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# Rethinking Old Age and Masculinity: Impact on the Re-Spatialization of Life and Research during the COVID-19 Period in Spain

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and experiencing confinement resignified spaces of life and research. This experience did not affect men and women or the youth and older people in the same way. In recent years, the pandemic's exacerbation of gender inequality and its harmful effect on the elderly have been extensively studied. However, few studies have focused on how it has impacted older men specifically, and even fewer have looked into the variations in the way they perceive their masculinity and inhabit (gendered) spaces. This paper aims to analyse that impact and those variations, as well as the research limitations that came to light in the investigation process of this study, which was also affected by restrictions imposed during the pandemic. We managed to conduct interviews and focus groups with men over 60 years old from different social backgrounds and sexual orientation to study their thoughts and beliefs about masculinity and ageing by taking into account how the re-spatialization of the participant's lives and of the research during the pandemic transformed both the (self-)perception of masculinity and of ageing, as well as the process and results of our investigation.

## Keywords

Gendered space, masculinity, ageing, pandemic, fieldwork

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# Repensar la Vejez y la Masculinidad: Impacto en la Re-Espacialización de la Vida y la Investigación durante el Período de la COVID-19 en España

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## Resumen

La pandemia de la COVID-19 y la experiencia del confinamiento resignificaron los espacios de la vida y la investigación. Esta experiencia no afectó del mismo modo a hombres y a mujeres ni tampoco a jóvenes y a personas mayores. En los últimos años, se ha estudiado ampliamente cómo la pandemia exacerbó la desigualdad de género, así como también su efecto nocivo en las personas mayores. Sin embargo, pocos estudios se han centrado en cómo ha afectado específicamente a los hombres mayores y menos aún las variaciones que ha supuesto en la forma en que estos perciben su masculinidad y habitan los espacios (generizados). Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar ese impacto y esas variaciones, así como las limitaciones que salieron a la luz en el mismo proceso de investigación, que también se vio afectado por las restricciones impuestas durante la pandemia. Logramos realizar entrevistas y grupos de discusión con hombres mayores de 60 años de diferentes clases sociales y orientaciones sexuales para estudiar sus opiniones y creencias sobre la masculinidad y el envejecimiento, teniendo en cuenta cómo la re-espacialización de la vida de los participantes durante la pandemia transformó tanto la (auto)percepción de la masculinidad como del envejecimiento, así como también el proceso y los resultados de nuestra investigación.

## Palabras clave

Espacio generizado, masculinidad, envejecimiento, pandemia, trabajo de campo

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When the SARS-CoV-2 virus spread in early 2020, governments were forced to declare states of emergency, which resulted in a virtual lockdown in most parts of the world. The “global lockdown” not only caused an economic and social crisis still in force but also resignified spaces of life and research. Long before, philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1967) and Henri Lefebvre (2013/1974), and geographers such as Edward Soja (1989) and Doreen Massey (1994) freed the concept of space from its traditional reduction to a static receptacle where social relationships occur in order to think about it in connection with time “as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity” (Massey, 1994; p. 4). Massey further emphasizes that “since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power, meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (1994, p. 4) permeated by different types of discrimination, such as gender and ageism, both remarkable during the pandemic.

On the one hand, discrimination based on age, particularly against the elderly, was normalized at the very start of the virus’s spread. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the elderly not only because the SARS-CoV-2 virus attacks individuals differently depending on age, but also because of the public policies enacted to protect the health of this specific population, as well as how the media spread information (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020). Although political and media-related discourses claimed to prioritize the care for the elderly, many of the adopted measures infantilized this group and reproduced homogenizing stereotypes about old age.

On the other hand, the pandemic also caused discrimination based on gender to be more noticeable. Although over the last four years, many investigations have shed light on how the coronavirus crisis exacerbated gender inequality affecting women the most, and how it also mainly affected the elderly, few studies have focused on the intersection between gender and old age during the pandemic and even less on how the disease affected the self-conception of older men and (hegemonic) masculinity, specifically about the way they inhabit gendered public and private spaces.

The literature on hegemonic masculinity offers a nuanced understanding of the social dynamics and power structures inherent in gender relations. Connell's seminal work, *Masculinities* (2005a), defines hegemonic masculinity as the cultural ideal of manhood, characterized by dominance, control, and the subordination of women and other masculinities. Kimmel (2004) expands on this by examining the historical and cultural construction of masculinity, highlighting how societal norms pressure men to conform to these ideals to gain acceptance and status. In their study, Calasanti and King (2005) discuss how aging interacts with hegemonic masculinity, noting that older men often face challenges in maintaining this dominant identity, which can lead to a reconfiguration of gender norms and power relations. Together, these works underscore the pervasive influence of hegemonic masculinity in shaping individual identities and social hierarchies, emphasizing the importance of deconstructing these norms to foster more equitable gender relations.

Critiques of the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” focus on its complexity and the potential for oversimplification. Scholars argue that Connell's framework, while pioneering, sometimes lacks clarity in distinguishing between hegemonic masculinity and other forms of masculinity, potentially conflating dominance with mere cultural idealization (Demetriou, 2001). Critics like Collier (1998) and Beasley (2008) suggest that the concept can obscure the

fluid and contested nature of gender practices, failing to account for intersectional influences such as race, class, and sexuality, and this study emphasizes, also age. Additionally, Wetherell and Edley (1999) contend that hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical tool may not fully capture the everyday negotiations and resistances men exhibit in relation to dominant gender norms. These critiques emphasize the need for a more nuanced and intersectional approach to understanding masculinities, one that recognizes the diversity of male experiences and the multiple axes of power that shape gender relations.

The concept of hegemonic masculinities in Spain has been critically examined by scholars from a wide array of disciplines, who provide insightful analyses into the cultural and historical specificities of Spanish male identities. Newman, Carabí, and Armengol (2012) discuss the intersection of gender and nation in Spanish culture, highlighting how the Franco regime's idealized image of the strong, authoritative male still influences contemporary Spanish masculinities. They argue that this historical context contributes to a form of hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes dominance, heteronormativity, and emotional restraint. Téllez et al., (2024) adds to this by exploring how contemporary Spanish media perpetuates these ideals, yet also increasingly showcases alternative masculinities that challenge traditional norms. According to Téllez, there is a growing visibility of more diverse male identities that contest the rigid, hegemonic standards of masculinity, reflecting broader social changes in attitudes towards gender and equality. These works underscore the dynamic and contested nature of hegemonic masculinities in Spain, shaped by historical legacies and evolving cultural narratives. These legacies and narratives permeate the spaces of life and strengthen the borders that separate the public for men and the private or “domestic” space as more appropriate for women. Although they were to a certain extent deconstructed in the context of democratic opening and appropriation of public spaces by men and by women during the Spanish transition, many of those legacies remained in force.

The lockdown experience calls for a rethinking of the public and private spheres and how they are not inhabited by men and women or by younger and older people in the same way, which is related with the uses of time. Research suggests that there are notable differences in the time use patterns of older adults across Europe, with distinct variations by gender and cultural context. According to a study by Freire, Sánchez, and Díaz (2012), older adults in Spain tend to allocate more time to social activities compared to their European counterparts, which may be due to the favorable climate in Spain or its high safety rates. Moreover, the study underscores gender differences in time use, indicating that older women, both in Spain and other European countries, tend to devote more time to caregiving and household tasks compared to men. Something that in the case of Spanish older people can be reinforced by the particularity of their recent history marked by Christian moral indoctrination during the Franco Dictatorship for 40 years.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures significantly changed the patterns in the time use of older adults in Spain, with a reduction in social activities and increased time spent on household chores and sedentary behavior for older adults in Spain (López-Bueno et al., 2021). This highlights the need to analyze the impact on how older people, particularly men, inhabit gendered spaces, by considering the intersection between aging and masculinity.

David Jackson (2016) argues that the dominant discourse of masculinity marginalizes older masculinities. However aging process itself can become a revealing (rather than oppressive) moment for many men if they manage to dismantle the mandates of “hegemonic masculinity” that they can no longer sustain (in fact, that they never could). As Jackson states, this can be more complex for privileged heterosexual men, going so far as to say that “aging men, in Western culture, inhabit an ambiguous, social category [for which] many aging men are still privileged (e.g. heterosexual, white, middle class, able-bodied, rich), [...] but simultaneously they are marginalized by ageism, bodily fragility and loss of sexual potency” (2016, p. 11).

The intersectional analysis of age and masculinity allows for a more nuanced understanding of how identities are constructed. Social practices, narratives, and discourses shape how men navigate these changing identities (Jackson 2016, p. 10). This, in turn, influences how they inhabit space, impacting both the social production of space (Lefebvre, 2013) and the spatial production of the social (Soja, 1989; Massey, 1994), as demonstrated by the traditional western culture distinction between the public-masculine-rational (as privileged) and the private-feminine-emotional (as underprivileged), that the pandemic situation has shown while at the same time calling into question. Therefore, it not only can serve as a case study to illustrate how new dynamics challenge the gendered space; by disrupting routines and challenging traditional notions of masculinity, it can be also a moment for older men to dismantle the hegemonic mandates.

### **The Pandemic and the Resignification of the Research Space**

The research space has also shifted due to the changes in the way of habiting the space because of the experience of confinement. COVID-19 restrictions affected academic and research activities, jeopardizing the implementation of fieldwork in many research projects, including ours. The closure of institutions, associations and centres for the elderly in Spain coincided with the beginning of the fieldwork in March 2020, originally based on carrying out in-person focus groups with men over 65 years to analyse social constructions of ageing masculinities through cultural representations in contemporary European literatures and cinemas.

The unexpected situation made it necessary to incorporate new strategies and analytical techniques. We conducted interviews and focus groups with men over 60 from different social backgrounds and sexual orientations to analyse their opinions and beliefs on masculinity and ageing by taking into account how the re-spatialization of their lives during the pandemic had an impact on their thoughts on masculinity and ageing, and by considering the impact of the pandemic on the same process of our research and its results.

This section explores how researchers coped with limitations in conducting interviews with older men in the pandemic context while finding unexpected benefits, prompting a rethinking of “fieldwork” and of research space.

### **Methodology: Between Problems and Solutions**

The coincidence of the lockdown and the beginning of fieldwork made recruiting older men extremely complicated. Even when restrictions ceased in Spain, some (care) institutions were reticent to transmit information to their residents about participation in online interviews. This exhibited a sort of “institutional paternalism” that infantilized older people and reinforced negative stereotypes of passivity and the social isolation of this group in an extreme context. To overcome these obstacles, we contacted various organizations (lifelong learning institutes such as Aula Senior of the University of Murcia, various book clubs, social centres for the elderly, and older people’s associations such as the *Fundación 26 de Diciembre* which provides specialized care for LGTBIQ+ older people in Madrid), and we used snowball sampling. This technique enabled us to conduct five individual online interviews during the strict lockdown, which was later expanded to a total of 20 men individually interviewed. Five other participants were interviewed directly as a group just as it was originally planned to be done before the pandemic spread. In total, 25 older men with different sexual orientations, social backgrounds, places of origin (rural/urban areas), family situations, and health status were interviewed to ensure an intersectional approach.

Although the selection of the participants was conditioned by the pandemic situation, health measures, and the emotional state of the participants, age over 60 and diversity of profiles were the main criterion of selection. Since this is qualitative research, rather than the representativeness of the population from a probabilistic perspective, the interest of the study was focused on the in-depth analysis of the case studies that helped understand the phenomenon under study.

Even though implementing individual online interviews was crucial to research under the challenging circumstances not only did the incorporation of technology impact important aspects of the study such as the coldness of the screen or loss of expressiveness and tone of voice, but it also conditioned the profile of the participants and limited the participant pool to those comfortable with technology. Many of them demonstrated medium to high cultural, social, and technological levels, and this enabled them to cope well with the use of new technologies.

To address these issues, mitigate class bias, and guarantee the representativeness and diversity of the sample, we implemented a mixed-modality approach, which combined online and in-person interviews in two phases. The first phase consisted of individual interviews (online or in-person, depending on epidemiological situation and the skills of the participants with new technologies), focused on self-perception of old age and masculinity and using biographical and narrative inquiry for interviews (Rosenthal, 1993), as well as focused on the cultural representations of this intersection through a discussion of three advertisements related to the research topic<sup>1</sup>. The individual interviews lasted 45 minutes and were structured based on two main themes and sections, one of them dedicated to the perception of aging and in connection to masculinity from a biographical approach, and the second one dedicated to the reflection of cultural representations of masculinity and aging in Spain taking three television advertisements in consideration. Within the framework of the first section, questions have been developed on the conceptualization of old age, explicit and implicit gender characteristics in

the aging process; differences between older men (class, ethnicity, rural/urban area, sexual orientation, etc.) and between men and women; intersections of masculinity and age (implicit or explicit contrast with younger/middle-aged men); stereotypes about aging, ageism and experiences of discrimination. In the second section of this first phase, attention has been paid to opinions of the *status quo* of representations of older men; influence on personal life (narrative identity) and forms of agency in relation to cultural representation.

The second phase of the research consisted of in-person focus groups with participants from the first phase (4/5 people were able to participate due to pandemic restrictions) and it was concentrated on cultural representations of older men in Spain through a joint debate about six film excerpts<sup>2</sup>. The focus groups lasted two and a half hours and were structured in six blocks, based on questions developed according to the topics and narrative arguments of the excerpts in the selected films. In this case, the thematic axes of the group debate were focused on corporality and (male) sexuality in old age; health, illness and experience of vulnerability; stereotypes about older men and of social inclusion/exclusion; non-hegemonic masculinities in old age; (non-hegemonic) ways of negotiating the aging process; intergenerational relationships; changes in the experience of temporality and the way of inhabiting (social) spaces; vital changes and affective relationships (retirement, widowhood, loneliness, etc.).

Although the original idea behind both meetings was to conduct them exclusively in two-stage face-to-face focus groups, the necessary implementation of online (or in-person) individual interview made it easier to access the personal life context of each participant, which was later considered during the joint meeting. Despite limitations, the need to move part of the “fieldwork” to our homes positively contributed to the research. Meeting participants through virtual platforms in the relaxed setting of their private living spaces allowed us to better familiarize ourselves with their intimate environments; using a “neutral space” – a common but perhaps mislabelled term in sociological fieldwork – would have made this difficult.

While digital interactions lack complete naturalness, Howlett argues it can “revealed angles of the field that would not be observed during in-person fieldwork, especially because scholars [...] are routinely advised to only meet in neutral spaces or places of work for reasons of safety and security” (2022, p. 395). Often, participants seemed more comfortable doing the interviews from their homes, even introducing family members and enriching the understanding of their private context. The pandemic situation, with its emotional intensity and disruptions to daily life, also brought a certain spontaneity to the interviews, mitigating the coldness of the screen. Thus, the mixed-modality approach proved beneficial in several ways. It facilitated technology access for participants and allowed them to participate in face-to-face meetings in a context of isolation. It enabled analysis of both content of both encounters and participant behavior and narratives across the transition from individual online interviews with a live story format in their houses to the face-to-face focus groups in a public space. This combination of phases, modalities, and qualitative techniques allowed for rich exploration of the intersection of age and masculinity and of social and cultural representations of ageing masculinities in Spain. Unexpected issues, such as how men inhabit space, emerged from the research and motivated the writing of this paper. Generally, the use of technology allowed us to access the participants’ most intimate and private life spaces, and the research motivated them to think about how they inhabited these spaces and others and how gender differences permeated them.

## Data Collection

As noted above, during the research process 25 older men with different sexual orientations, social backgrounds, places of origin (rural/urban areas), and health statuses were interviewed in Madrid and the Region of Murcia. Due to the variable epidemiological situation, only one group of 5 men could complete both phases in a focus group format (October-November 2020. Focus Group 2). Of the remaining 20 men individually interviewed during the first research phase, which was mainly carried out online (April 2020-February 2021), only 9 later participated in two face-to-face focus groups to conclude the second phase of the process, which was focused on viewing film excerpts. The first group of five men participated in the research in November 2020 (Focus Group 1), while the other four joined the focus group in March 2021 (Focus Group 3). The rest of the interviewees chose not to be part of the face-to-face focus groups or preferred to do both parts individually in an online modality for fear of virus contagion.

**Table 1**

*Type of Technique used with Participants*

<b>Pseudonym (AGE)</b>	<b>Individual interview (First part of the analysis)</b>	<b>Focus groups (FG) (Second part of the analysis)</b>
<b>Braulio García (67)</b>	Yes (strict lockdown)	FG. 1. Murcia (November 2020)
<b>Jaime González (69)</b>	Yes (strict lockdown)	No
<b>Martín Rodríguez (67)</b>	Yes (strict lockdown)	No
<b>Arturo Pérez (67)</b>	Yes (strict lockdown)	No
<b>Facundo Urriaga (67)</b>	Yes (strict lockdown)	No
<b>Salvador Giménez (66)</b>	Yes	FG. 1. Murcia (November 2020)
<b>Felipe Romero</b>	Yes	No (individual interview during the 2nd part of the analysis)
<b>Iván Requena (68)</b>	Yes	FG. 1. Murcia (November 2020)
<b>Jacinto Sielva (71)</b>	Yes	FG. 1. Murcia (November 2020)
<b>Darío Rivera (65)</b>	Yes	FG. 1. Murcia (November 2020)
<b>César Navarro (71)</b>	Yes	No
<b>Aurelio Gil (65)</b>	Yes	FG. 3. Murcia (March 2021)
<b>Evaristo Torres (80)</b>	Yes	No
<b>Sergio Costa (66)</b>	No	FG 2. Madrid (October/November 2020)
<b>Daniel Martínez (67)</b>	No	FG 2. Madrid (October/November 2020)

<b>Pseudonym (AGE)</b>	<b>Individual interview (First part of the analysis)</b>	<b>Focus groups (FG) (Second part of the analysis)</b>
<b>Fernando López (62)</b>	No	FG 2. Madrid (October/November 2020)
<b>Ernesto Fernández (66)</b>	No	FG 2. Madrid (October/November 2020)
<b>Ángel Águila (68)</b>	No	FG 2. Madrid (October/November 2020)
<b>Ramiro Serrano (67)</b>	Yes	No
<b>Gabriel González (65)</b>	Yes	No
<b>Adolfo Mora (68)</b>	Yes	No
<b>Marcos Vallés (70)</b>	Yes	FG. 3. Murcia (March 2021)
<b>Mateo Maldonado (78)</b>	Yes	FG. 3. Murcia (March 2021)
<b>Pedro Blanco (63)</b>	Yes	No
<b>Tadeo Sánchez (68)</b>	Yes	FG. 3. Murcia (March 2021)

This study focused only on men who participated in both phases of fieldwork: those who were able to complete both phases in a focus group format, those who participated in the individual interview during the first stage, and those who were part of the face-to-face focus group in the second stage. Exceptionally, online interviews during Spain's strict lockdown were included (even in those cases in which the interviewees decided not to participate in the second group stage) for their valuable lockdown insights. In total, 18 men aged 62-78 were analyzed (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Participant Profiles*

<b>Pseudonym (AGE)</b>	<b>Residency</b>	<b>Educational attainment</b>	<b>Former occupation</b>	<b>Family status (n° of children, n° of grandchildren)</b>	<b>Sexual orientation</b>
<b>Braulio García (BG)* (67)</b>	Urban	Secondary school	Public works manager	Divorced	Heterosexual
<b>Jaime González (JG) (69)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Nurse	Divorced	Heterosexual
<b>Martín Rodríguez (MR) (67)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Administrative	Married (2,0)	Heterosexual
<b>Arturo Pérez (AP) (67)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Administrative/public worker	Married, (2,4)	Heterosexual

<b>Pseudonym (AGE)</b>	<b>Residency</b>	<b>Educational attainment</b>	<b>Former occupation</b>	<b>Family status (n° of children, n° of grandchildren)</b>	<b>Sexual orientation</b>
<b>Facundo Urriaga (FU) (67)</b>	Urban	Secondary school	Administrative	Married (2,2)	Heterosexual
<b>Salvador Giménez (SG) (66)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Public worker	Divroced and remarried (2,0),	Heterosexual
<b>Iván Requena (IR) (68)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Real estate agent	Married, (2,4)	Heterosexual
<b>Jacinto Sielva (JS) (71)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Sales agent	Married, (2,1)	Heterosexual
<b>Darío Rivera (DR) (65)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Computer technician	Married, (2,1)	Heterosexual
<b>Aurelio Gil (AG) (65)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Public worker	Married, (3,0)	Heterosexual
<b>Sergio Costa (SC) (66)</b>	Urban	Secondary school	Guitar player	Single (0)	Bisexual
<b>Daniel Martínez (DM) (67)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Commercial agent	LAT (0)	Gay
<b>Fernando López (FL) (62)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Social educator	Divorced and living with a partner, (1)	Gay
<b>Ernesto Fernández (EF) (66)</b>	Urban	Higher education	Furniture restorer	Single (0)	Gay
<b>Ángel Águila (AA) (68)</b>	Urban	Secondary school	Marketing department staff worker	Single (0)	Gay
<b>Marcos Vallés (MV) (70)</b>	Urban	Higher education	University professor	Married (2,0)	Heterosexual
<b>Mateo Maldonado (MM) (78)</b>	Rural	Higher education	Plant manager	Married (4,6)	Heterosexual
<b>Tadeo Sánchez (TS) (68)</b>	Rural	Higher education	Secondary-school teacher	Married (2,2)	Heterosexual

### **Ethical Considerations:**

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Murcia. Before the first individual interview, the participants were given three documents. First, an informative text about the project and their type of participation. Secondly, they were asked to fill out a document with demographic information (identity data, data related to health, age, country of birth, language, professional situation or retirement, economic situation, sexual orientation, marital status, number of children/grandchildren and care work). Finally, they were given the informed consent document indicating how the information would be treated, their revocation rights and the guarantee of confidentiality of the information obtained, which they signed and handed over to the researchers. In cases where the interviews were carried out online, the documentation was sent by email. All informants' data were recorded and stored in a file based on what is established by current legislation on data protection.

### **Findings and Analysis: Resignification of Spaces of Life in Older Men**

The following analysis with a gender perspective and intersectional approach draws on the stories obtained from the individual online interviews and in-person focus groups, which were conducted in Spanish and audio-recorded. The data were coded in ATLAS.ti (version 9) and focused on the intersection of masculinity, aging, and the pandemic's impact on spatial perceptions. Beyond the changes in the “form” of the fieldwork due to the pandemic situation, the impact on the “content” of research was reflected in the visualization of four main themes linked at some point with (physical and symbolic) spaces of life in old age and particularly in older men's view: (1) ageism and residences for the elderly as precarious spaces; (2) fear and loss of public/social spaces; (3) loneliness and the recovery of private space; and (4) gender binarism and the resignification of private (“domestic”) space.

### **Ageism and Precarious Spaces: Residences for the Elderly in Spain during the Pandemic**

According to Spain's Institute for the Elderly and Social Services, more than 34,000 coronavirus-related deaths of those living in retirement homes have been registered since the pandemic started (*RTVE, 2023*). The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in Spain's care system, particularly within nursing homes. Many participants, especially those interviewed during strict lockdown conditions (March-April 2020) highlighted a lack of resources and institutional ageism. They pointed to pre-existing staff shortages as a key factor in the high death toll. While one interviewee stated that “The problem of the elderly was that they have caught by the virus in retirement homes with lack of care” (JG), other emphasized that “those [residences for the elderly] most affected were [those which were] most unprotected” (MR).

This crisis fueled feelings of indignation about politicians' lack of interest in the elderly and a system perceived as neglecting them.

It is an absolute outrage what happened in the retirement homes [...]. When there is a health problem like this, [politicians] cannot expect that the medical staff solve it [...]. The political class remembers

the elderly when the elections arrive [...]. They say that they are going to do many things for them. However, they do little, as is now shown (AP).

This “doing little” can be understood as a reason for the precarious state of the of the old-age residential model, which is currently the primary model in Spain. Here “precarity” must be understood as a generating process of situational vulnerabilities that are embedded in specific structures of power and by which certain groups are dispensable from a neoliberal system that does not produce precarity as an anomalous phenomenon; instead, they become the sustenance of that very system (Butler 2004). If, as Simone de Beauvoir said in 1970, “for society, old age seems like a kind of shameful secret that it is indecent to talk about” (1996, p. 170), the invisibility and precarity of residencies for the elderly should not be understood as exclusively resulting from the economic crisis but rather as an “induced precarity” resulting of a political and social crisis that dehumanizes older people and can be understood within the broader framework of structural ageism at a global level in our neoliberal society.

Speaking about the first months of the pandemic, the interviewees' criticisms pointed out the lack of management that led to many older adults dying alone during that period: “Old people had not got a dignified goodbye [...]. The old people who have given so much for their children, for education, [...] who have given so much [in general], did not deserve it” (JG).

[...] Look at all those old people who are being left behind to die alone, without resources, with nothing [...] It seems that [we] must die to do good for this society! Even though we collaborated in it all our lives (FL).

In addition, to the emotions of impotence and anger towards politicians due to the situation of nursing homes, the men interviewed expressed other emotions traditionally hidden under the mantle of hegemonic masculinity, such as fear and the revaluation of care tasks. Given the lack of care for the elderly and absolute precariousness in nursing homes, both quite apparent at the beginning of the pandemic, the same interviewee concluded: “Society must take care of us [older people]! [...] Our fear is based on the idea that society will not take care of us when we become dependent” (FL).

This response is indicative of a fear aggravated by the threat of the SARS-CoV-2 virus but also of one induced by the media that caused the elderly to withdraw from public and social spaces –and even to delay their reincorporation into society during the less drastic pandemic periods.

### **Fear and Loss of Public/Social Spaces**

The pandemic disproportionately impacted older adults' social lives. Lockdowns intended to protect them often resulted in unequal displacement from public spaces compared to younger populations considered “more productive”. In countries such as Colombia or Serbia, only older people were confined, while in the United Kingdom, those over 70 years of age were asked to self-isolate for four months. Countries like the United States and Brazil prioritized economic activity over measures safeguarding the elderly and Sweden became a paradigmatic case by

establishing what was called “focused protection”, consisting of recommending the confinement of people older than 70 years, while younger populations were advised to follow simple hygiene measures and stay at home only when sick. Even though this “focused protection” advocated taking measures that supposedly protected the elderly (Kavaliunas et al., 2020), it ended up discriminating against many people over 70 years of age who were in good physical and mental health.

Although this model was not established in Spain, many older people withdrew from public and social spaces, using their discretion. In addition to having suffered the most during the initial months of the state of emergency, the subsequent self-confinement of older people during the de-escalation phase was a widespread response to the fear of becoming infected, which, for many elderly individuals, caused a worsening of their physical and mental health. One of the interviewees explained how the refusal to go to some socialization spaces had had an impact on his emotional state: “I don’t go to the gym because I am terrified of this disease [...] I’m very attentive, maybe a little more hysterical than usual” (DM).

Fear played a significant role in older people’s lives as they withdrew from public spaces and delayed their return to those spaces in the “post-pandemic” context. Fear was a prominent emotion because those over 60 were considered to be in the highest risk group and due to the sensationalist manner in which information about the disease was transmitted. However, the role of fear in older people can be nuanced.

Studies indicate that while some older adults expressed less fear than younger ones, they still adapted their behavior to protect their health. According to a US study on age differences and fear during the pandemic, older adults (OA) were seen as less afraid of negative news than young adults: “Although OA may not have dwelled on the negative information, they still seemed to take the information seriously, resulting in more behaviour change to avoid negative health outcomes” (Villalba et al., 2020, p. 555). This hypothesis seems to be corroborated by a study by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) of Spain, which shows that the over-65 group in the country felt less fear of getting sick and dying from COVID-19 than other age groups. Only 10.9% said they felt very afraid of death by the disease, while 52.3% stated that they felt no fear at all (CIS, 2021).

Nevertheless, the combination of other factors may be behind their withdrawal from specific spaces of socialization and the greater length of stay in their homes. The same CIS study revealed a gender discrepancy within the older population's response, regarding fear during the pandemic. Men, perhaps “fearing” appearing vulnerable and feminized, reported less fear than women. This, combined with societal expectations of masculinity, may have led to (older) men neglecting safety measures, as for example is their greater refusal to wear masks. This occurrence has led some specialists to discuss toxic “mask-ulinity” (Palmer & Peterson, 2020) in the covid period, and something more relevant to this paper leads us to the need to explore the greater difficulties by older men in Spain to remain locked up in their houses that, as one of the interviewees expressed, are perceived as “a territory they [men] don’t feel like it belongs to them” (MR).

The reasons for this perception may be varied and diverse, but in any case they seem to influence the greater difficulty that the older men interviewed say they have had compared to women in facing confinement in their homes as a foreign space. As we have already mentioned, this may be due to differences in the time use patterns of older adults, with different variations

depending on gender and cultural context that influences the variation in the ways to inhabit spaces of life. But significantly, it can be influenced by the historical and sociological context in which these now older Spanish men have socialized most of the time (at school, at work, etc.), considering the context of the Franco dictatorship and of national Catholicism, which for generations naturalized the old distinction between public spaces for men and private spaces for women.

Beyond this distinction and how the fear of the virus interfered with social distancing and the loss of socialization spaces for the elderly, many participants identified an internalized fear related to another type of social distancing, the intergenerational one; and to another virus, “the virus of ageism” (Armengol, 2020).

We want no one to discriminate us. That is our fear, because old age has never been valued [...] this made us live [old age] with anguish, with fear, when it is a life process, which would also have to be intergeneralized [...] [because all] generations are necessities [...]. This society is only evaluating productivity (FL).

### **Loneliness and Private Space**

Unwanted loneliness, distinct from disinterest in socializing, harms mental and physical health. Studies show that loneliness “is associated with a 26%-50% increased risk in mortality” (Kasar & Karaman, 2021, p. 1222). The advance of loneliness in contemporary society, known as “silent pandemic”, promotes diseases and worsens the quality of life, especially in older populations. This situation, which spread with the COVID-19 pandemic, is especially concerning in our aging society.

According to Spain’s Statistics National Institute of Spain, nearly 5 million people lived alone in 2019, with over 2 million being over 65 (CENIE, 2021). Although the full effects of social distancing on the elderly are still unknown, many studies have already shown “that the degree of loneliness and quality of life [of OA] were negatively affected, [especially for those] who [were] staying outside the home in social service institutions, those who [were] living alone, and those who [had] a low socioeconomic level” (Kasar & Karaman, 2021, p. 1225). Participants in our study, both gay and straight, highlight how (self)isolation often coincides with retirement, a period often seen as a loss for older men. Some of the respondents highlighted the construction of their (male) subjectivity based on the physical and social capital of their work-oriented selves, socially imposed and passed down generationally:

My grandfather and my father have transmitted this to me. My grandfather used to say “the day I retire, I die” [...] We were educated to be a *homo faber* [...]. We were not taught [...] to cultivate ourselves as a person. (FL).

This model of masculinity and men as *homo faber*, which is based on its reduction as producer and provider, also emphasizes independence and discourages emotional connection. According to David Jackson, “many ageing men experience a lack of close, intimate friendships with other men and often face a diminishing social support network [...]. [They are

more] challenged [than women] by [...] social issues about loneliness, intimacy and relationships” (2016, p. 145) because, in general, they have fewer social resources available to deal with retirement and the ageing process. One of the men interviewed pointed out that “historically [women] have managed better [...] to get ahead [...] and establishes a much richer world of relationships” (EF), while another emphasized that “women have had to adapt and do networking, to be united with each other” (DM).

Older women, who traditionally focus on caregiving relationships, not only not usually experience a feeling of rupture at the time of retirement (if they have entered the labor market), but they also seem to adapt better to new contexts and processes, including those related to aging (Armengol & Varela-Manograsso, 2022, p. 4). Most of the respondents stated that the combination of the lower capacity of older men to socialize and the difficulty in adapting to new situations was reinforced in the context of the lockdown:

Men prefer to stay on the couch, or watch a movie, or series, or do some other less significant activities, while women are more likely to commit to a task [...]. Now, it is to stand in front of a screen and [learn to] use 'Zoom' [...]. And I, who am part of a book club, also note that the pandemic has expelled more men than women from the [Zoom] meetings [...]. Practically all the men have left [these meetings] and women remain [...]. They have different ways of coping with old age. Even having the same economic and social situation [...] there are certain aspects in which femininity is better organized to make old age easier (MV).

The difficulties described by the respondents predominantly affect heterosexual men: “When [heterosexual] men are left alone, they are more alone than anyone [...] [When] their couples die, they are alone because their only contact with humanity was through their couple” (EF).

According to Jackson, the process of reclusion suffered by many (heterosexual) men as they age can refer to homophobic –and often unconscious– feelings based on the fear of appearing “effeminate” (2016, p. 154). In the case of older homosexual men, favouring self-isolation often intersects with socially imposed isolation. If, as Kimmel states, “heteronormativity constructs both heterosexual and gay masculinities” (2009, p. 28) not only by way of exclusion but also incorporation, older homosexual men usually must deal with both dimensions of loneliness: self-and social-imposed loneliness (Armengol & Varela-Manograsso, 2022, p. 4). However, according to some studies, unlike older heterosexual men, homosexuals show a greater willingness to create networks and spaces for socialization. Similarly to women, the need to respond to their social exclusion (in this case, due to their non-normative sexual orientation), leads them to create support networks to minimize the double loneliness to which they are relegated.

Related to this, one of the members of the *Fundación 26 de Diciembre* stated:

We have the need to break loneliness, that isolation that we have brought upon ourselves [...] we have been educated in a way that [even] it bothers us to have someone next to us and we are not used to debate [...] because we have been in our own bubble. So [we have] the need to get together, to have spaces where we can feel accepted because we like a dick, that’s it! We like a dick –that brings us together (FL).

In any case, the strategy of creating networks and meeting spaces to deal with social exclusion was cut short by the pandemic. Both participants with hegemonic masculinities tending to construct their subjectivity mainly in the public sphere and those with alternative masculinities that find in that sphere ways to confront socially imposed loneliness because of their sexual orientations were forced to stay confined to their houses.

### **Beyond Gender Binarism and the Resignification of Private Space (Home)**

While hegemonic masculinity is often associated with the public sphere and *homo faber*, this doesn't imply exclusivity. Normalizing this view reinforces the gendered division of space and overlooks the dynamic character of space shaped by power and social relations. As Iris Marion Young suggests (2005), women traditionally confined to domestic work for “male projects” were denied opportunities for their own pursuits. However, she acknowledges the “ambivalent character” of house, or more specifically, of “home”. Beyond its negative value as it pertains to feminism: “[...] the idea of home also carries critical liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values. Some of these can be uncovered by exploring the meaning-making most typical of women in domestic work” (Young, 2005, p. 124).

The pandemic's lockdowns, extending the traditional confinement of women to the entire population, forced a re-evaluation of how we inhabit our homes and the persistent gendering of domestic space, especially for older heterosexual men. Those older heterosexual men interviewed in this study emphasized that they suddenly found themselves confined to their homes that they usually do not consider being “their own” space. One participant remarked: “Man usually is more outside and woman more at home, in her territory. There is still a long way [for her] to conquer space” (MR). Along similar lines, another interviewee stated, “[House] is [women's] environment, it is their place that they know better and dominate” (BG).

On this point, as many participants consider the house/home to be a woman's “territory”, we perceived in their narratives and self-perceptions of their gender an overall feeling that the pandemic and the lockdown had a more significant impact on them than on older women. Almost all respondents interpreted this in a self-critical way: “Men often can become difficult to handle inside the house” (BG).

There is usually more discussion [when men and women are together in home] because it is not the same for the man to be at home with the woman than to be out there with his friends, and when the woman is alone in her house, there is not so much conflict (MR).

Although these affirmations again seem to reinforce gendered divisions of space and roles, some participants saw the situation as an opportunity to change traditional dynamics or, at least, to think differently about cohabitation in the private/domestic sphere. The pandemic has highlighted how the spaces of life of older men (particularly in the house) are permeated by gender binarism, and realizing this has encouraged them to rethink and, in a way, resignify both the way they inhabit these spaces and their gender:

She usually does household chores. I'm used to her doing them for me. [But] now that we are confined, I have realized that she is [always doing something], if she does not bake bread, she makes a cake... I do not have the habit of doing those things (FU).

Although the same respondent recognized “that he doesn't usually do housework”, in the context of the pandemic, he “tried to manage to do it”. Similarly, another participant stated:

We were always taught that is the woman who is dedicated to the housework and the husband is who contributes to support the family. Now things are changing and specifically with lockdown, that role has totally changed. Now I do what I can do at home. I do not cook because it is not something that I like or know how to do, but I collaborate in other things [...] (AP).

Despite these positive changes, others remained skeptical about lasting change.

We have been conformed to [this] mentality for a long time... [and] in such a short time we will not have time to realize those aspects that should make us think about what we were doing wrong [in relation to] women [...]. I think [this situation] is going to be [only] a stage which, in any case, will make us manage in the house as best as possible, in a [space] that is not known well enough to us (BG).

The transformation of public and private spaces due to the COVID-19 period has influenced the perception and expression of masculinity among older men. Regardless of whether the pandemic will bring about lasting change or not, it exposed the deep gender hierarchy and made older men think about how hegemonic masculinity intersects with ageing in a stereotyped way, reinforcing gender roles. It also revealed how these roles permeate ways of inhabiting public and private spaces, reinforcing the spatial separation of house/home (for women) and workplace (for men).

As we just have seen, public spaces traditionally reinforced a competitive, independent masculinity (Connell, 2005b). Conversely, private spaces like the home were associated with caregiving (Lee & Waite, 2005). However, social norms and family structure have been changing, with men increasingly involved in domestic activities and caregiving, challenging traditional conceptions of masculinity centered around paid work and economic provision (Gerson, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated this by confining (older) men to the home, leading to more housework and caregiving or at least greater awareness of their relevance.

While not enough for a structural change, this experience may have nudged older men towards a masculinity that integrates emotional sensitivity and shared domestic responsibility. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of the home as a place full of activities that is not merely instrumental (Young, 2005). Activities which are related to care –and thus to life in general– and, precisely for that reason, are essential for all people and all genders.

## Conclusion

The use of mixed qualitative methodology (individual interviews and focus groups) and mixed modality (face-to-face and virtual through technological means) in this study demonstrated that they were more than a palliative to the pandemic context with benefits valid in currently research. Although challenges like accessibility and intimacy remain, echoing concerns of other pandemic researchers (Meskell et al., 2021), this study highlights the potential of utilizing technology for insightful qualitative research, consistent with previous research (Howlett, 2022; Seifert et al., 2021; Maierhofer et al., 2022), and invites to rethinking the concept of “fieldwork” and the research space in a new way.

Referencing Massey’s work, Howlett states that “given the fact that researchers can be both co-present with, and embedded in the lives of, participants from a distance, under-standings of the ‘field’ can thus no longer be limited to a geographic space with people and places ‘on’ it. Rather, the ‘field’ must be conceptualized as a continuum of *spatio-temporal* events and relations between people in diverse sociopolitical contexts” (2022, p. 396). In a post-pandemic context that encourages us to think about new ways of inhabiting private and public spaces permeated by gender differences, particularly those found in older people, the concept of intimacy must be reconstructed to understand personal suffering as a social problem linked to the collective recognition of subjective feelings (Durnová & Mohammadi, 2021).

The research found that (self)isolation during the pandemic increased loneliness and withdrawal from social spaces, impacting older men's (self)conceptions of old age and masculinity. Thus, changes in public and private spaces during the pandemic may have influenced the identity of older men regarding their masculinity by challenging and expanding traditional roles associated with gender (Wojnicka, 2022). This confinement challenged traditional gender roles and led to a re-evaluation of how men inhabit gendered public and private spaces of life. These changes potentially influence the construction of masculinity and may pave the way for more flexible and diverse expressions of masculinity in aging men.

These and other impacts will make it necessary to look into the continuity of these transformations. Some changes in masculinity may challenge circumstantially the performativity of masculinity due to the effect of pandemic measures in a limited frame of time (Beyer, 2022), or, on the contrary these changes (or negotiation) in of masculinity can last longer because of the care given by a spouse in situations involving dependence (Baker et al., 2010). However, the results obtained in this paper demonstrate that these variations over time (limited or long) must also be taken into account by considering the spatial dimension and how (aged) bodies inhabit spaces of life or are excluded from them. This dimension was previously considered in research to critically analyse the sex/gender/sexuality system but not to explore its intersection with ageing and ageism. The pandemic and the confinement experience highlighted the importance of rethinking this intersection and its interdependence with (gendered) space, opening a new “field” of research and of qualitative methodology.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gillette “Hay que ser muy hombre” (2019).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlvWAIr04LI&ab\\_channel=DossierNet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlvWAIr04LI&ab_channel=DossierNet)

Campofrío Cuídate “Larga vida”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg6aWsvoJ0c>

Nicorette: [https://play.sh.se/media/TV4+Stockholm\\_20070319\\_1509.mpg/0\\_9w1dvi1j](https://play.sh.se/media/TV4+Stockholm_20070319_1509.mpg/0_9w1dvi1j)

<sup>2</sup> Elsa y Fred (2005), directed by Marcos Carnevale; AzulOscuroCasiNegro (2006), directed by Daniel Sánchez-Arévalo; La grande bellezza (2013) and Youth (2015), both directed by Paolo Sorrentino; Abuelos (2019), directed by Santiago Requejo, and Dolor y gloria (2019), directed by Pedro Almodóvar.

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