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Hair and age

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There is a malleability to hair that gives it a distinctly expressive and discursive quality. For this reason it has long attracted attention in the analysis of culture and identity (Synott 1987). But hair is also part of the body, and these bodily origins have often been overlooked in efforts to deconstruct the hairstyle as a cultural artefact. In this chapter we consider hair and its relationship with ageing. In order to fully appreciate the significance of hair with regard to the meaning and experience of growing old, we must not only consider the signifying properties of the hairstyle, but also the lived experience of the ageing body. As Katz has argued of embodiment more generally, it is ‘a materialising process whereby the vicissitudes of physical and biographical ageing are grounded in bodywork practices, routines and environments’ (2011, 192–3). Consequently, the cultural expectation that we manage our hair, as it grows or recedes, becomes tangled, greasy, split or brittle, means that it is not only a necessary part of our regime of self-care but also integral to an ongoing and embodied biographical narrative. Hair can feature prominently in the relationship we have with ourselves over time. As it changes, hair helps us to recognize our own ageing (Hockey and James 2004). How we respond to the greying of hair often reveals something of our attitude to ageing. And this process, by which we make sense of our own ageing bodies as a response to how others see us, has long been a preoccupation for cultural gerontology and efforts to theorize the ageing self (for example, Biggs 1997, Featherstone and Hepworth 1991).

The intention here is to acknowledge the rich and varied ways in which hair has and can be used to support our understanding of ageing and the lifecourse. The discussion is organized around the differing temporal frames that hair itself embodies: from the gradual process of greying or balding that may take years; the weeks or months during which it grows; to the more day-to-day ‘bed-head’ knotted disorder that we face each morning and are required to tackle before presenting ourselves to the world. Ageing identities are implicated in each of these time-frames; therefore, to manage our hair is to engage with what it means to grow old.

Hair in time

Our relationship with our hair, the efforts we make to manage it and the meanings it holds are temporally organized. Hair can mark time, different styles reflecting trends in fashion or more personal milestones, but it also embodies the passage of time at the level where our biological...
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and biographical ageing intersect. Distinct from chronometric time, ‘hair-time’ is intimately linked to and frames our subjective experience of ageing. Paying attention to hair over time reveals it to be both a social and bodily process, while underlining the interplay between these two processes. Instead of seeing hairstyles as ‘snapshots’ of identity frozen in time, we come to understand hair as part of an ongoing and culturally situated embodied relationship with our self and others. Of the still limited debate on hair in the context of ageing there are three temporal frames to which particular attention has been paid.

**Hair in years: the politics of grey**

The broadest framing of the relationship of hair and ageing is the period, often of years, over which it begins to show visible signs of age by changing in colour and texture, also sometimes thinning or balding. However, it is the greying of hair that has received the most detailed attention in discussions of ageing.

In the UK, and across Europe and North America, attention has been paid to the iconic nature of grey hair as a signifier of old age. Alongside wrinkles and a stooped posture it is among those disaggregated features that constitute what Bytheway (2005) has described as ‘the sight of age’. Through grey hair, the micro-politics of the ageing body can be linked to a broader system of ageism and the social exclusion of older people (Bytheway 2011). Alongside chronological age, the sight of age is a common basis or ‘trigger’ for age discrimination, and grey hair has been shown to figure prominently in how social judgements are made in Western cultures (e.g. Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008, Ward and Holland 2011). Grey hair thus links the individual to a broader and undifferentiated collective (Holland and Ward 2012).

Ahmed’s (2004) commentary on hate crime is relevant here, as she suggests it is a process based on the way particular emotions ‘stick’ to certain bodies; hence, ‘what is at stake in hate crime is the perception of the group in the body of the individual’ (p. 55). From this perspective, greying hair is part of what constitutes the ‘stickiness’ of the older body, rendering it vulnerable to discrimination and to visceral emotional responses. Grey hair thus anchors the cultural construction of ageing in the lived experience of the older person.

The process of going grey marks a gradual diminution in symbolic capital, much in the way that ageing skin has been constructed in the marketing of skincare products (Coupland 2007), the micro-penalties incurred at an individual level applying unequally between women and men. Parallels can also be drawn here to Mercer’s (1994) reading of black hair as the annulment or negation of beauty. For women especially, to be beautiful is to be ‘not old’, and much in the way that Mercer revealed how untreated (un-straightened) black hair was once linked to a broader rationale for racism, so untreated (un-dyed) grey hair works to position older people as the antithesis of a beauty aesthetic normatively linked to youthfulness (Twigg 2007).

Research that has engaged directly with older people reveals how the practice of hair-dyeing encapsulates the tensions and dilemmas that women, and increasingly men as well, face in the management of appearance (Gerike 1990). Decisions about when or if to dye one’s hair are part of a broader dilemma that disaggregates older consumers. Hence, Ward and Holland (2011) and Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2010) found that many women in the UK and North America were caught between the compulsion to ‘fight age’ and hence to be judged ‘not old’ or to resist the intrinsically ageist message behind this anti-ageing discourse, but at the risk of being marginalized or socially excluded as a result. Based on interviews with older women, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2010) draw direct connections between hair colour and employment prospects, and even the maintenance of relationships, and paint this dilemma as one that is inescapable as we age.
Hence, grey hair is often experienced as desexualizing, while the process of going grey has been linked to experiences of social invisibility, a condition that Ward and Holland (2011) argue is collectively imposed on older women. Accounts offered of the experience of going grey thereby show how the meaning of ageing reveals itself through the responses of others, and suggests an underlying social consensus that exists towards the disciplining of older bodies. However, the meanings attached to grey hair are fluid and, it has been argued, have become increasingly contested, not least through the diversification of identities in old age and the different lifestyles now pursued as people age (Gilleard and Higgs 2013).

**Hair in weeks and months: in the hairdresser’s chair**

Another significant time-frame in relation to hair is the period during which it grows, eventually requiring cutting or re-styling. This ongoing process and the environments in which it is cut and styled have also attracted attention within social gerontology.

Hair salons, like many other domains related to fashion and appearance management, are intensely gendered spaces, but are also ordered by age and income (Drummond 2004, Twigg and Majima 2011). High end, high street salons have long sought to appeal to a younger clientele with disposable income and achieve this by creating an atmosphere most comfortable from a youthful perspective through choice of music, design, images on the wall and other targeted paraphernalia (Cohen 2010a, Yeadon-Lee 2012). Even the age-range of the workers signals the targeting of youth. As Robinson and colleagues (2007) have pointed out, these are spaces where it is difficult for older hairdressers to operate without feeling increasingly conscious of their age. However, as Furman (1997) and Symonds and Holland (2008) have shown, salons that serve a predominantly older customer-base have emerged, and these environments play a distinctive role in the negotiation of gendered ageing.

Based on ethnographic research in a New York salon frequented largely by older Jewish women, Furman’s (1997) seminal account of salon culture underscores how such spaces support the collective articulation of ageing identities. For Furman, the salon is a place where older women’s lives and experience are validated and recognized against a backdrop of broader patterns of social exclusion and ageism.

Resistance to socio-cultural oppressions is embedded in the way that older women treat one another—with respect, affection, and attentiveness; in conversations, and gestures that affirm and hence make visible older women’s pride in and attention to their bodies, and that acknowledge the pain, suffering and loss that accompany embodiment.

(1997, p.168)

Furman discovered that the salon provided scope to resist certain negative connotations of being and looking old, albeit against the backdrop of an ageist culture that pervaded the way the clientele viewed themselves. Furman, a social ethicist, critiques the manner in which the places created by older women are often dismissed as insignificant and morally irrelevant. Instead, the salon is shown to be a place of mutual care and support, where the telling of stories draws people into ‘shared universes of meaning’, becoming a site of collective agency. Here, parallels can be drawn with the emergence of black hair salons and barbershops in the US and UK, which evolved as spaces of resistance to a dominant aesthetic of beauty tied to whiteness (Banks 2000, Tate 2009).

Considerable interest has also been shown in the role played by hairdressers in the lives of older people. In the US especially, experiments have been conducted into how hairdressers...
might adapt their relations with customers to include offering advice on health and well-being (Solomon et al. 2004). Training has been offered to support recognition of early signs of dementia or depression and to discuss helping strategies with informal carers, so that the close and ongoing relations between hairdressers and their clients might be utilized as the new frontline of healthcare with links to practitioners and service providers (Anderson et al. 2009; Wiesenfeld and Weis 1979).

Commentators have pointed to the closeness and faux-familial-type bonds that can develop over time, and hence the potential for hairdressers to provide social support and care-giving in their contact with older customers (Cowen et al. 1979). The embodied practices of hairdressers are also relevant to these relationships (Robinson et al. 2007). In her work with beauticians, Paulson (2008) suggests that workers can guide their clients to alternative ways of styling the older body, thus showing how intercorporeal relationships can foster new forms of embodiment in old age, at least in relation to appearance management.

By contrast, in a study of older people’s experience of age discrimination, Ward and Holland (2011) identified certain tensions that exist between hairdressers and their older clients. The authors argue that hairdressers serve as arbiters of appropriateness in relation to appearance, gender and age, and cite commentaries from older women where they report feeling pressured to adopt certain age-appropriate styles. Such encounters reveal how hairdressers orientate their clients to normative constructions of ageing. This process appeared most explicit in response to dissident ageing identities, such as efforts by older lesbian women to get their hair cropped short. Nonetheless, the authors note that hairdressing can be an important source of self-esteem for older women, where transformative work upon appearance is linked to feeling good.

Tate (2009) argues that through styling, hair is transformed into a commodity. As such, certain enduring styles can acquire a cultural biography of their own. As Biddle-Perry (2013) has observed recently, the permanent wave, which has its origins in the early part of the twentieth century, was once associated with youthful self-expression, marked by infinite variation, and lauded in fashion magazines. Over time it has become synonymous with the ‘Pensioner’s hairdo’, its status as a commodity transformed through its association with a particular cohort of women who have now reached old age. This pattern of lifelong loyalty to certain styles is supported by secondary analysis of the Family Expenditure Survey. Twigg and Majima (2011) found marked differences in patterns of expenditure on hairdressing and salon attendance according to women’s age. The authors showed that women who began visiting salons in the 1950s and ’60s—a time of the ‘salon look’ that required regular styling—have maintained weekly salon visits throughout the life course. This has enabled them to maintain the same or a similar style to that first adopted in youth. Such patterns were found to diverge from women of younger age cohorts, who chose more easily managed styles in keeping with domestic regimes of daily showering.

Symonds and Holland (2008), drawing on interviews conducted in salons in South Wales, report a similar phenomenon. Many older women sought to maintain the ‘same hairdo’ against a backdrop of social, environmental and physical change. Resisting pressures to follow fashion, the rationale for styling was shown to be more personalized, linked to biography and the social networks in which respondents were embedded. As one woman explained: ‘I always have the same blow dry, but I like it a bit curly. That’s how my husband used to like it. He’s been dead for 27 years now, but I keep it the same’ (‘Connie’ cited in Symonds and Holland 2008). This emphasis on sameness, and resistance to fluid or disposable identities, reveals how styling can provide a basis for managing transitions. In Connie’s case, her hairstyle is used to embody memory. Hence, styling can be linked to agency in the lives of older people, in ways that resist dominant patterns of consumption or the pressure to observe certain rules of conduct and self-presentation upheld by the fashion and beauty industries.
A third time-frame embodied by hair relates to the daily, even hourly, deeply routinized and repetitive tending of our hair, as a constituent of self-care. The process of maintaining a style or image, after sleep and throughout the day, as we wash, brush and generally smooth down, tease out, tuck under or tousle our hair, is integral to the presentation of self. Yet as Twigg (2000) points out, these micro-practices acquire a different set of meanings in later life. Laxity over appearance, such as hair left unwashed or uncombed, is open to being read as an indicator of cognitive impairment, frailty and vulnerability. Indeed, unkempt hair has long been an iconic feature in the depiction and cultural representation of madness, a disordered appearance being assumed to signal a disordered mind (Gilman 1996, Ward and Holland 2011). There is then a particular investment in maintaining our appearance in later life as a response to this cultural encoding of appearances at the intersection of old age and mental illness.

Yet the everyday consumer practices related to the management of appearance in later life have attracted limited scholarly attention to date. A particular silence surrounds patterns of consumption and the meanings they convey for those described as being in ‘deep old age’ (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989) or the ‘Fourth Age’. As Gilleard and Higgs (2013) recently observed: ‘Gerontological research is full of studies of functional impairments and disabilities, but it is difficult to find much written about how people can, and do, strive to remain fashionable and keep up appearances when corporeal limitations are present’ (p.130). Under conditions of the ‘Fourth Age’, the potentialities of the body as a source of self-expression or as a site of pleasure and enjoyment have been overlooked as ageing bodies are treated as somehow ‘outside of culture’ (Katz 2011, Twigg 2000). Instead, they are ‘determined by biology and discussed almost entirely in terms of physiological processes requiring expert surveillance’ (Pickard 2013, p. 8).

The question here then concerns the transitions associated with corporeal capacity, memory and cognition, and in particular the moment when assistance is required to undertake what are described as ‘activities of daily living’ (to borrow from the language of health and social care). What processes are involved when care of the self becomes the domain of body work undertaken by another, and where the management of appearance becomes tangled up in a broader intercorporeal and intersubjective dynamic? To date, this transition has been given scant consideration, and there is an overwhelming assumption in the policy and practice literature that hair care, styling and more generally the management of appearance are easily assumed by another, to be subsumed within the daily task-oriented routines of care provision.

Nonetheless, there is every indication that people are resistant to total immersion in what Gilleard and Higgs (2013) describe as the ‘institutionalisation of frailty’. Cohen (2010b) for instance draws attention to the growing number of mobile hairdressers visiting the homes of people who are unable to reach a salon, while Ward and Campbell (2013), undertaking research in dementia care, highlight the hitherto overlooked care-based hair salon as a significant space for alternative forms of body work and understandings of the body to those practised in care. These services offer a form of expression and a means to maintain social belonging in ways that are distinct from the categorization and clustering of individuals according to disease categories, or the level and complexity of their care needs.

However, the transition to care often involves the stripping away of the social context in which hairdressing and appearance work acquire meaning. As Crosley (2006) points out, body techniques such as hairstyling have a ritual quality that marks ‘the transition of self from one situation to another’ (p.108). For instance, the Friday night ritual of getting ready for going out—having a wash; applying makeup, aftershave and deodorants; getting dressed; and styling our hair—has the power to effect ‘an existential transition from [the] mundane workday mode.
to the “soiree” self (p.108). Yet, much of this broader social context is no longer accessible for
those in care, with the result that many of the established prompts to maintain and manage
appearance disappear.

In a recent overview of the literature on appearance and care, Ward and Campbell (2013)
highlight the way in which institutions such as care homes can appropriate the appearances
of residents for the purposes of care—for instance upholding a generalized standard of appearance
in order to demonstrate the quality of care delivered. Under such conditions, as Lee-Treweek
(1997) points out, a smart appearance is treated as the endpoint or output of care, with few oppor-
tunities for self-authorship by residents themselves. Ward and Campbell (2013) and Campbell
(2012) argue that both the cultural and the embodied and sensuous dimensions of support with
maintaining appearance are too often overlooked in care, despite the potential opportunities to
uphold meaning and personhood through participation in the familiar processes of the salon.
Such insights suggest that a focus on hair and the practices associated with it might reap rewards
for how we understand the lived experiences of those who require or reside in care, in ways that
extend beyond mainstream gerontology’s present narrow focus on impairment, deficit and need.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored just some of the different ways in which hair offers a potentially fruit-
ful focus for cultural gerontology. We have seen that hair can provide a springboard for cultural
analyses that draw clear links between everyday phenomena and broader social patterns. And,
as this chapter has shown, a focus on hair provides opportunities to engage with some of the
enduring and over-arching questions concerning ageing: the nature of identity; autonomy and
agency; embodiment; and the discursive and culturally constructed nature of old age. Hair prac-
tices reveal and uphold intersections of class, gender, race and sexuality with age and provide a
means of understanding how these intersections are expressed and experienced in the context
of everyday life. They are part of the story we tell of ourselves, but also a means of telling that
story, and are hence an important resource for embodied agency. That said, the story of hair and
ageing remains a largely feminized one, and its relationship to ageing masculinities is yet to be
explored in any detail. At a subjective level hair itself is part of our embodied histories and, as
outlined here, offers its own distinctive time-frames through which we engage with our body
and understand ourselves. Ultimately, hair is a challenge issued by the body—to which we must
respond at a subjective, collective and cultural level. And for this reason it is both a worthy and
legitimate focus in efforts to study and understand what it means and how it feels to grow old.

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