

## 5. Squirrels and nostalgia: About wardrobe collections of older women

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### **Abstract**

The focus in this article has been on how older women, between 62 and 94 years old, talk of their wardrobe collections. The key questions guiding the analyses of the women's narratives have been: how did they describe their wardrobe collections; how did they talk of sorting through their garments and organising them; and how did they explain clothes kept but no longer used. The aim has been to let the women's voices be heard and to give their perspective.

Sorting through the wardrobe was an ongoing task, where some felt burdened by owning too many items of clothing, whereas others talked of the importance of remembering through items kept. Garments are like materialised photo albums, loaded with memories. Several informants showed a pragmatic side, emphasising that it was important that garments were put to use and not wasted. References to utility and thrift intersected with emotional ones. The informants used self-distancing descriptions, jokingly referring to themselves as 'squirrels' or nostalgic, reluctant to sort through their often substantial clothes collections and throw things away. Clothes also represented the pleasure inherent in the aesthetic work of combining outfits and making an effort to wear something appropriate for each different occasion

Keywords: ageing, older, women, dress, wardrobe interviews, collections, divestment

## **Introduction**

"I have too many clothes, just like everybody else – most people have too much stuff. But then I find it difficult to discard things. I go through the wardrobe now and then, and I think, okay, now, [nämen nu], now I will sort out, and then I go through the whole lot and then I think 'Oh, why couldn't I wear that', or 'I could wear that' and so it ends up still hanging in the wardrobe, and still not being used. (Laughs) So here are plenty of clothes. (Marianne, 68) But I am terribly bad at throwing clothes away.  
Karin: So then you save them?  
Yes, yes, for a hundred years. This one for instance, I must have had for at least ten you see.  
Karin: Do you still use it?  
Yes, sometimes. I can suddenly, after many years, think, oh well. (Hanne 63)

In this article, I will discuss the wardrobes of a number of women ranging in age from 62 to 94, using studies on dress as well as research on discarding belongings when becoming older, moving to a care home or otherwise preparing for old age. The purpose of the article is to explore the wardrobe collections of older women with a specific focus on how stage of life is given meaning in their narratives.

## **Background, previous research and disposition of the article**

In an ongoing study of older women and clothes I have conducted wardrobe interviews, using garments as prompts when interviewing about everyday life, transitions, changes, and continuities as regards ageing. Artefacts are a rewarding starting-point in such a task. When talking about different articles of clothing, of what is in use and what is kept even though no longer worn, it is natural for interviewees to reason about their present lives as senior citizens as well as previous roles and relationships. In talking about style and what clothes 'feel right', 'fun', or 'comfortable', to use the women's own words, there are also references to norms of what is seen as appropriate for an older person (see Lövgren 2014; Lövgren forthcoming). Clothes that for different reasons are no longer worn but are still kept lead them to talk about bodily changes, changes not only in appearance—changes in the aesthetic body, to use Hydén's concept (2005)—but also bodily changes that impact on mobility and nimbleness. Having to use a walking frame or no longer being able to bend to put on one's socks are changes

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that affect what one can wear. Wardrobes as points of entrance open the way to reflections on life changes, changes in roles and status, and, naturally, life-course-related transitions. Examinations of collections of clothing also triggered recollections of bygone times and changes in styles and materials that were talked of in relation to changes in the spirit of the age.

There are other studies that have used wardrobe interviews as a method, but they have not considered older women. Klepp and Bjerck (2012) give an overview of wardrobe studies, together with a discussion of the potential advantages of the method; they emphasise that the method encourages the recollection of what clothes one has, whereas it is otherwise easy to make mistakes in estimating one's actual possessions. In Banim and Guy's research women's identities through their everyday use of clothing was explored (Guy & Banim 2000): their oldest informants were 56. In a subsequent article, they went on to address the question of why women kept clothes they no longer wore (Banim & Guy 2001). In Woodward's study (2007), the oldest informant of which was in her late fifties, the main focus was the moment of choosing what to wear: getting dressed is identity construction using the wardrobe as a resource, negotiating one's appearance in public whilst in the private domain of the bedroom. Twigg in *Fashion and Age* (2013) uses interviews with women aged 55 and up for part of her study, and in one section three women in their sixties, who represent different ways of dressing as older, as they explicitly dress in opposition to a norm of becoming invisible and drab as they age, are interviewed about their clothing biographies. Twigg's pioneering work on ageing and fashion also analyses the role of the media, and of different cultural intermediaries such as designers and retailers. Aside from her research, comparatively little has been done on older people's clothing choices. As Twigg points out, this has to do with different research disciplines focusing either on fashion or on subcultures with a slant towards youth, or, when it comes to older people, on care and health, and less on aesthetics and consumption in relation to the dressed, ageing body.

My study fills a gap in the research since it addresses older women, regardless of their stand on fashion or their views on age norms. The main subject of the study is the changes and transitions seen when one ages. In this article, dealing with a theme identified from the wardrobe interviews, I discuss how the women talk about their clothes collections; of the organisational and identity work they do when sorting through them; and finally their views on clothing they choose to keep, but no longer wear. Central in all this are the ageing wom-

en's own voices. I will quote from the interviews, albeit anonymised and in translation, in order to let them be heard. In what follows, I will discuss the women's explanations for what they referred to as their overflowing wardrobes. This is best summarised in terms of different cycles of clothing, as dress can be understood in cyclical terms. Clothes are worn for different occasions, according to perceived norms and expectations of what is appropriate. Garments might first be used when getting dressed up, only later, having been worn in, to diminish in status so that they are used on an everyday basis, and then again, at a still later stage, perhaps mainly used at home, backstage. The interviews refer to a cycle of life, the life-course, where the women's current everyday life is one important aspect as regards their sartorial choices. The following section will deal with the organisational work the women do with their wardrobes. This too can be described in terms of a cycle, but in this instance a cycle of use and disuse. Finally, clothes that are kept, but no longer in active use, are explored. Here I use the concept of utility.

## **Method and material**

This is a study of older women. The women were invited to participate in the study regardless of their attitude to clothes or fashion. Twenty-one women between the ages of 62 and 94 were interviewed. Gender was motivated by the fact that women are culturally constructed as more interested in style and appearance, and as subject to stricter and more limiting norms demanding greater bodily disciplining. Women's physical appearance is represented as reflecting their worth, where men are ascribed value in terms of performance and actions (Lövgren 2009; Clarke 2011).

As clothes conceal and reveal the body, aspects of dress have, in contemporary western societies, been made into a concern for women. Ageing is also considered more of a liability for women, who are 'made' old earlier in life than men. Ageing is embodied and women's bodies are culturally made both 'invisible and hypervisible', so that signs of ageing are all that is seen (Woodward 1999; Cruikshank 2003; Twigg 2013). Dress mediates between the body and the surroundings, again motivating why garments are such a worthwhile point of entry when researching ageing. The age limit was motivated by an endeavour to interrogate the concept of "old" "older" and "old age". Old as a category is often presented as monolithic when in fact there is considerable diversity amongst the

old. When someone is being included in the category of old is also subject to differences. Sometimes for women it is from the age of menopause, in other words from around 52. In advertising the category often uses 50 as starting point, in other contexts it is 55 (for instance for senior housing or in discussions of the employment situation), 65, official retirement age in Sweden, is also a frequently used marker. Gerontologists in turn make divisions between young-old and old-old, or third and fourth age: retired and still in good health and frail and dependent respectively (Laslett 1991). As Cruikshank points out, all these divisions tend to reduce and delimit old age in an ageist fashion, not taking differences and diversity into account. For my study it was important both to include and specifically take an interest in the dress of older women, sadly neglected in much work on fashion, and to include a wide span in order to be able to discuss similarities and differences in experiences of ageing.

The interviews lasted between two and three hours. The women were initially found through contacts in my network, and then by snowballing—asking if they had friends or acquaintances they thought would be interested in participating. Some informants were also found through a pensioners' organisation; a church organisation; a retailer specialising in older consumers; and a group of women doing physiotherapy.

The women were drawn from different social backgrounds, but can broadly be categorised as middle-class. Several had university degrees and had worked in the caring professions. As professions typically dominated by women, these jobs mostly had low salaries. Three were still working part-time or as temporary cover, but most had retired. Generally, the women had small pensions, which affected their spending power. The crucial factor here was whether or not they had a partner. Those who did have a partner—who in all cases had a higher pension—had a higher standard of living. All the interviewees had children and grandchildren; all talked of themselves as heterosexual; and most were ethnic Swedes, although three had immigrated to Sweden from other European countries.

The interviews followed an ethnographical conversational pattern. The garments in the wardrobe guided the interview. A checklist was used to ensure that certain biographical details were covered. The methodological priorities here were issues of integrity and intimacy. Most women keep their clothes in a wardrobe, located in a bedroom, an intimate area of the home (Alftberg 2012; Woodward 2007). The very fact that the informants had to volunteer to partici-

pate in the study was one factor used to ensure that ethical standards were maintained. In addition, the rules of ethical conduct compiled by the Swedish Research Council on anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to discontinue participation were followed (Hermerén 2011). The women, fully informed, volunteered to invite a relative stranger into their homes and let her browse their hangers and drawers, and to discuss intimate matters. The women can be described as open-minded and interested in reflecting on themselves. A further question then is what impact this might have had on the results. I would argue that since this is an exploratory study, the purpose of which has been to find different themes that can shed light on ageing, and that since the participants have all been anonymised, and nothing they said can be traced back to them, this does not diminish the study's validity.

The interviews were transcribed together with detailed field notes. After several readings, different codes were assigned to the empirical data, both theoretically deduced but mainly induced from the interviews. The codes were then thematically structured. Tone of voice and choice of words were also coded, as were things remarked on by only by one informant, and not by others. Here a software computer program for qualitative research, Atlas.ti, was used; facilitating keeping track of the different codes. This article uses one of the themes identified in the course of the analyses: the question of wardrobe collections, with the subcategories of sorting, keeping, and disposal. This theme was found in all interviews.

## **Wardrobe collections**

As older women, with long lives behind them, and many different occasions experienced, several informants had large collections of garments. Woodward (2007) points out that, compared to the older ones, her youngest informants had had fewer opportunities to accumulate clothing, and they were also more inclined to discard clothes. The older women had more 'former selves', as she puts it. This was true for my informants as well. But the oldest among them had had to let go of many garments, due to the constraints of available wardrobe space on moving to homes for the elderly.

Several point out that they have had the same clothes 'for ages'. The word 'old' recurs when looking at series of garments, and differs considerably in use so that for some it meant clothes that were five, ten years old, whereas for others

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it meant clothes that were twenty, thirty years old—and yet again ‘old’ could be used about garments kept from the 1950s or 1960s. Sometimes they were tongue in cheek when assessing how long they had had the garments, as Hanne in the quote at the start, alternating between having had them for a hundred, or at least ten years: they were ‘ancient’, ‘from the year dot’, ‘hundreds of years old’, or something they had ‘had forever’. ‘These are old, old, old’ Kerstin declared as she went through her hangers. This was testimony to a slowly changing style of dress, a style that had lasted for many years, and still the items could be worn, even though the wearer was that much older.

I think these statements were mainly made to account for the size of the wardrobe collections, to play down the number of garments. But they can also be interpreted as an indication of uni-age clothing. Clothes that were worn in middle age could still be worn when in their late seventies for instance. Then style is not age graded, people are free to wear whatever they choose to, regardless of age. This testifies to less strict norms on age appropriate dress.

Working life had meant differing requirements in terms of dress. Hanne, still working as a preschool teacher, talked of the importance of having clothes that worked in bad weather, that were easy to wash, would not stain, and that were suitable for activities with the children. Others had had jobs where there was a formal dress code: smart trousers or a skirt. It had been important to wear something appropriate that reflected their position. For example, the retired teachers among the interviewees testified to the fact that it had been important to have something new to wear when meeting the same people time and again. Those having worked in the caring professions, as social workers or therapists, emphasised the importance of not overdressing—of coming across as too expensively dressed and so creating a distance between themselves and the client or patient.

Several recalled how clothing codes had changed during their working lives. When starting out, dresses or skirts were mandatory, and trousers were simply unthinkable for women. During the late Seventies this had slowly changed, and in their last years at work trousers had become the garment of choice for several of them. The oldest still felt that skirts or dresses were to be preferred, and reluctantly explained that they were now encouraged by staff at the retirement home to wear trousers since they were considered more practical when using a wheelchair or a walking frame. The informants’ narratives reflect changes in

dress that have occurred during their lifetimes, as well as changes in mainstream fashion and the zeitgeist impacting on choice of dress.

For many, their work clothes had never been allowed to become noticeably worn but the women felt they could do this as pensioners. This was given as one explanation for their expanding wardrobe collections. The women talked of how their days were very different now that they had retired. Several had leisure activities (especially true of the younger informants, who talked of choir practice, bridge classes, or doing volunteer work at their local church) when they could wear clothes previously worn for work. Since these occasions were far fewer, the clothes were rarely completely worn out.

It was felt that rituals marking transitions required different dress which also accounted for the size of the wardrobe collections. Celebratory meals or festivities demanded very specific clothing. Several had a prepared set to use for funerals, saying that at their age there are always funerals to attend, and it was convenient to have an organised, serviceable combination ready at hand. Occasions such as these have more defined, limited sartorial codes and called for recognisably suitable clothes. For funerals, the women felt it reasonable to use the same outfits on several occasions, but other special occasions required new sets of garments. When attending an event where the same participants as before would be present, several thought it important to have a different outfit than last time.

Everyday life at home meant that other items from their wardrobes could be used. For some this included clothing that they would not countenance wearing when going into town or meeting others, but that they were prepared to wear at home or in the garden. The women explained that they could then use clothes they saw as unfashionable, but fully functional. These days, even clothes that were showing signs of age could be used: 'I can always wear this at home, that always works', as Katja phrased it. They could wear them out. This can be understood in terms of living life backstage to a greater extent than previously. These accounts were testimony to their thrift, a topic that will be further explored below.

Bodily changes such as stiff joints and worn-out hips or knees necessitated changes in what to wear. Being unable to put on one's socks oneself, or not being able to bend or move, necessitated a change of wardrobe. As mentioned, those who used walking frames or wheelchairs were encouraged to use clothes that the nursing home staff considered practical.

Several of the women with wardrobes stuffed to the brim explained that they had garments for different versions of their body. Gretha, with a little self-conscious laugh, says that her clothes have all shrunk—especially since she retired, her clothes seem to have become smaller. She hangs on to the ones that no longer fit as a reminder to lose weight. The majority talked of their ongoing struggle to lose—or at least not to gain—weight. Mostly this was expressed in terms of appearance rather than health. At first, I interpreted this as a sign of a relentless size tyranny enslaving women in a constant battle, forcing them into vigilance and discipline. But I later came to understand the battle to remain approximately the same size in terms of keeping a bond of continuity with previous versions of oneself. To have to buy a new outfit is to fashion and present a new self, whereas being able to use clothes already worn, broken in so to speak, enables them to retain dimensions of their identity. Weight should thus not only be interpreted in terms of restrictive mediated body ideals, but also in terms of continuity of self (Banim & Guy 2001).

## **Bulging wardrobes**

‘I have too many pieces of clothing, even though I have got rid of some, which my daughter has taken away’, says Ellen, aged 94. Her daughter has even bought her an extra wardrobe, since there was not enough space in the only one in her room at the care home. During the interview, Ellen contrasts her abundance of clothing with her mother’s wardrobe when she was around Ellen’s age. Her mother lived in a rural area of Sweden, in poor circumstances, at a time when clothes were more expensive. Most people could not afford large collections of clothes, unlike today when many have bulging wardrobes and whose main concern is to sort out what to keep and what to clear away. Several of the women contrasted their wardrobes to their mothers’, illustrating a rapid change in consumption and the availability of clothes.

The women talked about how clothes today are much cheaper than when they grew up. Thus they had more clothes now than they had ever had before in their lives. The so-called democratisation of fashion (Craik 2009; Crane 2000; Fredriksson 2012; Lantz 2013) has led to more purchases and more items of clothing for consumers in Western societies. Mass fashion, with its increasingly rapid turnover and constant focus on what is new, has led to consumers feeling a need to constantly renew themselves (Lantz 2013). This was also true of the

informants. Several voiced disillusionment about what is available in shops, feeling fashion was targeted at the young. Still, most talked of buying new garments; some with the help of a relative.<sup>1</sup> Having a daughter or next-of-kin buy clothes was more than just practical: it reinforced bonds, testified to relationships and indicated not only a here and now but also a future. Others wanted one to be comfortable and to look nice, and invested in this. Even if garment purchases did not amount to large sums, they were still a sign of others thinking about the old relative. As Chapman writes: 'Things provide insight into how some older adults make sense of transitions' (2006:241) and in this case, garments bought by a daughter can be understood as materialised proof of a generational bond.

Amongst my oldest informants, there were those who said it was important to have new clothes, to have something to look forward to wearing. Alice, Ellen, and Karin, when showing their garments, all claim that dress is more important when one is older. Alice was at pains to stress that one should not make oneself older than one is. She went on to describe how important it is to take care of beauty in everyday life and to do the best with what one has. Ellen, quoted earlier, talks of death as a presence she is aware of; continuing regardless, refusing to limit her consumption, is her way of committing to life. To dress up is to participate in life. Putting an effort into her choice of dress is her way of signalling that she cares about her appearance. Dressing up for lunch at the old people's home was to her a sign of dignity. Changing circumstances of everyday life, in the form of moving house, meant her home, her flat, was in some senses a more public place than previously, when she managed on her own. Now staff can enter her rooms at any time, and lunch is eaten in a dining room, with others. Thus for her, and the others living in a care home, the social space of everyday living had changed meaning: life was not mainly lived backstage, but also frontstage, more publicly. Getting dressed up for these communal lunches was a source of effort and pleasure. Delighted, she picks out a blouse she has yet to wear: to her the blouse is already something to rejoice in, even when it is just hanging on its hanger in the wardrobe. Having a new garment in the wardrobe was also a way of thinking ahead, of having something to look forward to. Sometimes garments still had their price tags on, never worn.

The women commented that their mothers had looked older earlier in life than they felt they did. That the previous generation had looked like little old ladies as early as middle age was a recurring comment (see Lövgren 2013a). In

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this sense, several voiced the thought that one could remain youthful longer today. But this, for some, also entailed a certain hesitation as regards style. Since tradition and a strict age ordering as regards dress have dissolved, there is both freedom and uncertainty about what is appropriate to wear (Kawamura 2007; Twigg 2013). The informants were not always sure whether or not some clothes were suitable for them as older women. ‘Can one wear this at my age?’ Hanne asks herself in front of the mirror, holding a hanger up to her chest. The underlying sense that an age transition warranted a change in style led to more clothes consumption. This was mostly talked of as a gradual process—a slow adaptation to the changes and transitions of ageing.

As well as buying clothes, the informants had also taken on clothes from others. Some had kept clothes that used to belong to their mothers. Clothes were handed down from friends or relatives. Several took over clothes from their children, mostly from their daughters, but in some cases also from their sons or husbands. Elisabeth showed me some jeans she had got from her daughter who no longer used them. She even wore the trousers her daughter had worn when pregnant, and she had altered a pair of trousers from her husband explaining that they were now her favourites. Dress is used to communicate social and gender belonging, but for several of the interviewed women, clothes could be taken over from others regardless of the age or gender of previous wearer. Clothes could be transferred from those younger to those older, so age norms regarding dress were not strict in these cases. For some, it was not important to communicate gender through dress. This can be interpreted as testifying to a uni-sex and uni-age style, where neither age nor gender matters in terms of what to wear. It is to be noted that it is generally more accepted that women take on men’s garments, whereas men to a lesser extent can use dress that is coded female, this represents a status loss.

The women also passed on garments, so it was not a one-directional flow. In some cases, a daughter or friend could be given the clothing they no longer used. Several regretted that they had no-one to pass clothes on to, as significant others in their life had a different body shape to theirs. Hand-me-downs could also be used as dressing-up clothes for the grandchildren, kept amongst toys for them to use when visiting.

Above I have focused on how the women described their often over-full wardrobes; stuffed with garments they used, as well as plenty that they never wore. By Woodward’s reckoning (2007), an active wardrobe accounts for

around 38 per cent of the clothing in a standard wardrobe. Having full wardrobes—and clothes that are kept but never worn—is thus a common experience of many Western women.

## **Organisational identity work**

There was a link between how much storage space the informants had and how many items of clothing they owned. The actual wardrobe as such can be said to reflect a life-course-related cycle. A certain amount of wardrobe space had been available when their children were living at home. Once they had moved out, several informants occupied all the wardrobes, and those living in detached houses especially had lots of space for storage. Some explained away their abundant wardrobe collections by making this point. There had never been a need to clear anything out. Others had moved to smaller accommodation, which required them to sort through and get rid of clothes. The oldest informants, who lived in care homes, talked of the restrictions due to the limited wardrobe space.

The informants' clothes could be divided into active clothes (Banim & Guy 2001; Guy & Banim 2000; Woodward 2007); clothes that were currently not in season; and garments that should either be understood as memorabilia, or that were in a transitional stage where the women were unsure how to deal with them, including items kept because they felt the cycle of fashion would change and the clothes would become modern and fashionable again. The active clothes were also organised: some had clothes that they had started to wear, and could use again before washing, hanging on a chair in view. The active clothes had different intended uses. Clothes move through different cycles of use. When they are stored away, but still belong to the women, they can be perceived as being on hold, in a transitional state. Their status is unclear. They can be charged with meaning and ascribed value. They can be perceived as weighing down on their owners; needing to be organised and transferred to a new state. They can also be seen as resources. They represent a bond, a continuity, with earlier situations, roles, or relationships (Banim & Guy 2001, Woodward 2007).

Organising the wardrobe was described as an ongoing process. Above all, the women said they did this as the seasons changed, transferring clothes from the wardrobe to storage in the attic, but several also testified to regularly sorting through their wardrobes and assessing the garments. The tasks around this can be understood as practical, going through and taking an inventory of what is

available. Arranging the wardrobe using different systems, marking content in boxes and drawers and hanging clothes by function, shape, colour, or pattern are all ways of appraising what one owns, and assessing the resources the clothes amount to. It can also be understood as identity work. What clothes does one have, and for what occasions? For what roles? Going through hangers and drawers is a way of preparing oneself for encounters beyond the confines of the home. Dress is the shielding envelope between the body and the world; it both conceals and reveals identity, enabling one to show different sides and appear in different guises (Entwistle 2000).

Clothes speak to identity in that they present the wearer to her surroundings, marking her as belonging to society, as well as enabling her to distinguish herself (Craik 2009; Crane 2000; Entwistle 2000). To devote time to going through garments is a way of getting organised before meeting the world outside; a way of deciding which sides of oneself to show; a way of taking control. Woodward (2007) points out that organising clothing is also identity work. Showing one's wardrobe to an outsider in the shape of an ethnographer is perhaps best understood in the light of a process of reflexive identity work. It presents an opportunity to have little monologues about garments, to ask for opinions, mull over purchases, or wonder aloud what to do with a particular suit or dress; a chance to reflect on oneself.

## **Discarding and keeping**

Several testified to the fact that weeding out and tidying their wardrobe is an ongoing process. 'There is a need to constantly go through it', says Elisabeth. Some said that they wanted help in the process, like Karolina who had a friend who came round once a year to help her sort and tidy her wardrobe, or Britta, who as a birthday gift had wished for her daughter's help in going through her clothes.

Marianne, in the opening quote, confides that her wardrobes are overflowing. She sometimes tries to sort them out, but in the process of this convinces herself that the clothes can still be put to good use and ends up keeping them. 'I find it difficult to discard things', she adds with a laugh. 'As long as there's storage space you might as well keep them', she says, but nevertheless adds that she has far too many items. She stresses the importance of combining outfits, mixing and matching, and that some pieces of clothing are not so easily worn with

others and therefore are left in the wardrobe, rarely worn. She touches on an important aspect of dress: it consists of several pieces of clothing that are combined and therefore have to function as a whole, forming an outfit.

'I don't like to discard clothes', said Gerd, thus indicating that she saw them as assets. 'I don't want to get rid of anything', said Karolina, 'I just want to save everything.' Several informants described themselves as somewhat reluctant collectors. They dwelt on how they need to take stock of the resources their garments represent, but also how they do not want to let go of their outfits—a reluctance verging on resistance. They talked openly of failing to get rid of superfluous items. Some said 'I can't be bothered to do the work'; others that they 'didn't have the energy to' do it. Here a degree of self-criticism can be detected, since the choice of words indicates being too lazy to do the task. But their remarks also testify to the effort and energy required.

Another set phrase was to call oneself a collector or a 'squirrel'; an epithet used by several informants. Just as the squirrel collects for coming days, the women hung on to garments, keeping them in store for when they later might come in handy. The animal metaphor - connoting a rather cute animal, gathering nuts for harsher times - played down associations with hoarders. It was a joking way of distancing oneself from keeping things that were no longer really used. Referring to nature also established collecting and hanging on to objects as natural. By the metaphor the women managed both to distance themselves from keeping garments no longer used, and convey that it was a natural thing to do. Squirreling meant being practical and thinking ahead, planning for a future.

But it was not foremost practical considerations that made the women keep garments. By such self-distancing analogies, the women conveyed how they could not resist keeping clothes, yet also felt the need to clear them away. Expressions such as 'I don't have the heart to' or 'I can't bring myself to' can be interpreted as marking the way in which informants have to cross a threshold in order to sort through their clothes. Some of the women were not ready to do this. Their choice of words bears witness to this being emotional work, and not solely a practical matter. 'I am not quite ready to be separated from this', says Lena, whilst showing me a shirt she no longer 'really uses'. Gretha compares going through one's clothes to going through one's bookshelves, a comparison that emphasises the emotional bond that certain objects acquire.

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'I want to keep these till I die—and then they can do whatever they want with them', says Karolina, with conviction. Yet she also says that her wardrobe collection is too big. She is ambivalent, vacillating between the need to free up wardrobe space, accept her current body shape, and have clothes to wear, and being reluctant to let any of her clothes go. She shows box after box, filled to the brim with clothes she has kept, commenting 'this is nostalgia'. The word nostalgia, together with the phrase 'kept for sentimental reasons', recurs in other interviews. 'I am very nostalgic, don't you think', says Kerstin whilst she shows garments, explaining why she wants to keep them even though she no longer wears them. Sofia even has her storage boxes marked with the word 'Nostalgia'. The word shows how much the clothes have been treasured, and the extent to which they are charged with memories, recollections of situations, and relationships.

Nostalgia is a difficult concept to grasp, states Lundgren, in her work on how older people talked about 'the good old days' (2010). Nostalgia implies a longing for an idealised past and an awareness of the impossibility to go back (2010:250). Ethnologist Birgitta Meurling defines nostalgia as both melancholy and pleasurable. Nostalgically reminiscing says nothing of how things really were; recollections are selected both consciously and unconsciously. They are formed from experiences but also a product of norms, ideals and power relations. Nostalgia is an active approach and attitude to the past, as well as a way of processing the present (2014:59). It is a cultural practice through which to evaluate the present by contrasting it with the past (Koskinen-Koivisto & Marander-Eklund 2014: 135). Being nostalgic also means risking living up to a stereotype of old people, as conservative, resisting change, dwelling more on the past. To talk of oneself as sentimental, or like Sofia to mark boxes with the word nostalgia, is a way of establishing distance and conveying that one has insight into why, albeit sometimes reluctantly, one has collected garments. The women demonstrated a clear awareness that not only rational decisions had been taken; emotions guided their collecting too.

Many times the women conveyed a feeling that not only did they own the clothes, the clothes also owned them. There was a mutual bond between the material and the women: the artefacts had a dimension of agency about them (Alftberg 2012; Woodward 2007). Similarly, garments can be understood as trophies the women have acquired, and thus as representing relative wealth. They also symbolise possibilities. To get rid of them is to deny the resources they represent. Shopping mistakes that were kept can be understood in this light: admit-

ting to having wasted money hurt, so instead several hung on to these garments, even though they never ‘felt right’ nor were they used, denying the failed purchase.

Some informants said that their wardrobe collections weighed on them. They said they really should sort through them and throw things out, and they spoke of feeling guilty about their inability to do so. Here one’s age and stage of life became important dimensions. Some talked of an ongoing process, of undertaking a review of their possessions, having commenced when they were in middle age, but felt more keenly as they grew older. If they did not sort through their belongings, their next of kin would have to do it. Thus some had already destroyed items they thought were of a more private nature, such as diaries or letters. For others it was more a question of not passing on too heavy a burden to their children. An awareness that life is finite was present in the interviews.

It can be an effect of ageing, feeling one has to be more consistent in sorting it out, otherwise my daughters will end up with the whole workload. Feeling perhaps—there is no later. This helps me in sorting. To be stricter about discarding. (Lena)

Two of the oldest informants, living in care homes, spoke of how others had sorted through their belongings, making decisions about what to keep, what to let others take, and what had to be got rid of—the latter by giving clothing away to charity. The narratives of moving house were touching. The women expressed gratitude that they had had help with this, they themselves at the time having been in emergency care and not best able to do it. Yet while coming across as pragmatic, emphasising the fact that they were making the best of the situation, a certain unhappiness at having lost control was very much in evidence. Karin talks of how she misses a matching jacket that was given to a charity, and Alice is upset that a lifetime’s acquisitions, which she had taken such good care of, were now deemed to be of little value.

You save all your life, and are careful with your belongings. You go without to be able to get what you want to own. And then you have to give everything away. And as if that weren’t enough, we nearly couldn’t get rid of everything.

The feelings and care she had invested in her possessions were not valued by those around her, and yet it was to them she had to deliver what she had gathered through life. Others only saw their limited material worth, but to Alice the

things had a value far beyond the functional. The informants wanted others to see and appreciate what they had valued. Correspondingly, several expressed happiness when children or grandchildren wanted to take over kitchen utensils or other objects, and that these were still in use. This was evidence that others also saw the value in what they had acquired in the course of their life. Marcoux (2001) uses the term 'casser maison' for the process of divesting possessions when moving to a care home. He emphasises the emotional and existential aspects of this; how the giving of things is a giving of oneself, a way of constructing oneself in the family's memory, through transmission of things. 'The divestment of the self becomes a form of investment' (2001: 213). Being asked for an object is like being desired – and the opposite can then be understood as being rejected, and feeling grief and sorrow. 'A loss of self may result if people are forced to give special things away or if they are 'taken away' as Chapman phrases it (2006: 208). Marcoux's (2001) study focuses on older persons who themselves are in some control of what to keep and what to give away, and who strive to influence who will take the artefacts on, whereas for two of my oldest informants, it was somebody else who had cleared their home out, including the wardrobe contents.

Living in a care home, of course, one does not only sort out and minimise one's possessions; one also has an influx of new things and new garments. One interviewee explains that they sorted through her wardrobes before she went into the home. Since then, she has acquired new garments and says she should really sort through them again to make room and to get a better overview. Catharina Nord's study (2013) departs from objects kept after moving to a care home, exploring memorabilia, representations of self as well as objects currently most valued in order to understand how these support in the negotiation of new roles. Her informants expressed a reluctance to acquire new things, both because they had little space for more things but also because they did not feel a need for more things. My oldest informants, living in a care home, in contrast emphasised the importance of allowing oneself to buy new clothes. These represented both pleasure and effort in aesthetics, but also positioned oneself as alive, having to consider what impression one made on others.

Several talked of the difficulties of sorting through items because of the emotional and practical bonds to the items. The objects had economic value, emotional value, and utilitarian value.

***Materialised memories***

One reason given for keeping clothes one could no longer wear was what they represented. The garments symbolised different aspects of life. They were a kind of materialisation, representing a loved one, a relationship. This was even more pronounced if the garment was handmade, for then it also represented great effort and time invested in the garment. Likewise, if the garment had been a gift, it was also invested with attributes embodying the giver. The ties that the object represented are perhaps best described as imperatives. Getting rid of garments with all that they represented would be like failing to acknowledge the bond with the giver.

Materialised objects, the clothes in the wardrobe thus symbolised occasions and relationships. 'Oh, I've danced a lot in this I can tell you', Karolina says as she shows me a blouse she can no longer fit into. She holds another garment in front of herself and looks in the mirror, saying: 'I had plenty of good times in this one as well.' Katja turns to me and says: 'Don't laugh now, but this is really...' and she looks critically at the hanger she is holding up to show me. 'But, oh I looked great in it.' Then with a laugh she adds, 'Twenty years ago.' Occasions when the garment had been worn were also integrated into the garment as very particular qualities. The women could describe at length at what festivity, what party, on what occasion a particular dress had been worn, who had been present, and many times where and at what cost the garment had been bought. Articles of clothing embody former aspects of the self, as Woodward (2007) phrases it.

The garments are in several ways more charged with memories of relations and occasions than photographs are, since they also have a tactile dimension. Clothing awakens the feeling of it against the body, how it constrained or enabled movement. Colour, pattern, fabric: all denote memory. The clothes were tactile prompts in a process of remembering. The fabric could have been a gift from a brother-in-law; the garment, sewn by a mother-in-law; the dress, worn at an anniversary celebration. Clothes are a reminder of a life lived. They also aid recollection and preserve the body one lived in at the time.

Certain belongings are especially charged with meaning and value. Above all, there is the emotional bond the women touch on when talking about how they want to keep garments or are reluctant to get rid of them. Their clothes are like emotional anchors, testifying to relationships, occasions, situations, and roles (Woodward 2007). They are extensions of the self, and its assets and re-

sources. Clothes materialise connections to different aspects of the self, of who you are. To get rid of clothes is then an action that emotionally can be understood as symbolically affecting that relationship. As Banim and Guy (2001) put it (see also Guy & Banim 2000; Woodward 2007), letting go of clothes represents letting go of sides of oneself. Ambivalently, it can also be understood as a way of freeing oneself from material bonds. In different articles in the press, for example in fashion magazines, wardrobe organisation is represented as an important task if one is to come across as a competent consumer. Advice is given on how to clear one's wardrobe (Lövgren 2013b).

### ***Utility and thrift***

The fact that the women prefer to know what happens to their clothes, and that they will be put to good use, testifies to the values they are perceived to have. These values are both economic and emotional. Utility is also important: clothes should not be thrown away, they should be worn out. This element of thrift became apparent in their strong sense that things should not be wasted. The ethos was that of reuse. Things, and thus clothes, were perceived to have lasting value. In today's consumer society there are prevailing cultural notions of consumption as a confirmation and acknowledgment of worth; 'Because you're worth it', as the commercial succinctly puts it. How then can the women's position of making do and wearing clothing out be understood? Are they content with what is left over? Using a daughter's handed-down trousers can be understood in terms of getting by with what is to hand, but also of having different needs when one has retired, spends one's time at home—backstage—and no longer feels pressured into presenting an official, presentable self. The public self becomes less important, and what to wear diminishes in significance, whereas the relevance of other values increases. Woodward (2007) underlines that taking on clothes means weaving together multiple histories and biographies. Using a daughter's hand-me-downs can then be seen as establishing a bond and reinforcing a connection. Marcoux's work on 'casser maison' (2001), that is the divestment of possessions as an investment in relations; a form of reproducing oneself by giving, can also be of use here. Using hand-me-downs is a way of extending the self.

The oldest informants grew up in an era of scarcity, with few opportunities to buy new things. When they were children they watched their mother turn their father's shirt-collars to make them last when they started to fray at the

corners. They were given clothes that were made up from material that had previously been used in adult clothing. Growing up, they had to take care of their clothes, make them last, and use any fabric that could still be used. It seems that some of the informants' ethos was shaped by these circumstances and by a different attitude towards material goods. Today, clothes are comparatively less expensive and people in Sweden can generally afford to buy new and to get rid of clothes even though they could still be fit for use. The informants express contentment, feeling that they have much to be grateful for. They testify to having far more clothes today in their old age, than they ever did previously in life. Today most have well-stocked wardrobes—an abundance in comparison to their earlier lives. A few of the informants, a minority, had thinned-out wardrobes with very few items of clothing. They showed pride in their skills in economising and in being thrifty.

People born in the 1940s, the so-called baby boomers, are often seen as the first generation to have grown up in a modern consumer society, and are claimed to have a different attitude towards being provident than did generations born earlier in the century. Some of the women who stressed the importance of wearing out clothes were in their eighties. Two of them also had wardrobes that were limited in comparison with most. It appeared they took a certain pride in not being extravagant big spenders, but rather economical. But then there were other informants in their eighties who happily bought new clothes, even though their wardrobes were already filled to the brim. There were thrifty keepers of garments in their seventies, some with crammed wardrobes. Another possible explanation could be economic assets and resources. This still does not fully account for the differences in attitudes to wearing out and making do, or to treating oneself to new items. There was thus a difference in ethics and values amongst the informants that cannot only be accounted for in generational terms.

Several informants said that it is important to them that clothes are put to use: if someone could take them on or if they were given to charity, the value was not lost. Clothes were rarely thrown away, and then only if they were in tatters and no longer could have any value. Instead, the informants emphasised how they had been careful to mend and take care of things. This shows a respect for the intrinsic value of things, of the importance to use and reuse and can be understood as the opposite of consumerism.

The women struggled with issues of value and utility. Hanging onto a mistaken purchase even if one would never wear it can be understood as a way of insisting on its value—one has not wasted resources (Banim & Guy 2001). By keeping clothes, it means they can still be used. Kept clothes represent an asset, a resource. As Kerstin formulated it, with a Swedish proverb: ‘He who saves, has’, or, roughly, many a mickle makes a muckle.

The shoes collections I was shown were a resource that could not be transformed into mere utility, since footwear can rarely be passed on to others. Shoes have more of a personalised fit, shaped as they are by the wearer. They can perhaps also be understood as being more intimate than such garments as trousers, skirts, or shirts, but as they are also less intimate than underwear they could still be kept and put on display. This collection can be explained in terms of aesthetics. The shoes were talked of and held up as art objects, more than as functional artefacts to be used. They represented beauty and craftsmanship.

The garments represented value for the women. This value could not always be naturally transformed and transferred. They could not take for granted that others valued their clothes in the same way as they did. Perhaps ultimately no one will want to put their garments to good use. To admit that one’s clothes are of no use is to admit to a faulty synchronisation with one’s surroundings. The value one sees in them is not confirmed by others.

That said, the women had sometimes become reluctant guardians, safekeepers of the possible use of the garments. It could be a relief to let go of their role as trustees. Wardrobe work can be summarised as a creative exploration of different aspects of the self and of its possibilities. The wardrobe and its collection evolve, existing in a state of constant change and development.

## **Wardrobe collections of older women**

The purpose of the research is to use wardrobe interviews to invite narratives about how ageing is given meaning. Using dress as point of entrance puts the study in the field of cultural studies. By using narratives and an emic perspective on ageing, this study complements research on health, on ‘good old age’ as well as studies on consumption and a possible re-evaluation of the ageing landscape in commercially driven terms. This study also fills a gap in research on dress. It takes an interest in a category that has often been neglected when it comes to this: older women. The key questions guiding the analyses of the women’s nar-

ratives for this article have been: how did they describe their wardrobe collections; how did they talk of sorting through their garments and organising them; and how did they explain clothes kept but no longer used. The aim has been to let the women's voices be heard and to give their perspective.

Wardrobe interviews are a gratifying method, enabling talk on age, cultural meaning making around this, and on changes to the body, to personal status, and to everyday life. Narratives on transitions as well as continuities emerge naturally. Interviewing older women means sharing long lives and rich experiences. Several informants had well-stocked wardrobes, with many garments to talk about. They played down the scale of their collections by using words like 'old' or 'ancient' about items of clothing, stating they had had the garments 'for ever'.

Everyday existence as a pensioner meant for many living life backstage to a larger extent than before. Therefore they could wear out garments, no longer thought to be fit for more public use, where dressing up was thought to be required. For others the transition to living in a care home meant changes in relation to the privacy of their own home, and once again being more public, on stage, when for instance lunching with the other residents. The change in living arrangements thus impacted in a different relation to getting dressed.

The women took over garments from daughters, friends and other relatives, including men. This can be understood as gender in dress being less important to communicate as an older person. Many took over garments from others younger than themselves, which can be interpreted as norms of dress not being differentiated in terms of age, instead being uni-age. In particular, ordinary garments for everyday use, shirts and jeans, often leisure wear, were not age graded. On the other hand other garments in the women's collections were referred to as necessitated by age related changes, both of body, role and by norms on age appropriate dress. Most talked of changes in style as a gradual process, a slow adaption to changes, emphasising continuities as well as transitions. The use of a daughter's hand-me-downs mainly testified to changes in everyday life, where life more at home meant being able to wear out garments not thought appropriate in public. It also shows how garments represent a bond to others. Wearing them communicated belonging, just as garments kept for what the informants called sentimental or nostalgic reasons represented bonds to the past.

Several informants showed a pragmatic side, emphasising utility as an important value in their garments. It was important that things, in this case gar-

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ments, were put to use and not wasted. Thrift was held forth as an important cultural value.

It was evident that garments are like material photo albums, loaded with memories. References to utility and thrift intersected with emotional ones. The informants used self-distancing descriptions of themselves, jokingly referring to themselves as ‘squirrels’ or nostalgic, unable, or at least reluctant, to sort through their belongings and discard items.

Awareness that life is finite was another dimension raised in the interviews. Preparing for this by taking stock of one’s possessions, including clothes, was one strategy. Death came across as a silent presence in the narratives. What would happen to one’s belongings? Who would have to sort through them? For some a process had begun when moving to a care home, they themselves often unable to do the sorting and discarding as they were ill; thus having to let go of control and autonomy.

The importance of living life to the full while one could was another strategy and to that end several talked of allowing oneself the pleasure of new garments. Having something new to look forward to wearing meant planning for tomorrow, for a future. This was another way of communicating meaning on ageing.

### ***Acknowledgements***

I wish to thank all my informants for their generosity in showing me their wardrobes and sharing life stories with me. I also wish to thank Riksbankens jubileumsfond, who funded the research project.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The theme of consumption is further explored in a forthcoming article.

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