

Older Women's Bodies and the Self: The Construction of Identity in Later Life*

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Cet article étudie les difficiles et souvent conflictuelles relations entre l'image de soi d'une femme âgée et son corps vieillissant. Se fondant sur les données d'entrevues semi-structurées avec 22 femmes âgées de 61 à 92 ans, l'auteure examine l'influence de la perte de la perception de l'aspect esthétique et celle de la détérioration de la santé et des capacités fonctionnelles sur le sentiment d'identité d'une femme âgée. Elle commente aussi l'expérience du corps des femmes en tant qu'à la fois masque et prison du soi et dégage le défi de l'image réfléchie que se fait une femme de l'idée d'être jeune « de l'intérieur ».

This paper explores the uneasy and often conflicted relationship between an older woman's sense of self and her aging body. Using data from semi-structured interviews with 22 female participants aged 61 to 92 years, the paper examines the influence of the loss of perceived physical attractiveness and the deterioration of health and functional abilities on an older woman's sense of identity. The paper discusses the women's experience of the body as both *mask and prison* of the self and elucidates the challenge of the reflected image to a woman's sense of being youthful on the "inside."

THE CONFLICTUAL RELATIONSHIPS that adolescent and middle-aged women have with their bodies have been widely discussed in the literature (Abell and Richards, 1996; Bordo, 1993; Brumberg, 1997; Hesse-Biber, 1996; Morgan, 1998; Myers and Biocca, 1992). Whereas declines in health and functional abilities are normative in later life (Novak, 1997), today's cultural standard of physical attractiveness is that of a youthful, toned, thin and healthy body (Bordo, 1993; Brown and Jasper, 1993). Moreover, there is a "double standard" of aging (Sontag, 1972; de Beauvoir, 1972) whereby physical signs of advanced age are more harshly judged in women than in men. Despite the fact that attention to appearance and the pursuit of physical attractiveness are key aspects of the feminine gender role and identity (Franzoi, 1995; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984),

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older women's feelings about and experiences in their bodies have been largely unexplored. Research on the body in later life has tended to emphasize either the social aspects of the aging process or the body as an entity in need of medical intervention. Increasingly, attention is being given to the positive meanings of aging and the lived reality of later life (Friedan, 1993; Pearsall, 1997; Woodward, 1999). However, the existing research, which is notably scant, suggests that older women, like their younger counterparts, tend to be ambivalent about their bodies. Although their sample of older adults is limited, the research of Pliner, Chaiken and Flett (1990) reveals that appearance is an important issue for many older women. Rodin et al. (1984) report that, following memory loss, weight is the second largest concern of older women in their longitudinal study. Furman (1997) notes in her ethnographic research of beauty-shop culture that older women are concerned about, if not troubled by, the changes in their appearances that accompany aging and that appearance is an important factor in a woman's sense of self-esteem. Hallinan and Schuler (1993) state that women who exercise regularly are more likely to report a difference between their current body shape and their desired body shape than are those women who do not exercise regularly. Dinnerstein and Weitz (1998) assert that Jane Fonda and Barbara Bush provide examples of the anxiety and conflict related to changing physical appearance that women encounter as they age. In contrast, Fairhurst (1998) contends that while older women may be aware of the youthful criterion of beauty, their experience of their aging bodies is not necessarily negative and is shaped by the meanings they attribute to aging. Indeed, the internalization of the importance of physical attractiveness varies according to race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Altabe, 1998; McPherson, 1990; Molloy and Herzberger, 1998; Siever, 1994).

Identity is a concept that has been much explored in the literature. Stone (1977) argues that "identities are always situated . . . [and are] not to be equated with self" (5). Whereas identities are social objects, the self, by contrast, is a process that is subjectively experienced. Defining the self as both object and process, Mead (1934) contends that the body, or "biologic individual," and the self, or the "socially self-conscious individual," are mutually influential in that one's sense of self is constantly emerging relative to the changes in one's body. Identity is physically situated and shaped by the capabilities, limitations and activities of the body, as well as dominant cultural meanings pertaining to female beauty, femininity, women's social value and later life.

Despite the emergent nature of the self, individuals generate a consistent sense of identity in their ongoing "search for continuity" (Chappell and Orbach, 1986: 25). Breytspraak (1984) asserts that without a consistent sense of self, the individual will lack direction and the ability to act. Kaufman (1986) states that the elderly "do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather, they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age" (6). Critiquing what she perceives as the over-emphasis on change within sym-

bolic interactionism, Kaufman (1986) argues that older adults "emphasize the continuity of the ageless self amid changes across the life span" (13).

Continuity of the self is linked to the concept of "the essential self" which Strauss (1959) defines as the "core of personality" (33) and which is said to be constant over the life course, even as the body is changing and aging. Strauss (1959) argues that there are varying, potentially conflicting and emerging identities which are separate from the individual's unique self which is hidden behind the emergent identities. Strauss (1959), therefore, allows for the dichotomy of the body and the self whereby the "essential self" is masked by the body as well as the socially presented self or identities. While Strauss (1959) was largely referring to a behavioural self, the distinction between the mask and the "essential" self may also be linked to the separation of the self from the body. Referring to the "mask of aging," Featherstone and Hepworth (1989) assert that "changes in outward physical appearance are seen as separate from the self, which is considered to be more enduring" (150). In reference to older adults, Strauss's (1959) concept of the "mask" may therefore be interpreted as the aging process and the aged or "diseased," body.

Existing interpretations and understandings of the relationship between the body and the self are linked to the philosophical roots of sociology. Shilling (1993) argues that "the body has historically been something of an absent present in sociology" (9) as sociologists have embraced the mind/body dualism arising out of Cartesian thought and have tended to view the mind as that which makes human beings social. Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) contend that the "Cartesian legacy" has resulted in an assumption of "a fundamental opposition between spirit and matter, mind and body, and (underlying this) real and unreal" (8) within Western thought and research. Kirmayer (1992) further asserts that the Cartesian perspective has led to the valuing of the mind over the body.

To date, there has been little attention paid to the interrelationships between the body and identity in later life or the influence of the changing, lived body on an older adult's sense of self. Questions remain as to how an older woman's changing physical appearance and functional abilities shape and constrain her construction of identity. This paper draws on the concepts of age identity, the body as mask (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991) and felt identity (Goffman, 1963) versus chronological age to address the following research questions: 1) How do women perceive their changing appearances and what impact do these perceptions have on their sense of identity? And 2) What is the nature of the relationship between an older woman's sense of self and her body? The relationship between the body and identity is discussed in terms of Cartesian mind/body dualism, the women's perception of having "inside" selves that are separate from their bodies and the experience of the body as a prison of the self.

Theoretical Framework

Predominantly informed by symbolic interactionism, this study integrates the former with feminist theory and an analysis of systemic ageism such that I focus on the construction of meaning and identity (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969) in relation to the body within a gendered and ageist social world (Ginn and Arber, 1995; Stewart, 1994). Symbolic interactionism is particularly adept at elucidating the social construction of reality and identity (Ryff, 1986; Denzin, 1992; Charmaz, 1994). However, symbolic interactionism has been criticized for failing to account for social structure and power (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1975; Coser, 1976; Stryker, 1981; Denzin, 1992). Indeed, symbolic interactionism has tended to pay insufficient attention to sexism and ageism. Some theorists also contend that symbolic interactionism does not adequately illuminate the experiences of older adults (Kaufman, 1986; Hazan, 1994). In contrast, feminist theory and analyses of ageism provide important insights into the social structural forces that impinge upon older women (Ginn and Arber, 1995; McMullin, 1995; Garner, 1999). Jaggar and Rothenberg (1993) argue that feminist theory is a useful "lens" through which to focus social theory on the gendered nature of the social world. Nevertheless, feminist theory has tended, until recently, to ignore the experiences of older women (McMullin, 1995; Reinhartz, 1997) and discussions of ageism have tended to ignore the unique issues facing older women (McMullin, 1995). Because of the respective strengths and weaknesses of symbolic interactionism, feminist theory and analyses of ageism, I argue that taken together they are a powerful means of making sense of older women's lives.

Data and Methods

Striving to share in their "definition of the situation" (Thomas, 1972: 331) and to focus on the lived realities of "the everyday world" (Smith, 1987: 88), I conducted 96 hours of semi-structured interviews with 22 women aged 61 to 92. Given the importance of appearance to women's sense of self as well as existing time constraints, the study focussed on older women. Each of the women was interviewed by myself for three to six hours across two or three sessions. With the consent of each participant, all of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The use of multiple interviews fostered the validation of data by allowing for the clarification of emergent themes, meanings and inconsistencies raised in previous interviews.

Constructed after an extensive literature, the interview schedule acted as a guideline for the conversation between the researcher and the research participants. Interview participants were asked to describe their life histories, their body histories, the changes in their bodies that had accompanied aging, their thoughts and feelings about the same, their con-

cepts of beauty and their sense of selfhood. I endeavoured to keep the interviews flexible and responsive to the thoughts and issues raised by the women. Probes and clarifying questions were used to elucidate the meanings that the women associated with specific ideas and experiences so as to not "take for granted common-sense assumptions and understandings" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1984: 96).

The women in the non-probability sample were accessed through a local seniors' centre (two), two seniors' organizations (four), advertising on a community bulletin board television channel (two) and snowball sampling methods (fifteen) using several contacts in the community. Potential informants were told that the study was about how women perceive and feel about their bodies in later life and were given an information sheet outlining the structure, purpose and scope of the research. Interested parties contacted myself via telephone to set up interviews at a time and place most convenient to them. All volunteers were included in the sample and none of the study participants received any compensation for their participation. One woman who volunteered for the study later withdrew prior to the first interview due to a serious decline in her health.

The sample included four women aged 60–69, nine women aged 70–79, seven women aged 80–89 and two women aged 90–92. The women varied in terms of their level of health, marital status, financial situation, living arrangements, religious and cultural background, ethnicity, educational attainment, class affiliation, community involvement and employment history (see Table 1). However, selection bias may be an issue as the sample is a relatively well-educated one in which 12 of the 22 participants have obtained post-secondary education. The women also tend to be independent and in reasonably good health. Of the four married women, three had been married for over 50 years and one woman, who was in a second marriage, had been married for 25 years. The three women who were divorced had been so for one, 29 and 32 years, respectively. There was a range of three to 35 years and an average of 14 years in the length of widowhood amongst the 14 widowed women. Three of the 14 widowed women had been married and widowed twice. There was no diversity amongst the 22 women in terms of race or sexual orientation as all individuals in my sample were white and heterosexual.

Analysis of the data utilized Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "grounded theory" in a process concurrent with data collection. The data consists of 1,417 pages of text from the transcribed interviews which were coded using the three-pronged method outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. The first level of coding included the broad categories of General Feelings, Beauty Versus Health, Weight, Beauty Standards, Sexuality, Realism and Acceptance, Inner Beauty, Body as Mask or Prison, Socialization, Cosmetic Surgery, Exercise, Aging in the Future, Vanity and

Table 1
Sample Characteristics (n = 22)

	n
Age	
60-69	4
70-79	9
80-89	7
90-92	2
Education	
Less than high school	3
High school	7
College/university	11
Graduate school	1
Health Issues	
Arthritis	13
Cataracts/macular degeneration	5
Depression	3
Hearing loss	7
Heart problems	6
High blood pressure	5
High cholesterol	4
History of breast cancer	2
History of strokes	3
Osteoporosis	3
Stress incontinence	5
Marital Status	
Currently Married	4
Divorced	3
Never Married	1
Widowed	14
Mobility	
Walks unassisted	18
Use of cane	3
Use of wheelchair	1
Residence	
Apartment	3
Condominium	9
House	6
Retirement home	1
Subsidized housing	3

Accomplishments and Regrets. These categories were then subdivided into second-level codes. Emergent themes and conceptual categories were presented to the study participants for their evaluation and verification (Bogdan and Taylor, 1984). QSR NUD*IST, a computer software program designed for the analysis of qualitative data, was used to assist with organizing, coding and analysing the data. While thematic exceptions were closely examined and considered to be an important source of information, themes expressed by at least one third of the sample participants were considered to be substantively important. In an effort to limit and ameliorate the fracturing nature of coding, whereby phrases are removed from their broader narrative context, paragraphs rather than sentences were the basic coding unit.

Results

The "Inside" Self Versus the "Outside" Self

Similar to the findings of Cremin (1992) and Furman (1997), 18 of the 22 women express a tension between their sense of identity and their physical realities as they state that they do not feel their chronological ages. Referring to their bodies as "shells," "casings," "containers" or "limiting" vessels, the women suggest that their bodies are mere receptacles for their true selves which are hidden and maintained "inside." Two of the women contend that chronological age and felt age are never synonymous, regardless of how old one is in lived years:

Nobody ever feels their age on the inside. I've never known anybody that felt old. I had an aunt who . . . said to me one time, "I don't feel any different than I did when I was 17" (age 77).

Describing an awareness of a differentiation between her body and her sense of self since she was 15, another woman remarks:

I think that's always been true. I don't think it's just as I've got older (age 81).

Other women, while acknowledging that their bodies have aged, indicate that they do not feel "old":

I don't feel as old as I am. I don't feel 82 . . . but I am older . . . my body's getting older (age 82).

I was always 32 for years. Now I've aged a bit more. I'm about 50, I guess, now (age 71).

One woman suggests that she is growing younger on the inside:

I've actually felt younger as I got older . . . Up until about 30, I think I felt fairly young. Well then, the time between 30 and 60 were not good, not great years (age 69).

Describing having been unfulfilled and unhappy in her marriage, this woman asserts that following the loss of her husband and the amelioration of physical and mental difficulties she has felt more youthful.

As well as distinguishing between their chronological ages and their felt ages, 13 of the women differentiate between their "inside" selves and their "outside" selves. Three women make direct statements about their appearances being unreflective of their inner or "true" selves:

I don't really think about my body much. I know it's there but I'm still me inside. The outside is sort of a shell . . . I know some people would look at me and think, "Oh, well, that's an old lady walking her dog." Or something like this. But that isn't me really. I always have that idea that I'm still inside. I'm me inside. And I've always been me . . . Doesn't matter what the outside looks like or crazy actions I might have on the outside. That isn't really me—that's me inside (age 71).

Referring to her body as a "shell" and her sense of self as "me," this woman sets up a dichotomy between her perceived identity and her physical self or appearance. The woman has internalized the devaluation of older women in our youth- and beauty-oriented society as she disparages her appearance and perceived identity as "an old lady." The woman distances herself from her aged appearance as she argues that who she is on the inside is different from who she appears to be.

The distinction between one's identity and one's body is made even more clear in the following example:

I don't think we are necessarily just what our bodies are because look at the people who are terribly ill and who are encased in bodies . . . people with diseases, people who are paralysed and they can only speak and they go on being who they are. Their personalities are there even though they can't move but it isn't who they are. It's inside who they are. I think that's why when you're older sometimes you still feel young. . . . You are surprised at how you look because you don't feel like that. You feel quite young and . . . you feel vibrant. You feel alive and it has nothing to do with what your body is saying (age 78).

Through the example of individuals who are trapped in their bodies by virtue of disease or paralysis, the above woman argues that individuals' true selves are found on the "inside" and not in their appearances or phys-

ical shells. The woman goes on to suggest that her identity or selfhood transcends the physical boundaries of her body:

I'm not limited to my body . . . I have a spirit that's separate from that. *I have ideas that are separate (age 78).*

The self surpasses the physical body and the limitations that lived reality imposes on the individual.

However, two of the women, both of whom are in their sixties, assert that they do not experience a distinction between their bodies and their identities:

I keep myself aware of the fact that I am 67 and I think about that but I don't think about that in a morbid way or dwell on it in a morbid way but I think it keeps me focussed on where I am at this particular time rather than feeling as if I should be out dancing every night or something. I'm not physically able to do that.

Although she previously admits that she occasionally experiences a discrepancy between her body and her self, this woman suggests that it is important to keep her inside and outside selves consistent and linked together. She argues that awareness of her age allows her to be more accepting of the physical realities of aging and to maintain a positive sense of identity and self-esteem. Another woman asserts the following:

I would hope they are one and the same. Especially between what's happened to me in the last year. My body has expressed my stress. . . . Where your emotions are involved, I can't see how you could separate what your body shows the world around you (age 61).

Having recently experienced a painful divorce, this woman contends that her emotional state on the inside, which she equates with her sense of identity, is projected onto her body. Her emotions are what link her inside and outside selves and make her inside self visible to others. The woman also asserts that her husband's job in the helping professions made it important for her to separate her own identity as a "real person" from her projected identity as a "role model." Thus, even as they stress the importance of continuity between the inside and outside selves, both of these women concede gradients of distinction between their identities and their bodies.

Continuity of the "Inside" Self

Reminiscent of Strauss's (1959) concept of the "essential self," the women in my study often speak of the continuity of their identities. Although

their bodies are aging, eight of the women suggest that their inner selves, in contrast to their physical exteriors, are relatively stable and unchanging. Similar to Kaufman's (1986) "ageless self," the women contend that it is their bodies that change over time and not their selves:

I feel that I haven't changed at all inwardly. That's why I can relate to people that are 16 or 18 years old (age 67).

I don't feel that inside I have changed very much from what I ever was (age 77).

The distinction between the aging body and the continuity of self is made even more clear in the following quotation:

I think it's your personality all through your life. How you go into old age, too. It's just the same. . . . You don't change inside at all. . . . I don't think you ever age in underneath. You're in your being . . . or your soul or whatever it is. It's youth underneath the shell. . . . All your personality and your upbringing and your experiences and everything go into that. And that is something different from the outside shell. The outside shell is going on and aging and changing. But inside, you're different—you're just the same person as you always were (age 71).

This woman argues that the individual's sense of self, which she describes as her "personality," "youth," "being" and "soul," remains constant over the life course, even as it is hidden "in underneath" her physical "shell," which is continually growing older.

The increasing discrepancy between the body and the self is evident in the following woman's assertion that although her body is failing her, she is the same on the inside:

I feel exactly the same. Isn't that funny? . . . As you age, you don't really feel anything different. . . . I still feel as young as I ever felt except in motion (age 92).

This woman suggests that her felt identity has remained unaltered even as her deteriorating health is threatening her ability to live alone in the community, to drive her car and to lead the lifestyle she has always led. Many of the women assert that they are the same people within, despite their changing physical appearances, their declining functional abilities and their socially imposed identities as "old" women.

Appearance and Felt Identity: The Case of Florence

The relationship between felt identity and appearance is a complex and conflictual one that is shaped and constrained by the devaluation of later

life. While 13 of the 22 women distinguish between their felt identities and their appearances, it is helpful to explore the experiences of one woman, who will be known as Florence, in detail. Florence's lived reality and thoughtful assertions illustrate many of the women's feelings of loss, frustration, anger and bewilderment over the reactions of others to their "outside" selves. A woman who divorced in her thirties and never remarried, Florence pays a great deal of attention to her appearance as she sports stylish clothing, salon-dyed and -coiffed hair, artfully applied makeup and carefully groomed and painted fingernails. An independent and outgoing 67-year-old woman who refers to herself as a feminist, Florence comments on the influence of others' assumptions on her sense of self and well-being:

If you go into a store that caters to young people, . . . the salesgirl kind of looks at you as if . . . , "What is she doing in here?" . . . And yet I'm still Florence inside. But to the outside world, I'm an older lady.

There is an undeniable sense of frustration in her voice as she expresses a desire for younger people to recognize her true self within the disguise of her aging body. Whereas Florence feels young on the inside, her appearance contradicts and masks her felt identity. Striving to appear younger than her chronological age, Florence suggests that her aging appearance is at the basis of the patronizing and, often, offensive treatment she receives from members of younger generations.

Florence expresses a strong sense of frustration and injustice over existing assumptions and assessments of older women and older women's bodies:

What is it about women especially that if they look young that's great? You could take two women who are 65 and one has got grey hair and wrinkles and the other one hasn't got. They're both the same age and they both feel 65 so what's the big deal about looking younger? It's no guarantee that you're going to live longer, is it?

Florence is confronted by a painful dilemma. While on the one hand she works hard at maintaining a youthful appearance, on the other hand she questions why this is important to her and to those around her. Florence reflects on her changing appearance and the impact of aging on her sense of self:

My son asked me about growing older and how I felt and I said, "Well, in a way it's nice because when I was younger I was quite attractive and men would whistle and I would be quite complimented that men whistled at me whereas now I would not be complimented." But in those days you were. You'd think, "Oh, boy. They think I'm nice." "But," I said, "now that I'm older I've become anonymous." I can go anywhere and nobody even looks at me. Once you get past a certain age it's like you're not there any more. You've become invisible.

Although she indicates that she does not miss certain types of male attention, Florence conveys feelings of loss over having become invisible in a youth-oriented society. Florence states that she wishes that she had the nerve to not dye her hair and asks me to stay in touch with her so that she can some day send me a photograph of herself with her natural, grey hair. Although Florence suggests that she feels 16 on the inside and endeavours to maintain a youthful appearance, she expresses the sense that she is being inauthentic by looking younger than her chronological years. However, by becoming more "natural" and authentic, Florence may risk complete anonymity and further discrimination in a cultural context that devalues older women.

The Power of the Reflected Image

Similar to the angst experienced by Florence in terms of the contradictions between her appearance and her sense of self, the tension between the body and identity is evident in the women's experiences and perceptions of their reflected images. Cooley (1972) coined the term the "looking-glass self" to refer to how we assume that we appear to other individuals. While the image that the women in my study imagine others to have of themselves coincides with the reflected image they see in the mirror, there is a discrepancy between their internal image, or felt identity, and their reflected images. Fifteen of the women assert that mirrors and reflected images are a particular source of anxiety, shock and disappointment and serve to challenge their concepts of themselves as youthful individuals:

It's also a fact that you only feel as old as you feel inside. Sometimes it's a real surprise when you are walking along the street and you see yourself in the window and you can't believe that's you because you don't feel that old (age 72).

Reflected images contradict their sense of identity and serve to further reinforce the dichotomy between the women's perceived inner selves and their bodies:

When you get around 50, you start seeing things happening, getting older looking. You look in the mirror and you think, "That's not me." You . . . walk through Eaton's and see yourself coming and you think, "That's not me (emphasis)!" Because you're just the same inside (age 71).

While the reflected image constitutes an important element in our identity, particularly in terms of our behavioural and physical self-presentation, in later life the reflected image and the imagined internal image may become increasingly disparate as the individual continues to perceive herself as a youthful woman inside her aged body.

Although most of the women are shocked and dismayed by the discrepancy between their felt identities and their reflected images, not all women experience an incongruity between their sense of self and how they appear in a mirror:

Robert Burns said, "What some god, the gift he gives us, to see ourselves as others see us." I see myself in the mirror as other people see me. I'm quite sure about that. I have no illusions about what I look like. I'm never surprised and I'm never thinking, "Oh, my god, is that me?" Remember Maude? She said she was driving along and she looked in the mirror and she said, "Who the hell is that?" She didn't recognize herself . . . I've never felt that (age 77).

This woman states that "nobody ever feels their age" and rejects oldness as a felt identity she herself experiences. Another woman (age 81) states that she does not feel shocked by her appearance because "you just gradually get used to the wrinkles."

Nevertheless, 15 of the women do experience an inconsistency between their sense of self and their reflected images. The astonishment expressed by these women is often accompanied by strong feelings of displeasure:

When you're out and you think you've gotten yourself tidied up and dressed and looking pretty good and you walk along and you look in a store window and you think, "Oh my god. Is that me? I look awful!" (age 76).

The women are surprised by their reflected images and dissatisfied by what they see, by the effects of aging and by the contradictions between how they feel on the inside and what their bodies look like.

Physical Decline and the Body as Traitor or Prison

Just as reflected images augment the tension between the body and the self, in later life the body is often experienced as a prison of the self. Nineteen of the 22 women express frustration and grief over loss of youthful energy, health and abilities. The women state that their bodies will not do the things that they want them to do or that they think they can do:

All the things that you want to do you can't do . . . what you want to do up here [points to her head] your body won't do . . . In more ways than one your body doesn't do what you want it to do . . . Nothing works the same as it did when you were younger and it makes you angry. Up in your head you know what you want to do but your body won't do what you want it to do. And it changes shape and it just isn't the same old fit machine anymore (age 76).

Expressing poignant frustration, the above woman asserts that her body is becoming difficult to control as it refuses or is unable to comply with the wishes and expectations of her mind.

Another woman conveys her feelings of sadness as she describes the limitations of her body:

You still think that you can do everything that you've ever done . . . and it's a very hard thing to actually admit to yourself that you can't do something. . . . I hear this from my friends, too. "I just have to pace myself more. I find that I can't do this." So you know you're not alone but that doesn't change the disappointment that you have when you have to just not do something (age 72).

Conveying feelings of disappointment and irritation, the above woman describes two activities, namely carrying a box and planning a dinner party, she now finds difficult, if not impossible. The mundane nature of the activities serves to underscore the woman's exasperation over the ways in which her body is deteriorating and failing her. The body betrays the self as the individual discovers that there is a disparity between the mind, or the inner self, and the body and its capabilities. Rather than merely masking the true self, the body has become a prison that traps the individual's desires and expectations.

Another woman argues that there is continuity between her identity and her body because she is "still doing what I always did" (age 83). Rather than experiencing a sense of bodily entrapment, this woman attributes being the same person on the inside and the outside to the fact that her body does not limit her activities. It would be interesting to interview her again in the future to see if her experience of her body and her self remains consistent in the face of potentially decreasing functional abilities and increasing health problems. Periods of sickness and the deterioration of one's functional abilities are frequently cited by the women as moments when they feel entrapped by their bodies and when they experience the sense of being old:

If you don't feel well, you feel old (age 78).

Becker (1994) notes that the literature pertaining to self-rated health indicates that "persons do not view themselves as old except when they become ill" (62). The women in my study contend that their sense of a continuous and youthful self is challenged when their bodies are unwell:

That will always surprise you because deep inside, you feel about 19 or 20. Actually, I've never felt like an old lady. Except when I'm ill and then it really hits you. . . . I think it surprises us very often because you really don't feel your age mentally. . . . I feel very young most of the time. Inside I'm young. I mean, inside up here [points to her head], I'm young. It's just the body that's wearing out—the physical part. Which is too bad, really (age 86).

Indicating that she feels like a teenager on the inside, this woman suggests that it is only when she is sick that she feels her chronological age. Another woman links illness, physical appearance and felt identity as she states:

You get sick with a cold or something like that. And you look different and you feel different and you feel older (age 80).

Therefore, oldness is experienced on the "inside" as well as on the outside when the body is sick or not functioning as well as it might normally.

With the loss of functional ability and the sense of entrapment comes feelings of betrayal and frustration:

I don't think [the body] works quite as well . . . mechanically. . . I have a very good friend, for instance, who's got some kind of rheumatic thing and she can't lift her arm up very easily. . . It's a great frustration to her and I think you get very frustrated if you can't do things that you want to do. . . I think you get annoyed with your body when it won't do things that you want it to do (age 78).

Similarly, 19 of the 22 women in my study describe strong feelings of loss, irritation and anxiety over the limitations imposed on them by their failing bodies. Conveying grief and resignation, one woman describes the things she wants to do but is no longer capable of doing:

It's frustrating because there are lots of things you'd like to do. Your heart's willing but your body won't let you do it. I mean, I'd like to be out in the garden walking around much more than I do but I haven't got the energy. And I can only use up so much energy and then I know I've got to lay down or sit down or whatever. And that is very frustrating. . . . Before I used to walk three miles around the golf course every morning at 9 o'clock. I've done it in my day. And in my youth, we walked everywhere. We never had cars. We walked to work twice a day and then went out dancing at night. That's energy. But you can't have it forever. I used it up. I wore it out (age 86).

Previously an active and athletic individual, this woman accepts the realities of aging but regrets the loss of energy and physical abilities that have occurred over time.

Another woman articulates the distinction between the mind and the body as well as the ways in which the former is betrayed by the latter:

Because inside of us we're still the little girl. It's just the casing has gotten old. You think you can run for the bus. You think you can get on your knees and scrub the floor but the knees get sore and it's hard to get up afterwards. It's bothersome because you want to be just the same as when you were 21. It is frustrating sometimes. But, you have to take it because things aren't going to change (age 80).

While the strong emotions of frustration, loss and nostalgia are evident in many of my conversations with the women, there is a consistent theme of pragmatism as the women indicate that they are resigned to, if not accepting of, the physical realities of growing older. The women assert that physical decline and the resulting sense that the body is a cage or traitor are to be expected. Reconciling themselves with the losses brought about by aging may serve to offset any negative feelings directed towards their bodies as well as their sense of entrapment.

Body Entrapment and Identity: The Case of Jean

The inevitable decline of the body heightens the individual's awareness of the tension between the body and the self. The women suggest that aging and the accompanying physical changes result in a growing fissure between the body and the individual's sense of self. One woman states:

You can't expect your body to keep up with your thoughts, thinking and processes and that sort of thing (age 73).

The disparity between the body and identity is most visible in the example of Jean (age 81), whose story is a poignant representation of the experiences of body entrapment expressed by the other women. Having severe osteoarthritis, amongst many other serious medical problems, Jean is in constant and intense pain and walks with the aid of two canes. However, Jean minimizes the salience of the body:

I think there's a lot more to a woman than her body, of course. I mean her own spirit and her own sense of purpose and this sort of thing.

Jean contends that her body only entered into her awareness in later life as pain, illness and disability began to shape and constrain her lived reality. Jean comments on how her perception and experience of her body have changed over her lifetime:

I probably might have admired my body—and as I remember, I think it was alright— . . . when I didn't care about my body. It was just very useful to me doing all the things that I wanted to do. And it . . . held my dresses that I liked. It just served its purpose and so I didn't look at it especially. I've only really become very much aware of it when it's probably not worth looking at anymore.

Although she emphasizes the utilitarian nature of her body, Jean also indicates that she has internalized cultural standards of beauty that devalue older women as she suggests that her aged body is "not worth looking at anymore." Reflecting on the relationship between her body and her sense of identity, Jean states:

The thing is when you become more aware of constant pain—it's a distraction of your mind or your soul or your inner being. I mean you're very conscious of that. Of that inhibiting you from doing anything at all. Even thinking, it's very hard. . . . So that's almost as if it, the body, is subsuming everything else and just absorbing everything else. . . . I think I'm much more aware of my body than I ever was just because it hurts. . . . When it did what I wanted it to do I didn't think about it. It's when it doesn't do what you want it to do then.

Jean's body has come to the forefront of her awareness because of the unremitting and intense pain that she experiences almost every waking moment of her life. Whereas in her youth she was not aware of her body and did not experience a discrepancy between her sense of self and her physical reality, there is now a clear distinction and ongoing tension between the two.

Mind/Body Contradictions: The Primacy of the Self Over the Body

Although, as in Jean's case, awareness of one's body in later life increases as a result of declining health, chronic pain and/or deteriorating functional abilities, the women in my study tend to downplay the importance of the body in the mind/body relationship:

It's important for the person to realize there's something else besides your body to live for (age 90).

The words and meanings the women use to describe their bodies and lived realities are suffused with the Cartesian perspective which values the mind over the physical casing (Kirmayer, 1992). The women frequently make comments about the importance of one's attitude and maintain that attitude, or mind, and one's appearance, or body, are interrelated, albeit the former is more important than the latter:

A lot about your outlook on life comes from the mind. Depression comes from the mind. Happiness. So much comes from the mind. There's an old saying: "It's mind over matter." . . . Attitude is so important . . . If you take an apple, when it gets old it gets wrinkled and wizened-up looking. And your body's going to, too. You have to face the fact. But it's all in how you look at it. How you (emphasis) feel about it. Because what you feel about it, that's what other people are going to feel (age 76).

The women suggest that although acceptance of one's body is crucial, how one perceives and feels about one's body determines how the body will be projected by the self and assessed by others. The women argue that there is an underlying connection between one's mental perspective, or self, and one's perceived physical attractiveness, or body:

Your state of mind on any day can—I think it can make you look (emphasis) unattractive, too—but it can certainly make you feel (emphasis) unattractive (age 72).

The women contend that when one feels attractive on the inside, one looks attractive on the outside.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the tensions and contradictions between the body and the self in later life in relation to the physical changes that accompany aging. The majority of the women in my study argue that there is a disparity between their bodies and their sense of identity. The women tend to distinguish between an "inside" self and an "outside" self. The "inside" self is reminiscent of Kaufman's (1986) "ageless self," Strauss's (1959) "essential self" and de Beauvoir's (1972) distinction between "the Other . . . who is old" and the "private, inward experience" (284). The "outside" self is described as a mask or physical container of the "inside" self, which is hidden, if not trapped, within the aging body and is similar to Featherstone and Hepworth's (1991) "mask of aging."

The women account for the tension between the body and the self, or the "inside" and "outside" selves, in five different ways. To begin with, the youthful older adults contend that they feel like teenagers on the inside despite declining levels of health and functional abilities and the changes that have occurred in their appearances. Thus, the relationship between the body and identity is articulated in terms of a discrepancy between chronological age and felt age. The emphasis on being youthful on the inside despite one's chronological age highlights the strength of the devaluation of later life. The women differentiate themselves from the appearances, chronological ages and functional abilities of their bodies. In this way, the women distance themselves from the stereotypes concerning older adults as well as the physical realities of growing older.

The masked older adults suggest that what they look like on the outside belies their true identities within. The idea that the body masks an individual's felt or "true" identity is similar to Gubrium's (1986) research on individuals suffering from Alzheimer's disease and senile dementia. Gubrium (1986) suggests that Alzheimer's disease has been socially constructed such that the disease is distinguished from the person, or "victim," that is hidden within the diseased and failing body. Conceiving of Alzheimer's disease as "an enemy" (99) that is to be fought against and resisted by all those concerned, Gubrium (1986) contends that the body and the self are separate from each other such that the former masks, traps and betrays the latter. Unlike Strauss's (1959) concept of the mask with which individuals voluntarily hide their "real" selves by concealing, suppressing or manipulating their "identifying signs of status" (Glaser

and Strauss, 1967: 83), Gubrium (1986) suggests that individuals with Alzheimer's disease are forcibly masked. Both Strauss (1959) and Gubrium (1986) argue that beneath the masks, whether they be socially constructed and presented or forcibly assigned through physical aging, is a true self, distinct from what others perceive in the behaviour and body *of the individual*. Similarly, the women in my study assert that aging involves an inevitable, undesirable and uncontrollable status passage (Glaser and Strauss, 1971) in which the true self becomes less visible in the aged shell of the body and the masks of their bodies become more impenetrable over the life course.

The entrapped older adults, such as Jean, express the sense that their bodies have become prisons which constrain the ability of their youthful selves from participating in activities they once engaged in freely and easily. In contrast to ongoing health problems, many of the women refer to those periods of time when they have influenza and other common viruses as moments in their lives when they feel old. Illness renders *chronological* age more salient than *felt* age, albeit temporarily. Cremin (1992) reports that the older adults in her study indicate that they feel old in "specific and transient" (1305) situations such as unsettling, embarrassing or conflictual situations or in specific interactions or difficulties that arise due to the loss of independence which results from memory loss, declining functional mobility and acute health problems. Williams and Bendelow (1998) contend that

our relationship to our bodies, in the normal course of events, remains largely unproblematic and taken-for-granted; bodies are only marginally present, giving us the freedom to be and to act . . . bodies . . . become most conscious of themselves when they encounter "resistance" or "difficulties" of various kinds. . . . If this is true of bodies in general, then it is particularly true of sick and painful bodies (159).

Williams and Bendelow (1998) assert that the "painful body emerges as an estranged, alien 'thing-like' presence, separate from the self" (160). Declining health and functional abilities make the body more visible and palpable to the individual and underscore the "relatedness of self and world, mind and body, inside and outside" (Williams and Bendelow, 1998: 160).

In contrast, the fighters, represented by Florence, struggle against the implications of having to appear young in order to avoid patronizing, if not discriminatory, behaviour in our youth-oriented society. Similar to the masked older adults, Florence, who is also an example of the youthful older adults, yearns for the recognition of her true inner self by members of younger generations. Florence struggles with the standards of attractiveness that she has internalized. While she continues to mask her chronological age with make-up, hair dye and youthful attire, she also expresses the wish that she did not feel that she had to do so in order to remain visible and socially valued.

Finally, the realists argue that who they are on the inside is congruent with their chronological ages on the outside. Notably few in number, the two women who exemplify this category are pragmatic about the physical realities of aging. The women stress the importance of being aware of one's age so as to not feel inadequate or frustrated with declining physical abilities. The women also acknowledge that they do, at times, experience a disparity between their sense of identity and their bodies. While the women concede that it is a difficult to achieve and maintain, realism is perceived as the desired approach to body-self dichotomy.

The five ways of expressing the tension between the body and the self are not mutually exclusive and share a number of elements in common. The youthful older adults, the masked older adults, the entrapped older adults and the fighters all tend to express frustration and pain over the limiting nature of the body. The body as camouflage serves to conceal the self and to enable younger generations to see the women as "old ladies," and thereby as devalued and frequently invisible. Reflected images confront the women with the physical changes that accompany aging and challenge their imagined, youthful internal images of themselves. The reflected image generates angst, bewilderment and even despair and has the power to contradict an older woman's sense of self, if not social worth, in relation to her changing body. Similarly, the body as prison restrains and betrays the youthful and vibrant inner self. Unlike individuals with advanced Alzheimer's disease or senile dementia, the women are acutely aware of their changing realities and I would suggest that the awareness of the prison that the body constitutes for some older women makes the distress experienced by them more acute. One might speculate that the women might progress through the body-self typology from fighters and masked older adults to entrapped older adults as their bodies increasingly constrain their behaviour and their energy becomes more focussed on basic activities of daily living.

At the same time, the women argue that the "inside" self, as the source and interpreter of meaning of lived reality, is what is most important. Perhaps the valuing of the self over the body is a means of negotiating the loss of physical attractiveness and functional abilities that occurs in later life. Indeed, the women describe having re-evaluated their priorities such that individuality and personality come to be esteemed over the fleeting beauty and energy of youth. The prioritization of the self over the body may also be the outcome of socialization in which the Cartesian perspective predominates and the women have been taught to value character over appearance.

In conclusion, this paper has addressed a gap in the body-image literature which has tended to ignore the experiences and perspectives of older women. The paper situates the complexities and contradictions in the construction of a sense of self within the broader social context that devalues age, women and frailty. The application of symbolic interactionism through a feminist lens illuminates the ways in which socially constructed

meanings pertaining to women, aging and older women's bodies augment the tensions and conflicts between the self and the body, as well as felt age and appearance in later life.

More research is needed to examine the interrelationships between the body and identity in later life. This study is limited by its small sample size and sampling techniques. It would be beneficial to investigate older women's body image and construction of identity quantitatively in order to obtain more generalizable data. It will be important to explore the influence of cohort effects to see if changing gender roles and media messages shape women's perceptions of their bodies and their identities. Future research must also investigate the influence of race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and regionalism on an older woman's perceptions of and experiences in her body. Finally, it will be important to examine possible similarities and differences between older women's and older men's body images and sense of identity in relation to their bodies.

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