

**‘NOTHING BUT A NUMBER’: THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG SOUTH AFRICAN MEN  
IN AGE-DISPARATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OLDER WOMEN**

by

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## DECLARATION

I declare that **‘Nothing but a number’: the experiences of young South African men in age-disparate relationships with older women** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

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SIGNATURE

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DATE

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It took me longer than I thought, but it's done. In anything you do, you will encounter obstacles; but you have to constantly remind yourself why you started the journey in the first place. In the midst of it all, I encountered challenges that made me doubt my abilities, test my resolve and question whether any of it is worth it. Now that I am done, it was definitely worth it.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The phenomenon of age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women is relatively under-researched and therefore open to misunderstanding. The common assumption is that the younger men enter these relationships with a view to benefiting in terms of money or material goods. This qualitative study explored the experiences of five young men from around Pretoria who are in relationships with older women to understand their motivations for entering into those relationships and their experiences in the relationships. The in-depth interviews were thematically analysed and themes that emerged indicated that, unlike what has previously been found among young women who are in relationships with older men (namely that the young women are often coerced and therefore do not have much power in their relationships), the young men entered the relationships willingly and rely on cultural norms that allow them to navigate and negotiate their roles in the relationships. It is therefore recommended that age-disparate relationships not be discouraged; instead, interventions should focus on assisting young people develop agentic power in such relationships.

### **KEY TERMS:**

Age-disparate relationships; younger men; older women; experiences; transactional sex; motivations; risks; agency

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines age-disparate relationships as “sexual relationships between young women and substantially older men” (Harling et al., 2014, p. 2). Leclerc-Madlala (2008a) as well as Beauclair and Delva (2013) define age-disparate relationships specifically as relationships with an age difference of 5 years or more between partners. Although some literature uses the term interchangeably with intergenerational relationships, the difference according to Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a (as cited in UNAIDS, 2011), and Parker and Hajiyannis (2008) is that intergenerational relationships refer to relationships in which there is a 10-year or greater age disparity between sexual partners. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘age-disparate relationships’ will be used, defined as a sexual or romantic relationship involving an age difference of 5 years or more irrespective of the partners’ gender. This will therefore be the minimum age-gap that this study focuses on.

The 1990s saw a spike in interest around the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships which was sparked primarily by the association between age-disparate relationships and the risk of HIV infection for young women. This association was supported by findings from a number of studies that extensively explored relationships where the woman is significantly younger than the man (Brouard & Crewe, 2012; Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Ott, Bärninghausen, Tanser, Kurie, & Newell, 2011; Shisana et al., 2009; Zembe, Townsend, Thorson, & Ekstrom, 2013)

Although currently considered acceptable, older man-younger woman relationships initially had elements of negativity attached to them due to their perceived transactional nature (Van Der Heijden & Swartz, 2014) or coercion (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Harrison, 2008; Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; Shefer, Clowes, & Vergnani, 2012). Younger women were perceived to be attracted to significantly older men because of benefits such as money (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004), clothes and jewellery (Masvawure, 2010). Despite this initial and slightly lingering negativity, age-disparate relationships between younger women and older men have become an acceptable

element in the relationship arena. These relationships between older man and younger woman are accepted even though they are marred by a number of controversies such as power disparities. I discuss this further in Chapter 2.

By contrast, there is still limited research on the phenomenon where the man is significantly younger than the woman. In an attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge on this phenomenon, the focus of this study is therefore on age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women; a phenomenon that is gradually gaining popularity in South Africa and internationally (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Maundeni, 2004). This phenomenon is now also observed in African countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Botswana, Swaziland and others (Amo-Adjei, 2012; Evans, Delva & Pretorius, 2009; Langen, 2005a).

The increased popularity and sometimes peculiarity of relationships where women are older than men is further noted in the number of television shows that are focused on these relationships; for example, *Age-gap love* and *Extreme cougar wives* on TLC channel, *Cougar Town* on MNet channel, etcetera. Books such as Valerie Gibson's *Younger men: How to find them, mate them and marry them* (1994) and *Cougar: a guide for older women dating younger men* (2002) also contributed to this increased interest in the 'cougar-phenomenon' (Lawton & Callister, 2010).

Despite mainstream media's increased focus on these relationships, one of the major obstacles to understanding the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships where the man is significantly younger than the woman is the familial and social attitudes towards the relationships which are defined by varying levels of stigma and reservation. Part of the social stigma towards these relationships is the perception that age-disparate relationships where the man is younger than the woman represent mother and son relationships (Warren, 1996) which consequently lend an air of perversion to them.

The terminology that is used in South African townships when referring to the participants in younger man/older woman relationships is also indicative of the negative attitudes that society generally holds towards these relationships. Some of the terminology used to refer to older women

in these relationships are: cougars, because the older women are considered predators who go on the hunt and prey on younger men (Keogh, 2013); sugar mommies, because they provide material goods (Brouard & Crewe, 2012); cradle snatchers (grabbing babies from their cribs), *mphe motho* (a Sotho expression which, literally translated, means ‘give me a person’), *s’gogwana* (a Zulu slang word referring to an old woman), *ma-oprah* (referring to older, successful women such as Oprah Winfrey) or *ma-senior* (also referring to mature older women) and sultry mama or spicy mama (older women who are sexually appealing).

On the other hand the terminology used to describe the younger men involved with older women includes toy-boys, as they are perceived to be the older women’s play things; sugar babies, because they make life ‘sweeter’ for the older women through their sexual exploits; gold diggers, as they are considered to only be interested in the financial benefits that are associated with being in a relationship with an older partner; and *mabojwana* – a street language phrase meaning a young person within legal age. Another popular term is Ben 10; which is taken from the ten-year-old cartoon character, Benjamin Tennyson. This term is used to suggest that the younger men, like Ben 10, are superheroes with a lot of energy (“Are you a Ben10? 9 local slang terms explained!” 2016). Younger men in age-disparate relationships are also referred to as ‘kept’ men because they are financially dependent on the older women who are considered providers due to their financial standing (Mojola, 2014).

In order to understand the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women, it needs to be explored from the perspectives of the participants, which includes the younger men, in order to debunk some of the myths and misconceptions that society holds about these relationships. This is particularly critical, considering that it is these perceptions that contribute to the misunderstanding of the relationships and subsequent misalignment of interventions.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

As already alluded to above, despite the increasing popularity and prevalence of age-disparate relationships, there is still a paucity of academic research on the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships between a younger man and an older woman. As a result, these relationships are surrounded by myths and misconceptions emanating from social perceptions. These social perceptions are centred on assumed motivations and risks for younger partners entering into these relationships. The emergent generalised view is that the younger men who enter age-disparate relationships with older women do so under conditions of coercion and manipulation that is fuelled by unfavourable socio-economic situations (Dunkle et al., 2007; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Oyediran, Odutolu, & Atobatele, 2011; Parker & Hajjiannis, 2008).

Taking the above into consideration, a significant number of research articles highlight the link between the perceived motivations and risk of HIV infection as well as intimate-partner violence (Parker & Hajjiannis, 2008). These two factors are considered primary risks due to the unequal power dynamics and the inability of the younger, less financially able partner to negotiate safer sex (Dunkle et al., 2007; Langen, 2005).

Although elements of coercion may be applicable to some partnerships where the age difference is significant, clustering all age-disparate relationships into the same basket limits our view of the younger partners as active agents in the decision to enter into and discuss the terms of engagement in these relationships. The popular view of younger partners' helplessness positions the younger partners in age-disparate relationships as victims who are incapable of making their own informed decisions. Unpacked, and unexplored, this narrow view creates a challenge in identifying and developing suitable interventions that will be more relevant and applicable to their situation.

## **1.3 Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore younger men's perceptions of and lived experiences of entering into and being in age-disparate relationships with older women.

## **1.4 Research questions**

The main question to be asked in this study is: What are the perceptions and experiences of younger men who are in age disparate relationships with older women?

The related sub-questions are:

- a. How do young men perceive and experience the benefits, risks and challenges of being in age-disparate relationships?
- b. What are the different contexts within which these relationships come into being, develop and (possibly) come to an end?
- c. How do young men experience reactions to their relationship from acquaintances, friends and family and how do they deal with these?
- d. Taking the above into consideration, what are the implications for interventions?

## **1.5 Rationale and significance**

As a researcher, my interest in studying this phenomenon and wanting to understand it from the perspective of the younger men participating therein, is that I am concerned by the general perception that the younger men are coerced into the relationships by the older women. By adopting this narrow view, society assumes that the younger men are powerless and therefore unable to decide or negotiate the terms of their engagement with older women. My concern is that this narrow view, coupled with limitations in the availability of studies focusing on age-disparate relationships where the younger partner is male, creates a gap in understanding which will hamper the development and implementation of relevant sexual health programmes for younger men in these partnerships.

However, although I believed from the outset that age disparate relationships do not conform to negative social stereotypes, I did my best to approach the study with an open mind and to look for evidence of both positive and negative elements in such relationships. In pursuing this study, it is anticipated that society, other researchers, as well as programme developers, will start shifting the focus to be less on perceptions of the younger partners as victims who need to be saved and more

on empowering the participants who enter these relationships with the skills needed to negotiate their way around the relationships.

## **1.6 Research context: Pretoria**

The participants of this study were recruited from three areas in Pretoria: Pretoria, Sunnyside and Atteridgeville. Pretoria is the central part of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality which was formed by the amalgamation of several former local authorities including Centurion and Soshanguve.

The City of Tshwane is the single largest metropolitan municipality in the country and the third largest city in the world in terms of land mass, after New York and Yokohama, Japan. According to the 2011 census, the most commonly spoken language is Northern Sotho, followed by Setswana and Sesotho (City of Tshwane, 2016). However, the main unofficial language spoken in Pretoria is known as *Sepitori* by its speakers. *Sepitori* is a combination of Setswana and Northern Sotho (Pedi), with influences from *tsotsitaal* and other black South African languages.

Pretoria's city centre is best known for its many government buildings as well as large banks, shopping malls and other businesses. There are also a number of large apartment buildings, although most people (especially younger people) who work at the various National Departments that have Head Offices in the city centre prefer to stay in the nearby suburb of Sunnyside (City of Tshwane, 2016).

Sometimes referred to as Las Vegas due to its strip of night clubs, gambling spots and party facilities, Sunnyside is a well-established suburb lying just east of the city centre. Sunnyside has become renowned for many things, including crime, foreigner influx and the many sprawling businesses on the main street. Unlike life in the townships, Sunnyside life centers mainly on money and income generation; the youth in this area, who are mainly students and young working people, are therefore better positioned economically as opposed to their township counterparts.

Atteridgeville is a township located to the Southwest of Pretoria and was developed for Black people who moved from areas such as Marabastad and Lady Selbourne. Demographically, Atteridgeville is a diverse township, the residents of which speak many languages. Although not the biggest of the townships, Atteridgeville has the appearance of affluence, especially amongst the older generation. The main challenge for Atteridgeville, just as with other townships in Pretoria, is the high unemployment rate among its young people.

The abovementioned areas were selected for their convenience and easy access for me with regard to initial and possible follow-up meetings with participants.

### **1.7 Structure of the dissertation**

Following this chapter, I review and discuss the existing literature on the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships in Chapter 2 where I will unpack the motivations, risks and nature of age-disparate relationships as well as discuss the theoretical grounding of the study. In Chapter 3. I discuss the methodology that was followed in identifying participants, as well as collecting and analysing data. Chapter 4, presents an analysis and discussion of the collected data while Chapter 5 provides the conclusions emanating from the analysis of the findings and makes recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on critically reviewing the available literature in order to understand the extent of the work that other researchers have done in trying to understand the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships. Journal articles, dissertations and books on the subject of age-disparate relationships were reviewed with the objectives of the study in mind; that is, to understand the experiences of younger men who are in age-disparate relationships with older women. During the review, it became apparent that there is an abundance of literature related to age-disparate relationships between younger women and older men as opposed to the literature where the phenomenon of age-disparity between younger men and older women is observed.

The review focused on literature that discusses the motivations or benefits of being in age-disparate relationships as well as the risks or costs for the younger partners. In some cases, interventions that are currently being implemented based on the perceptions around the motivations and risks of age-disparate relationships are also discussed. What the literature lacked were accounts of young people's personal experiences of being in age-disparate relationships.

The literature review will start by unpacking the nature and prevalence of age-disparate relationships and progress to the current discourses on the phenomenon. Although the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships is observed around the world, this review will focus primarily on the literature available in Africa and particularly the southern parts of Africa so as to contextualize it as much as possible to the study setting.

In order to fully understand the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women, what leads to their formation, maintenance or dissolution, I also discuss the theoretical framework through which the phenomenon is understood. The discussion will first start with a broad look at existing theories that have been used to explain the reasons that individuals

use to enter into romantic relationships and proceed to the Social Exchange Theory which is more suited to the understanding of age-disparate relationships.

## **2.2 The nature and prevalence of age-disparate relationships**

Traditionally, heterosexual relationships were characterised by the process of courting or dating, which involved a man pursuing a woman with a view to having a romantic or intimate relationship with her. This dating process involved a man identifying a woman whom he found attractive and pursuing her, using methods such as ‘gifting’ in order to gain favour, sexual or otherwise (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004) or with a view to marriage. According to evolutionary theory, partner selection for men is primarily informed by the degree of attractiveness and youth of the female because youth is considered an indication of fertility (Nelson, 1993). On the other hand, women would choose a partner who would be able to take care of them and their offspring financially and improve their social standing (Kuate-Defo, 2004; Longfield, Glick, Withaka, & Berman, 2002). In the event that both partners are compatible and meet each other’s expectations, the relationship swiftly progresses to a more long-term arrangement and in some cases, marriage.

It could be argued that evolutionary theory only really fits traditional heterosexual relationships. In these traditional relationships, participants were either of the same age or the male was older than the female partner. While marrying an age-mate was the common practice, it was not uncommon for men to marry women who were significantly younger than themselves (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2010). According to Langen (2005), the practice of finding a younger bride had its roots in cultural and traditional practices both nationally and internationally. In the words of Lehmiller and Agnew (2010): “In Western societies, and most other societies around the world, heterosexual men tend to be older than their female partners, and it is not uncommon for them to be significantly older.” (p. 2)

The changing economic and political landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started re-aligning family roles and changed the image of the man as the good provider (Bernard, 1981; Keogh, 2013; Silberschmidt, 2001). These re-aligned roles brought about a steady departure from the more traditional homogamy (men marrying women of similar age group) and hypergamy (where a

young woman seeks a man who is older) to hypogamy (relationships in which women ‘marry down’) (Mu & Xie, 2014). Some studies also suggest that due to their new demands, older women became sexually unresponsive to their husbands, thereby ‘forcing’ the men to look elsewhere and to engage in multiple sexual relationships in order to regain their sense of worth and value and to satisfy their high sexual drives (Nelson, 1993; Silberschmidt, 2001). The chosen partners or mistresses for these men became young women because these young women dote on them and make them feel important or valuable due to what they receive from the men (Longfield et al., 2002). By dating down, the men in turn created a gap for the older women in terms of romantic liaisons with their peers (Jacobs & Thomlison, 2009).

These relationships that are characterized by hypergamy and hypogamy, are now collectively referred to as age-disparate relationships and have been observed not only in South Africa, but also around the world, including other African countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Botswana and possibly more (Amo-Adjei, 2012; Langen, 2005; Oyediran et al., 2011; Wyrod et al., 2011). In these countries, age-disparate relationships where younger women are in relationships with older men, are more common than relationships where younger men are involved with older women (Kuate-Defo, 2004; Moore, Biddlecom, & Zulu et al., 2007).

Despite the more common woman-younger relationships, there seems to be a steady increase of men-younger age-disparate relationships. Maundeni (2004), for example, highlighted the increase in popularity of this phenomenon in Botswana. According to Zembe et al., (2013) the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women could suggest a shift in how the mating game is constructed. As alluded to above, the changing economic and political landscape has positioned women in more ‘non-traditional’ roles where they started receiving formal education and, subsequently, being gainfully employed (Silberschmidt, 2001a). This economic power could be contributing to the women being able to initiate sexual and romantic relationships with men, particularly younger men, perhaps partly due to the unavailability of men their age who are in relationships with younger women (Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014).

Due to the ‘newness’ of this phenomenon, the existing body of knowledge on the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women is relatively scant as scholarly

articles are mostly related to age disparity where the older partner is male and the younger partner is female (e.g. Amo-Adjei, 2012; Cowan, 1984; Higgins et al., 2010; Langen, 2005; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Parker & Hajiyiannis, 2008). Some of the reasons cited for this could be that, although gradually gaining popularity, younger man/older woman relationships still have a certain degree of novelty and stigma attached to them (Keogh, 2013).

In conducting a literature search for academic or scholarly articles related to the topic of age-disparate relationships where younger men are involved with older women, it was noted that the number of scholarly versus non-scholarly articles on the topic is tilted heavily toward the non-scholarly articles. Keogh (2013) also highlighted that articles on “sugar mummy” relationships are mostly anecdotal and a big part of popular literature. Although the older woman and younger man relationship is mentioned in some academic literature (e.g. Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Zembe et al., 2013), this topic seems to not be fully explored and is often-times discussed as an afterthought; for example, despite what the title of the article suggests, in ‘*Sweetening the deal? Sugar daddies, sugar mummies, sugar babies and HIV in contemporary South Africa*’ Brouard and Crewe (2012, p. 52) only mention sugar mummy(ies) four times compared to seventeen mentions of sugar daddy(ies).

The following literature review will focus on both the man-younger as well as woman-younger age-disparate relationships and their dynamics in order to supplement for the scarcity of literature on men-younger relationships. It is possible that some of the issues faced by women who are younger partners in age-disparate relationships are also applicable to relationships where the man is the younger partner.

### **2.3 Defining features**

In trying to understand these relationships, it is important to note their defining features as well as the characteristics of the participants. Unpacking the profiles of the participants was also important to further assist in understanding this phenomenon. In terms of age, the available literature suggests that the female partners in older man-younger woman age-disparate relationships are usually in high school (15 – 19 years old) (Chatterji, Murray, London, & Anglewicz, 2005; Shefer, Clowes,

& Vergnani, 2012; Shisana et al., 2014) or in tertiary institutions (20 – 24 years old) (Masvawure, 2010) with the average age of the older male partner being between 40 – 55 years (Cockcroft et al., 2010; Jones, 2014). In age-disparate relationships where the woman is older than the male partner, the subject of the average age for the older woman and the younger men has not been explored and is therefore unclear. The significantly large age gap between partners in age-disparate relationships sometimes raises the question of whether these relationships are always consensual or sometimes coerced (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Harrison, 2008; Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; Shefer et al., 2012).

In addition to being in concurrent relationships with younger women, literature suggests that older men in age-disparate relationships are either married or in a stable relationship (Chatterji et al., 2005; Muhomah, 2004; Shefer et al., 2012). In older woman-younger man relationships however, the older women, other than being married, are sometimes widowed or divorced (Jacobs & Thomlison, 2009; Lopman et al., 2009).

According to Longfield et al. (2002) and Wojcicki (2002), the duration of age-disparate relationships can range from one night or one month to a lifetime. The general agreement, however, is that the relationships are not usually long-lasting. This could be due to the perception that the relationships are based mainly on the exchange of one thing for the other; in most cases, the exchange of sexual favours for material goods (Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014) and should that material provision end, the younger partner will move on to find a more able older partner (Maganja, Maman, Groves, & Mbwambo, 2007). The other reason for the short duration could be because as soon as the spouses of the older partners discover the relationships, they insist on the termination thereof (Longfield et al., 2002).

The other general characteristic of men who participate in age-disparate relationships with casual partners is that these men usually have disposable incomes (Nelson, 1993; Shefer et al., 2012). In this way, they are able to provide material goods without depriving their families of their livelihood (Nelson, 1993).

## **2.4 Current discourses on age-disparate relationships**

Different studies cite many reasons that compel young people, particularly young girls and women, to enter into romantic relationships with older partners. According to Oyediran et al. (2011) young women cite economic survival, poor housing conditions, child-headed households, and the need for funds to cover education expenses as some of the reasons why they enter into age-disparate relationships with older men. In addition to the survival reasons above, young women also cite material gain, enhanced status, improved social connections, peer pressure, the need to live a modern lifestyle, and sometimes family pressure, as reasons for entering into these relationships (Cockcroft et al., 2010).

In relationships where the older partner is a woman, younger men have indicated that they enter into relationships with older women (sometimes called ‘sugar mummies’) because these women are considered better lovers, have their own money and there is therefore no pressure on the man to provide financially; in addition, there is also less pressure to commit to a long-term arrangement such as marriage (Maundeni, 2004; Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014). As noted in the cited studies, there is a difference between the reasons advanced by younger women as compared to those advanced by younger men for partnering with older people. For the younger women, the reasons lean more towards survival or provision of basic needs, whereas the younger men’s reasons are more in line with consumerism and the need for experimentation (Heslop & Banda, 2013). These elements or reasons will be discussed further elsewhere in the dissertation.

Some studies have also explored older people’s reasons for being in age-disparate relationships; for example, older men cite sexual gratification, power and improved social status among their peers as some of the reasons they enter into relationships with younger women ( Longfield et al., 2002; Masvawure, 2010). Some of the men interviewed in Nelson’s (1993) article indicated that being a sugar daddy brings respect for the men because it provides an illustration of power and wealth. Phaswana-Mafuya et al. (2014) and Jacobs and Thomlison (2009) suggest that older women get involved with younger men for stress-reduction, lack of intimacy in their stable relationships with men their age, loneliness, and a perception of young men as not demanding.

During their Orange Farm study, Parker and Hajiyiannis (2008) learnt that the older partners also believed that ‘young blood’ is a kind of elixir (or tonic) that revitalizes and cleanses them. Furthermore, some of the older partners assume that they will be free from HIV infection if they are involved with younger people (Luke, 2003) because young people are considered clean (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a). In contrast, some of the young participants in Tabane's (2004) study, for example, viewed being in relationships with older people as ‘dirtying the blood’.

Although there is an increase in the occurrence and acceptability of age-disparate relationships where the woman is older than the man, discourse on these relationships focuses not only on the motivations, which could perhaps be considered beneficial for the partners, but also on the risks and perceptions thereof. A perception that contributes to the stigmatization of the age-disparate relationships is that the relationships are characterized by the inherent expectation of receiving material goods or gifts in exchange for sexual favours between partners, which lends these relationships to the stigma of prostitution (Hunter, 2002; A. Miller, 2012; Motyl, 2013). Miller (2012) tries to dispel this notion by indicating that what was in the past referred to as prostitution, is now referred to as a ‘mutually beneficial arrangement’.

On the other hand, there is also a perception that older men use coercion to lure younger, vulnerable partners to enter into these relationships with the promise of financial benefits (AIDSTAR-One, 2009). Recent studies have, however, found that although there are vulnerable youth who are pressured into relationships with older men, some of the young women initiate relationships with older partners and actively use their bodies to bargain in exchange for material or monetary benefits. This changes the old discourse as it portrays (at least some) young women as having sexual agency in relationships (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008b; Masvawure, 2010)

An additional stigma emerges from the double standard of ageing which expects women to look and stay younger than their male partners (Cowan, 1984; Strebel et al., 2013). Because women mature faster than men, society frowns upon relationships where the man is significantly younger than the woman, as the younger man is still developing and trying to find himself (Proulx, Carob, & Logue, 2006). This negativity goes as far as labelling the older woman as immoral and lacking in ethics (Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014) while the older man’s behaviour is not considered deviant or anti-social (Nelson, 1993).

An older woman is generally considered undesirable, not only physically, but there is also concern that taking an older woman is counter-productive because they are past their child-bearing age (Proulx et al., 2006), which contradicts social expectations of women as reproductive agents (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2010). Cowan (1984) defines this double-standard of ageing as greater acceptability and value of the ageing man versus that of the ageing woman.

In addition to the ageist biases, sexist biases exist and are entrenched in social and cultural practices which allow men to keep lovers in a concurrency set-up, provided the man is able to afford both the mistress (usually younger) and the wife. On the other hand, a woman gets ostracized should she practice the same concurrency (Nelson, 1993) and is considered promiscuous; a label that is never attached to their male counterparts (Hollway, 1984). Manji, Pena, and Dubrow (2007) attribute this to machismo; a trait that women can never possess by virtue of their sex.

Earlier studies associated age-disparate relationships with heightened risk of HIV infection (Harling et al., 2014; Oyediran et al., 2007) which also added to the stigma around them. Studies on the drivers of HIV in sub-Saharan African countries suggest that the existence of age-mixing in relationships fuels the spread of HIV therein (Kelly et al., 2003). It is noted that in studies on the ability to negotiate self-protection against HIV and AIDS, age asymmetries can create a power imbalance in patriarchal societies where the man is significantly older than the woman (Delva et al., 2011; Langen, 2005). Power and economic disparities in age-disparate relationships and lack of decision-making power for the younger partner suggest that condoms may be rarely used. Sexual exchange and condom use are often-times considered part of a continuum of disempowerment (Parker & Hajjiannis, 2008).

One of the primary reasons advanced is that these relationships are marked by power imbalances that favour the partner with economic wealth. The younger partner who does not have the same power will therefore not be in a position to negotiate safer sex (Amo-Adjei, 2012; Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004). However, in their paper on intergenerational sex in rural Zimbabwe, Wyrod et al. (2011, p. 1275) sum up the contributors and risks to partners in age-disparate relationships thus: “HIV prevalence disparities by gender and age may be thought of as a complex interplay between

four factors: biological vulnerability, multiple and concurrent partnerships, age differences between partners, and power imbalances”.

The age-mixing between older men and younger women sometimes translates into the older men and their young lovers exhibiting higher levels of sexual risk taking, including unsafe sex, as opposed to their peers not in similar relationships (Evans et al., 2009). The married men, in turn, go home and have sexual intercourse with their wives, and subsequently introduce HIV into their marriages. Marriage, specifically, is considered a woman’s greatest risk for HIV infection (Higgins, Hoffman, & Dworkin, 2010) because condom use is less common within married and steady partnerships compared to casual relationships (Wyrod et al., 2011). Another concern is that women in their 50s, having reached menopause, do not consider everyday concerns such as pregnancy to be a concern in their sexual relationships (Jacobs & Thomlison, 2009) and end up engaging in unprotected sex and, in some cases, end up getting HIV infected or contracting other sexually transmitted infections from their sexual partners (“Sex and the older woman. Women over age 50 are having sex--and developing STIs--at a higher rate than commonly believed.” 2012, p. 4).

Just as the combination of transactional sex, masculine social norms, age-disparate relationships and multiple and concurrent partnerships are considered to represent a compounding mix of vectors increasing the risk of HIV infection and gender violence for younger women (Kelly, Mkhwanazi, Nkhwashu, Rapiti, & Mashale, 2012), perhaps the same could be said for younger men in relationships with older women. The above data could suggest that in light of the current HIV prevalence in South Africa, there is a heightened risk of HIV infection among younger men in the context of sexual relations with older women who are usually in stable relationships with men their age, married, widowed or divorced. Age-disparate sex could therefore be seen as creating infection bridges into the youth population.

Leclerc-Madlala (2009) further highlights that HIV infection risk is a result of an interlocked system that includes concurrency, transactional and intergenerational sex. Simply put, one cannot discuss any one of the three elements without discussing the others; for example, in this dissertation, it would be remiss to discuss age-disparity without discussing the concurrent as well as transactional natures thereof. It is anticipated that the discussion of these contexts could assist

in understanding the underlying reasons for the existence of age-disparate relationships. In addition to the abovementioned contexts, I will also discuss the cultural and gender contexts within which age-disparate relationships exist.

The above discourses highlight the need for further exploration of age-disparate relationships as they provide a multidimensional perspective on the phenomenon. Below is an attempt to unpack some of the issues raised above:

#### **2.4.1 Concurrency context**

As already alluded to above, age-disparate relationships often occur within the context of multiple and concurrent partnerships either in marriage or stable relationships with same-age partners (AIDSTAR-One, 2009; Longfield et al., 2002; “Statistical Release,” 2012; Zembe et al., 2013). Multiple and concurrent partnerships is a term used to define partnerships that overlap in time (Eaton, Hallett & Garnet, 2011) or where two or more relationships (usually sexual) take place at the same time (Soul City Institute, 2008). Existing literature indicates that the older partner in these relationships is usually married, widowed or divorced; while the younger partner is usually single but in a relationship with partners of their own age (Mojola, 2014).

Different studies have been undertaken on multiple and concurrent relationships in order to understand the drivers, risks as well as recommendations on how to minimize the risks to the participants. According to these studies, concurrency serves certain purposes for both men and women. For men, it affords them an opportunity to affirm their self-worth, adds excitement and variety and helps them meet cultural expectations of masculinity. This practice is also followed by young men as a result of societal norms and peer pressure (Maundeni, 2004). For women, concurrency also serves to affirm self-worth, boost self-esteem, provide avenues for material gain and improve status among peers and in society. In addition to the above, concurrency is believed to alleviate or mitigate against heartbreak from failed relationships (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009).

Despite the similarities, there are also clear differences between the reasons advanced by men versus women for engaging in concurrent relationships. This could be due to the cultural and societal expectations that men can and should participate in multiple and concurrent partnerships in order to prove their virility (Soul City Institute, 2008). The same cannot be said of women as women who take multiple lovers are considered promiscuous (Soul City Institute, 2008).

Another interesting point to note is that men who have multiple lovers, like men who participate in age-disparate relationships, have economic power that allows them to ‘reward’ their partners (Nelson, 1993; Strebel et al., 2013). On the other hand, the young women who are in multiple relationships cite the same benefits they derive from being in age-disparate relationships (Soul City Institute, 2008). It is these similarities between age-disparate relationships and multiple and concurrent partnerships that reinforce Leclerc-Madlala’s (2009) assertion that age-disparate relationships are part of an interlocked system that includes concurrency and transaction.

Just as age-disparate relationships are not solely responsible for heightened risks of HIV infection, these relationships are considered breeding grounds for HIV infections. It is their combined interaction with other factors such as the number of partners a person has, whether or not protection is being used during intercourse (Harling et al., 2014; Toska, Cluver, Boyes, Pantelic & Kuo, 2015) as well as whether the concurrent partnerships are with older, financially-able men (Akullian et al., 2017). A study by the Soul City Institute (2008) found that in multiple and concurrent relationships the participants differentiate between their steady partners as well as other side partners where condom use with the steady partners is not consistent because there is perceived trust between the partners.

In going to older men, the younger women create a gap for the younger men in terms of romantic or sexual partners. This unavailability of younger women could be a contributor to the younger men seeking out older women as romantic or sexual partners, which may support the findings of Phaswana-Mafuya et al.'s study (2014) that cited one of the reasons for going into age-disparate relationships as unavailability of similar-age partners for both younger men and older women. However, some of the young men who enter into relationships with older women still maintain relationships with women their own age. This is due in part because the younger men do not see

the relationships as having the potential to lead to a long-term commitment such as marriage (Maudeni, 2004; Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014).

#### **2.4.2 Transactional context**

Another context within which age-disparate relationships are believed to occur is the transactional context. The transactional nature of these relationship has led to them sometimes being referred to as ‘something-for-something’ (Van Der Heijden & Swartz, 2014), pay-for-play (Jones, 2014), fish-for-sex (Béné & Merten, 2008) or sex-for-money relationships (Wojcicki, 2002). Transactional sex refers to a sexual relationship in which material goods are exchanged for sexual acts (Chatterji et al., 2005). Stobenau, Heise, Wamoyi and Bobrova (2016) further define transactional sex as non-commercial, non-marital sexual relationships that are motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support and other benefits.

Historically, transactional sex was mainly limited to the social need for survival, but there is evidence that suggests that transactional sex is also influenced by consumerism due to the changing world in which people function (Zembe et al., 2013). Further evidence suggests that people actively seek transactional versus emotionally invested relationships because transactional relationships do not come with long-term expectations (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). The terms of being in a transactional relationship are predetermined and predefined because partners know beforehand what they want from the other partner. Although transactional sex does occur in stable relationships as an expression of love through gift-giving, it is more commonly noted in casual, short-terms relationships (Maganja et al., 2007).

The available literature indicates that despite being in stable relationships, some young women seek out additional wealthy partners to take care of their needs for material comforts as a result of growing economic needs and the need to keep up with peers (Maganja et al., 2007; Poulin, 2007; Wyrod et al., 2011). In their study on the relationships between older male taxi drivers and their younger taxi queens (taxi driver girlfriends), Potgieter, Strebel, Shefer and Wagner (2012) reported that these relationships are characterized by the exchange of sex for gifts such as taxi fare or even lunch for the girlfriends who, in most cases, are schoolgirls. In some contexts, the young girls go as far as having multiple older boyfriends who serve different purposes; for example, one for paying

fees and residence accommodation ('Minister of Education'), another for holidays ('Minister of Foreign Affairs and Tourism'), and the 'Straight Minister' who is the stable boyfriend (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004).

The literature on transactional sex shows that the risks associated with age-disparate relationships include, but are not limited to, unplanned pregnancies, early sexual debut, sexual and gender violence and infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Chatterji et al., 2005; Maganja et al., 2007). The study by Potgieter et al. (2012) for example, found that young girls often ended up at the receiving end of violence when they refused to trade their bodies after receiving favours from their much older taxi driver boyfriends.

Transactional sex will be discussed in line with the paradigms highlighted by Stoebenau et al. (2016) in their synthesis of the available literature on transactional sex. The researchers (Stoebenau et al., 2016) unpacked transactional sex and highlighted it as much more than the one-dimensional phenomenon that is popular in much of the available literature. Most of the literature on transactional sex and its motivations can be comfortably placed within the three paradigms highlighted in their paper; that is, 'sex for basic need' (Dunkle et al., 2007; Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017; Giorgio et al., 2016; Maganja et al., 2007), 'sex for improved social status' (Maganja et al., 2007; Wyrod et al., 2011) (Maganja et al., 2007; Poulin, 2007; Wyrod et al., 2011) as well as 'sex and material expressions of love' (Stoebenau et al., 2013).

### **Paradigm 1 - Sex for basic need**

The first paradigm emphasizes the common and narrow perception that younger people enter into transactional relationships with older people due to poverty. In the case of young women, it is perceived that the gender and economic inequalities place them in a compromised position financially. As a result, these women trade their bodies in exchange for finances or material goods needed to alleviate poverty or improve their family's economic standing (Oyediran et al., 2007).

The findings of a situational analysis on HIV prevention that was conducted in Orange Farm indicated that older men and younger women's relationships mainly exist due to the older partner being more economically empowered than the younger partner (Parker & Hajjiyiannis, 2008).

These older men have disposable income and are able to take on extra-marital affairs due to their possession of economic power that sometimes translates to sexual power (Pettifor, Measham, Rees, & Padian, 2004). This in return, creates a situation of helplessness for the women; particularly with regard to sexual decision-making in the relationships.

There are two interlinked primary risks associated with sex for basic needs; that is, the risk of HIV infection as well as the risk for physical and sexual violence. These two risks form the main discourse when issues of transactional sex are being discussed (Kuate-Defo, 2004; Maganja et al., 2007). Relationships in which the man is older than the woman are marked by instances of gender violence when a woman does not comply with the man's sexual demands after the woman has accepted the offered gifts (Maganja et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the young girls themselves also believed that trading sex is inevitable after receiving gifts from their older boyfriends (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004). Some went further to associate the value of the gift, particularly money, as meaning that in addition to giving sex, sex can be given without protection if the older man so wishes (Chatterji et al., 2005; Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004). Large age and economic asymmetries create power differentials that position the older and wealthier partner in control of decision-making in the relationship. This decision-making sometimes extends to relationship factors such as condom use (Luke, 2005). The non-use of condoms is sometimes considered the expression of gender power that social and cultural norms have indoctrinated in young boys and subsequently men (Maundeni, 2004).

The challenge with these deeply entrenched gender norms and masculine ideologies is that they are not flexible enough to allow for men and women to re-write their sexual scripts in order to provide for egalitarianism in relationships (Harrison, O'Sullivan, Hoffman, Dolezal, & Morrell, 2006). These rigid sexual scripts take away from younger women the ability or opportunity to negotiate sexual terms in their relationships with older men. Harrison et al. (2006) found that women with more egalitarian scripts are better able to express themselves in relationships.

Maundeni (2004) found that with the 'sugar mummy syndrome', where the older women are the ones who initiate affairs with younger men, condoms are usually not used during sexual encounters.

This could further support the notion that the person with economic wealth is the one who has decision-making power in the relationship. The women who try to negotiate safer sex or deny their benefactors are however sometimes exposed to violent behaviour because the older men believe that they have ‘earned’ the condom-less sex through gifting (Potgieter et al., 2012). Leclerc-Madlala's (2008b) presentation to the Technical Meeting on Young Women highlighted the need to develop male-targeted programmes that will make men aware that age-disparate relationships, by their nature, often involve abuse of power and status.

## **Paradigm 2 - Sex for improved social status**

The second paradigm relating to transactional sex tie reasons for entering into transactional relationships with the need for improved social status; what Stoebenau et al. (2016) refer to as social capital. Increased monetization of economies leads to a consumer culture that is further perpetuated by peer pressure as well as different media platforms which results in people wanting to fit in or keep up with observed trends.

Unlike with the previous paradigm that sees women as helpless victims who enter into transactional relationships with older partners for survival, this paradigm highlights that young people actively seek older partners for their own benefits; that is, they have agency and are not always the ‘victims’ who enter these relationship under coercion (Luke, 2005; Masvawure, 2010). Agency refers to the ability to evaluate and navigate realities of both the relationships and broader social context in order to choose one’s own desired outcome (Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017).

Masvawure (2010), for example, contends that young women in transactional age-disparate relationships have a certain degree of sexual power because they use the value of the gift to determine whether or not sex will take place and the terms of that interaction. Some studies found that the language that is used in describing the reasons for entering into transactional relationships with older partners is also key in understanding this paradigm. For example, Wojcicki (2002) speaks of ‘*ukuphanda*’ [to hustle], Maganja et al. (2007) speaks of ‘skinning the goat’. These phrases are suggestive of the presence and use of agentic power on the part of the younger women because these women consider themselves as being in control of who to approach, what they want from the relationship and when the relationships will be terminated.

A review of literature on agentic power reveals a situation of bias in gender considerations. Sexual agency is focused primarily on women being empowered economically to be able to not depend on men. In the case of younger men, it may be their masculine and culturally-determined gender roles that give them agency in relationships where the older women are presumed to have economic power. The context within which transactional sex occurs, the type of gifts received and how agency is influenced is important. For example, if women enter into transactional age-disparate relationships due to tough economic situations, they may experience constrained agency; that is, the inability to negotiate safer sex practices in the relationships (Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017).

Interventions in this paradigm are related to discourse on agency, its limitations and context. This discourse looks at empowering the younger partners in these relationships to translate the erotic power they have through their bodies to the ability to negotiate relationship and safe sex terms (Stoebenau et al., 2016).

### **Paradigm 3 - Sex and material expressions of love**

There is differentiation between transactional sex and gift exchange that is expected and linked to the everyday reciprocal exchange in relationships (Stoebenau et al., 2016). Gift-giving is regarded as necessary in the maintenance of relationships because it relates to the gendered notions of men as providers of material support. In these contexts, money is equated to love. Furthermore, for men to be able to provide for the female partner, it serves as an assertion of masculinity for the men. This is even more critical when a man keeps multiple partners. On the other hand, concurrency for women may emerge if the men are not able to meet their role as providers.

In order to develop relevant interventions for age-disparate relationships that are characterized by transactions, it is critical that programme developers and researchers recognize that transactional sex can occur across different socio-economic conditions and serve different purposes. The discourse must be centered on all three dimensions because vulnerability cannot be evaluated from a one-dimensional perspective. Stoebenau et al. (2016) speak of the continua of Deprivation (need or poverty), Agency (from vulnerable victim to powerful agent) and Instrumentality (extent to

which relationships are motivated by financial reasons) and how an understanding of all these factors are key in developing relevant programme interventions to address the risks and challenges associated with transactional age-disparate relationships.

### **2.4.3 Culture, gender context and associated power**

When exploring the current discourse on age-disparate relationships, we cannot ignore the cultural and gender context within which these relationships exist. Culture, gender roles and social context are strong determinants of behaviour because people and relationships do not exist in a vacuum (Silberschmidt, 2001b). Historically, cultural practices and systems positioned men and women differently on social and economic scales. Patriarchal systems ensured that men were more educated and employable which translates to being economically empowered (Brouard & Crewe, 2012). As a result of these patriarchal systems that created economic marginalization for women, women had to find alternative means to generate income (whether for survival or consumerism purposes) for themselves. This, as already discussed above, contributes to the emergence of age-disparate and transactional relationships.

Perceptions of age-disparate relationships are usually negative because these relationships are often considered a deviation from well-constructed cultural norms (Tabane, 2004) and gender expectations (Silberschmidt, 2001a). For example, there is a perception that that these relationships resemble mother/son relationships which results in the relationships being viewed as perverse (Warren, 1996). This perception, however, has not been fully explored in the literature.

Social and cultural beliefs around gender roles place men in positions of power in intimate relationships (Santana et al., 2006). These traditional masculine ideologies influence men's sexuality and behaviour in relationships (Harrison, 2008). This relationship power, however, is usually linked to economic power because traditionally, men are regarded as providers and women as dependent on them (Silberschmidt, 2001b). Older men indicate that their ability to provide material needs for their younger partners gives them power over the partners because they are able to dictate the terms of the relationships (Maganja et al., 2007).

The findings of a situational analysis on HIV prevention that was conducted in Orange Farm indicated that older men and younger women's relationships mainly exist due to the older partner being more economically empowered than the younger partner (Parker & Hajjiannis, 2008). Modernization theory (Uchudi, Magadi, & Mostazir, 2010) also states that individuals' decision-making abilities increase when they have higher economic class, social change, cultural security and orientation towards own issues. Put differently, power is located in the person with better economic standing.

Earlier in the dissertation, I alluded to the shift in economic and educational opportunities which have resulted in gender equality and associated economic empowerment for women. This shift has also led to women being empowered to break from the norm by not conforming to the traditional expectation to seek an older partner for financial support (Lawton & Callister, 2010). The phenomenon of older women taking younger men as lovers is one of the ways in which women broke from the traditional relationship norm (Proulx et al., 2006). This practice, however, is considered deviant as it disrupts existing gender norms (Strebel et al., 2013).

On the other side, this shift also led to a situation where men started reflecting on their masculinity. While some men accepted and adjusted to these changes, some experienced a sense of crisis and uncertainty. The latter group of men interpreted these changes and the resultant loss of economic domination in the household as disempowerment (Dworkin, Colvin, Hatcher, & Peacock, 2012). This is because many males subscribe to the cultural scripts of dominance and power in relationships. In contrast, women's cultural scripts are those of submissiveness and powerlessness. This powerlessness is often what makes it difficult for women to negotiate safer sex options (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009; Soul City Institute, 2008; van Staden & Badenhorst, 2009).

One of the findings in the paper from Zembe et al. (2013) is that the older women who are employed and in profitable sexual exchange relationships with younger men see this ability to provide as creating avenues of sexual, economical and decision-making power in the woman's favour. Women who have more economic power than men are considered by the emasculated men as being a further threat to their masculinity. Because men are culturally and historically viewed as powerful and dominant, they had to find alternative ways of restoring that sense of power, the consequence of

which was men taking multiple sexual partners, exerting physical and sexual violence on women they are in sexual relationships with (Dworkin et al., 2012), engaging in unprotected sexual practices and ‘sugar daddy practices’ (Silberschmidt, 2001b; van Staden & Badenhorst, 2009). In addition to being attempts at restoring masculine power, the above are also the dominant cultural scripts that men in an African context subscribe to (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009).

In age-disparate relationships in which the man is older, the young women create economic marginalization for boys (Bhana & Pattman, 2011) and as a consequence and due to high unemployment rates, young men end up feeling emasculated because they do not have the means to allow them to possess what Hunter in Bhana and Pattman (2011, p. 964) refer to as ‘provider masculinity’. Luke (2005) refers to this emasculation as ‘the removal of male power’.

In order to address this emasculation and reclaim some measure of male power, young men sometimes enter into age-disparate relationships with older women while still involved with women of similar age so as to attain financial and material support (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). In this concurrency context, the younger partner in an age-disparate relationship is able to provide for their younger, stable partner through the money they receive from the older, casual partner (Parker & Hajiyanis, 2008). This ability to provide could suggest possible attractiveness and sustainability of these relationships because they help the younger men to sustain the cultural expectations of men as providers and assert their masculinity.

In her book, *Feminism, HIV & AIDS: Subverting power, reducing vulnerability*, Tallis (2012) also focuses on gender violence as directed at women and highlights the need to challenge patriarchy and unequal power relations in order to minimise women’s vulnerability. Although masculinities or male gender roles are sometimes associated with intimate gender violence, this study in part explores whether the same masculinities and cultural roles that are dominant in younger woman/older man relationships also come into play in younger man/older woman relationships (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Santana, Raj, Decker, LaMarche, & Silverman, 2006). Perhaps, because of these social constructions of masculinity, the younger men would still be the dominant partner due to their gender irrespective of social or even economic standing.

Taking the above factors into consideration, this study will also examine whether younger men in age-disparate relationships with older women also subscribe to the same cultural and sexual scripts that define gender roles of masculinity which would suggest that they are still able to dictate the terms of their relationships; for example, condom use. On the other hand, it could perhaps be that the lack of economic power on their part positions them in a situation where there is gender role reversal; that is, the older women's economic power allows them to control and dictate to the younger men the terms of the relationship (Dworkin et al., 2012; Maundeni, 2004). Silberschmidt (2001), however, cautions that even though women may have economic power, men could still hold sexual decision-making power due to the deeply-entrenched hegemonic masculinity practices and beliefs. It is therefore key that the cultural and gender contexts of men and women and how these shape behaviour be understood in order to develop culturally relevant intervention programmes.

## **2.5 The theoretical framework**

In order to understand any phenomenon that is being studied, it's important to consider its theoretical grounding. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) a theoretical framework is used to provide a snapshot of a particular topic which is described in terms of specific and related theories. The theory is chosen from a myriad of existing theories and brought into sharp focus by relating it to the current phenomenon being discussed.

### **2.5.1 Theories of mate selection**

A number of theories have been formulated to describe how people choose the people they become romantically involved with. According to Proulx et al. (2006) there has been a shift from the homogenous relationships which were centred on the basic notion of 'like attracts like'.

The Theory of Propinquity, for example, states that people choose romantic partners from the people in close proximity to them (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950); Complementary Needs Theory on the other hand states that people seek partners whose opposing traits compliment their traits (Winch, Ktsanes & Ktsanes, 1954). According to Filter Theory, people seek partners based

on filters such as age, physique, intellectual capacity, race, religion, and so forth, that they have of the ideal partner (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962).

Although the above is not an exhaustive list of theories that have been formulated in an attempt to explain how people choose their mates, they give us a sense that although mate selection is an individual decision, in the end, that decision is influenced by a number of different factors; for example, the environment, social status, educational level, financial position, etcetera.

A theory that will be discussed in this dissertation in an attempt to understand the formation of age-disparate relationships is the Social Exchange Theory (SET). The above discussion on the reviewed literature suggests that individuals enter into age-disparate relationships because of what they stand to benefit (for example, improved social status, finances, material support, respect) from the relationship.

As a theoretical framework, SET explains relationship formation as an exchange of resources for rewards. Depending on how the individual values the resources that are exchanged, the formation, maintenance and dissolution of the relationships can basically be forecast (Sabatelli, Lee & Ripoll-Núñez, 2018). If the rewards are high, individuals will stay in relationships; however, if there are more costs (for example, risk of HIV infection, gender-based violence, etcetera) than rewards, the relationship may be dissolved.

### **2.5.2 Social Exchange Framework**

The major proponent of SET is sociologist, George Homans (1961). Following Homans' (1961) early conceptualisation of the Social Exchange Theory, there has been a number of theorists who expanded on the theory in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social exchanges; for example, Peter Blau (1964) social psychologists John Thibaut and Harold Kelley (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and more contemporarily, Richard Emerson (Emerson, 1976) and others.

SET is described as a behaviourist theory that is built upon elements of Rational Choice Theory and behaviourism (Zafirovski, 2005) and grounded in sociology, psychology and economics. This

theory views behaviour emanating from social interactions as a calculated result of materialistic or symbolic resources between at least two parties (Liu, 2012). According to Emerson, 1976 (as cited in Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations; that is, if each party feels that their actions are rewarded, they will strive to reciprocate. Furthermore, it uses standard economic frameworks to analyse social interactions (Emerson, 1976 as cited in Zafirovski, 2005).

Although referred to as Social Exchange Theory, the different postulators of the theory have added to the original work of Homans (1961) and created a bigger framework for discussing exchanges as a determinant of human behaviour. According to Emerson (1976), Homans, 1958 (as cited in Ritzer, 2009, p. 2144), and Sabatelli et al. (2018) instead of being considered a single theory, social exchange is a frame of reference within which different theories converge; therefore it is perhaps best referred to as the Social Exchange Framework.

### **2.5.2.1 Key concepts within the framework**

In his paper on the Social Exchange Framework, Sabatelli et al. (2018) summarises some of the major concepts within the framework. These concepts will be used to discuss the SET and how age-disparate relationships can be framed within that. Furthermore, the concepts will be discussed in terms of the life-cycle of relationships; that is, initiation or formation, maintenance or sustainability and dissolution.

#### **Initiation (or formation): Rewards, costs and resources**

The concepts of benefits and risks in relationships can be equated to the economic concepts of rewards and costs. Rewards are defined as exchanged resources that give pleasure, satisfaction and gratification (Liu, 2012; Wang, 2004). Costs, on the other hand, are defined as exchanged resources that lead to punishment or loss (Wang, 2004).

One of the basic tenets of the traditional Social Exchange theories is that people generally choose behaviours that will maximize their rewards while minimising their costs (Cook & Rice, 2006; Liu, 2012). According to Homans (1961), when people interact with others they exchange

resources that will either reward or punish each other. In these interactions, if rewards exceed costs, that leads to profit; and a relationship that yields more profit than loss will be maintained. In the context of age-disparate relationships, a younger partner may get involved with an older partner who has money (resources) in order to attain rewards (survival or social status). To this relationship, the younger partner exchanges their youth as a resource that needs to be rewarded.

**Maintenance (or sustainability): Outcomes, comparison levels, comparison level of alternatives and dependence**

Individuals become satisfied with relationships based on their evaluation of the outcomes; that is, if they believe that the rewards exceed the costs (Zafirovski, 2005). Another variance that contributes to relationship satisfaction is whether the outcomes meet the expectations that individuals had when entering the relationship; what Thibaut and Kelley (1959) refer to as Comparative Level. Basically, if individuals get what they expect from a relationship based either on past experience or the norm, they become satisfied. However, if they believe they can get better elsewhere, they may leave the current relationship to pursue the better option; what is referred to as the Comparative Level of alternatives.

In the same age-disparate relationship mentioned above, if the younger partner considers what they get from the relationship with the older partner as satisfactory, they will stay; based perhaps on what their peers told them (the norm). However, should there be a partner their age who offers more, for example, they may leave this relationship.

In some case, it is assumed that the younger partners will stay in relationships with older people even when they are subjected to physical or sexual violence because they do not have better alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This is where dependence as another variable is included. If there are no alternatives, or the available alternatives will not yield better outcomes than the current relationships, the current relationships will be maintained. This is particularly relevant in explaining the emergence of concurrency for the younger partners; that is, they are not able to leave the older partner to have a monogamous relationship with someone their age because the person their age does not have the financial resources they get from the older partners.

In exchange relationships, there are also basic norms linked to expectations; that is, the norm of distributed justice or fairness, which can be described as individuals' obligation to also reward people from whom they receive resources (Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012), the norm of equity, referring to when both partners get similar rewards from a relationship (Liu, 2012) and the norm of reciprocity where each partner gives to the relationship what they believe are important resources which must be reciprocated by the other partner (Liu, 2012). These norms determine to a lesser or greater extent whether a relationship will be sustained or dissolved.

### **Dissolution: Norms, trust and commitment and power**

Molm (1997) mentions trust and commitment as the ultimate relationship outcome. Trust refers to individuals' belief that their partners will not exploit them. When partners feel that their effort in a relationship is reciprocated (norm of reciprocity) and they are treated fairly (norm of justice or fairness) an individual grows to trust the other partner (Liu, 2012). In age-disparate relationships that are characterised by exchanges, although reciprocity may be present, it does not automatically lead to maintenance of the relationship because it may be an unequal relationship. If the exchange is not considered fair or equal, the relationship may not progress to trust. In order for commitment to be established, there must be high levels of trust which lead to mutual dependence from reciprocated rewards.

An exchange relationship that is characterised by an unequal level of resources may also be characterised by power imbalances. Power in a relationship occurs when the other partner has more valuable resources than the other (Cook & Rice, 2006). According to Emerson's (1976) power-dependence theory within the Exchange Framework, power and dependence in a relationship emerges when one person places too much value on the resources owned by the other person, as well as their perceived lack of alternatives to acquire those resources.

According to the literature review on the transactional nature of age-disparate relationships, some younger partners enter into these relationships due to economic need for survival. In these relationships specifically, the younger partners do not have a lot of resources to exchange and often-times fall victim to gender and sexual violence from the older partner with resources. If the younger people do not see other avenues (alternatives) for acquiring the resources they get from

the older partner, they may stay in the abusive relationships. The older partners in an unequal relationship may also refuse to use protection and threaten to withdraw benefits that the younger partner gets, thus exposing the younger partner to risk of HIV infection.

#### **2.5.2.2 Criticisms of the Exchange Framework**

Although useful in describing the establishment of interpersonal relationships, there are still some criticisms leveled at the exchange framework that may be grounds for future conceptualizations of the theory.

A number of scholars critically view the exchange framework as being too simplistic in discussing behaviour, because by explaining human behaviour in economic terms, the framework assumes that people are rational beings that carefully think about their actions and weigh the benefits and losses before acting whereas there are many other factors that influence people's behaviour (K. Miller, 2005). Despite this critical view, the Social Exchange Framework cannot be ignored as important in understanding the motivations to enter into age-disparate relationships. What is possibly crucial is to guard against viewing the benefits or rewards in purely monetary or materialistic terms; for example, when considering the three paradigms referred to above, it can be noted that 'transactions' are not simply for cash or material goods, there is also an exchange or receipt of social status, masculine status, etcetera. The challenge, however, is that, unlike with economic resources, such resources, which include symbolic resources such as emotions, pleasure and gratification are difficult to quantify (Liu, 2012) and their value may therefore vary from individual to individual.

Another major and persistent criticism of the Social Exchange Framework is that it only focuses on the individual without considering the context within which the individuals function (Sabatelli et al., 2018). By ignoring the institutional and social processes and structures that people function within, the Framework assumes that individuals exist and function in isolation (Cook & Rice, 2006). Context is defined as the historical, economic, cultural, legal, educational, judicial and political forces that shape people's day-to-day experiences and that directly and indirectly affect

health and behaviour (Pasick & Burke, 2008 as cited in Burke, Joseph, Pasick, & Barker, 2013, p. 2; Sabatelli et al., 2018).

According to Sabatelli et al. (2018), there is room for expanding on the already useful theory of exchange by taking into account the ecological and contextual factors that influence the way exchange relationships are negotiated and formed. K. Miller's (2005) criticism of the exchange framework that can be linked to the previous point, is that it assumes that the formation of intimate relationships is linear and ignore other dimensions (which could include the context) which may lead to the relationship formation to skip certain steps outlined within the exchange framework.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The above discussion on the literature as well as the theoretical framework linked to age-disparate relationships is key in understanding the historical background as well as the different contexts within which these relationships are established. A number of conclusions can therefore be drawn based on the above:

The reviewed literature clearly suggests that in addition to viewing age-disparate relationships as multi-dimensional, the partners in the relationships should also not be viewed as a homogenous group as different people are motivated differently to enter into these relationships. The common perception that these relationships need to be discouraged because of the associated risks represent a narrow view which may perpetuate the stigma around the relationships and further create a marginalization for the participants. If we consider the discussion on the theoretical framework, it could also be argued that age-disparate relationships are no different from other more normative relationships because the same risks and motivations identified in age-disparate relationships could actually be found in the formation and maintenance of any other relationship.

Just as the combination of transactional sex, masculine social norms, age-disparate relationships and multiple and concurrent partnerships are considered to represent a compounding mix of vectors increasing the risk of HIV infection and gender violence for younger women (Kelly et al., 2012), perhaps the same could be said for younger men in relationships with older women.

The implications for intervention is that programme developers need to look broadly at the exchanges as well as the resources that each party brings. For example, where the older partner may have the financial or material resources, the younger partner has their youth and body as resources they bring into a relationship. Recognising this, programmes need to focus more on empowering younger partners in taking care of those resources and using them as bargaining chips to negotiate the terms of their relationships. In so doing, they also claim some measure of power and decision-making abilities in their relationships with older partners (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

Homans' (1961) approach to exchange focuses on reinforcement; that is, people exchange behaviour that they know from past experience will be rewarded. Because exchange theories have elements not only of economics, but also behaviourism, it must be acknowledged that much as people are considered rational beings that calculate what they gain from certain relationships, they also learn certain behaviour from observing others. This can be used to explain the gender and cultural contexts within which age-disparate relationships occur, particularly for younger men in relationships with older women. In short, it could be inferred that they observed that culturally men can have the women they want (multiple concurrent relationships); this observable behaviour was rewarded in the past (social status and heightened masculinity) and will therefore have an influence on how the younger men behave in the future. Researchers and programme developers therefore need to acknowledge and consider the different contexts and underlying reasons that create and sustain these relationships and redefine those in order to influence behaviour change.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

The focus of the previous chapters was on introducing the study, reviewing the existing literature relating to the study and identifying the theoretical framework within which the study is framed. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how I obtained and handled the data that was needed to answer the research question. Before starting on this journey, there is a need to re-visit and re-state the aim and purpose of the study, which is to explore the experiences of younger men who are in relationships with older women in order to understand the nature and dynamics of such relationships.

The intention was to gain an understanding of these relationships from the younger men's point of view. In order to achieve this, the main question was broken into smaller, manageable questions, which were then used to inform the content of the data collection instrument.

This chapter will focus on the research paradigm, the design and the method, including a discussion of the population and sample. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the strategy that was followed in analysing the collected data, ensuring the study's validity as well as its ethical considerations.

#### 3.2 Research methodology

##### 3.2.1 Research tradition or paradigm

The problem to be solved or understood dictates the paradigm and method to be engaged in trying to understand that problem (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). It has already been indicated that the purpose of the study was to seek an understanding of the experiences of younger men in age-disparate relationships with older women. Thus it was necessary that a research paradigm and method should be identified that is compatible with this purpose (Du Plooy-Cilliers

et al., 2014). A research paradigm refers to the theory of knowledge that informs the researcher's thinking around how a problem will be approached (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In my view, people attach meaning to all the phenomena that they experience; therefore, the only way to understand phenomena is to interact with the people experiencing it.

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al (2014), there are three primary research traditions or research paradigms. Proponents of the Positivist tradition hold science in high esteem and believe that science can be used to enlighten people. Positivists believe that knowledge can only be gained from objective, observable evidence. The aim is to test hypotheses or theories in order to establish cause and effect. The knowledge gained is used to make generalisations. Then there is the Interpretivist tradition which holds that people or phenomena cannot be studied objectively. The proponents of this tradition maintain that people, unlike objects, change all the time and are influenced by the context they find themselves in. The interpretivist tradition seeks to interpret and understand human behaviour from the perspective of the people experiencing it. Because of this, human phenomena cannot be generalizable as they are subjective.

Lastly, there is the Critical realism tradition which recognises the limitations in following either a Positivist or an Interpretivist tradition. Critical realism combines both traditions because this tradition holds that knowledge must be rational and based on evidence (Positivism) and yet acknowledge that knowledge is borne of people's understanding or interpretation of their world (Interpretivism).

In order to fully understand the phenomenon of younger men entering into relationships with older women, I followed the Interpretivist tradition because there is a need to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals experiencing it; that is, the younger men. The aim is to see the younger men's reality through their eyes (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) by exploring the meaning and value they attach to their life experiences.

### 3.2.2 Research design

Terre Blanche et al. (2006, p. 35) define research design as “a strategic framework of action that serves as a bridge between research questions and the execution or implementation of the research”. Using the analogy of travel, Mouton (1999) compares the research design to the plans that one puts in place when preparing to travel.

The research design followed in this study was a qualitative, exploratory design which aimed to explore participants’ experiences of their world. By its nature, the Interpretivist tradition is qualitative, which ties in with the research design that I adopted. The dimensions within this design are discussed further below:

A qualitative approach to research seeks to uncover knowledge of how people think and feel about their world, understand phenomena as they occur naturally. Furthermore, it engages an inductive approach in order to derive meaning out of the participants’ accounts of it (Hancock et al., 2006). Unlike quantitative research that seeks to establish cause and effect or reduction to some variables or hypotheses (the Positivist tradition), qualitative research makes knowledge claims based on multiple meaning of individual experiences (Creswell, 2003) which are constructed in the mind of the knower and are situated within a cultural and historical context (Van der Stoep & Johnston, 2009).

Qualitative approaches try to describe and interpret people’s feelings and experiences in human terms instead of through measurements and quantification (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013) qualitative approaches aim to describe, interpret, verify and evaluate data. The primary advantage of utilizing the qualitative approach is that I was able to gain richer knowledge of a subject because the participants are not limited to a set of close-ended questions, as is the case with quantitative research. What qualitative studies lack in scope or numbers, it makes up for in depth (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003).

The major disadvantage of the qualitative approach is that it can be labour-intensive and costly (Babbie, 2007) and the study in question can be difficult to replicate, which might cast doubt on

the issue of trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Further disadvantages of the qualitative approach include an inability to investigate causality between different research phenomena, possible ethical dilemmas due to using human subjects, and expensive data collection and analysis (Rahman, 2016).

Despite having these disadvantages, Qualitative research design also has a number of advantages that make it ideal for this study; that is, it allowed me to obtain a more realistic view of the lived world that cannot be understood or experienced in numerical data and statistical analysis. It also provided me with the perspective of the participants of the study through immersion in a culture or situation and as a result of direct interaction with them, allowing me to describe existing phenomena and current situations. Furthermore, qualitative studies can yield results that can be helpful in pioneering new ways of understanding phenomena (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003; Rahman, 2016).

Another dimension to this study is that it is exploratory. Exploratory research is aimed at breaking new ground or exploring a less known area of study (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The purpose of an exploratory approach within this study is not to explain, predict or generate theory, but to understand an experience shared by the participants though seeking new insight into this phenomenon.

### **3.2.3 The researcher as instrument**

The researcher within qualitative research is positioned as the primary research tool for data collection and interpretation (Terre Blanche et al., 2006; Welman, Mitchell & Kruger, 2005). This means that the my own experiences and world view have the potential of influencing the type of data that is collected, how it is collected, and how it is subsequently handled during the data analysis phase (Xu & Storr, 2012). Through a process of reflexivity, I need to be transparent about own preconceptions and theoretical assumptions relating to the study. In so doing, I minimize potential bias that may be associated with the study (Galdas, 2017). I return to this issue in the final chapter.

### 3.2.4 Population

According to Lincoln and Guba, 1985 (as cited in Van der Stoep & Johnston, 2009, p. 188) “the best instrument for qualitative naturalistic inquiry is the human being”. To enable me to collect reliable data, it is critical that the right population from which a sample will be drawn is identified (Mouton, 1999). The right population is important in that should the wrong one be chosen, the reliability of the entire study will be compromised (Mouton, 1999). A target population in research refers to the group of people from whom a sample will be drawn (Welman et al., 2005). To facilitate the identification of the correct population, I need to re-visit the research problem as well as the research question (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

In qualitative research, it is required that a significant amount of time be spent with the participants in order to collect as much data as possible about the phenomenon. The data that are collected need to be extensively interrogated during the analysis phase in order to arrive at important themes (Hancock, 1998). It is for this reason that the participant group typically needs to be limited in number as the process can be labour-intensive.

In order to answer the research questions already alluded to above, I collected data from participants who met the following criteria:

- Males aged 18 years and above,
- who have been in relationships with women who are 5 or more years older than them and
- who reside in and around Pretoria.

I stipulated the minimum age in order to ensure that the participants would be adults who are able to give consent and participate in the study voluntarily; thus enhancing the ethical grounding thereof. I initially sought to interview about ten participants within the 18 to 25 years age group. The initial decision to the age bracketing as part of the inclusion criteria was an attempt to ensure that the sampling pool is not open too wide. However, due to the challenges in recruiting participants, it was then decided that the age-group limitation be removed and simply to focus on males 18 years and older. Furthermore, instead of the initial ten participants that were sought, only

five males were interviewed. The decision to reduce the numbers was influenced by the already cited challenge of recruiting the participants.

The challenge in recruiting participants could be attributed to possible stigma towards age-disparate relationships where the man is younger than the woman. As already alluded to in previous chapters, society is generally more accepting of relationships in which the older partner is male versus relationships where the older partner is female (Zembe et al., 2013). To assist with recruiting participants, I identified a younger man who had been in a relationship with an older woman. This individual then became the recruiter and assisted in recruiting other participants.

As already indicated in Chapter 1, participants were recruited from townships in the Tshwane Metropolitan area because the area is easy to access for me. This was particularly important because there might have been a need to re-visit the participants for re-interviews or clarifying particular issues raised during the first interviews. Tshwane Metropolitan area includes the surrounding townships, suburbs as well as surrounding areas.

### **3.2.5 Sampling technique**

One of the departure points and possible challenges for this research was the assumed stigma that the couples in an age-disparate relationship face because these relationships are still considered uncommon in sub-Saharan Africa (Langen, 2005; Zembe et al., 2013). The person who was identified as a recruiter assisted with identifying two of the study participants because he was also involved in an age-disparate relationship with an older woman in the past. This in itself lends a certain degree of credibility to the study and the recruiter encouraged the younger men to participate in the study.

Unlike quantitative research that seeks a representative sample, qualitative research determines the sample size based on factors such as data saturation which focus on whether new themes or categories are emerging from the research participants (Marshall, 1996). Marshall (1996) further emphasises the importance of flexibility when identifying the right sample for a qualitative study. As already alluded to earlier, I set out to interview ten participants, but could only reach five who

met the inclusion criteria and were willing to share information. This formed the basis of the sampling approach that was used; that is, purposive sampling (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Purposive sampling is defined as a type of non-probability sampling that requires that study participants be chosen on the grounds of the pre-identified inclusion criteria and their ability to provide information-rich data to a study (Babbie & Mouton, 2008; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). In addition to purposive sampling, I relied on snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. This type of sampling method, which is primarily used for exploratory purposes, refers to the process of accumulation that involves one or more participants recommending other potential participants to the researcher (Babbie, 2007).

Armed with a set of pre-qualifying criteria, I worked closely with the recruiter to identify suitable participants for the study. In addition to the set criteria, I sought participants who would yield the most informative and relevant data (Yin, 2011) and who were willing to openly share or discuss their life experiences, thoughts and feelings (Lester, 1999). Once participants were identified, I organized a meeting with each participant through the recruiter, to elucidate the purpose of the study and to explain why their participation is critical to the success thereof. Throughout the sampling process, I was vigilant to ensure that the participants are relevant and not just accept them because they are conveniently available (Yin, 2011).

### **3.3 Data collection approach and instruments**

Data collection refers to the methods and instruments utilised in collecting the data needed to make sense of the phenomenon. Qualitative research often takes a great deal of time because data should be recorded thoroughly, accurately and systematically (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Qualitative researchers use techniques such as interviews, observation and field notes to collect data (Walter, 2013).

### 3.3.1 Instrumentation

Qualitative research, just like quantitative, needs tools that will be used to collect data. Unlike quantitative tools which seek statistical data, qualitative tools are designed to seek deeper understanding of phenomena being researched; that is, meaning, experiences, beliefs and attitudes (Babbie & Mouton, 2008). For this study, I used a semi-structured interview schedule which was developed guided by the objective of the study as well as the research questions. Although other research tools were consulted, it was only for the purposes of understanding how interview schedules are developed as well as the general look and feel.

According to Welman et al. (2005) the effectiveness of any research tool is dependent on how well it is utilized. To ensure that this is a good instrument, the final instrument was tested in the field with the first participant. During this interview, I learnt several lessons, the most important of which was that although the questions appeared to be unambiguous, I needed to probe or explore more in order to obtain richer information.

In addition to probing, I needed to avoid leading statements or completing participants' statements. I also needed to try to not focus rigidly on the interview schedule, but to allow conversation to flow naturally (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The lessons that were learnt during the first interview were applied in subsequent interviews. It will further be noted that the first interview is the shortest because I was still testing it. After this first interview, I was more able to probe and engage the participants to ensure that more information is shared.

I utilized multiple sources of data collection; that is, interview recordings as well as field notes (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The field notes were used to note the participants' reactions during conversations; for example, body language, pauses, expressions, etcetera (Welman et al., 2005). Both methods provide a depth of information and also give two perspectives on one issue. This is referred to as triangulation (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Mouton, 2005; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). In his paper, Shenton (2004) lists different types of triangulation methods that can be followed. For this study, triangulation was done through the use of different data collection methods.

The interviews were conducted using the developed interview schedule (see Appendix 3) while the field notes on the other hand, were recorded on a pre-designed template which contained the interview questions as well as their prompts. This assisted in recording observations, where necessary, next to the relevant question.

### **3.3.2 The interviews**

As already indicated, I collected data through the use of semi-structured interviews which contained a series of open-ended questions (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) with key eliciting questions asked as prompts to ensure that all discussions with the participants address the same issues (Bhandarkar, Wilkinson, & Laldas, 2010).

In their book, Van der Stoep and Johnston (2009) outline the different formats and types of questions that can be used during the interview process. In order to gain full or optimal participation and disclosure from the participants, I familiarized myself with the strategies of effective interviewing such as building rapport, establishing trust between the participants and I, the ability to carefully word interview questions and the ability to remain 'neutral' in gestures and tone during the interview process so as not to unduly influence the participants' responses.

I conducted the interviews in both English and the preferred language of the participants. The use of the participants' preferred languages is important in that it ensured that valuable data is not lost due to participants not being able to express themselves in one pre-determined language.

Prior permission was sought from participants to record the interviews utilizing a tape recorder (Terre Blanche et al., 2006); this assisted with accurate transcription during the data analysis phase. Taking field notes of observed behavior was used as a secondary method of capturing the interview process because qualitative researchers "...often use multiple forms of data in any single study" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 151) to help them answer the research question and improve the study's validity.

The interviews were started with a summary of the study as well as the reasons for interviewing the participant. I began each interview by asking for some background information, which included basic details such as marital status and educational level. The purpose of these questions was informational, but also to help the participants to relax (Terre Blanche et al., 2006; Van der Stoep & Johnston, 2009) and warm to me (Welman et al., 2005). After setting the scene and helping ease the participants into the study, the next part involved asking participants about their experience with regard to the topic.

The consent form that the participants signed prior to the interviews indicated that the interview would take between 60 and 90 minutes. However, the actual interviews were not timed; instead, they continued for as long as the participants needed to answer and explain to a point of their satisfaction.

Before and during the interview, I needed to remain aware of my own behaviour; that is, appearance, and gender and how these could possibly influence the behaviour of the participants as well as their responses. Mouton (2005) refers to these as interviewer effects. One of the considerations was whether being an older female working with younger men would not pose a challenge. However, I realized that it would be my attitude and approach towards the participants that would determine how they behave and respond during the interview. I also had a casual conversation with the participants before the actual interview as this allowed participants to be comfortable around me. I further dressed in a casual way in order to be relatable to the participants. This also assisted in dispelling the perception that one of the participants mentioned about researchers being 'strict and serious professors from university'.

In addition to interviewer effects, I also had to pay attention to possible participant effects; that is, a situation where a participant would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear (Mouton, 2005). I tried to constantly monitor their body language and to ask some questions in a different way to establish whether the participant was being honest or 'putting on a show'. Observing these non-verbal cues also assisted me in assessing the comfort levels of the participants.

In order to record these as accurately as possible, I kept field notes. As already indicated in the previous section, these observations were made on a pre-developed template that contained all the interview questions. Notes were made next to each question and/or its related prompts. This information was important in understanding how participants felt about certain areas of the discussion and assisted with adding further information during the analysis phase. Looking out for and eliminating either interviewer- or participant effects reduces possible research errors and assists in improving the reliability of the findings (Mouton, 2005).

To further improve the trustworthiness of the findings, I assured the participants that their identities would be kept confidential at all times. This was particularly important in order to ensure that participants would be free to discuss the details of their relationships with older women without fear of other people finding out (Mouton, 2005).

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Collecting qualitative data is just one step in understanding the phenomenon under study. The next step which is critical in the research process is data analysis step. Babbie and Mouton (2008, p. 490) define qualitative data analysis or QDA as "...all forms of analysis of data that was gathered using qualitative techniques, regardless of the paradigm used to govern the research". Qualitative data analysis is further described as a non-numerical analysis and interpretation of collected data to unearth underlying patterns and meanings (Babbie, 2007). According to Babbie & Mouton, (2008), there are as many QDA methods as are qualitative researchers and most of them analyse data as informed by their theoretical frameworks or way of seeing the social world. Depending on the researcher's particular theoretical or epistemological perspective, there are a number of different approaches that can subsequently be used to analyse qualitative data; for example, content analysis, thematic analysis, phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, and so on.

Another dimension to analyzing qualitative data is the reasoning strategy that the researcher uses; that is, inductive or deductive reasoning or some combination of the two. In inductive reasoning, themes and categories emerge from the data as opposed to deductive reasoning processes where existing theory or previous studies determine the themes used (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In his

book, Babbie (2007) highlights the importance of emerging or existing theory in generating themes and highlights the importance of working with the creative tension between top-down (deductive) and bottom-up (inductive) processes. Taking this interplay between emerging themes and theoretical perspective into consideration, this study drew on both deductive and inductive analytic processes. On the one hand, I followed a deductive approach by using the theory that was identified in Chapter 2 to inform some of the themes that were utilised in coding and analyzing collected data. On the other hand, I also worked inductively by being on the lookout for themes that arose organically from the participants' accounts rather than from theory.

### **3.4.1 Thematic content analysis**

As the most popular method of analyzing qualitative data, thematic content analysis refers to processing of collected data by seeking and identifying themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Jugder, 2016; Walter, 2013). Thematic content analysis goes beyond simply identifying themes; it also aims to interpret and make sense of them (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Unlike with other data analysis methods which are tied to certain theoretical frameworks, thematic analysis is not linked to any theoretical framework, which lends it its flexibility in terms of application (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although different researchers within the qualitative field utilise different strategies of analysing the data collected during a study, there still remain broad similarities between those strategies and thematic content analysis.

Qualitative data analysis, as was also the case in this study, usually follows after the audiotaped material has been transcribed verbatim (Walter, 2013). After transcription, I followed the following six steps as elucidated by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarisation with the data: I read and re-read the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data. During this process, I made notes about interesting ideas and experiences that stood out in some of the texts.
2. Generate initial codes: During and after the process of reading the transcripts, initial codes started emerging. I did not make use of qualitative analysis software but relied on manual coding (see below). Although the coding process was guided by the existing theory, the extracts that did not fit into this theory were also coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Search for themes: The initial codes were grouped together based on similarities or when they appeared to address the same issues. These groupings became the themes. A table of the initial codes and emerging themes was developed. Extracts from the transcripts were included in the table.
4. Review themes: The themes that emerged in the previous step were further categorized in order of importance and whether they seemed coherent for building an argument. The themes classified as either important (main themes), useful (sub-themes) or irrelevant (considered as potential for being discarded).
5. Define and name themes: For each theme, a detailed analysis informed by the extracts was written. In some cases the theme names were refined to ensure they would make more immediately sense for the readers.
6. Produce the report: This final step involved collating the analyses from the different themes to form a coherent argument for the study. Extracts from the different transcripts under a particular theme were also used to strengthen the findings.

Although the steps highlighted above appear linear, they are in actuality parallel, overlapping and at some points interweaving. The above steps were clearly outlined and documented to ensure that future researchers would be able to replicate the study. This assisted with improving the trustworthiness of the study.

A final note on the analytic process: I tried to use Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) for managing the data and had a trial version of Atlas-ti 8 installed on my computer for this purpose. I used the software for coding transcripts for Participants A and B, but due to functionality limitations of the trial (only 50 codes and 100 quotes can be captured), I soon reached the limits of what is allowed. Rather than obtain a full version of the software, I decided to do the rest of the analysis manually, which was of course more labour-intensive, but it did give me a sense of being closer to my data and of being able to work in a more organic fashion. My sense, at the end of the analysis, was that CAQDAS can be a useful aid, but is not strictly necessary when working with somewhat smaller datasets such as my collection of interview transcripts.

### **3.5 Demonstrating trustworthiness**

For any study to be deemed valuable, it must be characterized by the attributes of reliability and validity. These attributes can be demonstrated through the instruments and techniques employed during data collection and analysis (Morrow, 2005). Validity refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of findings; that is, the instrument used during data collection must measure what it set out to measure. Validity can be measured through two major constructs; that is, internal and external validity (Shenton, 2004). Internal validity refers to whether the findings are a true reflection of reality and not influenced by external factors. External validity on the other hand, refers to the extent to which that reality is applicable to other similar participants.

Reliability on the other hand refers to the repeatability of the results over time; that is, can another researcher, using the same instruments and techniques with a similar group of participants get the same results (Shenton, 2004)?

Because qualitative research is not considered by hard-line positivists as a true science, the concepts of validity and reliability as described above, are sometimes deemed non-applicable (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003). Unlike quantitative research, which uses standardized tools, qualitative studies are not based on standardized instruments and the sample is smaller and non-random, which might lead to questions around validity and reliability.

In order to avoid possible confusion, qualitative researchers sometimes use alternative terminology, namely trustworthiness and rigour, which are used as a measure of the quality of research or the extent to which the collected data and data analysis is believable or worthy of consideration (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a qualitative study's trustworthiness can be described and achieved through the following four constructs:

#### **3.5.1 Credibility**

Credibility (or internal validity in positivist terms) refers to establishing the trustworthiness or truth of the findings of a study. There has been much debated about the difficulty of establishing

credibility in qualitative research (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The main challenge with establishing credibility is that qualitative analysis is inherently subjective and the researcher is the instrument of analysis (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

One of the strategies or techniques that has been employed to improve credibility of findings, is member checks (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003; Yin, 2011). During the analysis phase, I distributed the summaries to some of the participants to validate that their perspectives have been accurately reflected. This process allowed me to double-check the emerging themes and the composite summary in order to enhance the credibility of the research findings.

I also used multiple sources of data collection; that is, interview recordings as well as field notes to note participants' reactions during conversations (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Referred to as triangulation (specifically triangulation of sources) this method allowed me to validate the findings through two perspectives instead of one (Mouton, 2005; Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

### **3.5.2 Transferability**

Transferability (or external validity) refers to the ability of the findings to be applied to similar situations and yielding similar results (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Unlike the positivist or quantitative approach that proves external validity by showing the generalisability of findings to similar populations, qualitative researchers believe that generalisations are not possible because experiences are specific to individuals as well as the contexts within which they function (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003).

Some researchers posit that providing detailed descriptions of one's own context as researcher, participants' contexts, as well as having an accurate and detailed description of the research process and choice of data collection methods assist with establishing the study's transferability (Morrow, 2005; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The Instrumentation and Data Collection sections above, is an attempt to clearly and accurately describe the process that was followed in developing and utilising the data collection instrument; that is, the interview schedule and field notes, as well as the interview process itself.

### **3.5.3 Dependability**

Qualitative researchers often use the term ‘dependability’ instead of ‘reliability’. This refers to the study’s ability to yield similar results when applied in a similar environment, using similar methods with similar participants (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003). In order to achieve dependability, all the processes followed in the study were discussed in as much detail as possible.

My supervisor played the role of an external consultant to evaluate the methods I used in my study. To assist with this process, I recorded every stage of the research as well as the methods and tools used to collect and analyse data.

### **3.5.4 Confirmability**

This concept refers to how well the data collected supports the findings (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). One of the characteristics of qualitative research is that it lacks objectivity. This is because, by its nature, qualitative research is subjective and personal (Pandey & Patnaik, 2003; Shenton, 2004). A process which was used to enhance the study’s credibility was reflexivity which requires that I be upfront about possible personal assumptions that can be brought into the research due to background or personal circumstances (Smith, 2008). I discussed and acknowledged beforehand how these past experiences, biases and predispositions (which included the theoretical framework she believes the phenomenon is framed within) influenced the data interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013).

By acknowledging these biases and coupling it with an Audit Trail that details the exact methods and processes followed in this study, it affords an external person to duplicate the study and its findings.

## **3.6 Ethical considerations**

According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006) the introduction of ethics in research is believed to have started after World War II following the commitment of atrocities in the name of research.

Although different disciplines have their own ethical standards, the basic principles of ethics in human studies are the same. The purpose of ethics in research is to protect participants' wellbeing. Ethics further protect against misconduct and plagiarism and provide guidance to researchers in order to carry out their research in a morally defensible way (Forrester, 2010; Mouton, 2005).

The following activities were undertaken to ensure that this study was not in violation of the ethical conduct that is required for social science studies.

### **3.6.1 Ethical clearance**

Before conducting studies with human participants, I needed to obtain ethical clearance from their research institution which basically confirms that the study will not cause undue harm to the participants. For this study, I obtained the ethical clearance (see Appendix 1) from the University of South Africa's (UNISA) Ethical Clearance Committee (ERC). Part of the Rationale as contained in UNISA's Policy on Research Ethics is that "the rights and interests of human participants and institutions are protected. This is particularly important where information gathered has the potential to invade the privacy and dignity of participants and third parties, and where participants and third parties are vulnerable owing to their youth, disability, age, poverty, disease, ignorance or powerlessness" (UNISA, 2013).

### **3.6.2 Informed consent**

For the purposes of this study, the first area of concern with regard to ensuring adherence to ethical considerations is to obtain agreement to participate in the study from identified participants before commencement of the research. This agreement to participate was obtained in writing through the completion and signing of a Consent Form (see Appendix 2) prior to the commencement of the data-collecting process (Richards & Morse, 2013). The Consent Form served to also clarify my expectations and objectives of the study, what the study involves and what is expected from the participants. A separate line that seeks permission to record the interviews using a tape recorder and subsequent discussions for transcription was also included.

### **3.6.3 Voluntary participation**

Prior to assumption of each interview, I went through the consent form with the participant. The form highlighted what the study is and what it seeks to achieve. In the pre-interview, I took participants through the form and explained each concept and its meaning for the participants. By so doing, the participants were able to understand the terms and implications of their involvement in the study.

Participants were informed verbally as well as in the Consent Form that their participation in this study is totally voluntary. In addition to this, participants were informed that they have the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. Should they choose to do that, they would not be obliged to give reasons for their withdrawal and would not be penalized in any way for their decision.

### **3.6.4 Protection from harm**

Sometimes referred to as non-maleficence or beneficence, this refers to the principle of doing good to study participants by not harming them (Orb et al., 2001). Researchers have a responsibility to protect participants from harm at all times (Welman et al., 2005). The Consent Form in this study clearly indicated that no harm, either emotional, physical or otherwise, would befall participants during their participation in this study.

### **3.6.5 Privacy and confidentiality**

All endeavors were taken to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants' information. Any information that could possibly lead to the identification of the participants were kept out of the report. Where direct references or quotes were made, pseudonyms were used in the place of real names. This stipulation was included in the Consent Form. All interview tapes, transcripts and field notes were kept in a safe, locked place until after the conclusion of the study and the acceptance of the final report.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The methodology chapter in any study is critical in order to outline how a researcher reached the conclusions or findings of their study. This chapter outlined in detail, the steps that were followed in the collection and analysis of the data and also outlined the ethical considerations that need to be considered in the process of research.

## **Chapter 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapters I discussed the theoretical and literature perspectives on the phenomenon of age-disparate relationships wherein the woman is older than the man. Although this type of relationship has not been researched extensively, valuable insights can be drawn from the limited literature.

This chapter will report on the findings from the analysis of the interviews conducted with the five participants. I will provide a short narrative describing each participant before discussing the themes that emerged during the analysis.

#### **4.2 Participant profiles**

Below are brief profiles of the five participants who were interviewed for the study. Pseudonyms are used and some geographical details have been changed to protect the identity and privacy of the participants. These profiles were in part informed by the recorded observations and notes I made on each participant during the interviews.

Thato is a single, 25 year old male who resides in Sunnyside, Pretoria. Although unemployed, he had hobbies and interests that he believed would equip him with the necessary skills needed to attain independence. Thato was shy during the interviews and needed further probing when answering questions. He seemed to be embarrassed or uncomfortable to talk about his relationship with an older woman. The couple met ‘coincidentally’ and the older woman later propositioned the younger man to enter into a romantic relationship with her. The older woman is single, professionally employed and not in another relationship. She stays in Centurion and is 10 years older than him. Their relationship was still active after three months; however, Thato was talking about winding things down until they separate completely.

Mpho is 26 years old and from Atteridgeville. He is employed part-time as a care worker at an NGO and although not earning much, he appears to take his work seriously because it affords him independence. He indicated that he was raised in a family of women and therefore has strong views about women's behaviour. Mpho tended to volunteer more information than was asked because he seemed to want to make sense of what was happening with this relationship. At some point I thought his constant use of '*oa ntlhalohanya?*' ['do you understand me?'] could be his unconscious attempt to get validation for his views. This young man also had a chance meeting with the older woman, who is six years older than him and initiated the relationship. Throughout the interview Mpho emphasized the importance of being self-reliant and not dependent on the older woman to take care of his needs. The relationship had been active for four months.

Molefe is a 32 year old government employee who is originally from the Free State, but lives in Atteridgeville, Pretoria. He is a professional and seems to have entered into a relationship with the older woman because he loved her, irrespective of her age. The older woman is a divorcee who is five years older than him. At the time of the interview Molefe had sought another girlfriend because he felt that the older woman did not respect him. The new girlfriend only entered the scene two years into his relationship with the older woman. The younger man initiated the relationship with the older woman and they broke up when the older woman learnt that he was cheating on her.

Sello, aged 23, is also a government employee who is originally from Mpumalanga province, but now resides in Pretoria East. He is one of two participants who have been involved with more than one older woman. He has had a total of three older partners (including the current one) and he indicated he is not dismissing the possibility of having another older partner in the future. Although he initially seemed awkward and shy to discuss his relationships with older women, he gradually opened up. He met his current partner, who is 10 years older than him, through a mix-up of phone numbers. The older woman is a divorcee who is in a relationship with someone her age. The couple mutually initiated the relationship and it was still active 2 years on.

Kabelo is the oldest of the five. He is 41 years old and also a government employee who stays in Sunnyside, Pretoria. He is the only participant who is married and staying with his wife and children. Kabelo actively sought the older woman as a personal challenge and to attain a higher

social standing with his peers and other people who also admired the older woman. The older woman is a senior manager and is seven years older than him. Unlike the other participants' partners, Kabelo's partner wanted the stability of marriage and introduced him to her parents. He used what appears to have been deception and blaming to terminate the relationship after 10 months.

### 4.3 Themes and sub-themes

As indicated in the previous chapter, the data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis refers to processing of collected data by seeking and identifying themes and patterns (Jugder, 2016; Walter, 2013). The transcribed data was analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps; that is, familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and naming defined themes. This entire chapter is the last step; that is, the produced report on the themes. It should be noted, however, that although the steps are highlighted sequentially, in actual practice they overlapped.

In all, four overarching themes with 13 sub-themes emerged from the data, as are reflected in Table 4.1. In addition to the themes, there were two distinguishing factors that emerged from the analysis. These were also grouped and discussed with emerging themes.

Table 4.1

*Themes and sub-themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
1. Benefits/Motivating factors	1.1 'She's buying time with me': Relationships as transactional. 1.2 'Positions and stuff like that': The role of sex and sexual pleasure. 1.3 'She looks young but she's old': The importance of physical appearance. 1.4 'Wena kwena mosadi': The role of culture and respect. 1.5 Learning journeys

2. Risks/discouraging factors	2.1 ‘Her way or the high way’: Power dynamics in age-disparate relationships. 2.2 ‘Too much beautiful’: The risk of pregnancy and infection.
3. Context of relationship	3.1 ‘We have our people’: The issue of concurrency. 3.2 ‘This one is mine’: Secrecy versus public display.
4. Perceptions	4.1 ‘Nothing but a number’: The views of participants and their partners. 4.2 ‘Ke o moholo mo wena’: Family perceptions. 4.3 ‘What is happening here?’: Friends’ perceptions. 4.4 ‘When it comes to guys, there is no problem’: Public perceptions.
5. Other distinguishing features	5.1 ‘It won’t last’: Duration of age-disparate relationships. 5.2 ‘I only care about her’: Emotions in age-disparate relationships.

#### **4.3.1 Theme 1: Benefits or motivating factors.**

A question that almost always arises in discussions of age-disparate relationships, and which was explicitly addressed in each of the interviews, is why people engage in such relationships – what is it that they ‘get out of it’?

In the previous chapter I discussed some of the theories that have been used to explain mate selection amongst humans, in particular Social Exchange Theory (SET). According to SET, people are drawn to relationships which promise to deliver high rewards at low cost to themselves (Cook & Rice, 2003; Liu, 2012).

The literature on age-disparate relationships between older men and younger women echoes this idea, with the main attraction or motivator cited as being financial and material resources that serve to enhance the younger women’s lives (reward) (Kuate-Defo, 2004; Longfield et al., 2002). In talking with the five participants about their motivations, a more complex picture emerged in

which such transactional issues do play a role, but they are far from the only concern. Some participants, such as Thato and Mpho, in fact had their doubts about entering into these relationships and their reasons for eventually agreeing to do so appear not to have been purely transactional. I discuss this below.

#### **4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1. ‘She’s buying time with me’: Relationships as transactional.**

The literature on age-disparate relationships involving older men and younger women suggests that such relationships usually take place in the context of transaction; that is, there is an exchange of benefits for sex or companionship (Dunkle et al., 2007; Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017), with the younger partner typically exchanging sex and companionship for basic needs, improved social status or material expressions of love (Stoebenau et al., 2013).

There certainly are elements of this in the relationship dynamics described by some of the participants, but they did not admit to actively seeking older women for material benefit. The two participants who were unemployed and casually employed indicated that although the receipt or expectation of receipt of material benefits was not the main reason they entered into relationships with the older women, they did receive some benefits from their older partners:

*Yah. So, ha’ee eish, gwaba difficult gore yanong eish motho o ake moitsi ashifa o sentse a nyako nrekela diaparo yanong wae tlhalohanya? [It was a bit difficult considering that I’ve just met this woman and she wants to buy me clothes, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 7)*

*Yah, sometimes when I need money wa mfa. [...she gives it to me.] (Thato, p. 2)*

*Interviewer: And then are there other benefits?*

*Interviewee: ...Argh... Yah di teng. Whereby, akere hona byanong re nale four months, re lata five months, so, ke khona ho tshwara le bo maybe di key tsabo flete wa bonna. Ho nale zaka e elenng hore kea kereya, not to say hore ho lebelletswe zaka but zaka automatically eteng because akere motho oo reka nako lwena wae tlhalohanya? [Yes there are. Because we’ve been together for about four or five months now, I’m able to have my own set of*

keys to her flat. There's also money that I get; not to say that I'm here for the money. It's just that she gives me money automatically because she's buying time with you, you understand?'] (Mpho, p. 16)

Although not suggestive of calculatedly transactional exchanges, the above quotes do fit in with Stoebenau et al.'s (2013) paradigm of the exchange of 'sex for material expressions of love'. The picture being painted is of the older women providing financial and other support to the younger men out of their own volition to express what could be considered an appreciation of the time they spent with the younger men.

Mpho aptly captured this when he indicated that the older women should give the younger men something to show they appreciate the 'favour' that the younger men are doing them when they spend time with them:

*Sister ke lona le tshwantseng le itsi hore nna kele etsetsa favour he kele mo dimo ha lona....*  
[The woman must know that I am doing her a favour when I'm on top of her.] (Mpho, p. 26)

On the other hand, the younger men who were professionally employed did not identify with an exchange of material benefits with the older women:

*Nah nah, cause I don't gain anything, she doesn't gain anything. Like in terms of materials, like money, nah nah.* (Sello, p. 6)

*Interviewer: Okay. So you say material does not motivate you in this relationship?*

*Interviewee: No, no. Cause I don't remember like one day ena she ask me like airtime, nah nah, she's never asking things from me. And I've never also ask anything from her.* (Sello, p. 10)

*I wanted to explore, experience, (chuckles). I mean dating an older person, so it wasn't about money cause the time I was dating her I was working, so yah, it was for fun. (Molefe, p. 7-8)*

According to Molefe and Sello, their involvement with the older women was based on enjoying their time together:

*So we enjoy each other company, we don't give each other anything, any gifts, nah nah. (Sello, p. 7)*

Although Sello indicated there is no exchange of material goods in his relationships with older women, he mentioned what could also be considered a benefit; that is the 'services' that are provided:

*Yah, I think, that she has also a stable boyfriend so I think I met her this day and tomorrow she helping me with sex and the other days she came and after that, I don't know what happened. (Sello, p. 18)*

On the other hand, Kabelo indicated that he actively sought out the older partner because of her social standing (he referred to it as 'stigma') which would place him in a position to be admired by his peers. For him, dating the older woman meant an improvement in his social status (sex for social status) and this fits into Stoebenau et al.'s (2013) paradigm of 'sex for social status':

*Interviewer: So, was the money an attraction point for you or was it just one of those things?*

*Interviewee: Ah, it was one of those things, plus for me it was just people being knowledgeable that I'm dating her. (Kabelo, p. 15)*

*Just people being aware that dating this most beautiful and powerful woman, it was, it was a plus for me. (Kabelo, p. 15)*

In contrast to the majority of studies on age-disparate relationships that cite economic disadvantage as fuelling the high number of age-disparate relationships between younger women and older men (Dunkle et al., 2007; Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017; Giorgio et al., 2016; Maganja et al., 2007), Mpho believed that poverty cannot be cited as young men's motivation for being in age-disparate relationships. He believed that one of the reasons was to fund the township party lifestyle:

*Eish, wa bona sister hare tsena ha baya I could not say hore poverty ke yona e etsang hore ba gcine ba etsa dilo tse di yana wa bona sister. Mara mo kasi re nale batho ba eleng hore ba inelletse too much, like batho ba eleng hore ba dlala bo ma dice.* [Eish you see sister, if we are to dig deeper, I wouldn't say it's because of poverty. But here in the township, there are people who have given up on themselves; people who play dice.] (Mpho, p. 28)

*Hape mo kasi ho groviwa Monday to Sunday.* [Here in the township, people party from Monday to Sunday.] (Mpho, p. 28)

#### **4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 2. 'Positions and stuff like that': The role of sex and sexual pleasure.**

Mpho, despite his misgivings about the older woman and the initial shock of waking up next to her after a night of drinking and sex, commended the older woman's sexual experience and cited that as the reason for staying in the relationship:

*Yah (chuckles) ketlo botsa nnete. No sister le la modimo, yo yo yoo. Like hao nametse mo dimo wa bona.....so sister lela, eish, le wild in a way, in terms of, o nkeditse ke enjoye sex more wae tlhalohanya? [...I'm going to tell you the truth. That woman...like if she's on top of you....that woman is wild in a way...she made me enjoy sex more, you understand?]* (Mpho, p. 16)

*Interviewer: So you are just in this for the fun and the sex?*

*Interviewee: Yes.* (Sello, p. 10)

The older women's sense of sexual adventure was cited by Mpho and Sello as important:

*Eish... Neh maan. Senkile wa bona dilo tse dingwe asenke odi experiense mo lifeng wa bona. Like, nna ke believer hore sex is random, whereby haya tshwanna honna, like ntho one wae tlhalohanya sister? Like mo dimo ha mpeto all the time, ho timiwa mabone wae tlhalohanya? [Eish, no man. It's like some things you've never experienced in life you see. Like, I believe that sex is random, it's not supposed to be the same thing, you understand? Like on the bed every time, lights off, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 16)*

*Interviewee: Cause shem bona... I think I can say I'm enjoying, in terms of sex.*

*Interviewer: Mhm.*

*Interviewee: I enjoy her more than my girlfriend.*

*Interviewer: Why is that?*

*Interviewee: Sigh, she is willing to do anything so... (Sello, p. 16)*

*Interviewee: And sometimes we also do stuff that she don't do with eh, stable guy.*

*Interviewer: Oh, okay.*

*Interviewee: The positions and stuff like that... (Sello, p. 15)*

Sello further cited the physical make-up of the women's genitalia as a contributor to his sexual pleasure. According to him, despite being older, the older women's genitalia were tighter than some younger women's and therefore contributed to heightened sexual pleasure:

*Interviewee: ... And also she's not that big than... She's not bigger than her in terms of stretch, i vagina yakhe. [her vagina.]*

*Interviewer: Oh, okay.*

*Interviewee: She is more tighter than my... (Sello, p. 16)*

*I think... I met this older lady but she is thirty two, last year December, I think we only had sex twice...Leena she's also tight. (Sello, p. 16-17)*

The younger men who cited sex as the motivation for the older women to enter into relationships with younger men also believed that their ability to satisfy the women sexually is important and contributed to the women wanting to stay in those relationships:

*Interviewee: That I'm better than the stable partner.*

*Interviewer: Better in what sense?*

*Interviewee: Well, I take long.*

*Interviewer: Okay.*

*Interviewee: Uhm, well she says I'm bigger than her stable partner. (Sello, p. 15)*

What was interesting was that the younger man did not associate the sexual performance with youth but instead attributed it to his level of fitness:

*Interviewer: Is it... Do you think it's because you are younger that you have all these things that she likes?*

*Interviewee: No, it's cause I'm more fit, I think that's it. It's not because I'm young. I think it's because I'm more fit. (Sello, p. 15)*

Sello further indicated that all the older women cared about was being satisfied sexually

*... Mara la aba dala, ae as long as wena you satisfy them ae its fine. [...but these old ones, as long as you satisfy them it's fine.] (Sello, p. 14)*

Thato shared the same sentiments Sello because he also believes he is there to serve the older woman's sexual needs:

*Interviewer: Mhm, so do you think gore that's the case vele? Do you satisfy her?*

*Interviewee: Ke bona ele byao because you can't spend much time leena, yena the time ago nyaka maybe is the time leya somewhere maybe in a room. [I think so because you can't spend time with her...when she needs you you go to a room.] (Thato, p. 2)*

Sello summed up the view that he had of being in a relationship with older women by indicating that the sexual pleasure received from a woman is far more important than concerns about her age:

*Interviewee: Yes sometimes a guy can have sex with a lady that he doesn't like just because it's sex.*

*Interviewer: Mhm. Okay. So, the age is not an issue for men?*

*Interviewee: Nah. For men I don't think it's an issue. (Sello, p. 13)*

The above reflect the motivations for the younger men. When I asked them what they believed the older women's motivations were, they had different responses, with sex being mentioned explicitly or implicitly by several participants:

*Nna I never thought maybe otl mpotsa hore batho ba banchi baele hore maybe at the age ya hae ha bamo satisfaye maybe when it comes to having sex, something nyana. So maybe o bona okare the youngsters maybe ba sharp, maybe bona ba sale fresh. [I thought she would tell me that most of the people her age don't satisfy her sexually...So maybe she sees youngsters as ideal because they're still fresh.] (Thato, p. 2)*

*... O rata ho bolela ka bana ba bannyane leka mokhoo eleng hore bana ba bannyane they are so vibrant, wae tlhalohanya? ...Yah, hore bana ba bannyane haba bore neh, they will keep you going... [...She likes talking about young boys and how vibrant they are, you understand? ...Yah, that young boys will keep you going.] (Mpho, p. 15)*

*We just meet...I can say she just want sex. (Sello, p. 6)*

Sex and sexual pleasure appear to be an important determinant in the continuation of relationships with older women. However, contrary to the stereotype that it is only the older woman who is being sexually pleased, the young men I interviewed insisted that there is mutual pleasure for both parties derived from these relationships.

### 4.3.1.3 Sub-theme 3. ‘She looks young but she’s old’: The importance of physical appearance.

What a person looks like strongly determines whether or not they will be approached with a view to a relationship (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962). Although the physical appearance of the older women was not the main reason for entering into the relationships, it became apparent that the young men considered it important in the maintenance of these relationships.

Four of the five participants spoke of the physical and ‘youthful’ appearance of the older women in positive terms:

*Even when I met her, she doesn’t look her age. She looks young but she’s old.* (Sello, p. 4)

*Lehe atla ko jarateng maan, ase sister lela la mmele, o sharp, mmele wa hae o sharp maan. Ke motho o eleng hore okase monahanele wa bona.* [Even when she comes to my mother’s house, she is petite...so you wouldn’t suspect anything.] (Mpho, p. 10)

*So, the issue was, she’s too much beautiful, stunning....and well-built.* (Kabelo, p. 5)

*She was five years older than me, the way she, the body, I mean she, the, her physical appearance where she look like a... a young person.* (Molefe, p. 6)

It would appear that despite the older women’s age, their physical appearance made it easier for the younger men to stay in relationships with them. Perhaps this is because it will not be immediately evident from an outsider’s point of view that the younger men are dating someone who is older than them.

#### 4.3.1.4 Sub-theme 4. 'Wena kwena mosadi': The role of culture and respect.

The literature reviewed in a previous chapter highlighted the importance of culture in shaping relationships and relationship expectations between men and women. Aspects of these cultural expectations kept emerging during the interviews with the younger men.

The most striking way in which culture emerged in the interviews is in relation to the issue of respect. Almost all the participants seemed to believe that by virtue of being men, the women should show them respect because it is culturally expected of them:

*Serious nna ke phela ke mo kgala all the time wa bona, all the time. Like ke tlhaha ke mmotsa nna from the first place hore nna kenna monna wena kwena mosadi...*

*So ke believer hore mosadi o tshwantse a respecte monna before reya khole. [I always reprimand her. I remind her that I'm a man and you're a woman... So I believe that a woman must respect a man.] (Mpho, p. 18)*

Sello also believed that he set the terms of their engagement:

*Cause, in fact I'm the one who's leading...Yah. She always see me when I want to see her and I'm free. (Sello, p. 8)*

Molefe had a different experience to the other participants because despite believing he must be respected, he felt that he did not get it from his partner:

*...and also respect was not there, umh, and also she was umh, selfish and then she also don't know how to solve problems, she don't listen and... that's when I end up the relationship (Molefe, p. 5)*

Apart from Molefe, who believed that the woman was naturally disrespectful, the other participants depicted the older women as displaying the respect that men need:

*Interviewee: Who's boss? Is me.*

*Interviewer: It's you?*

*Interviewee: Yah.*

*Interviewer: What is the reason for that?*

*Interviewee: I don't know, she's very, she's very understanding. (Sello, p. 8)*

Thato received the respect that he needed, but felt that it would not last long:

*Interviewer: Do you feel hore waho respecter [...that she respects...] though?*

*Interviewee: Yah, yena at the first time batlo bontsha respect mara I think hore haetsenella there won't be no respect... [Yah, she will initially show you respect but as time goes respect won't be there] (Thato, p. 9)*

Mpho, on the other hand, received the respect; however, he referred to it as a necessity because the woman wanted to ensure that he did not leave:

*Interviewer: So wa gofa yona [So does she give you...] that respect?*

*Interviewee: Yah, wamfa mara not ... Omfa yona mara eish, when it's necessary wae tlhalohanya? [Yah, she does give it to me, but ...She gives it to me but, eish, when it's necessary, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 18)*

Unlike the other participants who sought and received respect from the women, Kabelo only mentioned the respect he received from the older woman's son. For him, this was important as he was anxious due to the son's age; that is, 18 years:

*And eish, that's why I say it's God's grace cause I was surprised. That boy respected me and bowed to me, as in maybe... As in maybe I'm sixty years old or something... (Kabelo, p. 17-18)*

The above supports the findings from Silberschmidt (2001) who cautioned against assuming that because the women are better positioned economically they will 'automatically' assume a superior

position. Men subscribe to deeply entrenched masculine gender and cultural scripts of dominance and power (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009) and these find their way into their relationships. The women in the above relationships gave the men the respect they believed they needed because of the equally entrenched cultural scripts of submissiveness and powerlessness. This masculine power that the men held is important when it comes to the discussion on agentic power in age-disparate relationships.

#### **4.3.1.5 Sub-theme 5. Learning journeys.**

A final motivation mentioned by some participants was a desire to expand their horizons by seeing for themselves what being in a relationship with an older person is like and perhaps learning something from the more experienced partner.

Although Thato cited sex as the reason for the older woman to go into a relationship with him, he cited his own motivation for agreeing to the older woman's proposition as curiosity:

*Interviewer: Curiosity ya gago neele around eng? Neo nyaka...[What was your curiosity about? You wanted...]*

*Interviewee: Neke nyako bona like, akere nekentse ke itsi gore go nale batho ba ba daetang old women and le hore ba yang then ere ke utlwe hore pila pila ho irahalang mo teng, mo situation seo sa relationship [I wanted to see what exactly happens there because I knew there were people who dated old women and how they were. So let me see for myself what happens in that relationship situation.] (Thato, p. 8)*

Molefe on the other hand believed that the older woman's age and divorce history will make her an ideal partner who can teach him about life:

*Firstly I thought that person who is older than me I was gonna learn more since well she was previously married... (Molefe, p. 5)*

### 4.3.2 Theme 2: Risks or discouraging factors

Just as the initiation of relationships is informed by motivating factors, there are also factors that lead to the termination of romantic relationships. According to SET, these can be referred to as the costs (Wang, 2004). These costs are usually negative and can be casually referred to as ‘deal-breakers’ because they may lead to loss or punishment and therefore render the relationships unsustainable.

#### 4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 1. ‘Her way or the high way’: Power dynamics in age-disparate relationships.

One of the motivations or benefits I highlighted involved the cultural expectations of the younger men to be respected by their partners. Although these men received the respect they believed is due to them because they are men, they still held concerns about the possible power that the older partners might have because they have economic power (Dworkin et al., 2012).

Power dynamics in age-disparate relationships are usually informed by the financial and social status of the older partner (Cook & Rice, 2003). In female-younger relationships, it is generally accepted that the man, by virtue of having more resources, will determine the relationship parameters. In this study, however, the roles were reversed.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the younger men felt that the older women were or wanted to be in control. The younger men who took issue with being ‘controlled’ labelled the older women as ‘control freaks’ denoting a sense of control that was beyond the average levels.

*...how can I put it? A control freak. She was eeh, aggressive and umh, kana lee bitsang nthoe [...what do you call this thing again?]? Eeh motho a [A person who...] ... eish... yah I think control freak is the right word ... (Molefe, p.5)*

*...ga retla ko di negative ya bora because ke fetsa ho bolela, yoba a control freak motho oo, so ogo controller byanong kaore ke bone example ka someone nna o neele gore wa*

*benefiter... [...when it comes to the negatives it can be boring because like I said, this person will be a control freak...they'll control you because I saw with somebody who was benefitting...]* (Thato, p. 8)

*.....O tlo batla hore holle sa hae stlhako sa mathomo. She won't understand he ke mmotsa hore nna keya di partying, ketswa le batho, wae tlhalohanya?... Otlo phela ale mo dimo haka wae tlhalohanya. [...she'll want to be in charge. She won't understand when I tell her that I'm going to a party, going out with people, you understand?...She'll always be on my case, you understand?]* (Mpho, p. 7)

*Yah, and then... she wanted things to be done her way or high ways .... selfish and then she also don't know how to solve problems, she don't listen and... that's when I end up the relationship.* (Molefe, p. 5)

*Cause even now when we fight like she would mention those naughty words like you boy, you are a boy, you know, there is lack of respect.* (Molefe, p. 6)

When asked about whether the benefits he might get from the relationship outweighed the disadvantages, Thato expressed that it is the woman's financial standing that informed her role in the relationship:

*O kaba boss but if o rekile dilo tse di tswang mo cheleteng ya gao. Obviously, o kase nyake motho aho botse selo eleng hore ha compromiser ka something, ke tsa hao, everything, ball pen, buka... lebati le tsentswe kwena. [You can only be the boss if you bought something with your own money. Obviously you can't want another person to tell you what to do if they haven't contributed anything.]* (Thato, p. 9)

Kabelo believed that both he and the older partner are in control, but with regard to different aspects of the relationship:

*Interviewer: Okay, so in this relationship, what are the power dynamics? Who is the boss, who was the boss in this relationship?*

*Interviewee: ... I will say, intellectually, she was very wise, but mainly, I was manipulating her psychologically. (Kabelo, p. 10)*

Being the younger person in a heterosexual relationship inevitably confronts a man with the possibility of a reversal of gender role expectations (Dworkin et al., 2012; Maundeni, 2004), and it was clear from my conversations with the participants that they all experienced some degree of discomfort in this regard. The men dealt with this challenge in a variety of different ways: typecasting the female partner as a control freak; complaining about a lack of respect; simply accepting the realities of the implicit ‘deal’ with their partner; ending the relationship; or claiming power over some aspects of the relationship for themselves while conceding other aspects to their partner.

#### **4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2. ‘Too much beautiful’: The risk of pregnancy and infection.**

I broached the topic of the risks (if any) associated with being in a romantic relationship with an older woman in each of the interviews with the young men.

Age-disparate relationships have been linked to a number of risks because of the age and economic discrepancies between the partners (Ott et al., 2011; Shisana et al., 2009; Zembe et al., 2013); for example, the risk of HIV infection and gender based violence (Parker & Hajiyanis, 2008; Tallis, 2012). In such relationships, the older partner is usually the one who has economic power which often translates into sexual power (Pettifor et al., 2004). For the young men I interviewed, risk was mainly linked to the possibility of pregnancy and infection.

*Like, otlo lwala then wa kereya ngwana leena, wa kereya gore your parents gaba nyake gore o date an older woman. [You will get sick then have a child with her, and you will find that your parents don’t want you to date an older woman.] (Thato, p. 12)*

*Interviewer: What do you think is the worst that can happen?*

*Interviewee: Nka lwala or wa mo impregnenta, is the worst thing that I think. [I will get sick or impregnate her...] (Thato, p. 5)*

*Interviewer: Uhm so issues like HIV and sexually transmitted infections at this point are not a concern for you?*

*Interviewee: Well, they are a concern. (Sello, p. 9)*

*I was worried, that's why I say I was holding thumbs that she should not get pregnant. (Kabelo, p.14)*

As the young men saw it, their partner's sexual appetite potentially opened up a conduit for other men's diseases to be passed on to them. For example, Mpho believed that the older woman's alleged reputation (promiscuity and being involved with younger men) coupled with her profession as a member of the army made her a high risk partner in terms of infection:

*Wa bona, le nale flopo, le rata batho ba banna...*

*... Masole ama baya, a lwala. [You see, she's not good; she loves men...*

*A lot of people in the army are sick.] (Mpho, p. 22)*

Similarly, Kabelo was also concerned about the risk of infection because the woman was 'too beautiful':

*Yah, cause the thing was... My thinking was, this woman, she's too much beautiful and well-built....*

*And it's obvious, all men in the world would run after her and I was thinking what if she's sick and there's something wrong with her. I was hesitant about that, that's the reason why we were using protection. (Kabelo, p. 14)*

It is generally accepted that partners who engage in secret multiple concurrent relationships are at high risk of HIV infection (Aondohemba, 2017), and the participants in this study seemed well

aware of these risks, taking (or at least claiming to take) the necessary steps to minimise them by using condoms.

*And motho o mo byana, that is why otlo phela o berekisa condom hee onale ena, okase itebale, wae thlalojanya. [And this type of person, that's why you will always use condoms when you're with her. You can't be too comfortable, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 22)*

*And then lenna okase itsi, so I told her gore sister waitsi mo hoetsahalang, mo are berekise protection, wae thlalojanya. [So you can't really tell...so I told this woman that you know what, we need to use protection, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 14)*

*Interviewer: Is it protected?*

*Interviewee: Yah protected.*

*Interviewer: All the time?*

*Interviewee: Yah, all the time. (Thato, p. 5)*

*Interviewer: Where you able to negotiate protection, or was it her call?*

*Interviewee: No, it was our own decision to use protection.*

*Interviewer: Mhm.*

*Interviewee: So even the time we decided to not use protection anymore, so it was both our decision. (Molefe, p. 6)*

The participants that chose or were planning not to use condoms indicated that they went for HIV testing:

*... I think after six weeks, she requested that we go do test to check status. We went, it came out negative both and then we stopped using protection after then, after results came back. (Kabelo, p. 13)*

*Until mo hotlo fitlhang nako ya hore we trust each other whereby we can go ro tester rele two wa bona. [Until such time that we trust each other, then we can go test you see.] (Mpho, p. 14)*

Just as the younger men were concerned about the above risks, two of the older women also, according to the interviewees, took measures to minimize their own risk:

*It's only condom. She's the one who make sure that we do it with the condom...Sometimes I can try not use a condom but she will refuse. (Sello, p. 9)*

*Interviewer: And in terms of that, were you using protection, who was deciding whether or not to use protection? Those kind of things.*

*Interviewee: It was her initially. (Kabelo, p. 13)*

The above is contrary to the literature on women-younger age-disparate relationships where condom use is rare and is determined by the older, resourced partner (Luke, 2005). In such relationships entrenched hegemonic masculine beliefs combine with economic status to determine that it is the male partner who decides on condom usage, whereas in the men-younger age-disparate relationships I investigated male hegemony and economic status do not coincide and the decision-making process regarding condom-usage is therefore less clear-cut.

### **4.3.3 Theme 3: Context of relationships**

If we are to understand the nature of relationships where the man is the younger partner, it is important to explore the context within which they exist because relationships do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced, among other things, by the context (Silberschmidt, 2001).

#### **4.3.3.1 Sub-theme 1. 'We have our people': The issue of concurrency.**

One of the practices that are influenced strongly by context is being involved in multiple and concurrent relationships (AIDSTAR-One, 2009). Eaton et al. (2011) define multiple and concurrent

partnerships as partnerships that overlap in time. According to Mojola (2014), the older partner in age-disparate relationships is usually married, divorced or widowed. This was found to be true in this study as four of the older women in relationships with the participants were divorcees. Furthermore, two of the older women were also concurrently in relationships with partners their own age.

*Interviewer: The older woman?*

*Interviewee: Beside the older oe beye aside, so kere fela nte kere motho o mongwe, like my age my age. [Let's set aside the older woman for now; I mean another person]*

*Interviewer: Oh so o nale your girlfriend? [So you have a girlfriend?]*

*Interviewee: Yah. (Thato, p. 1)*

*Interviewer: Okay. So this relationship took place in 2014?*

*Interviewee: Yah.*

*Interviewer: While you were married?*

*Interviewee: Yah. (Kabelo, p. 3)*

*Interviewee: Yah we are just nje... Because she's also having someone. She's having a stable, a stable guy.*

*Interviewer: Mhm.*

*Interviewee: I'm also having a stable girlfriend (chuckles) (Sello, p. 5)*

The above confirms what has been cited in existing literature that age-disparate relationships usually occur within the context of multiple and concurrent partnerships either in marriage or stable relationships with same-age partners (AIDSTAR-One, 2009; Longfield et al., 2002; "Statistical Release," 2012 and Zembe et al., 2013).

However, this was not universally true for the participants in my study. At the time of the interview, Mpho was single and not in a relationship. When I asked him if he would consider continuing the relationship with the older woman even after he gets a girlfriend his age, he indicated that it would

be wrong to be involved with two people at the same time. It could be that, unlike several of the other participants, he does not believe in having multiple and concurrent partnerships:

*Aee maan. Ae ekase spane... ke believer hore ke trap maan, o kase rate ngwana wa batho while you are busy le motho o mongwe ka mo moraho. [No man, it won't work...I believe it's a trap; you can't be involved with a woman while you're busy with another one behind her back.] (Mpho, p. 23)*

#### **4.3.3.2 Sub-theme 3. 'This one is mine': Secrecy versus public display.**

Another emerging element of these relationships which is linked to concurrency is that they take place in secret and are hidden, or that there is contestation in the relationship about the degree to which it should become public knowledge. The younger men I spoke to generally did not want their relationships to be known:

*Interviewer: Okay. Umh, batho ba tseba ka relationship ya lena? [Uhm, do people know about your relationship?]*

*Interviewee: Only certain people know, like my friends and few. So, yah. Ago itsi batho ba bantsi. [Not a lot of people know.] (Thato, p. 6)*

*Yah ke tshaba ho bonwa. That is why kere this relationship ena neh, haya tshwanna ho kereya eya khole wae tlhalohanya? [Yah I'm afraid of being seen. Hence I say this relationship mustn't go far, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 25)*

*Where she works, umh I'll say, long distance families or cousin of my wife, works there... She reports to her... Yah. So that's why the... I wanted things to be private. (Kabelo, p. 11)*

Some of the older women however, wanted the relationships to be public and the younger men were opposed to it:

*Like, mostly she needed... gatherings. That I come by her place, she calls her friends, the kids. Is like she needed to make a label to the world that this one is mine, the whole world must know that. She wanted everything to be public knowledge that she has a man and everybody must know it and we must always go in public galleries together, holding hands to show that we are partners, things like that. And I was not comfortable with that. (Kabelo, p. 10)*

*Ha'ee, wa itsi abilane leena. O khonore maybe re tswile maybe a ngfounetse hore maybe ko choming ya haye ho nale bo party ho nale bo eng eng wa bona, a nwe thata and then abatle dilo tsela tsa ho ngaparela-ngaparela mo hare a batho wae tlhalohanya... Eeh, kemo tseela kontle komo kgala nou... [No, she also knows because sometimes when we go to parties with her friends she might have a lot to drink and then want to cuddle in public, you understand? I take her to the side immediately and reprimand her.] (Mpho, p. 17)*

The need for secrecy in these relationships could be due to the concurrent nature thereof because in most of the cases, both partners had stable partners of the same age. However, negative social and familial perceptions regarding age-disparate relationships most probably also added to their secretive and hidden nature.

#### **4.3.4 Theme 4: Perceptions of male-younger age-disparate relationships**

Age-disparate romantic and sexual relationships are generally viewed with some suspicion, especially so for female-older relationships. Cowan (1984) demonstrated that the double standard of ageing (in terms of which women are judged more severely for aging than men) strongly shapes perceptions of female-older age-disparate relationships, with highly discrepant female-older relationships being judged much less probable of success than equivalent male-older relationships. However, from talking to the participants included in my study it is my impression that there is considerable variation within this generally unfavourable view, depending in part on a person's personal involvement with and familiarity with such relationships. . Below I discuss participants'

own perceptions, the perceptions of their female partners, their family and friends (as relayed by the participants), as well as those of society at large.

#### **4.3.4.1 Sub-theme 1. ‘Nothing but a number’: The views of participants and their partners.**

Having been (and in most cases still being) involved with older women, the participants were probably in a better position than most to express an informed opinion about such relationships. It was therefore striking that several did not have clear-cut pro or anti views about such relationships, but instead appeared to be somewhat ambivalent.

For example, when asked about his experience, Thato indicated that he was undecided in terms of his view; on one hand he entered into the relationship willingly, while on the other he was worried about possible mistreatment from the older woman:

*Interviewer: Hm. So wena oebona as what? [So what do you see it as?]*

*Interviewee: Nna, nna I'm between. Like ke between yona this. Ha utlwe kere akso made up my mind hore pila pila ke left or right but hoya kanna nna ke nyaka ho e fetsa. [I'm in the middle. I'm in the middle with this. Hence I say I haven't made up my mind whether I go left or right...the way I see it, it must just end.] (Thato, p. 6)*

However, others were much more decisive in their negative evaluation:

*Interviewee: Ah wa bona sister e, generally nna, like nna for my side, hae sharp, totally.*

*Hae sharp. [You see, generally, from my side, it's totally not a good thing.]*

*Interviewer: So you wouldn't encourage other people...?*

*Interviewee: Hore bae etse, no hae sharp. [Encourage them to do it? ...no it's not right.] (Mpho, p. 30)*

Although Molefe had a negative experience while dating an older woman, he did not have any objections to dating them (older women) provided some elements are present in the relationship:

*...that cause I said hore [that] age is nothing but a number, it depends on the maturity, communication, respect. As long as those things are there, I don't see why you cannot date an older person. (Molefe, p, 9)*

*Interviewer: If you hear of any of your friends being in this type of relationship...*

*Interviewee: I won't say to the person he must leave the, the woman cause of what I have experienced cause people they don't, people are not the same. So, maybe for them it will work out, I just have to give support to a friend and not judge. (Molefe, p, 9)*

Sello also gave conditional approval to age-disparate relationships, provided the (apparent) age difference is not too wide:

*Uhm, it depend the gap, how much is it. I think ten years is too much...*

*Mara ah, five... I think it depend on the age and the body of the person. Eh like I said that one, she's ten years older but she looks younger, so we can compromise there. (Sello, p. 12)*

Kabelo was the only participant who unconditionally endorsed being in a relationship with an older woman, although he did not elaborate on his reasons for doing so:

*Interviewer: Okay. And she fact that she was older, was it an issue for you?*

*Interviewee: Ha'ee nex, same. (Kabelo, p. 15)*

While the younger men had varying, ambivalent and conditional views and perceptions of age-disparate relationships, they generally reported the older women as being fine with such relationships, although usually qualified by stipulations regarding the desired characteristics (maturity, intellect, sense of humour, etcetera) of the younger men:

*Interviewee: She was aware that I was younger than her so she didn't have a problem.*

*Interviewer: Okay. She was okay with it?*

*Interviewee: Cause she said age is nothing but a number, but what counts is the maturity of the person, so yah. (Molefe, p. 8)*

*...I ask her her stand in that and all that...*

*And then she said (clears throat), age difference does sometimes matter. (Kabelo, p. 16)*

Kabelo indicated that although the older woman acknowledged that age can be an issue, there were things about him such as his ‘intellect’ that she liked:

*But with me, it didn't matter or she didn't mind it cause I give her a sense of humour, as in I'm same age as hers... Cause, she said, eh, intellectually I give her sense, as in I'm same age as hers. (Kabelo, p. 16)*

#### **4.3.4.2 Sub-theme 2. ‘Ke o mo holo mo wena’: Family perceptions.**

In most cases the younger partners were not ‘out’ to their families about their relationships because they believed that their families would not approve of these relationships as they go against social norms and expectations.

Mpho reported that his sister was vocal about indicating that the older woman has already had her share of ‘the good life’ and should leave the younger man to focus on his own life:

*Yah, so yanong sister laka o busy every day, motho o ke o mo holo mo wena, motho o what what, bare ne a nyetswe o nale bana kwa a tlhahang. Wa bona yanong hore wetsa le oulady a nne too much mo molaleng. [Yah, so my older sister is busy every day; this person is older than you, this person what what; they say she was married and has kids where she comes from. You see now she's even putting my mom too much on my case.] (Mpho, p. 10)*

*Interviewer: Mm. Ba tseba batsadi ba hao? [Do your parents know?]*

*Interviewee: Mm mm.*

*Interviewer: Ga ba tsebe? What do you think they would do ge baka tseba? [They don't know? What do you think they would do if they knew?]*

*Interviewee: Ah obvious, bo lwa, ba kase dumelane leona, bo mpotsa hore you've lost your mind. O ka dater motho o moholo, ele hore dithaka tsago di teng. O nagana gore motho oo o fella kae leena? Ke ka mokho ba ka mpotsang. [Ah obvious, they will fight; they won't agree with it; they will they will ask me if I've lost my mind. How can you date an old person when there are girls your age? Where do you think this will end up? That's how they will tell me.] (Thato, p. 12)*

Sello also believed that his family would object to the relationship mainly because of his upbringing and Christian background:

*Interviewer: Okay, so the family doesn't know about you and this woman?*

*Interviewee: No, they doesn't know.*

*Interviewer: Why do you think they won't take it well?*

*Interviewee: Sigh, ah, I mean the way I grew up like I said, I come from a Christian family, I grew up in church kind of school. It will be a surprise, I mean, how can I go for an older woman? (Sello, p. 7)*

There were, however, some exceptions such as Molefe who indicated that his parents accepted the relationship:

*Honestly I don't know cause nna my parents they never asked me that question, they just supported. As long as I'm happy, so whatever that makes me happy, so, yah. (Molefe, p. 9)*

An interesting element that emerged from the interviews with the participants was that the older women's family are reported as being generally less judgmental than the younger men's family. For example, the older woman involved with Kabelo had two children who accepted and respected him:

*Yah. But he respected me as if I'm sixty years old. He could be... He could see, he was aware that I'm younger to his mother. (Kabelo, p. 18)*

*The fourteen year old, mhm. Yoo, she like me as if I'm her biological father. (Kabelo, p. 18)*

Thato indicated that the older woman's cousin knew about him and the relationship and there was no judgment. The cousin even spent time with him in the absence of the older woman:

*Interviewee: Yah keitsi ke cousin engwe yana, e nale 32 cousin e nkitsing. [There's this one cousin, she's 32; she knows me.]*

*Interviewer: E jwang? How do they react to relationship ya lena? [How is it? How do they react to your relationship?]*

*Interviewee: Ah, hana problem, leena o kgona go mfounela ampotse hore o ko kae ke nyakahore retswe re tsamaye ba botlhe. Yena haana problem. [Ah, she doesn't have a problem, she can also call me, ask where I am and we go out. She doesn't have a problem.] (Thato, p. 5)*

Although the above quotes reflected the open-mindedness or acceptance of some of the older women's families, there were still those that did not approve. However, it was interesting to note that people who did not approve of the relationships were presented in the interviews as wanting the younger men for themselves. For example, Mpho's partner had an 18 year old daughter who knew him but thought that he was her mother's colleague. Mpho believed that the daughter would not approve because she was also interested in him:

*Interviewee: You could see hore leena ngwana ola o nale di looks tse di blind towards nna wa bona. [You could see that this child has certain looks towards me.]*

*Interviewer: O nale eng? [What does she have?]*

*Interviewee: Like di looks tsahe towards nna ke tsela tse bontshang hore mara why o sa ngfase. [Like her looks towards me show that she's wondering why I don't hook up with her.] (Mpho, p. 24)*

Kabelo also indicated that in addition to the older woman's children, his wife's cousin knew about the relationship and did not approve because she was herself interested in him:

*Interviewer: So the only person who knew from your side was this cousin of your wife.*

*Interviewer: And cause she wanted you for herself she never told other people? (Kabelo, p. 23)*

#### **4.3.4.3 Sub-theme 3. 'What is happening here?': Friends' perceptions.**

As was the case with the younger men's own perceptions as well as the perceptions of their families, their friends (and their partner's friends) also had mixed views about their age-disparate relationships. Some were unequivocally approving:

*My friends, waitsi bashimane enoba bashimane, ga bana taba. Ke bona ba itsing. [...you know boys are just boys, they don't care. They are the ones who know.] (Thato, p. 6)*

In other cases, friends were not as supportive. Mpho's friends viewed it in both a positive and a negative light. The ones who encouraged it also wanted older women for the benefits:

*Bona ba nyaka di benefits kaore that is why keho botsa kere a hona hore okanna le sister le le hole ole o monnyane osa nyake di benefits, hae khonahale. [They want benefits. That is why I'm telling you there's no way you can be with an older woman while you're young if you didn't want benefits; it's impossible.] (Mpho, p. 27)*

Sello's flat mates and colleagues (friends) knew about the relationship, but seemed to be more surprised that he is in an age-disparate relationship than surprised about the relationship itself:

*Ah my colleagues have never seen her physically but they just know that there's this person, they don't say anything. They are just surprised, like most people they say that; that quite guy kante [...we didn't know...] he can do stuff like that. (Sello, p. 11)*

The friends and colleagues did not however, have negative sentiments around the relationship itself:

*Interviewer: Mhm, but anything negative they said?*

*Interviewee: No, nothing. (Sello, p. 11)*

Just with the older partner's families, there seemed to be a general acceptance of the relationships. For example, Molefe's older partner's friends seemed to accept the relationship, despite knowing that he was younger than her:

*Ae I don't know what was the reaction of her friends because I only met one, I mean two while we were dating, two friends and then they accepted me as...and they also approved the relationship, so they didn't have a problem. (Molefe, p. 8)*

*Yah, di chomi tsa hae. So okereya batla mo nna bare eish mara papa ntho e oe etsang (chuckles). I'm like yoo, hebanna, lefatshe le ke lele byang (chuckles), kele makalletse in a way wae tlhalohanya? [Yah, her friends. You find that they come to me saying daddy what you're doing (chuckles). I get surprised, like what is happening on this earth? It really surprises me, you understand?] (Mpho, p. 17)*

There was one friend to the older woman, however, who tried to discourage him from being with the older woman because she had a certain reputation which apparently led to the failure of her marriage. Mpho reported her as saying:

*Aee maan, motho omo so ha sharp...Waitsi hore ho etsahetse ka lenyalo la hae? .....mangmang o rata di party, mangmang ke motho le bana wae tlhalohanya? [No, this person isn't good. Do you know what happened with her marriage? ...she likes to party and she likes young boys, you understand?] (Mpho, p.21)*

#### 4.3.4.4 Sub-theme 4. ‘When it comes to guys, there is no problem’: Public perceptions.

The family’s views are usually influenced by the views of the society they exist within. It is therefore not surprising that, given the mostly negative familial views, the younger men also believed that society generally frowns upon age-disparate relationships, particularly when the man is the younger partner.

Molefe believed that people are not supportive of relationships where the man is younger:

*Yah, people are not supportive of that because eeh, maybe, I don’t know what is the reason behind of not supporting ... (Molefe, p. 9)*

Although Molefe’s family was supportive, he believed that even though society generally does not accept the relationships, the people who are most affected is the family:

*Interviewer: Okay. Do you think generally society thinks like you? They don’t judge, they accept?*

*Interviewee: They are few, even though, you know like, facing the reality, no parent that can allow or approve their children to date older women. (Molefe, p. 9)*

By contrast, Sello believed that generally society did not judge men’s choices, implicitly linking this to the notion that men are generally allowed freedoms that are not extended to women where sexual matters are concerned (Maudeni, 2004):

*A guy being younger than the woman? I think most people, when it comes to guys, there is no problem. Because, I don’t know this, but as guys, ah we don’t have a problem...*

*Because most of us we talk about sex. The more... the most important thing to guys, just as long as you are having sex. (Sello, p. 13)*

Thato believed that society's perceptions are both negative and positive looking at the different elements that might influence those views; for example, the prospect of material benefits make them attractive while the age gap makes them negative:

*Some negative, some positive. Ba eleng hore bae bona negative ba nale hore hae motho o ke o moholo gao ntshwanne, dithaka tsago, hee. Ba ba positive bare hae o shap o tla o irela dilo tse pila, maybe a ka ho kereela koloi la kereya ntlu. So ke dilo tse o di kereyang in negative and positive stories. [Those that see it as negative say an older woman doesn't suit you, there are your peers. The positive ones say she's fine because she will do nice things for you; she can maybe buy you a car, you get a house. So that's what I find in negative and positive stories.] (Thato, p. 6)*

Mpho believed that in his township people did not have a problem with age-disparate relationships because they do not feel guilty about anything, by implication suggesting that people should feel guilty because these relationships are 'wrong':

*Eish, ya mo kasi e byana neh, ke nyaka ho botsa nnete sister, mo kasi ha bana die ding ela ya hore, ha bana letswalo lela la hore eish... Nou mo kasi, keho botsa kere bo ma sixty percent or fifty percent enna le batho ba eleng hore ke ba ba holo. [Eish, yes in the township it's like this; I want to tell you the truth now. In the township people don't have that guilt that eish... Now in the township, I tell you, about sixty or fifty percent date older people.] (Mpho, p. 28)*

#### **4.3.5 Other distinguishing features**

In addition to the above themes, there are other distinctive features of these relationships that emerged during analysis. These could not be placed under any of the above themes, but cannot be disregarded because they also contribute to the understanding of age-disparate relationships between younger men and older women.

#### 4.3.5.1 Sub-theme 1. 'It won't last': Duration of age-disparate relationships.

The duration or future success of age-disparate relationships is rarely discussed in the literature. Although the participants' relationships were at varying stages in terms of duration, only one of the participants, Mpho, overtly hoped for a longer- lasting relationship. The other participants did not enter the relationship with a view to a longer partnership.

Relationships were generally (expected to be) of relatively short duration due to an array of challenges identified by the younger men:

*Interviewer: Mm. Mara ga ele difference ya five years, don't you think gore le ka dula?*  
[But if the age difference was five years, would you be involved?]

*Interviewee: Ah nna ake bone, hae.* [No, I don't see it happening, no.]

*Interviewer: Ga oe bone?* [You don't see it happening?]

*Interviewee: Mm mm.* [No.] (Thato, p. 12)

*Interviewer: Is it better though? Is it better than ge o nale yona girlfriend ya gao?* [...when you are with your girlfriend?]

*Interviewee: Ah, it's not better cause it won't last.*

*Interviewer: O tseba jwang hore it won't last?* [How do you know that it won't last?]

*Interviewee: Ah, relationship that goes fast it will never last.* (Thato, p. 4)

It appears that Thato's reasons for the short duration of the relationship centred around the pace with which the relationship was moving because according to him, the older woman rushed into sex as opposed to getting to know each other better.

*Relationship e, ekanna ya fela wa bona. Nna this relationship acae lebella in a manner ya hore mothoo nkamo nyala you know, ah-ah, it is just an experience yaka. Enoba experience ya bophelo wae tlhalohanya?* [You see, this relationship can end. I'm not even looking at it in terms of marriage, no. It's just an experience I wanted to have in life, you understand?]  
(Mpho, p. 17)

*(chuckles), longer relation you mean like future? Eh, no no no. We will still continue with fun but nothing like her as a wife or like that, nah nah nah... (Sello, p. 7)*

*Interviewer: Okay. But you want to marry them?*

*Interviewee: No I don't want to (chuckles).*

*Interviewer: You would just do it for the sex and the fun, but not for long-term commitment?*

*Interviewee: Not for long-term commitment. (Sello, p. 18)*

When I probed further as to why the younger men would not marry or commit to the older women, Sello cited the age gap as too wide and therefore socially unacceptable:

*Interviewee: She's older and ten years is too much.*

*Interviewer: Mhm. So the age difference bothers you?*

*Interviewee: Yah. Ten years, ae [no] is too much for you can be my wife. (Sello, p. 7)*

Unlike the other older women who were relatively younger, the older woman who was in a relationship with Kabelo appeared to seek stability beyond a casual relationship:

*She ask me do I have intentions of marrying her, leaving my wife and marrying her.  
(Kabelo, p. 20)*

In addition to enquiring about the duration and expected future success of current relationships, it was also important to establish if any of the participants had been in relationships with older women before and whether they would consider another similar relationship. The participants' responses varied in that two of them indicated they would not do it again, while the other two emphasised that they would:

*Interviewer: Mm, now that oe kwele, would you do it again?*

*Interviewee: Ah, ya bora nkase e repeate gape. [Ah, it's boring I won't repeat it.] (Thato, p. 8)*

*Uhm, is something that I will never go back because of what I have experienced previously.*  
(Molefe, p. 8)

Sello and Kabelo have both been in relationships with older women in the past; Sello's current relationship is his third with an older woman, and Kabelo's his second. They further indicated that they would get involved with them again should the opportunity present itself in the future because, according to Sello, unlike women his age, older women are not demanding:

*Interviewer: Would you do it again?*

*Interviewee: Yah. I think, you see, older women like I said, they are very understanding. They don't ask a lot of questions, nini-nini [all of a sudden] they try to call you, where are you, ae [no], the rest of them a bana jealousy. [...they are not jealous.]* (Sello, p. 14)

Kabelo, however, was in two minds about this:

*Interviewer: Okay. Would you date another older woman? Is it an issue for you?*

*Interviewee: ... Yah, effects of it. The ultimate effects of it are not wise and I wouldn't mind, but the ultimate effect...* (Kabelo, p. 23)

The 'ultimate effect' that Kabelo was referring to was the older woman's desire to get married. Mpho was undecided because on one hand he is adamant that these relationships are not good and he will not do it again:

*Interviewer: Ke raore lege e se ka oo, do you think gore o tloba le... Go nale possibility ya gore obe le relationship engwe le an older woman? [Even if it's not with this specific woman, do you think there is a possibility of having another relationship with an older woman?]*

*Interviewee: Mcaa-ae hake tshepe, eish ae hake tshepe sister. [I don't think so, no I doubt it.]* (Mpho, p.27)

However, in the next breath he says he might consider it at some point:

*Mara hase ntho e eleng hore ke tlabe kee batla wa bona, mara hokaba ledi chances tsa hore ke boelle moraho wa bona, so nkasere never. [It won't necessarily be something I want, but should the opportunity present itself again. I can never say never.] (Mpho, p. 29)*

In addition to possible future relationships, the participants and I also discussed what, in their view, would lead to the end of their current age-disparate relationship. Sello believed that the relationship would end should he or the older woman get married:

*Interviewer: At what point are you going to end the relationship? Do you think it's something that will just end?*

*Interviewee: It will end yes, I think when I decide to take a wife, that's where it will end. (Sello, p. 13)*

*I'm not sure from her side. But I think cause right now we are not married, she's just that stable boyfriend for her so maybe the time she decide to marry her, that's when it will stop. (Sello, p. 13)*

Mpho also believed that the start of a new relationship, if he found someone his own age who would listen to him, would mark the end of his relationship with the older woman.

*Mara nna relationship ena sister nkase ho botse hore kae guaranteeya in a manner ya hore re nale ngwaha or two years. Ntho enngwe le engwe ekano etsahala mo ngwaheng, nkate kereela motho o eleng hore ke thaka yaka otlo nkutlwellang and ten dilo tsaka dibe sharp. Nna koe fetsa. [This relationship, I can't say I guarantee it will last a year or two. Anything can happen in a year; I might find someone my age who will listen to me and my things are fine. Then I'll end it.] (Mpho, p. 22)*

Mpho said he would also end the relationship if she gets to a point of wanting to get married:

*Yah eish, wa bona eo sister neh, nekentse ke nahana hore ka nna le die sister hero tlo tlohelana gotlo etsahalang mara? Kae lebella kare okay, die sister le, he nako entse eya, otlo batla ho nyadiwa wae tlhalohanya?* [Yes eish, I've been thinking about that one wondering what will happen in the future. I thought that this woman, as time goes, will want to be married; you understand?] (Mpho, p. 20)

Some participants were open to the possibility of a long-term committed relationship with an older woman. For example, Sello and Kabelo indicated that under the right conditions, they might consider marrying or committing to an older woman:

*I don't know maybe she... A two year, two years different or one year I can consider.* (Sello, p. 18)

*Yah, if maybe, if I wasn't happy I would give it a thought maybe, ending the marriage and going for her...Cause I was very much happy with her.* (Kabelo, p. 24)

Thato, although having initially indicated that he does not like being in an age-disparate relationship because of the dynamics involved, indicated that he would consider a longer relationship with the older woman if things moved gradually:

*If o nyaka hoba serious? ... Aheo yona akitsi hore nkae buwa yang. If nna kaitisi horeho nale motho wa age group yaka o eleng hore kamo rata then yena o batla hoba serious, I can think about it. Nkanna maybe ka nahanakabona hore ke ira yang hore ke khethe tsela e sharp.* [If she wants to be serious? ...I don't know what to say to that one. If I know that I have my peer who I love and want to be serious with I might start thinking about it. I will have to sit and consider both options before making a decision.] (Thato, p.4)

The issue of duration has been addressed in the academic literature on age-disparate relationships, but to a limited extent. Kuate-Defo (2004) emphasised, among other issues, the need for additional

work to establish the average duration of these relationships as well as what influences that duration. Despite this lack of specific information, which could be attributed to the limited research into these type of relationships, Beauclair, Dushoff and Delva (2018) found that relationships where there is a wider age-gap between partners tended to last longer than relationships where the age gap is narrower. This finding, however, applies to age-disparate relationships where the older partner is male and the younger partner is female; the same may not apply to male-younger relationships.

#### **4.3.5.2 Sub-theme 2. ‘I only care about her’: Emotions in age-disparate relationships.**

In the course of the interviews I became increasingly struck by the diversity and intensity of emotions that seem to be at the centre of the relationships that the younger men had with older women. This is perhaps not surprising because by their nature relationships involve a display and experience of a varying range of emotions. In studies on age-disparate relationships where the woman is the younger partner, the women indicated that they preferred older men because they cared for and loved them versus the younger men who ‘played around’ (Wamoyi, Buller, Nyato, Kyegombe, Meiksin & Heise, 2018).

The young men in this study did not, however, strike me as emotionally superficial ‘players’, but as having a varied and nuanced emotional life.

Thato seemed to be the one vacillating between the widest ranges of emotions; at one point he appeared to be wistful and longing for a real relationship and later appeared frustrated by the relationship’s pace, form and direction:

*Interviewer: And then since o bile le ena, how was that experience? How did it feel? [Since you have been with her, how was the experience?]*

*Interviewee: It was different because dilo tsateng di fast, it’s like ka age group yaka, re ira dilo step by step. So ya haye, dilo tse tsothhe di bile fast, when coming to meeting, re bonane ka pela le hona ha etla mo sex, ebile ka pela. So dilo tsa ho tshwana le tseo. [It was different*

because everything moves fast...with my peers, things moved steadily. So everything was fast, from meeting to then having sex. Things like that.] (Thato, p. 4)

In the context of romantic relationships, whether casual or committed, the role-players oftentimes experience feelings of affection towards the other partner which can sometimes evolve to feelings of love. The participants in this study experienced varying degrees of affection and expressed this differently towards their older partners.

Kabelo acknowledged that, over time, his feelings towards the older woman evolved into love:

*Even though, as much I mention that I like her, but with time once I was involved with her, I developed to love her in a way. Yah, I developed to love her.* (Kabelo, p. 17)

Sello, on the other hand, would admit to caring for the older woman, but not to loving her:

*Interviewer: It's not about love?*

*Interviewee: No no no, just the feeling, we care about each other but not love.* (Sello, p. 6)

Mpho was even more determined to place emotional distance between himself and the older woman, making it clear that he feels neither affection nor love towards her:

*Interviewer: So you're not attached?*

*Interviewee: Ha'ee, ake attached ka mokhoo. Hanchi ke... [No, I'm not really attached...]*

*Interviewer: So okasere wa mo rata? [So you wouldn't say you love her?]*

*Interviewee: Ah-ah, nkasere ka mo rata. [No, I won't say I love her.]* (Mpho, p. 17)

Linked to feelings of love, jealousy may surface in relationships, particularly where there is concurrency. Sello however, indicated that despite knowing about each other's stable partners, they were not bothered by it:

*Interviewer: Mhm. So you're not jealous?*

*Interviewee: Ah, I'm not.*

*Interviewer: And you think she's also not jealous?*

*Interviewee: I think so. (Sello, p. 14-15)*

It is commonly believed that, compared to women, men lean more towards sexual pleasure or sexual accessibility than emotional attachment in relationships (Wade & Mogilski, 2018), but this was not fully borne out in my conversations with these young men. While some presented themselves as in it purely for sexual pleasure, others, such as Kabelo and Sello were more willing to consider the possibility of emotional attachment and romantic love.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The themes that emerged from the interviews are suggestive of male-younger age disparate relationships as complex and multi-faceted, and as playing out somewhat differently for each particular couple. In making sense of such relationships, an obvious point of departure is first to compare them to 'normative' relationships where the participants are more closely matched in terms of age, and in the analysis I highlighted the many unique challenges that the young men and their partners face compared to people involved in more conventional relationships. However, it is perhaps important to note that the young men's relationships are, for all their non-normativity, first and foremost sexual and romantic involvements similar in form, and with similar challenges and pay-offs, as are found in any other relationship involving a couple.

A second point of comparison against which to understand the young men's relationships is relative to the (much more widely studied) phenomenon of female-younger age-disparate relationships. Again there are many similarities between the two types of relationship, but here the differences seem starker and more significant. Younger men in age-disparate relationships appear to view the benefits and risks quite differently from their female counterparts. Although there are transactional elements in both types of age-disparate relationships, different types of transactions are involved. Whereas the academic literature suggests that in female-younger relationships there is more often than not an exchange of sex for the provision of basic needs or survival, this was not

the case for any of the young men I interviewed. Instead, the young men predominantly saw themselves as exchanging their time for rewards such as money, social status and sexual pleasure.

In addition, the young men seemed to be better positioned to manage the risks involved than young women in age-disparate relationships. The agentic power which men have because of cultural and gender scripts inform and shape their behaviour in romantic relationships, and as a result, they are able to negotiate safer sex and exert more power in relationships, even when they are the younger and financially less well-off party.

In this chapter I tried to elucidate the experiences of young men in age-disparate heterosexual relationships, as they emerged from the accounts of five young men. My sense is that the main features of such relationships outlined above, as well as many of the details discussed earlier in the chapter, apply in most cases where a young man is in a relationship with an older woman. However, it is well to remember that the participants were not intended to be, and are not, representative of all young men involved in age-disparate relationships with older women, and it is certain that the picture painted in this chapter would change somewhat if, for example, relationships involving greater age differences or relationships from different social contexts were to be considered. These issues are discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of younger men in age-disparate relationships with women who are at least five years older than them. A qualitative, exploratory design was used to develop an empathic description and interpretation of these experiences. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis and presented in the previous chapter.

This chapter seeks to present a final discussion of the findings in line with the research questions, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. I conclude the chapter with my own reflections on the research journey.

#### 5.2 Discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions

##### 5.2.1 How do young men perceive and experience the benefits, risks and challenges of being in age-disparate relationships?

The dominant societal perception is that young men enter into age-disparate relationships for the benefits they hope to receive from the older women, usually in the form of money or material goods. The findings of this study showed that there were indeed elements of transaction and receipt of monetary or material benefits. However, this was only confirmed by two of the participants, which could perhaps be attributed to their lack of full-time employment. Moreover, although these young men received benefits, it was more for consumerism instead of survival as it is usually expressed in the literature.

All the participants cited benefits beyond the monetary as their motivation for entering and remaining in relationships with older women; for example, the physical attractiveness and youthful look of the older women which could be assumed to be linked to the older women's ability to

satisfy them sexually. In his paper on the analysis of sugar mama and sugar daddy practices, Kuate-Defo (2014) found that unlike in relationships where the woman is the younger partner, the younger men report sexual pleasure as one of the motivations for entering or remaining in relationships with older women. This was supported by the findings, because almost all the men commented that the women were adventurous and willing to try different positions.

One of the young men indicated that the main benefit for him was that his social status was elevated when people learnt that he was involved with this particular older woman. The young men also considered respect as an important benefit in their relationship. Respect emerged mainly because the men believed that, culturally, and in terms of gender norms, they should be respected by the women.

Linked to the respect, participants highlighted the power dynamics that sometimes play out in the relationships as a risk. Some of the participants felt that the women were controlling because they were older than them. This sometimes led to the dissolution of the relationships because it is against their cultural expectations as men to be controlled by women. This contrasts sharply with what is contained in the existing literature: these men are able to walk away, whereas the literature on women-younger relationships suggests that the women are not able to leave relationships for fear of violence and loss of benefits from the older men that they are involved with.

Another risk that the participants highlighted was the possibility of HIV infection because the women were physically attractive and it was assumed that they would attract more men. In addition, the women's past history was a concern because the men did not know their sexual pasts. Pregnancy was a concern mainly for the women as opposed to the young men. In acknowledging these risks, the men (as well as the women) took measures to ensure that the risks would be minimised. These findings were in contrast to the literature that highlight HIV infection as the biggest challenge associated with age-disparate relationships.

### **5.2.2 What are the different contexts within which these relationships come into being, develop and (possibly) come to an end?**

Age-disparate relationships predominantly take place in a concurrency context. Four of the men interviewed in this study were in concurrent relationships with women their age, a finding that supports what is in the literature. Inherent in the concurrency setting is secrecy.

In terms of the relationships coming into being, the older women in three of the relationships were the ones who initiated the relationships. What could perhaps be found as interesting is that with three of the relationships (two initiated by the women and one where the man initiated) deception was used. The women used their ‘coincidental’ encounters with the younger men to position themselves as victims. The man on the other hand did not inform the older woman that he is married. Perhaps this can be attributed to the concurrency and secretive nature thereof.

The area of secrecy and concurrency needs to be explored further when discussing issues of risk to ensure that the agency that these younger men have can be used to ensure that they protect themselves in order to protect their partners so they do not spread infection between the different populations.

### **5.2.3 How do young men experience reactions to their relationship from acquaintances, friends and family and how do they deal with these?**

The young men in this study did not personally have a problem with being in relationships with older women. The general view was that age was nothing but a number, although it came with a qualifier namely that the women should have a ‘youthful’ appearance.

The study found that there is still much negativity from society in general towards these relationships, particularly towards the older women because they were considered predators who were taking advantage of the men and wasting the men’s time. The men’s friends were split in terms of their support, with some approving because they hoped to be ‘hooked-up’ with women who would give them money or material benefits, but others feeling that the older women would

eventually start controlling the younger men because the men are not bringing much to the relationships. This concern, however, was applicable to the men who were not professionally employed.

It is generally believed that relationships where the woman is older are against social and cultural norms. Just as with other social situations, people choose to cite culture based on what they want to achieve. The same happened in this study where the men would quote their families as saying the relationships are cultural anomalies. However, when in the relationship they used culture to express their expectation of respect from the older women. It is therefore important that when interventions are developed, they recognise the cultural and social contexts within which these relationships exist.

#### **5.2.4 Taking the above into consideration, what are the implications for interventions?**

Unlike with age-disparate relationships where the younger partner is female, it appears that the benefits for the man-younger relationships outweigh the risks that are associated with them. This is not to suggest that there are no risks to being in these relationships; it is how interventions are crafted that needs to be reconsidered.

The findings point to a need for more work to be done on the younger man age-disparate relationships to ensure that the men continue using their agentic power to negotiate the terms of their relationships with the older women.

Lastly, I believe that when every student or researcher writes up their findings there is always hope that those findings will be used to inform policies and programmes. Realistically however, unless as a researcher I start the dialogue on agency in my own circles and expand it to bigger settings, how else will policy and programme developers know of my study, its findings and the relevance thereof? Unless this phenomenon is widely discussed in academic literature, it will continue to be discussed in hushed tones and the shroud of mystery and accompanying stigma will persist.

### **5.3 Conclusion from the findings**

The general experiences of younger men in relationships with older women, although having similarities with experiences of younger women in similar relationships, have elements that confirm that with agentic power, partners in age-disparate relationships do not have to be viewed as victims who have been coerced into relationships with predatory older women. With this understanding, it is necessary that the dialogue on age-disparate relationships shifts from that of vilifying these relationships to that of assisting the younger partners to identify areas that can be mutually beneficial for both parties.

The young men in the study entered the relationships with the older women either through their own initiation of the relationships or the women having been the initiators. Either way, the men entered the relationships willingly with no coercion. Once in the relationship, they encountered advantages and disadvantages that are typical to any relationship irrespective of the age differences.

Interventions should therefore not be a one-size fits all; the different contexts within which the relationships exists as well the individual motivations should be interrogated to develop relevant interventions.

### **5.4 Limitations of the study**

The scarcity of academic literature on man-younger age-disparate relationships posed a challenge as I relied mostly on the literature relating to woman-younger relationships. There is therefore a need for more academic research into this phenomenon.

Another key limitations of this study was accessing the participants. Although, by its nature, qualitative research does not lend itself to generalizability, a good sample size is important to allow for data saturation. However, due to the perceived stigma associated with being involved with an older woman, it was challenging to access the target population. As a result I had to reduce my

initial target of ten participants to five participants who I accessed with the assistance of a recruiter who the participants trusted because he was involved in an age-disparate relationship in the past.

The lack of diversity among the participants was also a limitation as all of them were African and from urban areas. In addition, three were professionally employed with some level of post-matric qualification. Although one of the other two participants was also not professionally employed, he nonetheless earned his own income. The cultural and socioeconomic status of the participants may well have influenced the participants' responses to some of the questions.

### **5.5 Recommendations for future research**

It is important for future studies into this phenomenon to consider the above limitations and attempt to overcome them. For example, future research could aim to work with a bigger population that has a wider representation of participants from different racial groups, different age groups and different socioeconomic backgrounds. In South Africa, specifically, the study by Phaswana-Mafuya et al. (2014), for example, had a bigger and more diverse sample but lacked the depth of information from individual accounts as it employed focus group interviews to get a sense of the prevalence of and motivations for sugar mommy practices. Individual one-on-one interviews could have assisted the researchers to access richer data.

The dynamics in relationships are influenced by the settings of those relationships; it would therefore be interesting to note how the phenomenon plays itself out in rural and peri-urban areas. That is, how do participants from these areas experience this phenomenon as opposed to the participants from urban areas?

Although this study focused specifically on the men in age-disparate relationships, it still touched on the views of the older partners which were mainly observations from the younger men and could have been biased. Just as there is scarcity of literature on young men in age-disparate relationships, there is even less literature on the older women in these relationships. There is therefore a need for further research into this phenomenon looking at multiple dimensions. The older women could be interviewed to get an understanding of their experiences and juxtapose them

with the experiences of the younger men in those relationships in order to get a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

## **5.6 Final personal reflections**

As with most research, the first point of departure for me was curiosity. My curiosity around this phenomenon began a few years ago when I started noticing a surge in interest in relationships where the man is younger than the woman. These relationships drew curiosity not only from me, but from other people as well, to the point where the young men in these relationships were given a name; that is, ma-Ben 10. Suddenly Ben 10s received media attention; there were TV, radio and newspaper interviews, magazine articles and so forth. People discussed this phenomenon at workplaces, homes, churches and any other settings where people gathered. The details of the relationships, particularly the age gaps, were both fascinating and shocking. The phenomenon was said to be especially rife in Atteridgeville, so it was perhaps not surprising that the first two participants were from Atteridgeville.

The situation was brought closer to home when my male cousin, who at the time was 39 years old, married a 44 year-old woman. The man's family had mixed feelings about it, with most leaning towards the negative. The woman's family and friends believed that my cousin was after her money because she was a professional with a beautiful home in Pretoria East. The woman's family's concerns echoed most of what people around me were saying about these relationships; that is, the young men are in it for the monetary and material benefits they hope to receive.

On the other hand, there are many relationships where the man is significantly older than the woman and nobody bats an eyelid. The only time when people would have a negative opinion is when the man is wealthy and the woman is not. The younger woman would be viewed as a gold-digger who is with the older man for his money. The issue of transaction kept emerging. Could this be the only reason young people enter into relationships with older people?

I am married to a man who is nine months younger than me and I asked myself if he fitted the definition of a Ben 10. Have I been in this type of relationship all along and never realized it? My

preliminary research on what constituted a Ben 10 relationship was that the age gap needed to be significant. The question that arose was what is considered significant? Leclerc-Madlala's (2008a) definition of age-disparate relationships with an age gap of five years or more clarified things and meant I could exclude my relationship from being classified as such. The relief that came with knowing that I was not dating a Ben 10 made me ask myself why I felt that way. I am not prejudiced towards any type of relationship – each to their own – as long as it wasn't me in that relationship. It is definitely not something I see myself doing. When a young man approaches me, the first thing I used to jokingly say was that I do not have money; which meant that I also believed the young men approached older women for money and maybe sex. Whatever the reason, I did not think love was the main reason. With all these observations, questions and personal opinions, it then became important for me for me to understand why young men entered these relationships in order to check if indeed money and sex were the only things young men wanted from older women.

At the first meeting with my previous supervisor I was asked what my views around age-disparate relationships were. My answer was that I believe that most of the young people who enter these relationships do so willingly and know what they want to get out of them. As with the findings in the majority of the literature, I believed that young people went into age-disparate relationships for material and monetary benefits. What I disagreed with was that the young people are victims who have been coerced into these relationships due to adverse socioeconomic conditions. I also did not believe that the younger partners were at the mercy of the older partners. I saw the younger partners as calculating and in charge of the decisions they made. My supervisor also mentioned the issue of the risks; for example, HIV infection as a possible concern and perhaps an angle I should pursue. My view was that if we could acknowledge that the younger people have some power in these relationships, it would be easier to assist them to use that power to negotiate the use of protection during sexual encounters. I therefore did not see a need to focus my study solely on the risk of HIV infection.

My open-minded views on relationships assisted me in the interviews because as much as some of the information was 'shocking' and surprising, I was able to keep myself in check and did not overly react to some of the participants' accounts. This self-awareness was important because I did not want to create a situation where the participants would add exciting pieces to their accounts

in order to elicit certain reactions from me. I must agree though that as an older woman who would personally not be involved in a romantic relationship with someone younger than me, it took a lot of control out of me to not be shocked by some of their accounts. For example, when the younger men recounted the sexual exploits between them and their partners and again when one of the participants went as far as promising the woman marriage just so he can date her and attain a higher social status amongst his peers.

I set out on this journey with those views at the back of my mind, but I must admit though that when the findings showed that the men were not really interested in the transactional elements of these relationship I was surprised because as already mentioned, I believed that material and monetary benefits were the main reason they approached older women. However, I was not surprised to learn that the men had agency and were the ones who decided on the terms of engagement in the relationship. What stood out was that it was more the cultural influence (that demand that men should be respected) as opposed to the younger men's active, individual agency in these relationships that allowed them the power to make decisions on issues such as condom use.

At this point I feel that I now have a fairly clear understanding of how male-younger age-disparate relationships work and where further research may be needed. However, if I were to personally pursue future research around this phenomenon, my main aim would be to try and approach it in such a way, with regard to my own views, as to allow the data to truly 'surprise' me.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance Form



Ethical Clearance for M/D students: Research on human participants

The Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Unisa have evaluated this research proposal for a Higher Degree in Psychology in light of appropriate ethical requirements, with special reference to the requirements of the Code of Conduct for Psychologists of the HPCSA.

Student Name: Angela P Maphakela

Student no. 3082 503 2

Supervisor/promoter: Dr N Zungu

Affiliation: External supervisor

Title of project:

A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of the Younger Man in an Age-Disparate Relationship

- Ethical clearance is given to this project without any further conditions
Ethical clearance is given on conditions that certain requirements are met (as appended)
Ethical clearance is deferred as the matter was referred to the Ethics Committee of the CHS, Unisa
Ethical clearance is deferred until additional information is supplied (see the appended list)
Ethical clearance cannot be granted on the basis of the information as presented (for reasons as listed in an appendix)

Table with 5 rows and 1 column containing 'X' in the first row.

Signed:

Handwritten signature of Prof. M Papaikonomou

Prof. M Papaikonomou
[For the Ethics Committee ]
[ Department of Psychology, Unisa ]

Date: 2013-11-27

## Appendix 2: Informed Consent form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**RESEARCHER** : Angela P. Maphakela  
**RESEARCH TITLE** : A phenomenological study of the lived experience of the younger man in an age-disparate relationship

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. This form outlines the purpose of the research and provides an explanation as to your involvement and rights as a participant.

The purpose of this research is to:

- i. fulfil the requirements for the Masters of Arts in Psychology at the University of South Africa (UNISA); and
- ii. gain an understanding of the lived experience of younger men in casual relationships with older women.

**Participation:** In order to participate in this study, you should be male, aged between 18 and 25 years old and in a casual relationship with a woman who is 5 or more years older than you. Please note that participation in this study is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving reasons. There will be no remuneration or reimbursement for your participation in this study, however, refreshments will be provided.

**Procedure:** The data will be collected through one-on-one interviews with the participant. These interviews will last approximately 60 – 90 minutes each. There will be an initial interview to gather information and a second interview at a later stage to confirm that the information transcribed is a true reflection of what was discussed with you. I will be taking notes during the interviews. I will also need to record the interviews to ensure that accurate information is captured.

**Risks, stress or discomfort:** Although it is unlikely there will be any risks, stress or discomfort from participating in this study, you might be asked questions of a serious and sometimes personal nature. You can therefore choose to opt out of discussing anything that makes you uncomfortable.

At the end of the research, a report will be compiled and submitted to my supervisor and the academic committee for review. Your name and any other information that can be used to identify you will not be included in the report. A pseudonym will be used where direct quotations need to be made.

By agreeing to participate in the study, you undertake to provide honest answers and not mislead the researcher in any way.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

## Appendix 3: Interview Guide

### INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**RESEARCHER** : Angela P. Maphakela

**TITLE** : A phenomenological study of the lived experience of the younger man in an age-disparate relationship

1. Briefly tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about your current love relationship.

Probe for: Age, background – such as marital status, does she have another partner her own age, is she employed and what type of work does she do? Does she have children, how old are they and do they know about this relationship?

3. Please describe, in as much detail as possible, your experience of being in this type of relationship.

Probe: What are the power dynamics, gender issues, cultural issues and reproductive issues – including contraceptive choices and prevention of HIV and STIs?

4. What has been people's reaction to your relationship?