



## Thinking about the future in older age

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Temporality  
Time  
Future  
Diaries

### ABSTRACT

Older age is often conceptualised as a stage of life in which the future is considered to be less relevant than the past. This is reflected in literature that emphasises the importance of the past in later life but overlooks the significance of the future. This paper addresses this knowledge gap by analysing narratives that older people write about the future. We do this through secondary analysis of diary entries written by older respondents to the British Mass Observation Project in 1988, in response to a directive about time. The aim of our analysis was to develop conceptual understandings of the relationship between older age and future time. Our thematic analysis identified four main orientations that respondents had towards the future: *dreading the future; time running out; taking one day at a time; thinking beyond finitude*. Underpinning all of these was a reluctance to contemplate and plan for changes in physical and cognitive health and future care needs, a finding echoed in more recent research. Drawing on critical time perspectives that foreground the fluid, complex and social nature of time, we suggest that reluctance to acknowledge and plan for the future in later life reflects conceptualisations of the future as unpredictable and inseparable from past and present temporalities. This contrasts with more instrumentalist ageing discourses that imply the future can be ‘managed’ from the present. We conclude by calling for a greater repertoire of how we imagine and narrate the future in later life.

### Introduction

In recent years the future has become of increasing interest to social scientists. How people project or imagine the/their future can shed light on individuals’ actions in the present, and more broadly help us to understand how future projections ‘shape and are shaped by social processes’ (Mische, 2009: 702). The act of ‘futuring’ or actively engaging with or creating representations of the future can highlight how people’s capacity to imagine futures is shaped by present intersecting inequalities (Oomen et al., 2022; Sools, 2020). While much futures literature focuses on childhood and young adulthood (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016; Coleman, 2017; Uprichard, 2008), the relevance of the future in later life has been relatively under-researched.

This article explores the relationship between later life and future time. Older age is typically conceptualised as a stage of life in which people take stock of their lives and reflect on the past rather than look to the future. This is reflected in literature that emphasises the importance of the past in later life, for instance in research that considers the benefits of reflection and reminiscence on life course experiences to help shape present identities and lives (Brown & Vickestaff, 2011; Rubinstein

& Parmelee, 1992; Sixsmith et al., 2014), while the significance of the future has gone relatively unexamined (Bornat & Jones, 2014). This reflects a linear conceptualisation of the life course where childhood is regarded as future orientated while older adulthood is viewed in relation to the past (Baars, 2012). Globally, life expectancy has been rising over the past few decades and there are more people living for longer than ever before (United Nations, 2022). This demographic trend can be conceptualised as an increase in future time in later life. While this could be considered a cause for celebration, future years in older age are instead often constructed as a ‘cost rather than potential’ (Cruikshank, 2013: 16). Against this backdrop, we argue that more research into the significance of the future in older age is needed.

In this article we draw on secondary data analysis of responses by British adults aged over 60 to a Mass Observation Project (MOP) directive on ‘Time’ from the summer of 1988, in which respondents were asked to reflect on how the future affected their present behaviour, how far ahead they thought and whether there were limits on how far ahead they could think. The first author is a historian and the second author is a sociologist. In analysing this data, we brought together insights from both disciplines, and the interdisciplinary collaboration has

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2024.101282>

Received 10 November 2023; Received in revised form 16 October 2024; Accepted 28 October 2024

Available online 5 November 2024

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shaped our approach to analysis. In order to avoid decontextualising the diary entries from the time they were written, in our discussion we provide some contextual analysis of ageing discourses and policies from 1980s Britain. However, it is not our primary intention to either provide an historical analysis of the diaries or to compare the diary entries and social context from 1988 with comparable data and contexts in the present day. Rather, we ask what these diary entries can tell us about how time is understood and conceptualised in later life.

To this end, we begin by critically reviewing existing empirical research that has examined the significance of the future in later life. We then draw on critical time literature from other movements and disciplines in order to construct a theoretical framework from which to critique dominant ageing discourses. Following this, we outline the research design and methodological approach before presenting the findings of our analysis. Our discussion is informed by a critical time approach that analyses the temporal understandings and experiences we identify in the Mass Observation diaries, and the temporal assumptions and ideologies implied in the policies and dominant discourses concerning ageing at the time the entries were originally written, and present-day discourses concerning the future in relation to later life. We conclude by suggesting how the repertoire of meaningful narratives of the future in later life can be expanded.

### *The future in ageing research*

Research that has considered the future in later life has tended to focus on either 'non-ordinary' aspects of ageing such as chronic, life-threatening or terminal illness (Hannum & Rubinstein, 2016; Mand & Elverdam, 2007) or normative transitions shaped by social policy, such as planning for retirement (Moffatt & Heaven, 2017) or making decisions about pensions (James et al., 2020). Less is known about how the future is understood in older age in more everyday contexts, although a small number of studies have examined this.

In their study of new intimate relationships in later life, Bildtgård and Öberg (2015) found that the heightened awareness of finitude and a sense of time 'running out' had prompted their Swedish older participants to 'seize the day' and make the most of the time remaining to them by forming new relationships. In Clarke and Warren's (2007) study of British older adults' thoughts about the future, participants' accounts varied from fearing a future of decline and dependency, to looking forward to future events and planning for death and beyond; many reported 'taking a day at a time' as a way to manage the perceived unpredictability of the future. Clarke and Warren argue that activities such as writing wills, planning funerals and engaging in everyday activities can be understood as proactive, empowering choices in response to an awareness of limited futures, and should therefore be included in definitions of 'active ageing'. The diversity of feelings about the future is echoed in Elliott and Carpentieri's (2020) analysis of narratives about the future told by a cohort of Scottish adults in their 70s. They also found that participants tended to avoid discussion of potential future ill health and increasing dependency, orienting the conversation instead to either past achievements or practical future arrangements such as planning funerals. Rather than arguing that making funeral plans should be included in definitions of active ageing, they suggest that the dominance of active or successful ageing discourses make it difficult for people to discuss potential future care needs because they fear identifying themselves as people who have failed to age 'successfully'.

While these studies assume death to be the temporal horizon informing people's perspectives about the future, Hasmanová Marhánková and Soares Moura (2023) argue that the social imaginary of the fourth age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013) is a more pertinent 'event horizon' affecting people's ability to plan in later life. The third age is broadly understood as a period of 'young old age' characterised by relatively good health and social connectedness where older adults are active consumers who exercise choice (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010). 'Real' old age is pushed back into a 'fourth age' which is imagined and feared

as a 'point of no return', beyond which lies infirmity, institutionalisation, lack of agency and 'social death' (ibid). In Hasmanová Marhánková and Soares Moura's study, they found that older adults in the Czech Republic framed future planning as relating more to the future achievements of loved ones, rather than to themselves. Participants emphasised 'living in the present' and feared future change as they associated it with decline and deterioration.

The discursive limitations placed on thinking about the future in later life reflect broader social and cultural understandings of the future in older age. Within the capitalist economies of the minority world in particular, the cultural fear of more future time in older age and its association with burden and decline reinforces, and is reinforced by, an emphasis on active or successful ageing, whereby older adults are exhorted to maintain their physical and mental health and, where possible, remain economically productive and 'useful' in society (Foster and Walker, 2015). The paucity of meaningful cultural narratives about the future in later life (Laceulle & Baars, 2014) has been argued to lead to 'narrative foreclosure' (Freeman, 2002), whereby older people may feel that the future does not belong to them and has nothing significant to offer them (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011), leading them to 'turn their gaze to the past, because their future horizon is curtailed in terms of available cultural narratives about ageing and death' (May, 2018: 320).

### *Critical futures and critical time perspectives*

In recent years another body of work has developed that seeks to reorient narratives of ageing futures away from active ageing discourses rooted in ableist, capitalist, colonial and heterosexual values, instead proposing alternatives of queer, decolonialist and crip futures that offer different ways of conceptualising possible futures in later life. Sandberg and Marshall (2017) draw on insights from feminist, queer and crip studies (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Kafer, 2013) that critique heteronormative and ableist visions of which bodies are included in, or excluded from, desirable futures. They identify the problem as being an 'inability to accommodate difference in other terms than as a binary. Other one must resist becoming', leading them to advocate for a 'project of queering aging futures' that requires 'actively imagining radically different aging futures that might accommodate difference and challenge normativity and structural inequality' (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017: 8). Examples of alternative ageing futures can be found in research with Indigenous communities that critique white, capitalist and colonial values of individuality, independence and heterosexual generativity, instead offering alternative visions of ageing that value reciprocity, relationality and interdependence (Grande, 2018). These narratives are also embedded in understandings of ageing that value relationships with people and place, involving ancestors and descendants over long time periods. An emphasis on reciprocity and responsibility to people and local environments informs alternative temporalities of ageing based on relational cycles and spirals, instead of an individualised, linear temporality based on human finitude and concerns with the passing on of capital to immediate descendants (Chazan & Whetung, 2022).

In the remainder of this paper, we put the ideas central to critical futures and time perspectives into conversation with diaries written in 1988 by people aged over 60 who were writing about their futures. In doing so, we aim to bring a deeper conceptual and theoretical understanding of time into the literature on ageing.

### **Methodology**

The data presented in this paper were collected as part of the project *Reimagining the Future in Older Age*, which investigated the socially constructed relationship between older age and future time. We analysed existing data collected as part of the Mass Observation Project (MOP). Our decision to analyse these data, rather than collect new data from older adults at the time we conducted our research, was informed

by an awareness of the 'methodological footprint' (Koro et al., 2024) of qualitative research, and a desire to avoid collecting new data where existing data might be sufficient. In order to develop our conceptual understanding of the relationship between older age and future time and to help us design subsequent stages of data collection as part of the same project we wanted to analyse narratives told about the future by adults in later life. Aware that the Mass Observation archive contained such narratives, we were not convinced that collecting new data on this topic was necessary for our aims. We acknowledge that people's understandings of time are shaped by the social and historical circumstances in which they live, and that analysing historical data about the future from the vantage point of the present may complicate and limit the claims to knowledge we can make about the relevance of these narratives to present-day understandings of age and time. However, our intention in using these data is more to prompt lines of inquiry and to provide a useful entry point to thinking about and with narratives about the future in the context of older age.

The MOP in its current form was established in 1981 at the University of Sussex and revived an earlier project that began in 1937 to observe and capture everyday life in a range of contexts in the UK. Three times a year, a group of volunteer writers (Mass Observers) are invited to respond to directives on particular topics. This article presents a qualitative secondary analysis of responses to a directive entitled 'Time' from the summer of 1988. This directive asked a series of questions about time; for our purposes we were interested in responses to the questions: *how much does thought about the future affect your present behaviour? When it does, how far ahead are you thinking? Is that the limit of how far you can realistically think about the future?*

The reuse of existing data sets and social surveys is becoming increasingly common in social science and the arts. While some of this literature is historic in its focus (Lawrence, 2019, 2022), sociologists have also returned to existing data sets in order to frame new research questions in the present (Goodwin et al., 2021; Lyon & Crow, 2012; Savage, 2011). While responses to the 1988 Time directive have previously been analysed from the perspectives of punctuality and 'the everyday ethics of time' (Shaw, 1994), to the best of our knowledge the responses have not been approached from a futures or later life angle. We take a novel approach in putting historical narratives of future time into conversation with more recent research on critical futures and critical gerontology, to develop understanding of how the future matters to people in later life.

The responses to the Time directive range in length. Some respondents provided relatively short 'survey-style' answers, while others wrote free-form narratives that run for several pages. The majority of respondents used the questions as rough headings in a similar sequence as they appear on the directive. In some ways this is similar to the question schedule used by a researcher in a qualitative interview, however the intersubjective relationship was obviously absent. As May notes of the MOP, 'when collecting written data, research participants are perhaps freer in terms of how they construct their narratives because the researcher's interaction with them is restricted to the initial guidance on the kinds of account that are sought' (May, 2018: 310).

In total there are 588 responses to the directive on Time in the MOP archive. We photographed a subsample of all diary entries from respondents over the age of 60, amounting to 240 responses: 156 women, 83 men and one 'not answered'. Our thematic analysis involved three steps of interpretation. First, each response was read and 208 responses were selected for further analysis based on the relevance of the respondents' narratives to our research question. Of these responses 131 were written by women and 77 by men. The oldest respondent was 90 years old and the youngest 60 years old; 123 respondents were aged between 60 and 69 years old, 77 were aged between 70 and 79 years old and eight were aged between 80 and 90 years old. We did not specifically analyse the responses according to cohort/age, which we acknowledge as a limitation given the age range of participants. Although the project aims to maintain a cross-section of 'ordinary

people' in British society, the majority of observers tend to be white, middle class and well-educated. Therefore, while ethnicity was not recorded for – or mentioned by – any of the respondents in the archive, we assume they were white. It is equally difficult to determine the sexuality of respondents as only marital status is provided in the archive and only for a proportion of respondents. Similarly details of living arrangements were only provided for a proportion of respondents. While we acknowledge that analysis of responses by gender and/or relationship status (e.g. single, widower, married) would be worthwhile and we would welcome future research that explored how these categories intersect with temporal experiences and reflections, this is beyond the scope of the current paper.

The 208 responses sampled for detailed analysis were re-read closely and the data was thematically coded. For each respondent key words and quotations relating to the future were noted. Both authors also recorded their own keywords based on their interpretation of the Mass Observers' narratives, attitudes and feelings about the future as it related to their age. The first author coded all of the sample in this way and the second author coded a third of the responses. They then discussed their coding to ensure consistency in how they interpreted the data. In the final stage of the thematic analysis we developed broader themes under which these codes were grouped according to the Mass Observers' responses to the future.

## Findings

Analysis resulted in our identification of four key themes: *dreading the future; time running out; taking one day at a time; thinking beyond finitude*. These are analytical categories that identify different orientations to the future, rather than typological categories in which individual Mass Observers can be placed. As such, they are not mutually exclusive and the themes are not presented in any particular order (e.g. most to least common).

### *Dreading the future*

Many Mass Observers wrote of dreading the future, apparently prompted more by the fear of a prolonged period of decline in old age prior to dying, rather than death itself. This dread led many writers to actively avoid thinking about the future. One female respondent (70) stated 'I try not to think too much about the future. As I am 70 it will be old age now until I die' (G1513). Another woman (65) wrote that she tried 'not to think too much about old age and what it might bring' as she did 'not look forward to a useless old age with nothing to do waiting to die'. Indeed, she felt that 'time is no longer valuable when one is having too much of it' (H266). This attitude troubles the assumption that time is always experienced as 'running out' in later life; similar to more recent research findings, future time in older age may only be welcomed if it occurs in the 'third age' of relative independence and health (Ekerdt et al., 2017). For these respondents there was little consideration of older age as a time to enjoy life; rather, future time was associated with decline and uselessness.

Some respondents referenced negative normative assumptions about what could be expected from the future in later life. For instance, one 67-year-old woman (C1192) stated that 'most [older people] do not look to the future with any hope of status quo, but a decline'. She stated that 'my dread is to go into an Old Persons Home and to sit in a chair against the perimeter of the room, and do nothing, because there seems nothing to do'. Like many respondents she tried 'not to think too much about the future', actively avoiding planning for it and instead hoping for the best. The dread of dependency and moving into a care home expressed by some respondents reflects a horror of 'institutionalisation' that was amplified by a number of texts published throughout the 1960s and 1970s which strongly criticised long-term institutional care for older people (Gubrium, 1976; Meacher, 1972; Robb, 1967; Townsend, 1962) and which were characterised as a 'literature of dysfunction' (Jack,

1998: 18).

Many respondents feared becoming a burden, a view that was expressed by one 62-year-old man who suggested that he'd 'seen too much of people becoming very old, lonely and ill, depending for help' and 'quite honestly I don't believe I should like to get into that state' (S473). He thought that 'old people in their sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties become selfish and expect families, friends and neighbours to carry them'. These entries appear permeated with the internalised ageism that Laslett (1987) suggests was present in the 1980s, despite decades of improved living conditions in later life.

#### *Time running out*

In contrast to feelings of dreading the future, many respondents wrote of experiencing time as 'running out', resulting in them wanting to 'get their affairs in order' or 'seize the day'. For instance, one 66-year-old woman who considered the future to be 'rather short' wanted to 'tidy things up and get straightened out' (B58). She wanted to have direct discussions with her family 'about her death and afterwards' though her children 'sh[ield] away from any talk about their parents' deaths'. She found this frustrating as she wanted to be able to make decisions about her end-of-life care and death. Another 66-year-old woman also thought of the future when having a 'throw out' and thought that her actions in organising her belongings would mean less work for her daughter to do after her death (D666). Thinking about minimising the impact for their families of clearing out possessions after their death enabled these two women to be content in the present. For one male respondent (80), preparing for the future for him and his wife simply meant that they had 'offered our dead bodies to Leeds University Medical School, both our daughters and sons in law know about this' (B48). These practical and unsentimental attitudes to making plans for deaths and funerals were similar to those found by Elliott and Carpentieri (2020).

As well as making practical arrangements for death, for some respondents the sense that time was running out prompted an attitude of wanting to make the most of the time remaining to them. A 71-year-old man stated that 'almost before we realise it, another week has gone by' but 'there are still so many things we want to do'. Although very much aware of the passage of time, that 'our span must be drawing to a close we can rarely think about it and still plan ahead' (D1877). This involved buying a new car and plans to travel. He noted that they did not 'regret the past and can still look forward to the future'. Looking forward to the future facilitated confidence in the present and extended to reflecting positively on the past too; temporal boundaries were permeable and non-linear.

Some respondents acknowledged the possibility of future ill health affecting their quality of life and so put limits on the extent to which they planned their futures. For example, one 62-year-old woman, conscious of potential future impairments, limited herself to thinking only ten years into the future. She stated: 'as long as I give myself time to dream, to read, to do silly things like watching 'Neighbours' on TV, to walk in the Welsh hills, to get to know my real neighbours, to be there for my family, and to enjoy my family, then those 10 years will be the best of my life!' (B1533). While acknowledging that there may be challenges ahead which prevented her wanting to think too far into the future, this also ensured that she valued her life as it was in the present, which enabled her to plan positively for this initial period. Several respondents stated their aim was to 'cram in' as much as possible while still mobile.

The possibility of experiencing future physical or cognitive decline prompted some respondents to do as much as they could in the present to extend their quality of life in the future. This is exemplified by one 67-year-old woman who thought it was important to 'look after our health in order to safeguard our own future'. This involved walking and 'geriatric type exercise' such as badminton and square dancing which would 'improve our chance of a healthy future' (H281). A 61-year-old woman dreaded 'the thought of mental or physical deterioration' and did her best to 'keep everything in good working order'. She 'devoted

time each day to walking, swimming or the exercise bike' and also tried 'to do a crossword or something that requires some concentration'. In all these instances individuals' behaviour in the present was very much shaped by expectations of the future. However, there were acknowledged limits to the ability of individuals to stave off ill health. 67-year-old respondent H281 went on to write that despite her exercise regimes, at some point 'matters will be taken out of our hands' and as a result 'worrying about things we cannot alter would most definitely be a waste of time'.

#### *Taking one day at a time*

Many Observers' responses to thinking about the future in the sample was to 'take one day at a time', an attitude reflected in later research (Clarke & Warren, 2007; Hasmanová Marhánková & Soares Moura, 2023). Several respondents suggested this was a new 'philosophy' adopted as they had got older and one 74-year-old woman stated 'I wish I'd done it many years ago' (B36). There were philosophical and nuanced perspectives on this focus on the present with one 71-year-old man suggesting that 'we think we are coping well with the terrifying speed with which our present recedes into the past. Today, we assume that NOW is really all we've got and behave accordingly. Furthermore, in retrospect, we realise that NOW was all we ever did possess' (B1392). Another respondent, a 70-year-old man, shared a very similar view that:

the only time we actually have is NOW. The past is memory, whether good or bad. The future is uncertain. When one reaches 70 it becomes important to do things now as tomorrow is only a belief. The young see tomorrow as a time when they can do what they do not want to do today. However, one must always be optimistic and hope that there will be another day to come, like hoping that tomorrow's weather will be better than today's rain (B1440).

In these responses the future is not ignored or avoided completely; finitude was accepted but the uncertainty as to when it would come meant that respondents did not see the point in planning ahead. Several respondents made statements such as 'look forward to each day, you never know what's around the corner, so live each day as it comes' (70-year-old woman, B7360).

As well as a more philosophical response to inevitable mortality, the 'one day at a time' attitude could also be influenced by circumstances in the present. For example, illness prompted some respondents to 'make the best of each day' and focus on the present as a coping strategy, actively trying 'not to look very far ahead' (66-year-old woman, C602). Financial considerations played a similar role in shaping an individual's focus on the present and perhaps avoidance of thinking long term. This could be positive in the sense that some respondents did not need to worry about the future in terms of money as they were financially comfortable. A 64-year-old woman chose not to 'think too far ahead, usually planning about a month or so on' as 'we both have a pension from our employment and we don't have to worry too much financially about the future and are just grateful for a happy family, good friends and for all the time we have been able to spend together' (B1156). Yet for some respondents such ambitions could be frustrated by a lack of financial resources. As a 71-year-old man stated, he and his wife had 'plenty of time, but not enough money to do the things we really want to do. Such is life!' (M737). He did not 'want to look too far into the future, just live day by day [...] just happy in the knowledge that the family are more or less (in these uncertain times) secure for their future and the essential ingredient happiness is in abundance'. Again there was a sense that he did not want to focus too much on the future, on the 'things we really want to do', or what the alternative may be, but was instead grateful for the happiness that he and his family experienced in the present.



### Thinking beyond finitude

The final theme concerned respondents who wrote of the future in terms of relationships with others – both before and after their own deaths. This theme contrasts with the previous ones which were more centred on individual plans, aspirations and fears. For some respondents, wanting to spend more time with grandchildren was a motivation to live longer. One 60-year-old woman wanted to see her grandchildren ‘established and contented in life and, if it is their desire, to see them married’ (D1685). A 65-year-old man thought that having grandchildren ‘helps keep you young and you look to the future in which you see these grand-children grow up. It’s the best way’ (D1419). It encouraged him to think ‘another ten years to go’ at five-year intervals. By contrast, a 69-year-old woman was prepared for the time when she would become inactive and was ‘conscious that I will not see my grandchildren when they are grown’ and therefore felt that ‘planning in a definite way for the distant future is a pointless exercise at my age and I don’t do it’ (P1669) These different attitudes to spending time with or missing out on time with grandchildren highlight how the future was associated with younger people.

Other responses anticipated a time beyond death when respondents hoped to be remembered by others. Some respondents hoped to be remembered for a particular legacy, for instance one 71-year-old man hoped that though ‘time must run out for me’ he would ‘like to think that through my writings I won’t be entirely forgotten’ (R1167). More commonly, respondents spoke about their legacy in terms of family relationships, a relational framing of the future found in more recent research (Hasmanová Marhánková & Soares Moura, 2023). A 63-year-old woman hoped that ‘perhaps something of me will pass on to the younger members of my family through whatever contact I have with them’ (R1432). Many respondents spoke of wanting to leave a financial legacy for their descendants, and they were more concerned with their children’s future after their own deaths, rather than the remaining years of their own lives. This attitude is exemplified by one 65-year-old man who concluded that ‘being old one [sic] doesn’t really have a future’, thus his ambition was ‘to build as much capital as possible’ to leave to his children (B1442). Other respondents balanced their own needs and preferences in the present against their desire to pass on wealth to their children. For example, one 63-year-old man described the societal changes which had resulted in older people living in ‘old people’s homes’ rather than with their children but described this as ‘not as bad as it sounds’ (H1806). The main issue for him was the prospect of selling their house to ‘pay for their keep’ and therefore not passing on the money from the house to their descendants. He and his wife planned to ‘stay as long as we can in our own house and then if necessary move to a smaller ground floor home’. He explained that as their children were in ‘a reasonable financial position’ he ‘did not feel guilty if we had no legacy to leave’ and would therefore consider financing ‘sheltered accommodation out of our accumulated assets’.

All of these responses suggest a desire to look beyond their own future to that of those who would survive them. While a predominant concern was passing on wealth to younger generations, respondents also hoped to be remembered either through personal projects such as writing, or more simply through family relationships.

### Discussion and conclusion

The MOP responses that are analysed and presented here were written at a time when living into older age had become more normal, but not necessarily anticipated or welcomed. This is reflected in the themes of ‘dreading the future’, ‘time running out’, ‘taking one day at a time’ and ‘relationships beyond finitude’, none of which explicitly plan for an older age in which everyday life might be significantly affected by age-related impairments and changes to living arrangements. Writing in 1987, a year before the Mass Observer diary entries analysed in this paper were written, Laslett wrote that:

until very recently it was not only quite possible, it was in some ways quite sensible, for people over most of the life course to ignore the possibility of living for long after leaving active life and a job. This was particularly so for men. The chance of surviving into their seventies and eighties was small enough to be looked upon as unlikely, even as a piece of bad luck, an eventuality to be coped with if it should arise (1987: 146).

Laslett argued that despite life expectancy, health and living conditions having improved considerably over the course of the twentieth century, resulting in a normalisation of the ‘third age’, negative stereotypes of older age affected people’s ability to anticipate or even desire living into their seventies or eighties. The difficulties in 1988 of imagining what a desirable future in older age might look like were perhaps unsurprising given the view of some British policymakers at the time that older people were ‘a burden’ who had no use of aspirations such as future education (Biggs, 2011).

Within economically advanced countries, living into older age has become even more common in the years since the Mass Observers were writing their responses. Despite – or perhaps because – of this, the findings of more recent research exploring thoughts about the future in later life are remarkably similar to those we present here (Bildtgård & Öberg, 2015; Clarke & Warren, 2007; Elliott & Carpentieri, 2020; Hasmanová Marhánková & Soares Moura, 2023). With the benefit of hindsight and the reflections of contemporary and later writers such as Laslett and Biggs, we suggest that our analysis of historical narratives of the future from the vantage point of the present may prompt lines of inquiry for analysing more contemporary data, for example how intersections of demographic, policy and social change can shape people’s understandings of age and time.

In the remainder of this discussion, we apply a theoretical approach drawn from critical time perspectives that highlight the complexity and non-linearity inherent in temporal experiences, to the four temporal orientations that we identified in the Mass Observers’ diaries. Understanding time and temporality as contingent, fluid and (re)produced through social relations and processes (Adam, 2004) can help us to understand relations to the future as we age. We suggest that this can help to explain resistance to imperatives to anticipate and plan for the future in later life as implied in active or successful ageing discourses, which rest on temporal assumptions of time as linear, and the future as predictable.

A common theme running through the diary entries was a sense that time and ageing are uncontrollable and unpredictable. This prompted different responses from Observers. Some respondents explained their unwillingness to engage in future planning by referencing ‘temporal horizons’ both of death and a prolonged incapacity that they believed might prevent them from accomplishing desired activities and plans in the present and near future. The sense of time ‘running out’ prompted other respondents to try and accomplish as much as possible in a present in which they were relatively active and healthy. However, respondents also feared a future of dependence and incapacity that they would experience as having ‘too much’ time. As more recent studies have noted, time in later life is therefore not necessarily experienced evenly as a single, linear temporality ended by death, but can be fragmented according to expectations and fears regarding an imagined fourth age and mortality (Ekerdt et al., 2017; Elliott & Carpentieri, 2020). Some Mass Observers responded to fears of an incapacitated future by taking steps in the present to remain as active as possible for as long as possible. This is understandable and coheres with a preventative approach to ill health, but also reinforces discourses of active or successful ageing that ‘a good old age’ is something that individuals have the agency to obtain as long as they engage in the ‘right’ behaviours in the present, overlooking structural inequalities influencing how people age (Timonen, 2016). While active ageing discourses were not as prominent when the Mass Observers were writing as they became in subsequent decades, the Observers were writing in a political climate characterised by a shift

towards individual responsibility. Five years before they were writing, on the eve of the 1983 UK General Election, the Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock warned voters about the perils of becoming 'ill or old' under the leadership of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who oversaw the erosion of the welfare state.

Active ageing policies and discourses have been widely criticised for individualising responsibility for good health in later life and overlooking structural inequalities that affect wellbeing (Foster & Walker, 2015). Drawing on a critical time perspective, we suggest that such critiques are based on an analysis of how people's past experiences, or 'cumulative inequality' (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009) influence their presents. While this is crucial, we argue that it is also important to consider how active ageing discourses limit possible futures, whereby in later life we are asked to contemplate our futures only within narrow parameters of existing policy priorities centred on meeting economic, health and housing needs. Furthermore, the implicit conceptual understanding of the future in policymaking assumes it to be predictable, knowable and manageable. This contrasts with sociological approaches which conceptualise time as a social construction; our perceptions of it change historically and culturally (Adam, 2004, Adam, 1995) and while policies often imply a cause and effect between present action and future events, sociologists argue that this is rarely the case (Urry, 2016).

We acknowledge that avoiding thinking about the future can be problematic for practical and existential reasons. Failure to plan for potential care needs risks reducing the agency that older people have in decision-making in crisis situations, where their care preferences may be unknown and disregarded (Girling & Morgan, 2014; Gould et al., 2017). We also resist suggestions that as we age, we have no stake in the future and do not belong to it (French et al., 2021). However, we caution against uncritical attempts to 'force' people into future planning in ways that valorise productivity and personal responsibility and which overlook the fluidity and non-linearity of how time is experienced. Drawing on Sarah Sharma's concept of 'recalibration', Coleman and Lyon's (2023) analysis of Mass Observers' accounts of how time was experienced during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that participants' understandings of the relationship between present and future time was not fixed, but constantly re-evaluated and recalibrated. We echo their calls for 'a sociology of futures that account for the diverse and even contradictory ways in which futures both emerge from and compose everyday life at different scales' (434).

We suggest that the challenge, then, is how to provide alternative framings of futures in very old age that resist linear, instrumentalist and productive discourses and ideologies. One suggestion has been to expand definitions of 'active ageing' to include 'small actions' undertaken by adults in the 'fourth age', which enable them to live as they wish for longer (Kiuru & Valokivi, 2022). While recognising that agency might take different forms in very late life is important, expanding definitions of active ageing, rather than critiquing the concept, only get us so far. Some anthropological research exploring meanings of ageing offers possibilities for alternative ways of contemplating the future in later life. Lamb's research with older adults in Bengal, India (Lamb, 2014) and Danely's research with older Japanese adults (Danely, 2016) reveal narratives that acknowledge and embrace 'meaningful decline' in later life, in opposition to the concept of a 'permanent personhood' associated with active and successful ageing discourses, that implies a denial of ageing (Lamb, 2014). Lamb and Danely call for alternative discourses and understandings of how we think about later life that understand the value of vulnerability and loss to selfhood, rather than conceptualising these as indicators of failure (Grenier, 2020). These are potentially helpful reframings of ageing futures, but caution is needed in order to avoid the concept of 'meaningful decline' not only reinforcing ageism but justifying temporal inequalities in which people in later life are discursively excluded from the future.

We suggest that critical approaches to ageing can benefit from other critical movements and studies that pay attention to temporal inequalities, and which consider who gets to belong in or to imagine

themselves in the future, and which bodies are discursively or materially excluded (Godhe & Goode, 2018; Kafer, 2013). Such intersectional approaches can help to open up new ways of framing the future in later life that better account for how time, older age, and the relationship between the two, are not universal but socially constructed and always situated within intersecting dimensions of power and normative discourses. The alternative framings of ageing futures described above are appealing but one difficulty, as others have noted, is how to 'scale them up' to challenge the pervasive binary discourses of ageing as either 'success or failure' (Jones et al., 2022). It is also important to recognise social and cultural context: alternative values and framings of ageing futures cannot be 'parachuted in' to any setting and expected to immediately resonate. Nevertheless, the entrenchment of 'future avoidance' in later life in Minority world societies suggests that reimagining futures in later life could be beneficial both for making practical plans for the future in older age, as well as more fundamentally imagining more inclusive futures.

### Financial support

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant ES/S011889/1).

### Ethical standards

Ethical approval for this project was gained from the University of Stirling, reference GUEP 828.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Valerie Wright:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Melanie Lovatt:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Richard Ward for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We are also grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers and to members of the Temporalities reading group at the University of Stirling for their helpful and perceptive comments. We also thank the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the Mass Observation Archive at <https://massobs.org.uk/>.

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