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## **What Distinguishes Men's Experiences of Middle-age?**

### **Men's Experiences of Middle-age: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Middle-age is distinctive in both the quantity of stressors experienced and their nature, so is an important area of study. This study used semi-structured e-mail interviews to investigate how a group of nine Caucasian, middle class, heterosexual men aged between 45 and 55 years made sense of ageing and middle age. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach was employed. Analysis of the accounts indicated four superordinate themes: (1) feelings of being trapped in between post-industrial and contemporaneous gender ideals, (2) mind over body, and the disregard of the metrosexual body ideology, (3) fatherhood, being busy, and lost opportunities, (4) holistic and inward self-awareness. Future studies are needed to enable an understanding of middle-aged men's experiences of distress associated with ageing, and to investigate whether this is associated with the progress of long-term physical and mental conditions at midlife.

*Keywords:* ageing, midlife, masculine ideals, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Middle-aged people constitute one-third of the world population (International Data Base, 2013), and they are better educated and healthier than their predecessors (United Nations, 2013). Midlife has been associated with peak functioning in many domains, including some aspects of cognitive functioning (e.g. Fonda, Bertrand, O'Donnell, Longcope & McKinlay, 2005); skill mastery (Hoffman, Kaneshiro & Compton, 2012); and the capability to deal with various roles and stressors (Lachman, 2004). However, several authors have argued that this generation aims to 'disown' middle-age (e.g. Cohen, 2012). For example, middle-aged people are commonly much admired by the media for their abilities to simulate the attributes of those aged twenty to thirty years, rather than for their experience and wisdom. Furthermore, data suggest that, in the USA, men in this age-group try to emulate younger men (Marshall, 2008). Thus, successful middle-age is often represented as the imitation of youth (Allen & McCabe, 2012). Middle-aged men's perceptions are interesting in this context, and this study will investigate middle-aged men's experiences of midlife.

### **Men, Masculinities and Ageing**

To age is to change, and this relates to how masculinity can be performed (Nilsson, Hagberg & Grassman, 2013). The notion of hegemonic masculinity is associated with the work of Connell (1995) and with studies on men and masculinities (Kimmel, Hearn & Connell, 2005) and has become influential in the study of men's health. The term refers to dominant constructions of masculinity, which influence men's identities and behaviours. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity structures hierarchical relations among men and between genders in different social contexts (Messerschmidt, 2012). Thus, there are multiple masculinities, based on hegemonic and nonhegemonic or alternative principles embodied in the physical and emotional self (Szabo, 2014). Hegemonic masculinity is an ideological construction in a

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sense that men may not necessary embody hegemonic masculinity, but conform to this ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and is being captured by what men do rather than what men are, thus found to subsist within men's social interactions. Norms of masculinity are actively constructed and reconstructed by men (Wiersma & Chesser, 2011), and masculine identity as a stereotypical ideal, embedded in the social context in which they live (Courtenay, 2000). Ethnic and cultural variations can be found in perceptions of gender ideals. British culture is often associated with the culture of the 'stiff upper lip' otherwise known as the 'strong and silent type' (O'Brien, Hunt and Hart, 2005) where men are less likely to seek psychological help compared to, for example, men in Brazil (Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006) ignore medical symptoms and present with advanced disease (Hale, Grogan & Willott, 2007), and less likely to be admitted to hospital compared to women (UK Hospital Inpatient Statistics, 2011). Additionally, suicide in the UK, which has been linked with the "complex nature of some masculine attributes" (Emslie et al., 2006, p. 2256) has been highest among males aged between 40-54 years since 1981 (Samaritans, 2015).

In terms of ageing processes, masculine identity has been investigated within the context of older men's body image (e.g. Cacioli & Mussap, 2014), homosexuality (Slevin & Linneman, 2010), cancers (e.g. Hammond, Teucher, Duggleby and Thomas, 2012), maintenance of independence (Smith et al., 2007), and leisure/health (Wiersma & Chesser, 2011). Ageing is often associated with threat to older adults (Levy, 2009), for example, being a victim of negative stereotypes of ageing has been linked with cardiovascular stress (Levy et al., 2008), increased psychological distress and poorer quality of life (Yuan, 2007). Furthermore, older adults suffer the highest marginalization from sources of social resources and status (Pietilä, Ojala, King & Calasanti, 2013).

The media often portray ageing as a threat to masculinity and sexuality, using this threat as a marketing tool (e.g. Calasanti & King, 2007). Once middle-age is reached, women

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and men are targeted by the cosmetics industry (Craciun & Flick, 2014). The cognizance of the ageing body has become significant, due to the distribution of physical comforts and 'magazine medicine' (Crawshaw, 2007, p. 1606) in wealthier, democratic, and consumer-centred societies. The aggressive marketing of anti-ageing products often distracts ageing adults from taking on well-established health-related behaviours such as exercise and healthy diet (Perls, 2004). Meanwhile, successful ageing (Depp, Vahia & Jeste, 2012), and active ageing (World Health Organization, 2011) protocols promote physical health by encouraging involvement in social, cultural, economic, spiritual and civic affairs. It is likely that these policies influence how middle-age men conceptualise ageing: that everyone can have a middle-age that is vital, creative, and attractive. However, in those who are struggling with an uncertain future (e.g. without health insurance) this may create negative representations of ageing such as being unhealthy, unwanted and unemployable (Craciun & Flick, 2014). For example, one study (Pietilä et al., 2013) highlighted the fact that middle-aged working class men used terms such as 'codgers' to indicate other men who were approximately of the same age as them but whose health and physical condition was worse. This might also indicate that age groups can be conceptualized more on invidious distinctions among bodies and functional abilities than chronological age (Pietilä et al., 2013). Also, other studies have suggested that the way middle-aged men conceptualise ageing is tied up with other conceptions, such as influence of family and work roles through the sense of control they have over their lives (Barett, 2003); injuries, living and working conditions (Wandel & Roos, 2006); and financial security (Craciun & Flick, 2014).

Clearly, men's ageing identity can be a complex subject in relation to midlife, and one way to unravel the interplay between masculine identity, ageing and patterns of behaviours is by using exploratory constructivist qualitative research, focusing on the meanings attached to these issues by individual men (Forrester, 2010). Stereotypical images of genders are often

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constructed in language (Järviluoma, Moisala & Vilkkö, 2004), and because the IPA approach is deep-rooted in phenomenology and symbolic interactionism it seeks to understand the manifestation of human experience as it happens within the social world. IPA enables respondents to tell their story in their own way. Proponents assume that language, as a tool, is able to provide a valid representation of individuals' experiences (e.g. Smith et al., 2009). For this reason, IPA has been increasingly implemented in studies with men, for example, examining illness perceptions, (Bullen, Edwards, Marke, & Matthews, 2010; Levy & Cartwright, 2015), fatherhood (Millings, 2010), body dissatisfaction (Adams, Turner & Bucks, 2005), drug use (Van Hout & Kean, 2015), cancer and ageing (Hammond et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 2015). The idiographic nature of IPA corresponds with our study's aims of considering individuals' unique experience, and exploring the cohort group in detail. It is therefore suitable for examining the phenomena of ageing that are influencing intra-individual change and masculine identity.

The aim of this study is to conduct semi-structured interviews to explore men's perceptions, with a focus on how middle age is constructed as a gendered experience, to unravel how gender roles changed or persisted.

### **Method**

#### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to the study's commencement, ethical approval was sought and gained from the Staffordshire University Ethics Panel. The guidelines prescribed by the British Psychological Society (2009) were used to ensure ethical practice throughout the study. Before the study, all participants were provided with an information and consent sheet. This made it clear that all data would be kept anonymous, and also that quotations from interviews might be used in publications or reports, but names would not be used in the reports so that the participants'



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identities would not be linked to any data. At the end of each period of data collection, participants were asked to express their feelings or concerns regarding the interview and were also reminded of the opportunity to request further information and to access the report which emerged from the study.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through social media websites and posters. All participants were required to be 45-55 years of age and British Caucasian, heterosexual and willing to take part in an email interview. This was to reduce unwanted variation in accounts. Nine respondents were interviewed. Table 1 shows key characteristics of each of these men. Sample size was guided by Smith and colleagues (2009) who recommend that IPA studies benefit from a smaller sample size. Studies using IPA generally have sample sizes between 1 and 9 (e.g. Bullen et al., 2010; Hale et al., 2010; Lewy & Cartwright, 2015). Moreover, Smith et al. (2009, p.74) have stated that "IPA aims primarily to interpret the meaning of the content of one's account, and it does not require a particularly detailed transcription".

### **Materials**

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed with the aim of exploring men's perceptions of self-concept as a middle-aged man and their perceptions of ageing. The list of main topics were derived from the interview based on pilot work with one middle-aged man were: (1) describing the personal meaning of being a man; (2) aspects of ageing; (3) how ageing affects day-to-day activities; and (4) middle-age identity. The interview schedule was designed to explicitly unfold men's lived experience on these topics by examining how men make sense of their experiences. In order to enable detailed idiographic analyses and be able to discover nuanced patterns of convergence/divergence we followed up and probed areas

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that arose during the correspondences. The interviewees were encouraged to include issues that they thought were of relevance.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed semi-structured e-mail interviews as this method is relatively unobtrusive and allowed us to reach a population spread across the UK, and reduced interpersonal bias compared to face-to-face communication (Rossetti, 1998). The use of e-mail interviews has been found to be a particularly effective method (e.g. Murray & Harrison, 2004; Kivits, 2005; Meho, 2006; Pattison, Gara & Rattray, 2015), as it does not put the respondents 'on the spot' and participants are able to control both their rate of response and the terms in which their response is made, and is less intrusive than face-to-face interviewing (Gillham, 2005). Prior to the interview, the topics were piloted with the first participant who found all questions easy to understand and thought provoking. The list of topics provided a provisional structure to the interview and these were intended to be broad so as to enable respondents to raise issues which they felt were important. Based on these topics, the interviewer conducted semi-structured e-mail discussions and elicited responses. During the interview, participants were encouraged, but not required, to respond to questions about ageing. The aim was to invite a couple of e-mail exchanges (to ensure respondents' willingness to participate). The way participants became involved in the exchanges varied (frequencies of exchanges were between 4 and 6 in total).

### **Data analysis**

In order to ensure that men would not be identified through the details of their story, abbreviations (e.g. P1 for Participant 1) are used below to identify respondents. Interviewer questions are in bold italics above the responses below. The analysis began with an in-depth examination of the interview transcript. The strategy was to move from descriptive to

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interpretative analysis (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, a 'double hermeneutic' approach is generated, as the analysis is subjective and dialogical; the researcher has an active interpretative function in making sense of the participants' interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). An in-depth psychological viewpoint was used to understand personal meaning-making in these particular contexts. Based on Smith et al.'s (2009) suggestions, the texts were examined in three main phases: (1) describing the content, (2) exploring the linguistic aspects (the specific use of the language), (3) 'engaging' with the text on a conceptual level. Furthermore, interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes were researched. A theme list was created that re-occurred across the interview texts. Themes were identified and re-examined. Finally, the close, line-by-line analysis was followed by a development of a structure which illustrated the relationships between themes. This process led to the development of final themes and the interpretations were continuously re-checked if they were appropriately grounded in the original transcript.

Smith and colleagues (2009) suggest following Yardley's principles (Yardley, 2000) in terms of assessing validity. The key principle is the demonstration of sensitivity to context (e.g. taking into account the socio-cultural milieu) through the analysis process. Moreover, in order to allow the readers to check the interpretations being made, the participants were given a voice in the report. Verbatim extracts from the participants' material can be used to support arguments being made (Smith et al., 2009). Independent audit (Yin, 1989) was also carried out by the second author to check the report in terms of credibility and assess whether there was a logical step-by-step path through the chain of evidence.

## **Results**

Analysis of accounts indicated four superordinate themes: (1) feelings of being trapped in between post-industrial and contemporaneous gender ideals; (2) mind over body, and the

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disregard of the metrosexual body ideology; (3) fatherhood, being busy and lost opportunities; and (4) holistic and inward self-awareness.

### (1) Feelings of being trapped between post-industrial and contemporaneous gender ideals

Typically, participants attempted to capture the essence of their manhood or selected a feature that summarised the 'core of the masculine' and defined being a man in relation to that:

*If you had to describe what 'being a man' means to you, what would you say?*

*My immediate response is 'it is being a male human'. But to respond stereotypically I would say that it is being brave, supportive, tough etc. A more considered response would be it is a complicated thing, brought up to be that type of person and then shifting into a world where sometimes those things are demanded and sometimes they are not. I feel I have the pressure on me to be all things to all people [P1].*

The intricacy of being a middle-aged man was highlighted in the respondents' accounts, when they revealed that, unless they were being externally challenged (e.g. job loss, illness, inability to fulfil responsibilities), they did not contemplate what it means 'to be a man'; it was rather a latent drive (i.e. a felt pressure) for them which inadvertently shaped their lives and their sense of who they are. Moreover, a heightened sense of self-identity was often experienced when they were trying to maintain a permanent traditional masculine image of themselves: such as being brave, supportive, and being the protector and provider of the family, while being successful and respected in other roles.

*It's really difficult because I think ultimately there is an absolute truth in there. I think being a male in a society is defined by those things [being brave, supportive, tough]. And I think that's one of my struggles I had as a person. As a man I think there are elements of me the way I measure myself against these old stereotypes and maybe their 'needs' but I think it's impossible nearly to discuss that without thinking about*

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*society's impact on it. For instance in my family there is a bunch of needs that we have, me being a certain kind of man this is something I feel because of my situation in my own house I think historically that men are the breadwinners [P1].*

Fulfilling the 'needs of others' and conforming to the traditional stereotypical masculine code made this participant [P1] to question his own authentic identity. Furthermore, both the egalitarian (individual) self and the traditional masculine (collective) self seemingly created the sources of pressure.

*I feel the pressure because I'm a person who takes things on board. There are things I would like to be able to provide as a provider. I think part of this is because I went into this anti-male thing, because that was the thing to do when I went to college in the seventies. In the college I was right in the middle of the feminists, and now I challenge some of their thinking, but at that time I was with a lot of women and I could see that they haven't been empowered as the same way as men been empowered and I felt that was wrong. In fact, I remember I had a big argument with my Dad once. Which was probably the last ever proper conversation I had with my Dad. This was about my Mom's experience and he couldn't have that conversation with me. So, I definitely feel the pressure of that [P1].*

A felt sense of confusion and being entrapped between the past and the contemporary was depicted, when a participant discussed his gender egalitarian relationship and another man his cogency in society:

*In my house interestingly my wife has more than I do, we are actually very even what we do, but my wife suddenly became poorly at her work and suddenly I thought if I could only be a bit more of a breadwinner, our life would be better. So I'm upset about that, but then I think should I have that expectation on me? [P6]*

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*I think my struggle represents a general struggle, I have been on quite a journey. Men of a certain age and time became something we call 'useful' and now there is a change need and I still struggle with that change and society as well. I feel I'm the person, who is left, and I don't know which way to go with my position in this society [P8].*

Additionally, dealing with age-related physical changes and being habituated to meet the social demands of modern day living created feelings of dreariness and a sense of omnipresent anxiety. This was also highlighted when men discussed their feelings about their roles.

***Has ageing affected your day-to-day activities so far? If so, can you describe what ways?***

*I started to notice ageing about 3 years ago when I got to 42. I think the first signs were more pain and it takes longer to recover from exhaustion and pain after being active. I also feel that life has a monotony about it. Very few things feel new or exciting or fun or make me laugh. I tend to worry more about things that are out of my control [P9].*

*No affectation in terms of day to day activities so far other than with greater responsibility that is associated with being older/more senior, I no longer have time to do hobbies and other relaxing activities that I would like to do [P4].*

***Could you please explain what you meant by "greater responsibility"?***

*Leading a new and progressing professional area internationally (I could not have occupied the above positions as a younger person simply because of the developmental requirements needed to "get there"); being used as a sage/mentor for younger friends/colleagues [P4].*

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There was an inclination towards identification with a traditional mature or 'older' masculinity code, which indicated that this participant was no longer able to accommodate the needs of the 'individual self'. This 'mature self', who had to sacrifice time and effort for the 'greater good' reinforced the traditional masculine values and also caused the younger self to recede.

### **(2) Mind over body, and the disregard of the metrosexual body ideology**

Participants revealed a profound perceptual shift from the younger masculine ideal that they once devoured towards a mature masculine ideal, to cultivate intellect and virtuosity rather than attaining muscularity or fitness.

*I like role models like Dr. House, Steve Jobs, Woody Allen, John Malkovich... Not always the most beautiful and most athletic. If the inner beauty is missing the good looks do not help. After passing the age of 30 years you will need intelligence more because good looks can fade away [P5].*

*In my world, I would say it's the intellectual capability in combination with one's personality that's important as opposed to either appearance or physical capability [P7].*

In connection to male bodies, there were different forms of misrepresentations of the media observed by the participants: over-representation of 'unreal' images or the *feminisation* of the men.

*To be honest I feel the media has lost their mind when it comes to role models, it's like you have to be this perfectly groomed, athletic gorgeous man who goes around riding on horseback whilst taking care of one and all. Now in the real world one tries to do this but as we all know it's not always possible [P9].*

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*They don't look like real men... They're pampering themselves, doing body waxing, they can be tidy but I think they've gone too far, fake suntan etc. They will all end up like The Only Way is Essex [reality TV show] [P7].*

*I see these billboards of slim tall men, well groomed and shaved and I just look at them with no judgment because they don't speak to me. To me, there is no value in dressing well to look appealing. Dressing well to highlight occasions for instance or because one likes is different [P5].*

To conclude, common sources of disagreeable experiences were the perceptions that fictional middle-aged men presented on-screen and in magazines commonly looked well groomed, fit, wealthy and happy.

### (3) Fatherhood, being busy, and lost opportunities

Another occasion where time strains (i.e. lack of time for others and self) were accentuated was in association with being a father. The respondents [P1, P4, P6, P7, P9] reported that they experienced guilt and worry from time spent away from children, thereby both the unmet needs of finding time for family and also for self-care generated a felt sense of ambivalence.

*I need to spend more time working on the Family thing. I feel scary and sad as I've missed out doing a lot more. I really missed out on watching my daughter and son grow up [P4].*

Moreover, participants reported ranges of events and embodied experiences that drew their attention to time, ageing and masculinity. Either observed negatively or positively, the escalating events or reminders of mortality, such as losing family members and friends and being more vulnerable physically, moved attention towards the meaning of time and being. Whether the respondents were in their forties or fifties, all of them came to a realisation about



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how their time-left-to-live is finite. Awareness that time was limited was portrayed by examples and metaphors to express a more deep personal meaning in relation to ageing.

*Health, friends, parents as we get older we move up the chain and it's like running a race at first the end seems far away but when you get to the last lap then you realise it is soon over, life can be like that [P7].*

Generally, assumptions of 'limited available time' were frequently expressed in the respondents' [P1, P2, P4, P7, P8, P9] thoughts. Time restriction has been acknowledged in terms of fulfilling personal aspirations and responsibilities (e.g. *I'm concerned about running out of time to do everything I want/need to do [P4]*). Furthermore, unavoidable issues arose about contribution to life; prioritising things, how one's self will be seen by others when retired, where to live at later life and how 'today' will fit into the future.

### (4) Holistic and inward self-awareness

Some respondents saw midlife as perhaps 'having less but enjoying more', an opportunity for being mindful and appreciating life more holistically.

*I live life more 'full on' during my last few years... Drinking less but better wine for example. Better holidays. Taking my relationship more seriously and getting more out of it [P5].*

*Maturity makes me appreciate the now much more than it used to. My mother has never lost importance in my life. I cherish my father's memory, much more during the last 10 years. When I lost him I was too young to appreciate his importance in my life [P7].*

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This sense of in-depth meaning perception over surface perceptions perhaps supported men to settle into the ongoing vagaries of life, and to become more considerate in competitive situations and to obtain more perceived control in professional roles.

*I'm now quite happy to let the aggressive driver get away with it as opposed to trying to run him off the track as I would have done 20 years ago [P4].*

*At the beginning of my profession I was not paying attention at all. I was a self-destructive and drinking young doctor. The transition from medical student to young professional was difficult. It came with time [P5].*

Traditional constructions of masculinity such as seeking thrill and the presence of danger in the participants' lives were also commonly reported. However, men embrace risky activities in midlife not to be irresponsible, but to challenge themselves, to feel self-efficient and to take full 'control' by eliminating dangerous situations.

*I have done various 'dangerous' activities all my life. What I enjoy about these is eliminating the dangers as opposed to revelling in them. I learned enough to realise that many aspects of the outdoors cannot be tamed, but the dangers can be reduced or sometimes eliminated through knowledge, skill/ability and experience. I also enjoyed the fact that by facing up to these dangers, one could experience some wonders of nature that could not possibly be experienced otherwise [P4].*

Overall, it appeared that midlife experiences for these men included both losses and some gains. These experiences were often described as frustrating anxiety-provoking occurrences when men were subject to multiple roles and pre-internalised traditional values. Seemingly, adverse experiences highlighted the fact that these men struggled to integrate the old-

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fashioned masculine qualities with the contemporary values of egalitarian individualistic and autonomic masculine values, while trying to achieve a balance in everyday life.

### **Discussion**

Some of the findings mirrored previous findings where men's accounts of ageing and their health practices were examined (e.g. Branney et al., 2012; Gough, 2007). However, unlike these previous studies, this study concentrated solely on men aged 45-55 years, examining the utility of middle-age identity and capturing the changes in midlife. Our aim was not to recruit a representative sample, but to deepen and expand the current knowledge focusing on men at a certain age and culture to elude the overgeneralization of men's ageing experiences and to examine how hegemonic masculinity functions in these men's lives. We argue that in gender-focused studies where ageing processes are examined, age categories are perceived differently and people have different capacities and possibilities to be agents at different points in their lives (e.g. Nilsson et al., 2013). Gender is a fluid social category and many social factors, such as class, race, ethnicity and age play essential roles in the construction of gender (Järviluoma et al., 2004). For example, older men are often perceived as less masculine, more inflexible, less able to adjust and less productive than middle-aged men (Nilsson et al., 2013), whilst boys and younger men generally report pressure to appear muscular in order to fit in with their social context (Grogan & Richards, 2002).

In terms of traditional roles, men learn about social-cultural and gender related norms and what behaviours are expected of them by interacting with others. Men are socialized to adopt masculine values, involving those that privilege competition, gender power and hierarchy in order to succeed (Sallee, 2011). As the interviewed participants highlighted these expected conventional norms can lead to pressure to conform to these stereotypes and fixed ideals (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger, 2012). It seems as these internalised, persistent ideals

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and 'ought guides' ("*general struggles*" [P8], i.e. men 'ought to be' breadwinners, whilst questioning, "*should I have that expectation on me?*" [P6]) are in disharmony with the new generation's individualistic drives and desires. Moreover, the interviewees reported that man "*became something we call 'useful' and now there is a change need*" [P8]. Indeed, man no longer can experience a profound sense of 'usefulness' since the contemporary masculine culture moved away from hard labour, manufacturing and labour union systems to modern jobs that are characterised by being busy and rapid multi-tasking, often having many jobs and switching frequently between tasks, and its ethos urges men that "only the busy shall inherit the earth" in all social domains (Charlton, 2006, p. 1003). Thus, as a consequence there is a lack of opportunity for men to, for instance, to develop meaningful man-to-man companionships or to showcase 'male pride'. The new younger generation of men is often called more 'metrosexual', describing the man in a post-industrial and capitalist culture who is particularly fussy about his appearance (McNeill and Firman, 2014). Also, these post-industrial men have been associated with being great 'home stylists' and 'gastrosexuals', displaying elements of the feminine cleaning and cooking personas, such as baking cakes, feeding and caring for others, while in the same time signalling heterosexual masculinity, for example, as being "chunks – chefs and hunks", such as baker Paul Hollywood (Johnston, Rodney and Chong, 2014, p.16). These are modern men who are, similarly to women, claiming to be "a real catch" (Szabo, 2014, p.228) and revolve hegemonic elements around notions of individuality and romantic allure.

Furthermore, being 'useful' as a provider plays a significant role in the ageing process for men and this is especially for men born in an era where men construct their masculine identity around being the financial provider for the family, and according to Drummond (2003) that for new-generation males, the transition to retirement may be less traumatic because of the feminist movement. However, the current study's respondents have seen

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feminism in action and have experienced women's involvement in the workforce and their contribution to household incomes; yet the traditional masculine code of being a provider was a key arbitrary aspect of men's accounts that seemingly maintained dominant social constructions. This was consistently pronounced in the participants' accounts. Relatively speaking, there was an indication of confusion between contemporary men's fluid identity and the preservation of the 'being a man' ideal, a fixedness in cultural stereotyping that may restrict possibilities for personal growth and meaningful social inclusion (Biggs, 2004). As Szabo (2014) pointed out, context is important and often the two (i.e. egalitarians versus non-egalitarians) different modes of masculine culture do not integrate well. Some men may get admiration for involvement in domestic work from those with egalitarian attitudes, while other men can view domestic work as a threat to the breadwinning identity in a non-egalitarian context, where fathers have more responsibility for breadwinning and mothers for caregiving (Wall & Arnold, 2007). The men's experiences indicated that the more egalitarian relationships between genders might lesser men's perceived competency of being the traditional family man who went to work and provided for their families.

Feelings of being stuck between past and present generation ideals and being abandoned within society were a recurrent motif in the participants' accounts. These men seemed to feel lower self-relevance and greater disempowerment in contemporary society, reviving the longstanding dispute between genders; does increasing female autonomy discourage men from taking responsibility for the wellbeing of others? It has often been argued that women have gained a plethora of rights, became more powerful and adopted male-centered criteria to conform to the male-dominated hierarchy in management and became independent in a way that has not been matched by the same increase in men's careers or scholastic growth (Lee & Won, 2014). Thereby men could question why they should continue to provide for women when women insist on being independent? It could

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have been that traditionally men felt empowered by knowing that they were perceived as needed by 'vulnerable', 'dependent' women who trusted in their strength and leadership. As Kimmel (2009) put it, a boy became a man when he finished school, went to work, and began to raise a family. Thus to explicate the men's enquiry further, one might ask rightfully: how will this midlife generation of men who feel stuck in between past and modern chart the gender dynamics in contemporary society, fill the holes of men's needs and deal with this harmful sense of irrelevance?

Within the responses, we learned that this generation of middle-aged men certainly rejects becoming more feminised. For example, there were different forms of misrepresentations of the media observed by the participants: overrepresentation of 'unreal' images or the *feminisation* of the men. Some respondents [P4, P5, P6, P9] believed that the images portrayed by the media are misrepresented by "*too much feminisation*" of men, suggesting that it could be a struggle for individuals to preserve a unique identity (McConnell, 2003). Contrariwise, some interview respondents [P1, P7, P8], stated that these images do not possess power or significant value and fail to recognise male diversity, so they could therefore ignore them. For the respondents, the body was measured by the functional body ideology, which again reflects traditional masculinity that is rooted in industrial society; in contrast to the contemporary metrosexual body ideology that is associated with consumer masculinity (Rosenmann & Kaplan, 2014). Whereas the old masculinity archetypes privilege functionality and internal experience of the body, the latter espouses the external aspect on the body as an object submitted to aesthetic scrutiny (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). For men, the discourse of body-as-object discounts and de-accentuates other ways that the body is understood and experienced, thus narrowing the field of enquiry (Cash, 2004). Traditional masculinity views the body as an instrument necessary for functioning, therefore it is rather disinterested in the male body, as men were traditionally socialised to maintain their bodies

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just as they would fix a car *per se* (Rosenmann & Kaplan, 2014). Participants' attitudes reflected this (e.g. *"I just get on with it or take the pain killers"* [P6]) and accentuated that they seek help when the body fails.

Furthermore, participants privileged mind and reason over their bodies, a view which has been challenged by the new discourses of masculine metrosexual body ideologies that endorse hedonistic consumption of products that were formerly considered feminine (Rosenmann & Kaplan, 2014). The post-industrial body ideology encourages men to aim for a hyper-muscular body with minimal body fat (Grogan, 2008), which is unattainable for most men. Moreover, social messages, such as mass advertising, still have the tendency to reinforce the idea that older men should ape young men's forms of masculinity (Beggan, 2007). In the past, some cultural illustrations of masculinity in Western societies had the tendency to define it in terms of abilities and accomplishments of younger men (Beggan, 2007), thus men whose age identity is going through changes may experience an internal conflict in living up to the traditional masculine ideal (Craciun & Flick, 2014).

In terms of masculine characteristics of fathers, 'dads' were often linked with warmth, loving care and commitment, suggesting that men could be both traditionally masculine (i.e. breadwinners) and emotionally sensitive fathers (Wall & Arnold, 2007). In our interviews we attempted to unravel how this is for men (i.e. the degree to which they 'narrate' or 'embody') this combined ways of being an involved father, a devotee (e.g. *"man understands all things and all women's needs and wants"* [P7]) and in the same time trying to live up to the more hegemonic masculine codes (e.g. *"To be men is to do all things when we want to and for as long as we like"* [P9]). In the participants' accounts there was a sense of anxiety and guilt in connection to fulfilling parental expectations and manage a balance between work and family time, in contrast to previous studies that found mothers feel more anxiety and guilt about caregiving issues than fathers (e.g. Doucet, 2004). In connection to midlife stress and 'being a

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responsible father', Ekman, Avlund, Osler and Lund (2012) found that middle-aged Danish men who experienced regular demands (e.g. time) from their children more frequently experienced fatigue compared to demands from spouses or other family members.

Notably, the interview respondents often felt under pressure of being fathers which was amplified by economic insecurity, social competition, the recent years of underemployment, and consumer-constructed images about the spending power required to live the British lifestyle that young and middle-aged men are constantly told they want and feel they must have (Treadwell, Briggs, Winlow and Hall, 2013). It has been said that in midlife, a sense of control is an essential component of well-being, as some aspect of control rises with age (e.g. middle-aged adults feel a greater sense of control over their finances than younger people), while other areas of control decreases (e.g. middle-aged adults report less control over their children compared to younger adults) (Lachman, 2004). Family and work roles often influence age identity not as markers of one's age statuses, but through the demands that individuals face and the sense of control they have over their lives (Barrett, 2005). Despite the fact that some of the men felt that their relationships were egalitarian it seemed as if maintaining an equilibrium between professional and parenthood roles remained a female concern. In sum, our findings add to the empirical research (e.g. Raiden & Raisanen, 2013) that when it comes to family-work-life balance, British men may find juggling family and other aspects of life to be the most challenging.

In terms of holistic and inward self-awareness, Rosenmann and Kaplan (2014) suggested that the same post-industrial conditions that increased insecurities and generated a crisis of traditional masculinity also elicited heightened emotionality and self-awareness among men (Rosenmann and Kaplan, 2014). This self-aware masculinity reflects a holistic perspective of the self and others (e.g. *"to appreciate his [dead father] importance in my life"* and *"appreciate the now"* [P7] and *"appreciating more family bonds and friendships"* [P5]),



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and is often a social marker of middle-class attitudes (Illouz, 2008). Additionally, according to Neugarten (1996) in midlife, 'existence' is reconceptualised as 'time left-to-live' rather than 'time-since-birth'. For example the death of a parent can be a turning point for middle-aged adults as it could force them to confront their own mortality and re-evaluate their relationships holistically.

Moreover, in connection to coping with midlife changes, individuals might be more effective and realistic about their abilities to modify situations (e.g. "*I learned enough to realise*" [P4]). Authors (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001) advise that although some changes can be painful, this period of life could also prepare the stage for the development of wise reflection and leaving the 'false self' behind with its illusions and futile desires, depending on how people cope with these stressors.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. The respondents were exclusively Caucasian, mainly middle class, and computer literate. Therefore, experiences of ageing were potentially biased by a heterosexual, middle class worldview and restricted to men who had internet access. Also, because this was an e-mail interview, individuals may have taken the opportunity to re-read and edit their responses. We found the email interview method unobtrusive, although we would suggest that further research include men from other social and ethnic groups.

### **Reflexive analysis**

Reflexivity is a practice whereby the researcher turns a critical observation towards him/herself in order to get involved in a critical self-reflection of how his/her own social background, assumptions, positioning can influence research procedure and analysis (Finlay

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& Gough, 2003). In this study all authors had health psychology backgrounds and were mindful that the design of the study and interpretation of data could have been influenced by their 'critical realist' approach (which accepts that the concepts of the world are constructed through language, but also sees constructs as being underpinned by social and material structures; Parker, 1998). Furthermore, the authors revisited and challenged assumptions as a constant reflective process about ageing, midlife and masculine identities in Western societies. One of the researchers, as a middle-aged man undergoing natural changes to his identity, was careful to reflect on the transcripts without allowing his own experiences to colour the interpretation of the participants' discourses, as far as was possible.

### **Conclusions**

Stereotypical gender views, demands and pressures from men's social relations at midlife may be imperative as they are determinants of the psychophysical stresses they experience in daily life. Distinguishing between the inner self and how the self is socially performed allows the contemplation of critical understanding of the many ways that age, gender, class and ethnicity intersect and the contradictions they manifest for identity management (Biggs, 2004). In certain aspects, we found that the middle-aged respondents were better able to identify with the industrial traditional masculine code. Isopahkala-Bouret (2015) argued that resistance to long-held gender stereotypes requires rigorous effort to maintain and it may continue to subsist even within practices and relationships that seem egalitarian. As Biggs (2004, p. 50) suggested, "the past is often used as source material from which to build a serviceable identity in the present". Thus, appreciating men's personal experiences, there is a crucial learning point that emerges from the interaction between the traditional and the contemporary masculine ideologies: of the need to protect these men's authentic sense of being and empower men themselves to refashion alternatives to existing gender stereotypes.

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The above findings also have implications for masculinity theory in deepening our understanding both conceptually and phenomenologically. We learned that the delicate world of middle-aged British men is frail, full of social pressure and it is unlikely that these men are trying to emulate younger male identities nor to mimic contemporary metrosexual identities. Rather, these men are caught in the process of constructing masculinity between the old and the new. As Messerschmidt (2012) recommended, in order to understand hegemonic masculinities we need to derive non-hegemonic masculinities from hegemonic masculinities. We argue against the idea that self-presentations can be simultaneously hegemonic and non-hegemonic (e.g. Szabo, 2014) and propose that men's identities are undeniably fluid processes in nature and are created in momentary acts of identification. Consequently when men try to solidify and make either identities permanent (hegemonic and non-hegemonic) in an endlessly changing multicultural environment where needs and wants constantly occur, a source of confusion and distress may arise. Most importantly, self-cultivation is culture sensitive and solidified concepts can have harmful consequences on behaviours.

The findings from this research are impactful, since public health promoters should take these findings into account and assist men to develop more flexibility in constructing middle-aged men's identities in multiple ways and tailor information accordingly. For instance, when it comes to coping with difficulties, numerous papers (e.g. Courtenay, 2000) have argued that traditional hegemonic masculinity requires men to be tough and self-reliant, and in emotional control (i.e. suppressing emotions and denying vulnerability). Emslie et al. (2006) emphasized that men often label and mistaken their depression as 'stress' and believe that discussing emotional problems would view them in other men's eyes as weak and unable to cope, thus it is incompatible with hegemonic masculinity. Thereby, those men who adhere to hegemonic masculine values, such as being the breadwinner, may benefit from learning/internalising effective ways to balance self-care and social responsibilities before

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exhaustion takes its toll on physical and psychological health. Even though, in later life, many people manage to avoid becoming preoccupied or depressed about their own ageing or gender, the challenge for younger middle-aged adults is to integrate the perceived changes into their identities without being overwhelmed or demoralised.

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