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Older Women and Everyday Talk about the Ageing Body

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Abstract

This discourse analytic study shows how 10 older women, who exercise regularly or attend the University of the Third Age, adjust to the ageing body in their 'everyday talk' through taking a dualist position. The part of the body which is discursively constructed as ageing becomes objectified through appealing to a wider cultural discourse of ageing as biological decline. This dualist position is embedded within a wider cultural discourse of personal agency. The individual's control of the ageing body is emphasized, the ability to monitor and manage 'ageing body parts' through exerting the 'active mind' and the 'busy body' in activities, or simply focusing on 'looking good'.

Keywords

- *ageing body parts*
- *biological decline*
- *discursive constructions*
- *dualism*
- *personal agency*

DEDICATION: For Precilla Choi who was so enthusiastic about this work.

COMPETING INTERESTS: None declared.

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Issues of embodiment

THERE IS a lack of discourse analytic research focusing on the ageing body within critical health psychology, particularly in terms of the range of discourses surrounding functionality and appearance. Radley (2000) has emphasized the need for critical health psychology to consider the meaning of embodiment. The concept of embodiment concerns both the subjective meanings of the lived experience of the body for particular individuals and how those subjective meanings are modified by particular social and cultural contexts. So embodiment involves an integration of mind and body missing from mainstream scientific health psychology. Mainstream health psychology has separated and objectified both the mind and the physical body through the medical discourse. Critical health psychology explores the meanings of embodiment for individuals from the perspectives of particular contexts or cultures. Lupton (2000) shows how the social constructionist perspective sees both the self and the physical body as discursively constructed through language, with the possibility of multiple interpretations. This is a real contrast to the large-scale randomized control trials of medicine and experiments of lifespan and psycho-gerontology characterized by a statistical analysis of cause and effect. There is a vast quantitative literature focusing on factors co-related with successful ageing, such as personal control over development and quality of life perspectives (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Embodiment, the lived experience of the body when situated within particular contexts, is a concept not discussed within this quantitative and experimental literature. Research on the diverse meanings of embodiment requires the use of qualitative approaches. For example, recent research on how cultures of fitness shape subjective experiences of growing older uses open ethnography to access both body talk and body materiality in particular fitness contexts. Observations of body talk and bodily dispositions and behaviour can be recorded in ethnographic notes (Paulson, 2005). Other researchers have demonstrated how simply studying language provides insight into the diverse meanings of embodiment. Yardley (1997) argues for a material-discursive approach, showing how language is an excellent vehicle for exploring how mind and body interact in women's descriptions of experiences of dizziness. Foucauldian discourse analysis can be used to explore the range of interpretive repertoires culturally available to individuals in terms of body talk. This material-discursive approach needs to be expanded to consider the everyday discourses used by older women to talk about their ageing bodies, as discourse-analytic work has tended to focus on the expert discourses in the research literature (see Willig, 2000).

Cartesian dualism as a challenge to embodiment

The idea of embodiment is challenged by the philosophy of Cartesian dualism, the belief that there is a split or separation of mind and body. Dualist philosophy is reinforced by Leder's (1990) idea of the 'dys-appearing' body, the belief that the active mind/sense of self only becomes conscious of the body when parts of the body become dys-functional and re-appear. Recent memory work around women's experiences of pain and sweating has demonstrated how a separation of mind and body structured many of the memories (Gillies et al., 2004). Such a dualist construction could either be functional, in terms of facilitating the individual to take control of their body, or restrictive, when it highlights the individual's lack of control of the body.

Individual women's ideas of a separation of mind and body appear to be constructed by the various dualisms inherent in the wider social and cultural context. Gannon (1999, 2000), writing as an American feminist psychologist, explores the various dualisms which have privileged men over women, such as the mind–body dualism which has associated men with the intellectual abilities of the mind and women with the reproductive capabilities of the body. Gannon (1999, 2000) sees the loss of reproductive capabilities at the menopause as explaining the cultural discrimination against older women in both the USA and Britain. She provides an excellent overview of the expert discourses in the wider cultural context on women and ageing in terms of biological and contextual determinism versus personal agency.

Gaps in qualitative work on active older women's bodies

The gaps in qualitative research within health psychology concerning the ageing body lie in discourse analytic work focusing on the active ageing body, particularly in terms of exploring the range of discourses

concerning functionality and appearance. Biggs (1999) used psychodynamic theory to explain the development of a mature imagination in conjunction with an ageing outer body. Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson (1999) explored the meaning of body size and eating in the lives of older women through qualitative interviewing, relating the findings to contradictory discourses of beauty ideals, gender identity and the constructions of ageing in wider culture. Halliwell and Dittmar (2003), working with participants between the ages of 22 and 62 years, showed that women worried about appearance of the ageing body whereas men worried about functionality. There is no qualitative study within the health psychology literature which uses Foucauldian discourse analysis to demonstrate how older women adjust to the changes of their ageing bodies in their everyday talk.

There are some qualitative studies on active older women's bodies in social science disciplines other than critical health psychology but none specifically using discourse analysis to explore the everyday talk of older women about the body. Poole's (2001) qualitative interview study of fitness instructors does reflect the discourses of wider consumer culture in terms of slenderness, youth, beauty, health and fitness (Featherstone, 1991), but she does not consider the body talk of older women who attend fitness classes. Clarke's (2001) qualitative interview study in anthropology used grounded theory and produced a model of the ageing body as an older outer shell with an inner younger identity, the 'mask of ageing' (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991). Using the ideas of the French sociologist Bourdieu (1984), who talked about bodily dispositions in terms of both physical and social capital acquired from the individual's immediate social and cultural context, Dumas, Laberge and Straka (2005) consider how the 'ageing capital' of older women can influence their experiences of growing older.

Wider cultural discourses in the research literature

This study used the research literature to provide 'expert' discourses for the ageing body and interview data to provide 'everyday talk' or individual constructions of the ageing body (Willig, 2000, 2001). A review of the research literature led us to conclude that four major discourses are mobilized in order to construct meaning around the ageing body. Below, we briefly characterize the key features of these discourses. It will be interesting to see whether and/or to what extent these discourses re-emerge in our participants' accounts of their experience of ageing and the body.

1. A biological discourse emphasizes the vulnerability of the ageing body in terms of physiological degeneration, such as the menopause, osteoporosis and Alzheimer's disease, which is coupled with the ability of the ageing body to improve strength through exercise, thereby resisting some of the problems of old age (Bassey, 1998; Gannon, 1999, 2000). Much of the research structured by this discourse is from the quantitative and experimental perspective rather than the social constructionist perspective which highlights the central role of language in constructing social and psychological reality for individuals, as in this present study.
2. Social constructionist/historical and personal agency discourses recognize the tension between discourses of contextual determinism and discourses of individual control. The social constructionist/historical discourses demonstrate how particular contexts construct differing ways of talking about the ageing body in terms of biology. Contemporary western society offers the possibility of anti-ageing strategies such as fitness and cosmetic surgery, opportunities to stay young or resist age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Discourses of the active mind and busy body permeate western society (Katz, 2000). Individual women may resist or embrace the dominant discourses in a particular culture, as in Foucault's (1984) *The care of the self'*, through appealing to discourses of personal agency. Individuals draw on different discourses according to the various contexts in which they either actively position their ageing bodies or their ageing bodies are placed by others.
3. A female beauty discourse recognizes that older women talk about loss of control over their ageing appearance as they internalize consumer culture images of youth/beauty, health, fitness and sexuality, which has been described as the female beauty hypothesis (Fairhurst, 1998; Furman, 1997). Fairhurst (1998) has explored how older women talk about clothes in terms of 'growing old gracefully' rather than being 'mutton dressed as lamb'. The personal agency discourse manages the female beauty discourse in a dualistic manner when it constructs the ageing

body in terms of the mask of ageing, an outer ageing appearance but an inner youthful identity, and gerotranscendence, the ability of the active mind/sense of self to rise above the physical body (Biggs, 1999; Clarke, 2001; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991).

4. A feminist discourse sees women's ageing bodies as vulnerable due to the internalized male gaze in patriarchal society (Bartky, 1990), the beauty industry (Wolf, 1990) and the narrative of decline in consumer culture due to the loss of selfhood (Gullette, 1999). The feminist discourse sees resistance or adjustment of women's ageing bodies occurring due to gerotranscendence, such as after the menopause (Greer, 1991) and the ability to use a naturalistic discourse on ageing (Gullette, 1997; Wolf, 1990). Granville (2000) has explored how older women talk about rejecting outward symbols of the menopause, such as blue hair dyes and crimpolene dresses. The feminist discourse is both a political and a woman-centred approach, considering how individual older women talk about ageing and the wider political implications of such talk.

Methodology

Research design

Ethical approval was obtained for the study. Interviewees signed a consent form giving permission for qualitative interviews to be tape-recorded and the data to be published anonymously. Ten women between the ages of 58 and 83 years old were recruited from contexts promoting active ageing (a fitness centre and the University of the Third Age), so that positive as well as negative ways of talking about the ageing body could be identified. Within qualitative interviewing, the focus is on open-ended questions, to allow the interviewee to tell their own story. The interview agenda was used as a checklist, which meant that the interviewer focused on the main themes and the specific questions were only asked if the interviewee needed prompting (Kvale, 1996; Mason, 1996). Eight questions were utilized for the interview schedule:

1. What do you think when you look in the bathroom mirror?
2. What do you think when you are getting washed in the morning?
3. What do you think when you choose clothes from the wardrobe?
4. What cosmetics do you buy? Why? When do you use cosmetics?
5. Why do you attend the fitness class or the University of the Third Age? What benefits do you get from attending?
6. What physical changes of ageing do you notice when you are taking exercise or attending the University of the Third Age?
7. What physical changes of ageing do you notice when you are at home?
8. Is there anything more you would like to tell me about the experience of growing older?

Subjectivity and critical reflexivity

The subjectivity of both the interviewer and interviewee is acknowledged within qualitative interviewing, and the knowledge produced is recognized as a partial picture of reality. The interviewer asks open questions based on their interests and the interviewee uses these as a resource to help them explore the various discourses culturally available to use in everyday talk about ageing. Both interviewer and interviewee are active in the interview process. The interviewee interprets the questions within the context of the particular relationship with the interviewer, and the interviewer responds to the material that the interviewee chooses to discuss. The interviewer is both 'reflecting-in-action' and 'reflecting-on-action' in terms of talk but so too is the interviewee (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996).

Stages of analysis

The interview data were analysed using a six-stage version of Foucauldian discourse analysis outlined by Willig (2001) as this was a more concise method than Parker's (1992) 24-stage Foucauldian discourse analysis. The purpose of this Foucauldian discourse analysis was to explore to what extent 'expert' discourses in the wider culture are embraced or resisted, used as a positioning point or modified in the everyday talk of older women. Attention is paid to both the content of the interpretive repertoires and the rhetorical techniques of appealing to various discourses about the ageing body, that is the practical implications of using such discourses (Silverman, 2001; Willig, 2000, 2001). The actual everyday talk of older women as revealed in the qualitative interviews can be compared with the textual framework of cultural discourses identified in the wider culture

through the research literature. Such an analysis focuses on issues of embodiment, subjectivity, personhood and power rather than on the finer details of language use. The embodied nature of discourse is particularly acknowledged by tracing the practical implications of talking about the body in certain ways in terms of monitoring and managing the changes of ageing.

Six stages of Foucauldian discourse analysis

The coding was initially carried out line by line and then the text was broken up into sections according to the wider cultural discourses used to respond to particular questions.

- Stage one: highlighting the transcript for references to the body.
- Stage two: coding each section for wider cultural discourses.
- Stage three: specifying the action-orientation of each section of text.
- Stage four: identifying the various subject positions.
- Stage five: considering the practical implications of each section of text.
- Stage six: identifying the 'ways-of-being' made possible by each section of text.

Main discourses

Three major repertoires emerged from the analysis: a repertoire of constructions concerning the functionality of the ageing body; a repertoire of constructions concerning the transformation or transcendence of the ageing body through participation in Third Age 'cultures' such as fitness and the University of the Third Age; and a repertoire of constructions concerning the appearance of the ageing body. Within each of these, there was a tension between discourses of biological and contextual determinism, and those constructing personal agency. The construction of functionality around the ageing body could be further sub-divided into the constructions of 'Ageing as physical, mental and social decline' and 'Ageing as "active" mind and "busy" body'. The construction of transformation or transcendence of the ageing body through participation in 'Third Age cultures' were further sub-divided into the constructions of 'Fitness' and 'University of the Third Age'. The discourses about the appearance of the ageing body were sub-divided into the constructions of 'Ageing as "looking good"' and 'Ageing as "loss of beauty"'.

Dualist constructions to monitor the ageing body

Ageing body parts become 'objectified' All the older women used constructions of personal agency and using their active mind/sense of self to monitor and control the particular parts of their bodies constructed as growing older. These constructions were embedded in the wider cultural discourses of ageing as biological decline and the importance of personal agency (Foucault, 1984; Gannon, 1999, 2000). For example, the 73-year-old retired laboratory technician demonstrated how interpretive repertoires can objectify the ageing body part, in her case, the left arm which had been fractured on three occasions due to falls:

I did it last July, but that was a bad break, I broke both the bones and I've got a metal thing in my arm now, because the bones all fragmented and it had to grow, they had to join the two ends and it grew round it which I think it did quite well. I was quite surprised how well, but the bone is still a bit thin, thin is the word they use. But I have done it twice before, when I've broken my wrist once and then bones in my hand so, the injuries seem to be getting worse each time, that's why I was rather anxious to try and prevent another one.

This participant positions her left arm as an object 'it' in this extract, with a history of three fractures, each worse than the last. She uses a discourse of personal agency when she positions herself as a subject who can try to prevent further fractures. She appeals to the wider cultural discourse of ageing as physical decline when explaining the history of the last fall later in the text, explaining that she got off a coach and 'I just went down'. Her dualist constructions of her left arm as an object enable her to use her active mind/sense of self to monitor and manage these bodily changes caused by growing older (as she describes later in the interview, by attending exercise classes). This body talk leads to actions of her actually showing the interviewer her hands and wrists. In terms of subjectivity, her interpretive repertoires provide ways of seeing the ageing body as out of control and yet within the control of personal agency. This is a dualist construction of the body as an object and the active mind/sense of self as a subject, a separate entity taking control of the ageing body. Her constructions are both restrictive and functional as she facilitates her active mind/sense of self to transcend the ageing body part through the process of objectification.

Rejecting and accepting the 'mask of ageing' Many interviewees expressed initial lack of recognition of their ageing face when asked the

question 'What do you think when you look in the mirror?' This is another example of interpretive repertoires objectifying the ageing body part. Such constructions are negotiated through wider cultural discourses of female beauty and the importance of using personal agency to manage the ageing face (Foucault, 1984; Furman, 1997). In the words of the 74-year-old retired disabled participant:

One day, many years ago, I looked in the bathroom mirror and I thought 'Good Lord, who's that old woman looking at me?' (laughs). And that was the first time I realized I wasn't young any more. But when I look in the mirror now, I think I look younger than I did then (laughs). But I don't take notice of it. If you live long enough, you'll get old.

Her dualist construction is associated with initial surprise at the 'mask of ageing', an outer ageing appearance but an inner youthful identity, a wider cultural discourse discussed in the literature of social gerontology. Her use of Cartesian dualism is initially restrictive as it produces feelings of her ageing face being out of control because her active mind/sense of self does not match the reflection she sees in the mirror. She then uses her active mind/sense of self to transcend her ageing reflection, a functional use of Cartesian dualism. She manages her ageing appearance through appealing to existential philosophy, the inevitability of growing older. She has achieved gerotranscendence, the ability of the active mind/sense of self to rise above the ageing body, a wider cultural discourse discussed in the literature of social gerontology (Biggs, 1999; Clarke, 2001; Featherstone et al., 1991).

The 73-year-old retired laboratory technician similarly described initial disbelief at her 'wrinkly' reflection in the mirror:

I looked in the bathroom mirror and thought 'Gosh you look old.' And I never really noticed it … I think it's because usually when I make-up or comb my hair, I'm always in a place where the light isn't very good which is quite a good tip to use when you're old, not to look in the mirror when you've got the sun on your face. And I suddenly thought 'Gosh, you've got lots of lines and wrinkles which I hadn't seen.' So I'm trying to think of myself as more of a 'wrinkly person' than I used to be I think. I can't believe it happens suddenly, I just think I didn't bother to take that much notice.

This 73-year-old woman's constructions, embedded in the wider cultural discourses of 'loss of beauty' and the 'mask of ageing', facilitate her to re-define herself as a 'wrinkly older person' but at the same time to suggest practical strategies of 'not looking in the mirror too much' or using a 'dim light'. The dualist position is initially restrictive as she separates her active mind/sense of self from her ageing face, addressing her own face as if it were another person. Such a dualist position becomes functional when she uses personal agency to re-define her identity as an older person. The use of contrasting discourses is dynamic, facilitating her to adjust to an ageing appearance in practical ways.

Rejecting and accepting the ageing body shape The most graphic description of the changing body shape was given by the 58-year-old education consultant whose constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourse of ageing as physical, mental and social decline (Gannon, 1999, 2000). This is another example of interpretive repertoires objectifying the ageing body part, in this case, the ageing body shape:

And your body shape changes, when I look at my body in the mirror I remind myself, I could be my mother standing there, before she died. My mother had Alzheimer's and I used to look after her. And when we bathed her, it was a bit of an effort to bathe her, get her out of the bath and dry her, she had the same body shape as I have now and I find that a bit scary … I can't describe it, it's just the shape alters, it's thicker, you loose the waistline, your body just … you look like you're straight up and down, and something happens across the stomach and the hips, you look flatter, you seem flatter, you seem like you've got no shape, that's probably the best way to describe it. You just look like you don't have any shape. And I don't like that. Because that makes me think I'm that much … there are now no members of my mother's generation left, I find I'm the next one down. I don't like that, I don't like that at all.

This 58-year-old woman's dualist constructions position both her mother's body and her own body as objects losing their shape. Her active mind/sense of self interprets these changes as signifiers of impending decline and loss of control. The pauses in her speech confirm the emotional difficulty of talking about her mother who had died from Alzheimer's and recognizing that she herself is moving towards the last stage of life. Her use of Cartesian dualism to describe her body shape is completely restrictive at this point in the interview, although it becomes functional later on when she discusses using diet and vitamins to control her age-

ing body, a re-assertion of her active mind/sense of self over her ageing body (see the section 'Use of diet and vitamins for an "active" mind and "busy" body').

By way of contrast, the 60-year-old retired clinical psychologist uses her body talk to reconcile herself to a changing body shape as appropriate for her age:

The whole actual body part, for some reason, I find comforting. I quite like the fat (laughs). I know that's not politically correct but there's something re-assuring about all the softness and substance of it. My grandchildren come and go 'Pat, pat … I love your … fat bottom.' And you know, they give me a big hug. I'm not worried about being overweight or having to slim.

Her constructions suggest that there is an age-appropriate shape and that it is socially acceptable for an older woman to be overweight. In terms of subjectivity, she is asserting her active mind/sense of self to re-interpret her ageing body in a functional manner so as to feel empowered, not restricted, by it.

Dualist constructions of the menopause

The 60-year-old clinical psychologist positions herself as having 'loved menstruation' and describes the meaning of the menopause through a metaphor, which clearly demonstrates the separation of mind and body. Her constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of ageing as biological decline and feminism as facilitating gerotranscendence after the menopause (Gannon, 1999; 2000; Greer, 1991; Gullette, 1997, 1999):

T: The menopause … well for me I felt that I loved my periods, loved menstruating. I loved that contact with my body. Always. I always liked it, it was a reminder that I was a woman. I liked that then. So for me, losing my periods felt just awful. I felt like the pin had been taken out of my spinal cord, somehow my relationship with my body. It wasn't about having children or being sexual. It was like my body and it was what my body did every month. I like that. It was a kind of affirmation of my physicality I think. So I went into a huge grief about that but as I say, not because of getting old and not because of having babies but because of that wonder of what my body did.

I: But now you seem to be very serene …

T: Oh I did a lot of work. I always work at things.

Through taking different positions towards her body, this 60-year-old woman employs discourses of personal agency to adjust to the changes in identity of her ageing body. She positions herself as a subject who loved her periods as part of her body reminding her that she was a woman. She then positions her body as an object, with the pin taken out of the spinal cord when the menopause happened. This use of metaphor to describe changes in the body is both a restrictive and a functional use of Cartesian dualism. Her body as an object has become out of control. She actively grieved over the menopause, not because of getting old or loss of the ability to have children, but because of the loss of menstruation itself. In practice, these discourses confirm her feelings of loss of bodily function with the menopause but also the exertion of her 'active mind' to rise above the menopause through using discourses of personal agency. Indeed she had already paraphrased Germaine Greer (1991) in an earlier part of the interview about the liberating experience of being able to walk down the street knowing that as an older woman you were 'invisible' and 'to be unwanted is to be free'.

Practical strategies to manage actively the ageing body

'Active' mind and 'busy' body to manage the ageing body The dynamic nature of discourse means these older women devised practical strategies for managing their ageing bodies through their body-talk. The dualist construction of an 'active' mind and 'busy' body meant that some of the older women positioned themselves as making plans for the day when in the bath or shower, rather than examining their ageing bodies in any kind of detail. Such constructions are embedded in wider cultural discourses of 'active' mind and 'busy' body besides personal agency (Foucault, 1984; Katz, 2000). The 83-year-old bereavement counsellor reflected the wider cultural discourse of an 'active' mind and 'busy' body used by many of the interviewees in response to the question 'What do you think when you are getting washed in the morning?':

What I'm going to wear if I haven't already decided. I mean I don't spend hours thinking about what I have got to wear but I wonder what's clean and what the weather will be like, what I've got to do, what I've got to take out, where I'm going … Sometimes 'Help! It's about time I had a good clean up in here!' or 'I'll put that off till tomorrow.' (laughs) I mean that kind of thing. Things I've got to do in the day or want to do in the day.

Her constructions suggests that she is so mentally active in terms of making plans for the day that she does not contemplate her naked ageing body. Cartesian dualism operates in a functional manner as it provides her with a sense of the active mind/sense of self as taking control of the ageing body.

'Active' mind and 'busy' body to manage an ageing body part The split between mind and body illustrated in these older women's everyday talk frequently referred to the dualist construction of the 'active mind' and 'busy body' in order to manage an objectified ageing body part. These constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of ageing as biological decline, 'active' mind and 'busy' body in contemporary western society and the importance of personal agency (Foucault, 1984; Gannon, 1999, 2000; Katz, 2000). For example, the 82-year-old retired nurse uses dualist constructions of 'active mind' and 'busy body' alongside a sense of humour to facilitate her to adjust psychologically to the onset of breast cancer.

I: How did getting breast cancer make you feel?

S: Nothing really. I mean I was a nurse, it didn't worry me particularly, I hadn't got any glands under my arms … So I went in in a fortnight and quite honestly, I think they nearly popped the lump out because I was examined by about (laughs) 20 or 30 people who were doing their M and B exams, students. And then it was done, the operation was very quick and I had a mild worry, we were having a proper kitchen put into our flat at the time, so my husband had to cope with that and the poor man who was putting it in was having awful marital problems and he committed suicide. So I was thinking more of those sorts of things almost than the breast cancer.

This is a striking example of the use of humour as a rhetorical technique to minimize the impact of adversity. Through discursively constructing the lump as an object she was able to minimize the impact of being diagnosed with cancer, and occupies her active mind/sense of self with worrying about other people, such as her husband coping with the installation of a new kitchen and the workman committing suicide. Later in the interview, she talked about the breast cancer as being 'dead easy' because she was a nurse and actively decided to delay surgery so that she could go on holiday with her husband first. Her use of dualist constructions, exerting her active mind/sense of self in order to objectify the problematic body part and to keep her ageing body busy, is functional because it enabled her to feel in control when a diagnosis of cancer constructs the ageing body as out of control.

Use of diet and vitamins for an 'active' mind and 'busy' body It was interesting that only the youngest interviewee, a 58-year-old education consultant recruited from the fitness class, talked specifically about taking vitamins and using a special diet, with a balance of protein, carbohydrate and fats, as an 'anti-ageing strategy'. Her constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourse of historical change, with greater emphasis on the availability of 'anti-ageing strategies' influencing the 'Baby Boomers' who were born in the period immediately following the Second World War (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Such 'anti-ageing strategies' are firmly embedded within the wider cultural discourse of ageing as biological decline (Gannon, 1999, 2000). As she says:

And I started to learn Spanish at night school, and I'm in a class where I could be grandmother to most of the youngsters in the class, and they're very quick, very quick. And I found myself hardly being able to remember vocabulary, not from one lesson to another but from one 10 minutes to another. And somebody said to take this Ginkobaloba. It causes the blood vessels to dilate, enabling more blood to be piped to them, and the extremities of the brain can be improved by taking this, it's supposed to improve memory. I try, because I want to be, when I get properly old, to be as fit and mentally alert as I can. Hence the vitamin regime.

Her dualist constructions of separate mind and body are initially restrictive because she talks about her mind as being out of control, hindered by memory problems. She tried to regain control by taking a vitamin specifically to improve the blood supply to the brain. Her brain as a biological organ is constructed as an object over which her active mind/sense of self exerts personal agency. She positions herself as perceiving her brain and its biological and psychological functions from the outside. Her constructions confirm her practical actions of taking vitamins and learning a new language. In terms of subjectivity, these are ways of resisting the physical and psychological decline associated with growing older. As she explains about the special diet she and her husband use:

We follow a diet called the 'Zone' diet. It's to do with the insulin in your body. The idea is that you eat meals

which are very well balanced and you eat them regularly, so that your insulin levels neither go too high and so go out of the Zone, or too low and drop below the Zone, because that's when any damage might well occur in the body. And I think it is good. You eat a very good, substantial well-balanced breakfast and you find you don't need lunch then till one o'clock. Every meal must have some protein, carbohydrate and fats, in a certain proportion. They say it's to help older people, it's to enable you to go into old age feeling fit and mentally more alert than you might be.

She positions herself as appreciating the benefits of eating well and not getting hungry between meals, in the belief that she will enter old age 'feeling fit and more mentally alert than you might be'. Her constructions show that she is exerting her active mind/sense of self over her ageing body in order to follow a healthy diet. Such constructions re-affirm her practical actions as she provides a detailed description of the types of fruits, nuts and proteins she consumes later in the interview. In terms of subjectivity, she explores ways of promoting the well-being of the ageing body.

Cultural discourses of fitness transform the ageing body The 73-year-old retired laboratory technician uses Cartesian dualism in a functional manner when she talks about using physical exercise to take control of her ageing body, especially the left arm as the problematic part. These constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of personal agency and biology, with the potential to resist problems of the ageing body through improving muscular strength (Bassey, 1998; Foucault, 1984; Gannon, 1999, 2000).

When I've had this last fall, I've had three and I've always damaged this arm, and I thought 'That's enough.' So I decided one thing I can do is to try to sort of improve my balance, build up this strength, so that if I do go off balance and fall, hopefully I might not break something and also the flexibility, so that if you feel yourself wobbling, you can save yourself. So really why I go to this exercise class is a consequence of having fallen several times. I wouldn't mind falling if I could just get up and walk away but unfortunately because I have got osteoporosis, I do this damage to myself.

Her constructions challenge the problems posed by her ageing body when she loses control and falls over. There is a clear separation between the ageing body as an object and her active mind/sense of self as a subject in these constructions. She as a subject moves from the position of being out of control of her ageing body to taking control actively of her ageing body by improving flexibility through participating in an exercise class. In response to the probe 'What benefits do you get from the exercise class?' she continues:

I notice that I can stretch much higher, before if I had to close a window I had to get a gadget to pull a handle towards me. I can reach up to shelves, I feel I can stretch myself out a bit. Yes, I don't think that I have any signs that my bones have strengthened but I certainly feel more mobile. I mean you're always picking things up, bending, doing a lot of gardening. I think I can do it more easily. I think it's improving my mobility.

Her constructions legitimate her attendance at an exercise class and provide practical strategies for coping with any future falls due to enhanced flexibility, even though it is difficult to strengthen bones. In terms of subjectivity, she finds ways of resisting the physical decline of growing older through re-defining herself as fit and flexible.

The 65-year-old retired nurse spoke of how physical activity can both provide a sense of control over the ageing body and highlight lack of control over the ageing body. Such constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of fitness as an ideal for the ageing body and exerting personal agency to control the ageing body (Foucault, 1984; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Her dualist constructions of mind over body were echoed by a number of the other interviewees:

I'm definitely more flexible from going to the exercise class. I find that I can move more easily, I can extend my arms more fully, I'm just generally fitter, I can move more efficiently. I think it's easy to get stiff if you don't take regular exercise and I always feel more supple, I can bend, I can reach, when you're taking a shower or washing your feet or putting your socks on, those things are easier if you can bend and flex. So I think exercise is really important to keep you going as you get older. And it's also beneficial in terms of weight control, which is very important. And it gives you a feeling of well-being, you always feel better afterwards. Apart from feeling virtuous, you just get a buzz when you're doing the exercises and stretching a little bit rather than pottering around at home and not expending much energy. It gets your system going, hormones circulating in your body and you get a feeling of well-being.

Her constructions emphasize her heightened sense of control over her ageing body in terms of

enhanced flexibility and this transfers to improved performance in the activities of daily living. Her use of Cartesian dualism is functional because it shows how her active mind/sense of self can control her ageing body and also provide feelings of well-being. The classic mind–body split is apparent in the last sentence about the benefits of exercise: 'It gets your system going, hormones circulating in your body and you get a feeling of well-being.' In terms of subjectivity, this dualism provides ways of feeling fitter through participating in exercise in both physical and psychological terms.

This 65-year-old nurse also uses Cartesian dualism in a restrictive manner, when she explores how certain types of exercise show the limitations of the ageing body, providing feelings that the ageing body is out of control:

I went to a yoga class last year. I found I was absolutely hopeless but 64 is a bit late to come to yoga and you're already starting to stiffen up and you're not as flexible. I couldn't bend my knees or sit on my heels and I couldn't bend into many of the postures that they wanted me to. It's the same in the garden, I can't sit back on my heels and kneel. I can't kneel, I can't squat or crouch, I've always got to sit on a little stool to do the gardening, my little trolley thing, so I can be in a seated position. And I do have to watch my back because I've had surgery many years ago.

She positions her active mind/sense of self as frustrated at the loss of control over her ageing body, especially her loss of flexibility. This Cartesian dualism is initially restrictive but it becomes functional when she exerts personal agency to modify activities so that she can manage her ageing body, such as using a stool to do gardening and taking care of her back. In terms of subjectivity, she finds ways of being fit and active as an older person through modifying activities to suit the capabilities of her individual ageing body.

Beauty techniques for 'looking good' Most interviewees focused on 'looking good', using beauty techniques acquired from their mothers, rather than talking about 'loss of beauty'. Such constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of the particular historical context, female beauty and personal agency (Fairhurst, 1998; Foucault, 1984; Furman, 1997). In the words of the 72-year-old retired civil servant:

If I look in the mirror before I've done anything, I'm not too happy with it. But then when I've put a bit of make-up on, lipstick, brushed my hair and made things look a bit better, then I'm fine with it. I don't care about lines and stuff, I mean that's acceptable … when you're getting older … I think it's habit from when I've been young. I've been used to having some make-up on, it was the thing. And I feel naked without it. Naked's not good (laughs). I wouldn't go out without a little bit of something on. It might be a bit weird but it is how it is.

This participant constructs 'looking good' as being the product of the successful application of a range of techniques for improving one's appearance, rather than something simply given by nature, and therefore not necessarily age-related.

There are ways of looking unkempt and ways of looking good. She is using her active mind/sense of self in a functional manner, in order to manage the appearance of her ageing face. As she explains later in the interview:

Always moisturiser I put on. Perhaps a bit of tinted moisturiser and lipstick. I don't put on mascara, eyeshadow and blusher and stuff unless I'm going out … My mother always had Yardley, I remember that she had that sort of thick moisturiser and that's about all that she'd got on. Plus a little bit of lipstick. I do colour my hair on occasion, my nails on occasion. I've been trying some on today and bought some.

Her constructions confirm the importance of her mother as a role-model for demonstrating beauty techniques. Her mother had had moisturiser and lipstick and it is fascinating how this 72-year-old retired civil servant copies the beauty practices of her mother by always using moisturiser and lipstick on a daily basis. The practical implications of talking about 'looking good' lead her into discussing experimentation with hair colour and nail varnish, products which had historically become more available after the Second World War (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). There are ways of looking and feeling good as an older person through exerting personal agency to enhance an ageing appearance.

Sometimes, using beauty techniques was a case of becoming socially acceptable, rather than trying to enhance female beauty. In the words of the 75-year-old retired teacher:

I buy moisturising cream and lipstick. I've never used eye-make-up. That's about it. You see my mother's dictum that I had brains rather than beauty. I suppose I got into the habit of buying lipstick when I was about 20. I must think it improves me, it makes me look as if I pay some sort of attention to my appearance. I put it on after my shower but I

don't bother to put any more on during the day. But if I was going out, I might. It's obviously something to do with the public face isn't it?

It is interesting that her own mother had positioned her as having 'brains' rather than 'beauty', a dualistic separation of mind and body which this 75-year-old retired teacher follows in practice. She applied lipstick for her 'public face' and used moisturisers for dry skin but this is a minimal use of make-up, constructed by growing up during the historical context of the Second World War (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Her mother's dualistic constructions of her brains as better than her appearance have had a profound influence on how she now separates her active mind/sense of self from her ageing body.

The significance of one's mother as a teacher of beauty techniques was echoed by the retired housewife (who had chosen not to reveal her age):

I go grey if I don't wear lipstick. I think my lips go blue. And in my mother's day, she had these little powder compacts and you put your lipstick on in a little glass. Today I have several friends who think putting lipstick on is revolting and it shows how differently things go. One day it's all the rage and other days people don't want to do it. And I don't want to fit. I want to do what I want to do. My mother taught me how to use make-up. I was far too young to know anything about it. She wanted me to be like her. And she felt make-up enhanced a woman tremendously, which it did her.

This participant constructs reasons for wearing make-up. She positions her mother as such an important teacher of beauty techniques that she copies her beauty practices to the present day, even though friends may frown upon them. She positions her active mind/sense of self as in control of her body, ignoring the comments of other people. In terms of subjectivity, there are ways of enhancing an ageing appearance and ways of practising beauty techniques to heighten both individuality and the influence of one's mother.

Clothes for 'looking good' and practical purposes Talk about clothes focuses on both the pleasure of 'looking good' and the freedom to dress for comfort and practical purposes. These constructions are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of female beauty and personal agency (Fairhurst, 1998; Foucault, 1984; Furman, 1997; Granville, 2000). In the words of the 65-year-old retired nurse:

My favourite colour is cerise. I'm a great lover of bright pink, the fuchsia colour, I think that predominates my wardrobe. It's just a nice bright, vivid, cheerful colour. I think it goes with my skin tones and my hair colour really. When I was younger, I had dark brown hair and my mother's hair went silvery white when she was very young and mine went when I was in my 30s. So rather than dye my hair dark, which I think looks a bit unnatural, it seems more in keeping to colour it a sort of silvery blonde which I do once a month. So I think pink suits me basically and I feel people often comment 'Oh that colour suits you.' So that's why I choose it.

This participant positions her own ageing body in relation to her mother, when she considers how both of them experienced their hair going white at a relatively early age. She positions herself as choosing an age-appropriate hair dye, silvery blonde, which looks particularly good with pink colours. She is using her active mind/sense of self in order to mange her ageing body in practice which in terms of subjectivity provide ways of looking good as an older woman.

The importance of 'looking good', dressing appropriately for the occasion and wearing practical clothes is emphasized by the 74-year-old disabled woman in response to the question 'What do you think when you are choosing clothes from the wardrobe?':

Ah … I have a look at this one, maybe I'll get half a dozen out. I've got my case packed over there (for going on holiday) and I missed one out but I'd shut the case and I thought 'No. I'm not opening that case to put that dress in.' And as much as I like it, it's a lovely green and white, pale green, candy striped dress and it's got a couple of pockets in it, and it's so comfortable, you can wear it any occasion. And I usually wear slacks because it's … it's with my legs, I do feel cold after this big operation, but I have got osteoarthritis and various other complaints, so I'll have to keep myself warm. But I've got shorts packed, skirts, trousers and dresses, 'cos I dress for dinner but I open the wardrobe and I think 'Yes, I'll have that one.'

Like the 65-year-old retired nurse, she talks about clothes in terms of aesthetic pleasure (e.g. enjoying bright colours) but at the same time invokes comfort as a criterion. She chose clothes for comfort such as 'slacks' as her legs felt cold because of her operation and osteoarthritis. The pauses in her speech show she is troubled by her ageing body and yet she dresses carefully in order to overcome these problems. She positioned herself as 'smart' when having dinner on holiday but also liking to be casual in shorts. Her constructions on clothes confirm the actions of dressing both to 'look good' and for

practical purposes, besides the sheer enjoyment of sorting through her wardrobe. There are ways of dressing for comfort and looking good as an older woman through actively managing one's appearance, with one's active mind/sense of self in control of the ageing body.

In the words of the 58-year-old education consultant, the youngest interviewee:

I think to myself 'Now will that make me look good or will that make me look old?' Twenty years ago, we went to a college ball and I have this dress, and I was thinking 'I wonder if it will fit me?' So my younger daughter and I, we went upstairs and got this dress out and I can fit into this dress from 20 years ago. And it's a classic, it's not aged, I could have gone out and bought it yesterday. I was quite thrilled. She could do up the zip and it looked good. So I started going through the wardrobe and got out two other dresses. Do you remember the shirt-waister type with a belt and they'd have a bow at the neck? Well when I look at them I think 'Ah you look just like your mother. (laughs) So I'm not wearing that.' So I tend to go for a much younger style of clothing. I have two sisters, one of them is grossly overweight and the other is very overweight and when we go anywhere, it's me that stands out not them. They look the norm, it's me that looks slim. And I wear modern clothing, I don't wear modern clothing like the kids wear, but I mean trousers and nice smart top-like things. If you're wearing a much younger outfit, I think you act younger.

This 58-year-old education consultant was the only woman specifically concerned with not looking old through her choice of clothing. She positioned herself as an object standing out to the gaze of others because of being slim and wearing modern clothes. 'Younger outfits' such as 'trouser suits and nice smart top-like things' facilitate her to behave younger. She sorts through her wardrobe, actively rejecting dresses that would make her look like her mother, while recognizing that she can still look good in a ball dress which is 20 years old. Discourse dynamics recruit practices, such as dressing to look good, as well as subjectivities, in this case, a clear differentiation from one's mother.

Contemporary society provides greater flexibility in fashion for these older women compared with their youth in the post-war years. In the words of the 72-year-old retired civil servant:

I mean I wouldn't have been seen dead in what I am wearing now … Ladies had their hair permed tightly and wore hats. They seem so old-fashioned now, sad really. I wouldn't go back to that because it was more restrictive. And bras were all a horrible pink colour. Sort of ghastly pink. (laughs) And they were inclined to be a sort of cone shape. Like the ones that Madonna wears that people laugh about. That's how they were. Looking back on things like that it seems weird. It was stockings that you wore, you had to have a suspender belt of some sort to keep them up. Most people had these wide elastic things. That was a bit of a pain. Besides which, suspenders were inclined to break and you finished up having to find a button to use instead of the little knob. (laughs)

In terms of practical actions and subjectivity, these constructions show how this older woman can dress for comfort, without the restrictions of the fashion in the post-war years. She was actually wearing a skirt and a jumper for the interview but it is interesting that she perceives these as too casual, 'I wouldn't have been seen dead in what I am wearing now.' Ways of being in control of your ageing body are provided by being able to choose clothes for one's individual needs, a sentiment echoed by the other interviewees.

Discussion

No comparable qualitative Foucauldian discourse analytic study has been located in the health psychology research literature. There are plenty of quantitative studies in the lifespan and psycho-gerontology literature identifying the factors involved in successful ageing, such as those of Baltes and Baltes (1990), or measuring improvements in exercise capabilities in older age, such as those of Bassey (1998). Such quantitative research is extremely valuable but it cannot capture the details of how individual older women construct their experiences of the ageing body through their use of language. There are no qualitative studies considering the diverse ways in which individual older women use language to adjust in everyday talk to the processes of ageing in their bodies. This qualitative study has effectively shown how older individual women develop practical strategies for monitoring and managing the ageing body in their daily lives.

Dualist philosophy certainly informs the everyday talk of older women about the ageing body with a clear separation of active mind/sense of self from the ageing body or ageing body part(s). Obviously, this dualism may be perpetuated by the sheer limitations of spoken language at expressing the physical sensations of the body. Foucauldian discourse analysis as a method to research the ageing body is using body talk to access

body materiality so it could be argued the meaning of embodiment, how social and cultural processes shape the individual's lived experience of the body, cannot be truly identified (Gillies et al., 2004; Paulson, 2005). Qualitative research using methods such as Foucauldian discourse analysis, focus on the processes through which individuals negotiate identities for their ageing bodies. Leder's (1990) 'dys-appearing body', the idea that people are not conscious of their bodies until a problematic part re-appears, is upheld by the way in which older women objectify the ageing body part in their everyday talk.

It is useful for health psychology knowledge and practice to be aware of these dualist constructions which older women use in their everyday talk. In contrast to the American feminist psychologist Gannon (1999, 2000) who has shown how dualism permeates western culture in order to subordinate women to men, these older women use dualist constructions of the ageing body in their everyday talk to both monitor and manage the ageing body in practical ways. This use of Cartesian dualism may initially be restrictive when it provides constructions of the ageing body as being out of control yet these dualist constructions become functional when they facilitate older women to exert their active mind/sense of self to take control of their ageing bodies. There is a real sense of the active mind/sense of self monitoring and managing the ageing body parts in order to achieve gerotranscendence, a process embedded in the wider cultural discourses of female beauty and feminism (Fairhurst, 1998; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991; Furman, 1997; Greer, 1991). These dualistic findings echo the memory work on pain and sweating conducted with younger women (Gillies et al., 2004).

These older women objectified ageing body parts in their verbal constructions, such as an arm which had been broken three times, an ageing face which is unrecognizable when seen in the mirror ('mask of ageing') or a body which is losing shape and so becomes a signifier of impending decline. Such objectifications facilitate these older women to overcome constructions of lack of control and to find ways of talking about adjustment to problematic body parts, and an ageing face and ageing body shape. This talk leads to practical actions such as attending fitness classes in order to prevent further fractures, ignoring the reflection of an ageing face in the mirror or enjoying the grandchildren touching the extra fat. Older women explore both negative and positive constructions of the ageing body in their everyday talk. These interpretative repertoires demonstrate the alternative 'ways of being' which are culturally available for older women.

So the range of practical strategies advocated by these older women in the current study show how cultural discourses of personal agency are just as important as discourses of biological and contextual determinism in shaping the ageing body. These older women's constructions of an 'active' mind and 'busy' body in order to manage the ageing body, are embedded in the wider cultural discourses of 'active' mind and 'busy' body and of personal agency (Foucault, 1984; Katz, 2000). The wider cultural discourse of feminism facilitated some of these older women to achieve gerotranscendence, a sense of resistance or adjustment to the processes of ageing (Greer, 1991; Gullette, 1997, 1999; Wolf, 1990). A number of the older women talked about planning activities for the day when confronted with their naked bodies in the bath or shower, rather than examining their ageing bodies in any kind of detail. Such talk about an 'active' mind and 'busy' body was combined with a sense of humour in order to minimize the impact of adversity. This was particularly striking in the case of the older woman diagnosed with breast cancer. Other older women actually talked about using vitamins, a special diet or extra mental stimulation, such as learning a foreign language, in order to maintain an 'active' mind and 'busy' body. Some older women spoke of physical activity such as attendance at a fitness class, as transforming their ageing bodies through increasing flexibility, even if there are particular body movements they found difficult to perform.

Social and cultural processes certainly influenced these older women's constructions of beauty techniques for 'looking good'. Their constructions were embedded in the wider cultural discourse of female beauty. Most of these older women had been teenagers in the years immediately after the Second World War, and their mothers had provided important role-models for demonstrating beauty techniques such as the practical application of cosmetics. Using cosmetics appropriately was all part of enhancing the ageing appearance and becoming socially acceptable (Fairhurst, 1998; Furman, 1997; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Similarly, these older women's constructions of clothes related to choosing colours and clothes for 'looking good', because there was no longer the restrictive dress code of the post-war era when the only types of bra available were cone-shaped and pink. These older

women's constructions also focused on making choices for both comfort and practical purposes, such as selecting trousers to keep legs warm if one suffered from osteoarthritis. It is interesting that only the youngest interviewee, the 58-year-old, was concerned with making clothing choices which would make her look young. She deliberately chose a clothing style in order to distinguish herself from her mother. None of the interviewees used the constructions prominent in Fairhurst's (1998) study, 'mutton dressed as lamb', or 'growing old gracefully', perhaps because of the increasing flexibility of fashion and 'ways of being' available in contemporary society.

Conclusion

This Foucauldian discourse analytic study has explored the various interpretive repertoires which older women use to negotiate identities for their ageing bodies in their everyday talk. Such work constitutes a contrast to the quantitative literature on successful ageing because it focuses on the diverse meanings of embodiment constructed through language use. The everyday talk of these older women is embedded in wider cultural discourses relating to biology, social context, personal agency, female beauty and feminism. Analysis of this everyday talk shows how these older women devise practical strategies for monitoring and managing the ageing body, so that ultimately they can both look and feel good. Such positive use of language in their everyday talk challenges wider cultural discourses of ageing as biological, psychological and social decline. Particularly significant is their use of Cartesian dualism, a pronounced separation of the active mind/sense of self from the ageing body, which challenges the very concept of embodiment as an integration of mind and body.

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