“SHOULDN’T OLDER WOMEN HAVE IT BETTER THAN THAT?”:
AN ANALYSIS OF OLDER WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN
SITCOMS BY THE EXAMPLE OF NETFLIX’ *GRACE AND FRANKIE*

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In loving memory of Johann Haiß.
Abstract

Older women are far from having it easy in today’s television landscape: They are among the most underrepresented demographics across various media, and when they are featured, tend to be pushed to the sidelines of other characters’ narratives as nagging neighbors or grandmothers diligently tending to the little ones. The first part of this thesis attempts to provide an overview of how (in-) frequently older female characters are represented, gives a short history of sitcoms that have defied conventions and chose to foreground women over retirement age, and discusses aspects to consider when evaluating the quality of portrayals. In the course of the latter, a range of widespread yet erroneous beliefs concerning the competence, sexual activity, and other aspects of older women’s lives are investigated and set into comparison with actual data. In each subchapter, questions are formulated to guide the assessment of television portrayals. In doing so, this thesis tries to add to the growing field of feminist gerontology.

The second part consists of an analysis of the sitcom *Grace and Frankie*, which focuses on the lives of its two eponymous protagonists in the aftermath of their husband’s decision to divorce their wives and marry each other. When the character Grace asks “Shouldn’t older women have it better than that?” the answer is a resounding “Yes” and in *Grace and Frankie*, they largely do. As this paper will show, both women are characterized complexly, and their portrayals only rarely fail to meet the previously established criteria for progressive depictions of older female characters.
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1. Introduction

“Shouldn’t older women have it better than that?”¹ is not just part of this thesis’ title but also a question that forces itself onto viewers aware of how older women are frequently portrayed in television. In most European countries, people over the age of 65 make up about 20% of the population, yet in television and film, hardly a gray head is to be found (OECD “Elderly population” n.p.). A cursory glance through any TV station’s programming seems to confirm the impression that Western societies value youth so much that there is simply no room for authentic portrayals of old age: A plethora of perpetually young vampire protagonists is opposed by a mere handful of older characters.

These limited and highly simplistic portrayals of the older generations on television can be interpreted as a symptom of ageism. The term “ageism” was coined by Robert Butler in 1969 to refer to age-based discrimination and is modeled after the concepts of racism and sexism (Hellmich 31). This was a deliberate and highly appropriate choice, since age, race, and gender are “the three critical dimensions upon which we categorize others in social perception” (Nelson 207). What follows from this is that older women are in a particularly difficult situation since both their age and their gender combine to their disadvantage. Age- and gender-related discriminatory practices are also what prompts a female character in *Grace and Frankie* to exasperatedly exclaim: “Shouldn’t older women have it better than that?”. The answer to that is, clearly, yes and will be a guiding thought throughout this thesis.

The theory-based first half of this paper will review data on both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the representation of older women in the media (chapter 2). It will be argued that a key problem with media representations lies not only in a sheer lack of older female characters but also in one-sided conceptualizations. Older women are not a homogenous group, and their preferences and lifestyles are significantly more complex than media portrayals, which often push them into the narrow confines of stereotypes, suggest. In chapter 3, a systematic overview of issues relevant to an assessment of such portrayals will be given, with a particular focus on sitcoms, since the likelihood of humor being derived from the often-exaggerated inadequacies of older characters is higher in this genre than it is in others.

In the second part of this thesis, an evaluation of the sitcom *Grace and Frankie*, developed for the streaming service Netflix, will follow. The show has been received well by critics and audiences alike and has been praised for its depiction of older age. Chapter 4 will thus consist of an analysis of whether *Grace and Frankie*, which is named after its two main characters, both of whom are female septuagenarians, captures the diversity of older women’s lives well enough to offer realistic portrayals without resorting to ageist practices.

In this thesis, it will be attempted to remain as neutral as possible with regards to terminology. The term “old(er)” appears to be among the least charged and will therefore be used here (see also chapter 3.1.1). For some purposes it is helpful to distinguish between age groups that, from a very young person’s point of view, are all categorized as “old” but comprise different generations. To that end, the terms “young old” and “old old” will be used. Connidis pinpoints the beginning of “later life” at “age sixty-five” and makes a distinction between the “young-old” and the “old-old” (126). The former is encompassed by the period between 65 and 74, the latter by 75 and upwards (128).
2. The on-screen representation of older women

In the following chapters, the on-screen representation of older women will be discussed with respect to both quantitative and qualitative data. Chapter 2.1. will focus on the question of whether subjective impressions regarding an underrepresentation of older characters, particularly older women, in television and film are correct. In chapter 2.2, studies highlighting the importance of realistic representation will be cited along with a few first comments on how older generations are currently portrayed in television. Finally, chapter 2.3. will provide an overview of sitcoms foregrounding older female characters, with a subchapter dedicated to *The Golden Girls*.

2.1 Quantity of representation

TIME magazine author Chris Wilson analyzed the careers of 6,000 actors and actresses active in Hollywood over the last decades and identified significant differences between men and women (see fig. 1 below): For one, the average male actor peaks at playing five leading roles in a five-year-time span, whereas their female counterparts peak at four, meaning that, on the whole, women receive fewer roles. What is even more pertinent to this paper, however, is the fact that women’s cinematic careers start to decline much earlier – at the young age of 30 – and far more sharply than men’s do. As a result, women over the age of 55 are only about half as likely to be cast than their male colleagues; only at the advanced age of 80 do actors’ and actresses’ on-screen presences, should they still be active, realign.

![Figure 1. Actors’ (blue) and actresses’ (red) roles per five years plotted by age.](image-url)
This status quo has not gone unnoticed: Other authors have questioned the imbalanced representation of men and women above a certain age on screen as well. Peck, for instance, reassures female readers who share the impression that “once we get past 40, we start to feel kind of invisible” of the validity of this feeling: “In a lot of movies and TV shows, older women are in fact invisible, confirms a new report” (n.p.).

The report on which Peck based her claim was published by researchers from USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and “assesses inclusion on screen and behind the camera in fictional films, TV shows, and digital series distributed by 10 major media companies” (Smith et al. 1). Overall, their findings, divided into the categories “Gender”, “Race & Ethnicity”, and “LGBT”, suggest that “the film industry still functions as a straight, White, boy’s club” (Smith et al. 16). In a much more nuanced approach, the report provides further confirmation for the imbalance suggested by Wilson’s results. Drawing from a large number of samples, Smith et al. found that 66.5% of the 11,306 speaking characters evaluated were men, which leads to a 2:1 ratio of male versus female characters. Further, the research team investigated what they refer to as “one of the most politicized areas in Hollywood”, namely “casting women 40 years of age or older” (Smith et al. 2). Out of all characters under consideration, 35% were in this age bracket and again, the majority here is also taken up by men, who “fill 74.3% of these roles and women 25.7%” (Smith et al. 2). Peck was therefore certainly justified in her assessment of women’s invisibility in TV and film (or, more accurately, their muteness), which is further exacerbated with increasing age.

Although this discrepancy in representation exists across different types of media platforms, streaming services like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu did slightly better than traditional TV and film productions. In streaming series, actresses filled “33.1% of roles for middle age and elderly characters” (Smith et al. 2). Peck adds on to this by stating that “the newer on-demand networks have shown more of a willingness to break with casting conventions, with shows like Netflix’s Grace and Frankie […] and Amazon’s Transparent” (n.p.). Additionally, it should be noted that these two shows also prominently feature storylines related to LGBTQ+ issues (i.e. the coming out and

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2 Interesting to note here is also the author’s use of the term “older” throughout the text, which is applied to women over 40. Given the fact that life expectancy in most Western countries lies at about twice that age, the application of the label “older” to this still comparatively young age group is already quite telling.
subsequent marriage of two homosexual men in their seventies in the former, and a parent of three adult children who sets out on her new life as a transgender woman in the latter).

Moving beyond articles aimed at a more general public, there has also been some academic interest in assembling data on the portrayal of aging and older people in various media. Hoppe et al., for example, systematically studied the depiction of aging and old age in German TV commercials\(^3\). They argued that mass media play a significant role in distributing images and convictions related to aging and studied both how often and in which kinds of commercials older people appear (317). In general, they found the “young old” to be represented far more often than the “old old” (Hoppe et al. 318). What this means is that advertisements lean towards featuring men and women who show some signs of older age but are not – or not yet – strongly limited in their movements and therefore do not seem quite as different from younger generations as the “old old”.

Hoppe et al.’s results on quantity of representation mirror those presented above, with older women appearing only in about 30% of age-related commercials, so men again make up the majority of appearances (324)\(^4\). The authors therefore conclude that older women are particularly marginalized and made invisible by advertising. They also mention, however, that the low numbers could also be caused by age cues (e.g. gray hair, wrinkles…) being less accepted with women, who are shown with few or, especially when advertising anti-aging products, completely without any age markers (324). The fact that these products are called “anti-aging” while being marketed mostly to women already suggests an issue that will be discussed in more detail later: Age is framed as undesirable, and it is communicated to women more than to men that they need to combat the effects of age on their appearance.

The studies reviewed in this chapter are intended to serve as examples indicative of a general trend and are, of course, not to be seen as an attempt at presenting conclusive and

\(^3\) This study draws from previous research conducted in the US and other countries, which largely found similar results.

\(^4\) This particular study did not compare the total numbers of younger and older people in commercials, but the authors believe percentages to fall within the range suggested by similar studies. This range lies between 4.5 and 28% (depending on which cut-off age was used and where the study was conducted). It should be noted that even on the higher end of the spectrum, representation still falls short in comparison with real population numbers, as older generations make up about 40% in Western countries (Hoppe et al. 318).
precise results. Yet, what can be taken from these illustrations is that older people, and older women in particular, are represented to a much smaller extent than they factually exist. Women over 40 make up close to 30% of populations in the Western world (OECD “Population” n.p.) while they are awarded a maximum of 10% of TV and film roles according to the Annenberg report. Additionally, we need to bear in mind that there is no telling how many of these 10% are central characters, given that the study only investigated the numbers of speaking characters not the amount of lines or on-screen minutes. It is much more difficult to find valid numbers for women over the age of 60, but it is reasonable to assume that the imbalance between representation and actual population numbers is even greater. This holds true for TV, film, and advertising (and very likely other media) as well as it is the case across many different countries.

This lack of representation is not just the pet issue of researchers demanding gender equality in all areas; it is indeed very much felt by older women themselves. Peck’s reassurance quoted earlier in this chapter was aimed at other women to confirm that their impression of being invisible is not a subjective misinterpretation but a reality is only one among many voices on the topic. Martha Holstein, a feminist writer directly affected by the issue of representation as she herself is a woman in her mid-sixties, expresses her strong frustration as follows:

I am still objectified but now not in terms of sexual desirability but rather as one without importance sexual or otherwise. Sometimes I want to shout ‘Pay attention to me; I am alive, interested in the world and, I hope, interesting, even if I have gray in my hair (327).

This is a valuable comment for two reasons: On the one hand, it can be understood as an affirmation of the importance of having television shows (or films and other media products) that feature older women as main characters. Such a practice sends the message that women above a certain age can still have stories that are worth telling rather than being relegated to the sidelines of somebody else’s narrative. On the other hand, it touches upon a point that will be discussed extensively later, namely the doubly difficult position aging women are in, due to the combination of their womanhood and age. As Holstein sees it, the objectification of women does not end with advancing years. Instead, it fluidly moves from one stage into another, which results in women not being taken seriously when they are young and attractive because they are perceived relevant only as potential
sexual objects and changes into them being entirely irrelevant as soon as they lose sexual attractiveness.

2.2 Beyond the numbers: Quality of representation

Why representation matters

While academic interest in the portrayals of older individuals has seen slow growth over the last couple of decades, a myriad of compelling arguments on representation have been brought forth and empirically substantiated for years by researchers working in a plethora of other fields. One of the key findings of experts on LGBTQ+, racial, and other minority issues is that, when it comes to representation, it is not just the sheer number of characters belonging to a certain group being present that counts. Having masses of African American actors exclusively playing uneducated criminals might hike up the numbers of employed actors but causes a range of other problems. For one, with such representation negative associations are exaggerated, while positive associations are limited, and many different dimensions of the lives of African Americans are outright ignored. These imbalanced and inaccurate on-screen portrayals have repeatedly been shown to have real-life-consequences: Especially viewers who have little first-hand experience with members of the group are influenced in their attitudes and sympathy towards African Americans (e.g. overestimating the amount of crimes committed by African Americans) (“Media Representations” 23-26).

Importantly, it is not just those with strong reliance on media as a source of information about minority groups who are biased against them. Correll et al., for example, found that after being exposed to newspaper reports on black criminals, subjects made significantly more mistakes in a computer game aimed at shooting armed characters of different races (and not shoot them if they were unarmed or held objects other than a gun). Even those not actively holding negative views of African Americans were influenced by reading negative reports and erroneously shot unarmed characters more often (1102-1115). With this example in mind, it is easy to see how opinions shaped by media representation can have devastating consequences: Within a computer game, such a subconscious bias and the mistakes following from it are of no harm. When transferred into the context of police officers having to make split-second decisions in evaluation a potential threat, however, the lives of unarmed civilians are at stake.
These are just some remarks on the importance of representation in general. Additionally, several studies have been conducted with a deliberate focus on how representation may tangibly affect the daily lives of older people. Schulz makes an important point in *The Encyclopedia of Aging* by claiming that “the images of age presented on television tend to promote stereotypes”, which he attributes to older actors playing supporting roles more often than main roles” (“Consequences of Age Stereotyping”, 46). Stereotyping and simplistic portrayals are “convenient shorthand for support characters in television”, which is not completely reprehensible in itself, as it allows for less characterization time spent on characters of minor importance. However, Schulz believes that “as television educates viewers to see aging as a negative and undesirable experience, it perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy” (“Consequences of Age Stereotyping”, 46). While this assessment is principally correct, it does not consider how nuanced portrayals and their effects can be.

Levy introduced the concept of “stereotype embodiment” in an attempt to replace the almost exclusive linking or even equation of the aging process with a physiological process of inevitable decline. Instead, she proposes her theory, which takes a psychosocial approach and is based on “a series of laboratory studies with older individuals demonstrating that both positive and negative age stereotypes can have beneficial and detrimental effects, respectively, on an array of cognitive- and physical-functioning outcomes” (332). Unlike Schulz, Levy therefore also takes into account that positive stereotypes may exist and create corresponding effects. Levy further presents data showing that age stereotypes affect performance in a variety of areas including memory, balance, and even longevity. Holding positive views of old age increases the willingness to engage in healthy practices, for example, and supports self-efficacy, which in turn leads to a range of beneficial behaviors (Levy 335). Interestingly, age stereotypes – both those of a positive and those of a negative nature – have been proven to be activated and to work on an unconscious level, so awareness alone may not be enough to prevent negative consequences from unfolding⁵. The grounds for unconscious activation of negative age stereotypes are often laid long before individuals reach old age, and if this is the case,

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⁵ Essentially, this is the same process that was identified in the subjects participating in the study done by Correll et al., the difference being that there the focus of inquiry was on how subconscious bias influenced others, while here the effects of stereotypes on the group members themselves are investigated.
“there is unlikely to be a felt need to mount defenses against them; hence, susceptibility is maximized” (Levy 333).

Stereotypes concerning age and older people held by those not yet falling into that demographic can, of course, have a strong impact on the quality of life of older individuals, too. With advancing age, the need for support from younger adults working in a variety of fields tends to grow, but the area of health care often gains chief importance. Health care providers’ attitudes on aging can influence their susceptibility to over- or under-treatment of older patients, which may have wide-reaching consequences. The less differentiated their opinions on the aging process, the more likely providers are to struggle with sensitively distinguishing “normal changes associated with aging from acute illness and chronic disease” (Ouchida and Lachs 46). Depression, anxiety, and pain are among the conditions that are frequently under-treated in older patients because health care professionals often see their respective symptoms as natural features of aging. Over-treatment tends to occur when providers fail to effectively communicate and inquire about their older patient’s preferences (Ouchida and Lachs 47-48). Studies have found that “physicians provided better questioning, information, and support to younger patients”, but “were rated as less patient, less engaged, and less egalitarian”, and “responded less to the issues raised by older patients” (Ouchida and Lachs 50).

There are doubtlessly numerous other studies that expose the effects of age stereotypes on the behaviors and opinions of older people about themselves as well as on the treatment they receive at the hands of younger individuals. The wide-reaching effects of stereotypes on older people’s cognitive and physical performance, their willingness and ability to commit to healthy practices strengthening body and mind and, concerningly, even the treatment they receive at the hands of trained health care professionals are already reason enough to review the models of aging currently supported by media portrayals. In short, what can be taken away from these findings is the need to reduce the prevalence of unfavorable stereotypes and to replace them with more realistic images of life at old age.

**Older characters on television: A few general comments**

Now that the question of why representation matters has been answered, and the concept of representation has been extended to include not just aspects of quantity but also the
quality of portrayals, it is necessary to further consider how older generations are actually being depicted on television.

Kessler et al. conducted a study with the objective of ascertaining whether TV portrayals match gerontological evidence, meaning actual data on older people’s health, wealth, social support, and other factors. To that end, 355 main characters featured in prime-time series on four German television channels were identified. 30 of these characters (amounting to 8.5%) were “coded as aged 60 or more years, and none as 80 or more years of age” (539), thereby confirming the claim made earlier concerning the significant disparity between numbers of representation and real populations. The gender imbalance discussed before was found by Kessler et al. as well: “there was an over-representation of men (63%), almost reversing the actual sex ratio in the older population” (539). Generally, they found a slight positive bias in terms of characters’ socio-economic status and health – both were above average compared to real data, with characters older than 70 in particular. Interestingly, “financial status, job and level of education showed [...] a gender- specific pattern: men were portrayed more positively, but women more negatively than gerontological evidence would suggest” (Kessler et al. 539). Older women were found to be preferentially presented in the role of the nurturer – their most frequent profession was housekeeper (for men, it was head-physician). They were also shown “as giving more support than they received in all kinds of relationships” and none of them were sexually active (Kessler et al. 540-542). The authors commented that while, in the series under investigation, older women were not always explicitly shown in the roles of caring housewives and grandmothers, they still very much exhibited the same characteristics that implicitly define these roles, i.e. a focus on the domestic and being on the perpetually giving rather than on the receiving end of supportive interactions (Kessler et al. 542).

In a New York Times article, Neil Genzlinger laments the current portrayal of older people in TV, asking “When did ‘mature’ get so immature?”. A range of examples in which this immaturity is fleshed out are given, including omnipresent jokes about flatulence and other bodily functions, crass or crudely sexual remarks, and incompetence in handling modern technology. Overall, the author sees older characters functioning mainly as guarantors of cheap laughs, many of which occur at their own expense. Genzlinger interprets this development as a continuation of a well-established problem:
“One demographic or another has always lacked for good role models on TV. For decades, there were no prominent black characters, no characters with disabilities, no gay characters. Now the group with the most legitimate beef may be the late-50s-and-up” (n.p.). This corresponds with what has been discussed in chapter 2.1.

In his comprehensive book on *Understanding Communication and Aging*, Harwood deliberately advises readers to seek out television as a source for discovering “where a group stands in society […]. If a group of people is featured prominently on TV and is shown in a positive light, and the main characters in most shows come from that group, you can probably safely conclude that the group is valued by society and has power” (150). This is decidedly not the case for older characters who “are used a lot for comic effect, often in less-than-flattering ways”. Like Genzlinger, Harwood also gives the example of “the dirty old man” and adds “the forgetful aging parent” as stereotypical older characters (158). He explains that “such messages obviously rely on shared knowledge of the stereotype for their humor and almost certainly serve to reinforce that stereotype” (Harwood 159). As the previous chapter has shown, there is ample evidence for the destructive power of negative age stereotypes and their perpetuation through popular media.

There is yet another layer that Harwood brings to light in his writing: He repeatedly criticizes that the few studies investigating the representation of older people on TV or other media that conclude that portrayals are positive often make a key mistake. They generally neglect to set their results regarding elders in comparison with how younger characters are depicted in the same television shows. The previously cited study by Hoppe et al. is, among many others, guilty of not taking into account how the portrayals of older and younger people may differ. “This is a crucial point: It may be that older adults are not portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative fashion, but they are nevertheless portrayed less positively than young people” (Harwood, 161). Although such a practice may not communicate negative stereotypes, it indirectly still paints older protagonists in a more muted light; not as unworthy or ridiculous but as less interesting or valuable than their younger counterparts.

As much as authors write about the fact that unfavorable portrayals exist, there is little writing about their origin. Genzlinger speculates that they may stem from a desire for “payback for years of baby boomer boasting and self-glorification” who “have, subtly
or overtly, let every subsequent generation know that its music, books, movies and life experiences are inferior” (n.p.). Whether or not there is merit in these considerations on cause, the problem of one-sided and unfavorable representations of older generations seems well-established. There are numerous other authors coming to nearly identical conclusions, so Harwood’s and Genzlinger’s arguments should suffice as general comments. Chapter 3 will then provide a more detailed analysis of aspects relevant to providing complex representations of older women on television.

2.3 A short history of older women in TV sitcoms

More general comments on the representation of older generations having been made, a closer investigation of the subject at hand will now follow with a review of some of the milestones of older women in sitcoms, with a subchapter dedicated to what many consider the genre’s greatest success. In a discussion of older women on television, it would be a grave oversight to ignore the American sitcom The Golden Girls, which premiered in 1985 and ran until 1992. In fact, it is one of the shows that has received most scholarly attention within this research area and is often considered innovative enough to be seen as the starting point of women beyond middle age dominating a sitcom narrative (e.g. Cohen 604).

Nonetheless, opinions on which sitcom is best suited as marking the starting point of granting on-screen relevance to older female characters are not completely unanimous: Some, for instance, name The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977) as a suitable earlier alternative. Although most of its female-led cast was in its 30s and 40s in the show’s first season, older characters joined throughout the seven-year-run. Kaler argues that The Mary Tyler Moore Show presents “deeper patterns of femininity” (51) and, in doing so, starts breaking with the popular convention of reducing female characters to the stereotypical categories of “the sacrificing mother, the housewife, the career woman, the prostitute” (50).

Regardless of which starting point is chosen, the decade from the mid-80s onwards has generally produced some notable TV series with older female protagonists at their center. Wohlmann and Oró-Piqueras, for example, name Murder, She Wrote (1984-1996) and Miss Marple (1984-1992), both of which are crime dramas, along with The Golden Girls as TV shows that “focus on feisty older women who refuse to retire to
a passive, detached and calm lifestyle” (12). They continue their timeline with listing *Grace and Frankie* (2015-present) “as well as the British TV series *Vicious* (2013-present) and *Last Tango in Halifax* (2012-present) [which] illustrate an interest in the lives of older characters” (12). It should be noted, no matter how positively Wohlmann and Oró-Piqueras paint the amount of TV series with older female leads, that there is a rather significant gap of about 20 years between the “golden era” of *The Golden Girls* and the renewed interest demonstrated with contemporary productions.

Some examples for sitcoms in which older characters play recurring roles that aired during the timeframe in-between are listed by Harwood: *King of Queens* (1998-2007), *Frasier* (1993-2004), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) could potentially fill the gap. The former two are, however, not of much interest for this paper, as they only feature men – the retired fathers of a main character in both shows. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the titular characters’ parents Marie and Frank appear in all of the show’s 210 episodes, so there is both male and female representation of old age. As for the quality of representation, it can hardly be considered particularly progressive: The two eldest members of the family are described as the “omnipresent, insufferably meddlesome mother and father” (Nichols n.p.). Marie perfectly fits the stereotype of the unpleasant mother-in-law and grandmother by being described as “often cloying and constantly prying” (Nichols n.p.). These comments are taken from a review of the show’s first season, so the possibility of portrayals becoming more complex with time remains, but there is not much indication of the series having received any later praise for its portrayals having been nuanced or unusual.

Although it would be far beyond the scope of this paper to present a complete timeline of relevant shows, this list establishes a short overview, which aligns with earlier comments on representation: There is nothing resembling a tradition of narratives foregrounding older women in the sitcom genre, so the pool of examples to draw from is highly limited. That is not to say that sitcoms are unique in this scarcity; in fact, the only genre that can be credited for consistently managing to incorporate more older female characters are soaps and even those fare only marginally better (Kessler et al. 532).

Even though new attempts at achieving more balanced representation are therefore generally to be welcomed, there are still a few critical remarks that need to be considered. Harwood has expressed noteworthy criticism that applies to many, if not most, shows
with older main characters: “While older adults are rarely lead characters in shows, when they are the leads, they often portray older adulthood in apparently positive and almost always counter-stereotypical ways” (163). Originally, Harwood used the idea of “counter-stereotypicality” in the context of human interest reports on the news in which the achievements of older citizens are distinctly set apart from what is “normal” for or expected of older people (162). In constantly emphasizing the extraordinariness of select individuals, the masses of average older people are framed as a group of little to no interest.

Harwood also sees a frequent link between television series with older leads and capitalizing on “star power”: “A show like The Golden Girls that features four older women would be a very tough sell to most network executives. However, when it includes recognizable stars [...] it comes with a built-in audience of people who like those actresses, and thus is sustainable” (163). The same practice was employed for Murder, She Wrote and Matlock. While this is a technique used for creating interest in other (i.e. not featuring older characters) TV shows and films as well, it does speak to the willingness of producers daring to create a show that focuses on older characters. This, in turn, leads back to long-held beliefs about the interest of viewers in stories that prominently feature older generations. The show that has probably best managed to make a dent in such a conviction is The Golden Girls, as it was tremendously successful with audiences of all ages.

2.3.1 The Golden Girls

As previously mentioned, multiple articles analyzing The Golden Girls have been published, yet the conclusions drawn concerning the nature of how its main characters are portrayed are mixed. In a total of 180 half-hour episodes, the show follows the lives of four women nearing or at retirement age, whose cohabitation and “zest for life, including not least sexual desire” (Küpper 249) was certainly not the televised norm and resulted in the show leaving a long-lasting impression on the TV landscape.

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I feel it important to note here that the show owes much of its success to its popularity with the LGBTQ community. Both Berzsenyi and Küpper briefly comment on reasons for this, but there are numerous other authors who provide intriguing insights and background information including a discussion of Susan Sontag’s concept of “Camp”.

Several authors (e.g. Berzsenyi 2-3, Klippel 93) highlight that “story exchange” is at the center of most episodes. Rather than experiencing the outside world together, the four women are mostly confined to domestic environments, mostly the kitchen and living room, both of which are areas of the house traditionally considered part of the “women’s realm”. Küpper explains a popular assumption being that “the elderly gradually withdraw from the dynamic of current world events and take up a quieter and more sedate lifestyle” (253), which is largely supported by the behavior of The Golden Girls’ characters, who are confronted with outside events but display limited “interest and participation in current-day happenings” (254). This fact can be interpreted in entirely contrary ways: One the one hand, it could be considered realistic and a step away from the counter-stereotypic approach described earlier. Showing exceptionally active older people creates pressure for those who do not feel the desire or lack the physical ability to partake in similar activities (This point will be elaborated on in chapter 3.1). On the other hand, it might be seen as limiting. If societal perceptions are to be impacted positively, i.e. towards valuing older generations rather than perceiving them as boring and irrelevant, it is essential to show that being old does not automatically equate to being emotionally and physically removed from the world.

With regards to age-specific struggles, The Golden Girls has been praised for not excluding uncomfortable realities associated with advancing age:

Impediments [...] such as Alzheimer’s Disease, immobility, isolation, institutionalization, fixed and strained incomes, death and the like are represented and discussed [...] though typically minimized through humor and compressed into a given episode without follow up or more thorough and authentic portrayal (Berzsenyi 2).

This quote succinctly illustrates one of the issues at the heart of much criticism aimed at the show. Although rather progressive stances are taken on controversial or difficult issues (e.g. in the 1980s: open support for homosexual couples), none of them are explored through time and therefore barely scrape the surface. The fact that the women live together not entirely by choice but rather out of economic necessity is a reality that is implied but never explicitly discussed in the show (Kaler 53). Older unmarried or widowed women are at a particularly high risk for slipping into poverty, so the show could have taken the opportunity to increase societal awareness but neglected to do so. Part of that can be attributed to the episodic structure of the sitcom, in which each episode
establishes a crisis that is usually solved within the same episode after the women extensively debate the current problem, in most cases only to never mention it again (Klippel 92, Küpper 252). Still, some authors believe that, contrary to other critics’ comments, the topic of aging is dealt with in great detail and variety as “each roommate reflects different attitudes about aging with varying versions of mature adulthood” (Berzsenyi 3).

As already mentioned, the sitcom created waves in its relatively open discussion of sexuality, especially because it was older women talking about it without much restraint. Given that this topic is associated with somewhat of a taboo even today, its inclusion at the time was certainly noteworthy but also received criticism for not being quite as liberating as it seems at first glance. Klippel misses even small visual indications of sexual encounters having actually taken place and notes that the more vividly the characters describe such experiences the longer ago the event occurred (97-98). Both of these practices create a bigger distance between the women and their sexuality, which reduces the impact of confronting viewers with the taboo associated with sex at old age.

Some critical voices, especially those influenced by feminist theory, center their critiques around power relations between men and women in The Golden Girls. Although men tend to stay only for the duration of an episode, collectively they do affect much of what happens in the women’s lives. The character Blanche, in particular, seems to define herself largely through the appeal she holds for men, which often leads to conflicts among the women. While those “always resolve with friendship reigning supreme over a passing affair, the scenario replays in different episodes, sending a conflicting and confusing message” (Berzsenyi 6). Further, the sitcom’s last season ends with Dorothy leaving the house due to her planning to remarry, which “undermines the show’s overriding emphasis on friendship” (Berzsenyi 7) and begs the question, whether female friendships only serve as placeholders until women (re-)enter heterosexual romantic relationships. Additionally, a lot of the show’s humor stems from the women insulting each other (the need for doing so, in turn, repeatedly comes out of fighting over a man) with quips about age, weight or lack of success with men (Klippel 102).

Opinions differ on characterization. Some consider the four main characters to be strongly typified and reduced to a few defining traits (e.g. Klippel 93). Sophia, for instance, as by far the oldest inhabitant of the house, practices a habit of voicing her
opinions without caring much about etiquette, which “recalls the stereotype that old age goes hand in hand with excessive directness, if not with downright rudeness” (Harwood and Giles qtd. in Küpper 254). Apart from this being among the aspects criticized by Genzlinger and discussed before, strongly reduced characterization is not generally a hallmark of progressive portrayals, so this diminishes the revolutionary impact of the show.

Overall, it can be concluded that The Golden Girls has achieved a lot in drawing attention to older women’s stories within the sitcom genre. It has, without a doubt, started a conversation about issues related to aging while female, even though it was not without fault. The show certainly had the potential to spark further forays into increasing the on-screen visibility of women over middle age – not least because of its economic success, which showed that a well-made sitcom featuring such characters can indeed attract large audiences. Unfortunately, such a development did not follow in its wake, so any show choosing to focus on “golden girls” today, ideally in an improved and more nuanced way, has, at least to some extent, the chance to tread new ground.
3. Aspects to consider in older women’s TV representation

The aim of this chapter is to provide a systematic overview of issues that are relevant to evaluating the quality of older female characters’ portrayals on TV. Various aspects will be considered, including popular conceptualizations of aging, elements regarding interactions with younger individuals, the particularities of aging as a woman, and a number of other widespread beliefs and practices related to the infantilization of older women. Inaccurate and potentially harmful yet popular convictions about older people are given at the start of each subchapter. At the end of each, guiding questions are formulated, which will later provide the basis for the analysis of *Grace and Frankie*.

3.1 General views on old age: The deficit and competence models of aging

In gerontological research, two popular opposing models on viewing age have been identified. There is no total agreement on terminology: In German literature, the prevalent terms are “deficit” and “competence model” (“Defizit- und Kompetenzmodell”, see for example Hellmich 27-30). Others prefer speaking of “decline vs. successful aging” (e.g. Sandberg 13-14), but whatever terms they favor, most authors concur that this dichotomy exists, and they define the two models in virtually identical ways.

The conceptualization of aging that foregrounds deficit and decline emphasizes the losses associated with advancing age. Body, mind, societal status – all these and more aspects of life suffer, although not always to the same degree, the older one gets. The deficit model tends to find expression in political discourse, in which “the old” are regularly deemed to be a burden to society or, at least, a problem that needs to be solved (e.g. straining the health care system and necessitating the establishment of long-term care facilities). Simone de Beauvoir aptly struck a comparison between the situation of children and older people in their societal standing and treatment but mentioned a crucial difference between the two: While the former are seen as holders of future potential and therefore merit investment, the elderly are simply on a path towards death, which warrants only minimal consideration of their desires and needs (“der alte Mensch [ist] nur ein Toter auf Abruf”, de Beauvoir 185).

By comparison, the second approach seems preferable, at least at first glance. Competence and success are terms with decidedly positive connotations, but this impression is, in fact, misleading. The competence model stresses the importance of
leading active lives, staying productive and autonomous throughout advancing age. None of these ideas are bad in themselves, the difficulty with this point of view is a lot subtler: Essentially, what follows from adhering to the competence model, is an extension of youth into later phases in life rather than the creation of a positive narrative for older age. Sandberg therefore proposes that “successful ageing should perhaps more rightfully be termed successful non-ageing or agelessness” (13). Pressuring those who have crossed the threshold into older age to reject their real age and, thus, to deny this part of their identity is far from being advisable. It forces those who notice the physiological and mental changes that naturally occur with advancing age to mask these developments and to live as if their bodies and minds permanently remained as they were at middle age: unaffected by the passing of time. The key problem with this concept lies therein that underlying issues regarding how age is seen are not targeted: Ageism itself is not challenged and the hierarchy that prefers youth is maintained, with characteristics of youth simply being carried over into the so-called successful older age (Sandberg 13-14). Consequently, those who meet the standards of youth (i.e. are healthy, active, independent etc.) are accepted, unlike those who cannot or do not want to conform to the ideal, who are marginalized (Minkler and Fadem 230-233).

In a British focus group study from 2000, participants considered negative stereotypes to predominate in the portrayals of their age group on television. They named attributes like “dependent, frail, vulnerable, poor, worthless, asexual, isolated, grumpy, behind the times, stupid, miserable, ga-ga, pathetic and a drain on society” (Healey and Ross 110), all of which are encompassed by the deficit model. However, given that this study was conducted almost two decades ago, it is possible that representations have since shifted. Studies conducted in more recent years have demonstrated that in advertisements, such a shift has definitely taken place, with older actors mainly presenting an image of vigor and youthfulness7 (see for example Hoppe et al., Williams et al.). Williams et al. have categorized advertisements according to four types, only one of which portrays older people negatively. Participants of their study commented on this positive bias by stating that they perceive these characters as “fake, unrealistically and overly positive older

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7 These results have to be seen in context, however: In advertising, negative connotations with products are strongly avoided, so it is unlikely that advertisers would choose to incorporate reminders of our mortality and the inevitability of growing old while promoting their products. Williams et al. themselves noted that the observations regarding the “fakeness” of portrayals are “almost certainly unique to an advertising context” (104).
people” (Williams et al. 103-104). The authors echoed the above criticism of the competence model by insisting that “regardless of their surface level neutrality or even positivity, we would argue that such images potentially put limits on the range of contexts and lifestyles that we can imagine for older people or indeed ourselves as we get older” (Williams et al. 104).

3.1.1 Terminology

A short discursion into the words used to refer to older people is inserted here, as someone’s preferred terminology tends to reflect their views on aging.

Hellmich notes that many try to avoid direct reference to people’s advanced ages as if that constituted an insult and judges the frequent resorting to synonyms as a sign of ageism (30-31). Holstein makes a similar observation in criticizing the “commensurate disdain for the world ‘old’ or even ‘retired’ by such publications as AARP’s Modern Maturity” (317). It is indeed worth some consideration why even an organization that carries the term “retired” in its name (“AARP” stands for “The American Association of Retired People”) would shy away from words that in themselves do not carry much negative connotation. Only when old age itself is believed devoid of worth does an avoidance of the relatively neutral terms to describe it become necessary. Such preferences therefore indicate a tendency towards the competence model of aging, which, as has been discussed extensively, tends to uphold the ideal of agelessness.

Similarly, terms that express an attitude of equating old age with deficit and decline abound. “Elderly” and “elder”, for example, though very similar in writing, vary greatly on the connotational level. “Elder” has a significantly more positive note to it and may be associated with wisdom and mentorship. An “elder” is someone who is to be respected, whereas someone referred to as “elderly” is likely to be thought of in connection to frailty, vulnerability, and the need for support (Kleyman in Seaton Jefferson n.p.).

Other ways to refer to older people include the adjective “golden”. It is used in the title of the sitcom The Golden Girls, in which it provides an interesting combination of age (golden) and agelessness or youth (girls). “The women are ‘golden’ because, being over fifty, they allegedly are living the ‘golden’ or mature years in the ‘golden’ sunlight of Florida” (Kaler 52). Related terms link age to the “golden” season of autumn: Speaking
of a person’s autumn years or the autumn of life carries positive connotations as this is the season in which the harvest of summer’s labor is brought in. Similarly, older age can be understood as the period in which the results of one’s life’s work can be enjoyed.

There are, of course, countless more terms and expressions currently in use, a closer investigation of which would doubtlessly be illuminating. Nevertheless, the field of gerontology has not yet produced much research into this area. A few observations have been made by academics interested in the combination of language and gender, however, which are also relevant to the contents of this thesis. Suzanne Romaine has, for instance, noted the asymmetry in how we refer to older unmarried men and women. “Spinster” and “bachelor” while both denoting unmarried adults, express “the importance of society’s expectations about marriage, and, more importantly, about marriageable age” (Romaine 92). A spinster is “beyond the expected marrying age and therefore seen as rejected and undesirable” (Romaine 92), while the same does not apply to a “bachelor” who may well be assumed to be content with his status as such. Similar value judgements are made with “old maid” or “maiden aunt”, both are terms without direct equivalents for men. This already points towards a disparity in certain expectations towards women and men, which will come up again in chapters 3.3 and 3.4.

3.1.2 An alternative: Affirmative aging

Since there is a plethora of reasons why the two conceptualizations of old age as either defined by deficit or competence are flawed, it is reasonable to demand breaking free of this binary. An alternative concept has been introduced, which builds on the strengths of the existing models but moves beyond their limitations. Sandberg proposes the term “affirmative age” for this approach, which serves “as a way of more rightfully reflecting the complex lived experiences of ageing” (15). At its core lies accepting the undeniable reality that age leads to certain changes yet rejecting the label of inadequacy if these changes culminate in the inability (or unwillingness) to continue conforming to the standards of middle age. When applied to the area of sexuality, the idea of affirmative age is illustrated particularly well. This will be explored in further detail in chapter 3.4.2, but for now an example from Sandberg’s work shall suffice: In an interview, a 77-year-old man describes his initial discomfort with his weight gain leading to growing breasts, which after some time “through his wife’s eyes, he started to see [...] as fitting and
proportionate to his body, and even as a sexual asset” (Sandberg 24). As a result, he did not feel the need to combat the change that advancing age brought and to restore his body to its previous form but learned to derive pleasure from what he at first saw as a loss of masculinity.

A final remark on affirmative age comes from Holstein: “I believe it is disempowering to deemphasize physical weakness and disability while emphasizing strengths. The great achievement is learning to live fully and well – and proudly – despite such limitations” (318). Living fully, well, and proudly is surely a fine goal for any age group but even more so for older age, which is so often framed as a period of little worth or pleasure. At the same time, this approach grants older people the freedom of not having to be young, that is the liberty of living with their aging bodies and minds rather than perpetually fighting against them. Ideally, TV sitcoms would contribute to more firmly establishing the concept of affirmative aging by reflecting the diversity of older people’s lived experiences, including the struggles and joys life at advancing age brings with it. Correspondingly, the following questions should be considered in an evaluation of television portrayals of older age:

**Questions:** Does the show support the inadequate models of aging in either foregrounding decline or competence? Or is the affirmative approach towards aging supported to authentically depict the joys as well as the pains of aging?

**Death: An example**
The prospect of death lends itself uniquely well to supporting either of the popular conceptualizations of aging. Naturally, death is a sensitive topic for all age groups, but with time it transforms from affecting a person only tangentially and rarely, when older neighbors and relatives two or more generations removed (barring the possibility of accidents or disease leading to the untimely deaths of younger people) pass away, into being a regular occurrence. Many report that the deaths of their parents started their contemplation of their own mortality. Even if the loss of parents or other loved ones has little effect, being confronted with the influence of age on one’s own body – Holstein nicely describes this as moving from “a habitual body that we might ignore” to an “attention-demanding body” (318) – has the power to do so. Death, as something that
ultimately affects all human beings but becomes more salient with advancing years, has the power of being (ab)used to strengthen the worldviews of supporters of both models.

Part of the appeal of the concept of successful aging lies in trying to prolong life or, at least, staving off the thought of death, which is why, in seeking to escape the inescapable, many turn to denying their age. Staying active at old age has long been proven to increase life expectancy, but complete denial of one’s mortality and buying into the false promise that youth can be sold and bought is far from the healthiest coping mechanism.

In contrast, with the deficit model, impending death is adduced to explain the popular (albeit wrong) belief that older people no longer want anything from life, following the motto “Why try something new, when they are on death’s doorstep anyway?”. Further, death is sometimes utilized to justify minimal efforts spent on improving the conditions of life at old age. Constant rumination (e.g. contemplation of symptoms of physical decline and death) has additionally been shown to be a predictor for the development of clinical depression (Brinker 223-226), so a preoccupation with decline and the prospect of death is harmful on an individual level as well.

From a psychological standpoint, affirmative aging handles mortality best: It neither demands a denial of the challenges of age nor does it give way to pessimistically resigned attitudes that ease the path for symptoms of depression to take hold. Instead, affirmative aging emphasizes facing one’s death by enjoying whatever time is left, without constantly occupying oneself with mortality-related thoughts. For those who choose to design their lives at old age to more closely fit the model of affirmative aging “the proximity of death [may enhance] feelings and experiences” (Sandberg 27), so that life is appreciated fully within present health constraints.

One final thought on death and implications for TV portrayals: Death itself is clearly inevitable, but its circumstances may be influenced to some extent. Debates on active euthanasia regularly flare up in many communities, often with mixed opinions. Holstein makes repeated reference to writers suggesting suicide as a means of preventing a loss of

8 In politics, this rarely happens overtly, since those nearing or slightly over retirement age are among the most active groups of voters; alienating them would be anything but wise if re-election is a goal.

9 What is sometimes referred to as “assisted suicide” is illegal in most European countries and US states, whereas some forms of passive euthanasia (“letting die”, e.g. by choosing not to continue life sustaining measures like artificial nutrition) are more widely used (see Lucan or Anneser et al.).
control and dignity at old age (e.g. 327), while others reject the possibility for moral or religious reasons. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, I would expect most sitcoms to shy away from anything going farther than superficial mentions of death-related issues, with the exception of those deliberately trying to provoke. If they do choose to incorporate death, it can be assumed that this would be done cautiously for fear of offending audiences.

**Questions:** Is death used to strengthen the position of either the competence or the deficit model of aging? Does the show’s treatment of the issue hinder or support the concept of affirmative aging?

### 3.2. Interactions with the young: “Older people are incompetent”

Age, of course, affects how older people interact with their environments. Slowly increasing physical constraints may make it impossible to participate in certain activities or, eventually, to even leave the house. Critical events like a heart attack, for example, may also have a very sudden impact on many areas: “Acutely aware of our vulnerability, we approach social interactions and movement differently” (Holstein 316). But equally important is the way older people are treated by the young and the middle aged. Ageist attitudes take form in a variety of behaviors. Some are unrelated to gender, like being passed over for jobs, others are unique to women, like being ignored while waiting for a cashier’s attention who chooses to serve a younger woman instead. The latter example nicely shows how ageist and sexist attitudes cumulate to the disadvantage of older women.

A central element of ageism is the belief that older people are generally incompetent or incapable of adequately handling certain tasks. This may affect those on the receiving end of ageist practices individually and – just as is the case with racism and sexism – on a broader, institutionalized scale. A study investigating attitudes on aging in 20 European countries found that many popular myths surrounding age center on the productivity of older workers. They are judged to be less effective due to the hindrances of declining health, while also being believed to take away employment opportunities from younger people (Börsch-Supan qtd. in Carney and Gray 125). Actual unemployment rates for the age group closest to retirement mirror these findings and strongly indicate
that ageist bias does indeed put older people at a disadvantage on the job market. Although more 55 to 64-year-olds are employed than those of the youngest age group just entering the job market (15 to 24-year-olds), there is a significant discrepancy in percentages between the middle aged and older workers (OECD “Employment” n.p.). A study of age discrimination in the workplace conducted by Stypanski and Turek in 2017 showed that a third of participants had experienced either hard (illegal practices, e.g. demotion) or soft (interpersonal, e.g. ageist remarks) discrimination (54-56). Stypanski and Turek also reported a “higher prevalence of experiences of age discrimination among women (35.5% in total) than men (28.2%)” (57).

On an individual level, patronizing behaviors may well come out of good intention; children being worried about and wanting to help their aging parents is completely understandable, but there is a fine line between real support and unwanted as well as unnecessary interference. Unless a person is proven to be incapable of weighing options and coming to rational conclusions, there is no reason why age should impact their right to make decisions concerning their own lives. An area in which such behaviors have been documented are doctor’s appointments, where the presence of a third party (often a younger relative, partner, or caregiver) “changes the visit dynamic” (Ouchida and Lachs 51). A common observation is for the accompanying person to talk with the physician rather than letting the patient explain or answer questions themselves. On average, 75% of questions are answered by the third party despite the patient’s capability of responding (Ouchida and Lachs, 51). “A third person may believe he or she is being helpful, but [...] this could prevent providers from obtaining an accurate history and from recognizing cognitive impairment, depression, and elder abuse” (Ouchida and Lachs, 51). This shows yet again that behaviors based on ageist assumptions regarding their competence may have severely negative effects on older people’s lives.

“Older people resist change and are incapable of acquiring new skills”
Another similar, highly common misconception supported by TV portrayals is the presumed inherent inability of older people to learn new things, technology-related skills in particular. Cohen discusses the cultural myth that older people are “set in their ways” (610), meaning that they are no longer willing to change any of their habits, or as the popular proverb would have it, that an old dog cannot be taught new tricks. Many assume
that at some point the conviction sets in of having found the best way of handling life and viewing the world, thereby making all change unnecessary. This may apply to mundane tasks like folding towels as well as to moral judgements (Cohen 609-610). Some attribute this to the underlying notion that old age is considered a time of stability: “Reflecting current age relations, we tend to view change, including that in families, as the domain of young people. Typically, this means that the experience of old people is assumed to be stable and, implicitly, stale; certainly not where new things are happening” (Connidis 128). Modern technology lends itself as an anchor for exploiting the comedic potential of such assumptions in television, so scenes in which an older character has no idea what Youtube is or gets overwhelmed with a smartphone abound (e.g. Genzlinger n.p.).

“Older women’s primary goal is caring for their families”
Relatedly, older people feeling the desire to contribute to society beyond the accepted limits of the family is often met with surprise and reported on with a focus on the extraordinariness of such a yearning (see earlier remarks on counter-stereotypicality in chapter 2.3). Part of that may be explained by the notion that older people lack ambition – the time for self-improvement and success is assumed to reach its peak at middle age and to quickly end after some point, possibly coinciding with retirement. Women after retirement age are believed to naturally want to care for their families and be “good grandmothers”. While this may be true for many, it is a highly limiting concept that intensifies the stereotype of women as nurturers, whose goals are aimed primarily at supporting others. Various studies have shown that in television, women of all ages are significantly more likely than men to play “personal life-oriented roles such as wife and mother”, while “male characters [are] more likely than females to play work-oriented roles” (60% vs. 48%) (Lauzen 11). While there is little data on how older women compare to younger ones in this respect, Kessler et al.’s previously cited study suggests that in any case, such stereotypical portrayals are unlikely to be any less frequent. Older female characters are often shown as housekeepers and their imbalanced giving and receiving of support fits the profile of the self-sacrificing grandmother to whom one turns when in need of comfort.
Questions: Are older characters almost exclusively framed as irrationally declining help that they obviously need? Are they shown to be incapable of learning new skills such as handling modern technology? Are older women primarily shown in the role of the devoted grandmother?

The elderspeak phenomenon
Elderspeak, also called “secondary baby talk”, is a way of speaking that younger adults frequently employ when talking to older individuals. It is characterized by a slower “rate of speaking, simplified syntax, vocabulary restrictions, and exaggerated prosody”, including elevated pitch and volume (Kemper and Harden 656). Younger adults make use of elderspeak in order to accommodate to “the perceived communication needs of older adults” even when there are no cues suggesting that the latter have any difficulty comprehending (Kemper and Harden 656). The process is therefore often triggered unknowingly but still has a measurable impact. Studies have found that older adults whose cognitive performance levels are high perceive elderspeak as patronizing and demeaning and that being constantly confronted with it may contribute to “lower self-esteem” as well as “withdrawal from social interactions” (Ouchida and Lachs 50). Even with nursing home residents suffering from dementia, whose condition may require clearer communication, traditional elderspeak\textsuperscript{10} has been shown to increase resistiveness to care (e.g. “pushing away from their caregiver, saying no to help, and [...] yelling at their caregiver”, Herman and Williams 421-422). Overall, elderspeak is harmful to relationships between younger and older generations and should be avoided (at least in its traditional form, see footnote 10). Elderspeak has, however, found its way into TV and movies as well, along with similarly patronizing behaviors.

As has been mentioned before, the way age-related issues are framed is crucial. Küpper gives an example in his article on The Golden Girls that perfectly fits as an illustration of this point: In one episode, several younger characters assume that an older woman is hard of hearing solely because of her age and consequently raise their voices. The older character plays along in the shouted conversation only to ask, after some time,

\textsuperscript{10} The results of Kemper and Harden’s study (consisting of three experiments) suggest that a revised form of elderspeak that deliberately makes use of repetition and semantic elaboration may be beneficial if it is consciously tailored to older adults’ actual communication needs. Personally, I would prefer such a communicative strategy to receive its own name, so that a clear distinction between this revised, helpful version and the patronizing form of elderspeak can be made.
who of the people present struggles with their hearing so much as to make this necessary (Küpper 255). Here, the punchline is “based on showing up the expectations foisted upon the elderly and not the elderly themselves” (Küpper 255). Elderspeak is used in the scene both to illicit laughs and to criticize the practice itself, so not every instance of elderspeak has to be condemned outright. As long as the comedic effect of the scene comes from ridiculing elderspeak or the ignorance of younger characters using it despite it being entirely unnecessary, there is little danger of it increasing the real-life occurrence of such patronizing behavior.

**Questions:** Is elderspeak used in conversations between younger and older characters? If so, is it implicitly or explicitly criticized (e.g. Do older characters resist this attempt of communication and/or make fun of it)?

### 3.3 Aging while female: The relevance of money and appearance

In an earlier chapter, the point was made that women’s experiences while aging do not entirely match those of men. Nevertheless, a joint effort to study the impact of the intersection of womanhood and age has only fairly recently been initiated with the emergence of feminist gerontology. The movement “has rightly criticized the feminist community for its lack of attention to age, and gerontology and age studies for their neglect of gender” (Marshall and Katz 75). Only when both are taken into account can a full image of aging women’s experiences be gained\(^\text{11}\). This chapter examines two issues that affect older women far more strongly than men, namely the risk of poverty and the pressure to sustain a youthful appearance.

**Economic factors**

One gender-related aspect concerns older women’s economic status: Statistics reveal that women are significantly more likely than men to struggle financially at old age, which is the result of a cumulation of circumstances. Usually, women spend fewer years performing paid work and instead carry most of the burden of household and childcare duties. Additionally, female-dominated fields tend to be awarded lower status and pay,

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11 I would even suggest going a step further and consider how racial or religious backgrounds factor in, too. There is definitely a strong possibility of the lives of White, African American, or Jewish grandmothers differing and being affected by stereotypes colored by additional bias.
so even after having worked full-time, it is not unusual for women to receive small pensions (Hellmich 34). The quality of life at advanced age is very much dependent on economic and social factors, and the risk of poverty is certain to affect the extent to which retirement age is at all enjoyable. Furthermore, groups that are of low status and wealth are more likely to be rendered invisible to society at large, while on an individual level, these factors may combine to foster social isolation.

Because of its high complexity, this is an area in which TV representation cannot reasonably be expected to have much of an impact. Economic realities will not be changed by shows simply featuring wealthy older women. What can be done, however, is to raise public awareness by lending a voice to those affected. In the chapter on *The Golden Girls*, an author was cited who found fault with the show having the possibility but neglecting to shine a light on the four women’s cohabitation originally stemming from financial difficulty. Poverty is not usually among the issues Western political discourse likes to concern itself with, so bringing the topic to the attention of viewers might be a small step towards altering the false perception that poverty is exclusively a third-world problem. Much more intensely discussed issues are the lack of women in leadership positions and equal pay, the long-term effects of which include the increased likelihood of women experiencing a precarious financial situation after retirement. TV has already moved towards providing more models of competent, successful women which may further aid the changing perception of women being capable of excelling in just as many different fields as men. Small as its influence may be in this respect, TV can therefore still provide small contributions towards rectifying erroneous public beliefs.

**Questions:** Is the risk of older women experiencing financial difficulty or living in poverty addressed? Are women portrayed as competent employees or leaders?

**Appearance**
The importance of appearance and “being allowed” to look old is another area in which gender is linked with differing expectations. Connidis mentions “the observation that men grow old and distinguished while women grow old and undesirable” (123), which is a gender-based disparity that countless feminist writers have remarked upon. Older women are therefore under pressure to sustain a youthful appearance for as long as possible to
enjoy societal approval. Giving in to this pressure is an understandable reaction but extends the link between sexual attractiveness and worth into old age. Ultimately, this means that older women themselves are complicit in keeping the hierarchy of desirability and power that puts them at a disadvantage alive. One way in which this is done is women rejecting the term “old” as a label for themselves (Holstein 324), which is so common that women who do use it to refer to themselves are met with surprise and assurance that they are not old (Hellmich 36). Through individual women rejecting the term, the societal perception that being or appearing old is some kind of personal failure is strengthened – the vicious cycle continues. In essence, the pressure placed on women to adhere to the norm of youthful appearance constitutes a gender-based exacerbation of the concept of agelessness prescribed by the model of successful aging.

Holstein suggests that to older women, their physical “imperfections” are more salient than to younger women because the former “are defined as outsiders, as the ‘other’ by the dominant culture” (321). Sandberg explains the concept of “the other”, which is essentially just a different way of looking at what I have just referred to as a hierarchy or desirability and power, as existing in different oppositions, with one end being occupied by the desirable norm, opposite which is the “other” (18). Women experience two forms of othering in the juxtaposition of masculinity/male body and femininity/female body as well as the young-old opposition (Sandberg 18). Another strategy that also contributes to sustaining the status quo of norm and other, while intended to combat the “imperfections” that exclude women from the sought-after norm of the young, is changing one’s physical appearance. Holstein writes that “feminists have struggled with the combination of pleasure that many women get from makeup and other accoutrements of appearance and the potential repressive results of never feeling that we quite measure up” (322). This is a crucial point: Is all use of makeup and similar products and techniques to be objected to because, to some degree, it all amounts to creating closer adherence to a restrictive standard of beauty? Or is it possible that they may be used out of intrinsic motivation, i.e. out of pure enjoyment derived from altering one’s appearance or as an artistic pursuit? If both are possible, how can we then discern which is the guiding force in any given instance? I cannot presume to be able to answer these questions and the many others that follow from them, but what seems convincing to me is the thought that the use of makeup is linked to consumerist culture, which perpetrates “the myth and expectation that we can
fix our brokenness with a growing range of often costly consumer products” (Holstein 320). Consequently, I also agree that TV and other media should not perpetuate the skewed notion of older women having to deny their age in whatever way, since physical markers of age are “a fundamental part of [...] identity” and “without public attention that instills respect for these age related-markers, how are we to respect them ourselves?” (Holstein 322).

**Questions:** Are women held to different standards than men regarding how appropriate visible signs of their age are communicated to be? Do older female characters embrace or reject the label “old” for themselves? Do older female characters make an effort to disguise age markers to appear younger?

### 3.4 Infantilization: Are they old women or young girls?

Some aspects of infantilization extend to older men and women equally, like the elderspeak phenomenon. The infantilization of older women may, however, also take other shapes unique only to them. Klippel’s rather harsh assessment of *The Golden Girls*’ ability to authentically portray the lives of older women gives a few clues on which other aspects may need to be considered in this context.

In a detailed examination of the four women’s clothing, Klippel concludes that the predominance of pastel colors creates an association not only with femininity but also with early childhood and thereby indirectly pushes their lives in the “realm of the infantile” (“den Bereich des Infantilen” 104). This claim is not entirely easy to agree with, since many aspects may factor into costume decisions. Producers might, for instance, have a particular color palette in mind in order to visually set their sitcom in contrast to other shows, which would mean that such a choice is due to an effort towards facilitating the recognizability and uniqueness of the show rather than a conscious decision on characterization.

Klippel’s second point has lot more depth and is not so easily discarded. She argues that many of the sitcom’s storylines could just as well feature teenage girls instead of older women. It is especially the four women’s near constant discussion of men, who then hardly ever touch their lives in tangible ways but usually remain out of reach, that mirrors the preoccupations of girls during puberty. Whether these examples are judged to
be convincing or not, the following statement on what *The Golden Girls* lacks, according to Klippel, is an excellent guiding principle for evaluating all shows featuring older female characters:

Hier drückt sich ein Dilemma aus: die Serie setzt ja gerade auf die Vitalität der alternden Frauen, kann aber offensichtlich auf keinen Entwurf für weibliche Vitalität jenseits des gesellschaftlichen Funktionszusammenhangs zurückgreifen (Klippel 104).

The difficulty that the media seem to have with portraying older women positively reflects societal insecurity regarding how to conceptualize old age: Popular opinions are largely defined by the dichotomy of what has been commented on earlier as the deficit and the competence models. The dilemma described by Klippel falls into the latter category, as she criticizes *The Golden Girls* resorting to a known conception of female vitality (i.e. teenagers) that is inappropriate for the age group and amounts to a denial of age (see comments on successful aging as equivalent to agelessness in chapter 3.1). What is needed are models of older female vitality that are not borrowed from earlier life stages but shaped according to real lived experiences of older women.

**Question:** Does the show manage to create a realistic version of mature female vitality, or does it infantilize its older women?

This is an overarching question that needs to be subdivided into smaller areas in which TV series may fail or succeed in contributing to a progressive model of aging while female. In the following subchapters, aspects relating to the assumed moral innocence and sexual immaturity of older women will be discussed.

### 3.4.1 (Moral) Innocence: Old age as a second childhood

It is an entirely normal and largely inevitable part of aging to grow more dependent on outside support. For some that simply means hiring someone to do heavy housework for them or losing their driver’s license and having to find different ways of staying mobile. Others require extensive help in their final years that is similar to the care human beings need in their first months of life. Depending on an individual’s mental state, they are likely to struggle coming to terms with their inability to feed, dress, or bathe themselves, but even smaller losses of independence may be felt as a return to a more childlike state
of being. In order not to exacerbate this feeling, it is particularly important for younger people not to project defining attributes of childhood onto older age. One such attribute is innocence, which may reveal itself through shock or amusement when older people behave in ways that are utterly normal for adults but deemed inappropriate for children.

“Older women do not speak about sex”
One assumption that is often resorted to for comedic effect is that older women never speak about sexuality. Horton refers to films, where “it is always easy to get a good laugh by having an old person, especially an old woman, make any kind of statement that indicates she knows what sex is” (n.p.). That is not to say, of course, that the previously discussed obsession with sexuality that some sitcoms choose as a defining trait for their older male characters (the “dirty old man” trope) is a preferable alternative. These two clichéd conceptualizations of older people’s sexual desire can be interpreted as an intensification of gender expectations according to which men have a stronger need for sexual contact than women. Both are overused clichés that contribute to older people and their sexualities not being taken seriously, which will be discussed more closely in the following chapter 3.4.2.

“Older women do not swear or commit immoral actions”
A related issue that also relates back to the point made about the “innocence” of old age is older women’s use of swear words. Cursing is a psychologically complex behavior, but it is reasonable to assume that adults will continue using such language in a similar fashion with advancing age as they did all their lives. It is therefore not much of an innovative or realistic strategy to derive humor from the juxtaposition of the “adorable” older person and them cursing as if their lives depended on it. The assumption of innocence further extends into morality and the presumed impossibility of frail, seemingly sweet older people behaving contrary to that expectation. In his work on the philosophical complexities of the concept of moral innocence, Goldberg writes that “the morally innocent are often thought to be morally pure, incapable of wrongdoing, ignorant of morality, resistant to sin, or even saintly” (355). This is certainly a notion frequently applied to older people in television portrayals. In an episode of the police sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, for instance, an elderly suspect is brought in by a member of the
team. Despite strong evidence, none of his colleagues believe in the man’s guilt and treat him like a “sweet old grandpa”. Instead of reviewing the facts, they therefore instantly assume the man’s innocence based on his age. The suspect actually makes deliberate use of the age-related innocence stereotype to his own advantage, so in this respect the scene is slightly subversive. However, that effect is negated by the end of the episode when the suspect suddenly dies and not under the most dignified of circumstances (Brooklyn Nine-Nine “The Wednesday Incident”).

**Questions:** Are older women infantilized by being portrayed as (morally) innocent (e.g. in how they discuss sexual matters or use profanity)?

**3.4.2 Sexuality: “Older women are asexual”**

It is a common misconception that older adults are no longer sexually active, which often finds its way into TV and other entertainment media. While it is correct that “sexual activity declines with age, 53 percent of 65- to 74-year-olds and 26 percent of 75- to 85-year-olds report having sex with at least one partner in the previous year. Among the 75- to 85-year-olds who are sexually active, more than 50 percent had sex two to three times per month” (Ouchida and Lachs 48). These numbers lay waste to claims that reaching old age coincides with entering an “innocent”, celibate state. Yet “old age is rarely part of sexual imagery; this is especially true of old women” (Connidis 141). The previously cited study by Kessler et al. confirms this by having found that out of 30 television characters under investigation, only three were sexually active, all of whom were male (539).

When older characters in sitcoms are shown to be sexually active (although ‘implied’ is probably the better term, since even The Golden Girls who were vocal about their sexuality were never shown even at the beginning or end of an actual sex scene), their sexuality is often talked about by others with an air of disgust. There is a myriad of instances of sitcoms guilty of featuring such scenes and thereby strengthening the notion that aging bodies in a sexual context can no longer be attractive. As has been discussed, women are arguably affected more strongly than men by the perception that the marks of age render them unattractive.
A remarkable example again comes from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which has received much praise for its diverse cast and its highly sensitive and respectful approach towards covering topics like transsexuality, racial injustice, and discrimination (based on gender or sexual orientation) within the police force. Nevertheless, the show repeatedly displays ageist tendencies, for example in the following conversation:

Jake: Hey, did you guys see the dude I brought in today? The drug dealer? 81 years old! I think it's the oldest collar of my entire career.
Amy: I once arrested a 96-year-old for flashing. I was terrified he'd die in my backseat. Or flash me.
Jake [disgusted facial expression] Ew.
Rosa: My oldest collar was 78, but the PCP made her fight like she was 20.
[...]
Charles: You talking oldest bags? [proudly] 68!
Amy: That's not that old.
Charles: Yeah, but I was only 20.
Jake [confused]: 20? Were you even a cop then?
Charles: No, man, it was before I got into the academy.
Rosa: Charles isn't talking about his oldest arrest.
All [loudly, visibly disgusted]: Ew! (“The Vulture” 0:00-0:40)

It is important to note that this exchange occurs within a context in which sexuality is talked about a lot, so the taboo does not extend to all forms of physical intimacy. Within less than a minute, this dialogue makes it abundantly clear how most of the characters involved feel about even imagining sexual acts involving older people. Moreover, the one person who does not equate older age with a complete loss of desirability is ridiculed for this stance, which further strengthens the message delivered to audiences. This scene is by no means unique; there are dozens of similar examples to be found easily in many other sitcoms currently on air.

Unsurprisingly, inaccurate beliefs about sexuality at old age can have negative consequences, especially when it comes to sexual health. Physicians who make false assumptions about their older patients’ sexual behaviors are likely to “miss diagnoses of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV” (Ouchida and Lachs 48). Given that older adults, as has been described above, are still sexually active and do not necessarily have contact just with one partner, the danger of STDs spreading among the age group may increase as a result of such misconceptions. There has recently been a debate on whether TV shows have a responsibility to depict safer sex practices, which was sparked by Twitter users’ comments on HBO’s *Insecure* and subsequently taken up by several
reviewers. Some dismissed such criticism based on “the possibility that [the female] character could have gotten the shot, is on the pill or is allergic to latex” (Cummings n.p.), thereby focusing solely on contraception. Such thinking, i.e. seeing the use of condoms only as a measure to prevent pregnancy, is even more likely to occur with older characters, since in that function it is obviously superfluous with post-menopausal women, whereas it is still crucial in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

**Partnered sexuality: “Older women are celibate”**

As has already been touched upon, sexual activity is an area in which the ideals of stamina and performance are highly valued, with male sexuality in particular. This comes into conflict with the realities of aging, since with advancing years, bodies change in appearance and bodily function follows suit. While that does not mean that physical intimacy may no longer be successful for the people involved, the definition of success tends to change. In Sandberg’s review of two of her studies in which older participants were interviewed about their sexual activity, a common thread concerned “the potentials of intimacy and touch [...] without necessarily engaging in penile-vaginal penetration” (26). Arguably, this constitutes a shift towards a more feminine take on sexuality in which the performance ideal is abandoned in favor of deriving pleasure from foregrounding the emotional aspects of intimacy and touch. Clarke’s interviews with older women present a similar image: Most of the participants reported a decline in the frequency of sexual intercourse but higher overall satisfaction than in younger years and the general agreement that other aspects of intimacy and companionship had gained greater importance. Sexual intercourse “was considered to be the icing on the cake rather than the key ingredient of a fulfilling relationship”, while other activities, like cuddling, were promoted to higher status and “ends in themselves” (Clarke 136). Those who were no longer sexually active due to their own or their partners’ health issues largely “maintained that their emotional bonds with their husbands as well as alternative ways of expressing affection outweighed the importance of sexual intercourse to their relationships” (Clarke 135).

Strong adherence to the competence model of aging when applied to the realm of sexuality is likely to add a further layer to the previously discussed pressure this model exerts on older people. It is a biological reality that with advancing age, many men have
difficulty getting and maintaining erections, while post-menopausal women often experience vaginal dryness or decreasing libido. There are various products on the market that serve to alleviate these and similar problems, originally aimed at those affected by painful conditions. Authors like Marshall and Katz are, however, highly critical of the fairly recent but rapidly accelerated development of pharmaceutical companies’ marketing efforts to redefine “what might be statistically normal as dysfunctional” (90). Although the results from the interviews above do not indicate that participants perceived themselves as “dysfunctional” (in fact, quite the opposite was the case), these samples were by far not large enough to exclude the possibility of other members of the age group being affected differently.12

The challenge in the portrayal of older characters’ sexuality lies in neither incorrectly assuming that older people do not (and maybe should not) have active sex lives nor overcorrecting into the opposite direction by excessively focusing on a continuation of youthful sexual activity. The first of these assumptions may negatively impact older people’s self-perception and willingness to talk about sexual matters as well as hinder communication between health professionals and their patients if the former fail to ask the right questions concerning sexual health. The second, as a viewpoint falling under the competence or success model of aging, creates undue pressure.

**Masturbation: “Older women do not masturbate”**

So far, the sexual acts under discussion have fallen into the category of partnered sexuality, but for masturbation, some separate remarks are necessary. A study published just a few months ago has found an increase in women masturbating but also showed that “it is still far from becoming a component of their sexual repertoire as normal as it is for men” (Kraus 41). Female masturbation is generally still associated with a taboo that is widely preventing an open discussion of the subject, with many women not daring to talk about it with even with close friends (46%, in Kraus 40). The majority of women in a relationship who are dissatisfied with their sex lives have never spoken about masturbation with their partner (Kraus 41). This fact may, in part, be testament to the

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12 An important problem with research based on interviews lies in the risk of answers being influenced by social desirability bias, i.e. inaccurate responses consciously or unconsciously driven by the desire to “save face”. Intense dissatisfaction with one’s own appearance or sexual activity is a rather sensitive topic that may be influenced by this bias.
notion that female pleasure outside of partnered sexuality is not quite “proper” not yet having been overcome entirely. Based on the greater willingness of female participants to talk about masturbation with male rather than female interviewers, other researchers have hypothesized that the practice is “generally perceived as somewhat unrewarding” and that women may not want to disclose details about their masturbatory behaviors with other women, whom they are more likely to consider “judges” (Béjin qtd. in Kraus 41).

With older women, societal unwillingness to broach the subject is even stronger – the combination of age (disgust with older people’s sexuality in general) and gender makes itself distinctly felt here. Again, the actual prevalence of older women’s masturbation is by far not low enough to warrant this denial. In Herbenick et al.’s extensive survey, which studied sexual behavior of US Americans between the ages of 14 and 94, older women were shown to masturbate alone with at least the same frequency as they were sexually active with a partner. Almost half of the 60 to 69-year-olds and a third of the women 70 or older stated having masturbated within the past year (Herbenick 262-263). It is difficult to make such a claim with certainty, but numbers might potentially be higher still, if female masturbation was further destigmatized. This speculation is supported by the fact that in the study at hand, women over 70 had the lowest percentages among adults of ever having masturbated (58.3%, Herbenick 263). For men in the same age bracket, by comparison, the corresponding percentage was at 80.4% (Herbenick 261).

It is not much of a stretch to assume that the reason for this discrepancy lies at least in part with differing societal expectations and female masturbation having been strongly discouraged up until a few decades ago. Women of the age group spent most of their lives being convinced that female masturbation was unnatural or an insult to their partner, so it is likely that, as a result, fewer of them dared to give it a try. Although female masturbation is not an issue of paramount importance, it is evidently an area in which a gender imbalance exists. There is no valid reason why male masturbation should be so much more of an acceptable topic for discussion or a normalized behavior to be featured on screen while female masturbation is not.

13 Of course, the difficulty of opening such a discussion must not be discounted either, which is increased by a harmful ideal of masculinity according to which it is a “real man’s” responsibility to provide sexual satisfaction and failure in that respect is not an option (and should not be talked about).

14 In many cultures it, of course, still is. Here, I am referring to many Western countries.
Literature that specifically concerns itself with older women and masturbation on television is hard to find, but Kraus believes increasing mass media coverage to have contributed greatly to changing sexual norms, which in turn have led more women to lose their inhibitions to try out masturbation (38). This is why any show dealing with the issue of older women’s sexual activity – and first and foremost masturbation – in a respectful way is potentially rather innovative or possibly even discourse-changing.

**Questions:** Are older characters shown to be sexually active? If so, how is this behavior framed (e.g. ridiculed or praised by others)? Is safer sex mentioned or shown to be practiced? Is female masturbation featured and if so, how?

### 3.5 Stereotypes and humor in TV sitcoms

While the questions formulated above can, for the most part, be applied to any genre, a few additional comments are required on the relationship of stereotypes and humor in sitcoms.

The term “sitcom” as a clipping of “situation comedy” already points towards the importance humor has in the genre: A sitcom that fails to evoke laughter will not have an audience for long, so being perceived as funny by viewers is crucial to a sitcom’s survival. However, when it comes to the portrayal of older women (and men) in these shows, a major potential pitfall lies in the humor stemming mainly from the – often significantly exaggerated – inadequacies of older people. The key question, as Küpper puts it, is therefore: “How do these figures fit into these [sitcom] structures and by which means do they provoke laughter?” (251). Of course, there is nothing wrong with older characters having comedic impact and some degree of exaggeration and theatricality is difficult to avoid within the genre, but jokes should not be made mainly at their expense by re-affirming ageist stereotypes. It is not an easy task to strike a balance in this respect: On the one hand, viewers may be entertained by stereotypes they recognize (i.e. grandpa who constantly makes inappropriate remarks), so making use of these pre-established attitudes to entertain is simple and likely to be received well by most viewers, that is primarily those unaffected by the respective stereotypes because of their relative youth\(^\text{15}\). On the other hand, as has been discussed in previous chapters, representation has been proven

\(^{15}\)The same obviously applies to the employ and reception of other stereotypes (LGBT, racial minorities...).
time and again to have the power to affect how older people (and other marginalized
groups) are perceived and treated by others and how they see themselves. With these
negative consequences in mind, it can therefore reasonably be considered unethical to
excessively propagate harmful stereotypes.

It has been argued that many stereotypical ageist beliefs are not entirely
unfounded: Among the millions of people over the age of sixty, there are sure to be those
who are no longer sexually active and do not want to be, those who refuse help out of
stubbornness, or those who are overwhelmed with any and all modern technology.
However, stereotypes create a blindness that prevents from seeing individuals for who
they are and replaces their individuality with perceiving them as members of a category
with a fixed set of characteristics. The stricter the image (set of characteristics) a person
holds on how old people behave or, worse, existing prescriptive notions on how they
should or should not act, the more likely someone is to participate in discriminating
against them.

Earlier, Harwood’s recommendation on considering how older characters are
portrayed in relation to younger ones was discussed. According to Harwood, it is not
enough for portrayals to be largely positive; instead, they have to be at least on-par with
those of younger characters (161). A similarly nuanced approach is necessary, I believe,
when it comes to the incorporation of age stereotypes. Complete exclusion of any ageist
attitudes may not be the most fruitful strategy and going so far as to portray all older
characters positively as, essentially, slightly greyer and wiser people of middle age can
even have adverse effects (see remarks on the competence model/successful aging). It is
when ageist, and in the case of female characters also sexist, stereotypes are challenged
that TV is at its most progressive in its portrayal of older women.
4. Older women in *Grace and Frankie*: An analysis

*Grace and Frankie* follows the lives of its two eponymous main characters and their families after their husbands, Robert and Sol, disclose that they have been having an affair for more than two decades and now want to divorce their wives and get married. This entirely unexpected confession forces Grace and Frankie to become much closer than they ever wanted to be by moving into the families’ shared beach house together. The two women’s personalities and lifestyles are humorously incompatible, with Grace perfectly embodying the impeccable country club-dwelling business woman, while Frankie is an eccentric, marijuana-smoking hippie, who values her individuality saying: “I pride myself on not fitting in” (“The Incubator”).

The show’s first season sets out with primarily telling stories detailing how the women slowly develop an unlikely friendship in the aftermath of the cataclysmic event that is being left by their husbands in their seventies. Questions of identity are foregrounded in the first few episodes as Grace and Frankie strive to develop a clearer sense of who they are without their respective partners and devoid of their familiar environments and habits. In seasons two and three, several new plotlines are introduced, which more explicitly incorporate issues connected to age and its effects on the women’s business and romantic pursuits, both of which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters. The show’s fourth season is set to air by the end of January 2018.

Unlike many other sitcoms, *Grace and Frankie* is not episodic in structure. Shows like *The Golden Girls*, for instance, are characterized by strongly conventionalized narrative patterns within and loose connections among episodes (Küpper 252). Instead of storylines being introduced and resolved within the same time span of roughly half an hour, *Grace and Frankie* frequently extends stories across episodes or revisits themes later on. Reviewers have remarked upon this and other digressions from expected genre conventions, which are especially surprising considering that veteran sitcom-producers Marta Kauffmann (*Friends*) and Howard J. Morris (*Home Improvement*) are at its helm (Hale n.p.). *The New York Times’* Mark Hale believes *Grace and Frankie*’s most notable feature to be “how it tries to split the difference between the traditional broadcast sitcom and the new wave of more serious, cinematic comedies on cable and online” (n.p.). This thought will be taken up again in the following chapter, 4.1, in connection with how declining health and death are covered in the sitcom. The structure of the second half of
this thesis is modeled after chapter 3, and all questions formulated therein will be answered in each corresponding subchapter.

4.1 Deficit, competence, or affirmative aging

Although *Grace and Frankie* does not unitarily support a single model and occasionally features content that may foster either the deficit or the competence conceptualization of old age, the sitcom has a strong tendency towards the approach of affirmative aging. This claim will be referred to throughout all chapters, but the following analysis of physical decline and death in the sitcom will most explicitly discuss how selected scenes correspond with the models of aging described in chapter 3.1 of this thesis.

**Physical decline**

Throughout the show, references to the women’s ages and the toll it has taken on the reliability of their senses are made in passing. Grace’s dependence on reading glasses and Frankie’s bad hearing are, for example, slightly made fun of in the episode “The Dinner”, when the two discover a cake placed on their dining room table by their children:

G [looking at the cake and a note saying “We love our moms.”]: What the heck is this? I can't read it.

F: You can eat it! It's a cake. It won't kill you. (28:40-28:55, “The Dinner”)

Even when squinting and holding the card at arm’s length, Grace cannot make out what it says, while Frankie mishears “read it” for “eat it”. This scene constitutes a less frequent instance of a joke being made at the women’s expense, but there are also numerous instances of Grace and Frankie (or other older characters) themselves deriving humor from their physical limitations. In one scene, Grace’s partner Guy asks Grace and Robert whether they should walk the entire golf course, to which the latter two respond with an incredulous “Are you kidding?”. His answer “Yes, I am kidding. Among us we have three god knees. So I say: To the carts!” (“The Invitation”) illustrates the attitude towards the physical effects of aging often taken in the series: Certain limitations are acknowledged and accepted but do not hinder them in their enjoyment of various activities. This stance is also upheld in the following scene:

Grace: Life is short, Frankie. You know what we need? We need a girls' night. Just us girls. We can have drinks. And tapas. And just talk.
Frankie [smiling]: I'm never getting a hearing aid. I think I'm better off missing most of what you say. (23:25-23:55 “The Fall”)

One possible explanation for why Frankie does not want to do anything about her impaired hearing is her refusal to be marked as “old old” (the rejection of this label and the show’s general treatment of the very old generation will be discussed separately in chapter 4.5). Another – given this exchange more likely – answer is that she is content with her hearing, while acknowledging that it is flawed. This is, of course, an instance of situational irony given that Grace said something Frankie would certainly have wanted to hear but missed out on.

The third season develops the theme of physical decline further by contrasting episodes focusing on the women’s business venture with episodes that revolve around ailments brought on by advancing age. As has been discussed, a range of smaller everyday problems are regularly incorporated through the occasional mention or depiction of minor inconveniences they create, but in season 3, more severe difficulties surface. While the show’s tone remains sitcom-appropriately light in most, there are a few cases in which it closely resembles the tonality of a drama, which many reviewers (e.g. Hale, see above) have noticed.

“The Floor” is an episode that firmly falls into the comedy category plot-wise but has some serious undertones. As the title indicates, the living room floor plays a central part in the episode, when sudden back pain forces both Grace and Frankie to resort to lying flat on the ground (see fig. 2).

At first, this is not much more than a conventional sitcom scenario of terrible timing, since the women are supposed to prepare and get ready to leave for a business meeting just when the pain sets in. Humorously inefficient attempts at getting themselves out of this predicament are interspersed with exasperation, for example when Grace laments: “I expect this kind of thing from my wrists and my ankles and my knees. And my hips. But my back was never like those assholes”.

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16 This is the fifth episode of the show’s first season, until which Grace has been adamant that she does not want or need Frankie’s friendship. Shortly before this exchange, Grace nearly fell and her imagination of what would have happened if she had fallen and hurt her hip reveals to her how grateful she really is to have Frankie in her life.
A climax is reached when Grace abandons the race for the telephone (she wanted to get someone to help while Frankie is in favor of cancelling the appointment) and agrees with Frankie that there is no point in trying to arrive for their meeting in time:

Grace: [moans] What is the matter with me? Aah! How can I run a business when I can't even get off the floor? My daughters are right. I can't do this. I'm old! Before, when I was young [grunts] there was this big oak tree in the backyard. I could shoot up that sucker faster than any boy in the neighborhood. [chuckles] The best part was getting to the tippy-top and looking down at the world.

F: You do love that.
G: When I was up there, I thought I could do anything. See, inside, I still feel like that little girl but I know I'm just fooling myself. Every day my body tries to tell me how old I am, but today is the first day I hear it.
F: It sure is a hard thing to hear. (22:00-23:03, “The Floor”)

Before this moment, Grace has never wavered in her conviction that nothing could stop them from achieving whatever they set their minds to, so this honest declaration of feeling too weak, too old to turn their idea into a reality is as unprecedented as it is crushing. The literal experience of being forced to the ground is accompanied by Grace’s belief of metaphorically being brought down to earth. This time, it is Frankie who lifts her back up by saying: “That little girl is not gone [...] You're still climbing trees. Only now they're banks and incubators. I wouldn't be your partner if I didn't think you could get us to the tippy-top” (“The Floor”). The pair finally contacts Robert and Sol who, having to work around their own health constraints (Robert’s pinched nerve, Sol’s sciatica), make it
possible for Grace and Frankie to hold the meeting on their own terms (via video-chat instead of in-person, sitting with heating pads to alleviate the pain, ...). The incident is the epitome of affirmative aging in practice: Here, aging is not portrayed as unrealistically paradiiscial but as riddled with obstacles. The women’s pain and disappointment with their bodies’ failings is given ample room, yet they manage, with the right help, to work around their present limitations and achieve their goal.

Nonetheless, it could be criticized that the show overemphasizes the positive aspects of aging, which is certainly a valid point, since even the scene described above resolves favorably with the women overcoming the present hindrances. There are other examples to be found, however, in which the very serious side-effects of aging are not glossed over.

One short but impactful plotline that does not sugarcoat affirms the continued personhood and dignity of those suffering from age-related diseases that have neurological rather than physical effects. Grace’s long anticipated reunion with her almost-lover Phil Milstein is marred by her discovery that unlike planned many years ago, he had not divorced his wife, as she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, and he felt obligated to stay and handle her care. Phil speaks about the person he knew being present in body, but far removed in mind: “The Elaine I knew is gone. She hasn't been that Elaine for a very long time” (“The Anchor”). This explanation and Grace’s first-hand experience of the state Elaine is in illustrates the mentally and physically straining situation that is having to care for a spouse. What is notable as well is Grace’s decision not to enter a relationship with Phil, despite the simplicity of hiding it from Elaine. It is not the fear of being found out or judged by others for being with a man who is legally married that bothers Grace, but rather that “it's not fair to her” (i.e. Elaine, in “The Loophole”). Grace therefore acknowledges that no matter Elaine’s mental state, which has deteriorated significantly and apart from very rare lucid moments prohibits her to interact with others in a meaningful way, she is still “a person”. This is a strong statement in a world that all too often disregards the dignity of those with mental states impaired by disability or disease. This is one but not the only example of Grace and Frankie’s incorporation of a more serious health-related issue.
In “The Musical”, hardly a trace of the show’s usual lightheartedness is present. Frankie suffers a stroke and is told that, in all likelihood, the next one will be fatal. Grace resolves to do anything in her power to prevent this, but Frankie shows resistance:

Grace: There is something serious that you needed to know about, so you could take care of it.
Frankie: This is not what I want my life to look like!
G: So you have to take a few pills and check your blood pressure. That's not your life. I take pills. My God, this is America, everybody takes pills.
F: It's not just the pills. I was much happier not knowing. Now I'm going to wake up every morning thinking about spots on my brain. Every time I stumble over a word I'm going to think, "It's happening again!" Or wonder "Will I even get to finish my sentence?" It scares the shit out of me. (24:30-25:10, “The Musical”)

This scene outlines a conflict that threatens the women’s friendship and arises out of their incongruous responses to this frightening event. To Grace, gaining control over the situation is of paramount importance. She seeks out as much information about Frankie’s condition as possible to help her make all necessary changes to prevent another stroke. Frankie herself, in contrast, would prefer her previous state of blissful ignorance, since she is afraid that her newfound knowledge will negatively impact her carefree enjoyment of life. After working through her initial shock, Frankie is ready to adjust to her new situation without letting the possibility of death scare her into total passivity. This plotline is so valuable because it tackles a serious issue and offers two different perspectives, both of which are understandable. It does not prescribe just one legitimate reaction to such a critical event but overall highlights the life-affirming message that whatever time remains is not made any less precious because of mortality.

The juxtaposition of the women’s ambition, which, consequently, results in their success in launching their new business, and their increasingly serious health concerns creates a complex image of old age. Grace and Frankie neither idealizes the period as one of self-realization and achievement nor reduces it to the dreary and painful awaiting of imminent death. In doing so, a balance is struck between the competence model (or successful aging) and the deficit model. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, the concept of affirmative aging is repeatedly supported in various scenes. Additionally, Grace and Frankie occasionally deviates from the usual tonality to be expected of a sitcom and sheds
light on the devastating effects of serious diseases like Alzheimer’s or critical events like strokes or heart attacks\textsuperscript{17}.

**Death**

In the first part of this thesis, the relevance of death as a vehicle to further the position of either popular model of aging was outlined. Some thoughts on physical decline in the previous subchapter have already touched upon how mortality is incorporated in *Grace and Frankie*, now a more explicit discussion of death as potentially supporting the message of aging as decline or competence in the sitcom will follow.

The storyline most immediately connected to the issue of mortality is about Babe, a close friend of Frankie’s, who is also well-acquainted with Grace. The storyline spans three episodes (season 2 episodes 11-13) and begins with Babe’s return after a prolonged period of absence during which she travelled abroad. After Frankie and Babe chat and catch up, Babe, who has a reputation for organizing extravagant parties, shares her plan of wanting to throw “a party to end all parties” (“The Bender”). Frankie enthusiastically agrees to help with the preparations, during the course of which the question of the party’s theme comes up. Being told that it is a “bon voyage party”, Frankie is taken aback at her friend wanting to leave again (“F: Are you really going away again? You just got back. I'm still basking in the glow of your joie de vivre.”, “The Bender”) but then eagerly expresses her desire to join Babe. Only after a short exchange and Babe’s disclosure that she is “going to the one place you don't come back from” does it dawn on Frankie that she is being told about her friend’s impending death (“The Bender”).

The subsequent episode starts with Babe and Frankie speaking about the former’s reasons for wanting to die and her request for Frankie’s help:

B: After everybody leaves is when I leave. And by the way, I don't want any of the guests to know that this party will be my last night on Earth. I can't abide the idea of my nearest and dearest relating to me differently. FYI, I plan to be dead by sunrise - so go ahead and make brunch plans.
F: [scoffs] That's really not funny.
B: I know. I'm still sorting out this gallows humor thing.
[…]
F: But why do you want to die? Are you depressed?
B: No, it's nothing like that. I'm the happiest person I know! [laughs]
F: Exactly! You're the happiest person I know.

\textsuperscript{17}The latter is not discussed here for the sake of brevity. In “The Wish”, Robert has a heart attack and needs to undergo surgery. Elements of his recovery and aftercare are featured in subsequent episodes.
F: How can you be serious about this? This is insane!
B: No, baby. This is the sanest decision I have ever made. The cancer has come back. It's everywhere.

F: You're asking a lot of me.
B: But you're the kindest person I know. And in all my many travels, my most dearest [sic] treasured friend.
F: Yeah, you say that to all the people you ask to kill you. [Both laugh] (00:00-3:40, “The Party”)

Several elements of this conversation warrant closer discussion. From beginning to end, the exchange is defined through its attempt at balancing the seriousness of the topic with a certain lightheartedness that is fitting for the characters involved and, beyond that, on a superordinate level allows for audiences to be confronted with the issue in a more sitcom-appropriate way. In positioning Frankie as the inquisitive but supportive party, the show gets to establish the situation, which only later leads to some conflict. It is perhaps unexpected but not necessarily unrealistic that a person like Babe would want to keep the tone of the conversation on the lighter side; as she herself says, she “can't abide the idea of [her] nearest and dearest relating to [her] differently” which extends to the way she broaches the subject with Frankie. Babe refuses to be patronized in this question, since she has clearly taken the time to make up her mind and will therefore not be convinced to alter her plans. Yet, she also admits to not being entirely sure about how to verbalize her feelings (“I'm still sorting out this gallows humor thing.”) – in combination with her admission of being fully content with her life but considering assisted suicide the “sanest decision” available to her, this is deeply humanizing and facilitates audience empathy.

After a few brief moments of incredulity, Frankie accepts Babe’s choice but asks for some time to consider her own willingness to provide the requested help. Conflict is created only later, when Grace learns of the plan and grapples with the finality of Babe’s decision:

Grace: No. No, this can't be happening.
Babe: It is, sugar.
Grace: You can't do this.
Frankie: She is doing it. She made her choice.
G: It's not her choice to make.
B: Actually, it kind of is.
F: Of course it is! Her life. Her death. Her choice.
B: Ooh, I like that. If I had more time, I'd get a T-shirt made.
G: It's not right. Only God can make that decision. (13:00-13:25, “The Party”)

Up until this point, Grace has never been shown to be particularly religious, but much as many other Americans likely would, she nonetheless invokes her beliefs to argue against the ethical soundness of suicide. Frankie, on the other hand, underscores the right to make one’s own choice in such matters and with her exclamation “Her life. Her death. Her choice” echoes feminist rhetoric. Failing to convince Babe with the argument of divine disapproval, Grace tries a different angle by suggesting that there might still be hope. As befits her personality, she urges Babe not to “give up” but “keep fighting”, to which Babe replies: “But this is how I win, sweetheart. Besides, I don't want to go out fighting, I want to go out flying” (“The Party”)

This is an excellent example of affirmative aging, or what in this case might have to be renamed affirmative dying: Babe identifies her own goal given the circumstances her deteriorating health puts her in and pursues the best course of action for herself. As seen in the excerpt above, Babe is not tired of living and does not suffer from depression (“I'm the happiest person I know!”); instead, her wish to die stems from a rational evaluation of her options, in which death was ranked as the best out of many unfavorable alternatives. When going through the details of the plan, Frankie confesses to being scared. Babe agrees, but explains: “I'm more scared of being a burden, and being in pain, and of not being myself anymore. I couldn't bear that” (“The Party”). Preserving dignity and a sense of self is essential to Babe, which stands in stark contrast to the actual experiences of many older people in similar situations. Even in Western countries, it is not unusual for older people to spend whole years being reduced to living in conditions that barely do their status as human beings inherently deserving of respect justice. Living alone (and lonely) in squalor or being viewed as a number rather than an individual in notoriously understaffed and underfunded care facilities may not be the norm but neither is it a rarity and often goes along with a total loss of privacy and dignity (e.g. being left in soiled clothes for hours...). The reminder that old age and physical decline do not deprive a person of their status as such is therefore surely not superfluous. Babe champions the right to take control over one’s life – and death – and orchestrates it all according to her own preferences (e.g. she will die in her bedroom “And FYI, I'll be buck

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18 “Her body, her choice” is a frequently used slogan in debates on abortion.
naked because I like the way my sheets feel.”, “The Party”). Having and taking the opportunity to die according to her own design goes hand in hand with her full acceptance of what is coming. In one of her final lines, Babe again espouses the concept of affirmative age in stating that she does not “need a miracle” and continues with: “I've had a really good ride. I've lived it hard and well. With every breath, right?” (“The Party”). She is prepared for death and welcomes it as a step she has chosen for herself.

Season 2 ends with Grace and Frankie sitting on the beach, the samovar with Babe’s ashes between them (see fig. 3). They affectionately talk about Babe, who has inspired them to take action and not settle for what is expected or deemed appropriate.

In their enthusiastic agreement to venture into the business world (the details of which will be discussed in chapter 4.2.1), they reach towards each other to shake hands and accidentally knock over the samovar:

Frankie: Babe! Oh, shit! Help me scoop her up!
Grace: No!
F: Before the wind takes her away!
G: I don't even like to touch people when they're alive.
F: Babe loves the beach.
G: Oh! I got some Babe in my mouth.
F: Savory.
Without context, this scene could be interpreted as distasteful, yet from what the audience has been shown about Babe’s character, this fits in with Babe’s sense of humor and easy-going attitude, which she displayed even while being just minutes away from death. Still, there are sure to be some who feel that joking about a person’s remains is always in bad taste. I therefore fully acknowledge that my opinion might be colored by my own youth and corresponding distance to death and that the opinions of others are valid and might be better substantiated than my own in this respect.

Apart from this entire death-centric storyline, a few casual, joking remarks regarding mortality are made, for instance:

Frankie: Grace! Grace, I got a package. It might be a gift. It’s really heavy. It could be cheese. It could be cheese!
Grace: I don’t think we have room for any more cheese.
F: I will make room for cheese.
G: I’m putting that on your tombstone. (1:11-11:29, “The Anchor”)

In the already discussed episode “The Floor” in which both women find themselves incapacitated by excruciating back pain, Frankie jokes about having found peppermints and two pennies: “You can put them on top of my eyelids when I die. The peppermints. And by the way, if I go first, you have permission to eat me. But not my face”. What should be noted is that death is only joked about by older characters themselves and never by those who can still reasonably look forward to several decades worth of life. Both women also regularly cite their relative closeness to the ends of their lives as a reason for adamantly pursuing their goals and directing their attention to pleasant activities. For instance, Grace once remarks on the past ten hours having been quite eventful, to which Frankie responds: “Well, we’re old. We have to pack a lot of shit into a day” (“The Wish”).

Grace and Frankie’s treatment of the topic of death defies the expectation that sitcoms, as a genre aimed at providing light-hearted entertainment, do not cover controversial issues in depth. Here, the hotly-debated topic of assisted suicide is approached from two different angles: Frankie’s supportive reaction on the more liberal end of the spectrum is opposed by Grace’s more conservative refusal to condone Babe’s decision on religious grounds. Ultimately, the show does not stay neutral despite giving room to more than one opinion on the matter. Viewers are invited to empathize with Babe and are repeatedly
made aware of the reasons why she considers death the preferable alternative. Additionally, the topic of death is primarily dealt with in a way that conforms to the model of affirmative aging, as its inevitability is acknowledged and shown to be on the women’s minds from time to time, yet it does not permanently take away from their enjoyment of life. Instead of either one of them closing their eyes to the realities of their age(s) or resigning to melancholy, they choose to take a lighter approach towards death (demonstrated by jokes) and make sure to spend their time with meaningful interactions and worthwhile projects.

4.2 Interactions with the young and the assumption of incompetence

Older age, as has been pointed out in chapter 3.2, is generally considered a period in which no significant contributions to the world at large are made. The seasonal metaphor of viewing retirement age as the autumn of life illustrates this notion: It is the time when the harvest of a life’s work is brought in but not one during which any new seeds are sown. Of course, there is nothing objectionable in the decision of those who choose to spend their retirement with quieter pursuits. At a larger scale, one-sided conceptualizations of activity and competence at older age can be a hindrance to those who still want to leave their mark, however. Grace and Frankie decidedly fall into the category of those not ready to stop contributing to the world, and their ambitions are frequently at odds with what others deem appropriate. They primarily encounter such opposition on the individual level as coming from their children but also on an institutional scale, as the following chapter will show. After a few introductory remarks, each of the three questions formulated in 3.2. will be answered. The third question will be elaborated on in a separate subchapter, since corresponding content is given particular weight in Grace and Frankie.

In the aftermath of their husband’s announcements of their mutual desire to marry each other, both Grace and Frankie feel the desire to find fulfillment and distraction with work. Frankie has already created a space for herself in the garage adjacent to the beach house, where she not only spends her time painting by herself but also teaches art to a group of ex-convicts. These artistic pursuits provide a way for her to connect with the world beyond the expected domestic and familiar spheres (family, friends) and reach their
climax in season 3, when Frankie exhibits her paintings in a gallery (see chapter 4.5). In “The Dinner”, she comes across an advertisement for a position as an art teacher at a retirement home. This scene will be discussed from a different angle in chapter 4.5, but it is also relevant here, as it reveals an ageist assumption on the part of the employee showing Frankie around. The young man falsely assumes that she is interested in moving to the home without even considering that she might be applying for the job, which arouses intense indignation in Frankie.

Grace is afflicted by boredom as well, and resorts to absurd tasks like trimming the rug and alphabetizing the spices until it occurs to her that she might return to Say Grace, the company she founded and has since handed over to her daughter. Brianna denies her request on grounds of her fear that if Grace were to return, Brianna would be overshadowed by her mother’s presence. She also tells Grace that her face, which had until then been featured on Say Grace’s packaging, would shortly be replaced by a plant: “We're going for a more youthful customer, and she's urban, and she's active, and she responds better to a plant than a face” (“The Dinner”). After this rejection, Grace makes another attempt at putting her time to good use in entering a mentorship program for young women. Her initial enthusiasm (to Frankie: “You know, this is exciting for me! [...] I need a purpose, and this might be it.”, 8:30-8:40, “The Chicken”), is soon dampened, however, when her mentee is not prepared to do the hard work necessary for a change in careers. Grace does not respond well to being accused of “having had it easy”:

Listen to me, missy. I have worked since I was 15, and the only reason I stopped was because I retired from a business that I built. You've had it so hard? Try being a woman in her seventies. Talk about being invisible! People act like you don't know anything, that you don't count. (23:45-24:01, “The Chicken”)

The experience of feeling invisible was discussed at the very beginning of this thesis in connection with quantitative data on the representation of older women and will be prominently featured in the discussion of ageism and appearance in chapter 4.3. The

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19 I would like to point out here that *Grace and Frankie* shows a tendency towards having its main characters perform domestic tasks when they are in emotional turmoil. I am unsure as to how these examples should be interpreted, since they carry a somewhat sexist undertone in communicating something akin to it being a “natural” impulse for women to resort to cleaning to process strong feelings. Frankie “stress-cleans” on several occasions, for instance mopping the floor in “The Goodbyes” after finding out that Coyote has gotten in touch with his birth mother. It is at the very least strange that she would hide her feelings from her family and work through them while performing a task that she does not usually enjoy or even do at all and which is abandoned as soon as she finds another way to restore her emotional equilibrium.
origin of Grace’s impression of being treated as if she did not “count” is illustrated by the example of Brianna’s reaction to her mother’s made-up explanation for why her hand is injured (the real source of the injury was Grace’s experimentation with a vibrator, which she prefers not to disclose):

Grace: Oh, it's just my arthritis flaring up. I've gotten back into calligraphy.

Brianna: It's good you have something to do. (9:48-9:59, “The Coup”)

This is a phrase that older people surely hear quite often and that has a distinctly condescending note to it in communicating something akin to: You are not contributing much to society, so it is good that you at least manage to keep yourself busy in some way, although this activity is not beneficial to anyone else. Both Brianna’s intonation and facial expression support such an interpretation of her statement.

The first of three questions concerning older individuals’ presumed incompetence formulated in chapter 3 of this thesis was whether older characters are almost exclusively framed as irrationally declining help that they are doubtlessly in need of. Well-intentioned but unwelcome help tends to be forced upon older people by their children when the latter notice symptoms of their parents’ advancing age, while the former still feel capable of handling their daily lives without assistance. This marks a reversal of the established order in that the parent no longer offers support or advice to their child but is subject to receiving such offers, while simultaneously losing their influence and status as the experienced, wise party, whose opinions are valued. While there is nothing to be objected to when help is extended to meet a real need, sitcoms often use diverging opinions on older characters’ abilities to portray them as irrational and stubborn. There are several instances that can be referenced in answer to this question in Grace and Frankie. Three scenes in which Grace and Frankie feel patronized by their children’s attempts at offering help or making decisions for them will be discussed here.

In “The Test”, Bud and Coyote notice Frankie’s difficulty with retaining the material she has to study to renew her driver’s license and decide to ask her about it:

Bud: Have you been forgetting anything else lately?
Frankie: No, I'm not like what's-her-name in that movie with that guy. You know, the redhead?
B: Maybe it's time we think of some alternatives.
F: To what? (17:10-17:20, “The Test)
In this first part of the conversation, it seems as if the scene is headed in exactly the direction that is so frequently criticized, since it confirms Bud and Coyote’s suspicion by showing Frankie unable to recall either the title or the names of the actors she is referring to, while Frankie herself refuses to accept it. The two men continue with a range of arguments trying to appeal to Frankie’s rationality:

Bud: And it could be a good thing, Mom. You don't even like driving. And there's Uber now, and everyone delivers. Maybe, maybe we could hire a nice college student who's interested in performance art to drive you around. Huh?
Coyote: Yeah. Yeah. And think of the environmental contribution you'd be making.

Frankie: So you want me to hand over my keys and live the rest of my life as a shut-in.
Bud & Coyote: No! No.
F: Oh, right, I could take a cab to Applebee's, stockpile ketchup packets like Aunt Dotty! Why don't you just put me in a home where they have shuttle buses to drive you around?
C: Mom, nobody's putting you in a home. (17:33-18:05, “The Test”)

Their attempt is unsuccessful, however, as Frankie receives their ideas as an urge to give up a significant amount of her freedom. She escalates the argument by responding to the threat she perceives, which results in her sounding quite irrational. The conversation is quickly drawn to a close by Frankie, who tells her sons to leave (but not without regaining some of her “motherly instincts” and getting them some food to take home with them). Although Frankie decidedly rejects her sons’ concerns upon being confronted with them, they are later shown to not have gone without leaving their mark. In conversation with Grace, Frankie doubts her own competences and considers whether Bud and Coyote might have been right.

Grace: Well, it [Frankie’s mind] could be wandering the perimeter.
Frankie: I can't believe this is happening now. Just when my life is opening up again.
G: Oh, look, our brains are getting a little older, and it takes longer for things to sink in. You just have to be a little more patient with yourself. (19:45-20:01, “The Test”)

Grace’s attitude nicely exemplifies the approach of affirmative aging. She does not blindly assure Frankie that her sons are being unreasonable and that there is nothing to their comments; instead, Grace encourages her friend to accept that she might not be able to perform exactly as she did at a younger age and to be gentler with herself. The episode ends on a triumphant note: Frankie passes the test and jokes about her renewed license.
being valid for five years, so she still has “plenty of time to lose [her] mind” With this final scene, Frankie’s behavior is reframed as much less irrational than it first appeared. Passionate as her response was, she is finally proven right. Equally interesting from an “anti-ageist” standpoint is Grace’s promise of brutal honesty if Frankie should ever reach the point where her mental faculties really start to deteriorate. This is a subtle reclaiming of power – not their children but they will tell each other when they really do need additional help.

The reversal of the power and responsibility dynamics between parents and their adult children is directly addressed in an exchange between Grace and her daughters as well. Grace is angry about her discovery that Brianna was the person from whom Frankie received the loan for her and Grace’s vibrator project. Similar to Frankie, Grace also reacts strongly to the notion of needing help from her children:

Mallory: Mom, at a certain point aren't we supposed to do things for you? Because we love you and you gave us life and good hair. Maybe it's getting to be that time. 
Grace: It is not "that time." Do you understand me? It is not "that time"! We are not at "that time". (3:20-3:42, “The Pot”)

What is notable here is that Grace does not outright negate the possibility of such a time ever coming, she merely insists that this is not yet “that time”. Grace has consistently been characterized as a highly independent woman, who prides herself for having built her first company from the ground up without help, so her implicit admission that at some point she will require support is testament to her rational approach towards aging.

In another scene, Bud does not just offer help but gives it without considering that his efforts are unwanted. He is shown watching an instructional video on gardening – the task he is trying to accomplish despite Frankie’s undisguised disapproval.

Bud: Mom, you know, I'm doing all of this, all of this, for you. 
Frankie: Yeah, well, honey, why are you doing this to me? 
Bud: For you. 
[...] [Grace returns from the beach] 
Frankie: That boy's gonna help me to death. 
Grace: If he's going to be around here all the time, can he do something we actually need? Like get my shoe out from under the bed? (1:20-1:42, “The Sex”)
Bud’s misguided attempts at helping clearly miss the mark completely and are ridiculed by both women. There are more similar scenes\textsuperscript{20} in *Grace and Frankie*, but these three examples should suffice as evidence for the sitcom not falling into the popular pattern of supporting the stereotype of stubborn older people irrationally refusing help. Instead, in at least one such scene, it is the young who display a degree of irrationality (see Bud trying to help with a task he is completely inexperienced with).

In chapter 3.2 the erroneous notion that older people are naturally “set in their ways” and therefore unwilling or incapable of expanding their skill sets or reconsidering their habits and convictions was introduced (Cohen 610). Thus, the second question centers on how the sitcom depicts older characters in relation to their willingness or ability to acquire new skills like handling modern technology.

Frankie’s ineptness with computers reaches almost running-gag status throughout the series. She frequently uses her phone to call, text, and even record video, but it is not until the national spelling bee contest that her interest in being “part of the conversation” by using the Internet is sparked. Grace agrees to help her learn, but Frankie is overwhelmed even with acquiring basics skills:

\begin{quote}
G: It's easy. You just plug it in. And then [computer lights up]
F: Oh, boy! Can you do it again, so I can watch you? Carefully, step by step.
G: Turn it on again?
F: Yes! Do it so I can learn to do it. You know, you teach a man to fish. (5:50-6:10, “The Spelling Bee”)
\end{quote}

After a while, both are frustrated enough to lay he matter into professional hands and Frankie calls the tech-support hotline. While the previous difficulties could be chalked up to Frankie’s eccentric personality, the following interaction unmistakably frames the issue as one caused by age. A few questions into the conversation, which Frankie has not been able to follow at all, she tells the hotline employee how old she is:

Frankie: No. You're not listening. When I said "I know nothing," I meant "I know nothing." – [Whispering] I'm 70 years old.
Tech support employee [whispering]: Oooh. OK. We have someone for you, ma'am. Hold on, please. (7:58-8:10, “The Spelling Bee”)

\textsuperscript{20} See also “The Alert”, in which Bud gifts the women panic alerts in the name of all their children. Grace outright refuses to wear hers, while Frankie does so to soothe her son’s worries but only until her alert causes an embarrassing moment during a business meeting.
Frankie is then transferred to someone introducing himself as “Mike”, who asks her for her name, is almost excessively kind and careful to conduct the conversation in a very slow and calm speaking voice. This marks the only instance of elderspeak that can be identified in the sitcom but does not meet the previously discussed criterion of being implicitly or explicitly ridiculed by the older character addressed in that manner. In addition, the fact that Frankie’s age is seen as a vital piece of information that, as long as it is withheld, prevents the conversation from becoming as efficient as possible may be interpreted as an ageist assumption. It is rather odd for a sitcom like *Grace and Frankie* that is otherwise conscious of ageist tendencies and often explicitly criticizes them to repeatedly use the stereotype of older people being inept with computers to amuse audiences.

*The Guardian*’s Brian Moylan is more generous in his assessment of Frankie’s relationship with technology:

She knows how to take videos of herself and realizes how important texting is, but she just can’t figure out how to shut the damn thing off. [...] This isn’t the equivalent of saying: “Look, old people can’t use technology.” It’s much more layered than that, showing how people with AARP cards are trying to thrive in a world that is alien and sometimes downright hostile to them. (Moylan n.p.)

It can be disputed whether the show’s treatment of Frankie’s aptness in the use of technology is really as layered as Moylan claims, especially since its depiction is highly inconsistent in more than one aspect. Sometimes, the simplest interactions seem to overwhelm her (several scenes with computers, frequent quips about her downloading viruses), but she also uses a range of devices quite efficiently (records her own ringtones, buys things on the Internet). There are a few scenes that include examples of both, which portrays Frankie’s skills in a rather contradictory fashion. In “The Road Trip”, she has set out to find Phil Milstein online and has managed to provide Grace with a social media profile and an address, which is no small accomplishment. Yet Frankie also threatens to “erase” the website: “I'm gonna erase it, my finger is on the eraser key” – Grace: “There is no eraser key” (5:30-5:38 “The Road Trip”). Additionally, she conducts this rather impressive investigative work on Grace’s computer because hers has been “frozen”, which she assumes to either have been caused “by the FBI” or a virus (“The Road Trip”).

One might object to my interpretation of Frankie’s struggle with technology as bordering on ageism by claiming that it is appropriate for her as an eccentric character to
have unexpected difficulties with basic skills. It is true that Frankie is repeatedly shown to take rather curious approaches to performing domestic tasks, for example when using shampoo to clean the kitchen floor because “It smells better. I checked online” (“The Goodbyes”). Even if one were to agree with this, the fact that an ageist stereotype is used to further Frankie’s characterization as somewhat whimsical is nonetheless not the most considerate, and as has been shown, not a very consistent choice.

With the exception of Frankie’s troubles with technology, neither Frankie nor Grace exhibit signs of resistance to change. It takes both of them some time to come to terms with their marriages being ended so suddenly, and due to the momentous scope of this revelation, both women are cautious about entering new relationships. Nonetheless, they progress with their lives, romantically and otherwise, as the following chapter will show in discussing Grace and Frankie’s new business project.

4.2.1 Grace and Frankie: Complex images of activity, business pursuits, and grandmotherhood

The third question concerning older women’s range of influence being limited to the role of grandmother is of high importance within Grace and Frankie and will therefore be covered more extensively. Earlier, the assumption that “the elderly gradually withdraw from the dynamic of current world events and take up a quieter and more sedate lifestyle” was discussed (Küpper 253). For women, this withdrawal is commonly expected to include a focus of attention and energy on grandchildren and other family members, thereby extending imbalanced gender expectations into older age. Both Grace and Frankie deviate from this norm and, as has been pointed out, still want other things from life.

Before their joint endeavor to produce and sell vibrators geared towards the needs of older women, Frankie attempts a solitary foray into the business world by making her homemade yam lube available to the masses via a cooperation with Say Grace. In the season 2 episode “The Negotiation”, Frankie meets Brianna to discuss the terms of their business arrangement. Frankie is very careful about asserting her power and making demands, literally saying “I want more!”. In part, this is exaggerated for comedic purposes, for instance in the unnecessarily drawn out procedure of neither Brianna nor Frankie wanting to seat themselves first as a power play. Still, the older woman is never shown to be an easily manipulated but rather an equal negotiation partner who cannot be
pushed into accepting a deal she is not content with. The mere fact that Frankie is shown to be capable of creating a product that is deemed profitable enough to be sold by a company speaks to the show’s refusal to paint their older characters as irrelevant. Even more so, her success in entering a contract on her own terms communicates that her age does not diminish her right to make demands (e.g. having her art placed on the packaging) and to be taken seriously.

The women’s shared vibrator project emerges out of a conflict with their families, in which Grace and Frankie both express their discontent with being viewed as irrelevant and incompetent. This confrontation starts with the women feeling betrayed by their former husbands as they each discover a lie they had been fed for years – Sol told Frankie that musician Kenny Loggins had bought one of her paintings, and Robert had once bought dozens of gifts to hand out to his wife whenever an occasion arose. Grace and Frankie’s anger soon extends to their other family members as well. Their children at first try to defuse the situation by explaining that the men acted out of good intentions and lied only to keep the women’s self-esteem intact. Neither Grace nor Frankie are convinced but feel that such behavior expresses disrespect. The women continue to air similar grievances concerning a series of comments and actions on their children’s parts that they considered hurtful and insulting:

Coyote: What did we do?
Frankie: You! You turned me into a little old lady who's losing her mind and shouldn't even be allowed to drive.
Grace [to Mallory]: And I'm just a dupe who couldn't possibly have any good advice to give. And you [to Brianna]
Brianna: Oh, God.
Grace: You said you wouldn't hire me because I'd overshadow you. But I gave you the first new idea that Say Grace has had since you took over [hugging Frankie]
Well, we gave you the first idea, and you never acknowledged it. You took credit for it and then you threw Frankie to the curb. (24:10-24:35 “The Coup”)

Here, the women directly address a range of behaviors that made them feel insignificant. Their rage, although intense enough to be tinged with some theatricality, is not ridiculed but portrayed as a legitimate reaction to their families’ actions. It is their loved ones whose responses to hearing their mothers’ explanations for their spontaneous decision to make “vibrators for women with arthritis” are childishly exaggerated.

Mallory: Please let my water break!
Brianna: I think I just blacked out.
Grace: Oh, grow up. Older women masturbate too.
Brianna: Mom! –
Frankie: And we have vaginas.
Bud: Why is it every time my family gathers for a meal someone has to bring up my mother's vagoo?
Coyote: Just say "woodle" like a grownup.
Brianna: Okay. I highly doubt there's a vibrator market for geriatric women with arthritis.
Grace [holding up her arm] There is! I'm in agony. (24:55-25:15, “The Coup”)

The reactions of the younger adults present are an excellent illustration for the assertion that “sexuality of old people, like sexuality of adolescents frightens most people in between” (Walz qtd. in Connidis 123). They act immaturely on both the verbal and nonverbal level, as exemplified by figure 4 below, in which Coyote’s hunched posture with his fingers in his ears mirrors his and Bud’s childish refusal to use the medically accurate term “vagina” and preference for “vagoo” or “woodle”. Grace and Frankie’s postures, in contrast, are open and exude confidence: Not even Grace is ashamed of speaking about her sexuality and the specifics of older women’s anatomy any longer.

Figure 4. Bud and Coyote reacting to the women’s decision to produce vibrators. “The Coup”, 25:40.

The nature of the project that Grace and Frankie resolve to start to demonstrate that they are capable of much more than their ex-husbands and children give them credit for is significant as well:

Mallory: Seriously, Mom. How do I explain to my children that their grandma makes sex toys for other grandmas?
Grace: I'll tell you what you can tell them, honey. We're making things for people like us, because we are sick and tired of being dismissed by people like you.

It speaks strongly to the solidarity the pair feels with other older women that they choose to tackle a problem they are faced with on an individual level by righting what they perceive to be a wrong (of a different nature) on a societal scale. After Frankie’s last line, the women leave their incredulous families behind while a hip hop song plays (lyrics: “Push it to the limit. I’m in it to win it”, “The Coup”). The way this exit is set up is crucial: The audience is invited to cheer Grace and Frankie on rather than follow the other characters in their disbelief and disapproval.

The dissatisfaction of their families is, however, only the first in a long list of obstacles the women have to face in their plan coming to fruition. In their search for a bank willing to grant them a loan, they encounter institutionalized ageism and explicitly identify it as such:

Derrick (bank employee): So, I don't think that a ten-year loan would be prudent at this time. For our bank. With you.
Grace: Well, uh, would a seven-year loan be prudent?
Derrick: I'm not sure seven is realistic.
Frankie: What do you think is prudently realistic?
D: Somewhere in the one-year range.
F: I'm not the accountant here, but that doesn't seem like much of a range, Derrick.
G: I've done the break-even analysis and it's gonna take at least four years to… Oh, my God! I know what's going on here.
[…]
Grace: He's not gonna give us a loan because he thinks we're too old.
Frankie: Too old? I was blasting Drake all the way here.
G: You know what this is? Ageist. Ageist bullshit!
Derrick: Ladies, there are many, many factors that go into loan decisions.
G: Oh, I'm sure. There's how old you are, there's how many birthdays you have left...
F: How much pubic hair you have left. (3:20-4:30, “The Art Show”)

Clearly, the problem here lies not in the women’s lack of competence or the viability of their business plan but rather with the expectations and prejudice of someone at middle age. The sitcom not only criticizes this ageist assumption but also uses the exact term, which is important because some viewers may not yet be familiar with the concept (younger audiences mainly, as older viewers are likely to have encountered such bias first hand) or lack the language to talk about it. This is not an isolated incident either: Another
unnamed bank representative whom Grace contacts via phone even outright denies them a face-to-face meeting after learning about their age: “Another no. This one googled us. She knows our combined age is 146” (“The Art Show”). Despite these complications, Grace and Frankie refuse to give in and vow to see their project through:

Frankie: We’ll form an old lady gang. We're creaky, but tough. We're forgetful, but fierce. Gravity may be no friend of ours, but that doesn't mean our bottom line will bottom out.
Grace: Right. It's so insulting. Do we look like we're about to die? Do we look like we're senile and can't remember anything? Where is the car?
Frankie: I thought you were paying attention. (5:00-5:27 “The Art Show”)

A mild joke about forgetfulness is here combined with adherence to the model of affirmative age. Frankie does not deny that they suffer occasional lapses in memory and are “creaky” but always offers a positive to oppose each negative. The incompatibility of “old lady” and “gang” is also interesting in that both women repeatedly refuse to be referred to as the former (see also chapter 4.3) but subvert the sense of frailty associated with the term by linking it with the powerful and possible threatening status essential to gang-membership.

In the light of previously discussed literature concerning counter-stereotypicality and pressure on older women, there is one obvious piece of criticism to be applied to Grace and Frankie: The pair’s energetic pursuit of various ambitious goals cannot become a new standard for all women their age. It might be argued that the target of lifting older women out of the abyss of irrelevance was overshot here, so that the portrayal too closely resembles the ideals of the competence model of aging. The example of Joan-Margaret therefore warrants closer attention as her storyline adds another layer to the issue.

Sol and Robert’s law firm, now run by Bud, has employed a secretary called Joan-Margaret for decades. Over the years, Joan-Margaret and Sol have developed a close friendship, as evidenced by Sol’s shock at his son’s plan to fire the employee, whose work has long been suffering due to her advancing age.

Sol: But she's been here since the beginning.
Bud: Of time! The other day, she brought me a document with those tissues she keeps under her sleeve stapled to the first page. (13:05-13:17 “The Alert”)
Sol attempts to change the younger man’s mind by emphasizing that Joan-Margaret is essentially a company institution and accuses his son of being ageist. Finally, Bud manages to convince Sol that this step is non-negotiable. What can ultimately be taken away from this example is that making decisions over older women’s heads is never a good strategy, albeit here it is for a rather unexpected reason: During a last conversation with Sol, who has taken it upon himself to tell her about the firm’s decision to terminate her contract, Joan-Margaret confesses that she has been counting the days until her retirement and has simply stuck around to support her friend: “And truthfully, he's [i.e. Bud] not the only one waiting for you to retire. I've just been holding on for you, too. Jesus, Sol, I've got to get out of here!” (“The Alert”).

In this paper, it has repeatedly been demanded that television and other media need to offer more complex representations of life at older age. In *Grace and Frankie*, Joan-Margaret’s plotline is a lovely counterexample to the sitcom’s main characters in their relentless ambition. Joan-Margaret’s eagerness to finally leave the business and settle into retirement is no less valid than Grace and Frankie’s desire to dive into a new project and make it a commercial success. The sitcom, although it grants markedly more screen-time to its active main characters, is not unitary and much less prescriptive in its conceptions older women and their desire to make contributions to the world at large, which will be explicated further in the following chapter on grandmotherhood.

*(Grand)motherhood and stereotypical women’s roles*

There is a case to be made that societally, motherhood is still much more expected to be a natural desire for women than fatherhood is for men. Women who do not feel maternal instincts and decide not to have children are often eyed suspiciously or told that they will change their minds, at the latest once they hear their biological clock ticking. At older age, an extension and, simultaneously, a shift occurs with this expectation in that it is then assumed natural to be directing the majority of one’s attention to grandchildren. This was discussed in chapter 3.2 in context of the notion that older women’s primary goal is often believed to be total devotion to their families. Two studies were cited according to which women in television are frequently shown in domestic environments and as constantly granting others support while hardly ever receiving any such care.
Grace and Frankie plays with such assumptions by repeatedly characterizing Grace as a woman not in possession of maternal (or grandmotherly) instincts. In one episode (“The Negotiation”), she is pitted against “Grandma Jean”, Mallory’s mother-in-law, who fully embodies the image of a caring grandmother: She speaks in silly voices, tells stories, and knows how to dispel all of her grandchildren’s fears. Grace, by contrast, needs to brace herself before any prolonged interaction with her grandkids and is seen drinking from a teacup filled with a conspicuously clear liquid before entering the fort in which Grandma Jean and the kids are already immersed in play. From the first scene in which the audience encounters Jean, she is set up as the paragon of a nurturing grandmother, including her appearance (see fig. 5 below). Unlike Grace, she seems to dress for comfort, wearing sneakers and loose sweatpants that allow her to follow the children’s movements unrestrictedly and without much care whether her clothes get dirty. Her hair is braided in a way that might be intended to remind of German or Austrian grandmothers – one of the personas Jean takes on to entertain the children is the German “Gretchen Gumblehausen” – and she does not wear any jewelry that might get in the way of their various activities. Her whole appearance radiates warmth and the love she feels for her grandchildren, which is also expressed in the detailed knowledge she has about them (their favorite TV shows, their fears, ...). Despite Grace’s geographical closeness, she lacks such knowledge, which leads her to inadvertently scare her grandson Macklin by impersonating a clown. Macklin immediately seeks shelter in Grandma Jean’s lap.

Figure 5. Grandma Jean with Macklin. “The Negotiation”, 11:15.
Apart from alienating her grandson, Grace takes another unpleasant surprise away from the afternoon: Lice are now busily multiplying on her head and Frankie has to help her get rid of the infestation:

Frankie: Look, these things happen.
Grace: When you go near children.
F: Oh, you can't be mad at them.
G: I'm mad at their hygiene.
F: Well, to be fair, you're not a big fan of anybody's hygiene.
G: None of this would have happened if I hadn't been rolling around on the ground - the way Grandma Jean likes to do.
F: But that's also what kids like to do.
G: Kids don't know what they like! They're dumb! [pause] Oh, God! That's not something a grandmother should say. What is wrong with me?! (12:45-13:15 “The Negotiation”)

Grace recognizes her failed attempt to imitate Jean for what it was and is angry at herself for trying to act in a way that feels foreign to her. An even stronger emotion is evoked by her realization that she does not think of her grandchildren as is commonly expected. For the first time, she explicitly voices a sentiment she has indirectly expressed through her actions for what can be assumed to be years and the low opinion she seems to hold of her grandkids scares her. Throughout the series, Grace is repeatedly characterized as never having been a warm, maternal type, which is illustrated by a telephone conversation with her daughter Brianna. Grace asks Brianna whether she has ever felt unconditional love from her mother after being accused by Frankie of being incapable of relating to others in that way:

Brianna: Huh? Uh, well, no, Mom. That's not really your strong suit.
Grace: Oh.
B: But it makes sense. You're not very unconditional with yourself. I mean, I hope I didn't just offend you. This is not a national secret, right?

This response obviously has a strong impact on Grace and leads her to support her friend Babe in her decision to commit assisted suicide, after all (see chapter 4.1). What affects her even more is a short conversation with Mallory, who reminds her of something Grace had said years ago:

Mallory: Remember when you and Dad had brunch at the house after Madison’s christening? You stood in the kitchen making egg salad and you said this better be my last baby because I needed to start my life again.
[…]

Grace: I'm so sorry. You know, sometimes I wonder who I was in that house.
M: I don't know why I was holding onto that.
G [passionately]: Because it's horrible! I never should have said that. I'm really happy you're pregnant. And those babies are really lucky because you're the best mother I know.
M: Mom, I learned from you.

This exchange partially explains why Grace may have acted like she did without excusing her hurtful actions; her behavior was influenced by her own unhappiness, but she genuinely regrets her actions. Although motherhood was never completely fulfilling for Grace, she no longer believes the same to be true for everyone else and is now able to feel pride for Mallory, who has chosen a different path than Grace herself.

Given the few maternal traits Grace seems to possess, one might reasonably expect her daughters to have experienced her as a decidedly cold mother, which would certainly have lefts its mark. Yet the opposite is the case: Grace shares close bonds with both. Brianna’s reply to Frankie’s question how she survived her childhood speaks to this fact: “If you look past the icy exterior, and the layers of walls, there's actually an amazing woman in there” (“The Fall”). Grace’s characterization is complex enough not to portray her as the complete antithesis to a good mother. Instead, she is shown to possess an amalgam of traits: What she lacks in warmth, she makes up for in reliability and expertly handling all domestic tasks even though, as a successful business woman, she could likely afford staff to relieve her of these duties. In the flashback episode “The Elevator”, Grace single-handedly cooks an elaborate meal for two families, for example, while being equally skilled at sewing and other aspects of successfully managing a household (e.g “The Test”).

Brianna and Mallory seem to embody both of these strands of Grace’s personality in exhibiting entirely opposite preferences and corresponding lifestyle choices. While Brianna focuses all her energy on her company and has no desire to give up her independence, Mallory is the loving stay-at-home mother of four. Brianna is similar to

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21 In fact, one of this sitcom’s strengths and characteristics distinguishing it from many other shows that tell the stories of families lies in the humor not primarily stemming from dysfunctionality. All characters are relatively functional adults – even Coyote, who struggles with many aspects of his life, is not portrayed as the black sheep about whom no one cares, and his love for his relatives is one of his redeeming qualities. Conflicts, of course, do arise, and there is a great deal of banter, but relationships are not defined by the constant exchange of genuinely hurtful comments that various similar sitcoms choose as their trademark.
her mother regarding her ambition and competence in leading a growing business as well as in her dislike for young children (Brianna: “Mom, I just broke up with a guy. Shouldn't I be able to talk to my sister about it without watching babies hanging from her boobs?” – Grace: “Look, I think everybody can agree babies are terrible”, “The Focus Group”). Mallory resembles Grace in her skills to juggle a range of domestic responsibilities without much support from her husband, although she raises her children with a much gentler hand.

Frankie, on the other hand, is very much looking forward to becoming a grandmother, while being catastrophic with household-related tasks. For one, she hardly ever cooks and when she tries to return the favor to Jacob (saying to Grace: “I'm making dinner for Jacob. He always cooks for me so I'm flipping the script”, “The Apology”), Jacob has to silently correct Frankie's various cooking mistakes (e.g. reducing the oven temperature, picking a bracelet out of the mixing bowl, ...). She also routinely forgets to clean up after herself, and when Grace tries to talk to her about it, saying “I don’t know what the division of labor was in your marriage...” Frankie interrupts her and explains that her son Bud “did most of the cleaning” (“The Road Trip”). While being disorganized and inexperienced with domestic tasks, Frankie very much is a loving mother. As happy as she is about her two adopted sons, she does mourn never having gotten to have biological children. This fact is used to explain her enthusiastic care for a pregnant Mallory in the flashback to a weekend at the beach house five years earlier (Mitch: “I see pregnant women at the office every day and none of them are as excited as Frankie, ever”). Frankie devoted all her time to caring for Mallory who then – quite fittingly – gave birth on Labor Day, surrounded by her family. Brianna, who likes to keep a certain emotional distance to other family members, is especially close with Frankie:

    Grace: It's not like you to be upset when someone's upset with you.
    Brianna: I know, but it's Frankie. And she was like a mother to me. You were also like a mother to me.
    G: "Like a mother"?
    Brianna: She wasn't a replacement mother. She's another mother. More love. More love is so good. It's a whole village of ... Barry! Barry, say hello to my favorite mother! (11:55-12:24, “The Art Show”)
This example shows just how close Brianna and Frankie are and that Brianna, who usually bristles at the thought of establishing strong emotional connections with anyone outside her family, cares about Frankie so much as to consider her “another mother”.

However, the sitcom is careful not to create the impression that Frankie’s or Jean’s ways of being (grand)mothers are superior to Grace’s:

Frankie: Come on, you're not so bad. Some hamsters eat their grandchildren.
Grace: Hamsters don't live long enough to have grandchildren.
F: Don't confuse me with facts. I'm going somewhere with this. Not all hamster grandmas need to run around in the wood shavings making forts out of toilet paper tubes. Some keep the little ones from eating their poop.
G: We all know I'm not the fun hamster.
F: Then be who you are. Be the bossy hamster with the drinking problem. They're the ones who inspire their grandchildren to become writers. (13:15-13:50, “The Negotiation”)

Frankie mitigates Graces self-accusation (“What is wrong with me?!”) in acknowledging that her friend may not express care in the conventional, expected manner but that does not make her unloving altogether. Following this conversation, Grace returns to Mallory’s house, where she finds Macklin crouched in front of his mother’s room. He is worried about Mallory’s health, since Jean told him she was sick and asked the children to write get-well cards for her. Grace reassures him that Mallory just needs some rest. Macklin, now visibly happier, asks whether he can “lay down with her”, to which Grace responds: First of all, it’s “lie.” Second of all, no, you can't, because we don't want to give Mommy lice. But I'll tell you what we can do”. This is followed by a cut to Grace teaching Macklin how to play the card game Gin, and both their facial expressions suggest that they are enjoying themselves.

This scene validates Grace’s approach by showing that she cares and that she, too, is capable of granting emotional support and that even the seemingly perfect Grandma Jean can make mistakes. Grace cannot refrain from correcting Macklin’s vocabulary, which might be helpful after all, should he really want to become a writer like Frankie’s hamster-analogy predicts, but nonetheless manages to comfort Macklin. Their exchange constitutes somewhat of a tender moment, albeit without much physical contact, but what is crucial is that Grace has, in her own way, given Macklin what he needed.
To conclude, *Grace and Frankie* features several women in their roles as mothers and grandmothers, who all differ in their priorities, strengths, and weaknesses. Jean carries her role with her like a title in always being referred to as “Grandma Jean” and is characterized as the “classic grandmother”. She is the kind of nurturing, family-oriented woman who would drop everything and fly halfway across the country whenever her (grand-) children need her. Frankie has a more disorganized but unconditionally supportive style, while Grace appears less involved on the surface but is reliably excellent in handling any kind of family crisis (see also the plotline surrounding Robert’s heart attack). *Grace and Frankie* therefore manages to create different models of “doing (grand-) motherhood” without creating a hierarchy that communicates any approach to be superior.

### 4.3 Aging while female

A higher risk of living in poverty at old age and the pressure to adhere to youth-centric norms of appearance are two factors which have been identified as affecting older women more strongly than men. In the following chapters, the effects of both on Grace and Frankie will be investigated. The subject of appearance is featured in the sitcom to a larger extent, which is also reflected in the length of its corresponding subchapter.

#### Economic Factors

Concerning the inequality in financial means available to older men and women, it has been argued in chapter 3.3. that television shows should target the issue in two ways. First, by depicting women in roles other than the stereotypically feminine (mother, homemaker) but in a range of jobs including those of high responsibility. Second, by addressing the risk of poverty at old age, which is significantly higher for older women than it is for men, and by realistically representing the effects of such a precarious financial situation.

*Grace and Frankie* features several women in leadership positions, all of whom are portrayed as highly competent. Grace developed a beauty company from a garage project into a business generating huge revenues, and Brianna follows in her mother’s footsteps. A scene marking the pivotal moment in Grace’s decision to hand the over the reins to her daughter is included in the flashback-episode “The Elevator”. Brianna
successfully completes a difficult business transaction within minutes and later, as the company’s new CEO, skillfully manages to lead Say Grace towards large increases in profits (“And you know, we’re up 15% this last quarter”, “The Dinner”). Mimi, an acquaintance of Grace’s and the head of Purple Orchid, evens out the ratio of men to women in powerful corporate positions and, as she is in her mid-sixties, also provides another model for successful older women (“The Alert”).

As well as *Grace and Frankie* meets the criterion of portraying women as being in no way inferior to men concerning their skills as employees and leaders, the sitcom nonetheless neglects to provide a well-rounded image of older women’s financial situation. Grace has expensive tastes but can sustain her lifestyle even after her divorce. Both the Hansons and the Bergsteins are clearly rather wealthy – Robert and Grace probably more so than Frankie and Sol because in the former couple, both were active contributors to the family income – so it stands to reason that the women received large settlements following the separation from their husbands. Unlike Grace, Frankie does not display her wealth much; she neither has expensive hobbies, nor does she spend much money on appearance-related products, although she is prone to impulse-buying (Robert: “When Coyote went into rehab she bought a ten-thousand-dollar yurt”, “The Credit Cards”). Frankie is also shown to be notoriously bad at handling her finances (e.g. balancing a checkbook in “The Negotiation”), a luxury that only someone not remotely suffering from insufficient funds can afford.

It can be concluded that only one of the tasks regarding economic factors and older women is appropriately is fulfilled in *Grace in Frankie*. While it portrays women of all ages as competent and just as capable as their male counterparts, the sitcom does not improve upon what has been criticized about *The Golden Girls*. Both shows share their failure to increase societal awareness of older single women’s relatively high risk of experiencing poverty.

### Appearance

Frankie and Grace are shown to relate to their own bodies quite differently, which manifests itself in a variety of ways, but central among those is their acceptance of age markers. As previously discussed, older women frequently feel pressured to comply with firmly established, youth-centric ideals of beauty and experience the drawbacks following
from a failure or refusal to do so. An example of how Frankie approaches the impact aging has on her appearance lies in her attitude towards her hair and will be reviewed in the following subchapter among other scenes that exemplify Frankie’s take on aging and its effects on her looks. Grace’s attitude will be discussed in a separate chapter because it is more complex due to a gradual change in her priorities. A third subchapter will focus on the women’s confrontation with and reactions to age and appearance-based discrimination.

Frankie: “I am the perfect age, I am the perfect size. I am good enough”

In one scene, Frankie is thinking about Grace’s comment suggesting the possibility that Jacob – the farmer from whom she buys her yams – might have a romantic interest in her: “You think? No. Him? Really? With me? No. Although I do have my charms. And a fantastic head of hair.” (“The Sex”). This contemplation indicates that Frankie has a rather positive self-image in general but likes one aspect of her appearance in particular. The remark on her “fantastic head of hair” is so remarkable because she highlights a feature that is a distinct sign of her age: Her hair is full but shows no indication of having been dyed and is streaked with gray. This appreciation is consistent throughout the series; it comes up again a season later, for example, when Grace asks whom Frankie is on the verge of gossiping about and Frankie responds: “It’s about a certain long-haired beauty with sparkling eyes and a devilish wit. Me. It’s about me” (“The Negotiation”).

Frankie is criticized (in absentia) by Janet, one of Grace’s former friends, for not performing femininity and shaping her appearance in a way that is acceptable to them: “Oh, but you must be dying living out there alone at the beach with Frankie. I swear, at lunch, I thought a bird was gonna come flying out of that hair of hers” (“The Test”). This comment points towards Frankie’s refusal to adhere to the norm being perceived as inappropriate by those who are careful to hide the signs of their age, which makes her own appreciation of age markers all the more laudable.

Frankie takes an accepting stance towards her weight as well. In one of her video diary entries, for instance, she mentions having gained a pound but says that she believes it to be “a pound of knowledge” (“The Bachelor Party”). Fluctuations in her body weight are clearly much less important to her than the joy she gets from eating: Her love for Del Taco is referenced throughout the series and she says of herself to “eat and talk with
gusto”, which is why it is not unusual for Grace to find leftovers all over the house (“I'm still picking veggie-bacon shards out of my keyboard from yesterday”, “The Incubator”). Frankie is not at all oblivious to the prevalent beauty standards, she just chooses to view her body positively and tries to regularly remind herself of her worth. To that end, she has recorded herself soothingly repeating self-affirmations like “I am the perfect age, I am the perfect size. I am good enough”, which she listens to while driving (“The Musical”).

Frankie is also supportive of her friends in reassuring them that their aging bodies are beautiful as they are: In a conversation between Frankie and Babe, for example, the older woman mentions that she used to go on lots of walks and that her “ass looked good then”, to which Frankie replies “Your ass looks good now!” (“The Bender”). That is not to say that Babe has the body of a thirty-year-old but that although her appearance resembles what can be expected of an octogenarian, her beauty has changed but not lessened. In another scene, which was analyzed in chapter 4.1, Grace and Frankie both find themselves lying on the floor after injuring their backs. Grace clumsily rolls herself over Frankie so that she can reach the telephone. During this maneuver, the two women come into close physical contact, and Frankie uses this opportunity to pay Grace a compliment: “I probably don't say this often enough, but you are a striking woman” (“The Floor”). Given the rather inelegant nature of Grace’s movements and the close-up view Frankie gets of Grace’s every wrinkle, this is not just an instance of Frankie’s humorously odd timing for complimenting others but an example of her honest appreciation of what many consider flaws brought on by age.

Grace: “Am I trying too hard?”

Grace’s attitudes change throughout the series. In the beginning, she is intent on fulfilling societal expectations, which extends to her making an effort to hide her true age. While getting herself ready for a date, Grace asks Frankie for her opinion on her outfit:

Grace: What do you think? Am I trying too hard?
Frankie: Trying?
G: To look young. (5:45-5:52, “The Earthquake”)

This urge to appear younger than she is, is not condemned per se – Grace is asking about whether her attempt is too easily seen for what it is (and therefore made ineffective), whereas the desire for “looking young” itself is not questioned. A similar instance, in
which Grace’s daughter Brianna helps her with setting up a dating profile, adds the element of outside influence on wanting to appear younger:

Brianna: No, you can't say you're 70, though. Say that you're 64.
Grace: But I am 70. I don't want to lie.
B: But you don't look 70, you look 64. It's actually more honest to say that you're 64.
G: Ok. (8:15-8:30 “The Fall”)

Here, Grace does not feel the need to be untrue to her age, doing so is instead suggested by another party. Such a measure is necessary only when age is perceived to be inextricably linked with decreasing value or (sexual) desirability and is therefore a classic example of the extension of youth into older age and the retention of the hierarchy that considers youth to be superior to old age (see comments on successful aging/ the competence model). Whether the number stated on her profile says 70 or 64 has no impact whatsoever on Grace’s personality, health, or any other aspect influencing her suitability as a prospective date, yet a preference for stating to be 64 on a dating site aimed at connecting older individuals reveals a deeply ingrained belief that someone with all of Grace’s attributes at age 64 is superior to exactly the same person at 70.

Another element of Grace’s adherence to societal norms of feminine beauty is her somewhat restrictive eating. Grace is repeatedly shown to be overly conscious of her diet, which earns her some gentle mockery by Frankie. In “The Earthquake”, Frankie, for instance, tricks Grace into opening her mouth (“Wait, what is there... Is there something? Is your cap loose? Open your mouth!” 1:26-1:42) and fills it with canned whipped cream: “Ha! Now you can't eat until Monday”. Nonetheless, Grace continues to relish being complimented on her appearance and on sustaining her weight. She occasionally jokes about achieving the latter through consuming unhealthy amounts of alcohol, here while being asked by friends how she manages to look as good as she does after the difficult time she has just gone through:

Frankie: Have you guys looked at her plate?
Grace: I get a lot of help from my two Italian nutritionists Martini and Rossi.
[laughter] (11:10-11:22, “The Test”)
Following Robert’s heart attack, the Hansons and the Bergsteins spend the night at the hospital. Upon seeing her and Frankie’s slightly disheveled reflection in a snack machine, Grace exclaims:

Grace: Oh, God. We don't look a day over 350.
Frankie: I would've loved being born in the 17th century. Of course, I would have died in my 30s.
G: I look like our mailman. (3:08-3:18, “The Vitamix”)

This could be interpreted as a nod towards the disappearing difference between men and women as they enter very old age (including but not limited to appearance), which some writers argue to be a beneficial development, since it decreases gender-based inequality (e.g. Marshall and Katz, 75-76). Grace would obviously disagree with such a claim; she cares about her looks reflecting her femininity. While Frankie responds on a more literal level and Grace’s statement is purposely hyperbolic, it is indicative of how harshly Grace judges her appearance. Her lack of generosity occasionally extends to comments about her loved ones as well: When hugging Mallory, who unbeknownst to her family is pregnant with twins, Grace mentions that her daughter is “a little meatier”.

Mallory: I may have gained a little weight.
Grace: Well, you can take it off easily. You've got my metabolism.
Brianna: Did my mother just call my sister fat? Just aside from my father almost dying, this is the best day of my life. (9:40-9:53, “The Wish”)

Unlike Frankie, Grace spends significant amounts of time considering how she is seen by others, which may partially be explained by her professional background. She explains her habit of always wearing high heels as an effort towards sustaining her “trademark” (“The Alert”) but, at home, often walks around barefoot. This suggests that privately her preference goes in a different direction, yet in public Grace is conscious about the image she projects. As the founder and head of a successful beauty company, she was required to embody the physical perfection she was trying to sell and therefore under constant scrutiny. These ties to the cosmetics industry also mean that she used to financially benefit from women wishing to alter their appearance. The use of cosmetics has already been commented on as being rather complex. While it may therefore be difficult to evaluate individual women’s decisions regarding this matter, makeup companies whose marketing strategies influence what we consider flaws that need to be “fixed” are surely to be assigned a great deal of blame in fostering women’s insecurities. In the show’s first
episode (“The End”), Grace is recognized by a supermarket customer while standing in front of some of her products, which feature her portrait on the box. The product best visible in the scene is a “wrinkle reducer” (see figure 6), which is a prime example of a product for which a need has been artificially created. Only when wrinkles and similar signs of aging are considered undesirable can a product like this be introduced to a market; in a society that really values older women, no one would feel the need to disguise their age, after all.

![Say Grace products. “The End”, 17:45.](image)

Despite its manifestation across multiple areas in her life, Grace is not entirely unaware of the harmful influence these internalized attitudes have on her. When she unexpectedly meets a male acquaintance at a restaurant, the topic of not having had ice cream in years comes up. When asked for the reason, Grace responds: “I've been denying myself. Apparently, I'm quite good at that” (“The Spelling Bee”). She therefore acknowledges the restrictions – dietary and otherwise – she puts herself under and starts questioning these behaviors. A season later, she decides to clean out her closet, explaining: “I'm saying goodbye to the old me. This is a bon voyage party for her and her country club clothes” (“The Chicken”). In doing so, Grace partially distances herself from the person she used to be and the corresponding priorities and expectations.

Grace’s development, undoubtedly influenced by her divorce as well as her increasingly closer bond with Frankie, becomes even more visible during a scene with
her former circle of friends. In it, Janet, the informal leader of a group of “country club women”, shares a disparaging comment about Frankie and her hair (see above). This is only one among many derogatory remarks Janet makes about other women during the episode – she is portrayed as someone generally in the habit of looking down on others. This kind of behavior is tolerated by Grace only for a short while, however: She soon walks out on her former friends after Janet expresses a complete lack of empathy when talking about a common acquaintance who struggles with depression and substance abuse. Janet’s habit of denigrating other women based on their looks and their failure to conform to behavioral standards set by the wealthy, upper class community that she prides herself for being part of is therefore unmistakably framed as unacceptable, since even Grace, who according to Janet used to be “worse than [she] was”, will no longer condone genuinely hurtful, disparaging comments made about other older women.

**Ageism and appearance**

Overall, the show displays a rather critical attitude towards age and appearance-based discrimination. An outstandingly explicit scene in this respect comes from the season 1 episode “The Dinner”, in which ageist behavior plays a central role. More specifically, the concept of “othering” that many authors have referred to in their work (e.g. Sandberg or Holstein, see chapter 3.3.) is illustrated here with a direct opposition of how a conventionally beautiful woman is treated in comparison to two older women. Grace and Frankie are at a supermarket to buy cigarettes but, despite their best efforts, cannot catch a male cashier’s attention, who then immediately responds once an attractive young woman needs assistance. Upon seeing this, Grace loudly vents her anger: “What kind of animal treats people like this? Do you not see me? Do I not exist? You think it’s all right to ignore us? Just because she's got grey hair? [pointing at Frankie] What? And I don't look like her? [pointing at the young woman]” (26:30-28:20, “The Dinner”). She only stops when Frankie gently pulls her outside.

In chapter 3.3., the point was made that the marks age leaves on women’s bodies have an impact on how they are treated by others, or, as Holstein puts it, “bodily deterioration poses threats to our identity and integrity” (316). In fact, Holstein gives the example of older women being passed by at the makeup counter in favor of a younger woman although the latter is second in line and interprets this as a sign of older women
no longer being “sexually competitive and so hardly worth the investment of time” (316). The scene described above shows the despair, which is tinged with some theatricality but is, in essence, a realistic reaction, of a woman confronted with being ignored due to her age and therefore mirrors part of the lived experience of older women. What is notable here, however, is the way this unpleasant encounter is dealt with: Instead of using the scene for its comedic potential and provoking laughter solely at the expense of Grace and Frankie and particularly the former’s outburst, the scene is reframed so that the women use their “invisibility” to their own advantage. Once the pair is in the car and Grace apologizes for her lack of “poise” Frankie, lighting a cigarette, replies that they “have got a superpower [...]. You can’t see me, you can’t stop me.” In committing the, arguably not very mature, act of stealing cigarettes, they turn the tables on those who mistreated them and derive enjoyment from an otherwise decidedly unpleasant experience.

In season 3 (“The Alert”), an even stronger stand is taken that shows Grace and Frankie united in fighting ageist attitudes not just for their own benefit but for that of all older women. In their search for a suitable partner to distribute their vibrator, they meet with the CEO of Purple Orchid, a company that “specializes in adult romance and intimacy products”. To Grace and Frankie’s excitement the CEO is interested in breaking into “the older market”, which she considers underserved, and has already instructed her marketing team to design some material for an advertising campaign that will put Grace and Frankie “front and center” (15:15-15:50, “The Alert”). Their excitement fades as quickly as it was sparked, however, when they are presented with their photoshopped likenesses that have been rejuvenated almost beyond recognition:
Grace’s incredulous “Are you kidding? We look 12 years old in those pictures!” is met with the CEO’s insistence that “Nobody wants to see older women on a vibrator box. And nobody wants to see older women with anything sexy. Not even older women! You and I both know this, Grace. You know sex is young” (19:55-20:15, “The Alert”). From an advertiser’s perspective, this is an entirely reasonable attitude. As previously discussed, the avoidance of any association of products promising any kind of pleasure with unpleasantness is a universal strategy and societally, showing older women in sexual contexts carries an air of indecency. However, the alternative – smoothing over every wrinkle, whitening teeth, and removing every other indicator of the women being anywhere close to their true age – obviously makes even Grace, who used to delight in making herself look younger than she is, uncomfortable. Frankie is more vocal in emphasizing that their objective in distributing their product is wanting to “reach out to women like [them]”. Later, in private conversation with Frankie, Grace plays with the thought of entering into a partnership with Purple Orchid after all, as she believes the CEO to be right “from a business standpoint”. She has more than a few doubts whether that is the morally right choice, however, and admits that while in younger years, she would have assented in a heartbeat, she now contemplates the effects of her decisions with regards to the harm or good they do to people other than herself. Finally, the pair chooses to let the opportunity pass by and risks sacrificing their own success rather than
being complicit in “erasing the very women [they] made this for”. This entire storyline unmistakably serves to highlight the ludicrousness of marketing campaigns that take their ageist practices so far as to feature what looks like wax dolls with augmented breasts instead of daring to include real older women. The taboo surrounding the sexual activity of older women is also explicitly incorporated here; this topic will be discussed in more detail in a separate chapter.

To return to the questions formulated in the first part of this thesis, there is not much to be said concerning different standards for men and women regarding the appropriateness of visible signs of age. Appearance is not shown to preoccupy Sol or Robert at all, so this is indirectly the only indicator of unequal relevance of the issue to older men and women – male characters might not need to consider what they look like, since their worth is judged independently of appearance. The differences between Grace and Frankie are particularly pronounced in their attitudes towards beauty and the kindness with which they evaluate their bodies. Frankie continuously reassures herself and other older women of their worth regardless of adherence to established norms. She does not attempt to hide the signs of her age but is shown to proudly display them (e.g. by wearing her gray hair loose) and to associate age markers with positive attributes. Grace initially complies fully with the ideal of agelessness brought forth by the success model of aging: She spares no expense or effort to appear young and is in the habit of denying herself various pleasures to that end. Throughout the series, a change in attitude become apparent, which never reaches complete disregard for youth-centric ideals but nonetheless moves into the direction of stronger self-acceptance.

Holstein writes that “old women […] face two critical tasks that we must engage in simultaneously – to refuse to deny age and to engage in self-exploration and resistance. […] Such denial is ultimately self-defeating and threatening to our integrity” (315). Frankie more actively takes on these tasks while Grace struggles slightly more with doing so on an individual level (i.e. regarding the expectations she has for herself). On a broader, societal level, both women rebel against ageist behaviors, however. The show therefore offers significant amounts of explicit criticism of ageist practices related to appearance and the link between value and sexual desirability in particular. As for the question of the women’s acceptance or rejection of the label “old”, there is no definite answer to be given.
Both Grace and Frankie approach the term with a degree of inconsistency. The both refuse to be classified as an “old lady” on numerous occasions (e.g. “The Alert” 10:15-10-30) but do use “old” or “older” to refer to themselves. Grace, for example, expresses her dissatisfaction with Purple Orchid’s photoshopped materials and youth-centric marketing approach (“Sex is young”) by insisting “But we’re older” (“The Alert”).

Although the sitcom tends towards promoting an accepting stance towards “looking old”, it is important to note that both women are played by actresses who look (or are made to look) exceptionally young for their age. Even Frankie wears visible makeup in most scenes, so neither of them is allowed to authentically reflect the appearance of many women in their mid-seventies. Although within the show’s plotlines, ageist expectations are criticized on several occasions, on a metalevel, Grace and Frankie therefore still partially supports some of these messages. A truly bold move against such restrictive notions and towards “practicing what is preached” would be to feature characters that are not made to conform to conventional standards of beauty at all.

4.4 Infantilization

The guiding question formulated for this chapter focuses on whether a realistic version of mature female vitality is created in the show under investigation. Grace and Frankie overall accomplishes this task perfectly, but there is one case that stands in odd contrast with the tenor of the show.

In “The Burglary”, the women return home after dining out and find that the house has been burglarized. The women exhibit distinctly different reactions to this: Grace insists that “A couple of hooligans are not going to scare us away”, but Frankie is deeply perturbed by the event, which she considers a severe violation resulting in her “false sense of security [having] been destroyed forever”. Frankie’s perceived vulnerability also triggers a change in how she speaks about herself and Grace:

Police officer: Now, is it just the two of you alone in the house?
F: Why? Do you think they could come back? Because all there is, is little old me and this dusty bag of elbows! (3:48-3:57, “The Burglary”)

Previously, Frankie had resisted characterizations that highlighted frailty and passivity, so such descriptions are highly unusual and a symptom of the threat to their safety Frankie sees in the break-in. Grace agrees to accompany Frankie to a “senior
crime prevention class” taught by a police officer. Rather than assuage fears, officer Tuttle’s instructions intensify Frankie’s distress, however. When asked what to do should an intruder have already found their way into the building, this is his response:

   Officer Tuttle: If somebody has entered your home, the first thing you want to do is say your full name very loud.
   Frankie: Frankie Bergstein!
   Officer Tuttle: Then your best bet is to go ahead and soil yourself.
   Grace: Excuse me?!
   F: What if you don't have to go?
   OT: Oh, you'll have to go. (15:39-15:56, “The Burglary”)

This highly questionable strategy is received badly by Grace and can certainly be assumed not to be a recommendation that the officer would give to a middle-aged adult. The advice he offers seems more appropriate for young children, suggesting that he does not consider his audience a group of competent adults. The idea that people of advanced age are automatically incapable of controlling their bodily functions when under pressure is also an ageist prejudice. Frankie’s reaction at first seems to confirm the impression that the sitcom struggles to strike a realistic balance between her feelings of vulnerability and her status as an adult: She resorts to childlike behaviors like asking Grace to share a bed out of fear of sleeping alone. The issue is finally resolved, when Grace reminds her friend of what she has overcome: “The Frankie I know is an ass-kicker. The Frankie I know never met a phobia she couldn't beat. [...] She started a business in her 70s, for Christ's sake!” (“The Gun”). With this, Frankie returns to being the eccentric yet mature woman she had been before.

   In the following subchapters, issues relevant to a possible infantilization of older female characters are investigated including swearing, moral innocence, romantic relationships, and sexuality.

4.4.1 Swearing and moral innocence
The sitcom liberally incorporates swearing with hardly a common expletive going unused. “Fuck” and “shit” are among Grace’s favorites:

   G: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Always doing the right thing. Little Miss Perfect. Never got a B, never forgot a Thank You note. **Fuck me.** (“The Goodbyes”)

   G: **What the fuck** happened? Where were you? (“The Chicken”)
G: Your bullshit diary where you write in the air? (“The Test”)

This might to some extent contrast with the reserved, unemotional image Grace likes to project to the outside world, yet it cannot be interpreted as an instance of the previously criticized technique of eliciting laughs by the unexpected combination of having “sweet old ladies” use strong language. It is instead one among many aspects in which Grace’s behavior in private stands in opposition to how she acts in public (see also high heels vs. bare feet example). Another interpretation is possible as well, namely as her behavior implicitly criticizing the gender disparity concerning the appropriateness of swearing when practiced by men versus women: “Most people believe that women speak better than men and [...] that if they don’t talk properly, they aren’t real ‘ladies’ to begin with” (Romaine 173). In this sitcom, Grace’s use of such language is not framed as inappropriate although she otherwise acts in a “ladylike” manner.

The only incident that comes slightly closer to matching the stereotypical approach towards older women and swearing does so only at first glance: Robert is hospitalized after his heart attack and desperately wants to legally marry Sol before undergoing surgery. In their attempt to find someone to officiate the impromptu ceremony, Grace and Frankie yell at and swear in front of both a Catholic priest and a Rabbi because the one refuses to marry two men, while the other has qualms about marrying a couple in which only one partner is Jewish (“The Wish”). Both scenes are clearly intended to be funny, but the humor comes from the unexpectedness of someone swearing in front of religious functionaries, whereas the women’s advanced age is irrelevant for the scenes’ comedic impact.

Frankie’s use of swear words also warrants some closer attention. Throughout the series, she coins novel words and phrases (e.g. “Christ on a cupcake”, “Jesus tap dancing Christ”) that occasionally include pop-culture references (e.g. “Oh, mother of dragons”). This is not so much an indicator of her dislike for swearing – her vocabulary includes conventional curse words as well – but rather a sign of her inventiveness. There are two scenes in which her linguistic behavior does not correspond to her characterization, however. Both feature the use of gendered insults, which is atypical for Frankie, who usually refrains from speaking badly about other women; “bitch” occurs in both but Frankie displays inconsistent attitudes towards the term. First, she voices her frustration with a group of women who are obviously gossiping about her: “Do any of you bitches
have some gum?” (“The Funeral”). An episode later, she talks about Grace’s sister-in-law with Brianna:

F: I’ll tell you this, your Aunt Lydia is no friend of hers.
B: Uh, Lydia's a total bitch.
F: Uh-oh. Offensive word.
B: Cunt?
F: That's the word. (7:15-7:31 “The Fall”)

This is confusingly out of character as well as inconsistent in itself, since Frankie first uses the term herself only to later chide Brianna for doing the same, who then corrects herself to using a similarly charged word.

With regards to moral innocence, there are no indications of either Grace or Frankie being depicted as “morally pure, incapable of wrongdoing, ignorant of morality, resistant to sin, or even saintly” (Goldberg 355). Both are well-rounded characters who fulfill Goldberg’s criterion of being “moral agents” by recognizing their responsibility for their own actions (358-359). Multiple examples of the women making morally questionable decisions without the unexpectedness of their doing so can be found throughout the series (e.g. in “The Bender” when Grace tries to drown her sadness about not getting to be with Phil in alcohol and inadvertently kisses a married man). The only instance in which the sitcom might be criticized for depicting older characters’ bad behavior in a stereotypically humorous manner is the scene discussed in chapter 4.3, in which Grace and Frankie encounter ageist discrimination at the supermarket and resort to stealing cigarettes. As has been argued, I consider this example to be much better interpreted as a revolt against ageism and, thus, a piece of societal criticism, which runs much deeper than the superficial humorous play with innocent old age and immoral actions.

4.4.2 Romantic relationships
In chapter 2.3.1, several critics’ dissatisfaction with how The Golden Girls handled romantic heterosexual relationships was cited. Some considered the four women’s near constant preoccupation with men as strongly reminiscent of the behavior typical for teenage girls and saw this as a sign of The Golden Girls’ protagonists’ infantilization.

Relationships between men and women have extensively been studied by feminist researchers and, as has been pointed out in the first part of this paper, this is an area in
which the intersection of gender and age is particularly powerful. In *Grace and Frankie*, both women are pursued romantically throughout the series, but it is Grace who more actively seeks to establish a fulfilling romantic relationship. Early on, Brianna convinces her mother to try online dating: “You're happy when someone's taking care of you and you have someone to care of. You know, being a part of a couple, going on dates, subverting your needs” (1:50-1:59, “The Fall”). Most feminist writers would probably have more than a bit of difficulty accepting such a notion, and Frankie is of a very similar opinion: “Where were you, in a bunker in the sixties? That’s when the rest of us discovered you don’t need a man to define yourself” (2:40-2:47, “The Fall”). Although it might not be quite justified to attest Grace a total dependence on male approval for defining herself as some have done for the character of Blanche in *The Golden Girls* (e.g. Berzsenyi 6-7), being attractive to men is a major contributing factor to her almost excessive investment of time and effort into her appearance.

Another of Grace’s strategies to appear desirable indeed lies in self-denial that goes further than a denial of her true age and, as Brianna remarks upon, is characterized by a subversion of her own needs for the sake of pleasing her partner. These behaviors first come to light in her relationship with Guy, an old acquaintance with whom she unexpectedly reconnects. Contrary to her actual preferences, she pretends to enjoy a variety of things and activities (eating “hoagies”, playing golf). While folding laundry, Frankie makes an astute observation with reference to the domestic task the women are performing: “You know, if this sheet could talk, you know what it would say? ‘I fold myself into very special shapes for you, Guy. It doesn't feel very good, but I don't let it stop me. I'm used to it.’” (“The Invitation”). Grace brushes of this comment at first but then admits to being afraid of alienating Guy by being herself fully. She refers to an imaginary woman called Dahlia, who “has a long neck, and dark hair and very green eyes” and to whom she imagines losing in a contest for Guy’s attention. Her feeling of physical inferiority to this fantasy is, however, the only instance coming even remotely close to the “catfight scenario” so typical for teenage rivalries. Unlike in *The Golden Girls*, Grace and Frankie never compete for the same man’s attention and are supportive of each other’s romantic relationships.

There is one further comment to be made in a comparison between *The Golden Girls* and *Grace and Frankie* that does not relate to infantilization but still constitutes
noteworthy criticism regarding platonic and romantic relationships. In both sitcoms, the present living arrangements were brought on by unforeseen circumstances rather than choice but are ultimately kept up because of strong bonds having developed among the respective housemates. Older women’s friendships are the major theme in both shows, but in *The Golden Girls*, as mentioned, one of the women ultimately leaves her friends behind to remarry, which sends the message that even the closest platonic relationships between women cannot compete with the ideals of heteronormativity. In *Grace and Frankie*, a similar preference is communicated by Grace:

Grace: But Frankie, if I break up with him, there’s a good chance I’m going to be by myself for the rest of my life. I mean, I know you're going to be here and all, but-

Frankie: Don't be too sure that I'll be there,

G: ...but I just can’t stand the idea of waking up every day alone.

F: I could wake you up.

G: Maybe it's more about falling asleep in someone's arms.

F: I could do that too, but you won't like it. (2:14-2:40, “The Vows”)  

Grace clearly ranks the prospect of being in a heterosexual relationship as superior to living with her friend, while the same cannot be said for Frankie. The fate of Grace and Frankie’s friendship and cohabitation is left open in the season 3 finale with Frankie not having made up her mind as to whether she wants to join Jacob in his move to Santa Fe.

### 4.4.3 Sexuality

To continue with another comparison between *Grace and Frankie* and *The Golden Girls*, this chapter will comprise an analysis of how *Grace and Frankie* includes older women’s sexuality, *The Golden Girls*’ treatment of which many feminist gerontologists and other critics found wanting. Where *The Golden Girls* took a much more restrained approach and limited the inclusion of sex to the verbal level, *Grace and Frankie* tackles the issue on various fronts. Passionate on-screen kisses are not a rarity and with more than one scene featuring the act itself, the show goes a lot further towards fighting the inaccurate, ageist notion that sexuality is reserved exclusively to the young. Apart from the depiction

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22 This is not of much relevance to the purpose of this thesis, but a queer reading of Frankie’s character is definitely possible. Her subtle but recurring references (mostly framed as jokes) to the possibility of her and Grace’s relationship developing further support such an interpretation (e.g. in “The Burglary” Frankie asks Grace to kiss her on the forehead to calm her down. The police officer present comments on this with “You and your wife are adorable” to which Frankie simply responds with “Thank you!” without correcting him.)
of older couples in physically intimate scenes, which combats the myth that sexual activity automatically stops once a certain age is reached, the sitcom provides a range of information to present a fuller image of what older women’s sexuality can be like.

One such piece of information concerns physical changes that may have a negative impact on older women’s sexual wellbeing. In the show’s first season, Frankie inquires whether Grace is nervous about becoming more intimate with her new partner, Guy, and suggests that she prevent the possibility of vaginal dryness hindering her enjoyment of the encounter:

Frankie: And as our bodies age, our vaginas stop producing their natural lubricants.
Grace: You are just going to keep talking about my vagina, aren't you?
F: I want to show you something.
G: No, please, no!
F: Ah! You are such a prude. It's my secret weapon. [takes a small container from the refrigerator]
G: No, please, no.
F: Frankie's homemade yam lube.
G: That's a lubricant?!
F: Yeah.
G: I've been putting that on my toast!
F: Well, that's fine, actually. My gynecologist says you should not put anything in your vagina that you would not put in your mouth. I call it "vagacadabra". I'm gonna whip you up a batch. (4:00-4:45, “The Sex”)

This exchange aids characterization in exhibiting a greater willingness to discuss sex-related topics in Frankie, whereas Grace has some inhibitions, while simultaneously marking the beginning of Frankie’s lube project. From here on, the personal and the public are linked due to the overlap of their own experiences and their attempts at making products that support the sexual activity of older women widely available; the latter has been elaborated on in chapter 4.2.1.

**Partnered sexuality**

The show deliberately sets an antithesis to the notion commonly purveyed in television sitcoms that older women can no longer be attractive, especially not to anyone younger than themselves. In “The Earthquake”, Grace returns from a lunch with an overzealous date only to find Byron, one of Frankie’s ex-convict art students, eating a sandwich in their kitchen. He soon makes his interest in her unambiguously clear after telling her that he knows about her divorce:
Byron: Can I just say, you are smoking hot?
Grace: You can say whatever you like.
B: Okay. Please tell me that if he wasn't fucking you, somebody else was. (21:44-21:55, “The Earthquake”)

Their conversation is interrupted when another earthquake hits, which forces the two into close physical contact and they kiss. When things are progressing further – Byron lifts her onto the kitchen counter – Grace breaks away, nods her head slightly and he leaves without another word. Byron not only looks younger than Grace, but the actor Timothy V. Murphy was 55 at the time and with that 15 years Jane Fonda’s junior, so the scene communicates that older women can be attractive even to someone significantly younger. This stands in stark contrast to the popular narrative, according to which women’s desirability has a much earlier and definite expiration date than men’s. According to Cohen, age markers depreciate women who are valued “for how they look” unlike men who “are valued for what they do”: “Older men are viewed as distinguished, mature, and attractive, while older women are ‘ugly’ with gray hair and wrinkles” (601).

Moreover, this scene is doubtlessly deserving of praise for the male characters immediate, respectful reaction following Grace’s withdrawal of consent. Despite Byron’s “bad boy” looks and mannerisms, he does not transgress boundaries by forcing intimacy onto an unwilling partner. The realm of sexuality is one in which the dichotomous expectations of men and women tend to become markedly pronounced. Amongst those is the harmful idea that the male libido is inherently stronger and harder to control while women hardly experience sexual desire. Psychological research has repeatedly identified links between such convictions (often referred to as “rape myths”) and the likelihood of sexual assault (e.g Ryan 779-780). Whether media choose to support or subvert such beliefs can thus have tangible real-life consequences. In *Grace and Frankie*, there is no indication of men and women being anything but equal partners in their sexual encounters. If anything, the women seem to be slightly more in touch with their sexual needs and care about communicating these to their partners. Grace, as has been mentioned, is initially less comfortable with the topic and is hesitant to open up a conversation with Guy, her first boyfriend after the end of her marriage. Their first night together is rather clumsy and anything but satisfying for her, so next time, she gently guides him towards how she likes to be touched. Guy is appreciative of her instructions:

Grace: You're doing great.

Instead of dismissing Grace’s offer of guidance and feeling threatened in his masculinity, he steps away from any claim to dominate and enjoys being led by Grace – literally, in a slow dance, and figuratively, in their ensuing sexual encounter.

During their first night together, it is Grace who proposes sex. After doing so, she takes the time to change into a silken nightgown and tries to position herself on the bed as attractively as possible. Unhappy with the way she looks, she decides to turn the light off and hide under the covers, only to be forced to turn the lights on when Guy enters the room because he suffers from night blindness. Performance still seems to be of concern, at least for Grace and this is, in part, what makes the first stages of the encounter so awkward: Grace unsuccessfully tries to hide the parts of her body that she believes not to have aged well. These efforts may be explained by the fact that she is starting to be sexually active with a new partner after being in a committed monogamous relationship (at least on her part) for more than four decades, yet it cannot be denied that there is no indication of the emotional aspects of intimacy being foregrounded. This and other encounters therefore do not conform with what data tells us about the actual sexual experiences of older people (see chapter 3.4.2).

*Grace and Frankie* is exceptional in its emphasis on safer sex practices. As mentioned, the use of condoms as a protective measure against sexually transmitted diseases is hardly ever mentioned in TV shows, so it is particularly notable that this sitcom, which already breaks new ground in its coverage of older female sexuality, would go even further in advocating sexual responsibility. In “The Earthquake”, the dangerously ignorant exclusive equation of condoms with a technique to prevent unwanted pregnancies is targeted, when Frankie offers Grace condoms to bring on her date:

Frankie: Here, you might need these.
Grace: I’m going to a bistro, not having sex!
F: Why not? You’d be too bloated from the one piece of kale you might eat?
G: Why do I need condoms anyway? I’m not exactly a pregnancy risk.
F: Well, no shit. But with all the new penis drugs out there, old people are doing it like rabbits and the STDs are on the rise. (3:10-3:35, “The Earthquake”)

The same issue is brought up again later, when Frankie starts being more intimate with her partner Jacob:
Frankie: Well, regardless, Jacob is a pretty hot number, and I don't want to wonder every time I get a new itch or scratch down there.
Grace: Okay, score one for safe sex. (4:30-4:39, “The Incubator”)

Prompted by this experience, Frankie proposes to design easy-open condoms because the regular variety “are hell to open and having a pair of scissors on the bedside table just doesn't set the right tone” (“The Incubator”). In doing so, she expresses a desire to increase the availability of safer sex practices to the older demographic. Again, the women’s individual experiences inspire them to effect change on a larger scale.

A not directly age-related topic that still pertains to the issue of sexuality is the show’s inclusion of scenes referencing and even featuring sex work. The controversial nature of prostitution and other types of sex work is reflected not only in its highly varied legal status across (or even within) countries but also in its infrequent inclusion in sitcoms, apart from the occasional crude remark or bachelor party scenario.

Ethically, prostitution is a hotly disputed topic, with some feminists arguing that women should have the freedom to pursue any kind of employment of their choosing, while others believe sex work to be inherently degrading and exploitative. Debra Satz has made a convincing argument in stating that sex work that is performed voluntarily in all relevant ways (i.e. not due to force, out of a lack of other options, or economic necessity etc.) is “wrong in virtue of its contributions to perpetuating a pervasive form of inequality” (85). This means that in Satz’ view, female prostitution furthers the existing asymmetry in power and expectations towards men and women; the fact that women’s sexual services can be bought, while men are usually at the buyer’s and hardly ever at the seller’s end of the exchange perpetuates the status quo with women being relegated to a societally inferior status. In Grace and Frankie, the common order of who provides and who pays for sexual services is reversed, with women being put in the more powerful position. Brianna encounters a male escort by chance (“The Gun”) and continues seeing him on several occasions. She tells Mallory about it, who is surprised but does not seem to have any moral objections to Brianna being a “Jean” (“What's a Jean?” – “It's a female John.”; “The Pot”). Although Brianna does not want her mother to find out about this arrangement, it is not portrayed as outright wrong but rather seems a natural choice for her, who has repeatedly stated her desire to want the intimacy of a relationship without
any of its commitment. She does so, for example, when she speaks about never wanting to get married but wishes for “a man who's there when I want him and gone when I don't and is affectionate, not too much, and has great hair and good hygiene”. To this, Frankie drily responds that Brianna is “describing a dog” (“The Fall”). One might add “or a prostitute” to this observation, since Brianna’s employment of a professional perfectly meets her needs, at least until she decides to reconnect with a partner with whom she used to be in a serious relationship.

Another, much shorter, scene also positions a woman as the supposed recipient of a male escort’s services. In the morning after Grace and Phil spent a night at a hotel together, an overeager, extremely talkative employee named Kyle delivers room service:

Grace: Uh, Kyle? I'm sort of paying for my friend's services by the hour, so can we just kind of wrap it up?
Kyle [not at all fussed]: OK, all right. Um, well, please enjoy your breakfast. [winking] And your friend.

Kyle’s lack of even a hint of surprise is more than professional discreetness – he clearly does not see any abnormality or indecency in an older woman paying a man for sex.

The moral soundness of individuals taking advantage of such services or, more broadly speaking, the existence of a market for sexual labor may, of course, still be disputed. Nonetheless, Grace and Frankie can be credited for taking a rather novel approach with its inclusion of male prostitution and, the statistically more unusual, female recipients of sexual favors. If nothing else, the show at least does not contribute to the omnipresent dynamic in which dominant men hold most power, whereas women are in a much weaker, submissive position.

Masturbation

The topic of masturbation is first introduced when the pair finds gifts sent to them by their now-deceased friend Babe. While Frankie receives a pair of paintbrushes accompanied by a letter saying that Babe has rented a gallery space for Frankie to exhibit her art, Grace is given a vibrator:

Grace: Let's see. Mmm. You get something inspiring and artful, and I get a vibrator?
Frankie: Maybe that's your paintbrush, Grace.

F: Other than a man's penis, what have you used?
Klippel criticizes The Golden Girls for never mentioning female sexuality as independent of men – sex is only talked about (never shown, as already discussed) as a partner activity (99), so Frankie’s surprise at Grace never having masturbated is significant. Grace is also not alone in her age group in lacking this experience (see 3.4.2) but soon makes use of her gift, in the process of which her wrist suffers. During the confrontation with their families, examined more closely in chapter 4.2.1, Grace spontaneously decides to become an advocate for female masturbation and vows, together with Frankie, to design a vibrator that meets older women’s needs.

The unwillingness to discuss older women’s sexuality, masturbation above all, is not limited to younger people; older women themselves are affected by the taboo as well, as Grace and Frankie’s focus group afternoon shows. The prudent idea of asking a select few to test their product before it goes into production turns into a disastrous situation, when Grace discovers that her friend Arlene’s group of older women is really drawn together by religious affiliation as a prayer group. Grace nonetheless attempts to carefully introduce the topic by telling the attentively listening women about her osteoarthritis and inquiring whether any of them experience similar pain in their hands or wrists. Her subsequent question “And how do they feel after you masturbate?” remains unanswered and produces guarded looks and body language. Nonetheless, she decides to forge ahead and ask the women to open their “goodie bags”:

Elizabeth: What is it?
Grace: Oh, we call it a Ménage à moi. It's a vibrator. But not just any vibrator. No, it's designed specifically for the older adult woman with hand or wrist issues.
Carol: So, what would you like us to do with it?
Doreen (angrily): What do you think they want us to do with it? [scowls] I had a feeling this morning. I had a feeling. Don't go to the beach. Come on, Carol. Let's get out of here before they tie us to our chairs and force us to watch blue movies.

This scene nicely depicts the attitudes a more conservative group of women has to sexuality. Being confronted with a vibrator leads to reactions ranging from confusion to outright anger. Doreen, the woman seated in the middle (see fig. 8), feels extremely offended and insists that they leave immediately. To her, being asked to test this vibrator...
is akin to being forced to watch pornographic materials, both of which she obviously finds to be morally wrong.

Grace is understandably disconcerted and Frankie, although she tries, cannot do much to brighten her friend’s mood (Frankie: “But don't beat yourself up. I bet the first focus group for anal beads was a disaster, too.”). Frankie’s insistence that they have designed a good product is met with further exasperation on Grace’s part:

“I know that. You know that. I want the entire Midwest to know it. I want the South to know it. But how do we get them to listen? They clearly don't want to talk about it. I didn't want to talk about it. I know those women. I was one of them. I know why they're upset.” (19:06-19:25, “The Focus Group”)

This speaks to Grace’s attitude having changed tremendously during her time with Frankie and again emphasizes that their objective with this project is not just personal success but also opening women’s horizons in doing so. Naturally, the difficulty of getting “people to try a product that no one will admit they want or need” (Grace, “The Focus Group”), is a big setback for their venture.

Unexpectedly, Arlene returns a day later and admits that she took home one of the vibrators.

Arlene: There's no other way to say it. It awakened something in me that I thought was long dead.
Grace: Oh, Arlene, that's exactly how I felt, too!
Arlene: I never even realized how much I missed, you know, it. [gasps] Oh, how I've missed it.

[...]

A: So, I am gonna need a few of these for my prayer group. Well, that's why I came by.

F: You're kidding? Those women? I thought we were gonna get stoned by vibrator!

A: Well, it was a pretty quiet drive home. But then I got phone calls later that night. So, I'm gonna need three of these. Actually, four. Doreen is on the fence, but I think I can get her to see the light. Oh, you two are doing God's work.

F: What did she say?

G: [louder] We're doing God's work!


With that the focus group disaster turns into a success, after all. Additionally, the sitcom slightly mocks the hypocrisy of conservative religious Americans in that the women do not dare openly show an interest that they secretly have. Grace and Frankie’s business soon develops further, and their vibrator enjoys huge popularity.

Overall, the older women in *Grace and Frankie* are not infantilized in that they are portrayed as asexual. Their conversations about sexuality are relatively open and do not elicit laughs by suggesting unexpectedness or impropriety in their speaking about such matters. They are shown to be attractive even to younger partners and some differences between sexuality at middle and older age, especially those caused by physical changes and mild restrictions in movement (vaginal dryness, Grace’s arthritis), are depicted realistically. The taboo on thinking of older women in sexual contexts, masturbation in particular, is included both in younger and older character’s confronted with the issue (the former was included in chapter 4.2.1). However, the performance ideal cannot be said to be abandoned altogether and the sitcom does not incorporate the increasing emphasis on other aspects of intimacy (emotional closeness, non-sexual touch) frequently described by participants in qualitative studies.

### 4.5 The “old old” in *Grace and Frankie*

In chapter 2.2, Harwood’s remark on taking into consideration not only the overall quality of older characters’ portrayals but also how they fare in comparison to those much younger was cited (161). As should have become apparent in previous chapters, Grace and Frankie are characterized as no less funny, competent, or interesting than their
children or other younger characters, as can be expected of a show that chooses to focus on two older women. Harwood’s recommendation can be extended, however, to examine whether there is a difference in depictions between the “young old” and the “old old”.

In its first season, the main characters of *Grace and Frankie* are in their early seventies, which according to most definitions makes them part of the group of the “young old”. Advances in medicine in combination with other factors have made it increasingly common for men and women – the latter more often than the former – to reach their late eighties or nineties and this group of the “old old” continues to grow. In the media, this demographic is almost entirely invisible, however (see chapter 2.1). This is a phenomenon that cannot be sufficiently explained by stating that declining health allows for only a handful of actors and actresses to still be active at this age, since it is common practice in TV and film to have younger actresses play characters a decade or two older than themselves. Even in a sitcom like *Grace and Frankie*, the “old old” are, with a few exceptions, conspicuously absent.

One such exception is Barbara Hanson, Robert’s mother, who appears in one episode and dominates the plot of another without being present. The show’s treatment of this character, for whom none of the family members seem to feel anything but intense dislike, is not easily evaluated. Barbara is portrayed as an almost cartoonish villain whose rigid morals have antagonized not only her children and grandchildren but apparently numerous other people in her life as well. Consequently, no one is saddened by her death, as the following exchange between her granddaughters Mallory and Brianna shows:

Mallory: Hey
M: Yeah, I'm here. Oh, my God, I feel terrible.
B: Really?
M: Yeah. I totally forgot she was still alive.

Brianna breaks the news in an entirely flat tone and Mallory, whose initial reaction appears to fit what most viewers would expect from someone being informed of a loved one’s passing, is immediately followed by a rather callous remark. Further comments on Barbara’s death and her personality are all in the same vein: Sol and Brianna’s attempts at writing an obituary, for example, reveal her to have “volunteered with the mentally disabled because they're ‘easy to beat at cards’” and begin with the line “‘Say what you want about Barbara Hanson, but she always really hated Mexican people’” (“The
Apology”). In the long list of actions that alienated her family, Barbara’s insistence on imposing her narrow framework of moral beliefs onto others is a recurring theme:

Brianna: Oh, do you remember this? That was the day that she told you you were going to hell for living with Mitch before you were married.
Mallory: Still my favorite part of my wedding day. (3:20-3:30, “The Apology”)

This has presumably also led to her estrangement from her siblings and causes Robert intense pain when he finally musters up the courage to tell her about his new marriage (“The Gun”). Barbara rejects him without hesitation and reveals her homophobic attitude in calling him “selfish” for his decision to come out to her: “I could have happily died never knowing that you were one of them” (“The Gun”).

Essentially, the character of Barbara Hanson serves two purposes, the second of which is related to this scene. First and foremost, the lack of grief her relatives feel after her death and their corresponding unsympathetic and largely sarcastic comments about the deceased’s vitriolic personality are overdrawn for the sake of comedic potential, as can be expected of a sitcom. The second purpose depends even more strongly on shaping the character as an unlovable and, importantly, as an unloving woman: Despite Robert’s numerous jokes with Grace while the pair seeks to buy a funeral suit for Barbara (Grace: “Oh, how about something like this? Only all white.” – Robert: “That’s how she liked her neighborhood, too.”, 14:25-14:30 “The Apology”), his laughter finally turns into tears and a heartfelt apology to his ex-wife: “I'm sorry because I know how it feels not to be loved by someone who should love you. And I know how terrible it must have felt for you all those years. And I am so, so very sorry” (“The Apology”). Setting up Robert’s mother as such an antagonistic character was a deliberate storytelling decision to facilitate this cathartic moment, so understanding it as an ageist practice might not be an entirely just assessment.

The difficulty in interpreting Barbara’s portrayal is increased further by the fact that, on the one hand, age does not directly factor into the negative characteristics attributed to the character, although it can be criticized for reinforcing the stereotype of the hard, emotionally closed-off Catholic Irishwoman (or “Irish Voldemort”, as Sol calls her in “The Gun”). However, the harm done by such a stereotype is debatable, since today, according to my knowledge, neither Catholics nor the Irish generally suffer significant discrimination. On the other hand, Barbara is one of the few minor characters who are
part of the “old old” demographic and echoes several stereotypes frequently criticized in older people’s on-screen representations (e.g. racism, rudeness, ignorance towards the impact one’s liberally voiced opinions have on others). This lack of complexity in characterization combined with the show’s continuation of TV and film’s general trend of highly limited incorporation of “old old” characters does not point towards a strong awareness on the writers’ part of the potentially amplifying effects such practice may have on ageist bias against the “old old”.

In general, the show’s stance towards the “old old” is rather ambiguous. Apart from Barbara Hanson, Frankie’s friend Babe, whose assisted suicide plotline was analyzed earlier, is another member of this group. Babe is a minor character but is at least featured within two consecutive episodes. Actress Estelle Parsons was 88 years old at the time of filming (and with that 10 and 12 years older than Fonda and Tomlin, respectively), which certainly qualified her as being among the “old old”. Unlike Barbara, who was shown to be confined to a wheelchair, she has no visible signs of her illness, but certainly some of old age (white hair, wrinkles, some signs of fatigue). Babe’s characterization is almost in polar opposition to Barbara’s; where the latter is universally despised for her coldness, the former radiates warmth and surrounds herself with people of various ages and backgrounds. She is intent on connecting with the world at large and does so via her travels up until she chooses to end her life. Babe is consistently depicted as a fascinating personality who could share dozens more of her equally funny and intriguing stories, if her illness did not force her to end her life. In making that choice, she also exerts control over her own life and death that is often taken away from the very old. Altogether, Babe embodies a counterforce to popular assumptions about the “old old”. It may nonetheless be criticized that she and her story are too unusual to be relatable and, therefore, unlikely to be influential. Harwood would certainly consider Babe a character exemplifying his concept of counter-stereotypicality, for which he has rightly expressed criticism (see chapter 2.3).

There are a few more instances of the “old old” playing minor roles in different storylines, which reveal the attitudes that Grace and Frankie hold towards those older than themselves. During the show’s first season (“The Dinner”), Frankie applies for an art teacher position at a retirement home. After a while, Frankie realizes that the employee giving her a tour has mistaken her for a prospective inhabitant. Frankie reacts negatively
to this error and feels compelled to demonstrate her relative youth by rapidly stepping away from the employee, moving in and out of a squatting position, and yelling “I am young! My joints are supple!” (“The Dinner”). While doing so, Frankie comes close to colliding with a resident of the facility who is moving past with the help of a wheeled walker.

As figure 9 shows, the woman is unmistakably coded as being among the “old old” (hair, clothing, slow movements, dependence on a walker), from whom Frankie actively tries to distance herself through her demonstration of physical flexibility and verbal insistence that she is (not yet) one of them.

Positive portrayals of the “old old” are, however, to be found within the series as well. A scene from the third season’s opening episode is particularly noteworthy in this respect, as it contrasts with the scene discussed above in that Frankie exhibits a distinct sense of solidarity with the woman in question. At her art show, into which Frankie has invested a great deal of time and energy, no one seems interested in buying any of her pieces. When she is on the verge of giving up hope and declaring the evening a failure (to Grace: “Can I go home and put on my pajamas?”, “The Art Show”), Grace points out a woman who has been looking at a painting for “a good two-and-a-half martinis. And I’ve been pacing myself” (“The Art Show”). Frankie starts a conversation with the woman, who explains why she is so mesmerized by the piece:
Woman: This reminds me of a painting that was in the house that I grew up in. It's not the actual painting, but it's the memory of it, and it brings me back to a happy time.
Frankie: Oh, wow.
Woman: And the yellow makes me feel hopeful.

Frankie is visibly touched by the emotional impact her art has on this anonymous visitor, who admits that she would love to buy the painting but cannot afford it. To this admission, Frankie responds with a simple “How much you got?”, after which viewers only get to see her proudly placing a “sold” sticker on the piece and leaving the gallery. As short as this scene is, it is of crucial importance for the series’ plot and the choice of who displays appreciation for Frankie’s art is significant. Frankie had been struggling with the lack of validation she got from outside of her family, which is ultimately what she wanted out of the art show, while the monetary aspect was secondary. The woman’s words do not suggest a professional background in the arts but rather an intuitive appreciation of art and a deeply personal, somewhat nostalgic connection to this piece in particular. She is also a much better representation of the average 70+-year-old woman than Grace and Frankie are (see fig. 9 below). The fact that an old, “ordinary” woman (i.e. not an art collector or other outstanding, well-known person) is the one who finally makes Frankie feel accomplished therefore does not just give validation to Frankie’s artistic aspirations but also to the opinions of an old woman.

Figure 10. Grace and Frankie with the anonymous older woman at the gallery. “The Art Show”, 26:55.
While there are no scenes of Grace directly interacting with anyone belonging to the “old old”, there are a few in which unfavorable attitudes of hers about the group are brought to light. In “The Fall”, for example, Grace slips in a store and has what is probably best described as a vivid hallucination about what might have happened had Frankie not caught her. The scenario, in which she is taken to the hospital with a broken hip, takes place in Grace’s imagination, so Frankie’s words are not so much her own but reflect Grace’s opinion when she says: “Oh, God, that means you have to operate? I mean, like all the old people stories you always hear? With the surgery, and the PT, and the pneumonia, and sexual assault… And it all ends, you know how it ends. Dead.” (12:15-12:30, “The Fall”). This statement corresponds with common societal narratives about the “old old” that are colored by a distinctly negative hue. Fantasy-Frankie speaks about “old people” in a way that indicates a perceived distance to the group of the “old old”, whose stories are dominated by pain, abuse, and death. This image is strengthened by a moaning old man being wheeled by shortly thereafter; here, the “old old” are unitarily portrayed as frail and pitiful and Grace rejoices in knowing that she is not among them.

Overall, the show’s stance towards the “old old” tends to suggest that the association with being old and suffering a loss of joy, individuality, and ability to attract the interest of others is not destroyed completely. Instead, the cut-off line after which this loss manifests itself and people are no longer considered worth an investment of time or effort is moved further back, so that women like Grace and Frankie, who are in their seventies, are included in the larger group of people whose stories deserve being told. Although there are a few exceptions (Babe, the woman at the gallery), the very old, and especially those under severe limitations caused by their deteriorating health, are overall not featured prominently and with reduced complexity. It can be concluded that, while the sitcom displays an unusual sensitivity towards ageism suffered by its main characters, it is much less attuned to its own support of the very same bias when directed at the “old old”.
5. Conclusion

At this point, this thesis’ limitations need to be pointed out: It would have been highly illuminating, but sadly beyond the scope of this paper, to include the opinions of older women themselves on *Grace and Frankie*. Similarly, there was no room for commenting on how the sitcom treated Robert and Sol, who, as older gay men, are part of another marginalized group.

As the first part of this thesis has attempted to show, the representation of older women on television is generally subpar in both quantity and quality. Women above retirement age are featured not nearly frequently enough to mirror actual population numbers and their characterizations all too often limit them to the same stereotypical roles women have societally been relegated to for decades. *The Golden Girls* offered a lovely break in the otherwise largely one-sided depictions of older women’s lives, although it has also been criticized for perpetuating several harmful notions and for not exploiting its revolutionary potential to its full extent. Only recently have television sitcoms started exhibiting a renewed interest in increasing the on-screen visibility of older women.

One such show is *Grace and Frankie*, which foregrounded the experiences of two newly divorced septuagenarians. *Grace and Frankie* goes further than many similar productions in its criticism of ageist practices: It takes its older female characters seriously in characterizing them complexly as women with strengths and weaknesses, who experience both the joys and the pains of aging. In doing so, it provides support for the model of affirmative age, which is considered superior to the less nuanced approaches highlighting either competence or decline. Importantly, the sitcom deviates from the path frequently chosen in the genre that derives humor primarily from the inadequacies of its older characters: Grace and Frankie are funny without constantly being made fun of. The show consistently portrays its protagonists as competent and rebellious when confronted with well-intentioned patronization from their children as well as outright insulting age-based discrimination from sources outside of their families.

What *Grace and Frankie*, unfortunately, does not offer is a larger range of older women’s experiences: Its main characters – although they are somewhat restricted by pain, deteriorating eyesight, and other ailments – are still at the very active end of the spectrum for their age group and are in possession of the financial means to participate
widely in all activities that spark their interest. Race, the third category of social perception, is also neglected but would have made for an invaluable addition.

Overall, *Grace and Frankie* might not be all-encompassing in its coverage of age-related issues but contributes a much-needed layer to the depiction of women in television. It challenges a plethora of erroneous beliefs concerning the presumed incompetence of older women and a lack of novelty in their lives. Additionally, a dedication to the breaking of taboos surrounding older female sexuality, including advocating safer sex practices, is among its great achievements and it can be credited for attempting to abstain from judgement in providing more than one version of being a woman over the age of 65.
Bibliography


List of figures

Fig. 1:

Figures 2-10 are all taken from *Grace and Frankie*:

Fig. 2: “The Floor”, 4:04.
Fig. 3: “The Coup”, 26:52
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Fig. 5: “The Negotiation”, 11:15
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Fig. 10: “The Art Show”, 26:55
Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Ich erkläre hiermit eidesstattlich [durch meine eigenhändige Unterschrift], dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel verwendet habe. Alle Stellen, die wörtlich oder inhaltlich den angegebenen Quellen entnommen wurden, sind als solche kenntlich gemacht. Die vorliegende Arbeit wurde bisher in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form noch nicht als Bachelor/-/ Master/-/ Diplomarbeit/ Dissertation eingereicht.

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