

Visible and invisible ageing: beauty work as a response to ageism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how older women experience and respond to ageism in relation to their changing physical appearances and within the context of their personal relationships and places of employment. We elucidate the two definitions of ageism that emerged in in-depth interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years: the social obsession with youthfulness and discrimination against older adults. We examine the women's arguments that their ageing appearances were pivotal to their experience of ageism and underscored their engagement in beauty work such as hair dye, make-up, cosmetic surgery, and non-surgical cosmetic procedures. The women suggested that they engaged in beauty work for the following underlying motivations: the fight against invisibility, a life-long investment in appearance, the desire to attract or retain a romantic partner, and employment related-ageism. We contend that the women's experiences highlight a tension between being physically and socially visible by virtue of looking youthful, and the realities of growing older. In other words, social invisibility arises from the acquisition of visible signs of ageing and compels women to make their chronological ages imperceptible through the use of beauty work. The study extends the research and theorising on gendered ageism and provides an example of how women's experiences of ageing and ageism are deeply rooted in their appearances and in the ageist, sexist perceptions of older women's bodies.

KEY WORDS – ageism, beauty work, feminist theory, women.

Introduction

The pervasive obsession with youthfulness and physical attractiveness in contemporary society has resulted in a proliferation of products and services that older adults, particularly women, are increasingly compelled to utilise. While these beauty work options are designed to enhance women's physical appearances and consequently their social value, they ultimately serve to reinforce ageist conceptions of physicality and beauty. To date, the literature concerning ageism has tended to focus on stereotypes and

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discriminatory policies and practices. With a few exceptions (Furman 1997; Hurd 2000; Hurd Clarke, Repta and Griffin 2007), the embodied experiences of older women and their perceptions of beauty work have been largely unexplored. Using data from interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years, we examine how older women defined, experienced, and often submitted to ageist beauty ideals in relation to their appearances.

We begin by analysing the women's perceptions of appearance-based ageism in their interactions with significant others, potential sexual partners, and co-workers. We elucidate how the women used beauty work interventions such as cosmetic surgeries, hair dye, make-up, and non-surgical cosmetic procedures to respond to the perceived social pressure to alter their appearances and obfuscate their chronological ages. The non-surgical cosmetic procedures discussed in this paper include Botox injections (neurotoxin proteins that are injected into the skin to reduce muscle activity associated with frown lines), chemical peels (chemical solutions administered to the face to induce blistering and peeling with a resultant reduction of facial blemishes, wrinkles, and uneven skin pigmentation), injectable fillers (a range of natural and bovine-based fat products, hyaluronic acids such as Restylane, and synthetic materials that are injected into facial lines and creases to reduce the appearance of wrinkles), laser hair removal, micro-dermabrasion (the mechanical abrasion of the skin with crystals or roughened surfaces to polish or smooth the skin), and laser skin treatments (the use of lasers to remove the outer layers of the skin). We conclude by considering the women's beauty work efforts to maintain credibility, power and social currency in light of feminist theorising about ageism, and by discussing the irony of the women's perceptions of being invisible as a result of their visibly aged appearances.

Literature review

Defining ageism

A term coined by Robert Butler (1969), ageism refers to the 'systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender' (p. 243). Ageist stereotypes depict later life as a time fraught with physical, financial, and social dependency, loss of mental acuity, senility, personal inflexibility, asexuality, impotency, and unhappiness (Nelson 2002; Palmore 1999). Arising from an underlying fear of death and dying (Becker 1973), ageism entails the assumption that 'that youth is good, desirable, and beautiful; old age is bad, repulsive, and ugly' (Healey

1993: 48; Bytheway 1995; Nelson 2002; Palmore 1999). As such, ageism is rooted in an insidious societal obsession with youthfulness and results in the assigning of social value, resources, and opportunities based on actual and perceived chronological age. The loss of a youthful appearance is particularly damaging to women, who are socialised to be more concerned with their appearances than their male counterparts (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993). Indeed, women are harshly judged on the basis of their ability to achieve and maintain the cultural ideal of female beauty, namely a young, thin, toned, yet shapely body (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Cortese 2004; Gimlin 2002; Wolf 1991). Women are thus subject to a 'double standard' of ageing (Sontag 1972) and to gendered ageism (Ginn and Arber 1996) by virtue of their simultaneous membership of the categories 'old' and 'female.'

The research evidence suggests that employment-based ageism is particularly injurious (Bendick, Jackson and Romero 1996; Berger 2006; Chiu *et al.* 2001; Hirsch, MacPherson and Hardy 2000; Loretto, Duncan and White 2000; McMullin and Marshall 2001; Taylor and Walker 1998) and that it is not a gender-neutral phenomenon, as age interacts with gender to the disadvantage of women (Duncan and Loretto 2004; Ginn and Arber 1996; Walker *et al.* 2007). Women are more likely than men both to cite examples of age discrimination at the workplace that are associated with their appearances or sexuality (Duncan and Loretto 2004; Walker *et al.* 2007), and to attempt to circumvent the disadvantages of age stereotyping by looking as young as possible (Itzin and Phillipson 1995). Employers and managers tend to perceive women to be older than their same-aged male colleagues, and women's careers and peak earnings (actual or expected) occur at an earlier age than their male counterparts (Duncan and Loretto 2004; Itzin and Phillipson 1993). The collective impact of work-related discrimination is especially detrimental to women who live longer than men but who accrue limited pensions and fewer financial resources (Barnett 2005; Duncan and Loretto 2004; Falkingham and Rake 1999; Ginn and Arber 1993).

The mediating influence of significant others

Women's choices to engage in beauty work as well as their feelings about their bodies are strongly influenced by actual and potential intimate romantic partners. Comments from partners affect women's self-esteem (Murray, Touyz and Beumont 1995) and may amplify the pressure on women to achieve and maintain the youthful beauty ideal (Paquette and Raine 2004). Perceptions of their partners' preferred female body shapes and sizes also influence women's views and experiences of their

appearances (McKinley 1999; Markey, Markey and Birch 2004; Murray *et al.* 1995; Pelican *et al.* 2005; Tantleff-Dunn and Thompson 1995). The more satisfied a woman believes her mate to be, the more satisfied she herself tends to be with her own appearance (Miller 2001). Research evidence further suggests that men rely primarily on appearance in their selection of mates (Furnham, Dias and McClelland 1998; Singh and Young 1995; Smith, Waldorf and Trembath 1990), and that women's appearances are more important than men's with regard to marital satisfaction, quality of sexual relationship and fidelity (Drigotas *et al.* 1999; Friedman *et al.* 1999; Margolin and White 1987).

There is also evidence that lesbian partners are concerned with the physical appearance and attractiveness of their mates or potential mates (Heffernan 1999). Some research has suggested that lesbians are less influenced by conventional norms of attractiveness (Brown 1987; Schoenfelder and Weiser 1983), because of alternative appearance norms and standards in the lesbian community (Bergeron and Senn 1998; Pitman 2000; Taub 2003). However, other theorists contend that lesbians are no less susceptible to body dissatisfaction than heterosexual women (Cogan 1999; Dworkin 1989; Striegel-Moore, Tucker and Hsu 1990), and that the 'critical stance of lesbians toward cultural ideals regarding women may not be sufficient to supplant already internalised beliefs and values' (Heffernan 1999: 122).

Women, feminist theory, ageism and the body

The various social perils of looking old culminate in strong pressure on women to mask, if not alter, the physical signs of ageing with the use of beauty work interventions such as hair dye, make-up, and non-surgical and surgical cosmetic procedures, all in order to maintain their social power and visibility. Thus, some theorists argue that the use of beauty work arises from a restrictive model of femininity, and mirrors women's subordinate status in society (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993, Wolf 1991). Participating in beauty work is thereby seen as a requirement of the powerful and ubiquitous gender norms of an inescapable and oppressively patriarchal and ageist society (Bartky 1998; Gagne and McGaughey 2002; Morgan 1991; Negrin 2002).

In contrast, Davis (2003) emphasised the importance of agency in the decision to engage in beauty work. She contended that women who choose to undergo cosmetic surgery are neither deluded nor 'cultural dopes' (Davis 2003: 13), but are instead 'competent actors with an intimate and subtle knowledge of society, including the dominant discourses and practices of feminine beauty' (Davis 2003: 13). Davis's analysis underscored the

fact that women can be highly critical of cosmetic surgery, and yet still participate in, and thus perpetuate, the practice. She calls for a 'balancing act' (Davis 2003: 4) between a critique of the technologies, practices and discourses that define women's bodies as deficient and in need of change, and an understanding of why women might view various forms of beauty work as the only tools they have to compete in the many social realms that extol youthfulness.

The paper's contribution

While gendered ageism has furthered our understanding of older women's experiences, to date there has been little attempt to bring an examination of ageism and sexism together in order to make sense of the beauty work practices that women engage in while navigating the social realities of ageing. The current paper addresses this gap in the literature and analyses how women use beauty work interventions such as hair dye, make-up, and surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures to respond to the effects of sexism and ageism in their everyday lives, of their experiences in the workplace, and of their romantic relationships.

Data and methods

Design

The data for this paper are from in-depth interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years, who with the exception of two individuals were interviewed on two occasions for an average of three hours. The aggregate duration of the interviews was 147 hours. Focused on older women's experiences of and attitudes towards a broad range of beauty work interventions, the interview schedule had open-ended questions that asked the women to tell the story of the ways in which their bodies had changed over time, their feelings about the same, and their experiences of and motivations for using various beauty work options.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with the consent of each participant. There was a four-week to six-week interval between the first and second interviews, which afforded both the researcher and the study participants an opportunity to reflect on the issues discussed in the initial interview, as well as time for the first interview to be transcribed and analysed. The use of multiple interviews also allowed for validation of the data, in that a conscious attempt was made to clarify emergent themes, meanings and inconsistencies that had been raised in previous interviews.

TABLE 1. *The socio-demographic attributes of the study sample*

Variables and categories	Number	Variables and categories	Number
Age (years)		Household income	
50–55	16	Under \$10,000	3
56–60	14	\$10–20,000	3
61–65	10	\$20–30,000	3
66–70	4	\$30–40,000	6
Education	<i>n</i>	\$40–50,000	4
Less than high school	1	\$50–60,000	11
High school	9	\$60–70,000	3
College/university	22	\$70,000+	9
Graduate school	12	Declined to say	2
Marital status		Country of origin	
Currently married/ common-law	22	Canada	37
Divorced/separated	14	Europe	3
Widowed	4	Asia/South Asia	2
Never-married	4	Central America	1
		United States	1

Sample

The women in the non-probability sample were recruited using advertisements in fitness centres (14), seniors' centres (2), newspapers (19), and snowball sampling methods (9). The recruiting advertisement and letter of introduction indicated to participants that the study entailed an examination of older women's perceptions of non-surgical cosmetic procedures. Other than reimbursement for their parking expenses, no compensation was given to the participants. The women were diverse in terms of their age, country of origin, educational attainment, employment history and status, income, marital status, and sexual orientation (Table 1). Most of the women were aged 50 to 60 years (average 58), Caucasian, well educated, of middle- and upper-class socio-economic status, and born in Canada. The women also varied in terms of their use of beauty work interventions (Table 2). While two of the women did not use any form of beauty work intervention, 19 used hair dye and/or make-up, 16 used hair dye, make-up, and non-surgical cosmetic interventions, three women used hair dye, make-up, and cosmetic surgery, and four women used hair dye, make-up, non-surgical cosmetic procedures, and cosmetic surgery.

Data analysis

We analysed the data using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) method of open and axial coding. Repeated reading of the transcripts generated an initial set of 33 open codes. The current paper is based on an analysis of

TABLE 2. *The frequencies of the beauty-work interventions*

Beauty work intervention	Number
Beauty work:	
Hair dyes	27
Make-up	37
Non-surgical cosmetic procedures: ¹	
Botox	6
Injectable fillers	6
Chemical peels	3
Microdermabrasion	4
Photofacials	5
Sclerotherapy	2
Laser hair removal	3
Acupuncture for wrinkles	1
Surgical cosmetic procedures:	
Liposuction	1
Abdominoplasty	1
Breast reduction	2
Breast reconstruction	1
Breast augmentation	1

Note: 1. Several women had had more than one non-surgical procedure. The sample size was 44.

the ‘ageism’ code which, in turn, comprised the following axial codes: definition of ageism, experience of ageism, resistance of ageing, ageism and dating, messages from partners, and employment-based ageism. Our analysis of the codes and sub-codes culminated in the three overarching themes that are presented in this paper, namely, ageism and beauty work, ageism and relationships, and ageism and the workplace. Within each identified recurring theme, further analysis was conducted to identify exceptions and to develop and refine the gradations of overall patterns (Miles and Huberman 1994). Areas of disjuncture in these overall patterns were used to refine emergent patterns and to further clarify ‘the analytic hierarchy’ (Spencer, Ritchie and O’Connor 2003: 213).

Findings

From the analysis of the women’s narratives of their experiences of ageing, two definitions of ageism emerged: the social obsession with youthfulness, and discrimination against older adults. We begin by elucidating these definitions and by exploring the ways in which they underlaid the women’s decisions regarding beauty work. We examine how some women used beauty work to respond to gendered ageism, the reasons they cited for their chosen beauty interventions, as well as the perspectives of

those women who did not increase their beauty work interventions over time.

Defining and experiencing ageism: the privileging of youth and youthful appearances

Almost all the women that participated referred to the social valuation of youthfulness as they contended that beauty was equivalent to youthful bodies and appearances. The women made comments similar to that of a 51-year-old, single, heterosexual woman who worked full-time and who used hair-dye and make-up, and had had Thermage:

Youth is more attractive ... young people is where there's fashion. Young people are where there's fun. I guess it's important for anybody who is not young to think they should either be young or they don't count. If you put it into a sentence – be young or you're not counted.

A single, retired, heterosexual, 65-year-old woman who did not use any beauty work interventions put it even more strongly in the following remarks:

I think that these things are repulsive and shouldn't happen to us, and that an older woman's body is repulsive. So, of course, we look and see these things and think, 'My God, how repulsive', instead of looking at it and saying, 'Oh this is interesting'. [Such reactions make me] feel awful; it does something to your self-esteem if you feel you're repulsive.

As a result of their negative views of older bodies, many women followed their assertions that beauty was equivalent to youthfulness with expressions of their wish to alter their appearances, and they made statements similar to that of a married, heterosexual, 51-year-old woman who was a full-time university student, and who used hair dye and make-up:

I look in the mirror, and I judge myself, and I wish I looked the way I looked 10 years ago. ... I think very young, but my body seems to have aged faster. ... I wish my body would slow down. I want to stay young!

Several women further discussed the personal impact of being found wanting in relation to the extant beauty ideals, as articulated by a single, lesbian, 60-year-old woman who was a full-time university student, and who used hair dye and make-up:

We won't love women if they're not lovely. Our society says that from the beginning. And for women who are older, we're invisible anyway. If you're considered ugly and old, ageism is awful and it's so prevalent. As a woman, we always look to someone else to see if we're okay. And as you get older, you get less and less okay, and people look at you less and less. So if you say, 'Don't you think I look good today?' people say, 'Oh yeah'. And they look somewhere else, 'cause they don't really care. It gets down to, 'Well, you're old. You can't look good

anyway'. So, I think it's about trying to look young, youthful, perky, and put on this 'see I'm lovely, you can love me' kind of thing.

At the same time, some of the women argued that deviation from extant beauty ideals rendered older women invisible, as evinced by the perceptive observations of one single, heterosexual, 60-year-old woman who was employed full-time and used make-up:

These days with such an emphasis on youth and beauty, it's somewhat of a detriment to be older. ... We're such a youth-oriented society that if you're not young and if you don't look young, you hear older women talk about the fact that they feel like they're invisible.

Other women talked about being invisible in a general sense. Many commented on the impact of being unseen by potential sexual partners, as articulated by a 52-year-old, single, heterosexual woman who was employed full-time and who used hair dye and make-up:

I've felt for the last 10 years that I'm completely invisible to men [particularly if there is] a tall, long-legged blonde in the room. Nobody even sees me ... that's why I don't like to go to very many events where people are in their thirties. I am invisible. I am not there. I get introduced to somebody but they're looking at somebody across the room. It's as though you're invisible. You're not there.

Several women who were actively seeking a partner described how their aged appearance put them at a clear disadvantage on the dating scene. A single, heterosexual, 59-year-old woman who was employed part-time and who used hair dye, make-up and Restylane injections put it this way:

When you're in the city, there are so many young women. You don't get noticed because young women are being noticed. ... Let's just take a single woman like me, and then you hit, oh let's say, I think it's about 48. Then, all of a sudden society changes how you look at yourself because you're not noticed any more. And you notice that you're not noticed any more. ... So it's a mindset in this culture in North America – once you're 50, male or female, you don't exist, especially if you're female. You don't exist. You don't know anything. Fifty is not old! I don't even think 60 is old now that I'm almost there.

Partnered and single women also expressed the fear that actual or potential romantic partners would leave them in favour of younger partners who more closely approximated to the beauty ideal. For example, a 60-year-old, single, lesbian woman who was a full-time university student, and who used hair dye and make-up contended that:

Some women get these procedures done because they want someone to love them and they want to be accepted. ... The women that I know, they're afraid that their partners won't want them if they're saggy or full of wrinkles. There's that fear of losing your partner to a younger woman.

Reasoning in these ways, the women argued that having an older appearance made them invisible to others and constituted a potential threat to the acquisition and/or maintenance of a long-term relationship. In addition to the privileging of youthful appearances, a second definition of ageism emerged in the women's narratives, namely discrimination against older adults. Some of the women referred to the societal stereotype that older adults have little or no social value using the examples of the institutionalisation of older people and the inadequate provision of social and health-care services. A 65-year-old, single, retired, heterosexual woman who did not engage in any beauty work interventions asserted:

Our attitude towards older people, particularly older women, is that they've lost their power and they're insignificant and, taken to an extreme, they're of no value any more. They're a drain on the tax dollar. That's a strong message there. And we do it to older women – older people. We put them in old-age homes and lump them all together. It's the cruelest, cruelest thing we can do to older people. It's just a terrible thing!

A 52-year-old, married, heterosexual woman, who was employed full-time, used hair dye and make-up, and had had sclerotherapy, articulated another concern:

It's frightening to think that you're going to grow old and the medical system decides you've had a good life, you're old enough [achieved finitude] and the treatments should go to somebody else. You're dispensable according to society.

Witnessing discriminatory treatment towards their older loved ones caused some women to express fear over what the future might hold for them, as expressed by a 65-year-old, married, heterosexual woman who was employed part-time and who used make-up:

I wish I could say that I feel at peace about ageing and that I will let things play out the way they do, but if I gave you an honest answer today, I think I'm scared because I know that essentially the world thinks old things and old people are kind of like garbage. I'm just holding my own and when I look like a piece of garbage, it's probably how I'll be treated.

The sense of looking like 'a piece of garbage' (defined in terms of extant beauty norms) and overt discrimination were directly linked, and led some women to express a fear of death and dying. Many of the women referred to employment-related ageist discrimination. Women who were seeking to enter the workforce made comments similar to those of a 59-year-old, single, heterosexual woman who worked part-time, used hair dye and make-up, and had had Restylane injections:

You disappear off the map once you hit 45 or 48, and absolutely positively by 50. If you can't get a job, you don't exist. You go looking for work and all you can

find is temporary work if you don't have grade 12 or a university education and you're 50. Forget it! It's not going to happen. ... You can go and apply for a million jobs and you might as well be invisible because they're not going to take you; they're going to take the young woman.

Employed women were not impervious to perceived ageism and frequently made comments about the pressure to maintain a youthful appearance from others in their workplaces, as expressed here by a single, 52-year-old, heterosexual woman who worked full-time, and who used hair dye and make-up:

I'm 52-years-of-age and sometimes it's been held against me. You walk in the door and a 25-year-old walks through and you're applying for a position where you're dealing with the public, and although the 25-year-old doesn't have the experience, they hire the younger woman. It happened today to me – she's tall and blonde and long-legged and flirts with the bosses and has no computer skills and only has reception experience. I have 15-years' experience and a computer background. I get along awesomely with the staff. They kept her and they're letting me go. But she has the look. I'm devastated.

Some women reported having changed their careers as a result of the emphasis on looking youthful as an unspoken job requirement. A 55-year-old, married, heterosexual, full-time fitness industry worker who used hair dye and make-up commented:

I experienced pressure when I was a fitness instructor and especially when I was giving the fitness instructor training courses. ... Everybody in the course was 18 to 22 and it was like they were saying, 'Who's this old lady with grey hair up here telling me how to do this?' And I just thought, 'I've got to get out of this'. It was time for me to step out of this career – I felt that I was not believable. I was too old.

Thus, regardless of their employment status, the women were very aware of the impact of their changing physical appearances on their ability to obtain and retain jobs as well as to maintain credibility to others and themselves in their chosen careers.

Beauty work as a response to ageism

As a result of their experiences of ageism, many of the women indicated that they had turned to a variety of beauty work interventions. The women reported engaging in beauty work for the following underlying motivations: a life-long investment in appearance, the fight against invisibility, the desire to attract or retain a romantic partner, and to counter employment-related ageism. Their richly articulated expressions prompt many observations. To begin, some of the women argued that they used

beauty work interventions in order to fight social and physical invisibility, and to enhance their self-esteem. A 68-year-old, heterosexual woman who was retired, partnered, and who used hair dye and had had laser resurfacing of her skin and microdermabrasion said with remarkable perspicacity:

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 walk right over me. I would stop and stand there and they would just about walk into me, and they'd say 'Oh!' – like what are you doing here? So I kind of thought, 'I've become invisible'. That's when I felt, I've got to make myself more visible in some way so people don't think it's just another little old lady. I've got to do some things. ... I started feeling not-so-confident; feeling invisible is not a nice feeling. I felt put down and demeaned.

A 60-year-old, single, lesbian woman who was a full-time university student and who used hair dye and make-up made similar comments:

I dye my hair and my eyebrows otherwise I get looking like Santa Claus ... and I think, 'Oh my goodness, who is this person? Mrs. Claus'. So I get my hair and my eyebrows done ... it doesn't make me feel younger necessarily. It makes me feel like my features are more defined. I'm more there. I'm not as invisible.

These women, therefore, turned to various beauty work interventions to achieve a more youthful appearance and to make themselves more visible to others. Some of the women also described how having been physically attractive as younger women made the physical and social realities of ageing and ageism more difficult. Thus, a 59-year-old, single, heterosexual woman who used hair dye, make-up and Restylane injections articulated the following self-regarding views:

This is going to sound conceited but appearance is important to me because when I was young I was always very attractive, and because of that I got preferential treatment in a lot of things and preferential attention. I went through my life pretty much with that everywhere I went. I became quite used to it. That's why my vanity is really getting the better of me now, as I grow older. Because my appearance is going to be compared to what I was when I was young. So it's top priority to look as good as I can look and it always has been. When you're young and you're youthful and you're being told everywhere you go how attractive you are, it's very unsettling to look in the mirror and see any wrinkles appearing. When you see your beauty or your youthfulness disappearing, you become acutely aware that you're getting older.

Another single, retired, heterosexual woman who was 63 years of age and who used chemical peels, make-up, and photo facials recounted how

the loss of a youthful appearance had impacted her sense of identity and self-esteem:

I have always looked younger than my age. This is what's drawing me into the hope here with these new procedures because this is the first time in my life that I am starting to look old ... which is hard ... I feel that I look like an old lady. If men at the bars saw me now, I don't think they would even talk to me because everything and everyone has to be young. ... That's why I started the chemical peels and photo facials because they promised that you'll look younger.

Interestingly, all the women who described having heavily invested in their appearances indicated that they moved beyond the use of hair dye and make-up and turned to a variety of non-surgical and surgical cosmetic procedures as their appearances became more aged.

Thirdly, some of the women suggested that they used beauty work interventions to address their fears of being left by a current romantic partner or to try and make themselves more physically appealing to a potential mate. A single, retired, 59-year-old, heterosexual woman who used hair dye and make-up, and had had Botox and collagen injections contended:

My face is sagging and I'm at a stage in my life when I'm looking for a new partner, hopefully to spend the rest of my life with. I've been going out with a guy who's 18 years older than I am, and we've been on and off for the past five or six years, but I want somebody younger for a long-term relationship, possibly marriage. So, my appearance is very important to me right now. It's difficult to find men in my age range who are not going out with younger women. In this city there's 10 women to every man, so that cuts down my possibilities of finding a partner around my age range. I am seriously thinking about either major surgery on my face or something that will be coming up in the near future that would be an anti-ageing procedure.

Similarly, a 60-year-old, retired, heterosexual woman who used hair dye, make-up, Botox, Restylane and Perlane injections, as well as Thermage, asserted that she felt compelled to work on her appearance in order to retain the attention of her younger partner:

I do feel pressure to look younger. My boyfriend is younger than me and I wouldn't want to get too old looking because of the age difference between us. He's 53, and I'm 60. I think he could be dating someone who is 40 quite easily. So there's pressure on me to look good. Or I feel that pressure anyway. I guess because too, I really don't have a real commitment from him, either. It's a different world out there when you're single, and I'm lonely. ... I don't think I'd be quite this frivolous if I was still married. I would be travelling in different circles. I'd be at the church supper every Sunday night – I'd be a little more relaxed about my appearance.

Having internalised ageist and sexist norms, this participant candidly discussed her rationale for using a range of beauty work practices, including non-surgical cosmetic procedures, for the purposes of perceived social opportunities and acceptance. Another married, retired, heterosexual, 65-year-old woman who used hair dye, make-up, and Botox and Restylane injections, and who had had breast reduction surgery indicated that as her appearance had changed over time, she began to feel insecure in her long-term relationship:

I became worried about my appearance in that I felt that if a younger woman came into the picture – not that he has lady friends, but you know, I just felt a little bit threatened somehow. I began feeling a little bit threatened by other women ... and I think that's why I probably started becoming more aware of my appearance.

This woman began to use various non-surgical and surgical cosmetic procedures in an effort to feel more attractive and to retain the interest of her partner. Finally, some of the women indicated that they used beauty work interventions, specifically non-surgical cosmetic procedures, in order to be more competitive in the work world. Women who were actively trying to obtain employment or change careers made comments similar to a 61-year-old, single, heterosexual woman, who worked part-time, and who used make-up and had had laser facial resurfacing done for the following reasons:

I don't want injections. I don't want radical surgery at this point, but I work with the public so I want to look younger. ... I've been to many, many interviews. You know, I'm 61. And in my type of work, they want younger people. So I had laser treatments done. ... Now I'm considering going for a peel for my wrinkles.

In addition, women who were in positions where they worked with the public or where they felt pressure from employers and colleagues to retain a youthful appearance made comments similar to those of a married, 51-year-old, heterosexual woman who was employed full-time, used make-up, and had had microdermabrasion:

I think at work there is pressure to look younger ... just being a health care worker, I think you have to practise what you preach. Appearance is very important, I think. At work you try and look smart because we're representing an image and we're trying to teach patients ... so appearance is important for you to value.

Some women felt that youthful appearances were required in order to be successful in the health and image-oriented industries in which they were employed. As a result, they turned to increasingly extensive and intrusive beauty work interventions. In contrast, not all the women felt

compelled to alter or increase their beauty work interventions because of the physical realities of ageing and their experiences of ageism. Many indicated that their basic beauty routines had formed earlier in life and had not altered drastically over time. These women tended to provide deeply held reasons for not resorting to additional beauty work interventions in response to their experiences of appearance-based ageism. For example, some happily-married or partnered women asserted that they did not mind the social realities of ageing, as exemplified in the statement of a 64-year-old, retired woman who used hair dye and make-up:

I don't mind being invisible. I quite enjoy that. Like when I go to the gym with all these gorgeous young things around me, I can just look any way I want and just be pedalling away and do whatever I want. No one is paying any attention to me and it's really nice; I really enjoy that. My husband is always telling me I look sexy ... I get lots of attention from my husband, my family and my friends, so I don't need that. But if [your appearance] is your selling point, that must be hard.

Several of the informants argued that because they were content with their current partners and had strong social support networks, they were protected from the pressure to engage in increasingly extensive beauty work practices. A few pointed out that retirement as well as the decision to remain single had afforded them the luxury of not having to attend to appearance pressures, as reported by a single, 55-year-old, retired, heterosexual woman who used make-up:

I think I'm removed from some of those situations where I would feel it. If I was still in the workforce, or in the dating scene, I think I'd feel it more. I have to be very honest – I'm not doing any of those things. I think women who want desperately to compete; they're going to really feel it.

A few women argued that they had accepted their socially devalued status even as they lamented the equation of beauty with youthfulness. A 55-year-old, married, heterosexual woman who was employed full-time and who used hair dye and make-up recounted the following:

Walking down the street with my daughter, I might as well be bloody invisible because they are all looking at my daughter. At first, that bothered me. I do remember when it really bothered me that I wasn't attractive any more. Then I went through this angst about that being an issue. Now it's amusing, I guess, you know, that men of all ages find youthful women attractive. What the fuck is that all about? ... What a shame that the ideal is young as opposed to being old and wise. What a shame. What a reflection on our society that we don't see the beauty in ageing. Why isn't ageing beautiful?

Finally, the two women who did not use any beauty work interventions described feeling conflicted about their appearances even as they

suggested that they resisted the pressure from the cosmetic industry to use various products. A 58-year-old, partnered, lesbian woman who was a full-time university student and who did not engage in any beauty work interventions stated:

I'm as vain as the next person around the corner. ... I'm concerned about how I look which to me is a bad thing. I've always been told it's bad to be concerned about spending lots of time on stuff like make-up. I'm very critical of the cosmetic industry, but I like to look so-called young. I like it when people come up to me and say, 'Oh, you don't look 58!' I'm conflicted though. I feel bad about being vain because of how I was raised and because I did a lot of feminist work around how advertising sexualises women. I've been fighting it from an intellectual perspective for so long. I shouldn't be vain because I'm preaching against it, and I question am I being true to myself?

The other woman, who was single, retired, heterosexual, and 65 years of age, put it this way:

The media has always impacted me. I've never been able to ignore it or distance myself from it. I've incorporated the values of our mainstream media. So it's been a continual struggle for me to counter those values. As I grow older, it's very difficult to see the wrinkles appearing and the skin losing its elasticity. My radical feminism, on the one hand, is saying, 'Don't be so absurd'. The other side of me struggles. When I look through magazines and see all of these advertisements for wrinkle creams and the amount of cosmetic surgeons there are out there now, I am just absolutely appalled at what's going on ... but I've considered getting rid of these wrinkles, and the facelifts and all that. Whether I'll ever do it or not, I don't know, but certainly I've considered it.

In this way, both of the above women conceded that they were not impervious to the social pressure on women arising from the emphasis on female appearance and the equation of beauty with youthfulness.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined how older women defined and experienced ageism, as well as their attitudes towards beauty work interventions as a response to the social implications of ageist discrimination. Conventional definitions of ageism have focused on stereotyping and discrimination based on chronological age as well as a fear of death and dying (Becker 1973; Butler 1969). While some of the women we interviewed referred to aspects of these established definitions of ageism, the majority suggested that their ageing appearances were pivotal to their lived experiences of ageism. The women reported that the social fixation on youthful bodies as indicative of attractiveness, femininity and sexual desirability led them to

experience a loss of self-esteem, insecurity in relationships with actual or potential sexual partners, employment-related discrimination, and perceived invisibility.

Indeed, the women's narratives concerning their experiences of ageism were rife with the perception of being invisible, although this term was defined both in terms of social realities and physicality. Specifically, the women argued that as a result of having wrinkles, grey hair, sagging skin, and other physical signs of advanced age, they were invisible to others as potential and worthy romantic partners or employees. Similar to the findings of Duncan and Loretto (2004) and Walker *et al.* (2007), the possession of an aged appearance resulted in a lack of recognition, opportunities, and resources based on others' perceptions of the women's chronological ages and concomitant social value. The women described how they had become progressively more unseen by others, particularly after they had turned 50, as their bodies increasingly deviated from cultural beauty ideals.

Ironically, the women's perceptions of invisibility were grounded in their acute visibility as old women. The possession of physical markers of ageing rendered the women more visible as objects of discrimination as they highlighted the women's deviation from youthful beauty standards. Thus, the visible markers of grey hair, wrinkles, and sagging skin were the physical determinants of social invisibility. Extending the work of Itzen and Phillipson (1995), the women in the sample argued that by making these physical signs of ageing more invisible to others through the various forms of beauty work, they themselves would become more socially visible and valued.

The women's discussion of their attempts to mask their chronological ages reflected feminist understandings of agency and determinism in relation to beauty work (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Davis 2003). Many women argued that appearing more youthful allowed them to compete for significant others, meaningful employment and social recognition. While these women suggested that they were exercising agency in their fight against ageist discrimination, both relationship security and employment status shaped and constrained their decisions regarding beauty work. Importantly, the vast majority of the women accepted ageist definitions of physical attractiveness even as they were aware of how damaging these definitions and stereotypes were to their social currency and self-esteem. In their lack of resistance, and consequential acceptance of these ageist stereotypes and the required use of beauty work, the women were all situated in a painful and vicious cycle. The women's beauty work efforts and acceptance of social norms concerning feminine beauty further entrenched the stereotypes concerning older women and physical

attractiveness, and ultimately reinforced the loss of social value that they fought so fervently to retain.

Our findings suggest that social position influences, but does not necessarily determine, one's experiences of beauty work, ageism and ageing. Thus, employment and partner status underscored but did not prescribe the predominantly heterosexual women's understandings of appearance-based ageism and the beauty work choices that they made. Similarly, the women's attitudes towards beauty work also reflected their personal value systems, as evidenced by the two women who did not engage in any form of beauty work intervention and self-identified as feminists. Although some literature (Bergeron and Senn 1998; Brown 1987; Pitman 2000; Schoenfielder and Weiser 1983; Taub 2003) has suggested that lesbian women may be less influenced by cultural beauty ideals, our findings point to an underlying tension in the women's experiences. One of the lesbian women we interviewed used beauty work and expressed feelings of social invisibility and loss of self-esteem as a result of the physical realities of ageing, similar to the interviewed heterosexual women. The other woman, who did not use any beauty work, reported conflicting images of her ideal physical self and described an ongoing struggle between resisting cultural beauty norms and wanting to retain a youthful appearance. However, the conclusions we are able to draw from our findings are clearly limited by the fact that only two of the women in our sample self-identified as lesbian.

A potential limitation for this study is its sample size and sampling techniques. While we interviewed women who ranged in age from 50 to 71 years, the sample was predominantly composed of Caucasian, well-educated, heterosexual women aged 50 to 60 years. Thus, the experiences and voices of non-white, less educated, women of lower socio-economic status, lesbian women, and women aged 60 or more years were not comprehensively represented in the data. The use of multiple interviewers may also have resulted in some inconsistencies in the data collection process despite an attempt to provide extensive training and monitoring. In the future, it will be important to analyse the data to examine how specific life experiences may contribute to women's understandings of ageing, ageism and beauty work. It will also be important to focus more research on the experiences of lesbian women.

In conclusion, our findings build on the extant literature and point to a new lens for understanding ageism that is grounded in terms of women's experiences and perceptions of their changing physical appearances. The women's narratives highlighted a tension between being physically and socially visible by virtue of looking youthful, and the realities of growing older. Paradoxically, social invisibility arises from the acquisition of visible

signs of ageing and compels women to make their chronological ages imperceptible through the use of beauty work. Undoubtedly, women's experiences of ageing and ageism are deeply rooted in their appearances and in the ageist, sexist perceptions of older women's bodies. For many women, there exists a painful tension between being aware of ageism yet still submitting to it by accepting the importance of physical appearance and the cultural requirements of female beauty work. That women engage in beauty work suggests that regardless of their awareness or their agency, their choices are ultimately determined in a world where to challenge ageist stereotypes is to run the risk of further stigmatisation and permanent invisibility.

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