteristics (Abrams, 2014; Bunkle, 2016; Worth, 2022). Boomers and war babies grew up in a transitional era, characterised by a combination of the old and new (post-war austerity *and* consumerism, waltzing *and* jiving), and by opportunities and continued constraints with regard to education, employment and sexual practices. Importantly, the trend towards early marriage, and the sexual division of labour within marriage, meant that most women were thwarted in pursuing their initial ambitions. The iconic 'swinging sixties' were experienced by few in our sample, although most were exposed to similar ideas about expanding possibilities for girls/women and the importance of self-realisation and self-fulfilment. Common transitional experiences prove significant for later-life bridging practices.

Methodology

Between August and October 2020, interviews were conducted with 45 women who had participated in the Girlhood and Later Life project. This project was a study of

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the transitions to adulthood of young women in Britain from 1954 to 1976, and the implications of youth transitions for their later-life experiences and identities in the 21st century (Xue *et al.*, 2020, 2021; Tinkler *et al.*, 2021*a*, 2022).[3] Participants were sampled from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) using sequence analysis. Following qualitative analysis of the ELSA survey data relating to each of the women, from 2018 until early 2020 we conducted two qualitative interviews with each participant, one on youth and the other on later life. These interviews used standard as well as creative elicitation techniques designed to encourage participants to remember their pasts from diverse vantage points. Three creative elicitation techniques were used: music elicitation, which involved participants choosing three music choices that they associated with their youth, listening to these at the start of the interview, and exploring the moments that they brought to mind; a 'Biographical Map' (Tinkler *et al.*, 2021*b*), which involved the creation of a visual representation of the spaces and mobilities of youth that were meaningful for participants; and a 'Then and Now' exercise, which consisted of asking participants in advance of the interview to identify a photograph from youth and one taken recently, and to prepare short responses to the questions about what they thought 'life held in store' for them, and what they would tell their younger self about how their life had 'turned out'. The blend of interview and elicitation methods proved successful in generating rich data and in maintaining the engagement of our participants, almost all of whom reported enjoying the experience.

While efforts were made to contact all 70 women who participated in the original study, 45 responded to our request for a follow-up interview about their experiences to date of the pandemic. Among those who did not participate in a follow-up interview, some did not return our telephone calls while others said they were too busy with caring and related responsibilities. Interviews were semi-structured and took place over Zoom or telephone. They typically lasted up to one hour. They were transcribed and analysed according to nine broad themes covering their approaches to lockdown, changes in everyday life, place and neighbourhood, and position in relation to others. Next, 12 case studies (*i.e.* participants' interviews) were selected for in-depth analysis. These cases included five women from professional middle-class backgrounds, two women from technical lower middle- or upper working-class backgrounds, and five women from manual working-class backgrounds. Class background was ascertained using ELSA data on father's occupation as well as data collected during the pre-COVID interviews on the women's own trajectories through education and employment. The cases included women who grew up in urban and rural localities across England and in Wales. They covered much of the span of ages in the wider sample, including some of our oldest participants, who were born in the early 1940s and were in their late seventies when interviewed, and some of the youngest, who were born in the early 1950s and were in their late sixties when interviewed. Taken together, these cases reflected the class, geographical and age diversity of the sample of 45 women. We then analysed their COVID experiences against the backdrop of the pre-lockdown later-life interviews that were conducted for the original study to tease out different interpretations of bridging.

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Findings: realms of im/mobilities

In a short space of time, a national lockdown in March 2020 introduced numerous changes to everyday lives: travel beyond one's immediate locality ceased; non-essential services closed or moved online; queueing for essential goods like food became commonplace; social contact was regulated and mixing severely curtailed. Like most people, the women in our study experienced an intense contraction of their mobilities. Our interviewees' experiences related to three main realms of mobility: home life, going places for leisure and pleasure, and social connection. Pre-lockdown, physical mobilities in these three realms constituted the basis for bridging with younger generations for both war babies and boomers. In what follows, we explore how mobilities were affected by lockdown in each of these realms, noting how women responded and the implications for bridging practices.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, our interviewees did not convey a strong generational identity. The exceptions were university educated or those who lived in London and who had enough resources (typically middle class) to participate in its youth culture and 'swinging' social life. The lack of a generational consciousness and identity might be because most interviewees felt on the outside of the 'swinging sixties' and did not feel options had changed dramatically for them in terms of education, employment and sexual relations (*see also* Heron, 1985; Maitland, 1988). Nevertheless, there were signs of a latent or implicit sense of generational distinctiveness, in the use of 'we' ('*when we were* young it was what you did…') and in how the women compared themselves to their mothers. However, lockdown experiences shifted how our interviewees articulated experiences. They brought into focus implicit, and some explicit, generational thinking. Indeed, in reflecting on their experiences of lockdown, our interviewees had a seemingly greater propensity to see, and narrate, the social world in generational terms.

Home life

During lockdown, day-to-day life revolved largely around domestic space and routines. The vast majority of war babies and baby boomers presented themselves as coping with these conditions. Most interviewees felt relatively fortunate during lockdown because of their home environments; typical of their cohorts, most were home-owners. However, the capacity to cope with restricted mobilities was usually cast in terms of mental capacities and dispositions – a set of skills, a frame of mind, an attitude – rather than as a competency linked to socio-economic standing or material possessions, suggesting the latter were taken for granted. This emphasis on coping was often explained by participants in term of resources from one's past, most commonly lessons learned from parents although some mentioned individual past experiences of adversity. It was in the realm of home life that most participants leaned towards the parental generation and where they found that the physical immobility experienced in lockdown was a minor hurdle compared to the hardships experienced by their parents' generation – the 'war generation'. For many, narratives of home life and domestic practices (*e.g.* baking, gardening, *etc.*) became a space for asserting a positive identity, presenting oneself as useful, resourceful and able to handle unexpected adversity. In what follows, we consider how both personal and collective pasts were summoned in the interviews to account for how home life was managed during lockdown.

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The ability to cope with lockdown was often presented in terms of a personal past, specifically as an inheritance from family: lessons learned in early life passed on from parents. Coping was key to middle-class Beverley's (born 1950) upbringing:

> …my parents were always, you know, 'well come on you can do it, you can cope, so just get on with it sort of thing' … I would sort of almost hear my father, saying to me … 'just get a grip'. (COVID-interview)

Often, the personal past was cast as part of a collective one. Parents were identified as members of a historical generation, one that had lived through the 1939–1945 war and managed amidst post-war austerity and rationing which lasted until 1954. Marie (born 1947), a working-class boomer, attributes her ability to cope to her mother who worked as a factory inspector throughout Marie's childhood and beyond. She describes her mother as part of a generation who worked hard for very little. Abigail (born 1941), a war baby from an upper-middle-class background, similarly described herself as coping with new home-based routines, a legacy from her parents' generation – 'probably something to do with our parents having gone through wars'.

An important aspect of coping was managing restricted consumption. Growing up amidst war-time and post-war scarcity, Abigail had few personal possessions but can clearly remember what books she had because they were special to her as a consequence of their scarcity. She believes that her appreciation of the value of things helped her cope with the pandemic. In her interview, Abigail approaches the topic reflexively, conscious to avoid being negatively stereotyped as an 'old woman':

> …there wasn't the huge variety of everything that people have now. And just take for granted. We made do with less … Oh I'm really talking like an old woman aren't I now? (laughs). (COVID-interview)

Referring to 'we', Abigail suggests that her experience was shared with her peers, as does Claudia (born 1943) when she cites the example of her working-class parents and their wider generation, specifically their experience of wartime conditions of scarcity:

> …the queues were getting longer and longer. And less and less in the shops. But we coped. And all I kept saying to my children was, my parents had it worse than this in the war. And they go, 'Oh here she goes again'. (COVID-interview)

For many, coping meant keeping busy at home: using time productively and wisely. This too was often cast as a skill learned in childhood. For Chrys (born 1947), a middle-class boomer who was shielding as a result of a lung condition, the moral imperative to use time in this way was linked to her parents and her post-war upbringing:

> We didn't have very much … my parents … just managed to scrape things together for the house and my mother made everything … we didn't have a

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> television, so we entertained ourselves, we played games a lot, my mother did a lot of cooking, she bottled fruit from the garden, which is what I do as well. So, I have the skills from my childhood and the background to do all that kind of thing, I'm very good at entertaining myself, I never get bored and I think that my childhood has given me that. (COVID-interview)

For Megan (born 1950), a baby boomer from a farming background, coping with the pandemic was partly about knowing how to make do without material goods, but this capacity was strongly rooted in her personal past rather than a collective one. Megan experienced considerable poverty and neglect in childhood and youth: she was 'brought up in a pigsty' and is 'used to not having'. She was equipped to approach the unpredictability of the pandemic with a calm attitude: 'don't panic, don't worry, if it's going to happen it'll happen'. She describes herself as a survivor:

> That I survived all I did when I was a kid with all the bugs that was going around, I never got any … I like to think that I'm a tough old boot, because I was brought up that way. (COVID-interview)

The experience of poverty and neglect are identified as providing her with the skills and attributes to cope with the pandemic. The impoverished and unsanitary conditions of her youth are reconfigured as a source of strength and increased immunity.

Expressions of resilience were often accompanied by figures of speech, such as being 'of an ilk', having 'Dunkirk spirit' or 'making do'. These phrases were typically mobilised to align the speaker with older generations and they invariably 'othered' younger ones. Donna (born 1949), an only child whose mother was a bookkeeper and father was a builder, explained: 'I'm from a generation that you have to grit your teeth … We are a bit tough.' Alongside identification with the parental generation through work ethics and material hardships, there was also a sense in many interviews that generations are becoming less emotionally robust, as Donna suggests:

> We don't mean to be critical, but when you see how our children pander to their children, you think you're making a rod for your own back dear. I suppose I was brought up reasonably tougher sort of thing and my husband was, so I think we're a just more, can deal with things a bit more really. (COVID-interview)

Vanessa (born 1941) articulates well this perception of diminishing resilience. However, unlike Donna, she includes herself in a sliding scale of resilience, perhaps due to her more materially comfortable upbringing. Vanessa is the only child in a lower-middle-class family. She had attended a girls' grammar school and then a London college to get a hotel receptionist qualification before working full time in a number of hotels from age 19:

> We had it easier [than my parents' generation] … Mum's generation you know, childhood, teenage, they had it much tougher. Much harder … But, today it's all gone, everybody's feeling too sorry for themselves. (COVID-interview)

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Vanessa also sees her personal experiences of hardship in adulthood contributing to her robustness. At the time of the COVID-interview, Vanessa felt fortunate for having a big garden and being fairly self-sufficient in the house she shared with a cat. She carried on driving and doing her own shopping throughout the pandemic. Vanessa minimised her struggles by putting the situation into perspective as she highlighted the difficult period she had after losing her husband. Like some of the others, she sees her emotional robustness as grounded in her personal past travails:

> I had to cope with so many things. You just get on with it … Having lived in different places … lived with difficulties … feeling sorry for yourself is not an option. (COVID-interview)

The themes of resilience and adaptation emerge as a coping mechanism with both practical and moral undertones. 'Keeping busy', and being seen to cope, was particularly important for older women because the immobilities associated with lockdown threatened independent living. As Sarah (born 1952) explains:

> It sounds pathetic but I really didn't like the shopping changes … I know we could have asked people for help. But when you're relatively fit, or when you are fit, you're used to doing everything for yourself, you're a bit reluctant to ask people for help. (COVID-interview)

The crux of women's domestic autonomy and independence is a determination to avoid dependence, as Marie explained:

> One of the most important things is being independent. And being able to carry on your own life … I shouldn't like to think that somebody was controlling, what can I say, my money, or what you eat, or you know where you go. (Interview pre-COVID)

In both the pre-lockdown and COVID-interviews, Marie describes at length the example of her mother who remained independent until her death at 97: 'she was a very capable, independent woman. Lived right up until the day she died in her own home, cleaned, shopped, looked after herself.' Becoming recipients of help reversed long-established roles which could be experienced as a loss of status in relations with younger family members. Donna's daughter did her shopping; this was seen as caring, but also as a sign of Donna's dependence. Expressing ambivalence, Donna quipped: 'Daughter is trying to save us.' Abigail worried that relying on friends for shopping undermined equality within her friendships. Being homebound during lockdown was experienced by her as a kind of 'dry run' for the future:

> I'm beginning to realise what it might be like when I'm older … I have a foretaste … And that worries me a bit, that this is sort of a practice run (laughs). (COVID-interview)

The importance of coping at home attained further significance because it compensated for lost physical mobilities in other realms.

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Going places

Going places is now a well-established part of the retirement experience. Most of our interviewees have the time, health and financial resources to travel, although there was a wide spectrum of experience and expectations. This spectrum ranged from occasional daytrips and short holidays within the UK to extensive, regular travel abroad. While several women mentioned that their parents also travelled in later life, travel has become an expected dimension of the retirement experience for war baby and baby boomer cohorts. This reflects historical shifts since the 1960s in: attitudes to saving, including a willingness to spend on oneself rather than accumulate for future generations or as a safety net (Leach *et al.*, 2013); and a belief in a right to pleasure and leisure which, although long-standing amongst the affluent, was increasingly democratised post-war (Blaikie, 1999) with an emphasis on travel as a leisure experience (Urry, 1990).

However, lockdown led to the suspension of going places, that is, mobilities where the journey and destination are key; such mobilities typically relate to leisure and pleasure. For both boomers and war babies, the significance of this suspension needs to be understood in terms of class-inflected emphasis on a youthful outlook, continued opportunities for self-development and expectations about the enjoyment of retirement which we now consider in turn. These orientations were important as a means of bridging with younger generations.

Going places has implications for identity as defined by self and others. Part of a youthful later-lifestyle, it has been strongly associated with baby boomers and it was one of the ways women align with younger generations. Following the example and literal footsteps of her sons, middle-class Beverley has trekked in the Himalayas. Mary's exasperated reactions to comments about her active lifestyle and travels reveal clearly that these pursuits are typically associated with chronologically younger people but that she is determined to keep doing them – they are key to her rejection of the significance of chronological age and her resistance to ageing:

> I don't really like it when people are saying, 'Gosh, aren't you wonderful for 75.' That drives me up the wall, because in my head I'm 45. And so, there is that sense and people say, 'Wow, aren't you brave going to Venice! Oh!' Oh, for goodness' sake! I'm not doing the North West Passage in a coracle. I'm going up the Grand Canal on a vaporetto for goodness sake! (Interview pre-COVID)

In the lifecourse interview, working-class Donna also associates youthfulness with being active and travelling:

> I think we all keep quite young really. I think we all still go abroad on holidays. And still like going to do different things. So I think you keep quite young really. (Interview pre-COVID)

For many, restrictions on going places had implications for self-development. Our interviewees grew up in an era which stressed the importance of nurturing and fulfilling the self, part of the 'expressive revolution' (Abrams, 2019). This has been most forcefully adopted as a creed by the middle-class women in the sample, for whom travel was about ongoing self-fulfilment and self-realisation – the continued

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accumulation of experience. At a stage in their lives when women felt time was limited, the suspension of travel was felt keenly as a personal loss. As Beverley explained in the COVID-interview, 'you realise that we're not going to be around for ever, so most of us are making the most of our retirement and doing whatever we can while we can'. Like many of her peers, Beverley was compensating in later life for what she missed in her youth, when travel achieved heightened prominence as a source of experience. Growing up in a middle-class family operating on a shoestring, she had enjoyed annual camping expeditions to Europe and a school exchange trip to Germany. She had moved away from home at 18 and did voluntary work in Scotland followed by a degree in London. Intent on going places, she had planned to go to Canada for work and travel after graduating. Instead, at 22 she married and moved around the UK to facilitate her husband's naval career, raising their family almost single-handedly while he was on duty overseas. For Beverley, this represented a lost opportunity to travel and be 'true to herself'. Beverley's youth looked rather like her mother's, but her orientations were towards younger generations and she has since used retirement to fulfil the ambitions of her youth. Her choice of terminology is revealing – she had enjoyed a 'gap year'. The importance of self-fulfilment is also prominent for Mary, as seen in her planned activity holidays, including painting in southern Italy. This was part of Mary's broader concern with self-development; in her pre-COVID interview she expressed regret at having had only one sexual partner and being subsequently less rounded as a person.

Several working-class participants did not experience lockdown as a radical disruption to travel plans because they could not afford extensive travel, but they still expected a modern retirement involving pleasurable winding down incorporating trips, including occasional special ones, such as cruises. Megan's mobilities for leisure and pleasure were particularly modest pre-COVID, consisting of day trips and occasional weekends or weeks away. Megan was from a poor, rural background, but had benefited from access to social housing and a stable income in the form of her own and her partners' pensions. However, because disabled and reliant on her partner (who was also her carer) for getting around, Megan rarely left her local area even before the pandemic. Trips were, nevertheless, important to Megan. A 'planner', she had invested time and energy identifying 'interesting' places to visit, such as Berlin, suggesting their holidays are a hybrid of pleasure and education. While Megan does not explicitly link day trips and holidays to a right to enjoy retirement, she speaks elsewhere in the interview about how she and her partner have worked and saved for a long time for their retirement.

The retirement expectations of middle-class participants were of a different order. For them, retirement is not about losing pace, but maintaining it through doing different activities. Lockdown was experienced as hugely disruptive to their plans of going places. Mary articulated a strong sense of entitlement to enjoy going places in retirement; her class privilege reinforcing baby boomer expectations. Middle-class Sarah similarly expects an active retirement in which regular international travel plays a key part. She fell in love with Greece after package holidays there in the 1970s, and was eager to return as had been planned. This expectation of an active later life meant that, in her estimation, the pandemic is having a greater impact on their lives relative to other age groups:

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> …we have less time left to enjoy our lives, so it's sort of taking a bigger toll on us … If you've got, as we had two or three holidays booked, and they don't happen, and okay hopefully they'll happen next year. But next year we're a year older and a year less fit and able to enjoy them.

Single, children-free and financially independent, Abigail did not experience restrictions on going places as a hardship but this was only because she had travelled extensively throughout her youth and adult life, and because pre-COVID, due to a deteriorating eye condition, she had already contemplated relinquishing international travel: 'I have been able to travel and see how the other half lives … and that's been a huge education and advantage'. Chrys was an exception. She had never travelled much and did not regard this as important. Family life was where she felt most fulfilled; she prioritised a relational self rather than self-realisation through travel.

Responses to proposed restrictions on the mobilities of older people also revealed intergenerational tensions. According to recent research (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020), 30 per cent of older people reported experiencing some form of age discrimination during COVID, described by others as an outbreak of ageism (Ayalon, 2020). The divisive connotation attached to the baby boomer generation in recent years could have exacerbated the social discrimination against older people (for an overview, *see* Martin and Roberts, 2021). In our study, resistance to ageism is most pronounced amongst the able-bodied participants, especially middle-class baby boomers. Mary 'raged' at the prospect of travel restrictions based on chronological age. Sarah is similarly exercised. However, if some comments defy perceptions of passive older people, others, sometimes simultaneously, point to instances of internalised ageism. Beverley is critical of ageist proposals but apologetic; she repeatedly comments that 'it sounds really selfish' to complain about lost time and opportunities. Seemingly mindful of popular criticism of 'selfish oldies' reluctant to relinquish their privileges, Beverley is insistent that people over 70 have 'busy, active lives', and hopeful that 'people are waking up to the fact … that, actually, we've still got a lot to offer'. Indeed, social connections were an important aspect of later-life identity and status, as we now discuss.

Social connections

Pre-conceived views of older people as a homogenous and vulnerable group whose social lives typically revolve around their homes were perpetuated by the media and the government through the first few months of the pandemic, and eventually penetrated the discourses of younger people, including the children of our interviewees. Sometimes our interviewees also mobilised these ageist views when referring to other older people, although rarely to themselves (*see also* O'Dare *et al.*, 2019: 73). However, our participants reveal a different picture of their pre-pandemic social connections. Prior to lockdown, they benefited in many ways from physically mobile social connections, which also served to bridge with younger generations. As we now illustrate, COVID-related constraints on physical mobilities undermined ways in which women had previously established their usefulness and enjoyed an active social life. Adaptive strategies helped some, but not all, women to continue to feel connected.

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Usefulness was a key subtheme that emerged from the analysis of this realm of im/mobilities: being productive through volunteering, community life and grandparenting were ways of extending one's worth to society beyond retirement, thus debunking representations of older people as having diminished social roles and no longer being able to contribute. Charity work and volunteering were important staples of retirement for many pre-COVID. Sophie (born 1949) has been doing charity work for years; she also ran the Neighbourhood Watch scheme. While COVID brought a halt to much of this engagement, it did not stop it completely. Soon after the lockdown started, Sophie set up a local food delivery service and initiated a scheme of 'old-fashioned swaps':

> I was just trying different things … I set up, with the Neighbourhood Watch group, we set up a fruit and vegetable delivery that was coming every week … through the Neighbourhood Watch I set up a register of helpers and what they could do. Whether it was dog walkers, whether it was doing shopping, or collecting prescriptions or whatever it was. (COVID-interview)

Sophie also set up a group to make tunics for the National Health Service (NHS): 'We all felt as though we had a purpose.' Prior to lockdown, middle-class Geraldine (born 1946) had been active with exercise classes, a stitch and knit group, choir and church. Members of the stitch and knit group kept in touch over social media and redirected their energies to collectively sew bags for NHS staff to wash their clothes in, as well as to knitting clothes for premature babies at the local hospital. Geraldine found the knitting 'therapeutic', and enjoyed feeling useful as well as socially connected.

A strong ethic of care emerged in many women's accounts. Pre-COVID, working-class Doris (born 1950) expressed this through nursing her mother through dementia and helping to cook meals for older people at church. During lockdown, Doris continued with similar practices on a smaller scale: she helped friends with paperwork and shopped for a former boyfriend. Beyond a sense of purpose, our interviewees often benefited greatly from their altruism, sometimes bridging backwards to what they learned from their parents. Sophie rationalises her behaviour and commitment to help others, explaining that her mother was someone who liked to think she could help people. Now she sees that helping people has helped her cope with lockdown.

Pre-COVID, mobile, face-to-face grandparenting had been hugely important for many of our interviewees – collecting children from school and looking after them when parents were at work. It was a source of pleasure and emotional fulfilment (Airey *et al.*, 2021), part of their identities, also a way of being useful and resisting notions of ageing as inactive and dependent. As Donna explains, pre-COVID, grandparenting kept her young:

> I think all our friends, we're all quite young in mind … all of us look after grandchildren while they go to work, while our daughters or sons go to work, we look after the kids for them. And perhaps that's kept us young. (Interview pre-COVID)

For most, 'active' grandparenting was suspended during lockdown, closing off an important avenue of affection, social worth and 'youthfulness'. Chrys was atypical

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in maintaining an active grandparenting role during lockdown. A former teacher, she regularly 'Zoomed' with her six-year-old granddaughter. While the plan to focus on schoolwork was not very successful, Zoom proved enjoyable and productive: 'we do things on the whiteboard and she reads to me and I read to her and we make up poetry and things like that, play games'.

Virtual mobilities enabled many women to maintain social connections in the absence of physical mobilities; for some this built on pre-lockdown practices but for many it involved new experiences. Social media often facilitated women's attempts to remain useful, but it was also important for social life with family and friends. For Sarah, the loss of the 'social side of things' during lockdown was greatly resented, but partially compensated for through online socialising:

> …we've got quite a close group of about six to seven friends. And we were doing online quizzes and things with them on a weekly basis. So that was much the same as if we'd been seeing them at the pub… (COVID-interview)

Sophie also discovered Zoom as a way to communicate with friends and drink wine together, while Abigail's involvement in an arts group continued virtually. Vanessa kept connected using a combination of old and new technologies: 'I will phone the boys or we text every day or with [son] the one in [country in Asia] there's often a Skype call.' Women who had children and grandchildren locally mentioned how intergenerational exchange encouraged and assisted their digital connectivity. However, Donna expressed frustration at the role reversal resulting from the fact that her children helped her to connect digitally while she was unable to be similarly useful by providing child care for them. These new dynamics inhibited association with younger generations as equals, causing a blockage in bridging with them.

Not all women embraced virtual mobilities. Megan lacked the confidence to do this: 'I wouldn't know how to use those if I tried. I'm not capable of doing anything like that.' Moreover, for Megan, there was something special about how her pre-COVID physically mobile social life fostered her self-esteem. Recalling her first reactions to the lockdown, Megan immediately mentions her clubs being cancelled: 'I was scared, I was. My clubs were cancelled … I couldn't go to my clubs, so I was stuck at home from then onwards.' Prior to lockdown, Megan had played bingo and attended a day club twice a week. These activities meant a lot to her. A committee member in a community group, she especially missed this role because it gave her a sense of dignity and worth. She felt that people looked at her differently:

> I felt good, because I was involved … I wasn't just a normal ordinary everyday player … I felt useful. With me being like I am, a lot of people wouldn't think I'm worth much, but going there … I'd use me sticks in the hall … I could walk around with me sticks and I felt good about it. (COVID-interview)

Discussion

Focusing on home life, going places and social connection, we have seen how the first national lockdown was experienced as problematic by the women in our study

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because it undermined mobility practices that had previously been fundamental to their identities and social status. To understand what was at stake for women and how they responded, we now discuss the burning and building of bridges in turn.

Burning bridges

Pre-COVID, most in our sample – war babies and baby boomers alike – felt relatively young for their years; they resisted traditional notions of chronological age and typically thought they were ageing differently from their own mothers. This relative 'youthfulness' was often expressed through independent living, going places, and social connections that afforded a sense of social purpose and which enabled social activities and socialising. Physical mobilities were key to youthfulness and to women's capacity to bridge forwards to younger generations. However, the conditions created by the pandemic led to the burning of bridges forwards, that is the undermining or severing (at least temporarily) of women's links to the practices, moralities and subjectivities of younger generations. In lockdown, women were no longer able to go places in the pursuit of leisure that had previously been important aspects of being 'boomerish' and of forward bridging. They experienced the thwarting of their class-inflected expectations of the enjoyment of retirement, of opportunities for continued self-development and self-fulfilment and, more broadly (because travel is constructed by them as the elixir of youth), the definition of themselves as relatively youthful. Mobility restrictions also closed down a primary means through which women had previously maintained and enjoyed social connections that were significant for forward bridging in that they had established the women's continued (youthful) vigour, their social value and contribution (supporting family and community) and their right to an active (typically, consuming) social life. On the home front, the contraction of physical mobilities undermined forward bridging by threatening women's capacity for independent living and compelling many to be uncharacteristically reliant on other, especially younger, people.

Im/mobilities have symbolic significance. Being mobile is fundamental to a late-modern self (Urry, 2007). While for most younger people, immobilities were perceived and treated as temporary, immobility is perceived as an imminent state for older people. Older people are under pressure to remain animated – visibly mobile – to resist being labelled as 'old' (*e.g.* Katz and Marshall, 2003). Unsurprisingly, disabled women already had a complex relation to mobility (*e.g.* Megan, Abigail, Chrys), but COVID extended this to all women in our study. The significance of immobility was heightened because our interviewees were typically 'haunted' (Blaikie, 1999: 260) by the spectre of 'old age', which they all sought to fend off. The meaning of chronological age has become fluid in the late-modern period (*e.g.* Blaikie, 1999), but Laslett's (1989) concepts of the Third and Fourth Ages are useful as they refer to categories of experience in later life rather than specific age ranges.[4] The Third Age emerged in western societies in the 1950s and gained cultural ground by the 1980s. It is a period characterised by independence, activity and self-fulfilment (Laslett, 1989: 4). In stark contrast, the Fourth Age is characterised by being: dependent, homebound, inactive and defined principally by age status, *i.e.* as 'old'. Illness and physiological impairment are foregrounded

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in constructions of 'old age' in a profoundly ageist way, even if such conditions are not necessarily experienced by older people as all-consuming, entailing withdrawal from social life or even as permanent (*e.g.* Chambers, 2003; O'Dare *et al.*, 2019: 73). People in the Fourth Age are 'othered' (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000: 199), and on entering 'old age', a person is at risk of losing self-definition and self-determination. Currently, our interviewees are Third Agers. However, the conditions of lockdown immobilised women in ways typically associated with 'old age' as negatively conceived. As Abigail explained, during lockdown everyday life was brought closer to the brink of the Fourth Age: our sample of women were homebound and often increasingly dependent on others for personal and home maintenance; they lost opportunities to be going places and socially connected with implications for pleasure, self-fulfilment and self-development.

Government, public health and wider popular discourse in spring 2020 compounded the problem for our interviewees of how they were seen, and saw themselves. They were under threat from the suggestion that the mobilities of those aged 70 plus needed to be treated differently from the mobilities of younger people because of the former's increased risk of serious illness and death from the virus. Our interviewees were increasingly reminded of their age and, moreover, defined by it. Both the loss of self-definition and the specific emphasis on chronological age set older women apart from younger generations who were free to eschew the significance of chronological age and to self-define. It simultaneously undermined the insistence of many older women that they were still youthful. The combined effect of these elements meant that it was harder for our interviewees to establish bridges with younger generations; simultaneously, they felt shunted closer to the category of 'old age'.

Lockdown discourse about the riskiness of older people's mobilities were also often experienced by our interviewees as a conflict over self-determination. There has been a significant lessening of regulative traditions in the post-war period including 'fragmentation of retirement' (Phillipson, 1999). Further, a post-war embedding of emphasis on the self has, since the late 1990s, been intensified by 'ideologically and discursively powerful' lay and academic versions of individualisation theory (Duncan, 2011: 244). Recognising the discursive significance of the self and 'individualised biographies' is not, however, to see people as self-contained units. Smart's (2007: 28) theorisation of 'personal life' posits agency and choice as relational. Lockdown undermined (bounded and relational) personal choice over ageing because chronological age and the (often ageist) social meanings widely associated with it was reinforced and foisted on to women in later life. The foregrounding of chronological age in public debate threatened to deprive women of agency in their navigation of ageing. Losing control over self-determination at a sensitive point in their lives threatened to set these women apart from younger generations.

Lockdown severed or damaged older women's bridges to younger generations. This resulted from physical constraints on their mobilities, the symbolism of immobility, the foregrounding of chronological age in the discursive construction of the unique riskiness of older people's mobilities and, following from this, undermining of their right to self-definition and self-determination. The women were in a precarious position during lockdown. They were in limbo and often struggled to perform a

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'boomerish' version of the Third Age which had previously afforded practical, symbolic and discursive links to younger generations. This brought them worryingly closer to being seen as, and seeing themselves as, 'old'. The sudden suspension of their mobile lives also fuelled a palpable sense of finitude and urgency.

Building bridges

Women responded to, and compensated for, the constraints on their physical mobilities and the varied significance of these by developing adaptive strategies through which they restored or reinforced bridges forwards to younger generations. Building, or strengthening, bridges forward was achieved largely through the adoption (often novel) of new technologies and applications (Zoom, House Party, *etc*). These gave women virtual mobilities and enabled many to maintain social connections and remain independent. For some, social media provided opportunities for self-development and self-fulfilment that had previously relied on them physically going places and connecting with others.

More commonly, boomers and war babies responded to the lockdown by reinforcing or building bridges backwards to older generations. Backward bridging was evident in the study by Leach *et al.* (2013) of boomers at mid-life – the value of things, work ethic and thrift. Similar themes can be glimpsed in our pre-COVID interviews but not consistently. During lockdown, bridging backwards was more widespread and accentuated with emphasis on stoicism and resilience. Links to the values and practices of past generations became a vital resource in how women understood themselves and handled the rupture of everyday life. A stronger link was built to their parents' generation because they perceived them to have the mental disposition ('grit', determination), orientation (capacity for hard work) and practical skills ('making do', thrift) to endure hardship. Moreover, for some, in a context where physical mobilities were curtailed, bridging backwards reminded them of how their local community could be a source of support and pleasure. Building backwards also gave value to domestic busyness. Women emphasised the work ethic of their parents' generation and harnessed its symbolic significance. A 'busy ethic' (Higgs *et al.*, 2009) 'defends retired people against judgements of senescence, and it gives definition to the retirement role' (Ekerdt, 1986: 243). More broadly it maintains a person's identity as a Third rather than Fourth Ager (Katz and Marshall, 2003). While lockdown prevented busyness outside the home, women could use home-based industry to establish a similar principle.

Boomers relate to both younger and older generations. Leach *et al.* (2013: 118) concluded that mid-life boomers had a distinctively 'boomerish' way of relating to other generations: 'inter-generationality as a cultural commitment … is part of the generational habitus of the boomer generation'. We demonstrate that bridging is important for both the war babies and boomers in our study. Moreover, we argue that bridging is a dynamic practice – open to change – and that this agentic practice is consistent with qualities associated with boomers, although we see this also with war babies. Building backwards meant very different things to building forwards, but in the context of lockdown a common principle is discernible: the importance of self-definition. Characteristic of late-modern lifestyles, women made choices in the navigation of their lockdown experiences and how they narrated

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them. Higgs *et al.* (2009) argue that, as with other aspects of the late-modern life-course, ageing is an arena in which the autonomous self is expected to act and to make the right choices. While, as previously noted, personal biographies are not unbounded or disconnected from others, self-determination remains an important principle for our interviewees. Specifically, in many cases, building backwards can be interpreted as choosing tradition (Gilleard and Higgs, 2009: 25).

Pre-COVID, few interviewees drew heavily on tradition except where the connection served the construction of self, as in Marie's case. Marie spoke at length in the pre-lockdown and COVID-interviews about her admiration of her mother who was obdurately independent until she died at 97. In lockdown, connection with her mother neatly served Marie's construction of her own ongoing Third Age identity. When other ways of defining self were threatened in 2020, many of our interviewees (re)discovered or reappraised connections with older generations. Importantly, building bridges backwards contributed to staving off the Fourth Age.

Conclusion

The women in our study bridged backwards and forwards in dynamic ways; this, we suggest, is a legacy of their youth. Although boomers are associated with social and cultural change, the reality of their youth was more complex and they had much in common with war babies. Both cohorts grew up in a transitional era, characterised by the coexistence of the old and new, opportunities and constraints. They were exposed to similar ideas about expanding possibilities for girls/women even if many did not achieve these at the time. Moreover, they were all touched by the intensification of discourses around the self – self-fulfilment, self-realisation – that have since been further embedded in late-modern expectations of life.

We conclude that the capacity to look both ways was a strength for both groups during lockdown. Most women were forward-leaning pre-COVID, but typically with roots in the past. Lockdown greatly accentuated the significance of building, or reinforcing, bridges backwards. What is significant is their willingness and ability to do so. Their agentic mobilisation of bridging practices is another legacy of their common exposure to ideas about making the most of life and self-defining. Both necessitate, and indeed accomplish, the postponement of the Fourth Age, which is a priority for ageing boomers and war babies.

Lockdown brought into sharp focus the significance of im/mobilities for women in later life in terms of practices, identities, and how they orient and understand themselves in generational terms. This significance is not specific to lockdown but is revealing more broadly of the ageing experiences of women born 1939–1952 for whom youthfulness translated into new ways of keeping bodies animated, through work, leisure and travel. Indeed, the utility of im/mobilities as a lens is heightened because of its importance in popular and academic characterisations of 'old age': im/mobilities gets to the crux of what is at stake for ageing women.

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Author contributions. PT devised the study. LF and LL conducted the COVID-interviews; LF also conducted many of the interviews pre-COVID. LL coded the interviews. All authors analysed transcripts. PT led on the framing and drafting of the manuscript. All authors contributed to writing and editing the manuscript.

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Ethical standards. This research received approval from The University of Manchester Ethics Committee (2017-1558-3443). Participants received information prior to agreeing to take part in the study and provided written consent.

Notes

1 Revisionist historians have challenged how radically different these eras really are.

2 The relationship between physical mobilities and ageing has been studied from diverse perspectives (for an overview, *see* Hitchings *et al*., 2018). However, the value of mobilities for understanding the cultural aspects of generation in later life has not previously been explored systematically.

3 For more information about the project, *see* Cruz *et al.* (2022), Fenton and Tinkler (forthcoming) and https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/girlhood-and-later-life/about/.

4 We are not adopting Laslett's entire thesis and acknowledge criticisms of it (Gilleard and Higgs, 2007).

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