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'If I look old, I will be treated old': hair and later-life image dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the social symbolism of hair, how it is managed and styled in later life, and what attitudes to appearance in general and hairstyling in particular reveal about ageism in contemporary culture. The paper draws on findings from a two-year, nationwide, participative study of age discrimination in the United Kingdom, the Research on Age Discrimination (RoAD) project. Using data collected by qualitative methods, including participant diaries and interviews undertaken by older field-workers, the paper explores narratives of image and appearance related to hair and associated social responses. The paper focuses on older people's accounts of the dual processes of the production of an image and consumption of a service with reference to hairdressing – and the dilemmas these pose in later life. The findings are considered in the context of the emerging debate on the ageing body. The discussion underlines how the bodies of older people are central to their experience of discrimination and social marginalisation, and examines the relevance of the body and embodiment to the debate on discrimination. A case is made for further scrutiny of the significance of hairdressing to the lives of older people and for the need to challenge the assumption that everyday aspects of daily life are irrelevant to the policies and interventions that counter age discrimination and promote equality.

KEY WORDS – hair, hairdressing, ageing, gender, identity, age discrimination, ageism.

Introduction

A trip to the hairdressers or barbershop is a routine event that most people experience. Over the course of a lifetime, many people forge close relationships with those who cut and style their hair and spend many hours in their company. The art of hairdressing is such that the embodied practice of cutting a person's hair is often accompanied by conversational engagement, creating opportunities for clients to share

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personal information while the worker imparts advice on styling and appearance. Such advice is guided by a series of informal rules or conventions that reflect what is considered an acceptable image at different stages in the lifecourse. Hairdressers serve as arbiters as to what is appropriate to a person's age and gender, and their work is a particular example of the regulation and disciplining of the older body as well as its enhancement. In the context of hair-care and styling, much is revealed of the broader challenges to maintaining an image in later life.

This paper examines the social symbolism of hair, how it is managed and styled in later life, and what attitudes to appearance in general and hairstyling in particular reveal about ageism in contemporary United Kingdom (UK) culture. Whether in a salon, at home or in institutional settings, hairdressing is rarely examined critically. Even when these personal-service encounters take place in health and social-care facilities such as hospitals, care homes and palliative-care settings (Higginson, Hearn and Myers 2000), they are rarely scrutinised as are other aspects of these environments. There is evidence, however, that hair is integral to our sense of self (Batchelor 2001) and that hairdressing is associated with self-esteem, especially for women, and that this association increases with age (McFarquhar and Lowis 2000). As a particular type of body work (Wolkowitz 2002, 2006), hairdressing is simultaneously a site of production (of an image) and consumption (of a service) (Stevenson 2001). The dual processes of consumption and production and the dilemmas they pose for older people are the foci of this paper.

The discussion draws from the findings of a two-year study of age discrimination, the 'Research on Age Discrimination Project' (RoAD) (for further details *see* http://road.open.ac.uk and Bytheway *et al.* 2007). The project was both participatory and iterative in design, allowing opportunities for the research team to discuss the findings with the participants and for the participants' views to shape later aspects of the research. In the process, we recognised that hair and hairdressing offered particularly fruitful insights into the everyday experience of ageing and later life. Many of the broader issues addressed by the project, of image and appearance; of multiple identities and discrimination; and of the social treatment of older people, coalesced in certain contributors' narratives about their hair and its management. This paper draws together such contributions and considers them in relation to the debate about the ageing body.

Locating hair in discussions of the body and identity

Hair remains surprisingly peripheral to the blossoming debate on the body and embodiment across the social sciences (*e.g.* Fraser and Greco

2004; Nettleton and Watson 1998; Shilling 1993, 2008), and the growing interest in what has been labelled body work and body labour (Kang 2003). With few exceptions (*e.g.* Brownmiller 1984; Synott 1987, 1993), efforts to explore body issues have tended to overlook the significance of hair and of how it is worked upon. Much of the earliest discussion of hair was in anthropology (Synott 1987) and in feminist explorations of its significance to gender relations and identities. The role of hairstyles in both signifying and upholding gender divisions has been discussed (Brownmiller 1984; Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2010; Weitz 2001) along with the routine removal of body hair as integral to hegemonic femininity (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003). To date, far less thought has been given to men's hairstyling or the meanings that men attach to these styles (Nordberg 2005).

The significance of hairstyles to the intersection of race and gender has also been explored both in the UK (Tate 2009) and in the United States literature, not least with reference to the links between black women's resistance to Western beauty norms and the wider struggle for racial equality (Rosado 2003; White 2005), and to the growth of a parallel beauty industry that upholds different beauty models (Harvey 2005). Renteln (2004) examined high-profile legal challenges to certain types of hairstyle and head coverings that she argued reflect broader ideological differences and contrasting religious and cultural values.

Hair and ageing

As Faircloth (2003) observed, the body visibly marks us as ageing, but commentators on ageing bodies have so far paid little attention to hair, despite the manifest changes with ageing in the colour, consistency and, for some, amount of hair (*e.g.* Faircloth 2003; Woodward 1999). This neglect may signal an assumption in social gerontology that hair and its styling are comparatively inconsequential: after all, no-one dies from a bad hair cut. However, greying hair is a signifier of old age and features prominently in the visual imagery of later life that often positions older people as 'outsiders'. Such images are 'grounded in culturally-sedimented information about the body and senses' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995: 5). Bytheway (2005) argued that the sight of disaggregated features such as grey hair and wrinkles is a 'trigger' for discriminatory actions.

In this paper our concern is with how such 'emotionally-charged' representations of old age are received and responded to by older people and, in particular, the personal dilemmas that arise from the interplay between body, self and society (Hepworth 2003). At a subjective level,

every individual comes to recognise her or his own ageing, and is forced to confront their attitude to growing older, through changes in bodily appearance. In an effort to capture these responses to the personal experience of ageing, Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) suggested the motif of a 'mask of ageing' to emphasise the perceived dissonance between outward appearance and the inner self. In their work, Featherstone and Hepworth pursued a particular interest in the cultural interpretation of biological changes associated with ageing and particularly how older people draw upon available narratives in making sense of the ageing experience. They outlined the process by which individuals assess their visibly ageing selves: 'Our perception of our own bodies is mediated by the direct and tacit judgements of others in interactions and our own reflexive judgements of their view, compounded by what we think we see in the mirror' (1991: 356).

As explored in this paper, the normative connection between youth and sexual attractiveness faces older people with dilemmas over how they present themselves to others. For instance, Twigg (2007) pointed out that ageing leads to tensions surrounding any laxity about one's appearance. In this context, hairstyling takes on particular resonance as a signifier of competence and independence. Appearance and self-presentation are thus 'part of a set of wider processes around disciplining the body, constraining and enabling its expression, making it subject to the discourses of morality' (2007: 295). The variable level of control that older people have over the management of their hair, the way it is styled, by whom and for what reasons illustrate, we argue, the 'disciplining' of old age and provide a basis for understanding broader patterns and experiences associated with ageing. Indeed, the focus upon hair in this paper reflects our concern to develop a more nuanced understanding of everyday age discrimination and the impact it has upon the lives of older people.

Hair and care: appearance and bodily regulation within institutional settings

The provision of care provides a context for the regulation, surveillance and control of older bodies (Lee-Treweek 1997; Twigg 2006; Ward *et al.* 2008*b*). Consequently, in care settings and in caring relationships, the hair of older people is open to be read and judged according to criteria that reflect institutional priorities. On visiting his mother following her admission to a mental hospital in Yorkshire, the playwright Alan Bennett recollected:

> She had on admission been bathed, her hair washed and left uncombed and uncurled, so that now it stood out round her head in a mad halo, this straightaway drafting her into the ranks of the demented. Yet the change was so

dramatic, the obliteration of her usual self so utter and complete, that to restore her even to an appearance of normality now seemed beyond hope. She was mad because she looked mad. (2005: 12)

This extract underlines how admission to care involves relinquishing control over the body as it becomes subject to institutional imperatives. In the hospital, to be bathed and the hair washed indicates a concern for cleanliness and hygiene – while the combing and curling of hair and matters of appearance are shown to stand outside of nursing practice. Bennett's observations signal the way that past images of madness still haunt perceptions of the unwell, with hair a key symbol in the visual coding of mental disease (Gilman 1996). A number of studies of institutionalised care for older people have drawn attention to the emphasis placed upon outward appearance as an indicator of the provision of good care. For instance, in the United States of America (USA), Reed-Danahay (2001: 54) found that nursing assistants in care homes competed with one another 'by at least having their residents "look good"' in an effort to counter the perceived stigma of Alzheimer's. The author noted that the care workers felt rewarded during outings when members of the public failed to recognise that those they cared for had dementia.

Based upon research in the UK, Lee-Treweek (1997) characterised the provision of care as 'a production line' that created some 'semblance of gendered normality' through the assembly of 'lounge standard' residents. In this context, appearance and image become less a matter of self-expression and more the means to counter an expectation of cognitive decline widely associated with old age. In dementia care, outward appearance and grooming have also been treated as signalling the relative comfort and welfare of individual residents. For instance, Ward and colleagues' (2008*b*) observations in residential dementia care led them to see an equation between a neat and orderly appearance and the resident's wellbeing. They found that when judging the quality of care, relatives placed greater emphasis upon appearance and presentation than upon the frequency or quality of communication with the residents. The research also found that maintaining an image through hairstyling and dress helped to support an embodied biographical continuity for residents, at least in the eyes of their relatives. In the same study, hair also figured in the meanings attached to dementia care for workers. For instance, one care worker is quoted describing a resident she once key-worked, who moved to another unit:

When I go down there, her hair is looking so stringy and everything. Every morning, every day, most of the morning I come in, I try to shower my residents

and wash their hair, blow-dry it, set it and everything. I go down there and look at her: *she's a completely different person*. (Ward *et al.* 2008*b*: 641)

This quotation indicates that some carer workers prioritise attention to appearance as a means to support wellbeing and as an expression of the bond they have with particular residents. Observational research in care homes has also drawn connections between hair, appearance and sexual identity. Hubbard *et al.* (2003) found that residents frequently expressed themselves sexually, using both verbal and non-verbal communication. A visit from the hairdresser provided care staff with opportunities to attend to the appearance and presentation of residents, often by paying compliments that acknowledged their gendered and sexualised identities through reference to their attractiveness. With regard to care-home residents' interest in hairdressing, one report linked access to hairdressing to the maintenance of dignity and highlighted how difficult it can be for residents themselves to exercise control over their appearance (Age Concern England 2006). Age Concern England noted that the then level of Personal Expenses Allowance (PEA) failed to account for such basic but highly valued services as hairdressing. The report argued that 'maintaining a good appearance is vital for the well-being and confidence of each individual. … The PEA must be sufficient to enable people in care homes to afford a decent standard of personal care and clothing, including a haircut' (2006: 14). Despite the significance attached to hairdressing in care settings for older people, it is a service and practice that remains largely unexplored in the literature on care and little is known of the relationships that develop between older service users and hairdressers over time.

Hairdressers and older clients

Scrutiny of interactions between hairdressers and their clients, including ethnographies of hairdressing salons, has provided insights into this particular personal service encounter (Hall, Hockey and Robinson 2007; McCarthy 2000; Nordberg 2005) and into hairdressers' working conditions and workplace pressures (Cohen 2010; Gimlin 1996; Lee *et al.* 2007). To date, however, very few hairdressing studies have taken ageing as a focus (Furman 1997; Symonds and Holland 2008). In the USA, the role of hairdressers as confidantes of their clients, privileged to personal information and troubles-telling, has been investigated with particular emphasis upon the help-giving role they play and how this might be enhanced (Wiesenfeld and Weis 1979; Cowen *et al.* 1979). A recent survey specifically explored relations between hairdressers and older clients, noting that some relationships had developed in the course of many years'

regular appointments (Anderson, Cimbal and Maile 2010). The study found that hairstylists rated themselves as well able to recognise the signs of conditions such as depression, and recommended more formal links between salons and mental health services and the promotion of hairdressers' gate-keeping role.

In the UK, some ethnographic research has considered the perspectives of hairdressers. For instance, Hall, Hockey and Robinson (2007) suggested that male hairdressers offer an insight into an alternative mode of contemporary masculinity and noted they often provide less obvious forms of body work, including the care of older customers. The study also highlighted the difficulties for older hairdressers in a youth-oriented workplace. In an ethnographic study of beauty treatments for older women, Paulson concluded that beauticians act as 'cultural intermediaries' from whom older women can 'learn new bodily dispositions and construct their subjective experiences of the ageing body in new ways' (2008: 258). To date, Furman's (1997) ethnography of a New York beauty salon frequented by older Jewish women remains the most detailed and nuanced exploration of hair, ageing and gender. The author gave prominence to the relationship that older women have with their self-image, and argued that they are 'twice-objectified' when they look in the mirror as 'a woman and as *old* woman' (1997: 109). While the author found it difficult to engage the older clients in direct talk of ageism and its impact upon their lives, discussions of hair and appearance provided a vehicle for exploring behaviour towards older women that is often not noticed: 'it is the usual way people act without thinking … ageist attitudes which are "natural" hence invisible and politically inaccessible' (1997: 122).

The RoAD project

The RoAD project was funded by the Big Lottery for two years and commissioned by Help the Aged (now Age UK)[1] to reveal evidence of age discrimination in the period immediately leading up to the establishment of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and development of the related equalities legislative framework. The main aim of the study was to gather accounts of instances of age discrimination from older people with a focus upon discriminatory practices in the context of everyday social encounters. A number of different approaches were used to gather data:

- Through contact with a network of 38 older people's forums across the UK, an open call was issued for people to send in accounts of specific instances of age discrimination using a template provided by the

research team that asked for details of what happened, in what context and of who was involved. This generated 153 separate accounts of age discrimination.

- Twelve older people were recruited to the study as field-workers in different parts of the UK. Each supported up to three diarists who were asked to keep a week-long record of any age-related experiences and were subsequently interviewed by the field-worker. This generated 35 complete diaries, each accompanied by a taped interview record and a short report written by the field-worker, which described 128 instances of age discrimination.
- Drawing upon examples from the diaries and the open call, the research team developed 14 vignettes (reduced to 12 after piloting), and through the project newsletter used these to consult with a mailing list of nearly 200 people. Respondents were asked if they considered the incident described to be discriminatory and whether it 'rang bells'. They were also asked whether they had comparable experiences to share. As well as fulfilling a member-checking function in gauging the validity of the vignettes, this generated 1,114 responses in total, an average of 80 for each of the vignettes.
- The final stage of the project was a series of nine 'sub-projects' some of which were led by the field-workers and provided the opportunity to explore in greater detail issues that had arisen during their work with diarists.

The research team conducted a thematic analysis of the data and from this identified nine distinct topics (see Bytheway *et al.* 2007) including the theme of 'appearance and fashion'. Two meta-themes were that of discriminatory experiences based upon chronological age, and discriminatory experiences based on the 'sight of age', *i.e.* the older body. In common with prior efforts to engage older people on the topic of age discrimination (Furman 1997; Levenson 2003), the team found that simply asking people to recount their experience of age discrimination was problematic, not least because many were initially unsure of what the term meant or referred to. By contrast, a focus upon a particular domain of everyday experience, such as appearance and fashion, supported by experiences recounted by other older people, proved a fruitful approach for eliciting accounts of discriminatory experiences.

Discussions of hair and hairstyling cropped up at various stages of the research. Reacting to one octogenarian participant's diary-note that it was frustrating always to have 'a pensioner hairdo', the team took the decision to analyse such contributions more closely. One of the benefits from engaging older people as field-workers was that the interviews

functioned as a form of peer-debriefing (Lincoln and Guba 1985), at which the related dilemmas and feelings associated with the diarised events were explored and discussed with a 'disinterested peer'. The field-worker who interviewed the diarist wrote a short piece about the incident for the newsletter. Readers were asked whether in their opinion, the phenomenon of a 'pensioner hairdo' served as an instance of age discrimination. This consultation confirmed that the topic was one that many people saw as relevant to the question of age discrimination and provided an avenue for accessing further accounts of related experiences. In the final phase of the project, the field-worker who had originally interviewed and discussed the diarist's hairdressing experience conducted a small interview study in South Wales of two hairdressing salons mainly frequented by older women (*see* Symonds and Holland 2008).

Hair, embodiment and gendered ageing

None of the male diarists recorded hair-related comments or mentioned trips to the barbers as instances where age became relevant to their day-to-day experiences. Indeed, very few men touched upon the topic of self-presentation and appearance at all when discussing discrimination in later life. The overall absence of appearance-related contributions to RoAD from men is open to interpretation. Some men may find it less easy to talk about the way they look or how this changes with age, although Oberg (2003) has shown that direct questioning can support discussions of this type. The RoAD experience suggests that eliciting insights into men's self-understanding of their appearance requires overcoming conventions about what is considered appropriate 'men's talk' according to a hegemonic form of masculinity (Connell 1987). However, the appropriation of the blue rinse by older gay men such as Quentin Crisp (the writer, actor and celebrated raconteur) evinces that not all older men share the same reticence concerning their hair.

The RoAD diaries, consultations and interviews confirmed that discriminatory experiences attached to ageing are often gendered in nature (Macdonald and Rich 1983; Sontag 1972). In contrast to the low number of appearance-related contributions from men, many women gave prominence to changing appearance as a 'trigger' for an altered social experience as they related their personal experiences of discrimination. The observation of one diarist succinctly captured this – while discussing with a field-worker the politics of hair dyeing, she simply noted 'if I look old, I will be treated old'. Implicit in this exchange was the shared understanding that to be treated as old was entirely unwanted.

Dilemmas of ageing

The limits of age defiance: hair and the visibly ageing self

Asked to reflect upon their diary entries, the RoAD diarists drew attention to the dilemmas they faced in the context of day-to-day living. In the process, these discussions highlighted the value of peer debriefing when researching topics such as discrimination, where both diarist and field-worker have shared knowledge and experience. The interviews also provided insights into the process of self-assessment outlined by Featherstone and Hepworth (2005) and the reflexive relationship between self-perception, the judgements of others and the mirrored self-image. One contributor aged in the early sixties recalled her thoughts as she sat on a rush-hour bus, 'When I'm on the bus and I think, God, I'm the only person with grey hair. I don't imagine there's anyone thinking, oh, I quite like the look of her'. Another of similar age raised a broader question:

> If someone is dyeing their hair because they don't want to have grey hair, what does that say about how they think people with grey hair are treated in society?

In these observations, grey hair was associated with a sense of being set apart; no longer subject to the (sexualized) gaze of others. Through its signifying quality, hair mediates between a social and more intra-personal experience of ageing. A lesbian participant aged in the late sixties drew on the notion of the 'closet', relating it to her response to visible bodily change and revealing how available narratives are used to make sense of ageing:

> I do feel confident now about myself but there were times, yes, when I thought, oh, I'm overweight, you know, my hair was going grey and it was thinner, I thought what's happening to me, I never saw this coming and yes, I didn't feel very comfortable and I did stay in the closet, if you like.

In the USA, Gerike (1990) interpreted hair dyeing as a form of 'passing' that maintains a certain status and a link to those accorded greater privilege and social standing. This question of whether and to what extent they felt compelled to 'fight' ageing was a dilemma that many RoAD contributors reported to emerge as their hair turned grey. The dilemma of age defiance created contention and divided the opinions of RoAD contributors, some of whom viewed practices such as hair dyeing as capitulation to the blatantly ageist messages emitted by the hair and beauty industry. For instance, a discussion led by a RoAD field-worker with a group of London-based older feminists concluded that images used in advertising and the printed media simply refused to acknowledge that women grow old. Other RoAD contributors viewed hair dyeing as an

astute tactic, buffering against discrimination. As a woman in her early sixties said:

> But I sometimes say to younger women who are toying with that [dyeing their hair] and thinking what to do, that it does make a difference, it does make a difference if you are grey and they can think you are older than you are, or frumpier than you are.

One contributor to the open call for accounts of age discriminatory experiences remarked on the time and labour associated with dyeing hair and maintaining the colour, but ended by noting the consequences of giving up on the process.

> Eventually I got tired of the amount of time it took [to dye hair] and it rapidly went white-silver. Following on that I realised that I simply became invisible. (RoAD contributor)

As the above quote attests, there comes a time when 'defying age' is given less priority and when 'age resistance' is replaced by a rejection of the ideology that characterises the beauty industry and broader marketplace. Other contributors noted that wearing their hair grey linked to political affiliation as feminists. One in her early sixties said, 'make up and thinking about your hair and all those things were not quite … well, really there were more important things'. The same interviewee noted that, as a therapist, grey hair was a benefit and perceived as linked to 'wisdom or extra knowledge', signalling the situated meanings attached to hair and appearance.

Hair and social exclusion

Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008: 664) studied attitudes to hair dyeing among a Canadian sample of older women. One of their participants said:

> I noticed when I had grey hair that when I'd be walking down the street, I became invisible. I'd be walking down the sidewalk and just kind of automatically, when someone was coming in the opposite direction, I'd move to the side. But I noticed other people didn't move. They would just walk right over me.

Hurd Clarke and Griffin's interpretation was that to appear old equates with a form of social erasure (*see* also Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2010). Within the RoAD project data, a salient narrative of gendered ageing concerned the encroachment of invisibility. Indeed, when such contributions are considered alongside the findings of research into gender and ageing, we argue that invisibility emerges as a meta-narrative in accounting for the social experiences of older women. Grey hair was reported to play an important role in these experiences, and going grey is repeatedly

cited as representing a form of threshold, signifying the entrance to old age (Gullette 1997).

According to the RoAD contributors' accounts, invisibility was interactionally achieved and something collectively 'done to' older people, which had various consequences (*see* also Ward *et al.* 2008*a*). Often, the motif of invisibility was used figuratively to convey a sense of being discounted or marginalised. In addition to no longer being recognised as sexual, people found themselves socially invisible; sometimes ignored in conversations, or overlooked in shops and bars. For some of RoAD's oldest contributors, hair colour and style were reported as an unwanted badge of belonging; invisibility by dint of sameness. As one diarist aged in the late eighties wrote:

> Now when I go to town on the bus I look around at others and I think they all have the same hairstyles, elderly ladies like me. They all look the same, tight little white curls, so tight you can see their scalp through it.

There were also instances of 'invisibility' being cited in more literal senses by the RoAD contributors. Accounts of physically-enforced invisibility included being almost run over by bike-riders, and barged out the way on busy streets. Such incidents echo the opening of Woodward's (1999: ix) book, *Figuring Age*, in which she recounts the death of an older woman hit by a cyclist: 'What was his defence? "I didn't see her"'. Relating the dilemmas of image to the consequences of invisibility underlines that hair and the way it is styled are far from insignificant to the lives of older women.

Responses to dissident ageing

Much of the published research on image, appearance and ageing has drawn attention to the commercial basis on which messages concerning old age are communicated. A fear of ageing provides a vehicle for marketing (Coupland 2003, 2007) and offers consumers a rationale for patterns of consumption (Gullette 1997). Contributions to RoAD reveal that reinforcing notions of acceptability extends well beyond these commercial interests. Efforts to resist or redefine a socially-acceptable image in later life were reported to meet with censure and ridicule, as two respondents aged in the late sixties and early seventies explained:

> I am not a dreary dresser. Most people remark on how fashionable I am, but I do get young girls sometimes remark about my dress and hairstyle and stare at me and laugh, but I ignore them.

> I feel that I am regarded as a freak because my hair flows like a mermaid's and I make up my own fashions, and I shall stay like this for as long as I can.

The word 'freak' underlines the affective dimension in responses to dissident ageing. The older we become, the less acceptable it is to use appearance and self-presentation as a means of distinction and expression of self. Individuals are reminded of this through the incursion of repeated 'micro-penalties' including ridicule and disapproval that focus upon the older body (Katz 1996). Ahmed (2004) argued that an embodied and visceral dimension to discrimination is currently overlooked in the debate about how to tackle it. In respect to ageism, Featherstone and Wernick (1995: 5) noted how responses to older bodies, their sight and smell, can be understood in terms of a 'historically-formed disgust function' that carries 'a powerful emotional force'. An emphasis on embodiment underlines the affective dimension to discriminatory encounters, while bodies are also argued to signal a broader social dynamic: 'the perception of a group in the body of the individual' (Ahmed 2004: 55). Such a perspective offers a useful approach to thinking about the ways that age discrimination attaches to image in later life. How the bodies of older people are perceived as signifiers of 'oldness' plays an important part in the discriminatory encounters they experience. These encounters often appear to be driven by an affective response to old age.

During the course of keeping a diary for RoAD, one contributor aged in the late sixties recorded reading the comments of a fashion editor in a broadsheet newspaper: 'never let grey hair grow long. Long grey hair is scary, so cut it short or dye it'. Underneath this entry, the diarist noted: 'So the young are afraid of witches?' During the end-of-week interview with a field-worker this entry was picked up on and led the diarist to recall an earlier experience.

> I'd had an occasion about six years ago when my hair was grey and fairly long and I was out doing a teaching day on supply and young eight-year-old boys who saw me for the first time fell on the floor rolling with laughter and shouting, 'she's a witch, she's a witch'.

The field-workers, all of whom were older people, had been encouraged to discuss age prejudice openly with interviewees wherever relevant. In a report of the interview the field-worker detailed the subsequent discussion:

> I take her back to grey hair. She said: 'What's scary about long grey hair? Witches have long grey hair but is this what makes them scary?' … Scary is a scary way of describing it. We think about myths of potency of hair, connected with witches, suggests power – younger people recognise power and want to get rid of it, to disempower.

In the course of the interview and subsequent report, the field-worker teased out a number of issues concerning image and acceptability in later life. Prominent among these was the manner in which power imbues the

politics of appearance, gender and ageing. Long hair suggests a (perhaps sexual) potency that is incompatible with old age. The interview also revealed how notions of acceptability and ageing are both understood and upheld even by young children as they ridiculed their long-haired teacher. As the field-worker observed, from an older person's perspective, the real threat resides not in some aspect of appearance but in the act of labelling someone as 'scary'. Where hair and image in later life are concerned, the data reveal that both resistance and conformity have unwanted and inescapable consequences. Older women in particular appear caught in a dilemma over their appearance: on the one hand considered ridiculous or grotesque; and on the other, simply discounted and unseen. As Hurd Clarke and Griffin concluded, 'there exists a painful tension between being aware of ageism and submitting to it by accepting the importance of physical appearance' (2008: 671).

In the hairdresser's chair: experiences of regulation and control

Many limiting conditions associated with old age impinge upon beauty and appearance-related regimes, potentially disrupting efforts to maintain a desired image in later life. In the final phase of the RoAD project, a small-scale interview study of Welsh hairdressing salons was undertaken by a field-worker (*see* Symonds and Holland 2008). Many of the older community-dwelling interviewees highlighted the personal importance of a visit to the hairdressers. Particular emphasis was placed upon a desire to maintain a certain look or style often against a backdrop of physical deterioration and chronic limiting conditions. One interviewee said:

> I like having my hair done. It's important because when you get older you can't do it yourself. At least I can't now because I have arthritis. I only used to go to the hairdressers to have a perm and set it myself, unless I was going somewhere special – but I don't do it now.

Many interviewees revealed that they had kept the same style for years. For these women, maintaining the 'same hairdo' helped support continuity in the face of physical change. The onset of illness or physical impairment underlined the crucial role played by the hairdresser and the importance attached to having access to and sufficient funds for hairdressing services. A diarist aged in the late eighties recollected that 'Tuesdays were the days to avoid going to the hairdressers because it's pension day. Pensioners' days are the ones to avoid. Everyone comes out with the same hairdo'.

Previous research on hairdressing had highlighted its beneficial potential for clients, not least in respect to self-esteem, and the many positive aspects to the relationships that develop between workers and clients (Cohen 2010; Gimlin 1996). In the context of research on age discrimination,

a different perspective on the role and conduct of hairdressers was revealed. From the perspective of RoAD contributors, hairdressers were portrayed as arbiters of age appropriateness, this function often most marked in response to individuals considered transgressive. For instance, a number of lesbian women interviewed for one RoAD sub-project, drew attention to the coercion they encountered when seeking an image that departed from notions of acceptability. Two lesbians aged respectively in the early seventies and late sixties made similar observations about hairdressers' reluctance to cut hair short:

> I've found it very difficult for them to cut my hair how I wanted it 'til I went to a men's barber and said 'look!, I want short back and sides'. … Otherwise you end up saying 'cut more off", and they say 'no, you don't want to look like a lesbian!'

> I've got a very nice hairdresser, I've been to him for years but it took me ages to persuade him to cut my hair really short. He kept saying to me 'you don't want to look too butch do you?' And I said 'Yes, I don't mind looking butch actually'.

Hairdressers were described as steering older clients toward certain styles, leading to a debate over the phenomenon of the 'pensioners' hairdo'. A consultation respondent aged in the mid-seventies said, 'I smile in church where hats are no longer worn. Obviously a visit to the hairdresser before coming. Uniform style of hairdressing. As we get older (and) less mobile perhaps, "keeping up appearances" is essential for our wellbeing'. The reference here to a 'uniform style' is one that 'rang bells' with many of the people consulted for RoAD. Some pointed out that changes in the texture and thickness of hair limits the choice of style. Others however signalled the perception that they were under pressure to subscribe to fixed and often unflattering notions of how an older person should appear. As one aged in the mid-seventies said:

> I left my hairdresser after 15 years because despite asking her to change my hairstyle for over a year, I was still being churned out like every other old-age pensioner. I repeatedly told her we were like peas in a pod. The style was a perm on top and shingled at the back. Her excuse was that my hair was too thick and it would not lie any other way.

Another interviewee aged in the late seventies remarked that, 'If I look around here [a sheltered housing facility], there's two mobile hairdressers that come round and you could tell which hairdresser's done whose hair because its stereotyped … with the rollers and all the rest of it. I don't know if it's because that's what old people want, or are they just accepting that because that's what's offered?' These quotes illustrate issues central to this paper. They reveal that image dilemmas for older people are often negotiated under conditions of limited agency or choice. More than any other part of our appearance, hairstyles are frequently co-produced and as

such can be a locus for conflicting notions of acceptability and appropriateness related to later life. But why is it that hairdressers assert this pressure on older clients to conform to a certain image?

A proposition issued in the RoAD newsletter, that the phenomenon of a 'pensioners' hairdo' was an indicator of age discrimination, created contention among the RoAD contributors. Many, including the majority of the men who responded on this topic, argued that it was possible to resist this pressure, through asserting oneself more forcefully during the hairdressing encounter or by simply taking their business elsewhere. It was this strategy that was employed by the RoAD diarist (aged in the late eighties) whose experience had sparked the debate. She described visiting an upmarket salon where no pensioners' discount was available, in order to avoid the uniform style she perceived as a badge of old age.

> I went into town and found a hairdresser's that had no reduction and you paid like everyone else. But with the young girls, they hover round them for hours, and I thought they don't leave that young woman for a minute. They are fussing round them until the hair is finished. And I'm paying the same money. I have to stop them back-brushing.

For this diarist, an attempt to buy her way out of being treated differently due to age was unsuccessful. Her experience suggests that the pressure to conform extends beyond commercial considerations and is a powerful guiding influence upon the manner in which many such service encounters unfold between workers and older clients. Acting as arbiters of appropriateness, hairdressers reinforce the message that while younger consumers may pursue an image as a mode of distinction, older people are required not to stand out. Rather, they must conform to a uniform image that effectively renders them invisible (and indivisible).

Conclusions

The RoAD project data have allowed us to explore both the embodied and symbolic dimensions of hair in later life. Changes to the colour and consistency of hair as well as the onset of limiting conditions in later life can lead to a greater reliance upon others for help in styling and managing hair. But these physical changes also have a symbolic resonance; grey hair, as well as uniform styling or a failure to maintain a style are read and judged in certain ways. It is these judgemental responses, expressive of negative attitudes to old age, which create dilemmas for people as they age. The data reveal that consumer culture disaggregates older consumers. Divisions are created between those who feel compelled to 'defy age' and those who reject this anti-age ideology. The RoAD project

participants were divided over how to respond to this dilemma but were consistent in recognising that such a dilemma existed and required some form of tactical response in the course of everyday living. In this respect, discussions of hair and styling provide insights into the nature of the discrimination that older people face and the practical responses to it.

A key finding from the RoAD data concerns the relational quality of old age. In the accounts offered of the responses to their appearance, be it from small children or passers-by in the street, or in the more prolonged exchanges with hairdressers, participants revealed how old age is socially upheld. Perhaps most telling were the narratives of invisibility; a condition or status that is interactionally imposed through a social process of collective participation. Old age emerges as something that can be done to individuals and in the eyes of many participants is triggered by certain changes in their appearance, not least the greying of hair. Quite simply, to look 'old' means being treated in ways that are unwelcome and unwanted and neither by conforming to or resisting a normative image can this treatment be escaped. Finally, the RoAD data lend support to the importance placed by Furman (1997) on challenging assumptions that everyday experiences such as hairdressing are necessarily insignificant and morally irrelevant. Choice of hairstyle is far from inconsequential. The discussions of hair and its styling that were fostered by RoAD revealed the constraining, disciplining and even moralising dimensions inherent in the ways older people are treated. In this respect, the research underlines that to neglect the mundane and routine aspects of day-to-day living is to risk overlooking crucial insights into the social experience of ageing.

NOTE

1 In April 2009, the two long-established and largest advocacy organisations for older people in the UK, Help the Aged and Age Concern, merged to form Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI, Age Cymru (see http://www.ageuk.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/).

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