“It’s natural”
An exploration of age analysis in intersectional feminism

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Abstract

Historically, age has been and still is a major organizing principle for social relations and the allotment of resources and power, yet age is very seldom acknowledged as a social categorization in its own right and in intersection with other identity categorizations. While feminist scholarship and activism have deconstructed racist and sexist discourses, in which biology is often used to legitimize social injustice, the presupposed naturalness of ageism is rarely challenged. The aim of the present paper is to explore if and why age relations and ageism are invisible in feminist work by interviewing eleven feminists in a Swedish context. The interviews, which are qualitative and semi-structured, have been thematically analysed to identify patterns in the respondents’ approaches to age as a social categorization in intersectional analysis. A recurring theme is explaining age and ageism in terms of a fluidity of age relations, which make it a complex categorization to include in intersectional analysis. Drawing on theories of ageing and intersectional feminism I explore how the research material can be understood from a social and historical perspective. The thesis builds on a post-constructionist epistemology which underlines the importance of situated knowledges and accountability, and I therefore chose to make myself as the author visible throughout the text by writing the I and including personal accounts related to ageism and ageing.

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Keywords: Intersectional feminism, age, age relations, ageism, embodying ageing.
ABSTRACT

Historically, age has been and still is a major organizing principle for social relations and the allotment of resources and power, yet age is very seldom acknowledged as a social categorization in its own right and in intersection with other identity categorizations. While feminist scholarship and activism have deconstructed racist and sexist discourses, in which biology is often used to legitimize social injustice, the presupposed naturalness of ageism is rarely challenged. The aim of the present paper is to explore if and why age relations and ageism are invisible in feminist work by interviewing eleven feminists in a Swedish context. The interviews, which are qualitative and semi-structured, have been thematically analysed to identify patterns in the respondents’ approaches to age as a social categorization in intersectional analysis. A recurring theme is explaining age and ageism in terms of a fluidity of age relations, which make it a complex categorization to include in intersectional analysis. Drawing on theories of ageing and intersectional feminism I explore how the research material can be understood from a social and historical perspective. The thesis builds on a post-constructionist epistemology which underlines the importance of situated knowledges and accountability, and I therefore chose to make myself as the author visible throughout the text by writing the I and including personal accounts related to ageism and ageing.

Keywords: Intersectional feminism, age, age relations, ageism, ageing, embodying age.
Dedicated to my late grandmothers

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Thank you all!

Love.
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INTRODUCTION

Background

Why is old age, and everything associated with it, so unsexy? I first came to ask this question (albeit formulated a little differently) when I was about nine years old and my grandmother asked me if I was not embarrassed to be seen together with her when we bumped into a friend of mine downtown. Why would I be? Quite the opposite – my grandmother was one of my closest relations, and although it is unlikely we would have met if we were not related, I like to believe we could have been friends anyway. A few years later it became obvious that hanging out with old people indeed held a low status among my peers, as I will come back to later. Why are young and old people expected to be unwilling to have voluntary relationships across generations? Speaking of old age - why is it that I feel almost guilty when longing for more wrinkles at the corners of my eyes, and for my hair to turn silver? How come I hide the unopened letters telling me to save for my retirement in the back of the drawer – could it be because I do not want to be reminded of the day I will discover just how poor my pension is, or about the day I am considered old by the system? Why is both our own ageing, and being close to old people or things related to old age, something that most people seem to distance themselves from?

These are questions that have been (more or less subtly) on my mind since childhood. Even if I have not spent even close to as much time analysing ageism and age-related hierarchies as I have analysing gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and to some extent dis/ability, it has always been at the back of my head somehow. So then, when I first read that “age/generation” was one of many social categories that may be analysed in intersection with others (Lykke 2010:50), I was curious what such analysis would reveal, and simultaneously not as excited as I was by reading about other social locations and the deconstruction of various systems of oppression. Now, why is that? Should I be? Or are there good reasons not to care as much about age and ageing, as about other social categorisations? I wanted to be introduced and convinced about the importance of including (or not including) age in intersectional analysis but as it turned out, as far as I can recall, we did not touch upon it even once in the programme which this thesis is a part of. And why is that? Is it because of a lack of time and space, which means other power differentials, which have been fundamental to the development of intersectional theories, have been prioritised (an argument I would accept)? Or, is it because age/generation and age relations simply do not appear as “sexy” as other social categories, which engage more (and younger) people? Perhaps ageing is still too “natural”? 
The spontaneous reaction I have often encounter when touching upon age, ageing and ageism in feminism is that it is exactly that: “natural”. It is natural to age, it is natural to grow older – I cannot argue with that, at least not as far as my biological and bio-technological understanding goes. What I question is the implications of ageing – how one’s social position is affected by one’s prescribed age– and why it is not paid more attention in feminist work. Everyone that lives for long enough will become old, but not everyone’s old age will affect them the same, which is strongly linked to one’s intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability, sexuality and geopolitical location. As researchers (like Calasanti and Slevin 2001; 2006) who have dedicated lots of energy to challenging the taken-for-granted status of age relations have pointed out, there is not much work done on the intersections of age and gender, or age and other social categories. I have noticed a similar disinterest for age analysis in feminist environments I have been part of or gotten in touch with, too, and I wonder why that is. I could not find much (or let us just say: no) research explicitly exploring why feminists seem to care so little about age. If this could be identified as a gap in feminist research, it is a big one since there has been relatively little considerations of age in intersectional feminism at all, whether regarding specific topics and intersections with other social positions, or meta-perspectives on how age could, or should/should not, be included.

In the present paper I want to approach the latter topic by exploring the approaches toward age, ageing and ageism among a few feminists (myself included) in a Swedish context, and discover how age is, or could be, incorporated in intersectional feminist work. By writing this thesis I hope to make a contribution to the growing (but still, relatively low) feminist interest in age as a social position which intersects with all others. It is not that I want to convince anybody that age relations would be more urgent to focus one’s analysis on than other hierarchies of oppression, but I do wish feminists to start reflecting (more) upon age relations and the social consequences of age and ageing as taken for granted. Really, why is it that feminists are good at challenging and dismantling power structures and reveal how “nature” is used as legitimizing oppressions, yet are blind to age relations which are dismissed as “natural”?

Aim and central questions

The overarching aim of the present study is to explore in what ways age relations and ageism are included in feminist work, and find out why age as a social categorization is not included in intersectional feminist analysis to a greater extent than it seems to be today. The research
objectives thus take departure in my preunderstanding of ageism and age relations as areas of concern that at large have been neglected by feminist scholars as well as by activists. In order to trace down possible reason to why the interest in age is relatively low in feminism(s) I have chosen to interview people who according to their own definitions are “dedicated” feminist, familiar with intersectional perspectives. I want to find out about their views on age as a social category, and their experiences of ageism and ageing, in order to better understand the current exclusion of age analysis from intersectional feminist work, and its possible inclusion in the future. The aim is also to find out if my suspicion even holds up to be true in the eyes of other feminists: perhaps I have just been blind to engagement in age-related analysis, because I did not expect to find it? The purpose of the present study is not mainly to account for how age as a social position actually is (or should be) included in intersectional feminist analysis, although I will illustrate the field by examples of how age analysis and feminism can be approached. Rather, the research objective is to make an investigation in the status of age as an identity categorisation in relation to feminist work.

The overarching research questions that guide this project are as follow:

- According to the respondents, how (if at all) is age included as a social category in intersectional feminist analysis?
- How can the presence/absence of age relations in feminist work be understood?
- If age relations and ageing is not included intersectional feminist analysis – do the respondents think it should be included more? What are the challenges to including age relations analysis in feminism?

These questions will be approached with an awareness of intersectionality, with special attention paid to when the respondents’ stories touch upon age in intersection with other social positions. The respondents’ own intersectional identities will be made explicit in the analysis whenever they themselves have brought them up in the interviews, but otherwise left out of the text with consideration of the limited scope of the present study, which is to mainly focus on age as an analytical category. As a side-effect of my entrance to the topic (being a feminist myself) and the method of inquiry (semi-structured interviews), the thesis will be coloured by my personal experiences and approaches concerning age as an identity category in intersectional feminist analysis, ageing, and ageism which I will critically explore and account for throughout the research process.
“Youth is wasted on the young” – my positionality and entrance to the topic

For as long as I can remember I have had a soft spot for old people, but only in recent years did I start to problematize this feeling of being drawn to a specific “group”, as if a homogenous group of puppies to (patronizingly) love. As a young child, and until her death when I was 15, I loved being with my maternal grandmother, Birgit, who would sometimes babysit me and my younger sibling. She would hold my little hand and tell me the skin was smooth as a peach, and I would pat hers and admire how her skin was so infinitely tender. I would tell her that it was like a wrinkly apple (a compliment in my ears), only softer, and she would laugh. We would spend holidays together in her summer cottage, or visit relatives’ gravestones at the cemetery and she would tell me how her – our – family were up there beyond the clouds, smiling down at us and appreciating how I helped caring for their memorials. When we met her elderly neighbours they would praise me for being “such a kind child who wanted to spend time with its old grandmother”. I was proud and surprised at such remarks, because of course I wanted to hang out with my granny – she was one of the closest persons in my young life, after all! As I entered my “feminist awakening” in my early teenage years, I became increasingly uneasy about the way the “good girl”-ideal was eating its way into my self-identification (simultaneously as I rebelled against my surroundings’ ways of living), but the relationship with my granny – and how others reacted on it – taught me several things. One thing is that everyday speech about old people, like people of other non-normative positions, reveal a homogenizing of diverse “groups”. In discourses of age, people tend to view children, young people and old people as groups rather than individuals with a wide range of intersectional positions and personal histories, while plain “adulthood” is normative. Speaking of old people, just like with other stigmatized groups, they are assumed to be a homogenous community which age-privileged people (like young or middle aged) do not want to be associated with. Endless are the jokes on the cost of old people, as if still a legible “group” to maintain stereotypes of.

The negative attitude towards old people has caught my attention many times throughout my educational path, too. In junior high I was the only one who volunteered to do work experience at a local residential home for elderly – everyone else found the mere thought of caring for old people (whatever that meant) repulsive. Yet another few years later I was one of perhaps two or three of my class who had actually enrolled in the care assistant program as a first hand choice (and all but a handful were female). Half an eternity later (or so it felt, because being fed up with school, I had vowed never to set my foot in an institutional educational setting again) I embarked on a social worker’s training, where teachers every now
and then would ask us which our preferred future clienteles would be. Although our teachers ensured us that caring for old people would be a sure way to get a job in the future (why do we assume that old people have special needs, but are not in need of therapy or interventions or other fields everyone wanted to work in?), few people replied “elderly”. Neither did I.

As for my own age and relation to my aged and ageing body, I have been told I “seemed older” since I was about 14 – this has not happened for the last few years, though, so maybe my years have caught up with my previous “maturity”, or perhaps people simply think it is impolite to tell someone 21+ that they seem older than they are. Perhaps those comments (which I took as compliments) in my teens and early 20s shaped my stance to my own age. Sometimes, though, the sentiments were the same but with attention paid to my perceived young age. When people occasionally told me I was so “young and brave”, for instance when travelling or working abroad, I never quite understood what they meant. I was the oldest I had ever been at that point and why would I turn braver with age? Likewise, when public discourse on youth regrettably let me know that I, as a teenager, should value my “carefree” years of youth (which so far have been the least happy of my life), I wondered what could possibly be so horrible in adult life that I should be grateful for being a 15-year old who felt like a rat trapped in a cage. Suitably, one of my favourite bands at the time, Smashing Pumpkins sang “youth is wasted on the young” and that was exactly the guilt I felt I was expected to feel (Corgan 1995). I was young, and because of my age not sensible enough to value it. I felt like an old, undeserving child, having stolen youth from those who could better have used it.

No one – researchers included - are independent of their social, historical, political, emotional, psychological context. Caroline Ramazanoğlu, reader in sociology and Janet Holland, professor in social research underline that it is important, even for knowledge producers of minor projects, to critically reflect on how they want to pack their bags of experiences to bring with them on their journeys (2002:148). This is something I have thought about quite a lot during the process of writing this paper, as I see how my relationship with ageism, ageing and age as a social location are things that very clearly affect the research project. Currently, I am privileged by an ageist structure, and have to constantly work on making my own biases and prejudices visible. My ageism is what pushes me to embark on this very topic – I really feel there is a need to explore age relations from an intersectional perspective to a greater extent than is being done today, both for my own part, and in feminisms at large.

The very writing of this paper is a kind of anti-ageism therapy for me, personally. At times I have felt my topic of choice to be outright boring, which paradoxically is a feeling that
fuels me to continue with it. Of course I am not saying that everyone has to find every subject as interesting, and of course people have their own passions, but why is it that so few people – myself included – “happen” to find age relations worth focusing upon? I can certainly see the point of choosing a topic that one is passionate about as passion is one undeniably strong motivator that may push one to keep fighting through various challenges. However, I find that my “anti-passion”, or ambivalent passion if one will (since the “soft spot” for old people is still there), helps motivating me, too. Doing this research project has allowed me to approach the bottom (if there is such a thing, which I doubt) of my own inherent ageism.

On words: definitions and clarifications

Naming age

Speaking about age and ageing generally bring associations of old age into mind, or perhaps the loss of youth (at whatever stage that is experienced). Although my entrance point to this paper is old age, I will henceforth discuss age and ageing in relation to any chronological or social stage of life – in other words, not necessarily in connection with old age specifically. Ageing is a process that literally happens all throughout life, although it is rarer to speak of a ten year old than of an 82-year old as “aged” or as “ageing”. Who belongs to a certain age category anyway? In gerontology and social sciences, there are often statistics of how many percent of the population of any given country that are over 65 years old. The World Health Organization (2016) notes that there is no universal definition of at what age one becomes an “older” or “elderly” person, and emphasises that those terms are closely linked to the social and historical contexts in which they are used. However, old age is usually considered to coincide with retirement age, which is about 60-65 in many Western countries (ibid). When I am thinking of old age, 65 does not pop up as a given threshold for entering old age. Perhaps it is partly because my own parents are around 65 and I consider none of them “old” (maybe since that would indicate that I, too, have aged, which I obviously have) – my mother is fitter than I am, which is an example of how one’s perception of age is tightly linked to health, ability and social status, among other factors. The increasing average life expectancy can be interpreted as “a slowing down of the ageing process”, at least for those who can afford to enjoy their “golden years” after retirement (Baars 2009: 93). Other than for statistical analytical reasons, then, speaking of a chronological time of life when one enters old age becomes meaningless.
According to the United Nation’s convention on the rights of the child (1989), a child is anyone under the age of 18. In the Oxford dictionary it can be read that a child is “a young human being below the age of puberty or below the legal age of majority” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). Thus, there is no universal definition of the status of the child, but many countries have adopted UN’s definition and treat persons under the age of 18 as children in juridical and social contexts. It is interesting to note that one is both a child for a certain period of life, and may forever be the child of somebody (depending on one’s personal relation to, and definition of, parenthood). The feeling of being young or old or simply holding the age norm, is dependent on social context. I felt quite old when I played with stuffed toys when I was ten, but when receiving letters calling my attention to retirement savings, I feel young at 30.

In the present paper I will use “young” and “old” rather than “younger” or “older”, unless specifically comparing imagined age categories to one another. As Dutch professor of interpretive gerontology, Jan Baars, asks: when we talk about “aged” or “older people” as if their status was given, who are we really comparing too (2009:87)? Older than whom? Although ageing is a universal process which happens all throughout life, concepts of ageing are used to refer to abnormal groups, especially to old people. According to American professors of feminist sociology Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin, researchers – including feminist researchers – tend to try to avoid the negative associations of old age by using the somewhat “softer” and less direct word of “older/elderly”, rather than actually questioning why old age has such a bad name to start with (2006:3). My intention is to ask exactly that question.

They

In the present thesis project I chose to use the gender neutral/inclusive personal pronoun singular they (rather than writing “he or she”, and leaving out people whose pronouns are none of the mentioned). Furthermore, they is used (with the approval of the respondents in question!) as the translation of two of the respondents’ personal pronouns in Swedish (den and hen, respectively). There are many gender neutral and/or inclusive personal pronouns in English, such as e, xe, or ze, sprung from various ideological contexts and with different political significance. The reason why I chose they rather than any other pronoun is that they is well known in the English language, and not derived from any one specific political context.
Outline of thesis

Having presented the background, aim and research questions of the present thesis project above, the upcoming chapters are as follow: in the methodology chapter I will discuss ethical, methodological and epistemological choices, including the search for respondents, challenges, and limitations concerning the scope of data collection.

The following chapter deals with the thesis’ theoretical points of departure, which mainly are intersectionality and theories of age and ageing sprung from cultural gerontology, especially drawing on Calasanti and Slevin’s (2001, 2006) ground-breaking work on including age as a social category in feminist analysis.

In the analysis chapter I will present the results of the thematic analysis of the material in three main subchapters based on three themes, namely how the respondents approach (if at all) ageism in their feminist work; their attitudes to age and ageism in general as “phenomena”, and the respondents’ accounts of their own experiences of age, ageing and ageism. Throughout the analysis chapter there are a few vignettes, based on snapshots from memories that have influenced my view on age, or more recent reflections on age. Finally, the conclusion of the thesis include a brief exploration of how the respondents view the possible future of an age perspective in intersectional analysis in feminist work, and a discussion of the research process and results. The interview guide, Facebook-posts used for finding interviewees and a list of the respondents’ original quotes and English translations used in the text are enclosed as appendixes.

METHODOLOGICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL & ETHICAL CHOICES

In this chapter I will account for the choices which on a very practical level have had implications for the conducting of the present research project. While my preunderstanding and theoretical affiliations have affected my choice of topic, research questions and methods, I left the more precise selection of theoretical points of departure to the later part of the research process. Ethical and methodological considerations have been ongoing since before the project “officially” started. Therefore, ethical considerations will be present all throughout this chapter, or indeed, the whole thesis, and the brief part in the end of this chapter where ethics are explicitly discussed is to be read as a mere addition to the larger context.

The present thesis has grown out of a feminist epistemology in which situated knowledge and localized subject positions are central, drawing on the work of American
feminist scholars Donna Haraway (1991) and Karen Barad (2007). Like Haraway, Barad and others, I believe that the knowledges we hold and produce are not separable from our experiences. My past and present, (i.e. constant) interactions with age and ageism are very much present in the words I am typing at this very moment. Had I not had my own love for, and prejudice against, old people I would never have embarked on this project in the first place. Had I not – for whatever reason – had the urge to challenge the privileges of youth that I have so far enjoyed, or the tools to do so, I surely would have chosen a different topic for the present thesis. Likewise, there is no clear cut between what I have come to know through lived experience and through discourses, or between subject and object, or culture and nature. Drawing on Barad, who rejects not only the above mentioned dichotomies (to mention a few) but also that of the differentiation between ethics, epistemology and ontology, my thesis project is influenced by her idea of a post-constructionist ethico-onto-epistemology – “an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being” (2007:185). Inspired by Barad’s and Haraway’s material-discursive interpretations of subject-object positions, my thesis is written with an understanding of social identities and processes, such as age and ageing, as at once socially constructed and as having a materiality, with physical, tangible consequences. Haraway (1991) argues for a knowledge production which neither universalizes grand narratives, nor is completely relativistic. Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges; “an epistemology of partial perspectives”, is a kind of contextualized “objectivity” (1991:191). There are three things that are important to avoid in Haraway’s epistemology: classical standpoint feminism’s universalizing of one type of perspective; postmodern philosophy’s claim of total relativity; and the “god-trick” (Lykke 2010:135f). To avoid the latter, that echoes a positivistic ideal of an anonymous, objective all-knowing researcher, I will join the feminist tradition of making myself, as the author, overtly present throughout the text. In line with this intention, and with departure in feminist ideals of dismantling the illusion of academic objectivity, I chose to write the I in the text as to make myself as the author visible and accountable (Lykke 2010:166f). Furthermore, beside an exploration of approaches toward age among Swedish feminists, this paper will be a medium for me to deal with my own ageism and the impact it has on my feminism.

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1 Epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge: what constitutes knowledge, and how can researchers know what they know? Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of something (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002).
Cuts: coming to term with delimitations

One of the greatest challenges for me when embarking on any kind of project, is to come to terms with the fact that I cannot create an encompassing product that will contain every idea I can possibly come up with on the topic. That is probably why I seldom finish creative projects such as paintings or texts, because there simply is no given point where are finished, and as one goes along one gets new ideas that could fit right in there. My toughest challenge is to realize that it is me who have to make the cut, who have to say: “it is (at least kind of) done now”. Usually I never get even close to finishing since the overwhelming ideal of producing something that reflects every possible perspective anybody could ever have on the topic, stops me from even getting properly started.

According to Barad (2007) there are no universal, given cuts between researcher and whom or what they study, as both the subject of object of research are parts of the same world and are intra-acting with each other. However, for practical reasons delimitations have to made since it would be an overwhelmingly impossible task to conduct research on every aspect that could be included. Hence, although there are no a priori cuts between those who are in one way or another involved in a research project, it is essential from a methodological and ethical point of view to construct provisional cuts. According to Barad, “objectivity is a matter of accountability for what materializes, for what comes to be. It matters which cuts are enacted: different cuts enact different materialized becomings” (2007:361). Again, methodology, epistemology, ontology and ethics are closely linked. What differs Barad’s cuts from those in traditional methodologies is her emphasis on cuts having to be made not only to define research participants, but to define the researcher themselves (Lykke 2010:151ff).

Barad’s provisional cuts are about momentarily defining and contextualising both researcher and who/what is being researched, and the relationships there between. These are questions that I have dealt with throughout the process of finding respondents for my study, interviewing them and then handling the material collected. For instance, in what way is the relationship between the respondent and me influencing the material? Is it necessarily a disadvantage (and unethical) if we have a prior friendship? How is my life history and present being (especially when it comes to implicitly age-related experiences) affecting the theoretical and methodological choices I make?

In alliance with the aim of this study, I chose to interview feminists in order to explore their experiences of inclusion/exclusion of age relation perspectives in intersectional feminist work.
The reasons for not limiting the research project to focus on a specific “kind” of feminism are several. One is that I wanted the interviewees to volunteer based on their own definitions of their feminist identities, and that it would be quite tricky to try to categorise feminisms (outside of the text books), as my belief is that feminists (like myself) are influenced and driven by several, not easily separable, feminist traditions and bodies of thought. Another, rather practical reason, is that I had a premonition that it might not turn out to be so easy to find people who were interested in participating in a study exploring age, and limiting the scope to a certain feminist tradition could make it even harder. Besides, a selection based on affiliation with a specific feminist strand might also have caused the group of respondents to be less diverse than it is now, concerning age-span and non/activist backgrounds, among other factors.

The delimitation I did however do from start when looking for respondents was to only look for people who have lived in Sweden for long enough to be shaped by the country’s social politics. I did not look for Swedish feminists with the illusion of finding a homogenous group of people with similar backgrounds, but what I think people have in common, which is relevant to my project, is a (to some extent) shared expectation on the state’s role in people’s lives, and a similar understanding of social phenomena. I have come across the notion that “the Swedish right wing is more left than some other countries’ left wing parties” more than once and perhaps there is something to it. Despite recent years’ privatisations of formerly public assets I rarely meet people who totally support neoliberalist ideas of minimal involvement of the state. The Swedish ideal of combining socialism and capitalism to create “the people’s home” (folkhemmet)² still lives on and people seem to agree on the necessity of the state taking care of its citizens, and therefore many take the state’s presence from cradle to grave for granted. It would be very interesting to compare if and how respondents’ geo-political contexts influences their attitudes toward ageism and age as a category in intersectional analysis, but as I lack the in-depth knowledge of other countries’ social/welfare systems for now I think such a comparison would be imbalanced. Furthermore, and out of concern for what I found practically viable for this project, I assessed that the analysis would hold higher quality if I prioritised a smaller scope, rather than width by embarking on a world-wide one. With Haraway’s (1991) idea of situated knowledges embedded in my epistemological point of departure, I decided to keep it “smaller”, although I realise that the respondents’ knowledges and experiences will not be easily concluded just because we share some degree of common cultural experience.

² A home only for some, mind you – a strong folkhem’s (people’s home) nationalism helped legitimate generous social security for the country’s own citizens while excluding the surrounding world’s people (Sörlin 2006:48).
Finding interviewees

In order to get in touch with people who would be interested to participate in my study I chose a *purposive sampling method*, which is a common way of finding respondents in qualitative research projects (Bryman 2012:418). Unlike convenience sampling, which means choosing respondents who are available by chance to the researcher, purposive sampling allowed me to find respondents with a greater variety of “characteristics” with relevance for the study’s questions (ibid.). As it is not the aim of the present study to generalize to a larger population, a random, quantitative sampling method was not required. My initial approach was to send out requests via various channels, in the hope that feminists would volunteer and that I could choose people representing a variety of feminist work and backgrounds. After a few attempts it became clear that the future interviewees would not exactly wash over me, and that more direct methods of selection would be necessary to get in touch with people.

Initially I was hoping that contacting a few political feminist groups to ask whether any of their members would be interested in being interviewed, and making an open invitation in a feminist discussion group on Facebook in connection with a discussion on the topic, would provide me with enough respondents (see appendix II for the Facebook post). Aware that putting such faith in finding respondents through a social network like Facebook would risk leaving the sample age-wise skewed in that I was unlikely to get old volunteers, I thought the advantages of Facebook weighed heavier. Since I was interested in getting in touch with “any” feminists and not only deeply devoted activists or researchers, I thought Facebook feminist groups would be a good medium for finding respondents, as it consist of feminists with various backgrounds, practices and believes.

As it turned out, though, not many people volunteered, apart from a friend who had previously let me know that they were interested in participating, who replied to the Facebook-post in order to help giving the post some visibility among the rest of the group. I then posted an almost identical text in another feminist group on Facebook, and e-mailed other local political groups in other towns, of which one replied that they had several members who were interested in participating, either in a focus group (which I had suggested) or in individual interviews. Due to practical challenges of finding a time when we could meet (people were busy with work, someone was leaving the country, I was travelling to another parts of the country to conduct a few interviews etc.) the effort eventually died out. Realizing I had to stop hoping for people to contact me via the Facebook-posts or the e-mail invitations to the political groups, I started contacting a couple of feminists whose names I had gotten to know from their publicly
known work, and a couple of acquaintances. Initially, I intended to make face-to-face interviews only. Distance-contact interviews do have certain disadvantages, although the video chats partly compensated for the missed out personal contact that phone interviews cause. However, when I realized how difficult it turned out to be to find volunteers, I started to contact persons I knew I would not have the possibility of meeting in personal.

The fact that most respondents did not find me but the other way around, is something that I expect to have affected the material a lot. Had enough many people replied to my Facebook-posts so that I did not need to look any further, it would have meant that my selection of interviewees would consist entirely of people who had expressed an interest to participate in a study where age perspectives in feminism is explored. I would expect that people who respond to such an invite would do it out of an interest in the field, and thus already have reflected on it prior to reading the post. Instead, the majority of my respondents were contacted directly by me, or in one case by someone I had already interviewed, and their motivation of participating might have been to do me a favour and/or a general interest in feminist research. The two persons who did volunteered via the Facebook posts, said that they had contacted me partly because they were interested in ageism and wanted to explore it further, and partly because they knew themselves how difficult it can be to find participants for student theses, and wanted to help me out.

The Facebook groups where I chose to make my posts are two of the larger Swedish feminist communities there is on Facebook3, one with nearly 18 000 members as of today, and the other with about 2000 members. All in all, two out of the eleven interviewees volunteered by contacting me after having seen my posts on Facebook. Eight of the other respondents were contacted by me and asked if they would be willing to participate: two of them are friends, two are acquaintances, two are persons whose names I knew but never had spoken to, and two are rather publicly known feminist activist and/or politicians. Of the other three, one person was directed to me by one of the other respondents, and two volunteered via Facebook.

As a complimentary tool of inquiry next to the interviews I wanted to make a small exploration of feminists’ online discussions. The idea developed from my need of a channel to reach my target group (people actively engaged in feminism), in a more unpredictable way than if I was to single out people from my own net of accountancies. I decided to make a post in two large,

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3I chose not to mention the names of the Facebook groups, as the respondents who volunteered to participate in my study would otherwise have their anonymity threatened.
closed groups on the social network Facebook\textsuperscript{4} to ask anyone willing to participate in my study to contact me. To do that I needed to introduce my topic, and in accordance with the rules of the groups I tried to make it a discussion, also depicting my own opinions but only briefly enough as to not direct the answers in a certain direction too much. Thus the intention shifted from mainly wanting to find interviewees (which I soon realized was a naïve expectation), to actually collecting material from the Facebook-posts themselves, loosely inspired by the method of \textit{netnography}. The term netnography was coined by Robert V. Kozinets, professor of marketing, to describe “a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the Internet’s influence on contemporary social worlds (Kozinets 2010:1). Since many of the respondents’ feminisms are influenced by the sharing of information via social media, I found it relevant to make use of Facebook (to pick out just one social network) to better picture their contexts.

\textbf{Interviewing}

The main body of empirical data that this study is based on consists of eleven interviews conducted in February and March 2016. Seven of the interviews were carried out face-to-face: two in cafés; four at respective respondents’ homes and one at the person’s office at their work place. Geographically speaking, two interviews took place in a large city; three interviews took place in two fairly big cities in mid-Sweden, and two in an average-sized town in the northern parts of the country. The other four interviews were held via the online video-telephone service \textit{Skype} (in one instance without video due to technical difficulties) with three respondents who live in southern parts of Sweden, and one who momentarily lives in Western Europe.

The interviews were semi-structured with open questions that allowed for discussions of topics that I had chosen beforehand, but also for the interviews to centre on what the individual respondent brought up. Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing is a common method in feminist research and often advocated – in comparison to structured interviewing but also to other qualitative methods – to be less hierarchical in the researcher-research object relationship and providing a more open exchange between the involved (Bryman 2012:491f). For instance, it often happened that respondents asked me about my own views on topics, which sometimes made the interviews turn into more conversation-like discussions than one-way

\textsuperscript{4} Facebook is a social networking service with 1,65 billion monthly active users, as of March 2016 (Facebook 2016). People who register on Facebook get user profiles, can among other things add each other as “friends”, send private messages, post text, links or pictures on their own or others’ profile pages’ “walls”/news flows, and communicate in groups which may be open and visible to all, closed, or private and invisible to non-members. Anyone can search for a “closed group” on Facebook and see its description, but only current members can read posts.
communication. To my aid I had prepared an interview guide (see appendix I) with a few general topics and supportive questions in case the interviews would stagnate, but in practice I barely looked at them – especially in the later interviews – since all of the interviews had a nice flow and most of the central questions were covered in one way or another anyway. I also wanted to encourage the interviewees’ own voices to be heard, rather than forcing the interviews into certain directions. In the last few interviews, this became a more overt approach, as I truly came to realize the value of the respondents’ unique stories, which sometimes could not have been told if the situation had been disrupted by the interview guide’s structure.

All of the interviews were recorded and range in length from approximately 30 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on what felt “natural” in the given moment of interviewing. I was – am – grateful to all the people who volunteered to be interviewed, and out of respect to them I did not want to push people to talk for longer than they felt comfortable with, nor cutting a conversation short by letting time rule too much. The average length of the interviews was about 50 minutes. The face-to-face interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and the online interviews were recorded with iFree Skype Recorder which I downloaded online for free. Bryman illustrates two possible problems with recording interviews: firstly, to gain the permission of the interviewees to record the interviews, and secondly to get the hardware to work (2012:484). I was fortunate not to encounter any problems in either way although I made sure to transcribe the interviews soon after they were done in order to have them fresh in mind, would the hardware have failed me. Well aware of the danger of only relying on the recorders, I chose to take the risk as I felt that note taking would have disturbed the rather laid-back interview situations too much, especially the face-to-face interviews. The interviews were transcribed by hand in their full length, except in some parts of some of the interviews where I only wrote keywords to remember topics which I thought was not of immediate use for the study, but which still provided a context and which I may wanted to return to later on in the analysis. Although transcribing interviews takes time, I found the hours spent listening, typing, rewinding, listening and rewinding once again, a good use of time. Not only did it bring me closer to my material, which I could start analysing while transcribing, but it allowed for repeated examination of the material, without the risk of mixing the interviewees’ answers up or my own memory fabricating bits of their information (Bryman 2012:482). Transcribing was an interpretative and contemplating process in which the identifying of patterns continued (that had started during the interviews), exactly because it took so much time.

Prior to the respondents’ participation, both in the e-mail/Facebook-contact in which
they received brief information about the project and before starting the interviews, they were
told about the research project and its background, and informed that their involvement was to
be totally voluntary and anonymous. The respondents were informed that they could decline
answering any of my questions, or interrupting the interview if they at any point felt
uncomfortable or changed their mind about participating. In case they changed their minds after
the interview situations, they were encouraged to contact me and I would not be using their
material.

A few more words on ethical considerations

Quite a lot has been written on the topic of researching otherness and the politics of representing
the Other. Interpreting data is an important part in the process of producing data, and in effect
exercising power (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002:116). Feminist critique of for example
ethnographic methods concern the fact that the researcher studies the Other and interprets the
data, which the studied people may not have any say in. Some researchers let interviewees read
the transcriptions before using the data, but the fact remains that it is in the end the researcher
who has the power to select and interpret material. When planning the present project I
considered handing back the transcribed interviews to the participants but decided against it as
I doubted it would actually benefit them. Instead I told them in the wrap up of the interviews
that I would send them any of their raw material quotes I would use in the finished paper,
together with a brief piece of the textual context in which it would be used, in order for the
interviewees to approve of the quotes once translated into English. The purpose was to let
people get a chance to confirm that the material was theirs, and to have the opportunity to
withdraw from participation before the full thesis was published (see appendix III for original
quotes and translations). Some of the respondents modified their quotes to make them easier to
understand for the future readers where the context of the whole interview was missing, and in
one instance, to improve the English translation – both grammatically, and in order to make it
their own voice in English. Furthermore, I asked respondents for details of how to present them
(“did I understand it right that you were active here, or at that time, and is it okay that I write
that you have this profession or that experience?”), and whether the alias I had proposed was
okay (to avoid unintentionally choosing names which were unsuitable). Two respondents said
they were okay with using their own names but in the end we agreed on using aliases.

In the case of the present study, the ethical question(s) of representing otherness has
been somewhat different than in other research projects, where the researcher is not part of the same “group” as the “study objects”. One of the aims of my project is to explore feminists’ views on age as a (neglected) intersectional category, and since I am a feminist myself that means researching my own “group”. All of the interviewees were familiar with intersectional frameworks, and additionally, many of the interviewees had academic backgrounds which included critical perspectives (although many came from working class backgrounds, like myself). In this way, I think the finished product of this research project, which mainly is produced for academic consumption, will be accessible to the respondents (although I am not sure whether the text being in English might be a problem or not) and my hope is that the respondents will get something out of reading the results from their contributions, too.

**Identification**

The question of identification is one which has concerned me a lot during the writing of this thesis. Who should identify the respondents? The obvious answer should be the respondents themselves, and yet the power of the writer should not be ignored. During the interviews, I asked the respondents to tell me something about their backgrounds and identities which they felt could be relevant in providing contexts for the interviews. To be honest, I often experienced this request to be quite awkward, and yet I did not want to finish an interview by knowing nothing about people’s identities, or rather (and worse still) – assuming that I knew things they had not chosen to share. In hindsight, however, I wonder if I should not have left it at whatever information the respondents spontaneously shared with me during the interviews. Sometimes they would mention their gender identities, sexualities, ethnic backgrounds, class, dis/abilities and so on in specific contexts. At the time of interviewing (at least to start with, and then I continued in order to be somewhat consistent) I wanted to be able to write some kind of presentation of the respondents which would briefly conclude their various positions. If the sample would appear quite homogenous I wanted the reader to know it, so that both they and I as the writer could problematize it. My fear was to have an “invisible” sample of respondents holding normative positions, consisting of all-white, all-cis people in their 20s and 30s, without actually making that clear to the reader. In case the sample of interviewees would turn out more heterogeneous, I wanted that to be said, too, without giving the idea that a single individual (or a few) would represent an imagined homogenous community based on whatever identity marker was being focused on, of course. I did not want to fall into the weird tradition (or so it seems in countless articles in social sciences) of introducing a person by writing something like
“Dana, 32, white female” without actually accounting for who made the choice to identify the person and to use those exact categories, or for their relevance. If I wrote something similar I wanted to make it sure that I actually introduced the person with their own identity markers, not some that I had assumed would apply. Wanting to be consistent in my analysis of the material, I wished to find out some typical “categories” for all of the respondents (such as age and gender), so that I would introduce them in a similar way. As I started the interviewing, though, I soon found out how intruding it felt to demand of people to tell me about any given positions, so I tried to “soften up” the situations by asking people to tell me whatever they wanted that they thought could be relevant, sometimes by giving a few examples (like class) if they seemed unsure of what I requested. That in turn meant I got information about various aspects of their positions, and whether that was because people were not comfortable with telling me certain things, or because they simply did not think about telling me about certain positions that may be normative and taken for granted, is hard to tell.

Now, after having carried out all of the interviews, I regret not having left it at whatever the respondents spontaneously told me during our meetings. If I had truly aspired at knowing a number of specific identity categories for each and all of the respondents, I should simply have handed out a questionnaire, which did not feel like an option at all. At the time I was hoping an open question of the respondents’ backgrounds would be a less intruding way of collecting information, and that overtly asking people for their own identifications would be a gesture of respect. After careful consideration, with the support and inspiration of my supervisor, I have decided to only mention individual respondents’ identity markers in contexts where they have direct impact – according the respondents themselves. For instance, since I only know a few of the respondents’ to be trans or cis⁵, I cannot make comparative analysis of how this affect their responses to certain topics during the interviews. It is however of relevance to mention the respondents’ gender identities if they themselves have called attention to how it affected their intersections with for example age and ethnicity in a given situation. In the introduction of the interviewees, I have chosen to conclude a summary of the respondents’ calendric ages, genders, class back grounds etc. in as far as I know of them, but there is no account of each person’s specific positions. For further research it would be interesting to explore how the individual’s specific social positions affect their approach to age relations in feminism, and what their

⁵Transgender (trans) is an umbrella term describing non-normative gender identities such as transsexual, non-binary, intergender, genderqueer or agender identities, which is not the gender the person was assigned at birth. Cis gender, which is the general norm, describe people whose gender identities match their legal and social genders (how they are “read” by others) and the gender they were assigned at birth.
experiences of ageism are. Such material collection and analysis is however beyond the scope of the present study, whose aim is to explore the “status” of age as a social location to include in intersectional feminism “in general”.

**Thematic analysis**

To analyse the data collected for this research project I chose thematic analysis method, mainly because it is a very flexible approach which leaves plenty of freedom for the researcher to best fit the method to their own purposes. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research and compatible with many different epistemologies, yet seldom acknowledged as a method in its own right (Braun and Clarke 2006:78). Commonly, researchers talk about how themes are “emerging” out of their material, which gives the illusion of the choice of themes being a passive process rather than the researcher themselves actively identifying and selecting what patterns to analyse. One of the many choices of the researcher is to decide what “size” a theme needs to be in order to count as one, although keeping to rigidly to one’s choice might be a bad idea. In the case of the present thesis I started by mentally identifying patterns during the interviews that I later on wrote down under preliminary headlines which I thought captured the “essence” of the theme. These later became sub-themes within three overarching themes, namely feminist work, age as a phenomena, and experience. What the patterns I picked out had in common was that they took up quite a lot of space during the interviews, and occurred in the majority of all of the interviews, although specific topics might have been discussed by only two or three of the respondents. One example was the experience of, as an activist, encountering attitudes of “activism being a hobby of the youth”, which two of the interviewees brought up. As I interpreted these stories as part of a larger pattern of experiencing sanctions and prejudice related to age norms, and because the topic of activism is relevant to the overarching research topic, I chose to devote quite a lot of space to the specific example of activism.

**THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE**

Mainly drawing from two “fields” that have traditionally been separated, I have chosen theories of ageing of cultural gerontology, and intersectional feminist studies as the theoretical approaches of the present study. As Lykke notes, “boundary work in between and across disciplines is widespread in feminist studies” and especially when entering a relatively
unexplored field, one can see why an openness to transgressing boarders is fruitful (2011:178). Just like gender studies have failed to theorize age relations, classical gerontology has traditionally lacked a gender lens, not to speak of an intersectional perspective which theorizes more than one oppressive structure at once.

Although feminist theorists’ interest in age relations has been fairly cool, and theorists who engage in questions of age have often been blind to intersecting power structures, there is a growing body of theories where these two fields are combined to some extent: cultural gerontology. Inspired by feminist, queer, sociological and post-structural theories, cultural gerontology has developed from conventional gerontology (Twigg and Martin 2015). Deconstructing age, cultural gerontologists strive to gain more diverse perspectives on ageing in intersection with other processes in life, rather than bunching “old people” together as a homogenous group. One way to do this has been to focus on the life course rather than on old age as a separate stage in people’s lives (as traditional gerontology does). Compared to critical gerontology, which focuses on a structural understanding of ageing, cultural gerontology also considers the materiality and embodiment of age (Twigg and Martin 2015). Drawing on theorists who combine cultural and critical perspectives on ageing, like Calasanti and Slevin (2001, 2006) and Gilleard and Higgs (2000, 2013a) do, the present research project is inspired by cultural gerontology, theories of ageing at any stage in life, and intersectionality theory.

**Previous research**

Both feminist theorizing and ageing studies are interdisciplinary and have activist origins, and strive for creating social change by knowledge production (Allen and Walker 2009:517f). There has however been relatively little feminist research done which includes an age perspective, or focuses on age as a position in intersection with other power structures, which several of the researchers and theorist who are engaged in the field have called attention to (for instance Calasanti and Slevin 2001,2006; Sandberg 2011, 2013; Krekula, Närvänen and Näsman 2005). Naively I have expected feminists (whether in academia or outside of it) to be critical of the ageism, which at large is accepted in society on the pretext that it is “natural”. Calasanti and Slevin point out that this is not the case: when feminist researchers mention age, which is rare to start with, they fail to acknowledge ageism as a unique power structure, and tend to treat it as a given which needs no further explanation (2001:187). Besides, there is a bias of middle age in feminist research, and when age is treated, age relations are still left out of the analysis (Calasanti and Slevin 2006:2). In ageing studies, pretty much all research concerning ageing
is about old people as a consequence of a biomedical understanding of ageing (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:25). When it comes to including age in intersectional feminist analyses, on the contrary, young people are mostly in focus.

Searching for previous research for this thesis has resulted in a few articles where ageing, and perhaps especially old age, is approached from an intersectional perspective, and in some instances research where an awareness of age relations is applied to other intersecting hierarchies of power, but ageism is rarely treated as a unique oppression. More frequently the searching led to results where one or the other perspective was treated – focus was either on age (studies in gerontology) or on other intersectional positions (feminist studies), without taking age relations into account, even if the age categories the research projects focused on were somewhat theorized. In recent years it has however become more common to analyse the intersection of age and other social positions. One example is Swedish gender scholar Linn Sandberg’s (2011) dissertation on age, masculinity and sexuality, in which she explores old men’s identities in relation to the discourse of successful ageing. Another example is Anna Siverskog (2015), PhD at Sweden’s National Institute for the Study of Ageing and Later Life (NISAL), who explores trans persons ageing in later life, and how one’s gender identity is affected by physical changes and age norms.

**Intersectionality – tool and theory**

Popularly used in feminism in recent decades, there are many different interpretations to just what intersectionality is. Coined in 1989 by feminist, critical race theorist and law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality theory put a name on the work of others before her, like abolitionist and women right’s activist Sojourner Truth. In her epic speech from 1851, Truth highlights the problematic focus on a single power structure, like sexism or racism, by rhetorically asking “Ain’t I a woman?” (cited in Lykke 2010:76). Truth’s question has been interpreted as a critique against white feminism which excluded women of colour, and has inspired Black feminist scholars in the US in the 70’s and 80’s (Smiet 2015:10). Criticizing the single-axis framework that made the oppression of Black women invisible and neglected in both race and sex discrimination law, Crenshaw calls for a more complex analytical tool and proposed intersectionality. According to Crenshaw, focusing on the most privileged in a group (i.e. Black men if analysing racism and white women in sexism) will distort the analysis and marginalize those who, in Crenshaw’s words, are “multiply-burdened” (1989:140).
Danish feminist scholar Nina Lykke suggests an umbrella-like definition of intersectionality, by which intersectionality is both a methodological and theoretical tool to analyse how various power hierarchies *intra*-act and produce social injustice (2010:50). Rather than understanding identity categorizations such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class as “adding” onto each other, intersectionality is a tool to help analysing how they mutually *transform* each other. A person might be disadvantaged by some power differentials while privileged by others, which result in different social positions depending on the specific historical and cultural context. Informed by poststructuralist theory, intersectionality is often defined as a *process* rather than structure, but different feminist traditions put emphasis on different aspects of the intersectionality tool (Lykke 2010:51f).

In the present text I will refer to an intersectionality concept which, like Lykke (2010) suggests, encompass different feminist theoretical frameworks. Since the aim of the present thesis project is to explore how age can be included as an identity categorization in intersectional feminist analysis, from a somewhat “meta-perspective”, I will not make an explicit intersectional analysis of the material myself. The analysis will however include an intersectional perspective, and the respondents’ (and my own) intersectional positions will be named when they themselves have drawn attention to them.

**Theories of age and ageing**

There are different ways of talking about age. In everyday life, and in the current research project when respondents got to state their ages, chronological age is commonly used to refer to how old one is. It may seem obvious to count the number of years one has lived when thinking of how old one is, but chronological time has not always held the importance it does today. Up until the urbanising and modernisation process at the dawn of the 20th century, there were quite big differences in time perception between cities and countryside in Sweden (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:19). In the countryside life was ruled more by nature’s cycle than by calendric time counting. Similarly, age categorizations are socially constructed – for instance, there was no concept to name adolescence prior to the twentieth century (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:14).

Chronological age is a measurement of one’s life time, not meaningful in itself but prescribed meaning through cultural and historical contexts. However, chronological age is often treated as a *cause* for the attributes and positions that are prescribed a given age category.
based on chronological age, which is the case in everyday social interaction as well as in scientific discourses (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:20). Gerontology is one of the field of research which has been criticized for using chronological age in an unreflective way. As for everyday life, it is not rare to hear nursing staff describing an old person as being “clear in the head” or teachers calling a teenager “mature” – the opposite would probably never occur, since old people are expected to be mature and young are assumed to have their cognitive functions intact. Such statements (without any further explanation) only make sense when those communicating them share the same understanding of chronological age’s social and biological consequences. Thus, chronological age can be an important analytical tool but does alone not offer a sufficient understanding of age (Baars 2009:88).

As an effect of understanding age in terms of a biological process, ageing has become increasingly patologized and biomedicalized – that is, old age and ageing is seen as a pathological rather than “normal” process – in the last century (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:23). There are however other perspectives on age than the biomedical one. About half a century ago, sociological perspectives started to develop. “In all societies, age is one of the bases for the ascription of status and one of the underlying dimensions by which social interaction is regulated”, according to American sociologists Bernice L. Neugarten, Joan W. Moore and John C. Lowe, who were some of the pioneers of the field (1965:710). Another influential theorist in sociological perspectives on age is American gerontologist Matilda White Riley who underlines the importance of change when it comes to understanding how society and age structures mutually affect each other (White Riley 1986). Sprung from the sociological discussion of ageing is life course research, in which age is understood in biographic terms; individual, historic and family time (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:29ff). An individual’s life cannot be understood in isolation from their social relations and historical context, and the individual’s identities and careers over their life course varies depending on relations with family, society and context. As I will discuss in the analysis of the material, many of the respondents speak in terms of a life course perspective when discussing age and ageing, although not necessarily using the very concept of life course.

Christopher Gillear, psychologist, and sociologist Paul Higgs (2000; 2013a; 2013b), use the third and fourth age as conceptualizations of the last stages of life. Rather than chronological phases, Higgs and Gillear see the third age as a “cultural field” which emphasises the autonomy and self-fulfilment of the individual, while the fourth age represents the collective
fear becoming dependent and old; of adopting otherness. I find these concepts useful to help nuancing “old age” and prevent an overly simplified view of later life. The western cultural ideal of an active, self-expressing lifestyle seems to be quite persistent throughout life but the means to actualise these ideals vary depending on one’s intersectional positions, perhaps most obviously affected by class. But as Calasanti and Slevin state, “old age not only exacerbates other inequalities but also is a social location in its own right, conferring a loss of power for all those designated as ‘old’ regardless of their advantages in other hierarchies” (2006:5). I daily see youthful-looking old people being hailed in pop culture and social media for travelling the world, checking off their bucket lists, defying ageing – while there is another “group” which is much less visible. If seen at all, it is as warning examples of what will become if one fails ageing (as opposed to successful ageing), or perhaps used for political purposes: “look, these poor people need (and deserve) our help”. I find the lack of agency in such portraying chilling.

According to Gillette and Higgs, one main difference between the third and fourth age is the loss of bodily control, such as incontinence and falling, in the latter (2000:168). More than anything else, though, dementia symbolises the fourth age’s loss of social agency, in that the individual fails to live up to the modernist project of maintaining a “civilized” body and mind (ibid). It should however be noted that dementia not is a “natural” part of ageing but an overall term for symptoms, mainly of mental decline, which are severe enough to have a negative impact on the person’s life (Alzheimer’s Association 2016). In older terminology, “senility” or “senile dementia” was often used to refer to dementia, and “senility” – which means old – is in daily speak sometimes still used as a synonym. This is an example of how old age itself was assumed to be the cause of dementia, not only that the risk of being affected by the illness increased the longer one lived.

Ageism

There is no academic consensus of just what ageism is, and disputes such as whether it should include various age categories or just the old affect how age related oppression is understood and explained. When I started this project I was mainly focused on the ageism against the old but soon got to widen my understanding of ageism as many of the respondents problematized ageism against children and young people. The term ageism was coined by the American gerontologist and psychiatrist Robert N. Butler in the late 1960s’ in an article where he discussed the unequal housing conditions older people encountered in the US. Butler’s definition of ageism was simply “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups”
(1969:243). Later on Butler responded to critique of his definition of ageism, which only focused on prejudicial attitudes, by also including discriminatory practices and institutional practices in the definition (Andersson 2008:8). Butler’s concept of ageism offers a flexible understanding of age related oppression and does not specify what age group is underprivileged, which fits well with how ageism was discussed by the interviewees of the present thesis project.

Although middle aged people can experience disadvantages related to their age, perhaps most notably in relation to ideals of youthfulness, middle age is the age category which possess the most economic resources and political power (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:79f). There are no clear stereotypes of this group in the same way as there are for children, youth and old people, since middle age is seen as the norm and generally is the most privileged group regarded age relations. Interestingly, it took nearly thirty years for the term ageism to be translated into Swedish (ålderism), which can be compared to the English terms for racism and sexism which were both imported to Swedish frameworks within a few years (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:84).

Sweden’s Discrimination Act (2008) only used to covered age discrimination on the labour market, but was extended in 2014 to cover all forms of discrimination based on age (with some exceptions, such as age limits on purchasing liquor), in similar ways that it covers discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, transsexual identity or expression, sexuality, dis/ability and religion. Except for protecting people from age-related discrimination, the law – which covers any age group – aims at contributing to a change of attitudes toward ageism. Whether it succeeds or not is too soon to tell but some interviewees hold hopes that it will.

**Straight age – queering age?**

While the biomedical discourse of ageing is quite dominant in a Swedish context, the dualistic view, where ageing and age is seen as either biological or social constructions, is giving way to a more complex view where ageing is understood in social, psychological, cultural, physical and biological terms (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:18). In social sciences, *social age* is sometimes used as an alternative to *chronological age*. I find it a useful concept for moving beyond a limiting, chronological counting of years (which might not say much about anything, really) and in order to better understand consequences of ageing, with consideration to historical and cultural contexts.

Thinking of the concept of social age makes me think of how gender first was introduced as *social sex* (which it sometimes is still called in Swedish as of today – *socialt kön*), whose
pedagogical and strategical use for political struggles are not to be underestimated. With affinity to queer feminisms, however, I do not view gender/sex as a binary opposition but as two sides of the same coin. Thus, when drawing parallels between social sex and social age, I am struck by the thrilling thought that there might be a similar development for the way age is perceived, as for gender. Quickly, though, I am reminded of the inevitability of ageing: the years do move on and make us visibly age in ways more predictable than could be said about actions congealing into other social locations over time (like gender identities). The logic of one’s lived number of years equalising one’s age equalising one’s social position seems an unquestionable fact; is it not natural that our accumulated years have social consequences? Is it after all not fair that they have, since everyone that has lived for long enough will have gone through various social locations – some of which one benefits from, some which disadvantage? Age somehow feels so straight. Not a line to challenge.

Except some people do, most notably when it comes to age norms. It can be the mountain biker who at (chronological) age 60 raves the forests. The activist who strives for a life-long engagement in the politics close to their heart, despite – or because – of expectations of activism being a hobby of the very young. Maybe the person who others call adult, who perceive themselves as a child in order to claim a freedom not granted grown-ups. Or the friendships between and across generations. The rebellion against pre-given age expectations of those who do not “dress their age”. And of those who decline to laugh at ageist jokes, or who listen to both the child and the oldest member of society, and who see them both as individuals rather than representatives of their age categories. There is resistance against the straight line of life course, small and big acts everywhere one looks in everyday life. My objection against social age as a parallel to gender seems not to hold up to scrutiny. I think of all the defenders of a dichotomic view of sex/gender, whether from biologist or social backgrounds. Many of the doubts I encounter when thinking of challenging ideas of age, echo arguments against queer perspectives on gender. Instead: how can age be understood as performative, as material-discursive, rather than either a fixed biological fact or a disembodied social construction?

**Approaching age as a category to include in intersectional analysis**

Because one does not arrive at old age devoid of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual preference clearly one’s old age is shaped by these particular social locations. Still, old age does in fact confer a loss of power, even for those advantaged by other social positions. (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:191)
When speaking about age as an intersectional category, casually with friends or when interviewing respondents for this project, I have noticed that some people seem to change view on the topic as the conversation moves along. Initially, one may not see what including an age perspective in intersectional analysis could contribute with, while later on – after having reflected on some examples of ageism in relation to other structures of oppression – saying that one simply needed to consciously think of age as an intersectional category in its own right before realizing its importance. It might be the insight that men are privileged by the current pension system, that there is a symbolic violence in discourses which deny children and people of the fourth age agency, or that old women’s health problems are neglected.

People are affected differently by various structures of power throughout life and depending on situation, which is why intersectional frameworks are needed in the first place. One is not only gendered, but also prescribed (and claiming) identities based on (among other factors) ethnicity, dis/ability, physical attributes, and sexuality. To not being aware of one’s identity markers is often a sign of privilege, as when white people state that they “do not see race” or when men say they want “equality, not feminism”. When do we notice our own, and others, ages? What space do we claim depending on our ageing bodies? Here I would like to make a call for asking the other question, which Maria Matsuda argues for in order to highlight systems of oppression which are often hidden “beneath” others (1991:1189). For example, where is class in debates about pensions, and old people’s right to medical care? Where is ageism in refugee politics and asylum policies? Or cissexism, like erasing trans identities, when adults speak of children? What does ageism in objectification of women look like? One way to approach age as an intersectional category would be to more explicitly include a focus on age relations in analyses of other systems of oppression. Another way would be to apply intersectional feminist frameworks on gerontology, by for example analysing how gender and ethnicity affect the care old people receive in nursing homes.

One reason why ageism, especially against old people, has not been paid more attention in feminist analysis might be that it is a form of discrimination that has not badly affected so many feminists – yet. Perhaps one needs to experience an oppressive structure first hand before it receives one’s attention? According to professor of English and gerontologist Ruth E. Ray (2006), many feminists start dealing with ageism in their analysis first when they are considered old themselves. Betty Friedan, for instance, published The Fountain of Age at age 72. Like Friedan’s previous work on sexism, though, her age analysis has been criticised of lacking
intersectional perspective (Ray 2006:24). Furthermore, Friedan accepts the discourse of successful ageing, a cultural ideal I will problematize in the analysis.

**ANALYSIS**

**Introduction**

One of the initial motivations behind this research project was to find out why age relations seem to be neglected in intersectional feminist analysis. Having collected data from eleven qualitative interviews, I could identify some patterns which I find useful in exploring the aim and research questions of this project. These were concluded under three main themes, each consisting of more specific sub-themes. My analysis of the interviews (sometimes related to some additional data collected from online communities, political campaigns etc.) is presented below under three main headlines: *feminist work, the phenomena of age and ageing, and experience*. The themes are hardly strictly separable but overlap and intertwine, but for the sake of an easier accessible presentation of the results I have chosen to structure the text in this way.

The first theme is *feminist work*, which also could be said to directly relate to the overarching research questions, which deal with how the respondents approach age and ageism in feminist work. Some of the reasons which were frequently brought up to explain why age analysis has not been more popular in feminist work, include a fluidity of age positions which makes it difficult to pinpoint who is disadvantaged or privileged by ageist structures; that other structures of oppression were experienced to more urgently call for attention than ageism, and that one is more likely to struggle for something one is passionate about (i.e. not age relations). The theme of feminist work also contains accounts of how the respondents may include age perspectives in their own work.

The second and third themes are tightly interconnected with the first, if at all separable. The second deals with the respondents’ approaches to *the phenomena of age and ageing*, in ways that are not necessarily that “personal” but which concern age “in general”. The homogenizing of old people, among others, and what constitutes one’s dignity as a fellow community member, are some of the topics discussed. The third theme deals with the respondents’ *experiences* of ageing and ageism: experiences of one’s voice being listened to or ignored depending on one’s age (in intersection with other social locations); of being excluded with the pretext of lacking sufficient experience; *performing* age through behaviour and attributes, and so on. The respondents’ experiences inform their approaches to age and their age
analyses in their feminist work, and it seems barely possible to talk about one’s feminism (or anything at all, really) without the narrative being coloured by one’s emotions, attitudes, memories, and thoughts – which in turn are influenced by experience. In line with the post-constructionist inspired epistemology of the study, I argue that this intertwining of classic dichotomies (like the mind-body split, for instance) is necessary for the understanding of the material.

**Intervening interviewing**

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the unstructured shape of the interviews opened up space for reflection and exploration of the topics discussed together with the respondents. The interviews were quite free floating and at times almost like any discussion where I would pitch in with my own thoughts, both to make the situation more “natural” and relaxed, and to hear the interviewees’ responses to my observations. I tried my best not to “direct” the interviewees too much in one direction or another but inevitably, the researcher exercises power through their choices of questions (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). Several interviewees told me afterwards that they had appreciated the way the interviews were held, especially that I did not expect given answers to the questions or tried to drag out whatever responses I anticipated from them, or thought would fit my thesis. At the same time, they also commented on how the interviews had changed their views on the topic, which is something I am well aware of is affecting the material I eventually got. After the fourth or fifth interview when the person I was listening to paused, considered for a moment and said the same thing – that this interview really made them start thinking of age in a way they had not done before – I realized that the very act of interviewing was a kind of intervention in itself. For instance, some respondents started out by saying they did not really see why age should be included in intersectional analysis, or that they had ambivalent feelings toward the concept of ageism and age relations, but after a while they literally said that it is now obvious to them that age analysis must be included in feminism. Sometimes it was more a matter of clarifying one’s ideas of ageism than of changing one’s mind, though, as when someone automatically replied “no, I think age is quite natural and unquestionable” when I asked whether or not they thought age relations should be included in feminist analysis. When I wondered why, it seemed like what they had meant was that ageing is natural – but its social consequences are not, and suddenly it made sense that age should be considered a social position to include in feminist work.
Sometimes, however, it appeared to me as if the respondent had changed their opinions. On the one hand this made me feel uneasy about so clearly having influenced their opinions, because my (conscious) motif for interviewing was after all not to change people’s minds, but to explore their thoughts on the subject. On the other hand I realised that this might have been exactly what I intended, and not a problem at all but rather a (positive) result of the thesis project. One of the reasons I chose the topic of age and feminism was that I saw a need for calling attention to such a neglected area of focus in intersectional gender studies and was hoping to contribute to the knowledge production of the field. What did not cross my mind was that the interviews may affect some of the respondents’ approaches to ageism, just like all of the respondents have influenced my thoughts on the topic.

**Feminist work**

The first overarching theme is feminist work, with a focus on the respondents’ understandings of age relations in their own feminisms, and whether they think there is an awareness or blindness to age relations and ageism in feminisms in general. If agreeing with my suspicion that age relations at large have been neglected in feminist work, why do the respondents think that is? Two recurring themes throughout the chapter are fluidity and naturalness, which many of the respondents use to explain their own and others’ approaches to age and ageism.

**“Who’s oppressed?” – Challenges to including age analysis in feminism**

A frequent question which was brought up in as good as all of the interviews, namely “who is disadvantaged or privileged by ageism?”, could provide a partial answer to the inquiry of the lack of age perspectives in feminism. The given answer would be that it depends on context, and that might be one of the main reasons why age seems so difficult to use as an analytical category in feminist work, and why it is hard to strategically politicize it. Compared to other identity based structures of oppression, which have quite clear hierarchies, it is difficult to once and for all declare a hierarchy based on age. While I would assume that most feminist are on the clear that there are no such things as “reversed” sexism or racism, it is not possible to talk

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6 By feminist work I refer to any kind of feminist activity the respondents engage in, may it be online or on-the-streets-activism, raising questions of equality at the work place or at home, participating in feminist demonstrations, supporting feminist artists, following feminist blogs, supporting friends against oppression, etc.

7 While individual white persons or men can be victims of harassment in a specific situation, they – as privileged by respective hierarchy – cannot be victims of sexism and racism since those refer to structurally sanctioned
about ageism in the same terms. Although structurally anchored systems of crediting individuals depending on their ages exist, persons of all ages can experience disadvantages and oppression related to their age at any time in life – depending on context – which means ageism does not affect merely one specific age category negatively. As Anna, who is 40 years old and works as the manager of a trade union in a large city, puts it:

Age is related to power relations and if you compare it to many other structures where there is a clear “what’s up and what’s down”, but with age it varies depending on context and you’ve got a top somewhere, because this thing about having authority when you are older, that ceases somewhere around 65, 70, or perhaps earlier for some. (Anna)

There seems to be consensus among most interviewees that the groups that are generally disadvantaged by their age categories in social and political contexts are children, teenagers and persons in their early 20s, and persons older than, say, 60. Exact frames for what the normative and privileged age would be seem difficult to establish but again and again people who were considered “young” or “old” – in other words, whose ages were considered worth naming – were brought up as examples of how age negatively impact one’s position in social and political contexts. According to the interviewees, both the “groups” had in common that they often were discredited, not taken seriously, not listened to, and had to work hard to prove their competence and earn their respect in ways that middle aged people did not. According to Maryam, a 24 year old local politician and feminist activist with a master degree in gender studies, old people might suffer worse structural discrimination than young people, though:

It’s different oppressions one meets depending on age and in different ways so therefore…but generally it is older people that have the toughest time…but it’s difficult to generalise, like when I’m not being taken seriously because of my age, I wouldn’t say that it’s an oppression but there is something wrong with that, too, and then you shouldn’t undermine that experience either but I can imagine that it’s considerably more difficult for people that are older, and maybe difficult in different ways, perhaps when it comes to work, housing, education and stuff like that. (Maryam)

However, as Maryam’s points out, it is important to acknowledge all experiences of ageism, even if they are not “the worst”. Overall, most of the respondents witnessed how they had experienced not being taken serious as young, sometimes well into their 30s, when working in places where the median age was higher. Sometimes it was seen as “natural” that the opinions of someone young, who had not had time to accumulate the same “life experiences” as someone


injustice. There has however been discussions of calling the privileges of old people (who are generally disadvantaged) by age relations, “reversed ageism”. (Andersson: 2008:10).
older, was treated differently. In general, though, it was only seen as justified to restrict the autonomy, based on age, for children who were thought to need protection and guidance from adults. At the same time, the agency of a child should be acknowledged, which often was not the case, as for instance when adults (often with good intentions) failed to see the child as an individual whose voice was worth listening to. As for older people, many of the respondents shared how they had observed – or themselves held – negative attitudes towards old people, where stereotypes such as old people having a hard time learning new things, being “unmodern” and not “updated” on current feminism, were common.

While difficult to identify exactly who is disadvantaged by ageist structures, since it depends on every given situation, it is perhaps easier to say who is privileged. Despite youthfulness being desired and idealised, the middle-age is the norm, and is the age category where economic and political power is the strongest (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvalen 2011:80). Linnéa, who is 30-years old and works in several different cultural fields, discuss that a certain, perhaps implicit, awareness of age is included in the satiric political expression of “white offended middle-aged men”8, which is commonly used in Swedish feminist debates to call attention to a group of people who hold multiple intersecting privileged positions but who are “offended” when marginalized groups fight for their own rights.

The fact that it is not easy to pinpoint one group of people who are disadvantaged by age relates to another factor which may help explaining why age analysis is not so common in feminist work, namely the fluidity of the social location of age. Like many of the respondents did, Rebecca, who is in their late twenties and whose feminist work among other things consists of running a large feminist, anti-racist blog and administrating online feminist groups, highlighted the fluidity of age oppression:

From different perspectives, I’ve noticed that age is such a fluid category, there is oppression wherever you are, and it changes with time – some kinds you grow out of and others you get into so you never get away from it (...) so no matter where you are, everyone thinks that they are the worst off. (Rebecca)

While no identity marker is fixed or “objective”, age is uniquely impermanent. If one live for long enough, one will be in positions that make one experience both the advantages and disadvantages of age relations. One will not stay a member of any one given age group, unlike other identity positions, such as gender, which one is expected to keep throughout life (Calasanti

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8 “Vita kränkta medelålders män”, made a well-known expression in the shorter form “Vita Kränkta Män (VKM)” – “White Offended Men” through author and comedian Kawa Zolfagary’s popular Facebook-group and book with the same name (2012).
and Slevin 2006:9). Ellen, a social worker in her late twenties, ponders how the fluidity of age challenges the notion that one can only understand one’s current social location. While a white person has never first-hand experienced racism, someone of a given age has experience of advantages and disadvantages that come with various ages, which in a way is a unique situation of knowing “both sides” of an oppressive structure. As Ellen puts it, “when you reach a 100 years you will have a hundred ages within you. A 20-year old has an immanent 5 year-old inside of them, it might be quite difficult…and it’s also so very, it’s shifting a lot both culturally and timewise.”

I was in my early teens and was doing work place experience for school at an old people’s home. I liked hanging out with old people, holding their hands, listening to their stories, trying to be close to those who yearned for human closeness but who felt lonely although living close to others, and trying to understand those who wanted to be left alone. On behalf of all the people I met, and my (possible) future old self, the grim attitudes of younger people and of society toward the very old disappointed and upset me. I thought the wrinkled and soft skin that signifies old age was beautiful. The loneliness sad. The loss of one’s contemporaries heart-breaking. The stereotypical images of old age unfair.

One day I froze in front of the resident’s old family portraits. I had seen the black- and white pictures of her many a time before but at this very moment I saw her. In all of her past and current ages, all at once, inseparable yet unique, mesmerizing, I saw her.I got immersed in one specific portrait of her, depicting a young woman, and in that young person’s face I saw the old lady I was currently caring for. I saw her as a child, too, and as someone yet older than she is now. It was beyond merely recognizing someone from an old picture and thinking: “wow, one can really tell it’s you!” – it was a revelation. I saw the grain of all ages in every image – past, present, future – years blurring, possibilities opening, no restraints on what actually came to be and what could have been. I felt high.

Age categorisation, and its fluidity, is physically visible in ways that are expected and whose changing throughout life to some extent is unavoidable for the individual – an adult cannot physically pass for a toddler, for instance, although one can dress and behave as one. The fluidity of an individual’s age categorization also leads to a sense that they are justifiable to some extent. Karin, a 60-years old paediatric nurse who currently works with development, summarises how age relations differs from other social locations, which cannot so easily be changed: “(...) but age, you change that all the time since we all grow older so in a way I think it’s a bit special, because it’s part of the naturalness of being a human, quite contrary to the other power structures.” To illustrate this, a couple of the respondents pointed at how children – based on their age – could not be given the same independency as adults, or that it felt
"natural" to retire from the labour market when you approach old age. It is important to underline that none of the respondents thought oppression based on age was justified, but what I want to demonstrate is how it seems common that age – and its consequences – are more generally perceived to be “natural”, than other social locations (which all of the respondents, who brought the topic up, agreed on were socially constructed).

That oppressive structures are seen as definite and nature-given, is however not unique to ageism. Just as biological discourses have been used to explain and justify racist, sexist and ableist structures (to mention a few), the social stratification based on age has been explained in biological deterministic terms since time immemorial. The usefulness of the concept of ageism has even been questioned with the argument that not even old people (who according to many theories of ageism is the group that is the most disadvantaged by age relations) report being oppressed by current ageist structures. That one is not aware of an oppressive structure does however not mean it is not there – on the contrary, old people have internalised age norms and positions throughout their lives, just as privileged age categories have, and is thus less likely to object once they are in the underprivileged position themselves. Many old people simply accept their relative deprivation from economic, social and political resources as “natural”, and without well-known theoretical tools to help analysing prevailing age structures (like the quite established frameworks for analysing gender relations) it is difficult for people to suddenly start problematizing their situations (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:80f).

It is hardly surprising that ageism is such a widely accepted part of social relations, then. What triggers my interest in the topic of age relations, though, is that “not even” feminists seem to be too interested in challenging the taken for granted social order in which ageism is a result – at least not until confronting theories of ageism. Maybe it is just a matter of awareness?

But it is somehow so obvious that we have an age, when we present ourselves, like I did now for example, in such contexts, age just follows with us somehow and it’s automatic (…) You have your birthday once a year, it’s there with us all the time but we don’t see age as something that is there and affects us, just like some people don’t think gender affects us. (Linnéa)

(…) we refer to norms unconsciously and of some reason age hasn’t been “discovered” yet. I think it’s something that’s just there in the back of our heads just like the hetero norm has just been there at the back of our heads, and in the same way you might not have a class perspective until you start understanding what class is. (Ellen)
Another similarity with other systems of oppression, apart from biological justification, is the homogenizing of persons of marginalized positions. As Karin observed, all retirees are bunched together, with no consideration of intersections with other identity positions. Cecilia, a 23 year old group leader of Feministiskt Initiativ (Feminist Initiative - FI) and social worker who teach unaccompanied minors, worryingly saw how old people – also among feminists – are frequently stereotyped and dehumanised into being caricatures of “how old people are”, in ways that resemble how people who are being racialized are constructed as a community for racist purposes. In social sciences, it has been common to create age categories and treat them as homogenous groups, which for example requires a gender blindness, as a conscious choice out of fear of the research about children or old people losing impact if too nuanced (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:65). The homogenising of individuals of various social positions based on a single, or a few, identity categories, can be a political strategy used by the “group” itself to unite a shared fight, but homogenising can also be a tool for dehumanising the Other and justifying oppression of those marginalised by the mainstream. In research fields such as gerontology and medicine, the biomedicalisation and patologisation of ageing has encouraged viewing old people as a unified group, instead of taking the individuals’ gender, ethnicity, class, dis/ability and so on into account when analysing differences in health and disease (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:20). Applying an intersectional perspective on health care would avoid making old people, or people of any age “category”, appear as a homogenous group, which might conceal complex causes of ill health.

“It goes both ways” – ageism within feminism

Fluidity of one’s age-related identities and status, alongside no clear hierarchy of oppression and privileges connected to age, make several age categories vulnerable to ageism. In feminist contexts, a disadvantaging by age can be seen both against young and old feminists. The typical scenario, which many of the respondents brought up in our conversations, is that older feminists see younger ones as inexperienced or “doing it (“the” feminist struggle) wrong”, while younger feminists see older ones as “inflexible” or “not updated” about current feminist perspectives and issues. Several of the respondents spoke of how young feminists’ voices were silenced or

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9 Feministiskt Initiativ is a Swedish feminist political party that got 3,1 % of the votes in the 2014 general election, which was not enough to meet the electoral threshold of 4 % (Valmyndigheten 2014). In the municipality elections, however, the party gained seats in several city councils around the country, and also took a seat in the European Parliament in the 2014 EU election.
their struggles trivialized, as if young people did not understand what the “real”, important feminist issues were and wasted time on the wrong things. Shortly after the interview, Rebecca problematized this on their blog and then reposted the blog text in a feminist forum\textsuperscript{10}, and asked readers for their own experiences. As Rebecca rhetorically asked on their blog: who benefits from feminists publicly trashing down on other feminists’ struggles? It is not just that whatever younger feminist tend to focus on is deemed unimportant, but the fact that they are young – the same critique against similar issues was not seen if initiated by older feminists. One person who replied to the post raised the harsh critique and ridiculing of “Tumblr-feminism” as an example, while “Wordpress-feminism”\textsuperscript{11}, activism on a similarly sized online forum, was unheard of.

Rebecca calls this phenomena – mocking certain forms of activism and certain topics – an oppression both related to age, and to knowledge. Younger people have logically speaking had less time to learn and develop in their feminisms, but if they claim an intersectional, inclusive feminism, they should not be excluded based on their core issues (although on a structural level, one can criticize why, for instance, “menstruation activism” or “pussy art” get so much more attention than, say, deficient health care for persons who suffer incontinence after giving birth).

Antifeminists are accusing feminists of not caring about the “real issues” enough as it is – is it not better, then, that feminists strive to support one another? As someone replied to Rebecca’s post: issues which appear “small” might be symptoms of underlying structures. One person, though, responded to the post saying that they thought the matter at hand was how people new to feminism are ridiculed, \textit{regardless of age} (although the two factors may coincide). Some of the respondents of the present research project shared similar views, based on experiences of how newcomers are received in some big feminist online communities.

According to some of the respondents who highlighted the problem of feminist self-critique turning into hostility against less knowing feminists, not only those new to feminism – often younger ones – are subjected to intolerance from the dominating voices in feminist online forums, but so are older generations’ of feminists. Some respondents thought that both newbies and old feminists who are “too” influenced by their 70’s second wave feminism are being punished hard for using the “wrong” vocabulary. As Linnéa put it: there is not a great “openness” or “forgiveness” for mistakes in some feminist platforms, perhaps most notably in discussion groups on social media like Facebook. Note that neither my respondents, nor I, are

\textsuperscript{10} With Rebecca’s anonymity in mind, I choose not to refer to their blog by name.

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Tumblr} is a social network and microblogging platform, where users can follow each other and post short texts, photos, links, videos etc. Tumblr currently consists of nearly 300 million blogs (Tumblr 2016). \textit{Wordpress} is a blogging system, a CMS – content management system – which includes templates and plugins that help users create free websites. There are about 409 million people a month who view Wordpress posts (Wordpress 2016).
defending the usage of racist, trans-phobic, heteronormative, sexist etc. language, or demanding that people hurt by such harmful language bear the burden of patiently “educating” those who use it. What is criticised is how feminist, whether newcomers or older ones who want to get “updated” on current perspectives, who want to listen and learn, walk into a shit storm if they unintentionally use the wrong expression in a discussion online, even after admitting their ignorant mistakes and asking for forgiveness. In some instances it is understandable (many groups ask newcomers to “please read the rules of the group before posting, and have a look at the vocabulary guide lines”); in others it feeds an elitism which works excluding for many who of various reasons have not had (or taken) the chance of educating themselves in feminist discourses (sometimes this is a sign of privilege, of course, as when one has not been exposed to certain oppressions and therefore has not had to make a stand, but at other times the possibilities of learning might be connected to one’s socio-economic position, or one’s dis/abilities).

Karin says she thinks she owe much of her current feminist perspectives to her daughters who keep her informed on LGBTQ\textsuperscript{12}-issues and to the feminist party Feministiskt Initiativ (FI), which she has been an active member of since she was part of the founding of the party in 2005. Thanks to FI and to her children, Karin – herself straight – says she has learnt a lot about intersectionality, knowledge which she thinks many of her own generation’s feminists lack: “(...)because when I meet other 70’s feminists I notice that those who have not spent time with younger feminists are stuck in the old, where there’s only gender.” Karin says she does her best to ”keep up” with new knowledge and perspectives in feminism, and that she is especially grateful to the tool of intersectionality for, in her experience, making feminist movements more welcoming to a multiplicity of voices. Contrary to the intersectional feminism(s) of FI, which Karin experiences to be quite “happy” and inclusive, she thinks that previous “waves” of feminisms were rather hostile and excluding (to all but the white cis woman).

According to Karin, many older feminists claim monopoly of “doing feminism right” when ruling their feminist groups today, which understandably scares younger feminists off from participating, which in turn cause dismay among the older feminist who think young people do not care. In Karin’s opinion, older generations of feminists oppress younger ones in this way. In her account, Karin express the notion that one needs to keep on being open and curious to new perspectives, which I interpret as a way of saying that feminism is “fresh produce”, something one is constantly performing – passively or actively. If stuck in old ways

\textsuperscript{12} LGBTQ = Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer.
of *doing* feminism, which typically exclude all axes of power but that of gender, it will not be seen as a very feminist struggle at all by those who have adopted more recent perspectives and tools. On the same line, Cecilia spoke of how fortunate she felt for having been introduced into an intersectional queer feminism “from start”: perspectives which may be new for people who still live in their “past” feminisms, were a fundamental part of Cecilia’s feminism. Cecilia expressed gratitude for living in a context where intersectionality (at least in theory) was taken for granted, but also wondered whether she would be able to keep up with new streams of thought herself. Will she and her (today young) generation automatically adopt whatever perspectives prevail in twenty years (assuming there would have been a positive development, whoever is to judge what “positive” means)?

Alde, who is in their thirties and work with communication in a non-governmental organization, points out that older feminist in some cases are made into icons which are idolised and hailed alongside the disregarding of other old feminists: “Another dimension is how we both celebrate feminists of the past and reject older feminists and their ‘dated’ analyses, which sometimes has merit and sometimes not.” The idea that older generations of feminists tend to be stuck in outdated modes of analysing problems seems to be quite widespread. Many of the respondents reflect on how there on the one hand are prejudices of old feminists being unable to keep up with “modern” feminism, on the other hand seems to be some substance behind the prejudice; that there are reasons to believe that more old than young feminists too one-sidedly focus on only gender in their analysis. Anna refers to the national radio’s pod cast which had an episode about the 25th anniversary of the feminist magazine *Bang* in which some of the founding members were interviewed. Some recalled how they thought a new feminist platform was needed, and how they felt that older generations’ feminists were still stuck on issues that had long been solved, for example public child care. “They [the older generations’ feminists] just didn’t understand that those things were no longer issues”, as one person who had been part of the founding of the magazine in 1991 recalled (Sveriges Radio 2016). Since then the magazine has kept changing as the editors have come and gone, and one can therefor follow the last decades’ development of Swedish feminism(s) in the magazine’s form and contents (ibid).

Several of the respondents support “the” feminist party of Sweden, Feministiskt Initiativ (FI), some by actively engaging politically in the party and some by showing solidarity in other ways. When speaking of experiences of ageism within feminism, many pointed out that they felt that the attitudes in FI – both on a local and national level – were more welcoming and supportive than in other feminist rooms, or in other political parties in which they had previously been
engaged. Instead of the usual generational conflicts that many of the respondents spoke of, they experienced a generosity toward various perspectives in their current political groups. Maryam said that there was unfortunately not a great age diversity in her own local FI group as the majority of its members are quite young, but that the groups is very welcoming towards people of all ages. Furthermore, while as a young politician encountering lots of prejudice and resistance from older politicians, Maryam spoke of a great supportive spirit between the members of her own party. Cecilia, from the same political group, had similar experiences.

“You fight for what’s close to you” – including age analysis in in feminism?

When discussing possible reasons why age is not more widely included in intersectional feminist work, many of the respondents spontaneously replied that ageism was not something they felt was a particular “urgent” problem compared to the oppression of other marginalised groups. Alexander, who is 29 years old and currently works as a communication and country support officer for the United Nations, speculated that one reason why feminists are not more passionate about age relations could be that age-related issues have not caused as big political and cultural tensions as other social hierarchies, such as ethnicity and class. Again age relations are seen as quite “natural” and legitimate by those disadvantaged by ageism, compared to how those oppressed by other hierarchies (thanks to civil rights movements) view their positions. This contributed to the feeling that ageism was not as great an injustice as other systems of oppression, which led to less upset emotions according to a few of the respondents:

Maybe I also have trouble getting worked up about it. I can see how it matters for how we are treated, what age we are, but I can have a spontaneous feeling of us moving through various phases and that there is a legitimacy to it, in a different way than in how we are treated depending on gender or ethnicity. (Oscar)

Several respondents expressed similar outlooks on ageism not being something they felt very passionate about. As Marie, who is in her late fifties and works at the gender department of a university, phrased it: ”I haven’t been very passionate about it, I can’t say that I have, and that could be because I haven’t been affected particularly badly by it [ageism]. Or that you just accept that that’s the way it is…” Following this line of thought, Marie thought that age power perspectives ”automatically” will be lifted more when feminist activists grow old:

And now there might be a group of feminists born in the ’40s who will keep on yelling and then they would make their voices heard, and I think that you need to speak for your own cause. I think it’s very difficult to push questions that you don’t know or feel passionately about (…) But that’s me, I’m a movement-kind-a-person and I have to feel passionate to take on a
cause…otherwise I think it feels a little ‘false’, somehow, to stand there…so I think it’s coming. 
(Marie)

Age relations are however explicitly included in the work of some of the respondents, especially if related to issues close to their hearts. Rebecca, a feminist activist and blogger, frequently raises questions of age relations in their work, in particular with a focus on children and young adults. One example, of which Rebecca has personal experience, is adoption – a practice where children’s rights often are put aside in favour of the interests of the (adopting) adults’.

According to sociologist Neal King, perspectives that challenge power structures are raised when scholars who represent marginalized groups enter academia (2006:59). Calasanti and Slevin, too, think feminist scholars focusing on old age will lead not only to the realization that old age needs to be included in feminist academia and activism, but also that age relations will be, much in the same way as earlier feminist scholars’ focus on women led to gender relations perspectives in academia (2001:179). The problem with relying on age being added to “the list of oppressions that merit study”, however, is that people hardly start representing the age group which is generally worst affected by ageism (that is, old people, which of course is no defined group at all and can consist of many generations), before actually leaving the field by retiring (King 2006:59). If age relations and the marginalisation of old people is to be theorized more in feminist academia, I think it is necessary that also younger people start seeing the relevance of including age analysis in intersectional frameworks. Except for solidarity with old people (or their future selves) who are the most disadvantaged by ageist structures, age relations also affect younger people negatively, and influence one’s other intersecting social positions.

Personally, I have found a lack of age relation perspectives in the gender studies program I am currently in, as well as in my previous bachelor of social work (where age was discussed a lot but not very often from an intersectional perspective), but I have recently found out that a couple of fellow social workers, who went to other universities, discussed ageism in their educations. Whether or not it was with a critical perspective on age relations and whether or not an intersectional perspective was applied, I am however not sure, put perhaps there is hope of change. Linnéa, who has studied social and cultural science, recalls how she got in touch with theories on ageism for the first time thanks to a lecturer who did research on ageing and intersectionality. As the studying of ageism, especially from an intersectional perspective, is a quite new and narrow field, Linnéa thinks it will take a while before the knowledge “seeps down” to debates outside of academia. At the same time as a top-bottom perspective can help explaining why the relatively new focus on age relations has not reached feminist activism yet,
Linnéa reflects that there also needs to be an interest among feminists outside of academia, who will push for the topic to be taught and researched more. But when there seems to be so little interest among feminists both within and outside of academia, how to spark a positive spiral of change, where one inspires the other to develop?

The fact that the passion for age power analysis seems limited does however not have to imply a disinterest altogether. Several interviewees expressed an interest in including age in intersection with other social positions, which they found more “urgent” to problematize. Although not focused upon as a system of oppression in its own right, an awareness of age relations could then contribute to a deeper analysis of the topic of choice. Cecilia thought that there “definitely” was a need to incorporate age analysis in feminism, but that it had to take its departure from other struggles, for instance by analysing how class or gender is affected by age. Maryam explained how she was well aware of how she was the youngest among the members of the city council and of how others treated her because of it, but that she had so far attributed it more to the fact that she is a woman and is being racialized, than to her young age. At the same time she had also reflected on how her own political group had a much lower average age than other political groups, and how this affected the way they were received. Speaking of, among other factors, intersections of gender and age, many of the respondents discussed how young age in combination with being female were two disadvantaged positions that “enhanced” each other, so that a young woman was even more likely to be patronized and dismissed as “less knowing” in political contexts, than if the person was a young man or middle-aged woman. In Maryam’s case, her ethnicity affected her social position too, so that she had to work harder than, say, a white man in his forties (who probably would take his respect from others for granted), in order to establish herself in her political role.

Reflecting on why age was the identity factor that in general received the least interest, Maryam said:

I think that it’s the one [identity categorization] that’s been forgotten since there’s so much and you never want to say that one is more important than another but in this case I think it is like that, since the strong voices that raise issues of class and ethnicity and sexuality are so much more dominant than those who raise age, maybe it’s just a few people who do and they’re being pushed aside (Maryam)

Several respondents expressed the quite common feminist stance of wanting to “fight your own battles”, which in practice leaves it up to everyone and no one to fight ageism as it is something that most people have experienced as young, or will experience later in life if they live for long enough – yet no one seems to really think ageism is that unfair that it is worth battling against.
Whose battle is it to fight, then, if anyone’s?

In many contexts where age is paid attention to, it seems to be of subordinate influence compared to other social positions. Alexander, speaking from his experience of working with humanitarian crises, was positive to the United Nations introducing age assessment as a cross-cutting issue in their work, but thought that the main factor affecting people’s lives was their geopolitical location. Where one lives makes a tremendous difference in one’s life: does one live in a warzone, an area of brittle peace or in a secure country? Is the neighbourhood well-off or poor and people marginalized? Rather than applying intersectional perspectives to age relations, Alexander saw a better use in “adding” age to analyses of ethnicity, religion and geopolitical location. Similarly, many of the other respondents gave examples of contexts when they thought age was of less importance to a person’s social position, compared to the influence of one’s gender, class, ethnicity, dis/ability, and sexuality. Some interviewees discussed that the oppression or privileges connected to some of one’s social positions will follow one throughout life: racism, sexism and other power structures will affect one all life, albeit taking different expressions. Other things are more specific to certain stages of life, which is a reason why an age power perspective is helpful in understanding intersecting positions throughout the life course. One example is that the risk of being exposed to violence increases as one becomes more dependent on others for one’s daily personal care, which correlates with old age and dis/ability. Old age increase the risk for people regardless of gender of being victims of abuse by partners, nursing staff, or neighbours at one’s residential home – what is gender-specific, though, is that women are victims of sexual violence more often than men are in heterosexual relations, and that more women than men have lived in abusive relationships all since their youth (Socialstyrelsen 2013). As one becomes more reliant on others, the chance of being able to get out of an abusive relationship decreases.

Just like intersecting oppressions can enhance and worsen each other, one’s position in one system of oppression where one is underprivileged, can be “compensated” by one’s privileged position in another. For instance, Anna spoke of how she – an economically well-off white person – had had the social and economic resources needed for finding and affording proper treatment for her mental illness, when public health care had failed her. Similarly, she was not worried about her parents’ situation although they were approaching an age and health status where they might not be able to live independently for an unforeseeable future, as they had the financial means of providing high-quality care and senior housing for themselves.
The phenomena of age and ageing

In this subchapter the respondents’ narratives of how they relate to age and ageing as “cultural phenomena” will be explored, both from political and individual perspectives. This theme include, among other things, inquiries of how homogenizing of age “categories” are used in politics; how consumerism affects the construction of identities and how old bodies are perceived in western cultures. The main focus will be on old age, as old age generally is considered to be the most underprivileged age category (Calasanti and Slevin 2006).

“The use of homogenized age categories

Something that has personally intrigued me is how old Swedish people are constructed as a homogenous group in a wide range of contexts. In social work, old people with various ethnic backgrounds are portrayed as the Other – a groups whose needs differ from the norm, i.e. white old people born in Sweden. (Torres 2008). Common sayings such as “you should earn your bread” which implies some people are less deserving than others, are seldom problematized. Rebecca articulated it like this: “The Swedish retirees are seen as ’now I’ve been working all my life, I’ve done my share now and now they deserve this’ while someone who gets here when they’re 65, 70 won’t ever work but only cost taxes so groups are positioned against each other where they should in fact be on the same side.” In politics, old swedes are often used as a symbol for the deconstruction of the welfare state: why do we not provide better economic, social and health-related safety for the elderly? Obviously that is a relevant question in my opinion, too, but the unsettling part is when such critical questions turn rhetorical, with the given answer: “the resources are wasted on another group, and it is not on one that is ours”. In a 30 second

“Why are you so old?” (Layla, 4 years old)

No one can make you reflect over things you have previously taken for granted, like a child has the ability to do. Why do grown-ups stop growing taller? Where were the humans when the dinosaurs were around – if humans did not exist, where were they then? Does the butterfly know it is a butterfly? And: why are you so old? When my four-year-old directed the latter question to two almost-strangers aged 80+ (according to themselves – I am useless at guessing age) at the public library I laughed in shock and awkwardness at the bluntness of her curiosity, but was soon relieved at the old woman’s answer. She replied that she had been fortunate enough to live for a long time and that she was proud to have reached her old age. She was beautiful. Standing there with books about ageism, I reflected on my own awkwardness at the topic. Why is it considered so rude to speak about old age? Why does nobody even want to be associated with it?
film from the general election of 2010, the “Sweden-friendly” (read: racist) party of Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats - SD) make the assumingly necessary competition between groups explicit: an old, white lady struggles to reach the “emergency break” of retirement funds before a group of people wearing all-covering black burqas do. By overly simplified logic, two marginalized groups are positioned against each other, because, as the voiceover declares, “all politics are about prioritizing” (Sverigedemokraterna 2010). Six years later, if one visits the party’s website and click on a presentation of their politics, the three issues that are introduced by pictures and brief texts are immigration, criminality and old people’s care (Sverigedemokraterna 2016). To construct groups as homogenous with shared interests, and with no regards of intersectional positions, is a widespread political strategy (not the least in western feminism, which has been criticised for its idea of a “universal sisterhood” in which all women all over the world are assumed to share the same political interests (Lykke 2010:53)).

According to Cecilia, SD’s use of old people for their political agenda’s sake (restricting and even reversing non-white immigration and creating a “united”, all-ethnic-“Swedish” society, that is) makes others, like herself, get the idea that old people are more supportive of racist politics than younger people are. Cecilia thinks old people are seen as a homogenous group which is stereotyped to be less tolerant – and more racist and homophobic – than the majority society. She compares SD’s “defence” of old people with that of women: early 2016, people who sympathized with SD called for the “protection of our women”, women who after rumours of increased numbers of sexual assaults by refugee men needed “guardians” patrolling the streets. As a counteraction, feminists started uploading selfies with the hashtag #InteErKvinna (#NotYourWoman), to make clear that we did not exactly feel safer out in public when right wing extremists took it upon themselves to protect their women (us!) from the Other (foreign men). How come no similar campaign was created as a reaction to racist rhetoric of protecting “their” old people (from the Other of all ages)? Personally, I would be as outraged if someone tried to speak for me as an old person, as a woman. Cecilia and I briefly discussed that it might be an issue of access: the oldest citizens of Sweden are probably not as active on digital media as the target group of the “protect our women”-patrolling (which consisted of younger women in particular) is, and were therefore not likely to start a similar online protest.

There has however been protests – only not as visible to the online activist as a hashtag. After the release of SD’s 2010 election campaign film, representatives from two of the

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13 On online social networks and microblogging services like Twitter, users can put “#” in front of phrases, which makes it easier for other users to find the post by typing the same word with the # -label in front of it. In this way, clicking on #InteErKvinna will result in a number of pictures from people having used that hashtag.
country’s largest organisations for retired people made statements that SD’s strategy to turn vulnerable groups against each other was repugnant and would not result in an increased support of the party (Skarin 2010) (whether that specific film had the intended effect or not is hard to say, but the party did get in to the riksdag – Sweden’s national legislature – in the 2010 election with 5.7% of votes, which by the 2014 election had increased to 12.86% (Valmyndigheten 2010; 2014). Four of the country’s largest organisations for old people, who together represent 850,000 members, criticized SD’s intentions to overthrow the ruling parties’ budget late 2014 in an open letter (Holmqvist 2014). Motivated by wanting to decrease immigration at any cost, SD ended up voting for the opposition parties’ government budget, which meant they (among other social measures) voted against the cabinet’s proposals of tax reductions for retirees, and caused the first governmental crisis since 1990. According to the old people’s organisations, SD failed their promise to work for lowering the taxes for retirees. As of today, SD still paints the picture of being the party that cares the most about our old people (Sverigedemokraterna 2016), but whether old people care for SD (more than young people do) is another question.

While certain age groups might be focused upon for the sake of various political agendas, there are also strategical reasons not to – or rather, not to include age relations in in feminism, even if different age groups are considered separately. For political reasons, focusing on other social categories (at the cost of neglecting many areas of concern, but catching some at the intersections) can seem a more strategical approach to pushing one’s agenda. Although it is widely accepted in many (or even in most?) feminist movements in Sweden today to work from an intersectional point of view, it can sometimes be of strategical use to focus on only one or a couple of power structures at the time. Oscar, who is a preschool teacher in his early thirties and who is engaged in a local Feministiskt Initiativ-group, speaks of how it is sometimes easier to pay attention to one power structure at the time, rather than having a very complex analysis which risks being too difficult to convey in public-friendly slogans and campaigns. The reason why age is a social category which seldom is prioritised in such political work, could be because – as Oscar puts it – “it’s difficult to get worked up about”. As discussed previously, the fact that the respondents, and perhaps young to middle aged feminists in general, do not feel that ageism is an issue that really concerns them or make them as upset as other kinds of oppression do, could be a key reason why age is not more popular in feminist work.
“You’ve got to earn your human dignity” – ageism, consumerism and productivity

A theme which many of the interviewees brought up when discussing ageism, that is closely linked to intersecting hierarchies of power like class and ethnicity, are neo-capitalist visions and consumerist culture. In order to be a “good” citizen one should be able to produce, or, if not able to produce, then consume, to earn one’s dignity. Returning to the discussion of what groups are oppressed or privileged by ageism, where children/young people and old people appear to be the two "groups” who are generally the most disadvantaged, it is worth pointing out that there are some differences in attitudes toward the two. Many respondents observed that while neither children nor old people are fully being taken seriously or listened to in social, political and cultural contexts in Sweden, the attitude towards children and youth is generally more positive. Although often silenced, children possess some worth in their expected future productivity. Old people are not expected to produce anymore, and thus lose some of their status. While children are often spoken of as “the future” (of the family; of the country; of the world) and scolding adults complain about how younger generations fail to live up to that expectations (which is how it always has been: already the philosophers of ancient times, like Socrates, worried about the moral decay of the youth), old people have served (or failed) their duties already:

(... of poor retirees the majority is women who haven’t earned enough for a pension that you can live off and they are extremely vulnerable. If you look at younger people, like those underage, firstly, they’ll actually turn the age of majority one day and get away from the oppression, and secondly, they’ve got the privilege of people actually having expectations of them contributing to society, that they’ll…well, ‘earn their bread’ or what you should call it, while old people at the homes aren’t a strong electorate, they won’t work or contribute again and therefore they’re just seen as a big expense while the younger ones might be a big expense but it’s money that you can win back again, there’s a different expectation on the young than on the old. (Rebecca)

In discussing how one’s human dignity in a welfare-capitalist economy like Sweden’s is connected to one’s productivity and consumption, Marie says she does not think older times’ societies were very kind to those who “didn’t keep up with the group”, either: “I don’t think society was very merciful in the days of the ättestupa either. If you don’t keep up with the group, well, you’re a burden and that’s pretty much the same system but a bit nicer, we put them in nursing homes instead of sending them off the cliff.” According to the legends, old people who could no longer support themselves or who were of no use for the community, would throw themselves – or be thrown – off cliffs in prehistoric Nordic times. The practice was called ättestupa. Researchers generally agree of its mythological origin, although there are plenty of precipices in Scandinavia where the supposed practice would have been held. (Odén
1996). According to Swedish author Ivar Lo-Johansson (1901-1990), it mattered less whether or not ättestupa-practice had actually been pursued in historic times, than what the legends symbolised and signified to the working class in current times (Odén 1996). Lo-Johansson compared ättestupa with his contemporary old people’s homes, which he called “psychological ättestupa”, and argued that both phenomena were means for the ruling classes to control proletarians, and that both were signs of society’s hostility against old people (ibid.). Lo-Johansson’s critique eventually contributed to extended, state-funded home assistance for old people in the 1950’s (ibid). As of today, the myth of ättestupa still serves its purpose as a political metaphor like the one Lo-Johansson used, as well as influences the common understanding of the role of old people as “burdens” on younger generations, once they stop contributing to the community’s survival.

Gullvi, my mamma, has talked about her dream of dying in the forest, her favourite environment, for as long as I can remember: “it would be much nicer to just be out there in the forest and then suddenly: ‘oh! I feel a little tired. I better sit down for a while!’ and then swiftly expire under a pine tree. ” I always thought it was a very nice vision, as I, too, love nature and could understand her wish to die outdoors rather than in an institutional setting (the only trouble was that some poor jogger or group of kindergarten children would have to find your possibly-already-decomposing body…). Upon asking her if I could write about this in the present paper when discussing the internalised fear of being a burden to others, she replied:

Yes, but it’s not only about not wanting to be a burden. I just don’t want to spend my last days in some old people’s home where young women who hate old people have to wipe my butt, and my children start feeling it’s a pain to come and visit me because I’ve grown cruel. I want to be independent, and I much rather live a few years less and stay vital, than being kept on life-support in some institution just for the sake of living for as long as possible. Sure, I can imagine living in a residential home as long as I don’t get bitter and mean, as long as I still enjoy reading the paper or watching crappy thrillers…as long as you’re satisfied with your life, as long as you have little things of joy in your life, well, then it’s fine. (Gullvi)

I cannot help but understanding her and actually feel the same way, at the same time as we both criticise how old people (or people of any age) are pitied if not perceived as “independent” or “active” enough. Having worked with old people in residential homes, I certainly do not think that life is not worth living once you need a little more assistance in your day. Even writing about this brings me the chills and dystopian associations of worlds where you are expected to throw yourself off the ättestupa if others think your life should make you miserable. Why then am so I reluctant to imagine myself giving up whatever (illusion of) independence that I hold onto as of today? Is my dignity as a member of community in direct relation to my degree of independence?

While there is a general discourse of the burden of the unproductive elderly – dating back to premodern times, as the myth of ättestupa illustrates – there is simultaneously the idea that “one
should reap what one sows”. Old people who have built the Swedish welfare state should have the right to enjoy the fruits of their labour, rather than being surpassed to poor living conditions and be disrespected by younger citizens (as previously discussed, this reasonable idea is sometimes twisted to indicate that people who have not “built” the country should not be welcomed to the warmness of the people’s home). This idea seemingly clashes with the public fear of the “greying population”, which portrays old people as part of a ticking bomb which will be the end of social welfare and generous pensions as we know (or want to know) it.

Marie and Ellen, who are from different generations, both recall how they grew up close to very old people, which was something very rare to do among their peers. Segregation based on age seems quite taken for granted in Sweden, and not something that I personally have encountered being challenged very often. Public child care and nursing homes for the old made it possible for women to join the paid labour market, at the cost of further generational segregation. Professional in-home care services are quite common in Sweden today, which is not to say it is a purely fortunate and unproblematic development since Lo-Johansson’s critique of institutional old people’s care, when it comes to neglecting social needs of those who might have preferred living together with others in residential homes. The exclusion is however clear in both cases: we do not live in large, extended families where generations integrate anymore. Contemporary work markets demand high flexibility of its members, which among other things might mean one has to move to another part of the country, or even abroad, to match a job, making it difficult to keep close care relations between generations. At the same time much of care work is (still) performed by unpaid, “invisible” relatives, of which the majority are women (SCB 2014:48).

Maryam, who is of immigrant background, describes how she thinks that there is a deeper respect towards old people in other cultures than in “mainstream” Swedish culture. Whereas older age in some cultures are associated with accumulated knowledge and experience which is appreciated and respected by younger generations, the older and less productive one gets in Sweden, the less valued one is. How does the family constellations affect age relations? Do old people hold more power in, also politically and resource-wise, in cultures where generations live together in the same home? Ellen sums up the devaluing, dehumanising and homogenizing she notices in Sweden of “old people” with the following harsh words:

(…) we don’t even consider old people because they are not seen as persons anymore. Like, “what, who?” because they are sitting there hidden away somewhere, “they probably don’t have any interests and why, they can’t do anything to contribute, they don’t have sex and no goals in life, they’re just sitting there, waiting to die” (Ellen)
The retirement age, which currently is 65 in Sweden (although much criticized suggestions of delaying it by two years have been made by some political parties in recent years), create a somewhat concrete milestone in the consciousness of the work force of wage labour. Speaking of a Swedish context, where wage labour is a very important part of the social welfare systems and of culture, life is divided into three parts: before you work, when you work and after work, that is, retirement (Rasmusson 2005:175f). It has not always been such a distinct border between productivity and retirement, which connects to the way stages of life has been understood. The retirement age is a political decision where “old people” are bunched together as a group – not a medically motivated necessity. According to Rasmusson, Swedish 65-year olds are overall healthier today than their parents were, which means the argument that the retirement age is motivated by “natural ageing” fails (2005: 81). Also, the position of old people on the labour market depends on the country’s economic situation – especially in countries like many of the European Union’s (Sweden included) where there is a mandatory retirement age (Baars 2009:94). Older workers serve as a ”reserve” work force in times of low unemployment and high demands of productivity, just like immigrants and sometimes women do, too.

But not only the role of the individual in the productivity system is important in the construction of identities – Gilleard and Higgs even argue that it is no longer central at all, but has given way to consumption (2000:28). Anybody (who has the resources to do so!) can construct, express and revise their identities through their consumption, whether they work or not, which transforms the retirement from being just a “post-work” stage, to become one of active identity construction (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). In this way, the boundary between productive work life and retirement might blur again, like in pre-industrial times.

According to Gilleard and Higgs, capitalist welfare states structure the population in age categories with various expectations and entitlements, which means that the concept of citizenship is important in understanding ageing (2000:90). While universal social security and public pensions were introduced to protect older people, mandatory retirement also kept them in poverty. Gilleard and Higgs (2000) account for a British context but I think it applies to Swedish history, and present times, too. As some of the respondents reflect, the poverty among the old in Sweden is gendered and class-dependent, which in turn intersects with ethnicity and other social positions. Income support and housing supplement (an economic aid to pay for one’s accommodation), have contributed to less poverty among people aged 65+, and the percentage of old people who are below the European Union’s standard for low economical standard is now equivalent to the population at large: 12 % (the Swedish Pensions Agency 2014). However, among the old who are considered poor the majority are women, and the
disposable income for people older than 65 is still considerably lower for women than for men (the Swedish Pensions Agency 2014:15).

There is a widespread ideal in western cultures of concealing any signs of ageing – at least when associated to old age (i.e. not signs of reaching puberty) – which the huge sums spent on anti-ageing creams and dietary supplements are signs of. I have lost count of how many times I have heard people say that they do not feel like whatever age they count chronologically; that their bodies age faster than they do. It is such a common statement that it is easy to forget that it presupposes oneself being separate from one’s body. This dualistic view can be traced back to Descartes but has in contemporary western societies had the implication that ageing no longer is seen as “natural”, but as something that the individual has to take responsibility of (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänen 2011:59f). This relates to discourses of successful and active ageing, which link back to a consumer lifestyle which generates identities as well as reflects them. According to Higgs and Gilleard, it is however not an isolated matter of commodification of individual fears of ageing, but a collectively fuelled expectation to not age into the group all western world seem to dread: the “greying” of the population (2000:127f).

**Old bodies – embodiment and ageing**

While there has been an increased interest in the body in various disciplines in recent decades, the old body has at large been neglected by feminists and gerontologists alike (Holstein 2006:324). Very few people write about women’s ageing: especially ageing and related issues in the later parts of life are rarely written about. Feminists tend to analyse the ageing body and its implications up to menopause – but politicizing issues that occur in later parts of life has not been a high priority on feminist agendas (Holstein 2006:325).

American feminist Betty Friedan compares women’s ageing with that of athletes in that their biggest assets are their physique: when women are no longer reproductive, and athletes no longer as fit, they age (Rasmusson 2005:101). And no one wants to age and get old, we are told. Is it any wonder then, that it is generally expected of women to stay young, or at least younger-looking, throughout life? The anti-aging industry (consisting of everything from dietary supplements, anti-wrinkle creams and inspirational life style-books to cosmetic surgery) is not late to make a profit out of the growing request. The last few decades’ cultural images of active, successful ageing demands of people to show that they have not “let go” of their looks, and that they are still fit. “Successful ageing” means one will be blamed if one fails this identity project:
one has not taken one’s responsibility of living healthy, or taken the right measurements to avoid the marks of old age (never mind that being able to spend the time and money required to age “successfully” is dependent on one’s socio-economic position, dis/abilities etc.). The successful ageing discourse also implies that it is unnecessary to work politically for improving public policies that target the old – why should we, if it is up to oneself to avoid needing later care services anyway (Holstein 2006:316)?

The expectations of how one is to age is closely linked to intersecting positions of age, class, ethnicity, sexuality and dis/ability. Speaking of sexuality, gender and age, Cecilia discusses how sexual harassments are used against women of all ages, but in various ways. Referring to an American context, Cecilia brings up the example of how certain female politicians are harassed for “not having gotten enough cock”, while others are accused of having “sucked cock to get to where they are”. In her own political context, a city council in a larger Swedish city, Cecilia tells of experiences of being seen as (and called) “the hot chick”, while an older politician was laughed off as “that cute old lady”. As Cecilia concludes: even if being called “good-looking” and “hot” are masked as compliments, it is still part of the same oppressive structure as other sexist and ageist stereotypes. Both Cecilia and the older woman have to earn their respect in ways that male politicians do not. Karin phrases it like this: “I think that much of the thing of being a woman is the same, regardless of age. You get patted on your head all your life, it never stops, and you get treated like a body all your life, assessed.” Whereas white, able-bodied, cis-men are subjects most of their lives (the fourth age being the exception, when one loses previous agency and respectability), the subject status of the rest of us, that is – everybody but that normative man – is not to be taken for granted.

The ideal of successful ageing does however affect people of all genders. While women face a greater pressure than men to look youthful by physically keeping up an attractive appearance, men are expected to maintain an active and independent lifestyle. If not succeeding in ageing in this way, men face social sanctioning if falling victims to the stereotype of old age: an unproductive, dependent, powerless existence (Sandberg 2011). While it, from the individual’s perspective, is understandable that one wants to disprove such negative attributes which are associated with old age by managing to age in an “active” and “responsible” way, it is important to reflect on the ideal’s implication for those who of different reasons cannot or do not want to age “successfully”. To move beyond the simplistic, dualistic view of ageing being either successful or declining, Sandberg (2013) suggests affirmative old age as an alternative conceptualization of later life ageing. Affirmative old age, phrased as a theoretical project, aims at acknowledging the specific embodiment of ageing in later life while neither enforcing
stereotypes of decline and dependency in later life, nor buying into the neo-liberal ideals of activity, consumer strength and autonomy (Sandberg 2013:12f).

In discussing gender and ageing, several of the respondents spoke of how men and women are expected to age differently. While men – at least up to a certain age – can benefit from certain signs of ageing by strengthening their authority and increase their sex appeal, women are expected to hide the marks of age by dyeing their hair and wearing the “right” make up and clothes. In this way, masculinity is not as threatened by ageing as femininity is (Gillear and Higgs 2000:49). Cecilia concluded the observation that men can sometimes benefit from ageing whereas women seldom do: "(...) the same way men don’t have to be objectified but when they grow older, up to a certain limit perhaps, they gain more authority while women are seen as old hags, that men have more life experience (...)” Perhaps this explains why masculinity, historically, dominated the portrayals of old age in the arts, with the odd old woman depicted as a witch (Higgs and Gillear 2013:36). However, to keep their masculinity, men are expected to remain active and powerful throughout life (or at least for as long as possible), and will lose their attraction if becoming dependent and fragile. If the old male was nude, his characteristically old face would be put on a young body in the arts of Ancient Greece (ibid). In Ageing bodies that matter: age, gender and embodiment in older transgender people’s life stories, Siverskog (2015), explores the diverse experiences of trans people’s ageing and embodying of gender identities as they grow older. While some persons find it more difficult

As I’m writing I suddenly stop seeing the text on the screen and instead become aware of the sun-lit reflection of my face. I notice how visible the lines under and in the corners of my eyes are, and experience three consecutive reactions. First: I am happily surprised at the lines, which grow deeper as I pleased smile at myself in the reflection. They resemble the lines of past lovers’ eyes’, which again and again were the features which attracted me to them, and now I’ve got them too – albeit thanks to time, not biology. Or perhaps that’s a false assumption, as the lines probably have been in my DNA all along but needed sometime to be chiselled out. Second: I become aware that these lines are what cosmetic companies, friends and movies have been warning me about for years: lines that reveal your age must be defeated or else you’ll never be happy. Suddenly I feel guilty of my acceptance and even joy and wonder if it is normal to have so visible lines at age 30. Third: I wonder why I don’t immediately allow myself to feel happy and content with signs of age. Why is it that old age, and even the tiniest signs of ageing in relative youth, are deemed oppositional to the symbiotic couple of beauty-happiness?
to perform their genders as their bodies become visually marked by old age, some find that signs of old age give them more androgynous looks, which for some is a positive side-effect of growing older. Siverskog discusses how the ideal of ageing successfully may affect trans people differently from cis people. For instance, where a flaccid penis or absence of menstruation may be interpreted by a cis person as signs of the ageing body “failing”, those same things might be experienced as normalizing for some old trans persons, who earlier in life were unhappy with their “uncooperative” bodies (Siverskog 2015:11).

According to Calasanti, the fourth age – the time in life, if one even gets there, when one becomes physically frail and lose social and bodily control – has been generally ignored by feminists (2006:271). When care work is analysed, the physical character of care work is de-emphasised in favour for other aspects of care which has a somewhat higher status (ibid). While there has been research on care work, where the old person is treated as a burden for the younger (female) care giver, the old persons themselves remain invisible – either as a care receiver or giver (Calasanti 2006:269). While it is true that women perform most of the care work both in paid labour and unpaid family work, and age and gender do matter for the arrangement of spousal care work, men’s care giving is often made invisible. Calasanti, who has done research on spousal caregiving for those with Alzheimer’s disease in an American context, conclude that gender differences are reduced when the care work that male and female spouses carry out is compared – what is different, though, is their approaches to caring for their spouse, and how they are treated by their surroundings (2006: 276ff). While the women of the study were expected to already know how to do care work, which added extra pressure and stress to the work itself, men did not face the same expectations from their social environments, and tended to treat the care work as a new set of skills to learn and new challenges to master (ibid.).

Marie recalls how her daughter, when she was in care assistant school, was repulsed by the thought of doing care work for a close relative like her mother but would do it for any stranger. The daughter’s class mates from Mediterranean countries expressed the opposite stance: they would not mind caring for their close relatives, but felt it was uncomfortable to do intimate care work, like helping someone to wash, for a stranger. According to Calasanti, the dynamics and context of an intimate relationship will be altered when one starts giving care (which is surely depending on cultural context and cultural expectations, too) (2006:270). Marie referred to this as the main reason why neither she, nor her daughter, would want to alter their relationship in such a way. Instead she spoke positively of the Swedish welfare system, in which there (ideally) is room for families to choose to which extent they want to be involved in the
personal care of each other. At the same time, Marie felt that the voluntary aspects of the parent-child-relationship were somewhat threatened by recent years’ signs of the welfare state being deconstructed and privatised.

Not everyone, however, is as open as the pupils of Marie’s daughters nursing school to carry out physical care work at all. In my early teenage years, when my class was offered work placements for a couple of weeks at various places, the general reaction to go to a residential home for old people was disgusted astonishment at the intimate care that was part of the care assistant profession. Even as I had entered a care assistant education, some class mates expressed similar reactions to caring for old people. It was not just that people were disgusted by whatever bodily discharges that quite naturally trigger feelings of repulsion, but that they were disgusted by the old people themselves. Old individuals became old bodies that were not only guilty of not being young anymore, but which had failed independency and self-control. Marie recalled how none of her daughters’ unemployed friends had wanted to start doing care work (where there seems to be a constant demand for short-notice extra staff) and described it like this:

(…) no one wanted to do it because “age is disgusting!” The physical, to be close to an ageing body. It’s alright when it’s a young, beautiful woman or a young, beautiful man (…) or children, then you can change a diaper but to do it on an older man, no, they would never do that; that was the limit for disgust. I think you perceive the old body as a little unpleasant. And a reminder of your own caducity, like “I’ll also get there” and that’s not fun to think of if you’re afraid of ageing. (Marie)

How many of those who work in old people’s nursing homes felt like that at first, but got over it (how?) or can at least cope with it today?

I’m all new here, has almost no experience at all of care work. I follow my mentor who walks up to the old man laying there in his hospital-style bed in the shady dark room. My mentor introduce us and we politely chat while the mentor angles the blinds to let some light in. When it’s time to help the man with his personal hygiene I feel awkward and try my best not to let it show, as to not make him uncomfortable, too. But somehow it’s difficult to take the focus off of the physical care work we are doing, and directing my full attention to him. The person risk becoming a body we care for. A few weeks later, when doing the same routine, I recall how I at first had difficulties in keeping contact with the man as an individual while carrying out the changing of pads and washing. It felt remote. Now we so naturally interact with focus on each other, chatting, joking, almost forgetting whatever care work is being done simultaneously – or at least that’s how I hope he feels, too.
In hindsight I see how my strategy (the vignette above) to overcome any awkwardness in the care situation was built on separating the person from their body. Whenever I talked about my work at old people’s homes, I spoke of the residents with love, and portrayed the care work as mainly being about catering for the social and psychological needs of the care receivers. I totally did what Calasanti writes is typical for feminists who deal with care work: I down-played the role of the body (2006:271).

The answers to the why no one wants to be old (although many give the impression of wanting to live forever), or even be associated with old age, seem pretty obvious. Old age and everything related to it have negative connotations so why would anyone, even if being old oneself, want to be linked to it? As Calasanti and Slevin write, this ageism – quite contrary to popular beliefs – makes it pretty unlikely that old people will unite for similar interests (2006:8). To make old age seem less negative, there are plenty of at-first-sight-positive-looking motivational quotes like “you are not older than you feel!”; popularly spread in everyday discourses and on social media together with sweet pictures of old people dancing with their canes or of sunsets. The underlying message, as I interpret it, is: “calm down and stay young and ‘functional’ – do not give up and consider yourself old.” Being old is a crime against everything the people who share those slogans have grown up to believe in: the celebration of youth, productivity, and independence. I cannot help but to wonder what the radical potential of old age is – could it become a platform to protest neo-capitalist ideals of consumerism and straight age categorizations? Tightly intertwined with one’s other social identities, such as dis/ability and class, could old age (or rather, the fourth age) somehow be conceptualised as a possible “tool” for radical resistance from queer perspectives? Could breaking age norms help dissolving intersecting harmful norms, and what space would be opened up if old age was embraced instead of denied?

Experience

The last theme of analysis is experience: the respondents’ experiences of encountering and dealing with ageism, but also their understandings, in relation to their experiences, of ageing and age norms. The first part deals with the respondents’ experiences of being listened to, or dismissed, depending on age categorizations and intersecting social positions – a topic which was also discussed, in relation to more specific feminist contexts in the chapter of feminist work. Here, similar experiences are treated in a more “general” context, but as previously
problematized, it is not possible to once-and-for-all separate this experience from that, or that theme from this. In the part of the last sub-theme, the respondents’ experiences of embodying age are illustrated.

“Experienced vs. being the expert” – aged knowledge

Discussing expressions of ageism, a recurring theme – whether speaking about young or old people facing prejudice and exclusion – was experience. Many of the respondents spoke of having had their experiences – or lack of experience – used against them. There were accounts of not being listened to or taken seriously in certain contexts which they attributed their age categories; memories that stretched from being made invisible as a child, to being patronized as a young politician, to have their knowledge discounted in later life. The respondents analysed that the way their voices were listened to, or ignored, depended upon their age in intersections with their gender, ethnicity, class, dis/ability and sexuality, and in which contexts they were. There was also the difference of being dismissed for having “the wrong kind of experience”, and having “the right” experience which could qualify you for being an expert on the topic.

In her work for a non-profit organization supporting people with eating disorders, Linnéa is sometimes interviewed by journalists. She notes that when she is speaking from her own experience, her age is always mentioned in the headline: “Linnéa, age X, recovered from eating disorder…”, while her age seems irrelevant if she is speaking from the position of an expert on the topic. Linnéa also thinks that her personal experience, in combination with her looks, make people read her as younger than she is:

Even though my experience of the disease is quite far back in time, the journalist probably thinks...they have built some kind of idea of how old I am based on what I’m talking about and the way I look, physically. Whereas in interviews which are solely related to knowledge they’re not at all interested in my age but only in what I actually have to say. (Linnéa)

As young, many respondents (either currently or when they were younger) expressed that a main argument made by their surroundings when their voices were not granted the same weight as older ones’, was to refer to their assumed lack of experience. In institutionalised political contexts, a couple of the young politicians I interviewed spoke of how their party – whose local group mainly consisted of young women – had to struggle hard to prove that they were competent and knew what they were doing. Since they were young, they were assumed to lack experience and knowledge of political processes. Add that they were not men, and some of
them not white, and they were met with particular distrust. Rebecca, who had been active in one of the country’s largest youth organizations when they were younger, recalled how they at age 16 had protested at a congress. After noticing how young people, and women of all ages, were not properly listened to, Rebecca asked to speak and then, in their own words, “rant ed” about how it was basic respect of the listeners to focus on the speaker, whether one agreed or not. Instead the (not so young) men of the gathering had seemed to listen carefully to each other, but started to look at their watches, shuffle papers, scribble at note pads and so on when someone else spoke – in other words, exercising typical master suppression techniques.

While it logically might be true that someone who just left high school has not had the same chance, if speaking in terms of time, to accumulate as much experience of political work than someone who is a few decades older, the real issue does not seem to be actual skill and competence, but age. As Cecilia rhetorically asked: would someone new to the city council have their experience questioned, like she had had hers, if they were 50 instead of 20? This also raises the question of which kind of experiences it is that counts. Anna recalls how she got the feeling of not being taken serious when she, at the age of 19 or 20, was the youngest member of a reference group of a government commission on the Convention of the rights of the child. Despite being the one that most recently had known what it was like being a child, her experiences were not cherished at the commission. When it comes to children not being listened to, Anna thinks a partial explanation has to do with the convention’s conflicting perspectives on the child. On the one hand, there is the perspective that children should have a say in matters that concern them, and have their views respected; on the other hand, there is the perspective that children should be protected by adults, which often leads to the “we know better because we are older”-attitude towards children. In practice, then, children are often not listened to with the pretext of adults protecting them (from themselves, possibly). Another example of when certain embodied experiences are not valued, is in policy making and lobbying organisations. Anna regrets the class-wise homogeneity of the union of tenants’ board meetings in a large Swedish city. Why were no homeless people invited – people who could share experiences and insights of what it may be like to live on the cold side of the city’s current housing situation?

Anna also discusses how one’s age often is understood as synonymous and relational to one’s experience and skill, and accounted for how she had been treated differently during her professional career. Anna felt she had been met with more trust and respect now when she is about 40 than twenty years ago, in a way she felt was not proportional to how much she had developed her skills as a leader in the same period of time. Neither was the large increase of how much she earned reasonable, according to Anna, but there is a widespread notion that one
should automatically be rewarded higher wages as one grows older, no matter how well it correlates to how far one has actually developed or how well one uses one’s skills and experience. Having worked in trade unions, Anna spoke of how the structure of wages were closely linked to age, i.e. the older you are the better paid, despite most collective agreements consisting of “objective” criteria of how wages should be set (such as evaluating various skills and responsibilities). Despite older people being privileged in this way, and also by age-related benefits such as gaining more paid days of vacation a year the older one gets, age discrimination on the labour market are often assumed to one-sidedly privilege younger employees.

The requirement of a certain kind of experience, often experience collected from the number of years one has lived and worked, can work excluding towards younger people. In some ways, some of the respondents found it legitimate to view experience in terms of time, as some experiences need time to “build up” into greater perspectives. Speaking of his years as an intern in the UN, where interns are not always treated as respectfully as could be wished for, Alexander said he could see a use of “doing those years of struggle” to collect experience that prepared him for later positions within the organisation. Being a white, able-bodied man, Alexander acknowledged that his years as an intern probably had not been as though as for others, who beside the low status of the intern might also have faced oppression based on their social positions.

The trouble, according to some respondents, is that the experiences of children and young adults, which could be long-term and stretch over years too (such as experiences of the current school system, which older adults have no experience of being pupils in), were given less weight than the experiences accounted for by older adults. Ellen recalls how she, in her early twenties, was treated negatively different than the other participants of a small creative dance group. Ellen felt that the other women, being 40, 50 and 60 years old, did not listen when Ellen called on her integrity, but decided things concerning both the group’s work and Ellen herself without considering her will. When other participants did the same, they were on the other hand met with encouragement: how good that they knew what they needed and marked their personal limits. Sometimes the oldest of the women would, in Ellen’s eyes, be treated in an as patronizing way as she, who was the youngest of the group, was. When not listened to, the others would often refer to a lack of experience that apparently motivated the excluding treatment. Nor was the experience Ellen did have acknowledged. After having felt she was not taken seriously in other situations, too, as for example when discussing social issues and
politics, Ellen decided to start studying a bachelor of social work at the university, with the hope of education making her voice louder and heard.

Cecilia questions the very structure of valuing year-based experience, rather than skills, so highly in recruitment and other situations. Explicitly or implicitly (by assuming younger people lack skills and knowledge), demanding a certain number of years’ experience means that young persons automatically are excluded from higher positions in organisations. In political contexts, Cecilia felt there was a widespread contempt and distrust towards younger politicians, which for example could be noticed when a young political leader was accused of having been “indoctrinated” because he was assumed to be too young to have made up his own mind.

The logical consequence of valuing year-counted experience so highly that young people are often written off as lacking (the right kind of) experience, would seem to be that old people, who have had more years’ time to accumulate experience, have high status. This is not true, though – instead old people’s experience tend to be written off, too, as something outdated and boring. How come old people’s experiences often are seen as invalid? Is it because it is assumed that time change, but old people do not?

Marie talked about a generational shifting at her workplace, meaning that older generations retired and got replaced by younger ones. Some “new” kinds of knowledge and experience were gained; some “old” ones lost. While not all knowledge that was lost was useful anymore (to know how to write in shorthand, for instance), other knowledge would have been valuable to keep in the organisation. Marie spoke of how she, now approaching 60, no longer feels as “hungry” for new things as she used to in younger days. It is not that she thinks one stops developing as one grows older, but that one might want a different pace of learning, or learning different things. Instead of getting used to yet another new computer system, Marie would like to grow the skills she already has, and for instance see older generations’ of employees experience being integrated in the work group by mentoring. Karin, who is about the same age, also raises the topic of how to take care of older generations’ skills and knowledge, rather than excluding them from social spaces, such as work places and political contexts. According to Karin, old people’s knowledge is forgotten when it would not have to be: “One thing that annoys me is that I think women of my age should be consultants to dammit everything! When it comes to children, child rearing, schooling, community planning and playgrounds…We know so terribly much!”

The one context in which it is clear that one’s status on the contrary *increases* with age, according to Karin, is in nursing work. Having decades of experiences of working as a
paediatric nurse, her competence is highly valued. The way older nurses are met with respect at the hospital might however not only be due to their actual experience, Karin ponders, but to their assumed experience based on their age. A context in which Karin’s age on the contrary is understood as a sign of lack of experience, is when she is mountain biking. As the leader of a mountain bike group, younger participants tend to frown upon noticing Karin’s age – until she has proven her skills in the forest and as a leader. Karin also has the experience of having to prove her mental capacities more now than up until she was middle aged, as she feels that strangers do not automatically read her as smart and witty the same way they used to. Several of the interviewees share experiences of having to work harder to prove their capabilities and be listened to in young and old age, than in the years in-between. Once old, though, one can compare it to days when one (possibly) was considered a respected member of community whose voice was heard, whereas young people might not have had that experience at all.

There are however people who consciously try to truly listen to everybody and take their experiences seriously, regardless of age. Cecilia, who is a local politician of Feministiskt Initiativ, tells of how her party’s members appreciate initiatives from the city’s citizens, regardless of the person’s age or other social positions. In some instances Cecilia’s political peers have been quite influenced by the suggestions of some children from a local special school, while politicians from other parties shrugged and thought that the initiatives were not so important if they came from children – especially children with disabilities.

In her work as a project leader in health care, Karin says she aims at “putting everyone’s experiences in a basked and using them all to reach the goal”, and respecting everyone’s opinions. Karin tells me she feels very happy and comfortable with recent decades’ emergence of intersectional perspectives in feminism, as she feels intersectional feminism, like she herself aims at doing, highlights the importance of listening carefully – especially to marginalised people’s voices – and valuing everybody’s knowledge.

Are there alternative conceptualizations of what the different stages of life are, based on experience? Several of the respondents speak of how they felt unfairly treated (in the present or past) when their young age was assumed to indicate a lack of experience. Is it one’s age that makes one’s experience valued, or can one “earn” one’s age by one’s experiences? Alde discusses alternative ways of understanding childhood and adulthood, based on experience rather than mere numerical age. To be an adult, one has accumulated knowledge of processes in life; has seen some things move in cycles; not everything is new so to speak. But what, and
how, one has experienced living is not only dependent on one’s age. A child may have reflected more in and on their short lives than some adults have, who might have led monotonous lives without much interest in contemplation. In yet another context that same child clearly “works” as a child, and that adult displays maturity. To conceptualize “adulthood” as a position where you feel somewhat responsible and trust your own experience, would open up for a wider understanding of age categories as fluid and contextual. It could also make it easier to explain the feeling many seem to have, of at once feeling very young and very old.

In discussing age categories, Marie says she often thinks it is more relevant to speak of life stages, based on “where in life one is”, than of numerical age. For instance, Marie felt she had more in common with people (if we are at all to bunch people together in age/life-related categories) who were in a similar position as herself when it came to family relations, for example. This is something I can relate to personally, too. For example, in some contexts I feel more connected to other single parents who are studying, no matter if they are ten years younger or twenty years older than me, than to someone my own age who has very different family responsibilities. Yet again, in other contexts, some other factor is more protruding and whether we have children or not is not the focus. What “group” one feels connected to is not fixed once and for all, but can change swiftly. The point is that age often does not say much about one’s situation at all, but is still used as if it did.

“Dress your age, or the age you want to appear” – performing age

Like some other social locations, such as the colour of your skin, age is visible in ways that other identities not necessarily have to be (sexuality, for instance). At the same time as being quite visible, however, age is also invisible, or perhaps rather taken for granted to the point where it easily passes by otherwise analytical eyes unnoticed. Also, age is not only fluid and relational (like other social positions), but age and its age-related expressions are expected to change throughout life (quite obviously, perhaps).

Although many of the respondents discussed age as a biological factor whose social power structures had some legitimacy, they were nevertheless critical of the way one’s assumed age influence the way one is received by others. Several respondents spoke of how they at an early age had come to realize that they were expected to behave in a certain way depending on their age, and that they to some extent could (or at least could try) to manipulate the age they looked and seemed. Anna recalls how she was frustrated at not being listened to as the youngest of all of the members of a reference group of a government commission on the Convention of
the rights of the child, and therefore bought a smart-looking blazer for the next gathering. Anna does not think the blazer had the desired effect – to make her appear older and more mature – but reflects that it might have worked in her favour if the others had not already gotten to know her in a less formal, less “adult” outfit. Anna also tells how she recently started working at a rather traditionally “square” organisation, and how she hesitated before wearing a comics’ figure necklace and mobile phone jewellery at her first week there. In the end she decided to wear them at work as she felt secure enough in her position as a manager to take the risk of the accessories making her seem somewhat “childish”. Furthermore the jewellery was a way of communicating to her co-workers that Anna is a leader who “does things differently” by breaking unwritten rules of what a manager is supposed to look like to earn their authority.

Linnéa expresses how people constantly struggle to determine her age. When sharing this with me during the interview, which was before telling me her calendric age, I wondered if I, too, would guess her age completely off the mark. In fact, I would be surprised if I would have guessed right, as I have always had a hard time telling people’s ages – sometimes with margins of error of decades. Sometimes my inability to guess people’s ages was amusing (at least for others), but personally I just shrugged. While age is something I suppose one automatically try to determine when one meets someone new (just like unconsciously trying to determine people’s genders, until one start hesitating and the action becomes conscious), I have never really been too bothered about finding out whether I am right or wrong. I do however realize that not everyone is like me in this regard, which Linnéa illustrated by telling how strangers desperately tried to find out her age and treat her accordingly. Sometimes it was the clerk at the shop who wanted to see Linnéa’s ID before selling tobacco; sometimes strangers at the municipality office who assumed she was a teenage mother until finding out she had social relations which raised both her status and age, and motivated them to speak to her as to an adult. Linnéa reflected on how her small-built physique as well as attributes, such as her colourful hair and “youthful” clothes, made people think she was at least a decade younger than she was. By choosing what clothes to wear and how to do her hair, she could influence the age she was perceived to be. I interpret this as an illustration of how age – like gender and other identities – has a performative dimension.

Neugarten, Moore and Lowe published an often-cited paper on age norms in 1965, which came to contribute to a more sociological understanding of ageing as a life-long socialization process rather than a biological fixed state. They argue that age norms are ever present, more or less explicitly, in our everyday lives. “Act/dress your age” is quite a common statement, meant to sanction those who break the expectations of age-appropriate behaviour
assigned to their calendric age. Linnéa’s and Anna’s examples above illustrate how the way one is read by others can be more or less subtly influenced by utilizing attributes and behaviours that are associated with a specific age group. Except for clothes and other accessories being a way of hiding or enhancing parts of the persona in communication with others (which is closely linked to age, ethnicity, gender and class), clothing also work as a communicator between the body and one’s self (Andersson, Lukkarinen Kvist, Nilsson and Närvänänen 2011:57). While certain physical changes that come with ageing are interpreted as positive in early stages of life (who did not want to look older in order to get into an age limits-event?), changes that are associated with old age (such as wrinkles, grey hair, sagging skin) are not greeted as warmly. Of course there are exceptions, though. Anna said she looked forward to having her hair turn grey so it would be easier to dye in bright colours, and personally I would love to keep mine whitish grey, but in general one is not encouraged to interpret signifiers of old age positively.

Although – judging from children’s fashion and media – kids cannot wait to become young adults, not everybody is in a hurry to leave behind childhood and its attributes. Alde discusses a different dimension of resisting limiting age categorizations, namely that they consciously identify as a child in certain spaces in their life, in order to claim a greater freedom of actions. While identifying as a man is strange to Alde, they can sometimes identify as a boy:

I have been able to see myself as a boy but not as a man, because, what is a man? That just makes me think of hegemonic masculinity, and that’s just really messed up. But as a boy, there’s room there, still space for movement, and I think I have held onto boyishness and playfulness and childishness because it’s not manliness. And I mean, what role models are there? I haven’t had an easy time finding role models who show what it means to be a man in a reasonable way. (Alde)

There is a different freedom to childhood (where boys are granted a greater freedom to be physically adventurous while girls get to explore emotional and social worlds in freer ways than boys), compared to adulthood. Cherishing the space that living one’s chosen childhood brings, is weighed against the fear of being seen as too childish in contexts where one’s adult maturity is advantaged. Some would argue that adulthood has a greater freedom to it than childhood does: one is more likely to have some degree of independence to choose what to eat or what to spend time on, for instance. Childhood can however be a space for different choices, or the choice not to choose.

The space a person is expected, or allowed, to claim in any given room is affected by intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, dis/ability and age, and people are treated differently
depending on physical attributes. Karin, who has decades of experiences of working as a paediatric nurse, describes how pre-teen and teenage girls are treated differently depending on how “well developed” their bodies are. A girl who is tall and has reached puberty is assumed to be more mature socially and psychologically, than a girl whose physique is thought to be more child-like. If someone has a visible disability, it will change the way they are treated, too. As Karin put it, *the children are met differently in the room.*

Another aspect of the space a certain age provides you with in a given context intersects with gender and sexuality. Cecilia reflects on how unfair it really is of younger feminists to assume that old people have no clue about “current” feminist discourses, and that they are all more or less racist, cis-sexist and transphobic, for instance. What space to act does one have, if everybody assumes one to be cis, straight and clueless when in fact one is an old trans woman with decades’ of experience of challenging oppressive structures? How do age norms affect “coming out” as a LGBTQ-person?

One recurring topic when speaking of symptoms of ageism, was to what extent one is “allowed” to challenge age norms without facing too big consequences. Some age expectations were of direct relevance for the respondents themselves to relate to. Alexander, now expecting his first child at age 29, spoke of how he – because of prevailing ideals in his milieu – had always thought it a more or less reasonable goal in life to have finished an education, gotten a secure job, a house, and two or three kids by the age of 30. He had also been well aware of age norms during his years of internship in the UN, when he complied with the norm of the young intern, whereas people – himself included – frowned upon an intern colleague reaching their forties. To be an intern so “late” in life was interpreted as a sign of failure of not having achieved a better career and not having fulfilled the age norm of possessing a secure employment and housing, which one was expected to have (and want) at that age. Alexander reflected how one automatically assess oneself and others in relation to prevailing age norms, instead of first thinking “maybe that intern has changed their career path and enjoys this, good for them!”.

Discussing one’s own experiences of encountering outspoken age norms, both Alde and Oscar problematized how activism often is treated as “something young people do before settling down”. Oscar, who has been engaged in animal rights since his mid-teens, and for the past decade in feminism, spoke of how people often seemed to be of the opinion that activism should be a passing phase in life, not a part of one’s lifestyle. To have the legitimacy of one’s activism questioned was something that Oscar interpreted as a general master suppression technique to dismiss activist struggles, rather than an issue of age discrimination, although...
did relate to age norms. While expressing an understanding of how others might have had to reduce their level of commitment to activism once they had family responsibilities or work duties that prevented them from being as dedicated as Oscar himself is, he found it desirable to re-value the place of activism in one’s life. In what way could one adjust one’s lifestyle to make space for life-long, sustainable activism? Alde had similar experiences of being expected to leave one’s activism behind and “settle down” as one grows older. Alde also reflected on how time might alter one’s relationship to things one has been involved in for a long time, whether it is activism or spiritual practices or something else. In Alde’s experience, people who had been active for many years had developed a kind of reflexive distance to their practice: ”People look back at their activist careers in a way I’m not used to (...) there is this distance to activism even if they, in some ways, are currently engaged. Looking back in a way you can’t if you’re in the middle of it. Something that changes when you’ve been active for a long time.” Both Alde and Oscar considered the age norms of activism to be problematic on a personal as well as political level, as it dismisses activists’ struggles as something less “important”, only suitable for the young, and encourages people to adopt more of a passive stance later on in life.

Despite these age norms and stereotypes of the activist, there are studies that suggest that old people are as engaged in social movements as the young – if not more. In her research on age and feminist activism, Spanish professor of sociology Celia Valiente (2014) challenges the assumption that feminists’ commitment to activism declines as they grow old. Alde’s, Oscar’s and my own experiences of general attitudes toward activism as a “youth activity” might however build on our own 30-something age positions. At our age and for the coming years, we are presupposed to - as Alexander puts it – have families, houses, and secure jobs. Activism is not part of that age norm. Once “done” with those expectations of (re)productivity, retirement might open up for time and energy to commit to an activist lifestyle. Personally, though, I too would like to avoid the “gap” of grass root inactivity in the active years of wage labour productivity.

When it comes to professional politicians, the age norms are a bit different than for activists, maybe because the latter are seen as more radical, which is assumed to be incompatible with certain ages. As for politicians, several of the respondents had experiences of being marginalised, patronized, not listened to and assumed ignorant as young politicians. Maryam, who wrote a debate article on the topic of age focus in media reportings on Gudrun Schyman, the leader of Feministiskt Initiativ, problematizes how Schyman’s age (today 67) is used as a way of both ridiculing Schyman herself, and undermining the party’s political significance. Approaching 70 as a woman is apparently too old for being an active politician according to
media and the public, but Schyman herself is of a different opinion. In a newspaper’s pod cast from 2015, Schyman states that she has no intention to slow down with her energetic political work, and encourages other older women to “speak up” too (Lagerwall 2015). She acknowledges that there is ageism, built on structural age relations, but also thinks older women should raise their voices: according to Schyman, they are in a better position to not to be afraid of making themselves heard than in they have been in earlier years (ibid.).

**CONCLUSION**

“**I hear their voices” - The future of age perspectives in feminism**

The aim of the present study was to explore in what ways age relations and ageism were included in feminist work, if at all, and find out why age as a social categorization (in my understanding) seems to be quite neglected in intersectional feminist analysis. Do Swedish feminists think age relations should be brought to attention in feminism, or is ageism already analysed enough? Overall, the respondents said they could see a need of more explicitly including age analysis in feminist work, or at least incorporating a greater awareness of how age relations and ageism affect other social locations than is seen today. But how to make it happen? As discussed earlier, there are many perceived obstacles to including age in feminist work: ageism has no clear-cut hierarchy so it is not always obvious what age category is disadvantaged by its status; compared to other social locations, age is one that radically and inevitably changes throughout life which means one’s age-related privileges and oppressions change, too; ageism is not seen as an as protruding system of oppression as other systems and thus is not prioritised in feminist work, and so on. While there are no clear solutions to overcoming those challenges, many of the respondents of this study express a willingness to include age analysis in intersectional feminist work to a greater extent than today. When asked what would be needed in order for more feminists to consider age relations in their work, many of the interviewees responded that ageism had to become more “visible” to start with. Many people simply have not encountered explicit age analysis and have not considered pros and cons of incorporating age in intersectional work – it is not a question that has ever really been raised. Upon hearing age being mentioned, many instinctively shuns away, maybe because they explain any age-related treatment (read: oppression and privileging) as “natural”, or because they simply cannot see how feminist work could benefit from including an age perspective. Maryam thinks there would be an openness among feminists to integrate an age relations
perspective in intersectional analysis, but that the knowledge of ageism and age relations at large is missing. One way, then, to increase the awareness of ageism and age relations, is to start *talking* about it, like we did in the interview. Maryam said: “it’s so important that you bring this up. After our talk this is something I’ll think about more and more in the future and raise in my discussions with other members of Feministiskt Initiativ so I think it’s about gaining knowledge and then bringing it forth more and more.”

On the question of the future of more explicitly including age analysis in feminist work, Marie replies that she thinks the interest for ageism and age relations will increase as feminists born in the 40’s and 50’s retire. “They’ll keep on shouting and make their voices heard”, as Marie put it, and:

> A lot of feminists are retiring now, well-educated women and they’ll not be silenced. I don’t think so, because they’ve had their platform and they seek their platform and if you think about media and politics and such, there has been very few who’ve fought for women and age in politics. I think I hear them…and they are on their way now…many of them are retiring. (Marie)

Ellen, too, is of the opinion that older generations’ of feminist will contribute to including a greater age-awareness in feminism as they grow old, but she does not think that it necessarily will include a *structural* perspective on ageism: “We’ll have to include age but age will be more ‘individual’ than ‘age’…” Ellen explains that as generations that grew up with individualistic perspectives of their identities grow older, they will bring those attitudes and expectations with them, and have different demands on their old age than previous generations had.

Cecilia sees positively on the future of age analysis in feminism, and highlights the potentially positive effects of age recently having been included as a ground of discrimination (in more fields than on the labour market) in Sweden’s Discrimination Act (2008). The fact that age only recently was acknowledged might be one explanation why age has not been discussed more in anti-oppressive work in a Swedish context, according to Cecilia, as laws have a normative function. Cecilia thinks there is a willingness among feminists to include an age perspective, but says the initiative has to come from “other directions”, for instance by applying a class analysis on old people’s situations. Also, instead of focusing on “who is oppressed”, as if there was a clearly disadvantaged age category, Cecilia emphasises the importance of a more complex understanding of ageism, in which age categories are not turned against each other. The term “ageism” was initially coined to name the prejudice one age group held against another (Butler 1969), but developed to also include age relations and discriminatory practices. Many of the respondents used “ageism” to refer to their own experiences, and observations, of
age-related oppression regardless of age, which is in line with Butler’s original definition of ageism. Understanding ageism in this way potentially opens up for complex analysis which take the fluidity of age into account.

Just as laws work normative and can influence the way oppression is understood, so can policy documents. Alexander accounts for how the UN recently adopted age as a cross cutting issue in the organisation’s needs assessments, which Alexander thinks will have a big effect on how age is perceived outside of the organisation, too:

...so it has taken nearly two decades for all of the member countries to agree on adding age as a component in needs assessments, or all types of projects the UN does will consist of both gender and age when one analyses something so this is really big (...) and all new, so I’m actually impressed by the UN, but of course one can always be of the opinion that it should go further and that one for example should add ethnicity as well. I would like to see that in a needs assessment but it’s not possible, it would be too complicated, or class differences…(Alexander)

Quite contrary to feminist work, then, the UN focuses on age but not on social locations of ethnicity or class – exactly because the latter are evaluated to be too complex to incorporate in practical work, whereas the opposite has been called upon in feminist work, namely that ageism is too complex to work with in theoretical analyses.

The short answer the question of whether the respondents think that age and ageing is included in intersectional feminist analysis sufficiently, is no. Despite challenges to include age as a social category, the respondents generally expressed their support of considering age relations in feminist work. Some highlighted the ways in which age relations already are analysed, but in general the material supported the suspicion which motivated this thesis project, namely that age at large has been neglected in intersectional feminism. Although there are examples of when age is considered (for instance in critique of adoption debates, where children’s perspectives tend to be neglected, or in discussions of intimate relationships where there is a large age gap between the partners), an awareness of the impact of age categorisation and age relations is not to be taken for granted in feminist work. Interestingly, people seem to think that ageism is not a “big deal” until they take some time to consider it closer, at which point everybody can tell of experiences of being disadvantaged by ageist structures, or give examples of one’s own ageist attitudes. Maybe age is not so unimportant after all? Sometimes age is at the back of people’s heads, but not brought forward as a social location to analyse in its own right, and not thought to be as influential on people’s lives as other factors. Sometimes it is dismissed altogether. When age analysis is included, it is often related to topics close to heart of which one might have personal experience, as for instance when Rebecca fight for
adoptees’ rights. With a greater public awareness of how ageism is ever present and affect social relations, then, I think more feminists would see the use of taking age into account in their intersectional analysis.

“Let a thousand flowers blossom” – Final discussion

It has been said that the (a) point of feminist knowledge production is to change lives (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002:63). This is something I feel to be true and the motivation behind my own writing. One of the reasons why I have embarked on the present research project in the first place is that I want to highlight power differentials related to age, which are often neglected in feminist work, and thus hoping to contribute to raising awareness of age as an important factor to consider in intersectional feminist analysis. In this way I hope to indirectly help changing lives by altering the struggle in the long term to be more inclusive of age relation perspectives. My intention is not to argue that ageism is more important to analyse than any other oppressive structure, but to make a call for acknowledging that age does matters and must be included in intersectional feminist analysis in order to understand complex intra-action of social categorizations. I do not think that incorporating age as a social categorisation in intersectional analysis would “compete” with other social positions, but that age would deepen the understanding of how various oppressive structures work.

As a feminist project influenced by a post-constructionist epistemology which emphasises the importance of situating knowledge and claiming accountability for its production, my intention with this thesis has not been to fulfil positivistic ideals of reliability and validity. The validity of the study is rather in the partial, contextual truths, with a focus on a deeper understanding of ageism and age categorizations in relation to feminisms – this is also the intended relevance of the project.

For further research in the future, it would be relevant to make a deeper exploration of when and in what ways age analysis is already included in intersectional feminisms – why is it seen as significant sometimes, and by some, but not others? What are the factors that affect feminists’ approaches to ageism and analysis of age relations? How do one’s social locations, and one’s feminist theories, inform one’s views on age? It would also be interesting to compare the findings of the present study with how feminists in various countries approach age as an intersectional category, and what their experiences of ageing and ageism are. Is the willingness to include a focus on age relations in the analysis of (other) structures of power dependent on
one’s geo-political location and culture, and if so – how? One could for example imagine that the extent to which old people are included or excluded in the family and society would be reflected in how (younger) feminists see the place of age analysis in feminist work. Furthermore, I think a critical exploration of the radical potential of queering age would be quite rewarding. How can ageing be understood in terms of performativity and as doing, rather than as an inevitable sociobiological destiny? In this research project I have only scratched on the surface of material-discursive understandings of age and how ageing is embodied in intersection with various social locations. Some age- and gender scholars have already embarked on the challenge of immersing feminism with age relations’ perspectives, but I definitely think it is a potentially enormous field that has a lot to contribute with.

Perhaps age is not the most relevant categorisation to analyse in any and every context, but in intersection with other constructs I think it will deepen the analysis. It is difficult to get away from the fact that we all are marked by age somehow, and that it does have an impact on our social positions. I am convinced that having an age analytical perspective and awareness of the mechanisms of ageism, even when choosing to focus on other systems of oppression, will not leave other factors such as gender and ethnicity in the shadow. I agree with Karin who was positive that intersectional feminisms have the potential of incorporating new perspectives without “threatening” the already existing ones (which are in constant change, anyway), as well as welcoming people of various intersections – also those of ages rarely visible in feminisms. To quote Karin: “Let a thousand flowers blossom!”
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APPENDIX I

Interview guide in Swedish (English translation below)

INTERVJUGUIDE: semi-strukturerad, teman att beröra

Introduktion:

Nu sätter jag på diktafonen, är det ok? (annars anteckningar)

Innan vi börjar så tänkte jag informera om att deltagandet i den här studien är helt frivilligt. Du kan närsomhelst avbryta intervjun eller kontakta mig efteråt om du ändrat dig och inte vill att jag använder det vi pratat om i uppsatsen.

Så, jag läser nu en tvåårig master på Linköpings Universitet, som heter Master of Gender Studies: Intersectionality and Change. Något jag ofta lagt märke till under utbildningen, men även i feministiska debatter över lag, är att ålder väldigt sällan uppmärksammas som en intersektionell kategori. Vad tänker du om det?

ÅLDER, ÅLDERISM & FEMINISTISK ANALYS

Anser du att ålder inkluderas i feministiskt arbete? Om ja – hur? När?

Om inte - varför tror du att ålder inte uppmärksammas mer?

Torr du att det finns en relation mellan att se andra typer av förtryck, t.ex. sexism, och att kunna analysera ålderism? Är interektionell feminism mottaglig för en mer uttalad analys av ålder – och finns behovet?

FÖRÄNDRING?

Finns det behov av att mer medvetet analysera utifrån ålder? Varför/varför inte?

EGEN UPPLEVELSE AV ÅLDER

Har du själv reflekterat över din egen ålder som feminist, eller överhuvudtget?
Har du upplevt ålderism, diskriminering pga din ålder, utsatt för stereotyper?

**RELATERAT/ÖVERGRIPANDE:** (not discussed)

Vad tänker du om vardagliga begrepp och uttryck som handlar om hög ålder, exempelvis att säga att någon är ”från stenåldern”? Nyligen hyllades en feminist som i sitt svar till en sexistisk man kallat honom för klasskompis till antikens filosofer och annat som antydde att han var för gammal för att ”hänga med”. Vad tänker du om sånt?

*English translation*

**INTERVIEW GUIDE: semi-structured, themes to treat**

**Introduction:**

I will put on the digital recorder now, is that ok? (Otherwise take notes)

Before we start I want to inform that the participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You can interrupt the interview whenever you want to or contact me afterwards if you have changed your mind and don’t want me to use what we have talked about in the thesis.

I’m now in a two-year master program which is called Master of Gender Studies: Intersectionality and Change. Something I have often noticed during the education, and also in feminist debates in general, is that age very seldom is raised as an intersectional category. What do you think about that?

**AGE, AGEISM & FEMINIST ANALYSES**

Do you think age is included in feminist work? If yes – how? When?

If not -why do you think age isn’t focused upon more?

Do you think there’s a correlation between seeing other kinds of oppressive structures, i.e. sexism, and to be able to analyse ageism? Is intersectional feminism receptive for a more explicit age analysis – and is there a need for it?
CHANGE?

Is there a need of more consciously analysing with departure in an age perspective? Why/not?

OWN EXPERIENCE OF AGE

Have you reflected on your own age as a feminist, or at all?

Have you experienced ageism, discrimination due to your age, age stereotypes?

RELATED/OVERALL: (not discussed)

What do you think about everyday concepts and expressions that concerns old age, for instance to say that someone ”is from the stone age”? Recently a feminist was celebrated for in their reply to a sexist man having called him for a classmate of the philosophers of the antique age, and other things that suggested that he was too old to “get it”. What do you think about this?
* Om ålder som en intersektionell kategori som påverkar andra maktstrukturer; ålderism i feminism + söker intervjunpersoner*

Hej!

Jag är nyfiken på om ni har reflekterat över ålder som en intersektionell kategori, dess plats i feministisk analys och om ni ser ett behov av att lyfta fokus på ålder mer (varför/varför inte?). Ålder har sedan urminnes tider fungerat som en organiserande princip vad gäller makt- och resursfördelning, och hänger starkt samman med andra sociala kategoriseringar så som kön, sexualitet och etnicitet, men ändå tas ett åldersperspektiv sällan upp i intersektionell analys. Varför inte? (Eller håller du inte med, det kanske visst tas upp?) Själv har jag länge haft känslan att ålder är så ”naturligt” att det därför inte anses viktigt, men att sociala hierarkier anses biologiskt ”oundvikliga” är ju ingenting som är unikt för just ålder – tvärt om har ju exempelvis rasistiska och sexistiska ideologier alltid förvarats med någon inbillad biologisk grund. Kan det vara så att ålder ses som mindre intressant eftersom det förändras under livet (på ett mer tydligt sätt än vad de flestas könstillhörighet gör, exempelvis), eller för att hög ålder anses vara oattraktivt i feminism så väl som i resten av sammhället? Vad tänker ni?


(Bild av Carol Rossetti)
I shared the post consisting of this picture and the text below from the original Facebook page of Carol Rossetti (2014), along with my own discussion post.

Carol Rossetti 19 November 2014

Translated by Monica Odom

[image text] Collette doesn't identify with society's expectations for senior citizens, and at the age of 64 she began college for a degree in architecture. Collette, your will to learn and love for life does not depend on your age!

Check my site and online store: www.carolrossetti.com.br

*English translation:

* About age as an intersectional category which affect other power structures, ageism in feminism + interview persons wanted *
Hi!

I’m curious if you’ve already reflected on age as an intersectional category, its place in feminist analysis and if you see a need to focus on age more than is currently done (why/why not?).

Age has since time immemorial worked as an organizing principle when it comes to the allotment of power and resources, and is tightly linked to other social categorisations such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity, and yet an age perspective is seldom included in intersectional analysis. Why not? (Or perhaps you don’t agree, maybe it is actually included?) Personally I’ve had the feeling that age is so “natural” that it has been perceived as unimportant, but considering social hierarchies to be “inevitable” is not unique to age – quite on the contrary, racist and sexist ideologies, for instance, have always been defended on assumed biological basis. Could it be that age is seen as less interesting since it changes during one’s life (in a more obvious way than most people’s gender identities do, for example), or because old age is considered unattractive in feminism as well as in the rest of the society? What do you think?

P.S. INTERVIEES WANTED! :) I’m currently doing a master of gender studies at Linköping’s university and have just started on my thesis, which is about age, age relations and ageism in relation to feminism. My plan is to interview engaged/active (your own definition) feminists as part of the project. Due to economical and practical reasons it would be great if you could meet up in Östergötland or perhaps in Stockholm. I can’t offer economical compensation but something to drink and a snack is on me. :) Write a message if you’re interested and I’ll send you more information!

(Picture by Carol Rossetti)
APPENDIX III

Original quotes and English translations (in alphabetical order of interviewee’s names)14

Alde:

- En annan dimension som finns är ibland hyllandet av historiska persone, älde feminism, men också dissandet av äldre feminister och deras daterade analys som ibland är legitimit och ibland inte.

Another dimension is the at times celebrating of historical persons, older feminists, but also the rejection of older feminists and their dated analyses, which sometimes is legitimate and sometimes not.


I have been able to see myself as a boy but not as a man, because what is a man? Then I’m thinking of hegemonic masculinity, and then it turns really odd, but as a boy, there is a room there, still a space for movement, and I think I have held onto boyishness and playfulness and childishness because it is not manliness and what role models have you got? I haven’t had an easy time finding role models who show what it means to be a man in a reasonable way.

Alexander:

- (...)…och det har alltså tagit 20 år för att få alla medlemsstaterna att gå med på att lägga till ålder när vi gör needs assessments eller alla typer av projekt som FN gör ska innehålla både genus och age när man anlayserar nåt så det är jätetstort och det är väldigt stort, det är nytt helt färskt, så där är jag faktiskt imponerad av FN men sen kan man ju alltid tycka att det borde gå längre och man skulle t.ex. kunna lägga till etnicitet skulle jag gärna se i en need assessment men det går inte, det skulle vara aldeles för komplicerat, och klassskillnader...

(...)...so it has taken 20 years for all of the member countries to agree on adding age when we do needs assessments, or all types of projects the UN does will consist of both gender and age when you analyse something so this is really big (...) and all new, so I’m

14 Paraphrasing not included. Some of the respondents’ narratives are referred to more in the text in paraphrases than by direct citing.
actually impressed by the UN, but of course you can always be of the opinion that it should go further and that you for example should ass ethnicity, I would like to see that in an needs assessment but it’s not possible, it would be too complicated, or class differences…

Anna:

- Ålder har med maktrelationer att göra och sen om man jämför med många andra så finns det ju en tydlig ”vad är upp och vad är ned” men med ålder varierar det beroende på sammanhang o du har en topp nänstand för det här med att du har mer pondus när du är äldre, det upphör ju där nänstans när du är 65, 70 eller tdiigare för endel kanske.

- Age is related to power relations and if you compare it to many other structures where there is a clear “what’s up and what’s down”, but with age it varies depending on context and you’ve got a top somewhere, because this thing about having authority when you are older, that ceases somewhere around 65, 70, or perhaps earlier for some.

Cecilia:

- (...) likadant att män aldrig behöver objektifieras men att när de blir äldre, upp till en viss gränns kanske, får de mer pondus medan kvinnor ses som gamla haggor, att män har mer liverefarenhet (…) (…) the same way men don’t have to be objectified but when they grow older, up to a certain limit perhaps, they gain more authority while women are seen as old hags, that men have more life experience (…) 

Ellen:

- När du når 100 så har du ju 100 åldrar i dig. En 20-åring har ju en inneboende 5-åring i sig, det kanske är väldigt svårt…och sen är det ju så himla, det skiftar ju så mycket både kulturellt och tidsmässigt.

  When you reach a 100 years you will have a hundred ages within you. A 20-year old has an immanent 5-year old inside of them, it might be quite difficult…and it’s also so very, it’s shifting a lot both culturally and timewise.

- (...) undermedvetet, att vi refererar till normer och av nån anledning så har man bara inte kommit på det där med ålder än. Jag tror att det bara finns i bakhuvudet på oss precis som heteronormen bara har funnits i bakhuvudet på oss, och likaså har man kanske inte heller ett klassperspektiv förrän man förstår vad det är.

  (...) we refer to norms unconsciously and of some reason age hasn’t been ’discovered’ yet. I think it’s something that’s just there in the back of our heads just like the hetero
norm has just been there at the back of our heads, and in the same way you might not have a class perspective until you start understanding what class is.

- Jag tycker det finns åldersdiskriminerings åt båda hållen, det är så jag tänker...(...) Att, om vi ska se det som en vågskål, så kanske vi höjer barnen till skyarna och inte sätter gränser där och äldre tar vi int enes med i beräkningen för de ses inte som personer längre. Typ "vaddå, vilka då?" för de sitter undangömda nånstans, de har väl inga intressen och vaddå, de kan väl inte göra nåt eller bidra med nåt, de har väl inte sex och inga mål med livet, de sitter ju bara och väntar på att dö".

I think there’s an age discrimination both ways, that’s what I think...(...) Like, if we’d see it as a scale, we might raise the children to the skies and don’t put any limits there, and old people we don’t even consider because they are not seen as persons anymore. Like, “what, who?”, because they are sitting there hidden away somewhere, “they probably don’t have any interests and why, they can’t do anything to contribute, they don’t have sex and no goals in life, they’re just sitting there, waiting to die”.

- Vi kommer att behöva ta med ålder men ålder kommer bli mer och mer ”individ” än ”ålder”...

We’ll have to include age but age will be more “individual” than “age”...

Karin:

- Men ålder det byter vi alla hela tiden för vi blir alla äldre så det tycker jag på ett vis är lite speciellt, för det är en del av det naturliga i att vara människa till skillnad från de andra maktordningarna.

(...)

(... but age, you change that all the time since we all grow older so in a way I think it’s a bit special, because it’s part of the naturalness of being a human, quite contrary to the other power structures.

- Jag tänker att mycket av det gemensamma kvinnovarandet är lika oavsett ålder. Man blir klappad på huvudet hela sitt liv, det går aldrig över, och man blir betraktad som en kropp hela sitt liv, bedömd.

I think that much of the thing of being a woman is the same, regardless of age. You get patted on your head all your life, it never stops, and you get treated like a body all your life, assessed.

- (...) för det märker jag när jag träffar andra 70-talsfeminister som inte har umgåtts med så många yngre feminister, att de är kvar i det här gamla där det bara är kön.

(... because when I meet other 70s’ feminists I notice that those who have not spent time with younger feminists are stuck in the old, where it’s all about gender.

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En sak som retar upp mig är att jag tycker kvinnor i min ålder borde vara konsulter till ta mig sjutton allting när det gäller barn, barnuppföding, skola, samhällsplanering, lekplatser. Vi vet så fruktansvärt mycket!

One thing that annoys me is that I think women of my age should be consultants to dammit everything! When it comes to children, child rearing, schooling, community planning and playgrounds…We know so terribly much!

Låt tusen blommor blomma!

Let a thousand flowers blossom!

Linnéa:

Men det är väl att det är så självklart att vi har en ålder, när vi presenterar oss i, som jag nu t.ex. i såna sammanhang, äldern hänger med liksom och det går automatiskt (...)Vi fyller år en gång om året liksom, det finns med oss hela tiden men att vi inte ser ålder som nänting som är med och påverkar precis som att vissa inte anser att kön är med och påverkar.

But it is somehow so obvious that we have an age, when we introduce ourselves, like I did now for example, in such contexts, age just follows with us somehow and it’s automatic (...) You have your birthday once a year, it’s there with us all the time but we don’t see age as something that is there and affects us, just like some people don’t think gender affects us.

Även om min erfarenhet av sjukdomen ligger ganska långt tillbaka i tiden så tror nog journalisten att...de har byggt upp nån föreställning om hur gammal jag är utifrån vad jag pratar om och hur jag ser ut, rent fysiskt. Medan handlar det om intervjer som är kopplade till enbart kunskap så är de inte alls intressearde av min ålder utan enbart om vad jag faktiskt har att säga.

Even though my experience of the disease is quite far back in time, the journalist probably thinks…they have built some kind of idea of how old I am based on what I’m talking about and the way I look, physically. Whereas in interviews which are solely related to knowledge they’re not at all interested in my age but only in what I actually have to say.

Marie:

Jag tror inte samhället var så nådigt på åttestupans tid heller, hänger du inte med gruppen, ja då är du ju en belastning, och dte ärju ungefär samma system fast lite finare, vi sätterdem på åldringshem vi skickar dem inte ut för Västra Väggar längre.

I don’t think society was very merciful in the days of the åttestupa either. If you don’t keep up with the group, well then you’re a burden and that’s pretty much the same
system but a bit nicer, we put them in nursing homes instead of sending them off the cliff.


(...)

Jag har inte brunnit för det, kan jag inte säga, och det kan ju bero på att jag inte drabbats av det eller känner nån som drabbats speciellt hårt Eller att man finner sig i att det är så här det ska se ut...

I haven’t been very passionate about it, I can’t say that I have, and that could be because I haven’t been affected particularly badly by it [ageism]. Or that you just accept that that’s the way it is…

• Och nu kanske vi har ett gång 40-talister som har varit feminister som fortsätter att skrika och då kommer de att göra sina röster hörda, jag tror det krävs att man talar lite i egen sak. Jag tror att det är väldigt svårt att driva frågorna om man inte känner till dem eller harkänt till dem eller brinner för det. Det klart att man kan titta på dem men att driva frågorna i en rörelse, det tror jag kan vara svårt. Men det är ju jag, jag är ju rörelsemänniska och jag måste ju brinna för att jag ska ta till mig en fråga..annars tycker jag att det känns lite falskt att stå där också...så jag tror att det kommer.

And now there might be a group of feminists born in the ’40s who will keep on yelling and then they would make their voices heard, and I think that you need to speak for your own cause. I think it’s very difficult to push questions that you don’t know or feel passionately about (...) But that’s me, I’m a movement-kind-a-person and I have to feel passionate to take on a cause…otherwise I think it feels a little ‘false’, somehow, to stand there…so I think it’s coming.

• De kommer att fortsätta att skrika och göra sina roster hörda.

They’ll keep on shouting and make their voices heard.

• Nu går ju en massa feminister, välutbildade kvinnor i pension och de kommer inte att tystna. Det tror jag inte, för de har haft en arena och de söker sin arena om man tänker i media och i politiken och så, de har ju varit få tidigare som drivit kvinnor och ålder i

A lot of feminists are retiring now, well-educated women and they’ll not be silenced. I don’t think so, because they’ve had their platform and they seek their platform and if you think about media and politics and such, there has been very few who’ve fought for women and age in politics. I think I hear them…and they are on their way now…many of them are retiring.

Maryam:

- Det är väl olika förtryck man bemöter vid olika ålder på olika sätt så därför…fast generellt så är det ju folk som är äldre som har det svårast…men det är svårt att generalisera, som när jag inte blir tagen seriöst pga min ålder, jag skulle väl inte säga att det är ett förtryck men det är ju något som är fel där också och då ska man ju inte underminera den erfarenheten heller men jag kan tänka mig att det är betydligt svårare för folk som är äldre, och då är det svårare på andra sätt, aksnek vad gäller arbete, bostad och utbildning och sånt.

It’s different oppressions one meets depending on age and in different ways so therefore…but generally it is older people that have the toughest time…but it’s difficult to generalise, like when I’m not being taken seriously because of my age, I wouldn’t say that it’s an oppression but there is something wrong with that, too, and then you shouldn’t undermine that experience either but I can imagine that it’s considerably more difficult for people that are older, and maybe difficult in different ways, perhaps when it comes to work, housing, education and stuff like that.

- Jag tänker att det är den som blivit bortglömd för att det finns så mycket annat och man vill ju aldrig säga att en är viktigare än en annan men jag tror att det blivit så i det här fallet för att de här starka rösterna i frågor om klass och etnicitet och sexualitet är så mycket mer dominanta än de som lyfter ålder, det kanske bara är ett fåtal personer som gör det och då trängs det undan.

I think that it’s the one [identity categorization] that’s been forgotten since there’s so much and you never want to say that one is more important than another but in this case I think it is like that, since the strong voices that raise issues of class and ethnicity and sexuality are so much more dominant than those who raise age, maybe it’s just a few people who do and they’re being pushed aside

- Så viktigt att du tar upp det. Efter att vi pratat så är det nät jag kommer tänka på mer på framöver och lyfta fram i mina diskussioner med andra FI:are så jag tror att det handlar om att få kunskap och sedan lyfta fram det mer.

So important that you bring this up. After our talk this is something I’ll think about more and more in the future and raise in my discussions with other members of Feministiskt
Initiativ so I think it’s about gaining knowledge and then bringing it forth more and more.

Oscar:

- Jag kanske också har svårt att gå igång på det. Jag kan ju se att det spelar roll för hur vi bemöts, vilken ålder vi har, men att jag kan ha en spontan känsla av att vi går igenom olika faser oh att det finns en legitimitet i det på annat sätt än hur vi bemöts utifrån kön eller etnicitet.

Maybe I also have trouble getting worked up about it. I can see how it matters for how we are treated, what age we are, but I can have a spontaneous feeling of us moving through various phases and that there is a legitimacy to it, in a different way than in how we are treated depending on gender or ethnicity.

Rebecca:

- Ur olika perspektiv har jag märkt att ålder är en så flytande kategori, det finns ju förtryck oavsett var en är, och de ändras med tiden, endel växer en bort från och andra kommer en in i så man kommer ju aldrig ifrån det (...) så oavsett var du befinner dig så tycker alla att just de har det särst.

From different perspectives, I’ve noticed that age is such a fluid category, there is oppression wherever you are, and it changes with time – some kinds you grow out of and others you get into so you never get away from it (…) so no matter where you are, everyone thinks that they are the worst off.

- (...) ja ser man på fattigpensionärer så är det ju i majoritet äldre kvinnor som inte fått ihop till en pension som går att leva på och de är ju otroligt utsatta. Ser man på yngre personer, som omyndiga, dels så kommer de ju faktiskt fylla år tillslut och bli myndiga och komma bort från förtrycket, och dels så har de privilegiet att folk faktiskt har förhoppningar om dem, att de kommer att bidra till samhället, att de kommer..ja..göra sin rätt eller vad man ska säga, medan de äldre på hemmen är ingen stark väljarkår, de kommer inte arbeta och bidra igen och därför ses de bara som en stor kostnad medan de yngre kanske är en stor kostnad men det är en kostnad som man kan vinna igen, en annan förhoppning på de yngre än vad det finns på äldre.

(...) of poor retirees the majority is women who haven’t earned enough for a pension that you can live off and they are extremely vulnerable. If you look at younger people, like those underage, firstly, they’ll actually turn the age of majority one day and get away from the oppression, and secondly, they’ve got the privilege of people actually having expectations of them contributing to society, that they’ll...well, ‘earn their bread’ or what you should call it, while old people at the homes aren’t a strong electorate, they won’t work or contribute again and therefore they’re just seen as a big
expense while the younger ones might be a big expense but it’s money that you can win back again, there’s a different expectation on the young than on the old.

- De svenska pensionärerna ses som att ”nu har jag jobbat hela mitt liv, nu har jag gjort mitt och nu förtjänar de det här” medan nån som kommer hit när de är kanske 65, 70, kommer aldrig att arbeta utan bara costa skattemedel så där ställs ju grupper emot varandra som borde vara på samma sida.

The Swedish retirees are seen as ‘now I’ve been working all my life, I’ve done my share now and now they deserve this’ while someone who gets here when they’re 65, 70 won’t ever work but only cost taxes so groups are positioned against each other where they should in fact be on the same side.