

# Becoming and being gendered through the body: older women, their mothers and body image

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## **ABSTRACT**

Following West and Zimmerman's (1987) theoretical understanding of how gender identities are created and maintained, this paper examines the ways in which older women learned from their mothers how 'to do gender' through their bodies and specifically their physical appearances. Extracts from semi-structured interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years have been drawn upon to identify and discuss the ways in which women perceive, manage and present their bodies using socially-constructed ideals of beauty and femininity. More specifically, three ways that women learned 'to do gender' are examined: from their mothers' criticisms and compliments about their appearance at different stages of the lifecourse; from their mothers' attitudes towards their own bodies when young and in late adulthood; and from the interviewees' own later-life experiences and choices about 'beauty work'. Interpretative feminism is employed to analyse how the women exercised agency while constructing body-image meanings in a social context that judges women on their ability to achieve and maintain the prevailing ideal of female beauty. The study extends previous research into the influence of the mother-daughter relationship on young women's body image. The findings suggest that mothers are important influences on their daughters' socialisation into body-image and beauty work, and exert, or are perceived to exert, accountability across the life-course.

**KEY WORDS** – ageing, beauty, body image, mother-daughter relationship, socialisation, 'doing gender'.

## **Introduction**

Women learn how to scrutinise, evaluate, present and control their bodies throughout their lives (Bartky 1998; Bordo 2003). While the media, education and peer influences are important, the primary agents of socialisation of cultural norms and values are family members, especially parents (Hagedorn 1994; Tepperman and Curtis 2004). Chodorow (1978)

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argued that girls are particularly influenced by their mothers, and that it is through the mother-daughter relationship that women learn about and internalise the social construction of femininity and patriarchy. Similarly, research has suggested that for young girls, mothers are the primary agents of socialisation about the body and body image (Archibald, Graber and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Hill and Franklin 1998; Lattimore, Wagner and Gowers 2000; Ogden and Steward 2000; Ogle and Damhorst 2003, 2004; Rieves and Cash 1996; Usmiani and Daniluk 1997; Woodside *et al.* 2002). Little is known, however, about the influence of mothers on daughters' body images throughout the lifecourse, and more specifically there has been no investigation of how older women's body images are shaped by and through their relationships with their mothers over time.

To address this gap in the literature and to examine how women learn from their mothers 'to do gender' through their bodies, this paper analyses data from in-depth interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years. The paper's conceptualisation of the practices that create and sustain gender identity derives from West and Zimmerman (1987: 14), who argued that, rather than being an ascribed or innate personal characteristic, gender is an 'accomplishment' that is achieved through social interaction. They asserted that the social construction and management of behaviour is guided by 'normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category', and further that, through social interaction, the 'social doings' of gender are scrutinised and held accountable to 'normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity' (1987: 127, 129 and 136). By employing this conception of gender as socially created and subject to social scrutiny and monitoring, this paper discusses how older women learn the unconscious rules of socially-acceptable female body behaviour and attitudes through interactions with, and observations of, their mothers.

### **Literature review**

Body image is 'a multi-dimensional self-attitude toward one's body, particularly its size, shape, and aesthetics' (Cash, Ancis and Strachan 1997: 433), and has 'perceptual, attitudinal, and affective components' (Striegel-Moore and Franko 2002: 183). Myers and Biocca (1992) asserted that body image is elastic, situational, and the product of the individual's perceptions and internalisation of both cultural and individual body ideals, and of current body image and actual body shape. Thus, a woman's body image is acquired in a social context in which beauty ideals, emergent gender norms, the media, and interactions with significant others shape

and constrain both her experience and perception of her body (Bordo 2003; Paquette and Raine 2004; Pelican *et al.* 2005; Wolf 2002). Attending to the health and aesthetics of the body is a 'moral imperative' in contemporary society (White, Young and Gillett 1995: 159), but the ability to monitor and alter the body as well as one's attitudes and perceptions of body work are shaped and constrained by 'class habitus' (Laberge and Sankoff 1988: 268). Bourdieu (1984) defined 'habitus' as a generating principle of tastes and preferences, which determines choices in the form of consumer and lifestyle practices along social class lines. For example, McLaren and Kuh (2004) reported that body dissatisfaction is more prevalent among women of higher than lower socio-economic status and education, and others have found that the type of beauty and body work in which a woman engages is related to her socio-economic status and class affiliation (Laberge and Sankoff 1988; McLaren and Kuh 2004).

From an early age, girls learn to perceive the female body 'as an object of discrete parts that others aesthetically evaluate' (Franzoi 1995: 417), in marked contrast to the male body which is viewed as a tool for action and achievement. Thus, women are socialised with the cultural norm that defines beauty as 'a feminine attribute, and its pursuit as a feminine responsibility' (Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore 1984: 275). In a social context that emphasises female appearance, that encourages women to view their bodies as comprising distinct elements which severally and in aggregate endorse an elusive if attainable beauty ideal, female dissatisfaction with appearance is normative and pervasive (Bordo 2003; Hesse-Biber 1996; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore 1984; Seid 1989). As a result, rather than mothers being to blame for (or the sole cause of) their daughters' negative body image, both mothers and daughters are constrained in a social context that emphasises female appearance. Indeed, feminist theorists have argued that the heavy emphasis on feminine beauty is a form of patriarchal oppression that devalues women's social worth and impels constant 'self-surveillance' (Bartky 1998: 80; Bordo 2003; Brown and Jasper 1993; Hesse-Biber 1996; Seid 1989). Building on the work of Foucault (1979, 1980), Bordo (2003) argued that the quest to achieve and maintain the beauty ideal renders the female body docile and insecure, because women are 'constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical "improvement"' (2003: 57).

Even as women are ambivalent about their bodies, their relationships with their mothers are complex and fraught with contradictions and tensions (Chodorow 1978; Fingerman 2001; Hirsch 1989; Kranz and Daniluk 2002; La Sorsa and Fodor 1990; Ray 2003). As the mother-daughter affiliation is not always free of conflict, Ray (2003: 114) suggested

that it is 'gendered and generational' and underscored by both the mother's enduring drive to provide care and nurture, and the daughter's need to become independent: in effect, women of successive generations are preconditioned to challenge and resist each other – the resistance in turn being conditioned by historically-specific social norms and values. Fingerman (2001) contended, however, that regardless of life stage and of the tensions, conflicts and changes in their relationship, most mother-daughter dyads retain a strong investment in their complex and sometimes amorphous bond. To summarise, building on previous research on body image and the complex nature of the mother-daughter bond, and using West and Zimmerman's (1987: 125) interpretive feminist approach to 'doing gender', this paper examines how women construct their behaviour within the constraints of a social order that makes their appearances the primary means of judging and assigning women's social value.

### **Design and methods**

The data were collected through in-depth interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years. All the respondents gave informed consent and all but two were interviewed twice. On average, the interviews lasted three hours and altogether 147 interview-hours were involved. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To provide both the researcher and the study participants with an opportunity to reflect on the issues discussed in the initial interview, as well as time for transcription and analysis, the second interview took place four to six weeks after the first. The use of a second interview also enabled validation of the initial findings, in that it was used to verify and elaborate the themes, meanings and inconsistencies that emerged from the earlier interchange. The interview schedule comprised open-ended invitations to provide accounts of the ways in which the respondents' bodies had changed over time, their feelings about these changes, the types of body and beauty work that they engaged in, and their attitudes towards and experiences of various kinds of beauty work. To avoid 'taking for granted common sense assumptions and understandings' (Bogdan and Taylor 1984: 96), probes and clarifying questions were used to elucidate the complexity and nature of the meanings that the respondents attached to specific ideas and experiences.

The data analysis used Strauss and Corbin's (1998) concept of open and axial coding. It began with the reading and rereading of the transcripts to generate an initial list of 33 codes, one of which was 'socialisation experiences', the focus of the current paper. The interview

TABLE I. *Characteristics of the sample*

Attribute	Frequency	Attribute	Frequency
<b>Age group (years)</b>		<b>Educational level</b>	
50–55	16	Less than high school	1
56–60	14	High school	9
61–65	10	College/university	22
66–70	4	Graduate school	12
<b>Marital status</b>		<b>Household income</b>	
Married/partnered	22	(000s Canadian\$)	
Divorced/separated	14	Under 10	3
Widowed	4	10–19.9	3
Never-married	4	20–29.9	3
		30–39.9	6
		40–49.9	4
<b>Country of origin</b>		50–59.9	11
Canada	37	60–69.9	3
Europe	3	70 or more	9
Asia/South Asia	2	Declined to say	2
Central America	1		
United States	1	<b>Sample size</b>	44

extracts with this code were read repeatedly to generate the following six axial codes:

- The receipt of positive body messages from the mother or mother figure
- The receipt of negative body messages from the mother or mother figure
- Poor childhood body-image
- Expressed desire to look like the mother or mother figure
- Expressed desire not to look like the mother or mother figure
- References to generational differences with respect to body image or behaviour.

## Findings

### *The achieved sample*

The women in the non-probability sample were recruited using advertisements at fitness centres (14), at seniors' centres (2) and in newspapers (19), as well as snowballing (9). No compensation or remuneration was paid, although the interviewees' parking expenses were reimbursed. While the women were of diverse ages, educational attainment, income, marital status and countries of origin, most were born in Canada and were relatively well educated (Table 1). The following sections examine the ways in which the mothers had been agents of accountability, role models

and points of reference by which the women chose to resist or enact their own gendered, embodied performances across the lifecourse.

*Doing gender through the body: mothers as agents of accountability*

When asked to tell the story of how their bodies had changed over time and how they felt about their appearances, the women indicated that their mothers had been an important source of body messages. They described learning 'to do gender' from their mothers' comments and evaluations of their successes and failures in achieving the feminine beauty ideal. Approximately one-third of the women stated that their mothers had given affirmation and complimentary messages about their appearances, which in turn fostered a positive childhood body-image. One woman, aged 58 years, who said that her relationship with her mother was close, put it this way:

She was really always very constant. She never said, 'Oh, you're overweight' ... ever, ever, ever, ever. She was always very positive. I've never had a feeling about my body until I left the house and then it came crashing in ... when I was growing up, I wasn't that overweight. You know, I was chunky. I was hefty and strong. I was a good Irish kid. So, my mom has never given me negative body image messages, which I've always appreciated. So, the negative stuff comes from the media and outside sources.

Another 59-year-old woman, who had enjoyed a positive relationship with her deceased mother, said:

My mother was always quite a complimentary person ... and I don't think I ever got any negative feedback from my parents, not on my body image. Like, I think they were concerned because I was pretty skinny when I was a kid. I think she was a bit concerned about my being skinny when I was a child.

A few of the women who received positive messages from their mothers indicated that their families of origin had focused on physical activity rather than aesthetic considerations. One 51-year-old woman who described an affectionate relationship with her deceased mother recollected:

I was the only girl in my family. I've got three older brothers, so I was very much a tomboy ... all into sports, and my Mom and Dad were into sports, so actually my mom was never a type who was into her body. ... You know, she was never into her appearance ... she was a busy mom. She worked, and she was always – she played bowls and, so she was busy sport-wise. ... I mean, I was just brought up in a very active family.

In such ways, this minority of the sample were socialised into a body-as-process rather than a body-as-object orientation (Franzoi 1995). In contrast, two-thirds of the women reported that their mothers had given them negative body messages when they were younger, and that their

mothers' remarks had focussed on ways in which they failed to achieve and maintain the female beauty ideal. While the majority of the women stated that these messages had mostly been received in their childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, one-quarter of the respondents recalled receiving similar criticisms later in life. Some in this group described the general negative body messages that they had received from their mothers. One woman aged 56 years, who reported an ambivalent current relationship with her mother, said:

There was a lot of focus on appearance. ... That was more important than (pause) ... not that they didn't say 'she is beautiful' as opposed to 'she is ugly and she is fat, and she doesn't take care of herself'. So more of the connotation, so that you felt that you, you know, what was right was to take care of yourself and to look good.

These women talked about a pervasive emphasis on appearance in their families. One-quarter of the respondents indicated that their mothers had made remarks about their weight being problematic and unattractive. One, aged 56 years, who described her relationship with her deceased mother as negative and 'full of resentments', recalled:

When I was 13, I was five-foot-eight [in height]; I was five-foot-ten by the time I was 16, so my mother was always worried about me gaining weight. My parents were quite heavy. My father was six-five, but he was heavy, and my mother was a very buxom woman, so she was always heavy, and she was always on diets and she was trying to force me on diets ... and did force me on diets or yell at me. I remember big arguments in the house about that.

The majority of these women indicated that their mothers had expressed concern about their daughters becoming overweight, and some also reported that the negative comments that they received about their bodies, specifically their weight, were rooted in a long-standing familial context. One, aged 65 years, who described her relationship with her deceased mother in affectionate terms, remembered that:

My grandmother would do things like take my mother after dinner and weigh her every night ... and my mother was not overweight. She had never been overweight, but there was always this shadow looming. So when I was a kid, I sort of got the same – I wasn't dragged up and weighed but my grandmother was always talking about weight and food.

In this family, concerns about weight and appearance were passed on through the mother-daughter relationship from one generation to the next.

Aside from such general concerns about appearance and weight, one-quarter of the women asserted that their mothers had feared inciting vanity if they bestowed positive messages about their daughters'

appearances. A 51-year-old respondent, who described her current relationship with her mother as distant and negative, recollected that:

In fact, in our home it was thought that it was not a good thing to say positive things about bodies – that led to pride. We would get comments if somebody was trying to look really good, you know, [comments] like, ‘Well, who does she think she is?’ Those kinds of comments: ‘she’s certainly going to be too big for her britches’ [and] ‘pride comes before a fall’.

The implication of such comments, it appeared, was that daughters were expected to be concerned about their general appearance but not to the point of conceit or superficiality. A few of the women commented that their mothers and mother-figures were particularly negative about their style of dress. A 53-year-old who described her relationship with her deceased mother as close confided that:

She always checked me out before I went out, I mean, even into adulthood. If I’d go over and visit her – and I was already in my own apartment – she always checked what I was wearing and, you know, she’d say, ‘You could dress nicer than that’, or ‘If I am going to go out with you, please dress nicely’ ... this kind of thing. It was always very important to her – to look perfect.

Some of the women whose expressions were of this kind suggested that there were generational differences in attitudes towards fashion and appearance, and that these mediated their mothers’ perspectives of their daughters’ appearances. A 52-year-old who described her relationship with her deceased mother in both positive and negative terms remembered:

I guess I was in grade seven or eight [of high school] when mini-skirts came out, you know, and so I just took an old skirt, cut it off short, and then went and showed my mom because I thought I was ‘mod’, [that] I was fashionable. You know, it looked good, and she just thought that it was horrible! And she said, ‘you can’t wear that thing!’

A few remembered that their mothers had told them that a particular feature of their body was unattractive, and that such negative comments were linked with hurtful views that the daughters needed to lose weight. A 61-year-old respondent, who described her current relationship with her mother as difficult, remembered that:

My mother used to say I had a big bottom ... which, really, oh, it really bothered me, obviously. ... She said lots of things around my appearance that probably affected my self-esteem. I guess the main message was, and still is, you know, it’s never good enough, it’s never enough.

Fewer of the interviewed women indicated that they had received neither positive nor negative messages about their appearance. More specifically, three asserted that appearance and topics related to body image were not



prevalent when they were growing up because their families were more exercised by coping and financial hardship. A 61-year-old respondent, who described her current relationship with her mother as positive, remembered that:

There was never any time to worry about appearances. ... I was always very neat. I used to baby-sit my brothers and sisters and, you know, with six kids it's difficult to have, to have time to worry about that. So I used to buy special shoes for good, and I used to take care of them. And special clothes, you know, for nice.

The respondents who grew up in poor families did not have the social or financial resources to attend to the achievement and maintenance of the feminine beauty ideal. Rather, the women were concerned with getting enough to eat and coping with the lived realities of poverty.

While the women who received positive or neutral messages from their mothers tended to be vague or noncommittal in their descriptions about how they felt about their bodies as young children and adolescents, those who remembered their mothers uttering negative body messages conveyed a strong sense of the dislike and insecurity they had acquired regarding their own appearances as children and or adolescents. As a 60-year-old, who reported a positive relationship with her deceased mother, said:

I was always a very tall, gangly kid, with big ears. I saw myself as quite unattractive. ... a lot of my younger years were spent hiding things – for [if you have] big ears, you wear your ponytail with your hair covering your ears so that your ears could be held down [and] for skinny, bony elbows, you always wore three-quarters sleeves. When you're tall, you learn about what fashion will cut your height. You're always trying to be something you're not.

One-third of the women referred specifically to weight when recalling their poor body self-image in childhood, and most of them indicated that they felt overweight as children. As a 65-year-old, who remembered a conflict-laden relationship with her deceased mother, said: 'So I wasn't treated particularly well or made to feel good about myself. I was a really shy, miserable little kid who, you know, felt like shit. ... I think I always felt like I was sort of chubby; I certainly didn't feel cute at all.' Judging themselves in relation to the cultural preoccupation with thinness, the women learned through early interactions with their peers and families that their bodies were deficient. At the same time, a few recalled feeling underweight as children. A 52-year-old who described her current relationship with her mother as positive said, 'I was always too thin. They used to call me "toothpick" and "rake". As you can see, I am extremely small, so everyone would always tease me my whole life'. Most of the dissatisfied women also recollected that when they were children, their

mothers commented not only about their weight but also expressed dislike for specific body parts, which evinced a ‘body-as-object’ orientation towards their bodies (Franzoi 1995: 417). Some of the women expressed dissatisfaction with their facial features (*e.g.* ears, nose, complexion and acne). A 50-year-old who described her relationship with her deceased mother as positive explained:

Because I had lots of acne, I became introverted. I did not mingle. I did not socialise because of my acne, so I became introverted and then I devoted myself to studying, perhaps to cover up my acne. You know, some people ... they didn’t care how I looked, those people who really liked me. But then, oh, but then I always felt inferior because of my acne.

Other women indicated that their breasts had been a source of dis-pleasure. A 66-year-old respondent who reported a distant relationship with her deceased mother, who had suffered from a mental illness and been institutionalised, recalled that she was ‘pretty flat-chested so I would get ... not compliments, I would get teased by other kids. ... and little kids, I remember they used to call me names because I wore glasses, and I was the only kid in the whole school that wore glasses’. As this quotation indicates, the women’s perceptions of physical inadequacy were heightened by the comments that they received from their peers. Many indicated that their dissatisfaction with their bodies culminated in a general sense of social and physical awkwardness. A 60-year-old, who said that her mother had been physically abusive and had passed away, recollected:

When I was growing up, I was relatively healthy but absolutely awkward. Plus, when I was in grade four ... I found out that I was almost blind, so I had these huge thick glasses, which didn’t make anything easier. ... I had a terrible time when I was growing up. In my ... when I was a pre-teen, a teenager, a young teenager, I had awful, awful skin problems. My acne was so terrible I could hardly go outside. I was very depressed about it and I got teased about it a lot.

#### *Doing gender through the body: mothers as role models*

The majority of the women suggested that they had also learned to do gender through their bodies by watching their mothers’ examples. Indeed, 39 women indicated that their mothers had been mindful of their own appearances and had worked hard to conform to the feminine beauty ideal through dieting and by using make-up and following fashion. A 68-year-old, who described her relationship with her deceased mother as neither negative nor positive, said:

My mother was conscious of her appearance. She had freckles, so she was conscious. She didn’t like her freckles, but she had beautiful red hair ... and

when it started to go grey, I think she was a little bit vain about that. Even though she said she didn't like red hair, I know that she pulled out her grey hair.

Some of these women made clear that their mothers' beauty behaviours had had a direct impact on their own lives. One, aged 51 years, remembered that she had an affectionate relationship with her deceased mother and that 'she was constantly on a diet in the 1960s – constantly on a diet ... and when she would diet, the whole family would diet, because that's the way it was then. ... She always struggled with her weight, so she probably didn't feel that great about her body'. In this way, the women's mothers had demonstrated the importance of monitoring and enhancing their appearances through their own beauty practices.

One-half of the women suggested that their mothers embodied an attractive example of female ageing. A 51-year-old described a positive current relationship with her mother and said that:

My mother looks young; she always has [and] her mother always did. When my grandmother passed away a few years ago, she still didn't have a wrinkle ... she had the peaches-and-cream complexion, she was unbelievable ... genetically she just rocked. So, my mom, her face has dropped like her mother's had, but she doesn't ... her face looks good, right? The rest of her body's falling apart, but her face looks good ... but yeah, as far as her face goes, and her skin and all that kind of stuff, she's awesome – she's awesome.

The other half, however, maintained that their mothers exemplified unattractive ageing and a failure to achieve and maintain the feminine beauty ideal. A 60-year-old who indicated an ambivalent current relationship with her mother remarked, 'I'm not going to let myself get like that ... to get like my mom, or like most women that were older ... they looked [like] what I would consider letting themselves go.' Another woman, aged 63 years, who described a distant and negative relationship with her deceased mother, candidly told the interviewer:

I looked in the mirror and I saw my mother! I said, 'Oh my God! I don't want to look like my mother!' It's like, oh wow, it's like me sitting here talking, looking in the mirror is like I'm talking to my mom. It's like, holy Jeez! I was so relieved when she died, you know? I don't want her back again; I don't want to look like her either.

These women viewed their mothers as having failed to do gender through their bodies in an appropriate and desirable manner. For some, this failure to do gender reflected generational differences in which the baby-boomers were seen as a distinct and more youthful demographic cohort. Beginning to look like their mother in old age was seen as a harbinger of becoming unattractive and constituted a blow to these women's identities and

self-esteem. A 51-year-old, with a distant and negative current relationship with her mother, reflected in this vein:

I see my complexion changing as I age. I see my pores getting bigger, my skin getting less resilient, you know, everything [is changing for the worse]. It's a lot to swallow when you realise you're just getting old, like, my mom. No, no, no! I'm a boomer ... boomers don't get old, you know? So I think that those [changes in appearance] are all connected with me, somehow, and in [reproducing] that great, corkboard of images of what it means to be old.

*Doing gender through the body: resisting and emulating mothers' examples*

Most of the women related their own choices regarding the use of beauty products and services to their assessments of their mothers' ageing. Specifically, one-half of them in various ways articulated that they were similar to their mothers, both in terms of the changes in their appearance with ageing, and in their attitudes towards beauty work. A 68-year-old, who said that her relationship with her deceased mother was neither negative nor positive, remarked that:

It's funny in a terrible sort of way how much like our mothers we are; you just realise that when you get older. My mother didn't wear make-up, she didn't wear jewellery, or anything like that. I don't either. ... I think, in a sense, in that my mother never wore make-up or anything like that, she was always ... she didn't care for any of that herself, she had no interest in it, and I think indirectly [that] it certainly influenced me.

The majority also indicated a desire to emulate their mothers' appearance, a goal they worked towards by choosing similar body-work activities and by investing a comparable amount of time or effort into their appearances. One 60-year-old said of her deceased mother, with whom she had a positive relationship:

She had beautiful skin, and my definition of beautiful, it was soft and acne-free. She used very little in the way of cosmetics ... she did colour her hair when she was younger [and] when it was coming in yellowy, she put a blue rinse on it, but then, as it stopped being yellow, she stopped colouring it. She didn't bother shaving her legs, she only had about eight hairs on each leg, and she didn't even use deodorant. In those days, unless you saw yourself as sweaty, you didn't, and she didn't see herself as sweaty. She didn't do much of anything ... [that's] interesting, and I don't do a lot of stuff either, so, interesting. I think you pick up a lot of stuff without even realising what you're picking up from your mom.

Most of the women who wanted to follow their mothers' examples reported having had positive relationships and having received positive body messages from them. In contrast, one-half of the women actively resisted their mothers' examples by engaging in various body-work activities to

avoid ageing similarly. A 51-year-old, who described her current relationship with her mother as distant and negative, explained her reaction in this way:

So grey to me is bad, I don't like it. It reminds me – my mother was almost always grey or greying my whole life. I spent a lot of time when I was a kid saying to people, 'No, she's my mother, not my grandmother'. I just ... so I don't want to be like that. There's nothing that attracts me to grey.

These women consciously differentiated themselves from their mothers' physical examples – and the devalued status of older women in general – through the use of beauty products and services. It is of interest that the majority of this group had received negative body messages from their mothers or reported conflict-laden relationships with them, and a few reported both.

Regardless of whether the interviewees wanted to emulate or to resist their mothers' examples, many expressed dissatisfaction with their changing appearances as they aged. To exemplify, one 51-year-old who said that she had a positive current relationship with her mother reasoned in this way:

I'm not terribly fond of my body, to tell you the truth. I've never been athletic, and I've never particularly liked exercise, so that's been a real struggle for me. ... It wasn't a huge problem until, I would say, maybe five or six years ago. I guess, right up until that pre-menopausal period; before that I was always able to get away with, kind of, spotty exercising here and there, the kind of daily stuff that now, [but] lately, weight has become a problem for me.

The women who were satisfied with their appearances tended to be pragmatic about the physical realities of ageing and to emphasise the importance of health over physical attractiveness. One 65-year-old, who admitted that her relationship with her deceased mother was conflict-laden, reflected that 'I just look at myself [and] I think I look, you know, I just look pretty good. And second of all, I work pretty good. I feel, you know, I can just take off and walk wherever I want. I just, you know, feel good. Like you know, I can still – I haven't started to fall apart too much yet.'

Positive sentiments regarding later-life appearance were relatively uncommon. Those who were satisfied with their bodies tended to attribute this to the work that they had invested in achieving and maintaining their appearances. One 52-year-old, who said that her relationship with her deceased mother had been positive, put this very well:

I feel good about my body. I'm happy with the way I look. I'm very happy about the way I feel ... and, you know, I work for that. With my exercising, I work towards a healthy heart and healthy bones, but it also affects my body. It gives me

a bit of muscle tone and a little bit of definition, and so I feel good about that. I'm happy to be at a more comfortable weight for me, because I look good in clothes. So I don't have to shop to hide things; I just shop for whatever feels good on me. So overall I'm pretty happy, there's not one part of my body that I like over another or anything like that, I'm just okay, I'm okay with who I am and how I look.

Nevertheless, even those women who expressed satisfaction with their bodies were quick to identify aspects of their appearances that were a source of displeasure. One 65-year-old, who reported an ambivalent relationship with her deceased mother, said that 'I look just awful when my hair isn't done up ... just awful, and ugly and old, and you know ... there are times when I can't look at myself – I won't look at myself in the mirror'. The women tended to be dissatisfied but pragmatic about their appearances.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

This paper has examined the ways in which older women perceive that their mothers have influenced their body images over time. All of the women who were interviewed stated that, across the lifecourse, their mothers had been an important source of information and evaluation regarding body image, and indeed the findings suggest that mothers are a primary socialising agent in the process through which women learned to do gender through their bodies. The nature of the influence ranged from explicit appearance-related comments to being a role-model for their own behaviour and attitudes concerning beauty. While one-third of the women remembered that their mothers had communicated predominantly complimentary messages about their appearances, two-thirds reported having received criticisms. The mothers' negative evaluations of their daughters' appearances included references to the ways in which the younger women's bodies deviated from the socially constructed feminine beauty ideal and thereby failed to do gender adequately. It is notable that those women who received positive or neutral body messages from their mothers were vague and noncommittal about their appearances when they were younger, while in contrast, those who remembered negative comments from their mothers were more likely to recall feeling dissatisfied with their appearances when young. Undoubtedly, the negative comments of the mothers facilitated the adoption and internalisation of a 'body-as-object orientation' to their own bodies; in effect, the women learned by their mothers' examples how to scrutinise and assess particular parts of the body.

The findings also reveal the influence of social class, in that those women who grew up in poverty at the time had relatively few financial, social and emotional resources with which to attend to the cultural ideals of feminine beauty. As Laberge and Sankoff (1988) and McLaren and Kuh (2004) found, the interviews demonstrated that social class mediated both the ways in which the body was viewed and the types of beauty work that were practised. Specifically, the women who were most concerned with the basic necessities of daily living tended to downplay the importance of appearance and instead emphasised being healthy and presentable.

The women also described the impact upon them of the ways in which their mothers felt about their bodies and of the kinds of beauty practices they used. The majority reported that their mothers had dieted, used make-up, and been conscious of fashion. Some also remembered that their mothers had received criticisms about their appearance from their own mothers. There was clear evidence that doing gender is ingrained, learned and often passed on unconsciously from one generation to the next, as though women are locked into a generational cycle of female body insecurity and devaluation. At the same time, the majority of the women used their mothers as a reference point against which they gauged and monitored their own ageing. One-half stated that their mothers had aged positively and that they strived to emulate their example, both in terms of beauty-work behaviour and actual later-life appearance. In contrast, the other half tried to distance themselves from their mother's physical example, by choosing to use (or not to use) different beauty products and interventions. Those who emulated their mothers reported positive relationships with and feedback from their mothers, but those who resisted their mother's example were more likely to have received negative body messages and to have reported a hostile or emotionally distant relationship. Those who distanced themselves from their mother's model of ageing asserted that there had been a generational change in values and ideologies, which suggests that ideals of feminine beauty and doing gender are negotiated and internalised anew by each succeeding generation.

The use of West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'doing gender' approach elucidated the ways in which women's body images are acquired through interaction with significant others, and reflect both the power of and ambivalence about underlying social norms of femininity and female beauty. The findings of this study have extended the discussion of gender as a social product, by examining the body as a source of tension and struggle as women construct, negotiate and internalise social meanings pertaining to ageing, older women, beauty and mothers. Applying West and Zimmerman's theoretical framework has illuminated the ways in

which women exercise agency through their beauty-work behaviour and choices in the context of a gendered social world that ties women's social currency to their physical appearance.

It is important to acknowledge that this study has revealed only the perspectives of daughters. While many of the respondents were also mothers, the discussion has focused on the women's recollections of their mother's influence on their attitudes towards their own body image and appearance. Inevitably, the transmission of body messages flows both ways across the generations, and one must also recognise that body messages are received from the media, during one's education, and from age peers. The general effect is to create a social context in which women are deemed inadequate and in need of constant self-surveillance and body management. Future research should interview older daughters as well as their mothers to raise our understanding of the ways in which the construction and transmission of body image meanings flows in both inter-generational directions. Similarly, it would be useful to investigate the influence of fathers on women's body images. Finally, research that attends to how body image meanings and messages are constructed and negotiated across more than two generations of women (*i.e.* between daughters, mothers and grandmothers) would also be useful.

In conclusion, an older woman's body image is the product of the negotiation and construction of meanings across the lifecourse through interactions with significant others. Women learn how to evaluate and manage their bodies through direct messages from their mothers as well as their mothers' examples. This study has revealed the complex and sometimes ambivalent nature of the mother-daughter relationship with respect to the development of shared meanings and understanding of ageing and appearance. Rather than blaming mothers for women's pervasive negative image of their own bodies, it is important to place the mother-daughter relationship in the broader social context that judges women on their ability to achieve and maintain a normative female beauty ideal. The mother-daughter relationship is an important vehicle through which women learn about feminine beauty norms and self-surveillance, and potentially a powerful tool by which to resist and transmute the cultural norms that judge women by their appearances rather than their actions and abilities.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by a standard research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant number 410-2004-0854). We thank Alexandra Korotchenko, Karin McFarlin, Robin Repta,



Shayna Rusticus, and Jo-Ann Zyla for their assistance with the data collection and transcription.

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*Accepted 4 November 2006*

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