

## Article

# Reconstructing the Social Image of Older Women and Ageing: The Transformative Power of the Narrative Set in the Local Context

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**Abstract:** This case study reveals that age-related areas are the least desirable professional future options for many university students in social work degree programmes. One of the possible causes is the negative social labelling of older age, especially pronounced in respect of older women. Additionally, there is a poor and limited educational approach towards later life and growing older inside and outside the educational settings. This article focuses on the social construction of older age from gender and double theoretical perspectives. In particular, it centers on the pillars of education and profiguration. For educational and analytical purposes, these aspects are approached in the classroom setting from a critical perspective by using the in-depth reading of a book that is set in the local context, in particular, the city of Lleida (Spain). It presents the results of the content analysis and reflections written by 170 first-year university students taking a degree course in social work, and the outcomes of the subsequent classroom discussions with the author of the book. The study results show that better knowledge about the complexities of ageing and later life can lead to the reconstruction of the students' viewpoints about older age, help foster critical thinking, and defy age-related stereotypes, beliefs, and prejudices.

**Keywords:** older women; social imaginary; active ageing; profiguration; gender; narrative; local territorial context; social sustainability; prejudices



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## 1. Introduction

The narrative has a transformative power both in the person who writes it and in the person who reads it. The latter aspect is the main focus of this article. The transforming power of the narrative is closely related to the educational power, especially taking into account that education occurs between permanence and change. On the one hand, education as a socialisation process implies the transmission of values, norms, and cultural contents that are transmitted from one generation to another/older adults to younger people. Hence, seen from the socio-anthropological perspective, education can be considered as permanence and the common guiding line of society and culture. However, during the teaching-learning processes, new discoveries, inventions, and innovations occur that are linked (or not) with what has traditionally been transmitted. Both young people and adults live in a society marked by continuous and accelerated changes that affect our everyday experiences and life stages. From a gerontological perspective, the changes that are already taking place in the ageing process will become even more evident in the coming years, described as the “new old age” [1]. Consequently, different alterations also take place in educational and socialisation processes. Relatedly, the narrative also identifies and represents arguments, thoughts, experiences and imaginations that relate to both permanence and change. When narratives are expressed, either orally or in written way, or even

through other artistic and creative manifestations, they acquire a transforming component of attention, reflection, teaching-learning, contemplation, affection, and humanity [2]. This case study focuses on these aspects and incorporates reflective work based on narratives and critical approaches towards later life.

From a sociological lens, narrative gerontology and literary analysis show that we can learn about the complexity of the ageing process and its social nature from the stories that people tell or write [3–9]. This article shows the importance of fostering intergenerational relationships as well as reading and reflecting on narratives as ways to build a more sustainable society, in which the interdependence between different generations implies enrichment and solidarity and helps challenge age-based discrimination or ageism. Breaking negative stereotypes about old age and gender and building a more positive image of later life, both from the point of view of young people and older people, favours self-esteem, quality of life, and people's physical and psychological wellbeing [10].

The guiding thread of this case study is profiguration, a new concept in sociology and the social sciences that refers to the social agreement between different generations. Profiguration implies interdependence and socialisation, and respect and support with the aim of enriching intergenerational relationships and social connections. It also helps improve social participation, creative actions, social innovation and active ageing as it is characterized by participatory, collaborative, and comprehensive education that promotes positive change and challenges social marginalisation and ageism [7,11,12]. Working on intergenerationality as based on reading and reflection tasks in university settings is an opportunity that provides students with an important base from which to critically reflect on their beliefs and attitudes in relation to the different ages of life and ageing. These exercises also help share and create new knowledge among students.

As will be explained in more detail in the following section, we observed conscious distancing attitudes of the first year of social work degree students towards older adults. After the appropriate reflection and discussions, we developed the activity that has become the object of this study and the basis of this article. At the same time, we wondered what beliefs and stereotypes about being older have taken root in the education of young people. How have these prejudices been built? What notions and archetypes of older people, especially older women, have been assimilated and constructed? Does knowing alternative models of ageing, such healthy and active ageing, change younger people's perspective towards older people and later life? Does reading and reflection on narratives about ageing, which are different from the stereotypical images of older age, favour positive images of growing older in younger people? Can guided and reflective work in university classrooms act as an instrument to overcome ageism and build a more age-friendly and inclusive society? These questions have been answered in this case study.

## 2. Materials and Methods

To facilitate the understanding of the methods, a diagram has been prepared that graphically illustrates the procedure and its parts (see Supplementary Materials—Annex S1). The following section explains the whole process in more detail.

### *2.1. Initial Data That Motivated the Development of the Case Study Task: Intergenerational Work Based on the Reading and Reflection of a Narrative*

For several years, the first-year students of the social work degree enrolled in sociology have been invited to voluntarily answer a questionnaire at the beginning of the course. The aim was to get to know them better, their previous studies, interests and knowledge, and their experiences related to the topics of the course. They were also asked to express their opinion about the profession they have chosen, their future plans as well as their personal and professional interests. One of the questions in the questionnaire asked them to explain in detail the fields in which they would like to work in the near future. Relatedly, there was another question asking them to indicate which areas they would not like to work in. During the consecutive years, the area related to older people was

among the most undesirable future career options among the first-year students of the social work degree. We systematically analysed the results of these questionnaires to detect the learning/training needs, improve pedagogical aspects and the image of later life, and overcome ageism. The answers to the questions (In which field/s would you like to work when you finish your degree? Why? In which field/s would you not like to work when you finish your degree? Why?) are shown in Tables 1–3. Table 1 collects the quantitative computation of the answers, in which the reference is made to advanced age and older adults, also referred to as senior citizens.

**Table 1.** List of students’ responses on whether they would like to work in areas related to old age and older adults.

| Academic Year | Enrolled Students in the Subject | Collected Questionnaires (Received Answers/%) | Interested in Working with Older People | Not Interested in Working with Older People |
|---------------|----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 2020–2021     | 99                               | 68 (68.68%)                                   | 6 (8.82%)                               | 13 (19.12%)                                 |
| 2021–2022     | 100                              | 64 (64%)                                      | 4 (6.25%)                               | 14 (21.87%)                                 |

**Table 2.** Students’ positive motivations.

| 2020–2021   | 2021–2022   |
|---|---|
| I want to help older people in care homes                             | I have always wanted to help older people.<br>I have chosen this degree specifically for this reason  |
| Older people catch my attention, I’m curious, I find them interesting | Since I was little, I have been interested in knowing the stories of older adults and wanted to help them improve their situation/circumstances |
| Because being with them makes me happy                                |   |
| It is the group of people with which I would feel better              |   |
| Older people are underestimated and deserve more respect              |   |

**Table 3.** Students’ main arguments not to work with older people.

| 2020–2021   | 2021–2022   |
|---|---|
| It is the area where I would least see myself working in. I wouldn’t be able handle it in a right way | I would not know how to manage it since I would relate it to my everyday life   |
| It doesn’t appeal to me and I don’t think I would ever feel comfortable working with older people     | In my life I have not had contact with older people. I hardly got to know my own grandparents.  |
| It is an area in which I would surely have a very bad time  | I don’t feel empowered because I haven’t had any close contact with older people. I would not know how to think or how to express myself or speak to older adults |
| From my experience, I think it requires a very hard emotional sacrifice                               | Grandparents are the best company, but dealing with older people and their problems would affect me too much  |
| I wouldn’t have a good time   | I would take their problems to my personal sphere/life  |

Table 3. *Cont.*

| 2020–2021  | 2021–2022   |
|--|---|
| I think it would be very hard to manage it   | I don't have the 'right' personality traits to deal with them |
| I think I am not mentally prepared to face the situations that occur in this area  | I don't think I could contribute anything to this area        |
| Working with older people is already a very 'common' area with which we live day by day, I would like to work in areas that are more 'taboo' and which are not that talked about | It does not appeal to me, I find other areas more interesting |
| I have been working in this sector all my life and I would like to open up new horizons  | I am not motivated  |
| I think it is a very dependent 'guild'   | I am not interested   |
| I don't want to work in a nursing home   | I am not interested   |

It must be taken into account that answering the questionnaire at the beginning of the course has been optional/voluntary (until now). This explains why only 68.68% and 64% of the total number of students enrolled answered it. Yet, it is significant to observe that only 19 (6 + 13) and 18 (4 + 14) students referred to older people in their responses. The rest mentioned other areas of interest, such as mental health, childhood, justice, social services, among others. This reveals that students are quite distant from the real needs of older people and their challenges. The percentage of those students who showed no interest in working with older people and in care homes did not reach 10% in any academic year. On the other hand, those who explicitly stated that they would not like to work with older people reached 20% and even exceeds this percentage. The distance between those who explicitly denied working with older people increased in the academic year 2021–2022 compared to the previous course 2020–2021, reaching 21.87%. Table 2 shows the main motivations and arguments of those students who stated that they did not want to work with older adults or in related areas:

The results reveal that the student main motivation is to help, which appears in three of the seven responses. The second motivational category is related to emotions, such as 'it makes me happy, 'it is where I would feel better', 'it is underestimated, it deserves respect'. There is a repeated temporal reference that indicates a vital implication linked to the socialisation received throughout life: 'I have always wanted to help', 'since I was little'. Other answers could be categorized as discovering the 'unknown' or the 'little known' sphere, knowing older people's stories, 'they call my attention, I'm curious . . . ' In other words, the sense of altruism, empathy, positive experiences, as well as the desire to help and better understand older adults are among the main motivations of the social work students who answered the questionnaires at the beginning of the course.

Table 3 collects the written explanations and the main arguments of those students who said that they did not want to work with older people in their future.

The results reveal how the student personal life experiences and previous knowledge influence their future decisions and are also the possible causes of the refusal to work with older adults. The emotional impact linked to one's personal experience (or the lack of it) and the socially constructed image about later life appears in 16 out of 22 responses (72.72%), and affects students' perceptions about old age and their future work preferences. These and similar notions are also echoed in the students' written reflections that are evidenced in the development of the reading guide (see Supplementary Materials—Annex S2), which demonstrates the growing need to promote activities that stimulate intergenerational relationships and mutual knowledge in order to overcome ageism. As research shows, breaking stereotypes and negative notions about later life entails a change in the social paradigm and fosters active and healthy ageing, intergenerational dialogue, and a more inclusive society [12,13].

## 2.2. Reflections Prior to the Study Based on the Analysis of the Previous Answers

Students' refusal to work with older people raised a question whether there was a (co)relation of different causes of a social nature that related to their formal, non-formal, and informal education. We also took into account the influence of social stereotypes created by the media on ageing and the type of social value attributed to old age; the lack of education and reflection about the process of getting older; the social limitation of daily relationships between young and old people, which are often reduced to dependency relationships; and a lack of more positive images of ageing and models of active older men and women beyond the traditional roles of grandfather/grandmother or caregivers. Since the collected data reveal low student motivation to work with older adults, which is one of our educational challenges, during academic year 2020–2021, we decided to approach the subject from more innovative, humanistic, and proximity methodologies. The choice of a specific book about ageing and older women was chosen to provide students with new notions about later life and improve educational opportunities.

## 2.3. The Case Study: Tasks on a Specific Reading to Overcome Age-Related Stereotypes

The specific use of narratives as a working method and as a training object is already widely documented in various research projects and studies that demonstrate its potential, interest and didactic and educational validity [2]. The contributions of the narrative to the study of older age also reveal the construction of positive images of later life, specifically from a gender perspective [13–15]. To address the causal elements that determine the images that young people have about ageing and older women, we focused on narrative analysis with a focus on older women. We incorporated a reading guide (see Supplementary Materials—Annex S2) that helps students critically read the book. As educators and professors, we also defend the need and importance of developing narrative inquiry, reading, and reflective and comprehensive methods as teaching and training tools in higher education settings.

The current digital world, characterised by the speed of information, the simplification of messages, the obvious displacement of the written form by visual content and the predominance of emotion over reason, greatly affects the construction of our social reality, opinions, and attitudes. Impatient immediacy and imminence bring added difficulties and accelerate the transformation of habits, making it more difficult to dedicate time, concentration and attention to observe, read and understand reality. The notion of 'learning to be, to make known, to live together' [16,17] implies the habit and ability to think critically, which is not innate but learned and developed throughout one's lifespan [18]. For this reason, in our teaching practices and academic evaluation we incorporate reading practices—essays, biographical, and literary narratives—that help promote knowledge of the social world and the local contexts. We used the guide that has been prepared specifically for this reading from reflective, experiential and critical approaches. Students were also asked to write a letter to the author of the book expressing their opinion, questions or concerns, which helped foster individual creativity and critical thinking (see Supplementary Materials—Annex S1).

For this case study, we selected a recently published fictional book *Casa Yé-ye* [19], which addresses active ageing experiences as inspired by real life situations of older women, who live in city of Lleida, which is familiar to the students enrolled in the University of Lleida. The book portrays women over 70 that do not conform to stereotypical notions of old age and the narrative of decline, according to which older people are seen as frail, dependent, and inactive [14]. The four older women defy stereotypes related to old age and the traditional family models, and choose to live together. This choice of life gives them more freedom to make decisions, which is often denied to older people. The male characters, who belong to the same age group as the heroines, also actively participate in life and challenge the negative notions of later years. The text is written in a slightly humorous and witty tone, and contains some dramatic points, as well as certain but uncomfortable truths about ageing that involve topics such as death, suicide, sexuality, family relationships,



physical or mental health, loneliness and the loss of love. The book brings readers closer to the dynamics of old age in a positive, constructive and innovative way.

The daily experiences of the older characters, as described in the book, were read and discussed with the first-year students. After the in-depth reading and analysis of the text, students showed a significant change in their attitudes and perspectives on later life. Working with literary narratives with intergenerational groups facilitates profigurative socialisation and interaction, and helps overcome age discrimination. The educational and transformative power of the narrative based in a local context and, in particular, the reconstruction of the social image of older women, also helps break the prejudices and alters students' future professional preferences. Many of the university students, as will be shown, claimed that, initially, they did not think about later life, ageing, or intergenerational relationships. However, after the critical reading of the book, they started to think more about ageing and some of them even considered working with older people. The results of this study show that working on intergenerational relationships through narrative inquiry can become a basis from which to reflect on beliefs and attitudes related to different stages of life, create and share new knowledge, and improve intergenerational relationships.

The literary and cultural analysis of the fictional narrative, together with the debates, provide us with relevant information that reveals the current social conceptions and beliefs about old age among first-year university students. At the same time, it allows us to see a more specific social image of older women, the perception of different ages and the ideas of what is considered as socially appropriate or inappropriate depending on one's age [20,21]. The in-depth analysis of the text, along with subsequent discussions by one of the authors of this article (educational psychologist), professors (sociologists), and first-year social work students, represents a rich source of data that offers not only a valuable exchange of information, but also invites us to question old age, the current images of ageing women and gender dynamics.

The gender aspect deserves a special attention in this study as it reveals how older women are perceived in the local context, which is still predominantly sexist and heteropatriarchal. In addition, the analysis of this work reveals other relevant issues in relation to age and ageing, such as the loneliness of old age, the concern to maintain one's autonomy until death, the difficulty in establishing new social relationships, pain, disability, and sexuality, among other significant topics linked to later life and its challenges. The following section explains in more detail the work methods of this study.

#### *Casa Yé-ye* and the Practical Application of the Reading Guide

This case study was developed in three phases that involved the interaction between educators, students and the author of the book. In each of them an ad hoc didactic and pedagogical methodology was used to achieve the study objectives.

##### (a) First phase: The selection of books and the elaboration of the reading guide

The first phase was focused on the decision to prepare an academic task that involved reflective and creative learning based on a reading that portrayed ageing of women in a more positive light. The choice of the book *Casa Yé-ye*, which was published before the start of the academic year 2020–2021, was based on the aspects discussed in the previous section: the focus on older women; the local and familiar settings; daily events and local scenarios; the fusion of both fiction and reality and a deep observation and lived experiences of ageing. As the author of the book, who is also a professor and researcher in areas related to gender and ageing, explains:

*After more than two decades of teaching subjects about active ageing and later life, and given a structural trend towards increased life expectancy, especially pronounced in older women, I have observed an urgent need to transfer my knowledge by using alternative ways. I wanted to bring my own experiences and observations closer to people in order to break the beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, and negative attitudes about older age. The experiential literary narrative was chosen as an effective tool to share my previous expert*

*knowledge and personal reflections to foster social change, intergenerational dialogue, and voice out the complex dynamics of growing older. The book Casa Yé-ye emerged precisely from these motivations and personal and professional experiences.*

The decision to develop a reading guide and the distribution of roles was shared with the author and the educators. Although the author of the book is also a professor at the University of Lleida, she teaches the social education degree. Thus, she had no connection with the social work students and could not influence their opinions and the content of their reflective writing. During the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 academic courses, she used the same reading guide (see Supplementary Materials—Annex S2) and methodology. The objective of the reading guide was to foster critical thinking skills and analysis of social aspects and notions about old age, especially older women. Specifically, it was intended to trigger students' thoughts and reflections on ageing that, in this case study, are addressed transversally as part of the program that involves life long learning, social inequalities, and gender dynamics. It was also intended to make students more aware of the heterogeneity of ageing and bring them closer to active and healthy ageing models. The reading guide consisted of eight sections on which the students had to give their opinion: (1) Reflection on the title of the book and its meaning; (2) Identification of the relevant ideas of each chapter of the book; (3) Reflection on the themes and problems presented in the book; (4) Reflection on the main characters; (5) The reflection on whether what is represented in the book is reality or fiction; (6) Reflection on students' prior knowledge of the topics explored in the book and how reading may have contributed to the construction of knowledge; (7) Reflection on possible contributions to the area of social work; (8) Personal assessment and final reflection in the form of a written letter addressed to the author of the book. The letter was intended to serve as a development of critical thinking skills for the students, as well as a guiding tool for the author to prepare feedback (see the content of the complete reading guide in Supplementary Materials—Annex S2).

(b) Second phase: Reading, reflecting and writing

The second phase involved the process of reading the book, the reflection, the analysis of the content and the subsequent written work that included critical approaches to the book and its main characters. The reading and orientation tasks were performed individually by each of the students.

(c) Third phase: Tasks, evaluation, feedback and meeting with the author

An assessment rubric was used to analyse students' written assignments for each section. Assignments and letters were also read by the author of the book to prepare comments and feedback for the students. The author did not participate in the evaluation process and did not have information about the students' grades. The final grade was shared only between the teacher and the student. The most significant aspects that were taken into account were the reflections of the students, the questions raised and the subsequent dialogue with the author and the students, which was scheduled once the semester was finished. This final dialogue was not part of the evaluation process and was voluntary. The meeting was supposed to be held in person, however, due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak, it was held out online.

#### 2.4. Method of Analysis of Written Content of the Reading Guides

In the previous section, we explained the methodology used in each phase, which involved the reading guide and feedback. In this section we highlight the method we used to perform the content analysis of the 170 reflective tasks, which are the basis of this article. Van-Dijk [22] and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) were used as a methodological approach to analyse task content and develop critical thinking skills. Before starting the general reading, a preliminary reading has been carried out to erase any personal data or identification of authorship. Likewise, all tasks have been anonymised by adapting a specific coding for data protection. For the content analysis, the parts of the tasks that focused on reflection and argumentation have been identified.

#### 2.4.1. Parts of the Tasks Selected for Analysis

Out of the 8 sections of the reading guide, we selected 6 for content analysis because they were the ones in which the students had to express their opinions: (1) Reflection and argumentation on the interest in the topics and problems presented in the book; (2) Reflection on the main characters; (3) Reflection on whether what is represented in the book is reality or fiction; (4) Reflection on the previous knowledge of the students on the topics explored and how reading the book has contributed to the construction of knowledge; (5) Reflection on possible contributions for social work professionals; (6) Personal assessment and letter to the author.

#### 2.4.2. Elements of the Analysed Content

The reading and analysis of the content of these 6 sections was based on the identification of the content of the general categories as shown in Table 4:

**Table 4.** General categories.

| Categories:   |
|---|
| Reflections on the effect of the known environment                                    |
| Construction of the social image of older age and the ways it is perceived            |
| Characteristics attributed to older age in general and older women in particular      |
| Descriptors of older age and older women before and after the reading of the book     |
| Opinion about older women and the ageing process before and after the reading         |
| Existence of explicit gender or feminist perspectives in the book analysis            |
| Elements of surprise found in the book  |
| Elements of self-reflection on grandmothers/grandfathers before and after the reading |
| Elements of reflection from a professional (social worker) point of view              |
| Reflection on how the students imagine their own later life                           |

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Participants

The tasks explained in the previous sections correspond to those elaborated by 170 students: 80 students of the academic year 2020–2021 and 90 students of the academic year 2021–2022.

#### 3.2. Contributions of Reading and Reflection

In this section we present the results of the content analysis that has been organized thematically, as shown in the following sections.

##### 3.2.1. Relevance of the Local Context

As described previously, one of the reasons for choosing the book *Casa Yé-ye* was the fact that it is set in the local area that is familiar to the students. The environment and the elements described in the book portray the bar, the cafeteria, the gym, the nightclubs, the streets and the neighbourhoods familiar to everyone who knows the city of Lleida. There is also a strong emphasis on the social aspect of Lleida, which is a peripheral, medium-sized, inland city, and evokes an image of ‘Spain where nothing ever happens’, as sociologist Sergio Andrés describes it [23]. Very often, literature suggested to university students is written by national or international authors and there is a lack of visibility of local authors that address the local issues and minority groups. Lleida is the capital city of a large territorial area with rural characteristics. The city of Lleida is a member of the Network Educator City and it is also an age-friendly city. It is the capital of a diverse territory of 11 interrelated regions in two large geographical areas: the plain area and the Pyrenees. According to data from 2021, its population varies from 3.945 inhabitants of



the less populated region with a population density of 9.2 inhabitants per square meter, to 211,609 inhabitants of the most populous area, which includes Lleida with 140,080 inhabitants (151.5 inhabitants per square km). Regarding the age-related factors, more than 20% of people are over 65. The ageing rates are between 113 and 207.9, and the age-dependency rates are between 21.3 and 40.3.

We prioritised the local context in this study, especially taking into account that students are trained for the social work profession that involves close human interactions in local contexts. In addition, many of them were born in the city of Lleida, study there or know the city quite well. We also thought that their own personal experiences in the environment familiar to them influenced their opinion about their future professional choices. We aimed to investigate whether the students noticed that the book was set in the local context and whether or not this generated any interest in the reading. The results affirm that the familiarity and proximity with the environment provides an important value for student. For example, one of the students SO8701 mentioned that “the book is set in Lleida and I find it fantastic since I had never read anything that was set in my city”. Andrés [23] explains the reasons for invisibility of medium-sized cities such as Lleida:

*Medium and small cities do not seem to have been as narrated, told about and sung about as other spaces and places. The medium-sized city and its intermediate territories have been assigned a symbolic image of a ‘no man’s land.’ They are not considered attractive enough to be the protagonists of stories, and it seems that nothing special ever happens in those places [3] (pp. 205–206).*

Yet, significant and special events do occur daily in medium-sized cities, as described in the book *Casa Yé-ye*, which shows active lifestyles of older people. As one of the SO9801 students observed, “everything that happens, happens in the city of Lleida, and that makes everything familiar to you, and you can relate and imagine the story as if it were more real”. Another student SO6901 pointed out that “seeing typical places in Lleida has allowed me to become more familiar with the book and experience each situation in much more detail.” Student SO9201 also noted that the local setting gave the story more credibility, familiarity, and value: “It’s very exciting to be able to read about familiar areas as it helps you imagine the action in a more realistic way.” The atmosphere that portrays the common and familiar places of the book also generates more empathy towards the main characters, whom some students imagine as real people that they could meet one day in the city of Lleida. As student SO6412 said, “we have been able to get closer to the characters, as if someone we knew was explaining their own story to us”. In the same way, the student SO9501 observed that the story “has made me connect faster with the protagonists, I have imagined them in the cafeteria and in the Ekke gym, I have imagined the Coquettes at night walking down the street looking for a pub”.

### 3.2.2. The Social Images of Older People

This case study also intended to identify the preconceived social image that students had about old age in general and older women in particular. Age is not only a matter of adding biological years to one’s lifespan, but it is also a socio-cultural construction [24]. Social age [25] is a series of descriptions of what one can and cannot do at each age, and it changes according to different historical periods and social milieu, thus being a product of social interaction and culture. Just as culture defines the differences between men and women that occur throughout life, so does the process of ageing [26]. We began the analysis by examining the concept of ageing in a broad sense to identify the general stereotypes attributed to older people, especially older women. It should be noted that students have never been asked to incorporate a gender or feminist perspective in the reading and preparation of their tasks. However, it was significant to see if they referred to gender dynamics and differences in relation to older age.

It is also worth a note that the majority of social work students are female. In 2020–2021 there were 13.40% male students and in 2021–2022 the number increased to 20.98%. Taking into account the necessary anonymisation and data protection, we have specifically studied

and identified significant gender differences in content analysis. Although it is important to investigate the social construction that students have about older women, we decided to focus on how young people internalised these notions. The analysis shows that all the answers incorporate reflections on the images of later life as acquired throughout social interaction and education. We also tried to identify the stereotypes that young people had about older age and ageing. The content analysis reveals four thematic fields. Three of them are recurrent in a large number of tasks: (1) silence and inhibition; (2) the negative view of old age; (3) the antagonistic construction of old age versus youth; (4) the positive image of old age and ageing. The fact that the latter appears in very few responses is highly significant.

(a) A positive view of old age

There are few student responses that show a positive view of old age and ageing. In all cases, the constructive evaluation of later life derives from a positive experience in the family, at work or during an internship, or from the image of an older woman as a caregiver. The positive elements related to old age are linked to values such as respect, gratitude, kindness, experience, wisdom, care, and education. As student SO9401 argued

*I am surprised by the whole context surrounding old age. This group of people are my greatest weakness, my weak point, I admire all older people for their long history, for the backpack they carry on their backs. I would like to be able to work with this group. I think that working with them would bring me happiness and personal satisfaction.*

Another SO8512 student also noted that: “I really appreciate older people, both in my family and with whom I live in my daily work. They are generous, kind and loving; likewise teachers, psychologists.” Similarly, student SO8112 highlighted that: “I have a very positive perception of older people, it is a group that I have always liked and admired ( . . . ) Most of them are people who have had a thousand experiences and it is interesting to take their opinions into account”.

(b) Silence and inhibition

Although today’s society is characterized by the so-called longevity revolution [27], the writings of many young people demonstrate a sense of detachment, social distance and “not wanting to look” at older people. In their writings, many of the students argued that ageing begins with retirement, around 65 or 67, and they think that nothing interesting happens after that phase of life or turning point. The idea of vital emptiness—of ‘stopping’ and ‘disappearance’—after retirement is quite recurrent in the students’ reflections. These notions reveal that students have been educated with the notion that people, upon reaching the retirement stage, cease to have their own will, interests, and social identity. For example, student SO9101 said that “many young people and adults (...) are a little afraid of getting old because they think they will lose part of their freedom and their way of being and doing things.” Many students also thought that old age is a taboo subject, which is evidenced in the following examples. For instance, student SO8701 observed that “society transmits to us a type of old age and ideas about it that make us think that later life is a topic that should avoided to talk about”. Similarly, student SO9501 pointed out that “old age is a topic that does not interest young people. Many times we tend not to talk about it, we label it as a taboo subject, we do not give it importance or we do not understand that stage.” Repetitions such as ‘not wanting to talk about it’, ‘being a taboo subject’, ‘it is not given importance’, ‘it is not understood’ are also common in students’ reflections. The students’ responses also show that old age is a stage they do not think about. For example, student SO4301 pointed out that “another negative connotation that we attribute to this stage is the perception of retirement as a void that cannot be filled and for which no one feels prepared.” Another student SO401 observed that

*In our society, getting older is a taboo subject. It is not common to talk much about older age, but the reality is that it will come to all of us anyways, no one can escape this final stage of life. Why don’t we talk about older age and getting older? I think it is because*

*society is afraid—just as death is a taboo subject, older age is also associated with death. Since this stage of life is the closest to death, we tend to avoid conversations that involve these two concepts: older age and death.*

Additionally, the invisibility and conscious social uprooting of old age is one of the causes that generate fear of ageing among young people and adults. The following examples exemplify this idea. Student SO9801, for instance, questioned:

*Why are we so afraid of reaching older age? Because it is a subject that nobody likes to talk about, a taboo subject. We associate the fact that a person can have a very busy life with a teenager, and perceive them as young; however, we associate a retired person with a person who does nothing all day long, which leaves older adults out of any consideration and interest.*

Similarly, another student SO901 reflected that:

*People see older age in a negative way or are afraid of reaching it. It may be due to the influence of the media and the cosmetic and aesthetic industries, such as the miracles of anti-wrinkle creams, aesthetic operations, etc. It is also because of the fear of physical changes—when you are older you have a higher risk of suffering from diseases, you are closer to death, loneliness, a fear of not feeling useful, not accepting your age and social pressure.*

Student SO9501 also made a similar comment by stating that: “We tend to think that when a person is older, he/she has fulfilled his/her ‘obligations’ and now it is his/her turn to rest and disconnect from everything around him/her. It’s like nullifying him/her as a person.”

#### (c) Old age versus youth: an antagonistic social construction

It is increasingly necessary to promote intergenerational relationships to overcome stereotypes about old age and “learn to be and learn to know” the complex, heterogeneous and diverse process of ageing [11,12]. Such notions are also highlighted in the students’ responses. For example, student SO7912 expressed that “old age is the last stage of human life, it is the moment in which you begin to say goodbye to everything you have lived through.” Without exception, all students were surprised by certain behaviour patterns of the main characters of the book, who were labelled as ‘juvenile’ because they acted in a socially constructed way as ‘young people’. They were amazed that the heroines openly talked about sex, that one of the female characters was transsexual, and that other characters enjoyed smoking marijuana. According to student SO8501,

*Society has a perspective of sex deprivation of older people, that is to say, that they do not make love, that when they reach a certain age, they stop having sexual desires. It is clear that no matter how much sexual the activity decreases, sexual desire and the wish to feel loved does not disappear. It is a basic need that we as human beings have.*

Similarly, student SO8601 pointed out that “sexuality is usually one of the main stigmas about older people. This book shows us that this is not the case: the protagonists enjoy sex in a free and impartial way. They even talk about sex without having any doubts and openly explain possible sexual problems.” By the same token, student SO401 commented that: “It seems that in older age sex no longer exists. The coquettes demonstrate that sex is not only for young people.” Additionally, student SO9501 argued that: “Margot [one of the older female characters] is shown smoking a joint to ease her pain. I had not internalised this aspect either, I must admit that I was not aware that older people would take this type of substance.” These comments show that youth is conceived as a stage full of vitality and activity, while later life is linked to the end of opportunities, sexual desire, and active lifestyles, as revealed in the narrative of decline [14]. These aspects, according to students, are more visible in older women due to the double standard of ageing [28], which explains how the disadvantages linked to physical appearance and sexual attractiveness can lead to

a double categorization, segregation and marginalization of older women. Student SO4301 commented that:

*Older age is a stage of anguish due to the losses or difficulties and, consequently, a decrease in self-esteem, like in the case with Lily [one of the older female protagonists]. She finds herself in a continual confrontation between buying clothing accessories to enhance a slender youthful figure and disguising the ravages of time that affect her body and make her curves fade away.*

Student SO401 also observed that “it seemed that the author was describing young people, but in reality the characters were not young.” According to student SO801, “I loved the characters, they are like a group of friends from now, but much older and, logically, more experienced.” Following the same line of thought, student SO4301 contended that:

*In short, the main characters have a lifestyle that is similar to mine, and I am twenty years old. I also I share a flat with other students, I go to the gym, I go to pubs, and I drink alcohol, just like them. But the difference is that they could be my grandmothers. It would seem surreal to me to think that I could meet my grandmother in the gym or at a party, but it is possible because, in the gym, I have seen older people who are doing exercises, but with less physical effort.*

Some students expressed a great interest in older age and offered interesting and thought-provoking reflections and conclusions. For instance, student SO4301 commented that:

*Old age has traditionally been related to negative notions, and linked to dependency and progressive physical incapacity and weakness, while youth has always been glorified. People and families need to plan and, above all, accept this stage of life (...) it is not just a stage, but a progressive process that depends on the entire life cycle.*

Student SO4901 also noted that:

*The story deals with the problem of older age from a positive and dynamic perspective. It employs adjectives that are usually related to youth, but in this book, it shows us how you can still live among friends, go out for drinks, show off, flirt, smoke joints, etc. What strikes me most about the subject of older age is the hiding of the effects of ageing. It's like the youth has totally taken over the stage. (...) The obsession with beauty and the hypersexualisation (through social networks), together with the digital divide, leave older people out of the game. Young people have the responsibility to give older adults their deserved place in family and society.*

(d) A negative view of old age

As explained above, the majority of students showed a negative view of old age. We grouped the elements that appear in their explanations into several characteristics and roles.

d.1. Negative characteristics

The negative notions about old age, as shown in students' writings, include: dependency, loneliness, sadness, annoyance, inactivity, illness, and the end of life. The students' reflections reveal the idea that as people age, they are perceived as less human and are seen as 'others' whose lives no longer matter much [14,29]. Viewing older citizens as problems for health care, the economy, and future generations further strengthens age discrimination and negative notions about old age. Furthermore, people tend to judge the value of other people based on how much they add to the betterment of society: those who no longer contribute to society “are not considered full members of society” [29]. These and similar ideas are expressed in students' writings. For example, student SO6412 stated that:

*Many people think that older people are a burden and, thus, do not want to spend time with ageing people. (...) People do not want to be aware of the existence of older adults and there is also a great controversy about their retirement pensions. But younger people do*

*not think about the cultural and historical enrichment that they provide us with—older people are our history with legs, names, and surnames.*

Similarly, student SO8601 pointed out that “the majority of the population believes that older age and dependency are closely linked”. Relatedly, student SO1612 commented that:

*For me, growing up means starting to be alone or lonely, since I relate it to death. When people get older, they begin to experience the deaths of their friends, family members or other important people to them. Once they get here [older age], they see themselves as a burden to their family members and that’s when the feeling of loneliness begins.*

The student SO8612 also mentioned that:

*A person who is over 70, for the rest of the people, especially for young people, is perceived as a passive person whose life is practically over. There is a lack of experiences to live and, in general, we associate older age with the end of life.*

#### d.2. Roles of old age viewed negatively

The students also pointed out to the obligations and social pressure in later life, such as taking care of grandchildren, not being able to decide for themselves and doing “what is expected of them” instead of doing what older adults want. Student SO4512 wrote that:

*In the book, I see a call, which I would name a call for older people’s freedom.’ Let me explain it better: when you get older, it seems that you are deprived of everything because you are old, which is synonymous with typical obligations that correspond to a certain age. I want to highlight the fact that the canons of beauty oppress us, women, until the last stage of life. In the book, it is shown how the three female protagonists feel vulnerable because of their physical appearance and how it changes over time. However, they are women who have high self-esteem and there is nothing that could stop them.*

Student SO9001 also explained that:

*An older woman today has lived through the times of sexual repression in a severe way. Hence, as shown in the book, the decision to live with her female friends and stop being a super-grandmother makes her feel bad. It becomes even more difficult to the heroine when she wants to tell her family that she wants to fall in love again. This shows that there is still a lot of struggle and the need to eliminate the consequences of sexual repression.*

The influence of heteropatriarchy conditions the way we judge older people and generates prejudices and stereotypes attributed to different female social roles. In the past, if older women did not embody socially acceptable roles as caregivers or grandmothers, they were not given visibility and value in society [30]. These roles confined them to domestic obligations, thus limiting their freedom and autonomy in later life [31,32]. Although today many women and older women in particular oppose to these socially constructed roles and expectations, many of them continue with caretaking duties, making older women important figures in multigenerational family relationships. The students realise the lack of role models for older women and understand that their own prejudices also limit them. Mary, one of the protagonists of the book, reflects on her lived experiences, which are based on her relationship with her grandchildren. One of the SO1012 students noted that:

*She [Mary] gives voice to many older women who are in the same situation as her. The heroine is a woman who was married for many years to the same man and was completely taken away her freedom. She represents the figure of a grandmother who helps with everything that is needed. It is very positive that her opinion is shown in the book, which reveals that she is tired and she does not want to do it because of obligation.*

Similarly, the student SO8401 observed that:

*Today society expects grandmothers to take care of their grandchildren, as if they had nothing else to do, as if it was their obligation. Today many families live at the expense of older people, their help, and their pensions. And let’s not talk about the loneliness older adults feel.*



Student SO5212 also noticed that:

*The most endearing character in the book is Mary, who embodies the vast majority of today's grandmothers. She represents the role of a woman as a caregiver who takes care of her grandchildren and becomes a grandmother-slave. She actually has no obligation to take care of her grandchildren.*

Thus, student SO4012 highlighted that she felt identified with the female protagonist when comparing her with her own grandmother and her lived experiences:

*I have seen my grandmother reflected in Mary's character because she also had to take care of my cousins when they were little because my uncles didn't have time to do it. My grandmother, just like the protagonist in the book, many times wanted to flee from that reality and start a new stage in life. However, the fact that she come from a family of farmers and has been taught the traditional roles since she was a child, stopped her from taking decisions on more than one occasion.*

Additionally, student SO5201 highlighted the existing loneliness and boredom that many older people face today, especially older women:

*We associate growing older with a stage of loneliness, dependency, illness, and boredom. If I analyse these aspects in more detail, I can see my grandmother reflected. Luckily, she is living with us and I think that she does feel lonely. Of course, her life mainly involves being at home, watching TV, sewing, walking, calling on the phone, receiving visits from family or friends, etc. But I think that other older people, who are in care homes, hospitals, or living alone in a house, must feel even lonelier, more sick, and discouraged.*

It is also worth a note that the absence of proximity and direct contact between young people and older people has a negative effect on the construction of the image of ageing. Two of the students, a male and a female, expressed the need to focus on a didactic, narrative and profigurative approach to education to better understand the process of growing older. Student SO3901 argued that:

*Personally, I openly admit that I have always said that the last group I would like to work with in my future is older people. I know, and I understand, that it is a comment that can generate controversy and that I can turn people against me, but I firmly believe so. It's not that grandmothers and grandfathers bore me, quite the opposite. Luckily, I have three of the four grandparents still alive and I try, whenever I can, to visit them during the week. But that is not an obstacle for me to reaffirm what I have said previously. I have always considered myself a practical person, which does not mean I am cold and insensitive, and that is why I prefer to focus my efforts on future generations. Obviously, everyday life should be made easier for older adults and there are many tasks to be done in order to take care of them, but I think that—right now—my character traits and personality fit more with young people. I also know, based on my first hand experiences, that this point of view is also shared by many of my classmates and university friends. And it is not the argument itself, but rather the idea. That is why I am concerned about the fact that older individuals are the forgotten group of society. They are the ones who have made our starting point. We now walk on the foundations they had built and we owe them everything. Without them we would be nothing today.*

Similarly, student SO6412 pointed out that:

*Older age evokes tenderness, but also sadness and loneliness. The maximum contact I have had with her has been through observing older people from my town, many of whom do not leave their houses and do not interact with others. They enclose themselves at home and do not give life a chance, they think that their lives have already ended. My only grandfather that is still alive is not like that, he started traveling when he was seventy years old, he walks, he studies, he clings to life with all his might. I always tell myself that when I reach his age I want to be like him, leave the idea that 'I'm too old' aside and live as I have always lived. (...) It is true that I would not like to work with older people, perhaps*

*because I have never been able to experience the moment of visiting my grandmother for a meal or listening to her stories, or playing cards with her. I have never been able to have the first hand grandparent-granddaughter relationship, and I have only experienced it by listening to the anecdotes and stories told by my friends. I feel that because of this lack of contact I don't have the tools or I don't know how to relate to older people. I also don't know how they are. I guess I feel the same way as adults who say they that don't know how to deal with teenagers. Maybe because I'm afraid to deal with older individuals and start creating a bond that I, probably, will never have.*

### 3.2.3. Overcoming Prior Beliefs about Older Adults

The quantitative analysis of the tasks shows that more than 90% of the students, after reading and doing the exercises, have changed their previous notions about old age and incorporated new aspects about ageing. The results affirm that careful and guided reading and, above all, the possibility of reflecting on it, helped students to question the previous ideas about old age and gender. Student SO9801, who has worked in a nursing home, commented that:

*This book has allowed me to see that there are many different ways to live later life. The author speaks of an active, free, happy, and crazy older age . . . She depicts an uncommon image of older age that nobody is used to ( . . . ) getting older can be boring or you can feel like a coquette, you can live your life to the fullest and be happy.*

Another student, SO9401, also stated that “the lifestyle of the characters in the book is breaking stereotypes. It is a style that does not match with the typical notions of older people that we are used to seeing around us.” Similarly, student SO1201 pointed out that:

*I had a very different perspective about older age, based on what I have seen and what my grandparents have told me. I thought that when we reach that stage of life, the only things that happen to us are a physical damage, a loss of memory, there is no desire to live, to do things, to go to parties, to leave home, to show off, etc.*

Students' responses show that they have dismantled previous myths about old age and created a new view of ageing from a different perspective. However, the fact that students' grandmothers regularly appear in their reflections on later life reveals the gendered nature of old age. The reports also demonstrate that later life can be an active stage in life that adds to quality of life [21,33]. For example, student SO9201 pointed out that “the book has made me understand that old age can be lived in a more fun way. Knowing this, I can accompany my grandmother (online) during this stage of her life and be able to better understand and help her.” Relatedly, student SO8501 wrote that:

*My grandmother has spent her whole life taking care of her grandchildren, and nobody ever asked if she wanted to do it. The book has made me realise that we have to take action and help her see that she should think more about herself and her wellbeing, because she has already taken enough care of everyone and has never dedicated time to herself. I think that many grandchildren and parents experience this type of situation but we do nothing about it because we are afraid to create discussions within family.*

We have classified the students' comments that referred not only to older people, but, specifically, to older women in different sections of the reading guide. In the section where students had to choose the main characters that had impacted the most, everyone (100%) mentioned the female protagonists Lily and Margot—strong, independent and confident older women. The elements that surprised them the most were linked to the deconstruction of stereotypes about older women, as has been mentioned in the previous sections. Student SO9801 mentioned that:

*The book gives us a very different perspective of grandmothers. It shows us how older women can have a youthful spirit and a lot of courage. The moments that stand out in the book are the parties, the sharing of a flat, going to pubs, putting on make-up, sex, drugs... The book brings you closer to an atypical reality of growing older, it breaks with*

*the typical notion of later life that is mainly constructed around the idea of taking care of grandchildren.*

Student S09201 also highlighted sexual diversity in later life and stated that being a transsexual older woman often implied invisibility and forgetfulness:

*I would like to give transsexual older women a voice, it seemed like a very interesting topic ( . . . ) I came to the conclusion that transsexual women should be much more normalised in their older age, I think that they only make themselves known during their youth and people forget about this group of people as time goes by and as they get older.*

By the same token, student SO8701 mentioned that:

*It is interesting to see that the protagonists still have sexual desires, since many older women tend to lose sexual attraction, for various reasons, such as menopause and because there is a decrease in oestrogen levels.*

The adjectives and related synonyms used by students to describe older women were grouped into the antonyms of the social imaginary of later life: strength, freedom, decision, joy, courage, pursuing dreams, creating projects, standing up and challenging the traditional social norms. For example, student SO401 noted that the book shows older women who have dreams and want to have fun later in life: “being older does not mean one cannot have fun in life.” Similarly, student SO1201 highlighted that age does not determine the way we feel about ourselves: “reading shows that being older does not depend on age: you can be over 60 or 70, or even 80, and not consider yourself old. In this regard, student SO4301 argued that “the coquettes [older women in the book] show us that the negative social connotation of the retirement stage is not real. They show that it is time to enjoy free time while bolstering their collective self-esteem to combat a negative view of later life.”

It is also worth mentioning that some of the students, without having been previously consulted or guided, pointed out the positive effects of working with narratives. According to them, they had not thought about old age, but the reading guide and class discussions allowed them to discover new approaches to narrative inquiry and imagine their (future) later years. For example, student SO8601 commented that reading “has given me space to break many of the stigmas I had about old age. I would like my old age to be similar to what is described in the book, and I would like to break the stereotypes related to later life.” Another SO9401 student stated that:

*For me, older people are not less important than other age groups, and they should not be an invisible group within society. On the contrary, I consider older adults as the most important individuals. An older person is an individual who is in the last stage of life. Older people bring with them all the knowledge, experiences, skills, and learning; they are wise and we can learn a lot from them. Older people also have fewer obligations and have the opportunity to enhance their both physical and emotional health, recover or start new hobbies, and participate in society with the aim to improve their quality life and wellbeing. This is how I want my old age to be.*

The book’s in-depth reading and critical reflections have also helped other students discover the unknown aspects about ageing and, as they stated, overcome their own fears about later life and ageing. As student SO8701 argued:

*The reading of the book helped me to overcome the fear of growing older and showed that age as a category does not matter. If you did not fall in love when you were young, you can still fall in love when you are older, you should not be afraid of not being able to find the love of your life because many things will happen to us during our life span. Similarly, many of us are afraid of death or growing older, and I am one of them. However, the book helped me not to feel so overwhelmed, because if you enjoy your every day as if it was the last day, you will not have that worry, because you will have done everything you wanted and even more than that.*

In the initial section, we showed the quantitative and argumentative predominance of the students' reluctance towards the idea of working with older people in care homes and related areas and services. However, the written tasks and the students' comments on the ways in which older women and older men experience active ageing show a significant change in their responses and reflections about older age. Many of the students have changed their initial thoughts. For example, student SO9201 commented that "although we do not want to work in areas related to old age, at some point in our professional career we will meet older people. Therefore, we must treat them in a certain way and be more patient and open-minded." Similar ideas are also expressed by student SO8201, who pointed out that "I believe that every social worker should know different things related to old age, for example, the potentialities of older people, the ways in which they physically age and their state of health. The book helped me see old age in a different way." Another SO9101 student stated that:

*Thanks to the reading of this book, my perspective towards older age has changed in a positive way. Now I see that being older does not mean not being able to do anything. That is why this reading has helped me change my mind about social work and older adults. From the very beginning I was very sure that I did not want to work with older people because I saw older age as the last stage before death. I thought that working with them would be very monotonous. Now I no longer look at later life with the same eyes. I think that many projects can be carried out with older people that do not focus on their decline or only on their needs.*

In a similar vein, the student SO201 wrote that:

*Thanks to this reading, now I want to learn more about older people. Until now it was the group I was the least interested in, but after reading the book I have realised that older people can teach us many things about life and I would like to delve deeper into it.*

#### 4. Discussion

We began this article by considering the possible causes of the negative considerations about older age and students' reluctance to work with older people as a sum of social factors in formal, non-formal and informal education. We also looked into what beliefs and stereotypes about later life have been internalised by young people. We questioned how and why some of them had prejudices and negative notions of later years of life. We also wanted to know if alternative models of ageing, such as healthy and active ageing, could generate positive changes in the images of older age, and if reading and reflective work could favour the reconstruction of later life. The content analysis and the examples provided in this article show that there is a sum of causes of a social nature related to the social construction of old age. The results of the questionnaires indicate that we are facing an educational challenge that will impact the future generations. The longevity revolution [27], the feminisation of old age (since older women outlive older men), and the prolonged years of retirement create new paradigms and, therefore, a need for a conscious intergenerational education that could foster more positive aspects of ageing and old age [1,12].

It is also worth noting the students' image of old age as the last stage of life. Many students think that reaching retirement implies approaching the end of life or an empty life without projects or activities. Their answers show the stereotyping of older people and a clear differentiation between one's chronological age and social age. As in Van Gennep's rites of passage [34], the 'cut' that defines an administrative and sociological situation, such as retirement, is identified with passivity, the end of the vital process and the taboo of speaking about death. The idea of old age as the "end" must be demystified and integrated into the processes of profigurative reflection and intergenerational relationship, which would enable a broader and more holistic view of later life. Fostering different and more positive perspectives about ageing is especially relevant for older women because they live longer than men and are subject to the double standard of female ageing [28],

higher levels of loneliness and poverty, lack of civic and social participation, and more financial burdens [24,32,35–37]. According to Nerenberg, “discrimination and disadvantage associated with both gender and age combine to compromise older women’s ability to achieve or maintain self-sufficiency and make them more likely to be poor and/or dependent” [38] (p. 4).

The study also reveals how narrative inquiry can give an opportunity to tell one’s life story. For example, students’ surprise that older age is not an asexual phase in life is an example of the importance of what Bodil Hansen Blix calls untold and unexplained narratives [4]. Neither grandmothers nor grandfathers speak at home, out of fear or out of shame, about their sexual options or needs. The narrative voice facilitates this disinhibiting and gives visibility to older age and sexuality that is being presented from a more positive point of view [39]. The reflective use of narratives as an educational resource also fosters intergenerational education and profigurative socialisation. In fact, one of the main motivations in our initial university education is to overcome ageism by working on literary narratives with intergenerational groups at the local level (the characters in the book, the author of the book and the university students).

The educational and transforming power of the narrative set in a local context and, particularly, the reconstruction of the social image of being an older woman, also helps to break social prejudices and enables changes in students’ attitudes and their future professional orientation. Many of them affirmed that they did think about active ageing or intergenerational relations, but after the reading exercises they started to consider working with older people as one of the possibilities or even as the main choice. Working on intergenerationality through narrative also helped reflect on beliefs and attitudes in relation to the different ages of life and gave an opportunity to share and create new knowledge. The literary and cultural analysis of the book, along with students’ comments and feedback, provided us with relevant information regarding the notions and social beliefs about old age and ageing and, in particular, the social image of older women [15,40]. The class discussions and group debates served not only as a rich database and an exchange of information, but also allowed students to question the beliefs about old age and gender, especially in relation to a local context that is still predominantly sexist and heteropatriarchal. In addition, the study results reveal the often hidden aspects about ageing that would have remained invisible if they had not been collected through the narrative analysis and class discussions. The students reflected on loneliness in old age, the concern to maintain one’s autonomy until death, the difficulty of establishing new social relationships after certain ages, pain and disability, among other important topics. The class exercises also helped students to think more about the relationships between young people and older adults and the need to foster intergeneration dialogue, social integration and profiguration that occurs by promoting education (formal, non-formal and informal) [6,7,12].

This case study also reveals that narratives can have a more powerful impact than scientific empirical data and demonstrates the importance of incorporating flexible reading guides to strengthen critical thinking skills and interdisciplinary education that leads to lifelong learning [41]. The results also show the need to incorporate the gender perspective in higher education and the study of the ageing process. The use of narratives as a didactic, formative, and socialising tool also implies dialogue, empathy, understanding, and solidarity, which involve the creation and sharing of new knowledge. Ageing, within the framework of intergenerational relations, has an alternative, enriching and socialising approach. In sum, the narrative connects the reader and the writer, fosters critical thinking, and contributes to raising awareness about ageism and the ways to overcome it.

## 5. Conclusions

One of the limitations of this case study is that it is only focused on the responses and work of the students enrolled in a specific course. In the future, we would like to extend the study and repeat the activity based on a different narrative of similar characteristics at the end of the course degree. Another limitation is that the questionnaires were carried out



during the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have affected the students' responses due to negative images of ageing shown on the media that involved suffering, death, chaos, and the fear of ageing. Another limitation is that the questionnaire, introduced at the beginning of the course, was voluntary and, therefore, we could not take into account all the responses of enrolled students. These aspects will be improved in the near future and upcoming research. Taking these limitations into account, the results of the study provide useful and rich data to foster profiguration and age-friendly society and education.

The case study has also revealed that is important to take into account how older people are seen by young people. The study outcomes show that, on the one hand, there is awareness of the stigmatisation of old age created during upbringing and education, which makes younger people see older people as belonging to the retirement stage or the end of life. On the other hand, there is a permanent and constant idealisation of youth. Students are aware of the existing stereotypes about old age and they continue to construct later life as the opposite of the active and autonomous life that belongs to young people. Therefore, there is a need to provide students with deeper knowledge of the heterogeneity of all stages of life via a humanistic educational approach, intergenerational exchanges, and examples from familiar environments, gender relations, and local narratives (written in their mother tongues). Intergenerational reading would also allow breaking with stereotypes about later life and offer valuable data for future research. The incorporation of didactic and intergenerational work of proximity through the reading and analysis of narratives can help promote attitudes for action.

The scarcity of the gender perspective that is found in student reflections is also striking. It seems that the students start university studies having been educated in aesthetic feminism: with the politically correct usage of masculine/feminine/neutral or generic articles, but without openly clarifying whether they refer to men or women. In fact, 80% of the social work students are female and, theoretically, they are part of the generation that is well educated in gender-related issues and is aware of feminism. Taking into account that ageing affects not only older people but every one of us, the construction of an active and healthy ageing from the narrative and the gender perspectives must be part of the curricular content not only in sociology-and gerontology-related disciplines, but also in other degrees and courses. Moreover, aspects related to ageing are only part of optional subjects unlike the topics related to childhood, adolescence and youth, which are better integrated in core subjects.

This case study also demonstrates that the significance of giving more importance to the power of narratives in university education, since they transform viewpoints and promote attitudes that trigger action and change misconceptions. In fact, narratives can have a more powerful dimension in terms of personal impact than scientific research because they are presented as literary models that make us think critically. However, in an educational and socialisation context, 'disoriented' and unguided reading is not valid and empowering. The use of reading guides, which are open and flexible, help strengthen critical thinking and foster interdisciplinarity and intergeneration dialogue. Additionally, initial students' training should also trigger an interest in lifelong learning and how to age actively. On this matter, the data obtained from this study offer better clues about how to teach ageing and challenge ageism among university students. We have identified three main modalities of action: (a) to reflect on the students' training as professionals, which makes them more aware about the need to have better knowledge about later life beyond the stereotyped image of older age, (b) to overcome ageism, since it determines the ways the students perceive and treat older people, and (c) to make later life and ageing more visible by helping the students understand that there are many different ways of growing older.

The study results also reveal that the local context is not perceived as explanatory enough. Giving more emphasis and importance to local issues would help identify and think critically about global problems, such as globalisation and internationalisation. This study shows that the local context, seen from a micro perspective, allows students to identify

the guidelines that are later developed and consolidated at a global level, which García-Canclini [42] refers to as a ‘glocalised’ context. Additionally, the references to local context and the gender dimension help provide space for intersubjectivity and reflection from a local perspective. This article also aimed to demonstrate that the use of narratives as a didactic, formative, and socialising tool implies proper individual characteristics and identifications, such as dialogue, empathy, understanding, solidarity, and sharing between those who are vulnerable and interdependent. Ageing, seen from the lens of intergenerational relations and profiguration, offers an alternative, enriching, and socialising approach to later life that can help improve emotional health and wellbeing of older adults. The use of narrative allows students to extend their reflections to other groups and alter their perceptions, which is needed in order to achieve social change and betterment. The in-depth reading helps connect with the readers, invite students to think critically, and overcome ageism.

In order to make significant changes in the social and cultural perception of ageing and to undo the narrative of decline [14], more action is needed beyond lectures or classroom sessions with university students. Scientific articles do not provide the necessary awareness, attitudes, values and norms about old age; thus, it is necessary to explore other ways of teaching and learning. Profiguration, narrative inquiry, and bringing together different generations to critically engage, discuss, and better understand the complexities of ageing is crucial to challenge ageism, give older adults a voice, and promote different perspectives on later life. Finally, although we started this section by listing the limitations, we would like to end on a positive note and hope that there will be more studies that use critical narrative approaches to challenge ageism, build a more sustainable and age-friendly society, and foster intergenerational dialogue. We plan to continue our research by using the same narrative and reading guide, while adding other readings related to ageing and content analysis in the near future.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/land11071057/s1>, Annex S1: A Reflective Reading Guide; Annex S2: Analysis Scheme.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Both the book *Casa Yé-ye* and the tasks were written in Catalan (the mother tongue of the author and the students). The book’s online version is currently being prepared for open-access. The tasks of the students are stored in the repository of the activities of the subjects of the two courses.

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