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ARTICLE

'In a hospital bed or … out doing Indiana Jones': older Irish men's negotiations of cultural representations of ageing

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Abstract
There is a growing body of interdisciplinary literature on the representation and construction of ageing masculinities; however, there is a lack of specific analysis of older men's responses to cultural images of ageing. It is important to examine how cultural meanings around ageing may inform older men's lived experiences, an underexplored aspect of gender and social relations. This article does so and contributes to social gerontology and masculinity studies. It draws on focus group discussions and follow-up interviews or reflective diaries with seven men aged 65–73 years, varying in terms of relationship status and sexual orientation. The research forms part of an international study. It discusses the initial thematic findings, interpreted with reference to literature on ageing in culture and society, and hegemonic masculinities. The analysis identifies five primary themes: under-representation and stereotyping in media; diminishment of family role; transition from work to retirement; agency as opposed to confinement; and ageing as engaged and autonomous, illustrating some of the issues involved in the fluidity of masculinity over a lifetime. It highlights how representation can inform perceptions and experiences of growing older, and shows shifting masculine identities that negotiate hegemonic expectations as well as discourses about ageing. This study demonstrates how the participants' modifications of hegemonic masculine and ageing identity interrogate and broaden these discourses, and opens avenues for future investigation.

Keywords: ageing; men; masculinity; gender; representation; Ireland

Introduction

Populations are ageing globally. In Ireland, 13.8 per cent of the population are aged 65 years and over and this figure is expected to increase in the future (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Older men are frequent consumers of television (Van Der Goot *et al.*, 2012), yet there are few studies focusing on their interpretation and response to images of ageing in this arena. While there is a burgeoning

literature on ageing masculinities in the social sciences (Calasanti, 2004; Hearn, 2007; Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2016), there is relatively scant research in an Irish context. Through exploring older men's perceptions of cultural representations of ageing, this paper finds shifting masculine identities that negotiate hegemonic expectations as well as messages contained in discourses about ageing, modifying and broadening these discourses. The findings contribute to international, interdisciplinary research literature on men's constructions of ageing masculinities and to two understudied areas in Irish academic literature; bringing the perspective of ageing to studies of Irish masculinity, and bringing to social gerontological studies an examination of how cultural meanings surrounding ageing may inform men's lived experiences in Ireland. They illuminate how age may broaden conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity in Ireland, which historically have been associated with athletic vigour, the authority of the father and the breadwinner role (McDevitt, 1997; Ferguson, 2001; Ní Laoire, 2005). We draw on discussions with men (aged 65+) in Ireland on their perceptions of representations of older men on television (three advertisements (adverts), soap opera excerpts and a documentary trailer) and in film (a full-length UK film). The research forms part of a larger international study, entitled Gendering Age: Representations of Masculinities and Ageing in Contemporary European Literatures and Cinemas (Mascage), where similar research was carried out in Austria, Estonia, Israel, Spain and Sweden. The unique methodology combining focus groups and diaries enables both wide-ranging discussion and in-depth reflection on the part of the participants. It asks to what extent is participants' experience of gendered ageing informed by images of ageing, and how do they negotiate this? The main themes emerging from the research are underrepresentation and stereotyping in the media, diminishment of role in the family, transition from work to retirement, agency as compared to passivity, and ageing, engagement and autonomy. The thematic analysis highlights issues involved in an aspect of social experience and gender relations largely overlooked in Irish research: the fluid nature of masculinity over a lifetime, and how it may become more difficult to navigate ideals of traditional hegemonic masculinity as one ages, ideals that often inform personal, family and working life. The discussion highlights how representation can inform our shared social values and assumptions surrounding ageing.

Literature review

Masculinities in Ireland

Research on Irish masculinities has focused on younger men. However, growing older can inform men's masculine identities in ways that can problematise earlier positions. Hegemonic masculinity, that is, ideals of masculinity, which are culturally constructed and socially constituted, informs a power structure in which expressions of manhood typically value qualities such as strength, success and control (Kimmell, 1994; Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). While hegemonic masculinity provides for some men to hold power, it also exacts a price from those men, as well as from those who because of age, race or sexuality, for instance, do not conform to the ideal (Kimmell, 1994; Calasanti and King,

2005). Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been key to understanding issues of privilege and subordination, it has been widely challenged as essentialist, restricting and not accounting for men's emotional lives or possibilities for changing masculinities (Elliott, 2016). Concepts such as caring masculinities have emerged that allow for men's adoption of values such as care, relationality and interdependence, values traditionally associated with women, into masculine identities, recasting traditional masculine values (Elliott, 2016). By exploring how older men in Ireland perceive the representation of their counterparts on television and in film, we consider how the often-contradictory narratives of ageing and masculinity can inform perceptions of older men and shape their experiences of growing older. This is an underresearched area in social gerontology. While there have been advances in understanding the lives of older women, the ways in which gendered ageing affects men remains underexplored; men may face challenges as age distances them from roles and relationship status that emphasise masculine ideals of power and autonomy (Arber *et al.*, 2003; Venn *et al.*, 2011). Although there are social gerontological studies considering older Irish adults in the context of cognitive decline, health and homelessness, rural old age and social exclusion (Cush *et al.*, 2020; Walsh *et al.*, 2020), there is a general lack of research on gendered ageing and on older Irish men's masculinities. Irish masculinity, historically rural and informed by the influence of the Catholic Church and the Gaelic Athletic Association (the most popular amateur sports organisation in Ireland), emphasised physicality, self-discipline and traditional family values (McDevitt, 1997; Ferguson, 2001). Yet, while the practices and activities family members carry out in relation to one another reproduce family relationships, they can also redefine them (Morgan, 2020), however, this sense of fluidity is missing from studies of Irish masculinities in family contexts. Ní Laoire (2005) discusses how farming is bound up with masculine identities in Ireland, emphasising a gendered division of labour, patrilineal inheritance and the powerful role of the father, which is closely connected with pride in providing for one's family. This historical link between Irish masculinity and the 'provider' role is reiterated by Goodwin (2002) in his study of men and work in Dublin, and Ralph (2020), who extends the masculinity/breadwinning connection to men who live in Ireland and work in other European countries. Given these associations, work on Irish masculinities has tended to focus on younger men, with a general lack of research on men past retirement age. However, due to patterns of inheritance where only the heir could inherit the farm, Ireland has the highest proportion of older never-married men in Europe, and while there has been research on bachelor farmers, it has not been focused on age or representation (Curtin and Varley, 1987; Kamiya and Sofroniou, 2011). Recent studies of Irish men identify a traditional understanding of gender alongside new norms of masculinity informed by social change, urbanisation and globalisation, and point to the multiple, shifting and situational ways that they present themselves as men (Ging, 2005; Ní Laoire, 2005; Johnston and Morrison, 2007; Darcy, 2019). Ging (2005) focuses on Irish male teenagers' consumption and reception of media images of masculinity, finding that participants were active, literate viewers, who creatively mediated images to understand their lives and masculine identities. Recently, Darcy (2019), in focus groups with Irish men aged 18–85 about their conceptualisation of masculinity, found that some are moving from stereotypical

notions towards more fluid constructs. While Darcy points to differences in how men construct masculinities with age, noting the incongruence between emotional reality and gendered expectations, the complexities of these intersections remain unexplored in the growing body of work on masculinity and Irish society.

Ageing masculinities

Research on the intersections of masculinities and age demonstrates how the cultural blueprint for 'being a man' is deficient in guidelines for older men, who may struggle with the pressure of traditional masculinities (Thompson and Langedoerfer, 2016). This struggle is informed by social ageism – discrimination and stereotyping in institutional and everyday contexts (Ojala *et al.*, 2016). While age in men can be a source of power, it can also indicate a loss of power, as ageism undermines gender-based privilege (Hearn and Sandberg, 2009; Jackson, 2016). Yet, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2016), examining how older men (aged 65–89) perceive ageism, found that while the men felt that age-based discrimination was prevalent, and although many had internalised ageist and sexist stereotypes, they considered it a socially distant issue that did not affect them directly. Gregorčič and Cizelj (2019), in a study of masculinities, age and gender capital, observe that a variety of masculinities and femininities are necessary for individuals in older age given the contradictions that can arise with traditional gender constructs, yet they are often perceived in ageist discourse as de-gendered. Another stereotype that older men encounter is the association with loneliness. Ratcliffe *et al.* (2021), exploring how age and gender intersect in older men's constructions of loneliness, found that they associate the experience with vulnerability and hence 'femininity'. Exploring subjective perceptions of ageing among people aged 65–74 years, Bordone *et al.* (2020) found that men are less likely than women to feel old or to think that society perceives them as old. Integral to whether men are likely to feel old is a close association between ideals of personal autonomy, masculine identity and the notion of ageing successfully (Smith *et al.*, 2007). Older men often construct hegemonic masculinity as an oppressive requirement but one which can be reshaped into traits associated with responsibility, caring for and helping others, thus maintaining the pride associated with masculine identity (Ratcliffe *et al.*, 2021).

The dynamics of work and family relationships can influence how masculine identity changes in later life, as traditional place and power is disrupted under globalisation (Hearn, 2011). There has been significant change in family structure and relationships in Ireland in recent decades, due to patterns including declining fertility, women's increased labour market participation, liberalisation in attitudes, and a shift away from celibacy and non-marriage, giving rise to decreasing family size and increasing diversity (Canavan, 2012). Although research is increasingly recognising the changing roles and relationships of men in this context, there has been little emphasis on grandfathers and less still on older men who are not fathers or grandfathers. Underdeveloped understandings of grandfathers reflect a feminised conception of grandparenting and failure to consider later-life masculinity (Mann, 2007). Opportunities for caring practices and new perspectives on gender roles in grandfatherhood can disrupt hegemonic masculinity, though the

role may also serve to affirm connections to hegemonic masculine ideals (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2016; Mann *et al.*, 2016; Hasmanová, 2019). In Ireland, while there are findings on the differing effects of grandchild care on grandparents' wellbeing depending on whether it is through choice or obligation (McGarrigle *et al.*, 2018), there is no research on how grandfatherhood may inform masculinity. There is a lack of research on the impact of different forms of non-parenthood on men's masculinities, absent from the literature due to unreflective assumptions as childless men are outside heteronormative pronatalist ideology and masculine ideals of virility, with discourse centred on women's experiences (Hadley, 2021*a*, 2021*b*). However, childless older men are more likely to be disadvantaged and to experience isolation compared with older women (Venn *et al.*, 2011). Ageing outside a heterosexual context is also understudied and there is a need to consider the complexities of the lives of older non-heterosexual adults, which can provide insights into the challenges faced by non-heterosexual and heterosexual men as the meanings attached to traditional relationships change (Heaphy *et al.*, 2004). Beyond family, retirement and loss of work identity can also inform men's masculine identities. Bordone *et al.* (2020) found that, for men, retirement is associated with feeling old. With the changing relationship between ageing and work in recent years, due to demographic change, globalisation, new technologies, job insecurity and policies to extend working life, research is needed to understand these changes in a broader social context (Phillipson, 2019).

Ageing masculinities and media representation

The relationship between ageing and media representation is a strained one, given the role of the media in reproducing stereotypical images, when not neglecting older figures (Iversen and Wilinska, 2020). Such images inform social preconceptions about later life (Iversen and Wilinska, 2020). As Gullette (2004: 12) observes, 'We are aged by culture'. The identities and lifestyles that are promoted in mass media inform individuals' lives as well as others' reactions. When older people appear in the media, the purpose tends to be the endorsement of age-marked qualities, roles or products (Ylänne, 2015). They are coded in positive or negative portrayals (Ylänne, 2015), for instance, frailty and loss, which is increasingly being replaced by wisdom and experience or, most recently, agelessness or 'successful ageing' (Uotila *et al.*, 2010), a broad concept that endorses 'ageing well' as the maintenance of good health and active engagement with life (Urtamo *et al.*, 2019). Such absence or stereotyping is conspicuous in advertising and has also been observed in primetime television series (Kessler *et al.*, 2004; Ylänne, 2015). Writers of Finnish print mass media were found to adopt two different representations of old age: an active, productive third age and a passive, dependent fourth age (Uotila *et al.*, 2010). On ageing and masculinity, Calasanti and King (2005: 19), examining ageism in a consumer market of 'successful ageing', find that men seek to live up to the ideal representations in mass media of 'working, playing, and staying hard'. While some men strive for these lifestyles, many lack the means or the health to do so and some deliberately resist (Calasanti and King, 2005). An interdisciplinary approach bringing together insights from media studies and from social gerontology is therefore critical, yet underdeveloped (Iversen and Wilinska, 2020).

Research by media studies scholars demonstrates how images often exhort older men to continue to follow hegemonic scripts. Studies highlight a lack of range in cultural representations of ageing and masculinity in mainstream media (Chivers, 2011; Boyle and Brayton, 2012; Evans, 2015; Moran, 2016), although some studies have found images that instead explore the complexities of later life (Saxton and Cole, 2013; Redding, 2014; Casado-Gual, 2020). King (2010) illustrates how the figure of the cop in action films demonstrates the contradictory scripts of hegemonic masculinity and ageing, *e.g.* strength *versus* decline, which prompt older men to find ways to keep ageing at bay. There are few empirical studies of ageing and television or film. However, King *et al.* (2018) observed that a documentary exploring links between masculinity, mental health and suicide encouraged Australian men to rethink stereotypes of masculinity and it encouraged help-seeking behaviours. The relationship between masculinity, ageing and the media is a complex one, as cultural representations inform social realities and individual lives. Here, we consider how older men in Ireland respond to visual representations of their counterparts in television and film, asking whether and to what extent is participants' experience of gendered ageing informed by such cultural narratives, and how do they negotiate this on an individual level? Considering that men's social power may change as they grow older in ways that can inform their positioning in relation to hegemonic masculinity, we further consider how this incongruity may inform their lives, and whether and to what extent they maintain continuity with dominant scripts of masculinity.

Methodology

The design of this study was informed by the need to analyse how their perceptions of ageing in society and, connectedly, cultural representations inform older men's lives in Ireland, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of Irish masculinities. This research forms part of a broader international study. The focus groups were designed to generate discussion of visual media within the wider context of the men's experiences of growing older in Irish society, while reflective diaries or semi-structured interviews would allow for participants' extended reflections. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate methodology, because this is an exploratory research topic in Ireland and one of the advantages of focus groups is that group discussion can generate new insights across the group (Ataie and Morgan, 2016). We chose to complement this with the use of diaries and/or interviews to give participants time for more in-depth reflection on the issues, and to discuss issues that they may be more reluctant to discuss in a group, thus getting the benefits of both focus groups and interviews.

Contact was made with two cinemas in a city in Ireland, a commercial cinema and an arthouse cinema, and permission was obtained to distribute information at screenings for older members of the community. It was decided to recruit participants who were habitual cinema-goers for this focus group and this may have led to a lack of diversity in the group, with most participants being middle class. It was intended to interview a comparison group of participants from a Men's Shed in a subsequent focus group; unfortunately this plan was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants volunteered to take part after reading a

flyer and/or speaking to a researcher who visited the cinemas. Participants did not receive any payment. Seven men were recruited, varying in terms of sexual orientation and relationship status; all are white, middle class, including a doctor, an accountant, two educators, an engineer, an information technology professional and a business owner, and currently live in Ireland and all but two were born in Ireland. The profile of participants, including work status, sexual orientation, relationship status, how many of the men are fathers or grandfathers, and health status, is described in Table 1.

The focus groups took place in two sessions, which were held on different days, with participants giving written consent. All seven men participated in both focus groups. No one person dominated the conversation. Most of the participants spoke for a relatively similar proportion of time. The oldest man spoke for a shorter time in both groups (*see* Table 2). However, this man spoke for longer in his interview than did the others (*see* Table 3), suggesting that the mixed methodology allowed for those who did not speak much in groups the opportunity to express their views subsequently. To begin, participants were asked to discuss how they experience growing older in Ireland. Next, three contrasting adverts from different European countries, centrally featuring older men, were shown to facilitate extended discussion of media representations of later-life masculinities. Finally, participants were asked to consider whether and how such representations affected them in their everyday lives. At the end of the session, diaries were distributed for participants to record any additional reflections over the duration of the two focus groups (Symon, 2004). A guidance sheet was distributed suggesting issues that they may like to consider; however, participants were encouraged to note anything they felt was relevant. Participants were offered the option of participating in a short interview with one of the facilitators after focus group 2 (FG2), instead of using the diary, if they preferred. Table 3 outlines the duration of the focus groups, the length of the interviews and the word count of the diary entries.

The men had the diaries for approximately three months; it took approximately three months to collect all the data (focus group 1 (FG1) was held in November 2019, FG2 was held in December 2019, and the interviews were undertaken and diaries collected in January 2020). The focus groups were conducted and the research instruments for FG2 were designed by two female researchers, one aged in her thirties from a humanities/sociological background and one aged in her fifties from a social gerontology background. The research instruments for FG1 were designed in consultation with members of the international Mascage team. One female member of the Mascage humanities team was present and gave logistical assistance during the focus groups and a male Mascage team member met the men after focus group two. The latter (a film studies expert) helped select the film and documentary for FG2. It is possible that the men may have raised different issues had the researchers running the focus groups been male; however, they appeared very willing to participate and express their views. Data were anonymised and pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the confidentiality of participants.

FG2 was designed to have a specific Ireland/UK focus. Content included television clips and a full-length film selected by the Irish team. The participants were shown four short clips from Irish television centrally featuring older men; these

Table 1. Profile of participants

	N
Age:	
65–69	5
70–74	2
Highest level of education:	
Primary	0
Secondary	0
Higher education	7
Work status:	
Full-time work	1
Semi-retired	3
Retired	3
Sexual orientation:	
Heterosexual	5
Homosexual	2
Other	0
Relationship status:	
Married	3
Divorced and re-married	1
Widowed	2
Not specified	1
Number of children:	
0	1
1 or 2	3
3 or 4	3
Number of grandchildren:	
0	4
3–5	2
10	1
Health status:	
Good	2
Very good	3
Excellent	2

Table 2. Participant contributions in the two focus groups

Focus group	Percentage of words spoken						
	Sean	Thomas	James	Brendan	Kevin	Dermot	Patrick
1	19.45	18.14	16.86	14.04	13.67	10.36	7.48
2	18.73	16.61	18.62	12.77	14.80	13.42	5.05

were chosen to reflect popular cultural representation (with three clips featuring different older male characters from *Fair City*, a widely viewed Irish soap opera) and contrast (with a trailer for a documentary *The Man Who Wanted to Fly* representing a different, more active image of an older man). After each clip, participants were asked for their views on how the clips represented older men. After lunch, participants were shown a full-length film set in the UK, *I, Daniel Blake* (released in 2016). The film represented an extended narrative of an older man negotiating a difficult socio-economic climate, allowing for deeper engagement on the part of the participants. A discussion was held, afterwards, about the story and the main character in the film, and how these representations compared with the participants' life experiences.

A reflexive thematic analysis approach was chosen to explore shared meaning-based patterns across the data about how growing older is represented and understood in Irish society, as well as exploring the ways these perceptions can affect older men's masculinity practices (Braun *et al.*, 2018). The focus groups were transcribed and data from the interviews, reflective diaries and emailed reflection were also included. The initial analysis was conducted separately by each of the researchers to identify themes. Data were read, reread and coded manually for repetition of particular words and definition and development of themes, understood as patterns of meaning (Braun *et al.*, 2018). The researchers subsequently met and discussed the themes extensively until agreement was reached on any points of contention, which were clarified through discussion. Our analysis was guided by the research question: whether and to what extent is participants' experience of gendered ageing informed by cultural narratives, and how do they negotiate this on an individual level? It was informed by our understanding of hegemonic masculinity as a culturally constructed and situationally contingent social practice (Berg and Longhurst, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This approach allowed for a considered exploration of whether and how social and cultural portrayals correspond with or inform perceptions and practices of age and gender in later life.

Thematic findings

Five central themes were identified in relation to representations of ageing masculinity: underrepresentation and stereotyping in media (and connectedly, views on the impact of representation); diminishment of family role; transition from work to retirement; agency as opposed to confinement; and ageing, engagement and autonomy.

Table 3. Data sources

Data source	FG1	FG2	Diary 1	Diary 2	Diary 3	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Email reflection
Duration or word count	1 hour, 50 min	1 hour, 41 min	692 words	1,376 words	2,253 words	12 min, 48 sec	21 min, 47 sec	18 min, 34 sec	310 words
Contributor	All 7 men	All 7 men	James	Kevin	Brendan	Dermot	Patrick	Thomas	Sean

Notes: FG: focus group. min: minutes. sec: seconds.

Underrepresentation and stereotyping in media

Most participants noted gaps, underrepresentation and stereotyping in current images of older men, especially in advertising. Several observed that some recent television sitcoms and films provide more diverse and complex roles (FG1). One participant observed that the largely family-oriented roles depicted in the clips shown did not represent him as a gay man (Dermot,[1] 66, interview). He did not refer to his family in the discussions or interview. Some observed that the stereotypes are at opposite ends of a scale. As one participant stated:

> It seems like people are either … in a hospital bed, or they're 75, a Harrison Ford still out doing Indiana Jones. (Kevin, 67, FG1)

In his diary reflection, he elaborated that 'the slightly declining abilities age generally brings' are not portrayed (Kevin, 67, diary entry). Similarly, another participant reflected on the lack of representation of older men who for reasons of mental or physical health are no longer 'able to participate in activities at such an active level' (Dermot, 66, diary entry).

 One advert that raised complex discussion of stereotyping was a Swedish advert for Nicorette chewing gum (FG1). In it, an attractive young woman walks confidently past an old man seated on a bench, as he places a piece of chewing gum in his mouth. She stops, leans over, takes his face in her hands, kisses him and walks away. As he stares after her, she is seen chewing the gum. The participants observed that the advert was taking two stereotypes, the grumpy old man and the 'hot' young woman, and building on the contrast. Although the advert appeared to suggest that the woman desired the chewing gum, one participant read a different cliché in the scene:

> It's almost like Nicorette turns you into Harrison Ford … the stereotype that you see in a lot of films that young women are going to fall for an older man. (Brendan, 71, FG1)

Another participant asked what would happen if the roles were reversed – in particular, he raised the issue of consent, observing: 'It makes me think that as you get older people feel they don't need your consent' (Sean, 66, FG1). In this light, the participants considered that if you flipped the actors' roles, the advert would be viewed as unacceptable, but assumptions are made because of gender and age (FG1).

Views on the impact of representation

Opinions differed on the impact of representation on the lives of older men, but overall, most participants felt that it was influential (FG1). One noted that representations remain with you:

> When you watch something, to fully engage with it you have to believe, and you turn to the outside world, some of that must remain with you. (James, 67, FG1)

Observing how culture can influence as well as imitate society, he reflected:

More complex portrayals in the past few years, are, I think, as much a cause of more sympathetic responses in society at large as they are a reflection of them. (James, 67, diary entry)

One participant asserted that he is not personally influenced by television shows or movies, for example:

I think I recognise them principally as entertainment and I kind of know who I am, and what I want to do, and where I'm going at this stage. (Kevin, 67, FG1)

However, most participants considered representation to be important.

Diminishment of family role

Participants' discussion of representations of older men and their role in families focused on fathers' movement away from the centre and grandfather figures as underestimated or taken for granted. All but one of the participants are fathers and three are grandfathers. Although these representations resonated with the experiences of some participants, others observed that age afforded freedom and the choice to engage with family, beyond what the images showed. Commenting on how older men are regarded in society generally, one man, who is a grandfather, noted:

One thing that strikes me about expectations is the issue around grandparents seen as a free resource … older people are seen as just something to use, rather than somebody to be. (James, 67, FG1)

In a Christmas advert for a German supermarket group, a man who appears to be in his eighties sits down alone to his Christmas dinner. His children receive funeral invitations and gather at his house with their families, only to discover that their father is alive, having tricked them into coming home for Christmas (FG1). The discussion generally considered the image stereotypical, with participants asking why the man did not take the initiative and go on a cruise or travel to visit family, himself. However, in interview one man, who is not a grandfather, felt that the advert reflects social roles in that it was 'Effective just as a plea from older, lonely, people not to be forgotten by their families' and observed that

The world has changed – when I was younger, it was common for a grandparent to be living with families, now you find its very rare, usually they're on their own or in institutions. (Thomas, 68, interview)

He wondered whether, 'As a woman, he mightn't have been quite as isolated – he might have been better integrated' (Thomas, 68, interview). Connectedly, in his diary another participant observed 'a theme of older men being alone – with family coming to him', and asked, 'Is there an implication that men living alone need more support than women?' (Brendan, 71, diary entry).

One of the clips from the Irish soap opera *Fair City* showed a man in his seventies seated in a pub doing paperwork at Christmastime. He is impatient at

being interrupted but cheers up and begins to reminisce when he sees a baby. Some participants considered that these grumpy or reflective depictions, while typical, were not unreasonable; they identified with these moods. However, one reacted strongly to the stereotype, stating that it 'was almost a slap in the face' how 'the lady came in and … questions his cognitive abilities' (Sean, 66, FG2) (is he making a list and checking it twice? she asks, in a joke that recalls the song about Santa Claus).

In another clip from *Fair City*, three men in their seventies discuss family. One is reluctant to visit family in Australia, in case of family drama, and the others empathise but observe that it is worth it for the good times. Again, some of the participants made connections with their own lives. One observed that men's position in the family changes with age, whereby they lose their central role:

> Initially they [father] would have been at the centre of the family when everyone was younger, but now they're all grown up and they're all off with their own families, their [fathers'] role has changed and they've moved more to the periphery. (Sean, 66, FG2)

Participants generally considered the dilemma of whether to travel to family a good reflection of a dilemma facing older Irish men, thus indicating the impact of social change and globalisation on family dynamics.

Transition from work and retirement

In discussions about ageing generally, as well as following the film *I, Daniel Blake*, the need to rethink their lives on retirement emerged as a preoccupation for several participants. Following the question, 'at what age do we become old?', one commented:

> Men … over-identify with their role in work, so when retirement comes, there's suddenly this big gate or you're falling off the edge of a cliff … and a lot of the connections you would have … were connected with the workplace, so when you suddenly leave then that changes. (Sean, 66, FG1)

On 'what roles do older people play in today's society?', another observed:

> Having just retired last year, you do have to rebalance and see where you're going, but undoubtedly your career or your job hugely shapes who you are and what you are and how people view you … it probably is the most defining character of our lives, maybe too much so. (Thomas, 68, FG1)

He later commented that 'women who may be at home or may have careers and be at home and double jobbing, just continue on doing what they were doing before' (Thomas, 68, FG1). In an interview, the same participant said the struggle to reorient on retirement was not something that happened to him, but to other men (Thomas, 68, interview). These comments suggest some gender-based assumptions about growing older, though he does not consider these to inform his own experiences.

The film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) prompted further responses about work and retirement (FG2). In the film, although his doctor finds him unfit for work, 59-year-old Daniel is denied state support. He is required to keep looking for work as a condition for receiving jobseeker's allowance. On the day of his appeal, Daniel suffers a heart attack and dies. At the funeral, a woman he had befriended reads out a speech that Daniel had planned to read at his appeal, about how he deserved to be treated with dignity, having worked all his life. In a diary entry, one participant noted that

> While the experience of Daniel Blake reflects the reality of what can happen to older people caught in a bureaucratic nightmare, it applies equally to people of all ages. (Brendan, 71, diary entry)

Similarly, in discussions, one participant commented that Daniel 'represents everyone' (Kevin, 67, FG2). Observing that any individual might suffer at the hands of the political or welfare system, the participants were not inclined to consider Daniel's troubles as age-related (although proximity to retirement and declining physical ability were a factor in his position). Participants tended to perceive Daniel as a proud, hardworking man who had paid his dues only to be ground down by the system and lose control over his situation (FG2). They extrapolated to the Irish context and the unjustness that they perceived of the increasing pension age (66 and set to rise to 68) and queried whether the State was breaching a social contract.

One participant admired how, despite the difficulties of his situation, Daniel

> was capable of showing compassion to the mother and the children even though he was under a great degree of threat … he was still open and giving and compassionate and supportive to someone else. (Sean, 66, FG2)

This statement highlights Daniel's caring qualities as effective forms of assistance and resilience.

Agency as opposed to confinement

Agency emerged as a central concern for the participants. As one defined it: 'by agency I mean his ability to take action … and to have choice' (Sean, 66, FG1). Some felt that the older men depicted were devoid of agency, and others disagreed. However, across discussions participants placed value on agency and choice in the face of changing circumstances with age. With the German supermarket advert, the focus was on agency in the family and one man noted:

> I did wonder why he didn't go to them over the various Christmases, which was sort of taking agency from him. (James, 67, FG1)

Another observed that

> At the beginning … it was like he had no option, no agency, no choice, couldn't do anything, was almost frozen in the chair. (Sean, 66, FG1)

It was considered by some that, in contrast to this depiction, age could afford freedom. One man contrasted it with his own behaviour: 'I'm the one with the free time at this stage, so … go see the kids' (Thomas, 68, FG1). On reflection, however, one participant considered that the man was shown to be 'independent and clever' by getting all his children to come to him (Brendan, 71, diary entry).

The film *I, Daniel Blake* raised similar issues of agency, this time in the realm of work and social welfare. One man observed the 'dehumanising' effect of the social welfare system (Thomas, 68, FG2) and another observed that although Daniel rebels, 'the wind is taken away from him' (James, 67, FG2). Another man sought to distance himself from Daniel's situation:

> I like to think I wouldn't be a Daniel Blake because I feel I can advocate for myself more effectively … but I've also not been personally faced with his situation so perhaps I'm overly optimistic in my belief that I can do more for myself. (Kevin, 67, diary entry)

An advert for running shoes informed discussion about confinement in the context of the need for care and support in older age. In it, a man is shown in a care home. He looks out the window and at his running shoes and makes several attempts to run away but is always stopped by care workers. The other residents give him back the shoes, cheer him on, and hold back the care workers as he runs through the hall and breaks through the door to the open landscape. One participant stated:

> I suppose that's reality, older people are treated like that and held back and put into a box, I mean not literally but into a section that suits their lives, and that's frightening. (Patrick, 73, FG1)

Participants were critical that the advert lacked nuance, and in general found it to be sad. One participant noted his surprise that 'the only option he appeared to have was to recapture what he was doing in his youth', which was unrealistic, 'say he slips and falls and hurts himself' (Sean, 66, FG1). Ultimately, he observed,

> He doesn't appear to have moved on … he seems very stuck; it's sort of a chronic depressive type of state. (Sean, 66, FG1)

These observations identify and critique stereotypes of older people as dependent and in decline. At the same time, participants remained mindful of the necessity for care and support, which can come into tension with the desire for independence.

Ageing, engagement and autonomy

The participants emphasised the importance of being engaged, active and purposeful. Several spoke about the importance of staying active. Two described ageing as something that can be 'pushed out' by maintaining physical health (Patrick, 73; Kevin, 67, FG1). One appeared to embrace age:

> I'm physically active enough but I sort of embrace becoming older; I quite like finding out about things, becoming older, observing different friends and circles, and I don't mind being a bit prepared for what's coming ahead as well, as opposed to hitting a brick wall. (Dermot, 66, FG1)

Participants agreed on the value of a positive mental approach to ageing. In this regard, they commented favourably on a trailer for a documentary *The Man Who Wanted to Fly* (FG2). In it, a man in his eighties is pursuing a lifelong dream to fly. He has cut a runway in a neighbour's field, built a hangar and is using his life savings to buy a plane. One participant observed that enthusiasm for new things is sometimes absent in portrayals of older people (James, 67, FG2). Another noted,

> It's usually young heroes who are doing things, so docs [documentaries] like this would be unusual; there's a tendency to forget about old men, who are out of sight. (Patrick, 73, interview)

They compared *The Man Who Wanted to Fly* favourably to the *Fair City* clip in which a grumpy old man slips into reminiscence, because it demonstrated life having a sense of purpose and meaning as opposed to focusing on impairment and limitations, and they considered this a positive perspective:

> This is looking to the future, and [in] the other we're kind of looking to the past. This is 'What can I still do?' and the other was 'What did I lose along the way?' (Kevin, 67, FG2)

The participants interrogated the term 'older' as generalising. To 'get old', as one stated, is 'a matter of perception … I don't look at myself as young, or as old' (Thomas, 68, FG1). Several times, they queried the assumptions that are applied to people as they age; one participant noted, about all the clips, that 'they're portrayed as being different because they're older, and they don't have to be' (Patrick, 73, FG2). Participants interrogated ageing stereotypes as unfounded, for instance citing the grumpy old man in the soap opera clip to claim, 'we all have those moods and actually it doesn't matter whether we're 30 or 60 or 70' (Kevin, 67, FG2).

Furthermore, older men were noted as being defined in relationship to others in some of the clips shown. One of the participants observed that some of the clips did not necessarily represent the older person but focused instead on the reactions of other people to the older person:

> It seemed to be that the people around them had expectations of what the older person was going to be … both [*Fair City*] clips were saying more about the other people and how they related to the older person, than anything the older person said or thought about themselves. (Sean, 66, FG2)

Similarly, in reaction to the German supermarket advert, the participant noted that it was 'defining him in relation to his family' (Sean, 66, FG1), suggesting that he

observed a diminishment of the older man's subjective identity with age in these representations.

Discussion

This article explores how older men in Ireland perceive, and situate themselves in relation to, media representations of growing older. The prevalent themes – underrepresentation and stereotyping in the media; diminishment of family role; transition from work to retirement; agency as opposed to confinement; ageing, engagement and autonomy – showcase some of the issues involved in an important aspect of social experience and gender relations; the fluidity of masculinities over time, and how it can become more difficult to navigate hegemonic ideals with age. The thematic findings provide insights into how gender and age ideals are informed by representation, as a loss of status with age influences shifting masculine identities.

In connection with underrepresentation and stereotyping, the participants identified underrepresentation of older men, and heteronormative and age-defined roles, as well as polarised positive *versus* negative portrayals overlooking the reality of gradual decline, for instance frailty set against activity, across genre and markedly in advertising, which corresponds with previous research (Calasanti and King, 2005; Uotila *et al.*, 2010; Ylänne, 2015). They were in general agreement that television and film are beginning to provide more diverse and complex portrayals of older men, as noted in recent studies (Saxton and Cole, 2013; Redding, 2014; Casado-Gual, 2020). The limitations they observe raise the issue of the deficiency of cultural guidelines for being an older man, or alternatives to traditional masculinities, as Thompson and Langedoerfer (2016) highlight. The participants were active, literate viewers, pointing to a range of stereotypes of ageing masculinity, and apparently negotiating these representations in their daily lives. While Ging (2005), stressing that media literacy is not synonymous with the ability to deconstruct ideologies, finds scant evidence that boys in Ireland enact their media usage in ways that challenge hegemonic masculinity, the men in the current study demonstrated some evidence in this regard, criticising or avoiding normative images in favour of nuanced representations, suggesting how age enables the transgression of gender boundaries.

Though they held mixed opinions on the power of representation to inform their views, most stated that cultural narratives have an influence on their lives. In his diary reflection, one participant demonstrated a high ability to consider the power of cultural messages to inform social thought, observing that recent, more complex, portrayals may be as much a cause of changing social attitudes, as a reflection of such changes. Generally, the men demonstrated a high degree of reflexiveness about the roles that they observed. However, some also demonstrated a degree of internalisation of stereotypes, *e.g.* an assumption that women's lives are more continuous than men's – less disrupted by milestones such as retirement – or that the younger woman in the Nicorette advert had fallen for the older man, though there is no evidence of this in the depiction. Participants tended to discuss experiences associated with ageing as things that happened to other people, not to them. Such deflection was a feature across discussions. These observations accord with previous research findings, such as Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2016), who

observed that while participants were conscious of, and many had internalised, age-ist and sexist stereotypes, often they did not consider these issues to inform their personal lives.

The changing dynamics of family relationship represented an important theme. Participants commented on how a man's role in the family is potentially diminished with age and carries a shift in power, as he is perceived differently, moved to the periphery as a father, and possibly used as a free resource in caring for grandchildren, or isolated as a grandparent. This is a more negative emphasis than in previous research findings on grandfatherhood (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2016; Mann *et al.*, 2016; Hasmanová, 2019). However, the participant who considered grandparents to be usually 'on their own or in institutions' is not a grandfather and his perception could stem from a feminised conception of grandparenting, one which leaves men on the periphery (Mann, 2007). The caring role highlighted by a participant who is a grandfather, while framed as underappreciated, resonates with international findings of adapted masculinity in grandfatherhood. Such research has observed grandfatherhood as a positive opportunity to renegotiate expectations about gender roles to incorporate caring, while remaining connected to hegemonic ideals (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2016; Mann *et al.*, 2016; Hasmanová, 2019). While study participants focused on their loss of family position and reluctance to be taken for granted, they looked positively on their ability and opportunity to travel to family, an outlook suggesting a continuing connection to hegemonic masculinity. Their preoccupations perhaps reflect the evolution of the Irish family, suggesting the lingering ideology of the patriarchal male head of household while family structures and relationships have changed and globalisation, overtaking this position of power, has resulted in families being split across countries by emigration (Hearn, 2011). Grandparenting and masculinity in Ireland is an underresearched area and future studies might consider issues of giving or receiving care, the implications for men who are not grandparents and the reformulation of identities, in the context of globalisation and changing family forms.

In addition to changing family connections, the issue of retirement was reiterated both in discussions about social roles generally and in response to the film *I, Daniel Blake*, as informing altered social- and self-perception. Participants raised the issue of reorienting on retirement alongside the loss of a social network connected to work. The connection of hegemonic masculinity with youth-oriented expectations of vigour and productivity, as opposed to stereotypes of ageing associated with dependency and inactivity, and the clash of these constructs, are indicated in their demonstrated apprehension associated with this event. They also stressed the opportunity for travel, hobbies and new connections – potential means by which hegemonic masculinity might be reaffirmed. Generally, the men's observations in this regard reflect the findings of Bordone *et al.* (2020) that it is life experiences as opposed to chronological age that make one feel 'old', and retirement represents one of the biggest disruptions of hegemonic ideals. The participants' appreciation of Daniel Blake's caring qualities was construed as a mark of honour in the face of his own troubles, and of self-determination despite his decreasing autonomy, suggesting support for new forms of hegemonic masculine identity, as observed in previous research (Ratcliffe *et al.*, 2021). Given that

pride in providing for one's family is central to hegemonic constructions of Irish masculinity (Goodwin, 2002; Ní Laoire, 2005; Ralph, 2020), our participants' singling out this revised image reinforces the need for a range of images of masculinities in older age (Gregorčič and Cizelj, 2019).

Several of the participants emphasised the importance of staying active and of having a positive approach to their ageing. Their discussion of their viewing habits generally, suggested that they enjoy watching corresponding representations. They universally upheld the image of 'the man who wanted to fly' as a positive construction; goal-oriented and bringing meaning to life. They all demonstrated an aversion to images that they identified as denoting a loss of agency with age, such as the man 'frozen in the chair'. This emphasis suggests some internalisation of the ideal of active ageing (Calasanti and King, 2005) and avoidance of the alternative construction of passive old age (Uotila *et al.*, 2010). It perhaps demonstrates a desire to maintain some of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, such as success and control (Kimmell, 1994), alongside age. There is a close association between ideals of personal autonomy, masculine identity and the notion of ageing successfully (Smith *et al.*, 2007). The participants' reactions nonetheless acknowledged the necessity for care in older age and this reinforces the importance of personalised approaches in social care and support based on autonomy and choice, as called for in a recent report by Sage, an advocacy service for older people in Ireland (Browne, 2016). Participants consciously interrogated the term 'older' as generalising and unnecessarily denoting difference. Despite this deconstruction, they were reluctant to ascribe themselves to this category, demonstrating a tendency not to identify as old unless life events intervene, or unless, along with reorienting themselves to this lifestage, some continuance with hegemonic masculinity, incorporating an ideal of ageing in a positive way, can be maintained.

While the participants interrogated essentialising ideas about ageing, their concerns regarding some of the representations shown, and their self-representation, in some ways conform to socially entrenched ideas about masculine and feminine characteristics. One of the participants observed the negative portrayal that some of the clips focused on the expectations of other people towards the older person, rather than on the individual themselves. This positioning could be considered a 'feminisation' of the older man. Several observed the association of an older man with isolation or loneliness, taking issue with this connection. Ratcliffe *et al.* (2021) found that older men associate the experience of loneliness with vulnerability and hence 'femininity'. The framework of hegemonic masculinity repudiates such passive constructions as feminine and to be avoided. Thus, it might be argued that hegemonic masculinity is more easily maintained in the active, productive 'third age', as opposed to the passive, dependent 'fourth age' associated with loneliness (Uotila *et al.*, 2010). Congruently, participants valued their independence and cognitive abilities such that some criticised images that they perceived to suggest older men as being incapable, and one considered as offensive a joke about making a list and checking it twice. The importance of retaining pride was a feature across discussions.

Traditional masculine identity in Ireland is informed by patriarchal constructs that emphasise values such as the male provider and the powerful role of the father (Ferguson, 2001; Ní Laoire, 2005). Yet, as this study has demonstrated, this

positioning is not fixed but fluid over time, with age and socio-economic change, and it becomes more difficult to navigate these ideals as one grows older. This fluidity draws attention to a flaw in the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which beyond men's shifting positions in relation to structures of power, does not account for the subjectivities of men's inner lives and their adapting masculinities (Elliott, 2016). Hegemonic masculinity repudiates feminised traits such as care and interdependence (Elliott, 2016), which the participants in this study valued across themes as part of their changing masculinities. Studies of young and middle-aged Irish men importantly identify new gender norms informed by social change, and the multiple ways that men may present themselves (Ging, 2005; Johnston and Morrison, 2007; Darcy, 2019). However, the shifting position of older Irish men is critically overlooked. Our findings demonstrate the pervasive impact of the narratives of ageing promoted in culture and society on older men's lives, which come into tension with these constructs while they contend with the expectations of hegemonic masculinity in the face of the embodied experiences and corporeal realities of age. Their modifications of masculine identity with age broaden hegemonic ideals as well as discourses of ageing. Although at times reinforcing gender and age associations, the diversity that they imply highlights areas where research in social gerontology might find new opportunities for gender- and age-based social change.

Limitations

For this study, we sought to recruit participants who were regular filmgoers. The participants were white, primarily middle-class and able-bodied men, and at the 'young old' end of the older adult category. Thus, they could maintain a certain amount of social and financial capital informing hegemonic masculinity, and distance themselves from the cultural narrative of decline. To be more fully representative of the wider population of older men, future studies should include a more diverse set of participants in terms of race, ethnicity, social class and ability, who may observe alternative images and implications, or negotiate hegemony in different ways. It would also be illuminating to include the perspectives of single and childless men, since most participants were married with children. Additionally, recognising that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' do not necessarily coincide with men and women, future studies should include those who identify as men or women and those who identify as gender non-conforming/non-binary/genderqueer. As this study focuses on men in Ireland, the findings cannot be generalised internationally. Finally, we acknowledge that the small number of participants means that we do not claim to generalise the findings to the wider population of older men in Ireland; nonetheless, it provides insights into the perspectives of these participants, which may be expanded upon in future studies.

Conclusion

This study has explored how television and film representations of older men in Ireland, as they inform social perceptions, play a significant but overlooked role in men's negotiated performances of hegemonic masculinity over time. It has demonstrated some of the ways in which underrepresentation, polarised images

and age-defined roles can impact on men's gendered experiences of ageing, experiences informing a need for reorientation in arenas such as family and working life. As traditional understandings of family and work life evolve due to changing social values, demographic change, extended working life and associated precarity, and globalisation, older men are in the position of negotiating inner masculinities and outer expectations in the context of ingrained concepts of the male head of household and breadwinner role in Ireland. This situation is compounded by a lack of guidelines in a cultural arena where images of older men are informed by traditional stereotypes as well as contemporary concepts of productive and successful ageing. In the face of this ambiguous positioning, the participants in this study demonstrated a high level of critique of age- and gender-based generalisation and stereotype, and reorientation of their subjective masculinities. Their reactions to the film *I, Daniel Blake*, for instance, linking the male protagonist with caring qualities as an effective form of assistance and a demonstration of resilience, suggest adaptive masculinities through changing circumstances over time. The theme of autonomy was also central, drawing attention to the importance of choice in relation to men's care needs and provision, working lives and family interactions. Combining focus groups and diaries, this study produced in-depth reflection providing insight into these experiences. We find that the older participants engage in a culturally situated repositioning of hegemonic masculinity. This positioning involves continuity with, as well as expansion of hegemonic ideals and discourses of ageing. It demonstrates the fluidity of masculinities over time. Our findings support the small but growing body of interdisciplinary work in international research literature on how older men perceive their gender identity with age and inflected by culture. These aspects of changing gender and social relations with age represent a largely unmined area of research in social science literature on men and masculinities in Ireland. Our findings suggest contextual differences in how older men in Ireland experience this negotiation of masculine identity, for instance given the evolution of the family in Ireland. Future studies might consider how the social positions of older Irish bachelors, childless men, rural men or grandparents inform ageing masculinity in a rapidly evolving society in Ireland. This study demonstrates the need for greater diversity in media images to provide context for the shifting nature of masculinities with age and challenge dominant, ageist characterisations of later life.

Note

1 All the names in the article are pseudonyms. Some excerpts provided in this discussion have been shortened by omitting text such as unnecessary repetition or filler words, however, they remain faithful to what was said.

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