

Shades of grey: to dye or not to dye one's hair in later life

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ABSTRACT

This article examines older women's perceptions of grey, white and coloured hair. Using data from in-depth interviews with 36 women aged 71–94 years (mean 79), we elucidate the women's attitudes towards and reasons for dyeing or not dyeing their hair. The majority of our participants disparaged the appearance of grey hair, which they equated with ugliness, dependence, poor health, social disengagement and cultural invisibility. The women were particularly averse to their own grey hair, and many suggested that other women's grey hair was acceptable, if not attractive. At the same time, half of the women liked the look of snowy white hair, which they associated with attractiveness in later life as well as with goodness and purity. While one-third of the women had begun to dye their hair in their youth so as to appear more fashionable, two-thirds continued to dye their hair in later life so as to mask their grey hair and their chronological age. The women suggested that they used hair dye to appear more youthful and to resist ageist stereotypes associated with older women. We discuss the findings in relation to previous research concerning older women's hair, the concept of doing gender, and theories pertaining to ageism.

KEY WORDS – ageing, ageism, beauty work, femininity, gender, grey hair, later life, older women.

Introduction

Levine asserted that hair is 'the only prominent feature of the body which is at the same time capable of painless amputation, infinite manipulation, and endless regeneration' (1995: 86). Although it is commonly regarded as a trivial manifestation of female vanity (McCracken 1996), for many women, the appearance and care-taking practices surrounding hair serve as a complex and endlessly mutable aspect of self-representation. Furthermore, hairstyles and colours are a symbolic indicator of age, ethnicity, gender, politics, sexual preference and social class (Gimlin 1996; Weitz 2005). Indeed, Synnott (1987) contended that

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hair is potentially the most important site for the expression of individual and group identity, as it is simultaneously public and private, and can be transformed to reflect a multitude of social positions and personal attributes.

In this article, we draw on data from in-depth interviews with 36 older women to examine how hair colour is used in later life as a marker of chronological age, social age, femininity and cultural currency. Specifically, we elucidate how our participants perceived older women's hair and hair colours, felt about their own hair and made choices with respect to either dyeing or not dyeing their hair. Our findings suggest that hair care practices in later life are an important aspect of doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and of negotiating and resisting ageist stereotypes and societal discourses concerning older women.

Literature review

The complex meanings attributed to hair and specifically its colour are rooted in an historical context as well as cultural discourses concerning age and gender. Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, safer and more effective hair dyes began to be developed and were heavily marketed by cosmetics companies as a fashionable means of self-expression (Weitz 2005). Accompanied by a growing cultural focus on youth, health and beauty, grey hair became identified as a disheartening reminder of an individual's eventual, if not impending, physical decline and ultimate demise (Nettleton and Watson 1998). The possession of grey and greying hair increasingly rendered the individual economically, socially and sexually irrelevant (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). One consequence was that women faced mounting pressure to hide their chronological ages by dyeing their hair so as to approximate the youthful beauty ideal and retain their social currency (Symonds and Holland 2008). Whereas prior to the 1950s older women rarely attempted to mask their ages (Weitz 2005), during the following decades doing gender and femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987) began to require, amongst other forms of beauty work, disciplining of one's hair through the use of a myriad of tints, dyes and hair-care products. Those who refused to pursue the ideal of youth through beauty work were subject to aspersions of indolence and self-neglect (Gilleard and Higgs 2000), and even assignments of ageist stereotypes if not active discrimination (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; McCracken 1996). Although there are no statistics regarding the usage of hair dye among women in the general population, Rollison, Helzlsouer and Pinney (2006) noted that in recent biomedical surveys, 66–74 per cent

of female participants reported that they use hair dye despite the potential associated health risks.

To date, several studies have investigated women's perceptions of their hair in later life and their concomitant beauty work attitudes and practices, including Furman's (1997) ethnographic research in a beauty parlour frequented mainly by an older Jewish female clientele, Fairhurst's (1998) interviews with 24 women aged in the fifties about their experiences of menopause, Winterich's (2007) interviews with 30 women aged 46–71 years regarding ageing and femininity and Symonds and Holland's (2008) interviews with 15 women aged 60 or more years about older women's hairstyles. In each of these four studies, women perceived grey hair to be a troubling visible sign of ageing, although Furman's (1997) informants also indicated that they liked the appearance of naturally white hair. Furman, Winterich, and Symonds and Holland, all reported that the majority of their participants dyed their hair in order to conceal their chronological ages and better to approximate the youthful beauty ideal, but Winterich also found that while white, heterosexual, middle-class women tended to have negative feelings about their grey hair, which they associated with old age and obsolescence, lesbians and women of colour were more likely to accept their grey hair as they rejected the dominant cultural appearance standards. At the same time, both Furman's and Fairhurst's participants maintained that there were appropriate and inappropriate hair colours for older women and expressed a preference for lighter colours. In addition, Fairhurst found that individuals who transgressed accepted norms of age-inappropriate behaviour, such as noticeably dyeing their hair, were ridiculed for their desire to retain a youthful appearance.

Building on this earlier research, our paper further explores the nuances of older women's attitudes towards shades of white and grey hair. While previous research has focused on middle-aged women and those aged in the fifties and sixties, this paper investigates the experiences and perceptions of much older women. Given the tendency to dissociate beauty work, sexuality and femininity from the concerns of old age, it is particularly pertinent to consider the attitudes and perceptions of women over the age of 70 years.

Methods

The data for the paper were drawn from a larger study of the beauty-work practices of older women. Thirty-six women aged 71–94 years (mean 79) were interviewed for a total of 63.7 hours. The in-depth, semi-structured

interviews examined older women's make-up, nail care, clothing, sun tanning, and hair-care practices (but this paper focuses on the last). With respect to hair-care practices, the study participants were questioned about their experiences and perceptions of greying hair, their motivations for dyeing or not dyeing their hair, and the meanings they attributed to grey, white and coloured hair. With the consent of each participant, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were recruited through advertisements in local newspapers and they were interviewed either in their homes or at the university. The participants received no compensation for their involvement in the study other than reimbursement of their travel or parking expenses. Although their ages, educational attainments, household incomes and partner statuses were diverse, the participants were predominantly white, heterosexual women who had been born in Canada or Western Europe (*see* Table 1).

The analysis of the data involved three phases, namely data management, coding and in-depth analysis. During the data management stage, all interviews were transcribed, reviewed and imported into the NVivo 8 computer program for the management and analysis of qualitative data. The coding was informed by Strauss and Corbin's (1998) concept of open and axial coding, whereby open codes are broad analytic categories, and axial codes are sub-codes of the overarching concept, and are themselves comprised of sub-categories that illustrate the nuances and tensions within the data. Reading and re-reading the transcripts produced a preliminary codebook, which included 'hair care' as an open code. Further analysis of the 'hair care' open code generated four axial codes, namely 'hair-care practices', 'meanings of white and grey hair', 'social influences' and 'meanings of dyed hair'. These axial codes were, in turn, further analysed and generated nine additional sub-categories. While 'hair-care practices' was broken down into 'appropriate/inappropriate hair colours for older women' and 'changing hair-care practices over time', the 'meanings of white and grey hair' axial code was sub-divided into 'grey hair as a signifier of oldness', 'grey hair as indicator of physical and mental illness' and 'positive perceptions of grey hair'. Similarly, analysis of the 'social influences' axial code produced two sub-categories, namely 'gendered meanings of grey hair' and 'grey hair and the experience of social invisibility'; and analysis of the 'meanings of dyed hair' axial code culminated in two sub-categories, 'dyed hair as indicative of youth, independence and social engagement' and 'dyed hair as a means of boosting self-confidence'. During this multi-stage and complex process, we moved back and forth between the interviews and the coded data to refine our analytic categories and to ensure trustworthiness.

TABLE I. *Sample characteristics*

| Attribute and categories | N |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Age group (years): | |
| 70–75 | 14 |
| 76–80 | 6 |
| 81–85 | 8 |
| 86+ | 8 |
| Marital status: | |
| Currently married/common-law | 11 |
| Divorced/separated | 8 |
| Widowed | 13 |
| Never married | 4 |
| Nation of origin: | |
| Canada | 27 |
| England | 5 |
| Scotland | 1 |
| Germany | 1 |
| France | 1 |
| South Africa | 1 |
| Level of education: | |
| Less than high school | 4 |
| High school | 7 |
| College/university | 17 |
| Graduate school | 4 |
| Technical school or other | 4 |
| Household income (Canadian \$): | |
| Under 10,000 | 1 |
| 10–20,000 | 2 |
| 20–30,000 | 5 |
| 30–40,000 | 7 |
| 40–50,000 | 6 |
| 50–60,000 | 2 |
| 60,000+ | 9 |
| Declined to say | 4 |
| Sample size | 36 |

Findings

Shades of white and grey: what the older women said about their hair

When asked about their perceptions of older women's hair, it readily became apparent that certain shades of white and grey were considered more or less appealing. Half of the women expressed appreciation of 'snowy white' hair, which they described as 'beautiful', 'gorgeous', 'very, very attractive', 'very striking' and 'lovely'. As well as liking the overall appearance of white hair, some suggested that white hair provided a beautiful casing for the face. For example, a 73-year-old woman said, 'White hair is attractive ... it looks nicer. I mean, it makes you look nicer. I think it shows your eyes off better. It's a lovely frame'. Similarly, other

participants maintained that white hair is attractive because it ‘lightens up [the] whole face’ and made people appear ‘to sparkle’ or as though they had ‘a light on top of [their] head. It’s beautiful’. Many of the women juxtaposed their appreciation of white hair with disparagement of grey hair. As an 84-year-old asserted, ‘White hair, I don’t know, it just looks cleaner, fresher than grey. ... Snow white is cleaner, purer [and] more aesthetically beautiful than grey in my opinion’. In this way, many of the women associated goodness, purity and angelic qualities with the appearance of white hair.

At the same time, the majority of the women suggested that grey hair was unattractive by using words such as ‘awful’, ‘ugly’ and ‘yucky’ to describe the appearance of aged women’s natural hair colour. Many women suggested that the unappealing nature of grey hair had to do with the fact that it was perceived to be a non-colour. The women described grey hair as ‘drab’ and ‘nondescript’, as exemplified by a 72-year-old who said, ‘I guess it’s just ... a non-colour, you know. It’s not black and it’s not white. ... It’s just kind of mousy looking ... it’s not anything, it is just kind of blah’. Additionally, the women’s dislike of grey hair stemmed from the impact it was perceived to have on a woman’s overall appearance. A 73-year-old reasoned that ‘grey hair – unless you have certain skin tones – doesn’t do anything for you. It just makes you look tired ... it sort of drags the life out of your skin’.

Despite their overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards grey hair, the women also contended that some greys were more attractive than others. For example, an 86-year-old observed that ‘some people grey nicely and some people, it’s like an awful colour. They just all look grey, you know?’ An 84-year-old woman put it this way: ‘I think some women look very nice with grey hair. But it’s not too often. It depends on the way the hair goes grey’. When asked to clarify what they meant by greying ‘nicely’ as opposed to unattractively, the women invariably pointed to their own hair as an example of an undesirable shade of grey in contrast to other greying women who were perceived to be more appealing. For some of these women, their dislike of their own hair had to do with the perception that the colour or their grey hair looked ‘dull’. A 72-year-old contended: ‘I have a friend who is just sort of salt-and-peppery and her hair just looks wonderful. [My grey hair] looked dull and ugly as far as I was concerned. ... I didn’t like the look of it on me at all’. Other women suggested that uneven greying was the source of their displeasure with their own hair. A 79-year-old elaborated this point of view:

I like grey hair if it’s even. My sisters-in-law had beautiful salt-and-pepper hair that was just so nice and even, not the way mine is. Mine just looks funny with this white streak over here and then the dark over there.

Finally, other women argued that their original hair colour clashed with grey, rendering them unattractive. A 73-year-old woman maintained that ‘when you’re dark and you go grey, it looks quite nice, but mine was just really yucky ... it was neither grey nor blonde ... it looks horrible. It looks like somebody peed on it or something’.

As well as disparaging their own grey hair, the women had strong opinions about appropriate and inappropriate styles and lengths of grey hair for older women. Long grey hair was particularly vilified and prompted many comments similar to those of an 89-year-old woman: ‘Long grey hair – it’s just unsuitable for older people ... an older woman with long hair looks like a witch’. Equating long, grey hair with 1960s counter-culture, a 72-year-old stated: ‘The former hippies with this long grey hair that’s got no style, hasn’t been cut for ten years, and they got baggy old clothes on, I think it looks like hell, quite frankly’. In contrast, the women argued that shorter, stylishly-cut grey was more flattering than longer grey locks on an older woman. A 74-year-old went further:

A woman can have grey hair as long its well cut – as long as she’s had a good hair cut and it’s trimmed. But you can see some women with straggly hair that’s unkempt. They look depressed and they’re depressing to look at.

The women’s feelings about grey hair were more complex than mere aspersions of particular shades and styles of grey hair. Indeed, many referred to the social connotations of having grey hair in their negative remarks. Some women suggested that the nondescript nature of grey served to render older women socially and physically invisible. For example, an 89-year-old stated: ‘I can’t understand why [some women] want to stay grey because it makes you look grey ... you fade away into the background and no one sees you ... you disappear ... and there’s nothing to hold anyone’s interest in you’. A 73-year-old woman described how the invisibility of older women played out in everyday life interactions:

Older women tend to come in two categories, those who are very well dressed and very stylish who are given immediate attention, and those who look like somebody’s dear old granny who is completely overlooked. You watch – in a department store – you watch who the clerks go for. Some nice grey-haired little old lady, your typical little old lady ... is the one that’s overlooked ... if they’re grey haired, they’re ignored every time.

Similarly, an 80-year-old woman maintained: ‘[Grey hair], it slots you as being old and as being obsolete ... you’re ready for the pasture and we really haven’t much respect for any contribution you could make’. As well as marking an individual as old and, therefore, likely to being discounted

by younger people, grey hair was also perceived to be associated with physical decline. An 84-year-old woman held this view strongly:

There are all those sayings like ‘over the hill’ and all that kind of stuff. Well [grey hair] is the biggest indicator that you’re on the downward slope to old age and all the rest of it ... by and large, I think it’s accepted as a signal that you’re now over the hill and sexuality fades and that sort of thing.

Other women equated grey hair with mental decline, as in the comments of one 76-year-old: ‘I think when [people] see grey hair ... I think your attitude changes somewhat. You’re not expecting to hear as sharp an answer sometimes, or as quick a response’. In this way, the possession of grey hair was assumed to be indicative of loss of mental acuity, declining functional ability and impending mortality.

To dye or not to dye

Given their largely negative feelings about the appearance of grey hair, it was perhaps not surprising that two-thirds of the women were dyeing their hair at the time of the interview, and seven of the 12 who were not had previously done so. When asked to discuss their reasons for changing their hair colours, the women revealed that their motivations had varied over their lifetimes. To begin, six of the women who currently dyed their hair and seven women who no longer did so indicated that they had started altering their hair colour in their youth, primarily in an effort to appear fashionable. For example, an 89-year-old woman who currently dyed her hair explained:

Well, it was the fashion and fashionable. Everybody did that. You know, it’s like buying a new pair of shoes. Why do you wear a certain heel-height or platform? Well, all your friends are doing it, so you want to be the same, and that was it.

Eleven of the women reported that they had begun to dye their hair when they started to go grey, generally in mid-life, and all but one continued to use hair dye at the time of the interview. Once again, most of these women suggested that their motivation for changing their hair colour had to do with the desire to appear fashionable. Thus, a 72-year-old who was currently dyeing her hair contended:

It was a fashion thing in the 1980s. There was henna and different colours and stuff like that so that’s when I started doing it. ... I had a few grey hairs so I went red for a while and, you know, it was just fun.

Many of these women also maintained, however, that their decision to begin dyeing their hair in mid-life was motivated by the desire to make their hair look less ‘patchy’, ‘dull’ or ‘wishy-washy’, or to cover an undesirable shade of grey. An 83-year-old who currently dyed her hair said,

‘I think I was probably about 45 when I started to dye it because it was going grey and dull. ... My hair has always been sort of wishy-washy brown, but it started to look dull so I decided to dye it’. Finally, seven women, all of whom continued to dye their hair, stated that they had begun to alter their hair colour after 60 years of age, primarily to cover their particular shade or distribution of grey hair. A 79-year-old put it this way:

I was fine until I started getting white on the front ... with brown in the back. Well, not brown, but a mousy colour at the back, so I wanted just to even it out. I used to have it done and paid to have it done, and then it was getting very expensive so I started buying the colours myself and I do it myself now.

Irrespective of the initial motivation for dyeing their hair, ten women explained that they continued to dye their hair colour at the time of the interviews because it gave them confidence and personal satisfaction. A 72-year-old put it simply: ‘It makes me feel better to have it done’. An 89-year-old woman described just as succinctly how she felt after going to the salon and having her hair dyed: ‘It’s good for your morale’. Several women suggested that dyeing one’s hair was a buffer against the social and physical realities of growing older, as conveyed by an 84-year-old:

You know if that’s [physical decline] going to happen to you, sometimes there’s nothing you can do about it, and then you have to decide: am I going to live my life in misery or am I going to look at what I can still do and find the useful things – the fun things that I can still be involved with? Well, getting your hair coloured isn’t really going to change that. It’s more than that, but that’s one of the things that can perk you up when you’re feeling just a little bit down. You know what I mean? There are degrees of help.

Similarly, other women also perceived the act of dyeing their hair to be a personal intervention that they could indulge in when feeling down-trodden. A 72-year-old described it this way:

I’m not doing it for other people; I’m doing it for me. The only advice I ever gave my daughters was, if you feel down or depressed, get dressed up and go shopping. ... Don’t lie around looking awful if you feel awful, it will pep you up if you look better. If you’re really feeling bad, get your hair done.

At the same time, 14 women stated that they continued to dye their hair because they did not want to appear old, and so to feel old. For example, a 71-year-old was clear about the association: ‘[I have been dyeing my hair] since I started getting greys, I guess about 15 years ago. I just feel that if let my hair grow out and go grey, I’d automatically feel old’. A 73-year-old recollected: ‘I’ve tried it, I’ve let my hair grow out years ago and all I did was look really ancient, and I thought, “No, I don’t really want to look that old, I just don’t”. And that was when I was, I don’t know, in my fifties

maybe'. In this way, the women altered their hair colour in an effort to retain a youthful identity, as expressed by an 89-year-old:

[I dye my hair] because I don't want to get old. It's bad enough feeling old and all the rest of it. You try and keep up – try and try and keep a little bit of youth with you. You know, it's hard. I don't know how to explain it. It sounds stupid, doesn't it? ... We all want to hang on to our youth. Well, we know we can't so that's my only way of trying. With my hair you know that's what it's all about.

Additionally, many of the women spoke of hair dye as a means of defying ageist stereotypes. Suggesting that people made assumptions about an older person's abilities or lack of abilities on the basis of their hair colour, a 94-year-old woman maintained that 'people conjure an image up in their mind and women have to dispel that now. I think the use of make-up and, in particular, hair dye has done that'. As well as talking about ageist stereotypes in general, many of the informants specified particular assumptions that they endeavoured to shatter or overcome through their use of hair dye. For example, to resist the assumption that later life was inevitably a time of poor health, some women suggested that by masking their chronological ages, they could appear more youthful and therefore healthier. An 80-year-old was adamant about the perceived connection:

I guess at 80 you want to look as young as you can and as healthy as you can. ... If you take someone with grey hair and colour their hair, it totally changes the colour of their skin. It makes them look far healthier than when they have grey hair around their face. Grey hair can make you look very, very ... washed out or haggard. If you colour it, even a lighter blonde or a light beige-y shade, that person totally changes.

Asserting that grey hair equated with physical dependence and social disengagement, some women indicated that their coloured hair enabled them to project an image of personal autonomy. For example, a 75-year-old rejected the idea that she wanted to give the impression of being young even as she argued that she did not want to appear to conform to the stereotype of the dependent and frail older adult:

I certainly don't want to look younger, I'm quite happy at the age I'm in, so maybe I'm trying to show that when you're 75 you can take care of yourself. You present yourself to the world as a smart, independent person who is taking care of yourself and doing the best you can all the time. And I guess I think that maybe the façade starts to give that opinion whether they know you or not.

For an 83-year-old woman, the ability to continue to engage in beauty work simultaneously signified and reinforced her self-sufficiency:

I like being independent. I think if I really wanted to have my children all concerned about me and rushing to see what they could do for poor old mom and so

on, all I'd have to do is do away with all the make-up, let my hair go and so on ... and I don't think I need that. The day may come when I do. So, dyeing my hair and doing my make-up – I think it helps to keep me independent.

Similarly, several women noted that they used hair dye for the sake of their families, both to convince significant others of their independence but also to retain their esteem. Having the good regard of her children and grandchildren was particularly important to one 94-year-old woman:

When my family introduces me, you know, there's my grandchildren or my children, they're very proud of the way I look and they're proud of the fact that I'm the age that I am and that I still do my hair and dye my hair and put make-up on and dress *not* like an old lady. They wouldn't associate an old lady image with me, I don't think.

Likewise, five women equated the act of colouring their hair with the ability to engage actively in society. A 79-year-old made similar points but with reference to the impression she made on her age peers:

I've gone to a couple of seniors do's, and you walk in and there's maybe three or four women that colour their hair that look as if they were really active and had busy lives. And the others with the grey hair are sitting around looking very tired and I think, 'Oh God!' I don't know why they don't do something but it's their choice, you know. I just thought they'd look better and a little more active if they had tried to look younger. It's not that I'm afraid of getting old, because I know I'm old and I'm feeling old, but it's just that why not try to not look old? It's sort of giving up as far as I'm concerned. I don't want to give up being active.

Finally, eight women suggested that they felt compelled to use hair dye to remain visible to others. For some, visibility was particularly important in the job market, as expressed by a 74-year-old: 'If you go for an interview and you've grey hair, you're slotted at once into a category of going to be retiring soon. ... That is a reason that a woman should dye her hair; even a man'. A 76-year-old woman put it this way: '[I dye my hair] because I was still working up until very recently and I wanted to present a good-looking picture. ... I think it says something about our [society]. ... We value youth; youth and energy, I suppose, and good looks'. Other women wished to remain visible and sexually desirable to potential romantic partners. For example, an 82-year-old confided:

I don't want to look old. I always like to look good for myself but also for men. ... I have this wonderful man in my life. ... He's so wonderful. He goes along with everything, but he said, 'I hate grey hair on women'. ... He said, 'You look fabulous. Do what you want to do ... just don't get any grey hair'.

Of the 12 women who were not currently dyeing their hair, only five women had never done so. They argued that grey hair was simply 'part of

life' and not something worth worrying about. An 81-year-old woman expressed this pragmatic view very well:

I didn't worry very much about it. It's all part of growing older. As long as it's washed and clean, that's all I worry about. ... I was born to be dark, then grey and then white, and that's the way it's going to be.

The non-dyers cited the 'bother' and requisite constant upkeep as their primary reasons for not altering their hair colour. For example, an 87-year-old woman said: 'No, it's too much trouble. I'm too old to be ... bothered with things like that'. Some also pointed out that dyed hair that is not properly tended appears unattractive, particularly when grey roots are visible. As an 81-year-old woman reasoned:

[I don't dye my hair] because it looks awful when it's growing out. You have to do it regularly. You have to have it done properly and it takes time and money. I can't be bothered. ... I can't see the advantage. You know, it would grow out and I'd have to keep on doing it.

Similarly, the seven women who no longer dyed their hair offered a number of reasons for having stopped. Like the five who had never coloured their hair, most cited the costs and bother associated with hair dyeing, but they gave other reasons as well, including concerns about the impact of hair dye on the health of their skin. One 88-year-old reported: 'I think it's a terrible waste of time and money, to say nothing of what it must do to your skin – it did to mine!' An 86-year-old explained her decision to stop dyeing her hair at age 55 in this way: 'I realised that it was not good for your skin and for your scalp, so I just stopped'.

Others among the non-dyers explained that they were pleased with the appearance of their grey hair, and that this was one factor in their decision to stop dyeing their hair. For example, a 73-year-old woman maintained, 'It's a nuisance and I don't think that in the long run it's particularly healthy for you. And I think my natural hair looks nice now that it's uniform'. For this group, once their grey hair was no longer patchy or uneven, or their hair had turned the much preferred colour of white, the women opted to put up no longer with the time, cost and effort involved in dyeing their hair. A 77-year-old explained: 'I used to dye it so it was like a straw-coloured yellow. Now I find it just goes white on its own. So I just leave it ... and I figure, you can hardly tell white hair from platinum blond anyway'. Finally, several women asserted the importance of accepting the physical realities of growing older. For example, an 86-year-old saw the act of dyeing her hair as a futile if not dishonest attempt to halt the passage of time:

I used to [dye my hair] but I don't dye it now. I see people here in their nineties and they are pitch-black. And, you know, they're going against nature. Your body

tells you that you are 90-years-old no matter what. When you know you're 90, you know that you don't have black hair. So I don't dye my hair.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have examined the complex meanings that older women attributed to grey, white and coloured hair. More specifically, we have investigated the importance of hair and hair colour to older women's sense of femininity, identity and social currency. Similar to the findings of Furman (1997), Fairhurst (1998), Winterich (2007) and Symonds and Holland (2008), the majority of our participants disparaged the appearance of grey hair. Suggesting that grey hair was ugly and a signifier of dependence, poor health, social disengagement and capitulation to cultural obsolescence, the women argued that grey was a non-colour which not only 'washed out' older women's appearance but also rendered them socially invisible. Lacking in colour, the women perceived those who had grey hair to be discounted by and imperceptible to employers, potential romantic partners, younger people and by no means least their own family members.

Interestingly, many of the women suggested that the grey hair of others was attractive, unlike their own, which they regarded as particularly disagreeable. In this way, the women's tendency to direct their aversion of grey hair primarily towards themselves served to mask their internalised ageism and their unwavering embracement of youthful beauty ideals to their own detriment. In addition to their displeasure with their own grey hair, the women also articulated narrow definitions of acceptable grey hair on other women, including prescriptions of tolerable hair lengths and suitable hairstyles. Specifically, many women expressed distaste for grey hair that is long or perceived to lack shape or style. Given that long hair in women is associated with femininity and overt sexuality (Weitz 2005), and given the assumption that older women are and should be asexual, long grey hair was seen as a transgression of acceptable appearances and behaviours.

At the same time, and consistent with Furman's (1997) findings, one-half of our participants liked the appearance of snowy white hair, which they associated with positive personal qualities such as purity and goodness. These virtues are often attributed to the stereotypical grandmother who is perceived to be sweet, kind and nurturing. While this stereotype exemplifies one of the few culturally-valued roles available to older women, it is also characterised by passivity, relegation to traditional domestic roles, and loss of political, economic and social power. In this

way, the possession of white hair may offer women one means of being considered more attractive than their grey counterparts, even as it reduces their access to the rights and privileges afforded younger-looking individuals.

In contrast, the use of hair dye was perceived to offer women a more effective means of retaining their social power and visibility. Indeed, as found in recent biomedical survey research (Rollison, Helzsouer and Pinney 2006), as well as in the studies by Furman (1997), Symonds and Holland (2008) and Winterich (2007), the majority of the interviewed women dyed their hair. They suggested that the use of hair dye cultivated a more youthful appearance, gave the women power to defy ageist stereotypes by rendering their chronological ages less apparent, and demonstrated and reinforced their functional and personal independence. That said, some women argued that their use of hair dye had more to do with personal care than ageist discourses as they asserted that getting their hair done was a meaningful way of offsetting the difficulties of daily life. Therefore, going to the hair salon or dyeing one's hair enabled the women to feel better about themselves and their personal life circumstances.

Our paper adds to the concept of doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) by underscoring the importance of appearance work and the negotiation of beauty and age norms in the social construction of femininity. Rather than performing the social category of old woman, the women in our study used hair dye to try to pass for younger and a more culturally-valued social position, but their performances of age and gender were complicated by current social norms about appropriate and inappropriate hair colours for older women. As with the respondents to Fairhurst's (1998) study, our informants maintained that the use of hair colour needed to be subtle and indiscernible, and considered women who used obvious, dark hair dyes as both disingenuous and failures in their attempt to conceal their ages and retain their social currency.

A potential limitation for this study is the small, convenience sample. While the participants had diverse ages, incomes and levels of education, none identified as lesbian or queer. In the future, it will be important to focus research on the experiences of lesbian or queer older women as well as women of different racial-ethnic groups. It would also be beneficial to conduct survey research to ascertain the extent of hair-dyeing practices in the general population.

In conclusion, although hair and hair colour are often assumed to be evidence of feminine vanity and preoccupation with appearance, our findings reveal that older women's care and presentation of their hair involves complex issues that are underscored by norms concerning age,

gender, sexuality and femininity. While one of the most readily apparent markers of chronological age, grey hair is also one of the easiest and least costly aspects of appearance to disguise with relatively accessible beauty products and hair-salon services. Deeply intertwined with ageist stereotypes of physical and social decline, grey hair is symbolic of old age and, increasingly, of a failure to care adequately for one's appearance. Given the affordability of hair dye and the insidious and pervasive stereotypes associated with older women, it is inevitable that women in affluent western societies will face mounting pressure to mask their shades of grey and to discipline their bodies through beauty culture.

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