Chapter 14

Narrative representations of the self: encounters with contemporary visual art

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Abstract

This chapter explores how and why older people construct narrative identities in response to encounters with contemporary visual art. The respondents rejected the negative characteristics they associated with being old and articulated a more positive counter narrative associated with active and involved older people. The narratives they constructed were also inflected by meta-narratives of family, class and the history of north-east England. This work has implications for arts and cultural policy suggesting that more emphasis be placed on how artworks are consumed. It also provides a greater understanding of the value of arts engagement for older people.

Keywords

- Contemporary visual art
- Art galleries
- Narrative identities
- Societal meta-narratives
- Arts and cultural policy

Introduction

How and why older people create narrative identities in response to encounters with contemporary visual art is explored using the results from *Contemporary visual art and identity construction – well-being amongst older people*. This was a 28-month study (May 2009 – October 2011) that examined the responses of 38 older people who were taken to three contemporary visual art in galleries in north-east England, UK. Participants visited the galleries in pre-existing groups – a writers' group, an older person's advocacy organisation, a film club for the over 60s, a charity providing activities for older men and a group from a sheltered accommodation unit. Baseline interviews provided background information about participants including their engagement with art and culture, the art forms that they preferred, as well general demographic information, such as marital status, social networks, education and employment history. The groups visited galleries three times over the duration of the project – each visit included a guided tour and then participants discussed their impressions and reflected upon what they had seen in focus groups.

The project's overall aim was to determine how older adults consume contemporary visual art as content for identity construction practices and how that related to well-being. This chapter explores the influence of encounters with contemporary visual art on the construction of older person's narrative identities and how this involves the process of positioning in respect to wider societal meta-narratives, specifically those to do with age, class and gender.

Theoretical framework

The following section provides an introduction to the theory that has been used to support the analysis of the data. It starts with a description of narrative identities and then considers the role of meta-narratives in identity formation. Following this is an account of how negative meta-narratives of ageing may influence the self-construct of people in later life.

Recent approaches to understanding identity (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012) emphasise its social nature and its narrative component. As McAdams (1993, p.5) states:

> Identity is a life story. A life story is a personal myth that an individual begins working on in late adolescence and young adulthood in order to provide his or life with a purpose.

A useful way of analysing narrative is provided by Hammack (2011) who suggests that narrative exists on two separate but interrelated levels of analysis. Firstly, individuals use narrative to make sense of the world around them and in order to do this they draw upon meta-narratives (variously described as discourses, master-narratives or scenarios) that they are exposed to in order to construct a narrative identity for themselves. These narratives that individuals construct then serve as 'motivational forces for particular sets of actions' (Hammack, 2011, p. 313) that are designed to support that particular narrative, or life story, as expressed within, or influenced by, a particular social context.

Individuals use meta-narratives in order to position themselves in relation to events that they feel have helped to define them (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). De Fina, and Georgakopoulou, note that 'rather than being positioned in a deterministic way by out-there structures, speakers actively and agentively select, resist and revisit positions' (2012, p.163). People are motivated to construct narratives identities, or self-presentations, in order to communicate positive images of themselves or to address negative views that they might feel that others have about them.

The second level of analysis, described by Hammack (2011), concerns meta-narratives or a storyline that is viewed as compulsory by members of a group to the extent that it is integrated into a personal narrative. Such meta-narratives can be identified as being associated with 'gender, race, nationality, class and sexual identity' (p. 313) and it is often assumed that they take on essentialist characteristics. The individual might view themselves as being assigned positions in relation to these meta-narratives rather than being part of the process through which those meta-narratives are being constructed. Individual narrative identities of age and ageing are expected to be inflected by meta-narratives associated with the categories of gender, class or ethnicity.

Meta-narratives that have become associated with older people have been explored in a study by Fealy *et al.*, (2012) that considered how the Irish Government's decision to remove automatic entitlement to health and welfare services for those over 70 was presented in newspapers. Older people were referred to with collective nouns or phrases such as 'the pensioners' or 'the retired', (p. 90) implying a level of homogeneity among the older population and ignoring its diversity. The authors identified five distinct identity types that were presented:

- victims;
- frail infirm and vulnerable;
- radicalised citizens on the march;
- the deserving old, and;
- the undeserving old.

Here narratives were used for political ends – to influence the debate on how the needs of older people can be addressed within the context of a difficult financial national situation. Murray *et al.* (2013, p. 79) note, younger people are generally cast as 'agents of change, or life creators, older people are cast as passive recipients of care'. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that narratives are not fixed and political needs can help to construct or modify existing narratives (Phelan, 2011).

From a study that focussed on representations of ageing in UK women's magazines aimed at the over 35 age group Soden (2012, p. 85) identified what she described as three myths of ageing which are presented as 'normal' and 'natural' in conversation.

- Ageing is a decline scenario: it involves both mental and physical decline;
- Age is synonymous with loss of power: sexual, economic and social, and;
- Ageing must be resisted.

These meta-narratives were not questioned and were incorporated into narratives of ageing presented by this media.

Meta-narratives that privilege youth might be seen as a threat to the self-construct of older people. The result of this can be seen in attempts by older people to distance themselves, individually, from the category of 'old' (Hurd, 1999). In a comparative study of age identities between Germany and the United States, Westerhof *et al*. (2003) found that 'Americans and Germans tend to feel younger than their actual ages' indicating the presence of negative cultural meaning of old age in both countries' (p. 378) and that the 'need to identify with younger ages is more strongly felt in American than German culture' (p. 379). Alarmingly, the significance of these stereotypes or meta-narratives on older people has been shown to be physiological. Levy *et al*. (2002), from a study of 660 people aged 50 and older, suggests that some younger people automatically accept as true the negative stereotypes or meta-narratives associated with age and by the time they become relevant they have been internalised. The study revealed that those who maintained a positive self-perception of ageing (measured up to 23 years earlier) tended to live longer. The expected increase in life expectancy was 7.5 years after age, gender, socio-economic status, loneliness and functional health were controlled for.

The role of the artworks in prompting discussion of wider meta-narratives and how they are used in constructing more individual or group/community narratives of participants is explored below. Importantly, the chapter will attempt to determine the purposes that a particular narrative might serve.

Data and methodologies

Mishler (1995) provides three different approaches to using narrative theory as a methodology. This chapter uses the third approach presented (p.90) which concentrates on the following:

- Contexts and consequences;
- Narrativisation of experience;
- Cognition, memory self;
- Narrative and culture;
- Myths rituals, performance;
- Storytelling in interactional and institutional contexts;
- The politics of narrative;
- Power conflict and resistance.

An account of narrative analysis used in aging studies is provided by Phoenix (2010) who provides a theoretical basis for this type of research and a typology of approaches.

We adopted a qualitative approach for the analysis as it enabled us to identify how encounters with contemporary visual art influenced the respondent's construction of personal narratives (Silverman, 2006).

Participants

Some of the groups of older people were pre-existing, while other groups came together specifically for this research, although their members already belonged to a common organisation. For example, the sheltered accommodation group members lived in the same place and knew each other, but they had not come together for activities before they volunteered to take part in the study. The recruitment process involved the research team making an appointment to talk to the groups where the purpose of the research and the practicalities of the research project were explained and people were asked to volunteer. Participants were then subsequently contacted to arrange baseline interviews. Contacts were made with local black and minority ethnic groups (BME), but a Muslim women's group and a Jewish group were unwilling and/or unable to commit. Other BME groups such as a local Chinese Association and a Further Education group for people who did not speak English as a first language were involved, but due to delays participants only made one visit.   It was decided not to recruit people with dementia and ethical approval was applied for and received from Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, on that basis. This chapter focuses on the 38 older people who made three visits to galleries.

Data Collection

There were seven data collection points for each group during the research project and five groups with between 6 and 9 members in each. For the baseline data, one-to-one interviews or group interviews were offered. Baseline interviews addressed a range of topics including participants' social and family relationships/networks, housing/neighbourhood, previous occupations, educational histories, interests, voting practices, general perceptions about ageing, and attitudes towards contemporary visual art.

Each group visited three exhibitions over the lifetime of the project, the final one being chosen by the respondents. A description of the venues and shows attended is provided in the Appendix. The groups were taken to the gallery by taxi or mini-bus, given lunch and then given a guided tour around the exhibition by a curator or education officer. Focus groups were then used to record responses to the experience of the visits. Two members of the research team were present during the focus groups, with one being a moderator and the other observing and making notes. The stimuli for the discussion were the art works and the gallery within which it was displayed. The moderator initiated the discussion by asking participants what they had thought of the exhibition, and then the group members discussed the exhibition and venue amongst themselves, responding to comments that others in the group made. Participants responded to what they had seen and heard without a structure being imposed by the moderator.

The focus groups were of between 30 and 120 minutes' duration and were digitally recorded and then transcribed. This resulted in 69 transcripts that were then coded using the Nvivo 9 software designed to help manage qualitative data (http://www.qsrinternational.com/). Codes were derived from close reading of the transcripts and informed by the literature on narrative identities, particularly that related to older people. Inferences about respondents' use of the art works to construct personal narrative identities were derived from the interpretations they placed on the art works and the themes chosen for discussion.

Groups recruited to the project

Sheltered accommodation group, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear. This group consisted of 7 women aged 62 to 90 who live in sheltered accommodation in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear. They had lived

locally before taking up residence. All of the group, apart from two, were over 68; of the younger ones, a 64-year-old had a learning disability and a 62-year-old was deaf and had recently been widowed. All apart from the 62-year-old (who had been a nurse) left school aged 14 or 15 and went into employment immediately working in occupations such as cook; factory worker; punch card operator; and sales person.

This group visited the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art to see *Parrworld* and *A Needle Women* (12 November 2009), the Shipley Art Gallery to see *Knitted Lives* (9 March 2010), and the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art to see *Systematic* (15 June 2010).

Writers' group, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear. This group, formed in 1986, consisted of 6 women aged 64 to 87 years old, 5 of whom were over 72. One member had 'O' and 'A' levels, while the others left school without qualifications at age 14 or 15. Three returned to formal education, with one obtaining a degree at age 62. Occupations included: cook; cleaner; shop worker; nurse; social worker; probation officer; housewife; secretary; and factory worker.

This group visited the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art to see *Rank* (17 June 2009), the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art to see *Parrworld* and *A Needle Women* (26 November 2009), and the Great North Museum: Hancock (24 March 2010).

Group recruited from an advocacy organisation for older people, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear. This group consisted of 9 individuals, 6 females and 3 males, who ranged from 63 to 83 years old. Three were aged 63-64, while 6 were aged between 79 and 83. Occupations included: cook; civil servant; teacher; cabaret singer; private industry worker; dental nurse; shop manageress; and university researcher. Educational qualifications obtained ranged from none to a PhD.

This group visited the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art to see *Parrworld* and *A Needle Women* (26 November 2009), the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art to see the show by *Semiconductor* (10 March 2010), and Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens to see *Extraordinary Measures* (12 May 2010).

Group recruited from a daytime film club for the over 60s in Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear (henceforth called the 'film group'). This group contained 3 females and 4 males, who ranged in age from 61 to 65 years old. Occupations included: primary school teacher; chartered engineer; social worker; occupational psychologist; and a supervisory job at a local brewery. All, apart from the former brewery worker, were educated to degree level, with the primary school teacher returning to education and qualifying as a teacher after leaving school at 16.

This group visited the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art to see the show by *Semiconductor* (23 March 2010), the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art to see a show by Jenny Holzer (13 May 2010), and a show by Anselm Kiefer (14 October 2010). Three people from the group (one female and two males) also visited a show on the representation older women that was organised by the NDA project 'Look At Me!' entitled, Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing held at the Workstation, Sheffield, UK on 15th March 2011.

Men's group recruited from a "live at home scheme' (aims to enable members to continue living at home independently whilst enhancing their quality of life*) Gateshead, Tyne and Wear.* This group consisted of 9 men who ranged in age from 62 to 88 years old (the 62-year-old was disabled and the ages of the others ranged from 72 to 88 years). Previous occupations included: company director; maintenance electrician; clerk; painter and decorator; and maintenance fitter for a coalmine. The 62-year-old member of the group left school with 'O' levels, while the others left at 14 or 15 without educational qualifications.

This group visited the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art to see the show by *Semiconductor* (28 April 2010), the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art to see a show by Cornelia Parker (8 September 2010), and the Hatton Gallery to see *Hugh Stoneman: Master Printer, The Art Fund Archive* (3 November 2010).

Analysis

<u>Visual art engagement being used to negotiate identity positions</u>
The following explores how the participants used the experience of visiting the exhibitions to position themselves in relation to the social category of 'old' and the social characteristics that they associated with older people. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012, p.172), drawing from Durkheim (1954) and Levi-Strauss (1963), state that social categories are:

> …moulds provided by culture within which individuals and groups construct oppositions and affiliations, similarities and differences. They are basic to the creation of social meanings in general and to identity in particular.

Respondents distanced themselves from particular characteristics that they associated with 'older people' partially through the act of taking part in the research project, and through visiting art galleries and engaging in other forms of cultural participation in their own time.

A 74-year-old member of the Writers' Group, who had been a civil servant stated, after their final visit to the Great North Museum: Hancock:

> I mean we are not old, but we have a young outlook and I think you know, sort of realise that you are not catering for the old, you are catering for the older people who are wanting to be stimulated you know, want new ideas brought into their lives, something so they can focus on and feel as though they are still part of society.

This respondent distances herself from particular characteristics that she appears to associate with older people – that they are passive; uninterested in learning; a burden; and somehow separate or not involved with society. She claims for herself attributes that she feels are more associated with younger people – those of wanting to learn, being productive and playing an active role within society.

Agreement with aspects of negative meta-narratives associated with older people is shown in the following response from an 83-year-old male retired civil servant who was from the advocacy organisation. He states in the final focus group held at Belsay Hall Castle and Gardens, Northumberland:

> Well I think because they become immersed in their own life and they have this little sort of narrow alleyway of their life that they are travelling. So in many ways yes, what you are actually doing is saying to older people wake up you know, look for something different in your life.

This respondent describes older people as 'they', distancing himself from particular characteristics he associates with older people, despite being an older person himself. The negative meta-narratives associated with ageing appear to be internalised by many of the research participants and provide a structure for social representations. These take on a prescriptive quality as described by Moscovici (1984) who states 'they impose themselves upon us with irresistible force

(p. 9). When faced with this, the strategy adopted involved respondents distancing themselves the category 'old' and it's negative associations. These results resonate with those of Queniart and Charpentier (2012) who found that the three generations of older women in their study refused to categorise themselves as old.

The respondent quoted immediately above also acknowledges that society is becoming more accepting of older people being active and involved:

> It's not just a question now of stick granny in a corner and give her her knitting and tell her to shut up, you know, as it used to happen generations ago. That it is now more acceptable that people of our age will come out and join in to actually want to take part in things. You've got grannies that go abseiling now and do all sorts of weird and wonderful things. So and I think society as a whole is more able to accept that because we are old it doesn't mean to say our life has come to an end, we are still able to take part.

For this individual cultural engagement is an important part of a more active and involved life. This could be identified as the development of a positive counter narrative of more engaged older people that might be seen as a strategy to resist the influence of the more negative ones.

The importance of representing older people as active and enjoying life was emphasised by a member of the film group, a 64-year-old retired engineer in response to some of the images displayed in the *Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing* exhibition (Warren and Richards, 2012).

> A bunch of depressives, that's how I would summarise them and none of them were doing anything...There was none of them painting, working, walking, there were the sort of contrived handstands, I suppose. None of them were actually doing anything. They weren't swimming, playing football, painting, music, art, walking, jumping apart from contrived ones in the studio, it wasn't like an active image of the age group that was there and I think if you looked at that in a 100 years' time you would say 'God, that was a depressing period to live in, I would top myself, I'd stick my head in the oven at the age of 60.

This respondent interpreted the images displayed as supporting negative meta-narratives of older women living passive lives. He feels that a counter narrative of older people being active would have been a more appropriate topic for the images displayed and was disappointed by the content. This respondent's approach is political, advocating for a positive image of older people to be displayed.

As can be seen from the responses above, both positive and negative meta-narratives exist at the same time – their relative influence is contingent on the nature of social interaction concerned and how the various meta-narratives at play within that social interaction are understood. The respondents wish to personally distance themselves from the social category of 'old' while at the same time advocating for a more active counter narrative of older people. Meta-narratives were often the subject of discussion when the characteristics associated with them were not accepted as 'natural' but rather socially derived and so open to challenge.

Art engagement being used to develop an existing narrative identity

Some of the respondents had a life-long narrative identity that incorporated knowledge of various art forms and the process of learning about them. While they were not explicitly reacting to the negative meta-narratives associated with ageing they might have been doing this implicitly. This

was most evident in the responses of the film group and to a lesser extent the group recruited from an advocacy organisation for older people.

A member of the film group, who was 61 years old and had worked at a local brewery, was typical in his arts engagement. He states:

> Yes I like art galleries I mean when I go on holidays you always pop into the art gallery; I always do, Amsterdam, Paris places like that. Here I regularly go to the BALTIC because it's ever changing. I go to the Laing Art Gallery.

This individual makes a point of mentioning that he regularly visits art galleries, both in Newcastle upon Tyne and when he is on holiday. He is self-presenting as someone who is culturally engaged and active.

A number of the respondents were willing to set themselves new challenges that were often in response to life changing events. A 64-year-old female member of the film group, who had moved back to north-east England from Australia after a divorce, was actively exploring new art forms. She states:

> I went to the Cheltenham art gallery and there was a very small exhibition on surrealist art, Man Ray and Henry Moore and people like that which had been done forty years before and on the side of that the ad said 'would you like to come to a surrealist writing workshop?' and I thought, 'I've got to do that!'

This represents a willingness to develop an existing narrative identity to incorporate an art form with which she was unfamiliar. The willingness to learn is also illustrated in the following quotation from a 65-year-old former teacher from the film group.

> I think what we all have in common is that we still have a curiosity about the world around us, we are not stagnant, that's probably why we signed up for the course. We were still at the cinema, we were looking at stimulating artwork there in the cinema and we still have a desire to learn and to find out things and I think once that goes then that's quite sad.

Katz (2000) uses an empirical study to show how older people 'incorporate the professional vocabulary of activity into their stories of retired living' (p.144) and that the need for activity can become a hegemonic narrative in itself.

The importance of taking up opportunities is illustrated in this quote from an 83-year-old male retired civil servant from the advocacy organisation for older people.

> I am not talking about sixties or getting up to seventies, I'm talking about getting over seventies and to eighty, we never got a chance to do what the young ones are doing today, this is our chance now.

He feels that that there are more opportunities available now than when they were younger and that older people should take advantage of them. Many of the older respondents left school aged 14 or 15 and went directly into work and have enjoyed more leisure time since retirement. Also, it could be argued that developments in cultural provision such as the abolishment of admission fees for art galleries and museums and grants made available through structures such the National Lottery have changed cultural provision and widened opportunities for access.

Themes from artworks being used to structure previous life experiences

The respondents who did not have a history of arts engagement used themes that they identified in the art works to identify meta-narratives or aspects of meta-narratives that would be incorporated unconsciously into the construction of a personal life narrative. However, in order to achieve this, the respondents needed to be able to identify themes in the exhibitions, which depended upon the nature of the art pieces being viewed. In this situation the meanings created in response to the art pieces in the exhibitions provided a resource to prompt the respondents into constructing a narrative identity. This became more difficult with art that was more avant-garde (Grenfell and Hardy, 2003, 2007), for example, conceptual art, works using digital media, or works which were not naturalistically representative or did not have a clear narrative or use of recognisable symbolism. In such cases, therefore, the personal interpretation provided by the tour was necessary. The following the meta-narratives were identified:

The family
Common amongst the responses from the older women who had lower levels of education and had not worked whilst they raised their children, was the way that encounters with the artworks prompted discussion with a narrative about the nature of family life. Caring for children and other family members was stated as being particularly important. A 64-year-old member of the sheltered accommodation unit noted:

> I love being a mother – and looking after me mother, I looked after her as well'.

The Parrworld exhibition at the BALTIC contained posters from the UK Miners' Strike 1984-5 (a labour dispute over the closure of coal mines), which provided themes that were used to engage with a meta-narrative of family. In response to the posters, a 68-year-old member of the Sheltered Accommodation group stated:

> With the Miners' Strike it was a situation that my husband was put in because he was a policeman. He was born in a mining village and all his family was miners, his brother was still in the pits, so my husband was on the frontline in the Miners' Strike and it caused a lot of animosity.

The experience of viewing particular pieces within the exhibition enabled her to recall the Miners' Strike and to place it into a personal context or structure. Within her family were two members on opposing sides, so the wider conflict had played out within her family environment. This disrupted a meta-narrative that views families as stable and cohesive structures, which made it a significant issue to raise.

The place of the respondents in a meta-narrative of family life was also evident in the responses made by this group to the Knitted Lives exhibition held at the Shipley Art Gallery which consisted of a range of knitted everyday objects representing the lives of older women in north-east England. A 72-year-old member of the group who was a wheelchair user stated:

> Well my mam [mother] she knitted loads of things and probably stemming from the fact that she had six children and it was cheaper to knit the clothes than it was to actually go out and buy them years and years ago and then she obviously knitted for the grandchildren.

Knitting clothes for family members was a normal part of family life and has embedded within it notions of caring appropriately for children and grandchildren. Also implied was a narrative asserting the moral value of stoicism as well as pride in bringing up children in a difficult financial

situation. These aspects of a wider meta-narrative of family were considered 'normal' and were therefore unchallenged.

The history of north-east England
Responses were also used as part of a resource that allowed participants to create a life narrative that incorporated a sense of the history of north-east England. In response to *Perpetual Canon* (2004) by Cornelia Parker, which consisted of crushed wind instruments suspended around a single light bulb, which cast their shadows across the room, a 62-year-old member of the 'live at home' scheme stated:

> What I liked about the idea behind was the brass band and the North East was that the mines are dying off – we don't have them anymore but actually the music still goes on and although there might have been two hundred brass bands at the Miners' Gala (see http://www.durhamminers.org/) twenty years ago and there's probably twenty now, it still carries on.

The meaning of the artwork, as intended by the artist, is not articulated by the discussion. The meaning is seen in terms of what it represents in terms of regional identity, symbolising the loss of traditional industries, such coal mining, in north-east England. To some extent, responses will be conditioned by participants' ages, depending on when events occurred. However, different generations may have a different collective reference point for the same exhibitions.

Class
The Writers' Group discussed the theme of class after they visited the exhibition entitled Rank, at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland. In a similar way to the example given above, this group did not discuss the art but used the theme as a prompt for a wider discussion. Members of this group described their political views (they proudly described themselves as working class in the baseline interviews) and the reasons for them in a discussion that ranged widely over their life course experiences. A 73-year-old female who obtained a university degree when she was 40 and went on to become a probation officer, stated:

> Social conditions have improved as well with the National Health Service coming into being. It meant that the lower working classes as 'they' liked to refer to them, the 'undeserving poor' as they used to refer to them, 'they' had access then to doctors and hospitals. At one time you had to be on a doctor's panel before you could be seen, and pay every month, but with the free medical treatment and better housing and better conditions with drainage and everything…the working classes have improved in that way because they didn't have access to these things before - that the upper class had - but now, you know, they have got good living conditions now, so that's helped. It used to be 'us' and 'them' but now it's sort of blended in now but that's thanks to the various Acts, Education Acts and Health Acts.

The narrative identity being constructed was very important to these respondents' sense of self which incorporated the working class communities with which they identified.

Wider meta-narratives associated with family, gender, regional identity and class, all inflected by age, were incorporated into personal narratives prompted by encounters with the art works. Unlike in the responses detailed in the first part of this section, the narratives and the characteristics associated with them were not contested by those in the groups concerned and were easily and naturally adopted. However, while there was less discussion as to whether the characteristics associated with particular narratives were correct or not, political choices were being made as to the nature of the stories that were constructed. It might be theorised that the

reason why these particular meanings were created was the respondents' need to align themselves with particular underlying meta-narratives that they felt were accepted and important within the social group. The negotiation and sharing of these stories within a particular context also creates a community narrative, bonding the group together (Murray, 2002). Associated with the underlying meta-narratives were various social roles (e.g. to do the family) and moral positions (e.g. class) (Harre and Moghaddam, 2003), which were unquestioned and claimed by the respondents.

Discussion and implications for policy and practice

The above analysis demonstrates how the respondents used the encounters with contemporary visual art to negotiate identity positions in relation to meta-narratives associated with ageing. The respondents tended to reject the characteristics they associated with the category 'old' that they had internalised and at the same time privileged a more positive counter narrative. Some used the experience to develop an existing narrative identity associated with arts engagement, while others identified aspects of meta-narratives in encounters with the artworks, such as family and class, which they incorporated into their constructed life narratives.

The main implication of this work is that arts/cultural policy needs to be rethought with more emphasis on the consumption of art rather than its production. Arts policy documents, such as the Arts Council England's strategic plan (2010) focus on the production of the artistic experience by artists and galleries and assumes that the meanings created are consumed unproblematically (Newman, 2013). The consequence of this that little attention is given to visitors and the roles art plays in the construction of narrative identities. For some of the respondents art is incorporated into a lifelong narrative identity that was deepened by the visits. However, for others without existing arts engagement, themes identified in the art were nothing to do with the meanings the artists intended to convey, yet were still important for the negotiation of narrative identities.

The above demonstrates one of the ways that engagement with art might support well-being amongst older people by providing resources through which past, current and future selves might be negotiated (Sabat and Harre, 1992). This supports Chapman's (2005) understanding of well-being in older people as them being able to construct multiple selves in an open-ended way. Some of the respondents seem to be doing this in response to life transitions, such as divorce or retirement, but for the majority it appeared to be a normal response to the social context within which they found themselves. This also appeared a very straightforward process for the respondents, all of whom demonstrated narrative intelligence as understood by Randall (1999). Some of the meta-narratives (particularly those associated with older people) were actively challenged while others were unrecognised and incorporated into a personal narrative identity. This also proves a way of understanding cultural value (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2014) which is important in a policy environment that privileges measurable outputs and as a result can misunderstand the true value of engaging with arts and culture.

A further implication is that it provides galleries with ways of understanding how older people, particularly those without a history of arts engagement, respond to the artworks that they show. This provides guidance for interpretative strategies and the sorts of information provided to visitors. It also enables them to make a stronger case to funding bodies (such as the Heritage Lottery Fund) being able to articulate the wider social value of proposed arts based activities particularly those designed for older people either in the gallery or in a community setting.

It was indicated by a number of the respondents that in order to remain active and to engage with arts and culture there was a need for a level of wealth and to be sufficiently physically healthy. As

is noted by Chapman (2005, p. 14) the process of 'ongoing negotiation of selves occurs amid diminishing levels of resources'.

A 64-year-old member of the film group stated:

> I think my age group really the two fundamental things are having a reasonable amount of money and being healthy, those are the two basic prerequisites. You can waffle on as much as you like about the arts or politics or whatever you like but if you haven't got those two prerequisites - and reasonable housing goes with it. I worked abroad a lot so I've got quite a lot of capital built up, own a house, no mortgage that sort of stuff so financially I'm hardly a billionaire but I'm OK you know but that would be irrelevant if I wasn't healthy as well which I am really.

The importance of keeping physically fit was an important theme for those in the film group (who were mainly retired professional people) - most engaged in exercise, either swimming or attending a gym. This was often for enjoyment but mainly to ensure that they could continue to do the things that that they wanted for as long as possible. This implies that the basics of life such as sufficient income, good housing and good health need to be prioritised in policy terms. Without this it is difficult to ensure the general wellbeing of older people that cultural engagement might contribute to.

None of the respondent's demonstrated narrative foreclosure as described by Bohlmeijer *et al* (2011) where an individual might feel that their life is over and no new interpretations of the past are possible and no future change conceivable. However, this might be a consequence of the data-set as respondents volunteered to take part in the research and so were not, by definition, in this position.

Conclusions

The respondents use the meanings they created through encounters with contemporary visual art to construct a personal narrative identity. This consisted of a number of interconnected elements. Firstly, a conscious negotiated engagement with meta-narratives, such as those associated with older people and secondly an unconscious adoption of aspects of meta-narratives, for example, to do with the family. This unconscious use of aspects of meta-narratives in the formation of a personal narrative identity is no less political than the conscious rejection of the more negative meta-narratives associated with older people. The social group that participants visited exhibitions with as part of a programme, and their accepted behavioural norms seemed responsible for many of the processes involved. This has implications for cultural policy and gallery practice in terms of taking into account and understanding participants' existing communities as integral to the experience of a visit. However, cultural engagement is viewed as secondary to the need to be financially secure and to be in good health.

Extra reference
Crossick, G. and Kaszynska, P., (2014) Under construction: Towards a framework for cultural value, *Cultural Trends*, 23:2, 120-131,

Appendix

The venues and shows visited by the groups

Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear
- *Rank, picturing the social order 1516-2009* explored inequality in society.
- *Semiconductor* are Brighton based artists Ruth Jarman and Joe Gerhardt who explore scientific knowledge through video.
- *Heliocentric* is a three-screen installation that uses time-lapse photography and astronomical tracking to plot the sun's trajectory across a series of landscapes.
- *Systematic* by Chad McCail. Explores how "society produces and fails to produce 'normal' individuals who accept its rules."

BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear
- *Parrworld* was produced by Martin Parr and consisted of a collection of photographs and assorted objects documenting historical and political moments and secondly an exhibition entitled *Luxury*, showing the different ways in which people display their wealth.
- *A Needle Woman* by the Korean artist Kimsooja. Consisting of eight simultaneous videos, it documents the artist as she stands motionless in the crowded streets of Lagos, Mexico City, Cairo, New York, Delhi, Tokyo, Shanghai, and London.
- Jenny Holzer used electronic text to explore themes such as authorship, power, hope, despair, need and longing.
- Cornelia Parker transforms familiar everyday objects, interrogating the meanings society gives to them.
- Anselm Kiefer is interested in myth, history, theology, philosophy and literature, and his work consists of painting, sculpture and installation.

Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear
- *Knitted Lives,* this consists of a range of knitted everyday objects, such as a shopping trolley—produced by 32 older women from the region (avant-garde)

Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens, Northumberland
- *Extraordinary Measures* is a collection of artworks on the theme of scale (avant-garde).

Great North Museum: Hancock, Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear
This museum was chosen for a visit by the writers' group from Sunderland. This museum shows mixed collections—for example, world cultures, natural history, archaeology and geology.