Gendered ageism and grey hair:

Must older women choose between feeling authentic and looking competent?

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Author's Note

Abstract

35   Ageing women frequently use hair dye to disguise their age in order to avoid being stigmatised as

'old'. Recently, however, some have chosen naturally grey hair. Informed by Goffman's theory of

stigma, we investigated why they would do so in the face of age-discrimination, and their

experiences of the process. We identified two major, oppositional themes, *competence* and

authenticity. Despite wanting to avoid perceptions of old-thus-incompetent, women risked grey

40   hair in order to feel authentic. However, they employed other beauty practices to mitigate the

effects of grey hair, indicating conflict between a (subjectively) authentic appearance and societal

perceptions of competence.

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    Keywords: Ageism, gender, stigma, authenticity, competence

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"Grey hair on a woman…produce[s] one of the least desirable personas in Western society

– an old woman" (Symonds and Holland, 2008, p.29)

65   The quote above attests to the profoundly negative effect on women of a universal marker

of the ageing process, grey hair. Nonetheless, there is a growing movement amongst women to

stop dyeing their hair and choose instead to go naturally grey as seen in mainstream and social

media, which we discuss further below. In the current research we investigated the reasons behind

women's decision to repudiate the precept that age should be camouflaged, their experiences of

70   doing so, and the consequences both in terms of how they believed others perceived them, how

they themselves felt, and how they acted.

Ageism, a negative stereotype, prejudice, and/or act of discrimination directed towards

elderly people (Ayalon et al., 2019), is not only endemic in western societies but is escalating

(Jackson, Hackett & Steptoe, 2019; Wilson, Errasti-Ibarrondo & Low, 2019). Responses to the

75   COVID-19 pandemic have recently underscored its depth and pervasiveness (Ayalon et al., 2020).

Whether implicit (e.g., jokey birthday cards) or explicit (e.g., medical discrimination), ageism

denigrates older people and denies them resources and opportunities. Its targets are aware of it: 3

in 4 (self-identified older) British respondents reported that older people are subject to age

discrimination (Bytheway, Ward, Holland, & Peace, 2007). Whilst ageism affects both sexes,

80   women are subject to greater discrimination in, for example, arenas of finance (Jones, 2011) and

employment (Button, 2020).

The gendered nature of ageism is especially apparent in the matter of appearance. Social

invisibility is a recurrent theme in ageing literature and in older women's accounts of their lives,

including when discussing hair (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2010; Ward & Holland, 2011). Ward and

85   colleagues noted striking gendered contrasts in their respondents' accounts of finding themselves

invisible to others: Women, more than men, experienced feeling unseen and erased from public

and social life (Ward, Jones, Hughes, Humberstone, & Pearson, 2008). Furthermore, a recent

survey of attitudes toward ageing found a general perception that women's physical attractiveness

deteriorates more than does men's (Royal Society for Public Health, 2018). Media representations

90 of women reproduce and exaggerate the cultural ideals of female physical attractiveness, namely,

youthful, thin, light-skinned, and toned. This is an appearance that is neither representative of, nor

attainable by, the majority of women of any age (Rodgers, Campagna, & Attawala, 2019) and

certainly not by older women. Men, on the other hand, may be considered to look distinguished

and attractive as they get older (the "George Clooney effect"; Royal Society for Public Health,

95 2018, p.18), whereas women are expected – despite the fact that it is clearly impossible – to

remain forever girlish (Sontag, 1972).

Gendered ageism is an increasingly pressing issue as, owing to demographic changes, each

year there are more older women in the population who are subject to its effects (United Nations,

2017). They are the target audience of media that promote a particular vision of 'successful'

100 ageing, described as a contemporary obsession (Lamb et al., 2017), the visual discourse of which

suggests that to avoid 'failure' one must continue to look young. Unfeasible though this might be,

older women often engage in beauty work – including dyeing their hair – so as to approximate a

youthful appearance. Beauty work refers to aesthetic practices performed on oneself in order to

gain benefits within a social hierarchy (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). For older women it is arguably a

105 rational response to ageism, being goal-directed behaviour that aims to counter a problematic

environment (Kahana, Kahana, & Lee, 2014). However, as age is only concealable to a degree,

and decreasingly so as one gets older, women can become increasingly at risk of age

discrimination with the passage of time.

Grey Hair and Age

110   The term 'grey-haired' is a common metaphor to represent old age (e.g., the phrase 'when I'm old and grey'). As the most malleable of bodily features, hair is a common site of beauty work and thus particularly subject to judgement (Weitz, 2001). It cannot remain neutral in so much as it publicly advertises one's status and identity (Biddle-Perry & Cheang, 2008). Whatever a woman does or does not do with her hair will affect how others respond to her and thus her social power.

115 Consequently it is, suggests Weitz (2001), central to women's social position. As Hillary Clinton put it, "Pay attention to your hair, because everyone else will" (Zernike, 2001, p.B4). Declining to use dye and to adopt such a potent, universal symbol of age as grey hair may seem hazardous for older women who operate at the intersection of ageism and sexism. The current study examined the experiences of those who have, nonetheless, made a decision to do so.

120   Thus far, research has primarily focused on older women's (predominantly negative) attitudes toward going grey and the feeling of social invisibility that doing so engenders (e.g., Clarke & Korochenko, 2010). One dominant theme of such research is that hair dye is a tool used expressly to counter this and other negative consequences. Scant attention has been paid to the motivations and experiences of women who voluntarily elect to go grey. Such a focus is timely

125 because – despite the significance of hair, the ubiquity of youthful images and the widespread use of dye (used by 75% of women in the USA, according to the manufacturer Clairol [Kreamer, 2009], and 69% in the UK [Statista, 2017]) – a number of women are choosing to allow their hair to be its natural colour. This is seen in popular press articles about both the general trend (e.g., Holden, 2017) and its recent increase due to COVID-19 lockdown (Delgado, 2020). It is also

130 evident in online discussion groups devoted to grey hair, of which there are currently around thirty on Facebook alone. These groups serve as sites where women can debate the desirability but also the difficulty of transitioning to grey hair. The proliferation and popularity of such groups suggests that stopping dyeing is increasingly common but that women who do so are aware of and anxious about grey hair's connotations.

135 **Theoretical Framework: Age Stigma**

To explore the consequences of women's decisions about going grey, we draw on the work of Goffman. He conceptualises a stigma as an attribute which deeply discredits its possessor (1963). One category of stigmatizing characteristic is an "abomination of the body", such as a physical deformity (p.13) that engenders disgrace, generated by ignorance, prejudice and

140 discrimination (Thornicroft, Rose, Kassam & Sartorius, 2007). The attributes, or abominations, of age can be seen as stigmata and age a stigmatised condition. As discussed above, negative age stereotypes, discrimination and stigmatisation are prevalent and persistent (see also, Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2004; Levy & Langer, 1994) and a natural, aged appearance (that is, one devoid of beauty work) on a woman can connote moral decline (e.g.,

145 Dumas, Laberge, & Straka, 2005).

The attributes of age are, of course, *acquired* stigmata that place people in a hitherto unfamiliar relationship with their social world. Members of society have been 'trained' in what the stigmatised condition entails and the newly stigmatised person can be uncomfortably aware of what they have become in society's eyes (Goffman, 1963). In the case of age stereotypes, the

150 training begins in childhood (Nelson, 2002), persists throughout adulthood, and becomes self-relevant when a person reaches old age (Levy & Langer, 1994). Both the internalised negative beliefs about old age (and thus about oneself as an old person) and the external ageism encountered in society can adversely affect health and wellbeing (Levy, Slade, Chang, Kannoth & Wang, 2018).

155 Having internalised such beliefs across the lifespan, people often attempt to conceal stigmatising attributes of ageing. Some are more concealable than others, so people often can and do act to disguise those that are more concealable and "pass" in society as non-stigmatised. That is, they employ *impression management strategies* in order to present the most socially advantageous image (Goffman, 1959). Dyeing one's hair is a common strategy. In so doing, older

160   women may pass as younger and be afforded a higher social status. When the positive and distinct

aspects of our collective identities are threatened, for example by discrimination, we have various

options to manage this threat (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This may entail shifting into another social

category if possible, a strategy that Goffman calls conversion. Older people do not have the option

to convert to younger. The most they can do to manage the impression that they give to observers

165   is to take measures to conceal their age and distance themselves as best they can from the devalued

category "old".

However, passing as a young woman is possible only for a limited time. As the years

progress, one's age becomes increasingly obvious, passing ceases to be feasible, and a person may

instead attempt to *cover*. This is a common management strategy intended to reduce the impact of

170   a known stigma (as opposed to an unknown or hidden stigma like a health condition; Goffman,

1963). It may involve downplaying the visibility of the stigmatizing identifier, for example grey

hair, or the attributes associated with the stigma, for example forgetfulness (*stigma symbols* in

Goffman's term). Those with a stigma symbol that is obtrusive commonly engage in covering as a

threat management strategy.

175   According to Yoshino (2006, p. ix), "everyone covers" to improve their social status by

toning down features associated with, for example, an ethnicity, sexuality, or disability stigma.

Women, he argues, are expected both to cover, e.g., mute their status as a mother in the workplace,

and to reverse cover, e.g., not be 'too' assertive – that is, as assertive as are men. In an ageist

society one can see that *ageing* women are similarly required both to mute the signs of age and, as

180   we describe below, to reverse cover by not appearing 'too young' for their age.

To summarize, Goffman (1963) describes three stages of stigma management: conversion

(attempting to leave the stigmatized social category), passing (hiding group membership), and

covering (toning down visible attributes tied to the category). We may apply this framework to the

experiences of ageing women: wishing to deny the reality of ageing; attempting to pass for

185   younger, for example through the use of hair dye; then – as passing becomes less achievable, too

burdensome, or otherwise unappealing – employing covering to moderate, rather than hide, their

aged appearance.

Unconcealed grey hair is a hyper-visible marker of old age that can, ironically, serve to

render women socially *in*visible. As discussed, older women report that as their appearance ages

190   they find themselves invisible, ignored, irrelevant and discounted (e.g. Ward, Jones, Hughes,

Humberstone, & Pearson, 2008). This is in line with widespread negative stereotyping that

associates age with dependency and with incompetence, for example forgetfulness, inflexibility

and inability to learn new information (Dougherty, Dorr, & Pulice, 2016). Women experience a

tension between wanting to avoid such negative consequences of signalling their age, and the fear

195   of being mocked as "mutton dressed as lamb" if they attempt to conceal it (Bytheway, Ward,

Holland & Pearce, 2007; Clarke & Korotchenko, 2010). This common expression in most

Anglophone countries is used to shame a woman (but not a man) for trying to look younger than

her age and carries connotations of sexual inappropriateness.

Society demands that women remain looking young and attractive if they are to retain

200   social status, but simultaneously that they "age gracefully" – another common term – which deems

as embarrassingly undignified any attempts to look youthful and implies that older women should

gradually fade from view. How and why, then, do women negotiate incompatible societal norms

and the social requirements to both cover and reverse-cover? And how do they experience feeling

that that they have fallen foul of others' expectations?

205   **The Current Study**

Concern about one's body and appearance resulting from stigmatisation does not diminish

with age (for a review, see Roy & Payette, 2012) and can have a range of detrimental effects on

wellbeing (for a review, see Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). This underscores the significance of

women's willing display of a highly visible and connotational change to their appearance, grey

210   hair, that has the potential to impact their health by opening them up to increased age

discrimination and stigmatisation. We wanted to understand the motivations of women who

decline to dye their hair and knowingly enter a lower-status social category, their experiences of

doing so and of the tensions induced by conflicting societal expectations around older women's

appearance.

215   Unlike previous eras when women had recourse only to local friends and family for advice

and support, today virtual communities offer a wide and accessible constituency of supportive

peers. Online 'grey groups' have a large, international membership; for example, Gray and Proud

on Facebook has more than 32,000 members (Gray and Proud, 2020). They provide safe spaces for

their members – predominantly identifying as women – to discuss both the process and the wider

220   effects of their decisions and, as such, provide rich arenas for investigating women's motivations

for and experiences of going grey.

We approached two closed Facebook groups where women discuss transitioning from

pigmented hair (whether naturally or artificially) to grey hair. In closed groups messages may only

be viewed by members, who can be debarred by moderators for violating group rules. As this

225   affords a certain amount of privacy and confidence in safely expressing feelings to fellow

members, we surmised that we might reach participants who were willing to respond frankly to

our questions within that safe space.

Our primary research questions focused upon how women navigate the tension between

conflicting societal norms around appearance-related ageing in general and going grey in

230   particular. Women may encounter social costs regardless of what they do: condemned for looking

'inappropriately' young, or having 'let themselves go', or simply rendered socially invisible. Why,

then, we wondered, do women choose to stop using hair dye, what are their experiences of doing

so, and (how) does their behaviour change as a consequence? We administered an open-ended

survey asking group members about their thoughts and feelings about age-related appearance, in

235   particular their hair, and their responses to the changes they noted, both in themselves and in the

reactions of others.

Method

Participants

In the current study we extend the usual age range for ageing research downward, as

240   people can start to go grey in their twenties and women (more so than men) are encouraged by the

media and prevailing culture to use hair dye as camouflage from early adulthood. Accordingly, we

included a lower age category of 30-39, and an upper one of over 70, while remaining mindful that

this includes a wide range of age cohorts.

Ninety-one members across the two Facebook groups took part, of whom eleven were

245   eliminated from the study as they returned either blank questionnaires or one-word answers not

suitable for analysis. That left eighty women in the study, the majority of whom ($n = 49$) were

aged between 40 and 60; at either end of the age range six were in their 30s and two were over 70.

Most resided in Anglophone countries: United States, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, the UK,

and Canada, including a respondent answering in French. Two non-Anglophone countries, the

250   Netherlands and Brazil, were also represented. One participant identified as Asian American, one

as Native American/White, five as Latina, and the remaining participants as White. Of those who

were employed ($n = 59$), the majority were in professional or administrative roles ($n = 49$).

Data Collection

We were granted access to the groups on condition that they not be identified and that all

255   respondents be anonymised. Additionally, the procedures and materials for the study were

approved by the University of Exeter's Department of Psychology's ethics committee[5]. We

designed a questionnaire that allowed for extended answers about participants' thoughts, feelings

and behaviours with regard to their ageing appearances and hair in particular (see Appendix). We

did not ask about reasons for not dyeing their hair in order to avoid suggesting that it was not

260 normative, which might have prompted defensive or exaggerated responses. Members of the groups encountered the questionnaire by means of an explanatory 'sticky' message, which remained visible at the head of discussion threads and explained the study, the ability to withdraw at any time, assuring anonymity. The message linked to the questionnaire where the option to decline to answer any or all questions was repeated.

265 **Analytic Approach**

The responses were imported into NVivo 11 software and we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the data, using the form known as template analysis (King, 2004). This constitutes a group of techniques for thematically organising and analysing data that occupies a position between methods with predetermined codes (such as content analysis; Weber,

270 1985), and those with no prior definition of codes (such as grounded theory; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Template analysis was appropriate for our research as it is applicable to a range of epistemological positions from positivist to social constructivist.

It was thus fitting for our critical realist assumptions about the nature of the 'real world' social context – namely the prevalence of ageism and sexism – in which our participants construct

275 and understand their position. Critical realism takes the premise that in an open socio-economic system *direct* causation cannot be induced or deduced but that the structures and actions that interact to govern human behaviour can be retroduced (Fleetwood, 2014). Such analysis can identify the structures and mechanisms that have a *tendency* to generate observed outcomes.

Template analysis utilises as a starting point a template of predetermined codes derived

280 from literature and the study's areas of interest, which may be substantially amended and refined during the course of the analysis. As such, it is a useful organising system when analysing large data sets such as we had in this study. It combines initial theory-driven codes with subsequent data-driven codes (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall & McCulloch, 2011) to create the equivalent of a code book or manual of code definitions. As a flexible, semi-structured method, it enables the

285   researcher to begin deductive categorisation and analysis of the data while allowing for subsequent

retroductive analysis with the aim of explaining observed outcomes in terms of their antecedent

social structures (e.g., ageism).

        The *a priori* codes that comprised the study's template were derived from reading

published literature, theoretical viewpoints, and the areas of greatest interest (discrimination,

290   motivation, and own and others' views about ageing). This produced a provisional template of 10

codes, which, through successive readings of the data and analysis, was amended as codes were

modified, added, omitted, expanded, or collapsed. In the final analysis some initial codes remained

(e.g., stereotyping), others omitted if they were not useful in explaining the data (e.g., confidence),

while new and unexpected codes were added (e.g., authenticity). All codes were defined in a

295   manual to enable the first two authors to interrogate and clarify them, and were tested through

blind inter-coder checking, iteration, and discussion. Proportion agreement was 92.3%. We

subsequently identified themes that most closely elucidated the underlying patterns in the

participants' experiences and strategies. This resulted in two major themes and six subthemes

incorporating different aspects and domains (see Table 1).

300   Our analysis built upon preliminary commentaries regarding the difficulties that

participants encountered as they transitioned to grey hair, namely stigmatisation, the dilemma of

contradictory societal expectations and the extra work entailed in trying to conform to them

(Cecil, Pendry, Salvatore & Kurz, 2018). In the current study we approached the coding and

generation of themes mindful of the main enquiries of our research: participants' motivations to

305   stop dyeing their hair and their experiences of doing so.

Findings

        We identified two major themes, competence and authenticity. These stood in opposition to

one another: the first was an important quality that participants were in danger of losing in the eyes

of society as they aged, but the second – a motivation for, and benefit of, ceasing to dye – risked

310 forfeiting perceptions of that very competence. Subthemes clustered within each. The first major

theme held subthemes related to the perceived *lack of* competence, namely stigma and

discrimination in life and in work; being shamed for looking like 'mutton dressed as lamb' or

conversely for having 'let oneself go'. It also held a subtheme, compensatory effort, indicating

attempts to retain the perception of competence via attention to hairstyle, clothes, and cosmetics.

315 The second major theme held two aspects of authenticity, namely, feeling and looking authentic;

and benefits of perceptions of (in)competence, that is respect or approachability. In this section we

discuss the themes in turn.

Table 1. about here.

320

Competence

Fear of appearing incompetent recurred in our participants' responses in various guises.

This is in line with theories of social perception indicate that people are located on dimensions of

325 competence and warmth (e.g., Fiske, 2018), and old people and women of any age (unless

subtyped as feminists or career women) are considered low in competence but high in warmth.

While older women may be perceived as competent in social and familial health areas (*vis-à-vis*

men), they are perceived to be low in competence when it comes to work or finances (Kornadt,

Voss & Rothermund, 2013). They thus can find themselves obliged twice over to combat

330 perceptions of incompetence while retaining, if possible, an aura of warmth that encompasses

characteristics such as good-nature, trustworthiness, tolerance, and sincerity (Fiske, Cuddy, &

Glick, 2007). Age- and gender-stereotyping may be seen in the following subthemes describing

participants' experiences of choosing grey hair and their subsequent behaviours.

Stereotyping and Discrimination

335   Participants' responses indicated that they were aware of negative age-stereotyping and its

unequal impact on women:

> It's a struggle for sure. Accepting that, yes, everybody ages…everybody…. Affirming that
>
> it's good, and natural, and beautiful – even though everything I have learned growing up in
>
> society says it's not! Sigh... We are definitely fighting against generations of negative
>
340   perception regarding aging women (Alex, 40-49).

They also indicated that they experienced the effects of such stereotyping, both in relation to

ageing in general and to hair colour in particular:

> I think younger people don't think they can relate to me so they keep their distance.…I
>
> work with college aged students. Before I stopped coloring my hair they thought I was
>
345   much younger and actually treated me like one of their own. Now they treat me like an
>
> older person – assuming I can't relate to them (Tracey, 40-49).

Some found that they were stereotyped as less physically able when they stopped dyeing their hair

and were, for example, offered seats on public transport. Mattie was very happy with her grey hair

but found that it caused other people to stereotype her:

350   I absolutely love my natural hair color.…I feel comfortable and love who and I [am] and

> who I am changing into….[But] I have noticed with my silver hair that I'm viewed and
>
> treated [as if I am] more fragile (Mattie, 50-59).

> Others found themselves considered not just less capable physically but less capable or

competent in other ways too. A participant evidenced the importance of hair colour in the

355   workplace when she said, "I am no longer working so I no longer color my hair" (Alana, 60-69),

suggesting that an older appearance was not looked on favourably at work. Another believed that

she needed to overtly convey competence through how she looked: "In the work place appearance

[of] youth is the first impression. You have to appear on top of your game" (Isabel, 40-49).

To present oneself as competent is, in Goffman's (1963) terms, to employ *disidentifiers,*

360   symbols that negate the symbols that announce a stigma. Youthful-looking dyed hair is one. One

participant felt she had lost her disidentifying symbol of competence at work when she went grey:

"I think my former boss treated me differently after I stopped coloring my hair. It's hard to explain,

but it is almost like I lost credibility with him" (Rose, 50-59).

Shame

365   Stigmatisation of old age as an incompetent and objectionable state can cultivate an

environment that sanctions age-shaming. Our participants reported experiencing this; for example,

"[I] wonder why I waited so long to go grey! I began coloring in my 30's after my sister in-law

shamed my grey strands" (Noelle, 60-69) and "Since I started greying in my teens, I never

associated it with old age. It was only under the influence of others that made me dye my hair"

370   (Trisha, 50-59).

For some the shaming was more subtle as they were rendered socially invisible and thereby

informed of their irrelevance. Typical reports were: "Glad I am natural and not coloring anymore.

But do feel invisible at times and not as appreciated as before" (Val, 60-69) and "I feel

invisible.…I don't exist. I don't matter to anyone who is not in my immediate circle" (Anne, 40-

375   49). On the other hand, having grey hair made some participants' status as 'old' *hyper*visible:

It is difficult at times to be around some of my friends who still color. I stand out like a

sore thumb and some people assume I am much older than they are because of my hair

color…. I do feel like younger people think I am much older than I am because all they see

is the gray/white/silver hair and make assumptions (Rose, 50-59)

380   Another participant was aware of the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of invisibility and

hypervisibility when she reported,

You almost feel invisible at times. I do notice more attention with silver hair

though.…Depends on where you work how you carry yourself and interact with people.

Many people as they age let themselves go assign themselves as old and this would be

385   reflected in how others perceive you (Nina, 50-59).

Letting Oneself Go. Nina's comment suggested that is it normative to think that to be

perceived as old is bad and that it is a woman's duty to prevent this from occurring by not 'letting

herself go' and becoming socially invisible. This common phrase and its implication that lifelong

appearance maintenance is imperative was evident in several responses. Some were explicit

390   rejections, as if anticipating accusations of having fallen into a shameful, stigmatised state: "I am

not letting myself go" (Angela, 50-59). Another participant referred to the gendered nature of the

concept when she said, "There's a thought that once you go natural with your hair color, that you're

'giving up'…. Men never seem to get this criticism" (Olla, 40-49).

Particularly problematic in this regard was the period of transition from dyed to natural

395   hair. Media portrayals of 'successful agers' may include men with tousled multi-coloured hair, but

women are invariably well-groomed and white-haired. They tend not to have half-grown-out (the

"skunk line", Anne aged 40-49), patchy, or piebald hair. While women are uneasy about the

reception of grey hair, they are even more so about this interim stage – which can last months or

years – when they correspond neither to the prescribed appearance of youth, nor to that of the

400   'successfully' aged. Participants indicated fear of others' reactions:

6 months into my transition to my natural grey hair has been quite the journey. Many

mixed emotions, fear of looking old, what others might say, what my husband would think,

ruled most of my day for the first 3 months (Blythe, 50-59).

[When starting to transition] it bothered me a great deal, with a loss of self-confidence, like

405   an unease or shame about having grey hair, as if I have neglected myself. I felt this at work

and in my family life [translated from French by first author] (Mirielle, 60-69).

Mirielle felt not just uneasy but *ashamed* at giving an impression of self-neglect. This is

understandable if older women are already considered incompetent by virtue of their sex and age.

Clarke, Griffin, and Maliha (2009) found that many of their participants made an effort to maintain

410   standards of appearance in order to counter assumptions that they were physically or cognitively

deteriorating. They wanted to show society and reassure family that they were capable, healthy

and independent. According to Twigg (2013), any sign of dereliction in an older woman risks

signalling moral collapse and thus social exclusion. In order to avoid giving the impression of

incompetence or dependency, our participants engaged in compensatory effort to mitigate the

415   ageing effect of grey hair, which we discuss below.

        Mutton Dressed as Lamb. However, there was another hazard to be negotiated: that such

efforts could result in criticism for trying too hard. Our participants wanted to avoid looking fake,

artificially youthful, or unsuccessfully camouflaged. Passing, it seemed, was no longer an option

as to attempt it would also risk shaming: "It's not possible to look younger unless your body is

420   biologically less aged...fake interventions just look artificial" (Kellie, 60-69). As another

participant put it, "I had colored my hair for over 30 years....I decided I wasn't fooling anyone. I

had a sixty year old face. I decided to go natural" (Jenny, 60-69). For Jenny, to try and to fail to

'fool' people through hair dye would be to risk the slur 'mutton dressed as lamb'. Participants,

then, were concerned to avoid looking neglected or unkempt, which requires covering, but also to

425   avoid looking unnatural, which renders attempting to pass as too hazardous.

        In order to retain a sufficiently youthful appearance to give the impression of competence,

while contriving not to look artificial and risk derision, participants felt obliged to pay greater

attention in general to their appearance than previously. They employed as a disidentifier a kempt

or youthful appearance in an attempt to negate the stigmatising symbol of grey hair.

430   *Compensatory Effort*

        Having grey or white hair was considered by many participants or their observers to be

ageing: "I have several girlfriends who think I am too young to wear my hair silver and gray. They

think I should dye it because they think I look young and my hair makes me look older" (Rachael,

50-59). Furthermore, to look old was indisputably objectionable: "I think people just link silver

435   hair with older women. Unfortunately" (Bonnie, 60-69); "I naturally want to look younger and

healthy" (Alana, 60-69).

Consequently, there was an apparently taken-for-granted assumption that grey hair must be

countered by greater attention to its style and cut, application of cosmetics, non-surgical

procedures, and/or careful choice of clothes in order to mitigate its ageing effect. Prue (50-59) said

440   that she was "changing my makeup to compensate"; Nicki (30-39) wrote that, "I wear makeup

almost every day and have started wearing lippy [lipstick] which I have never done". Another said,

I feel [that] the grey hair is very ageing. And I spend £££s on skin care and trying to keep

my wrinkles at bay….I also think I have become a lot more concerned by these ageing

factors since going grey...I guess that's due to the fact that people assume I'm older because

445   of my hair, so I try to compensate in other areas. Not sure I'm succeeding though, and wish

it didn't matter to me quite so much (Elizabeth, 40-49).

Clothes were also put to use in this regard. Many made efforts to modify their clothing in line with

their new appearance: "[I am] wearing stronger colours [and d]ressing a bit more adventurously"

(Nan, 60-69); "I am also learning and paying more attention to fashion, which before I really didn't

450   care a lot about, unless I had a special event…. I now pay more attention to what colors and style

suit my grey hair best" (Blythe, 50-59).

Participants appeared to be resisting cultural invisibility and claiming a place in the social

world through their clothes (Twigg, 2013) and doing so specifically in relation to the newly

acquired grey hair that they believed made their age more obvious and increased their risk of

455   marginalisation and invisibility. The additional effort directed towards non-hair aspects of their

appearance indicates a continuing disassociation from the social category 'old', with its

unwelcome connotations of incompetence. Having relinquished the endeavour to pass as younger

through the use of hair dye, there emerged instead an effort to cover. Consequently, it may be that

460 the maintenance and expenditure no longer directed towards dyeing hair is replaced (or potentially exceeded) by maintenance and expenditure on other aspects of appearance in order to cover sufficiently well to stave off stigmatising social categorization.

In view of participants' awareness of age stigma and discrimination, and the role played by pigmented hair in avoiding membership of a stigmatised social category, one might ask why they would voluntarily opt to stop dyeing it. As one British journalist recently asked, "Who are these

465 women who look like nature intended? Are they actually insane?" (Blackburn, 2019, para.1). What rewards did our participants anticipate? Going grey seemed to satisfy a desire to feel more like their 'true' selves and to find relief from the constant work required to conceal and to self-negate, which they perceived, on balance, outweighed the costs of doing so. The theme we identified to capture and illuminate their motivation was authenticity. However, as discussed below, the costs

470 of having authentically grey hair are such that participants continued to engage in other age-concealing behaviours.

Authenticity

We identified two related manifestations of sought-for authenticity. One was in relation to appearance, and the other in relation to feelings about oneself. Both seemed to offer some benefits,

475 which is the third sub-theme.

Looking Authentic

Participants reported wanting to look natural: as Daria (60-69) wrote, "I'm flying my natural flag." Feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity are powerful motivators as people seek to achieve the former and avoid the latter (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2012). Consequently,

480 it may be that participants' aversion to looking fake is as much a driver toward grey hair as is a desire to look natural or liberation from the effort and expense of dyeing.

Some were aware that the effect of dyed hair could be ageing rather than youthful: "Dyed hair looks so coloured... over-coloured and unnatural. In some cases it can look aging" (Kellie, 60-

69) and "Love my silver…. I see other older women with too dark colored hair and I now find it

485   ageing and fake looking" (Nina, 60-69). These responses suggest that a woman who is

unsuccessful in her attempts to look youthful can be shamed not only for looking like 'mutton' but

also for looking older than her actual age and thus a member of an even lower-status social

category.

An inauthentic appearance was emphatically presented as something to be avoided: "I

490   would be embarrassed to colour my hair back to the way I had it!" (Eva, 60-69), but was to be

balanced against the simultaneous imperative to avoid looking neglected, unkempt and

incompetent. Either course of action entailed a risk of shame and it seems that many of our

participants opted for authenticity while also, however, being vigilant to avoid any suggestion of

neglect and incompetence. That is to say they perceived a need to engage in covering. However, a

495   further factor was evident. Participants suggested that their desire for authenticity was not just to

project an acceptable appearance and avoid being shamed as fake, but also extended to their

personal identity.

Feeling Authentic

Besides wanting to *look* natural, participants wanted to *feel* natural. Rose (50-59) put it this

500   way: "There are times when I've been tempted to color…but I keep coming back to wanting to

stay authentic. I am 55 old, after all, and it is perfectly natural to have gray/white hair. Society is

just going to have to deal with it!" Part of the desire to feel authentic is the specific aim of feeling

in line with a changing (older) self. The following extracts give a flavour of this:

I'd begun to feel like covering [my grey hair] was a sham, and that when I dyed my hair, I

505   was—in a way—pretending to be someone I wasn't. I was not only lying to the world, but

more importantly, I was lying to myself…. With my decision came a new kind of

confidence that I am facing the world exactly as I am" (Ursula, over 70).

"I actually feel better about myself because my exterior matches my chronological age.

This is me, like it or not. I am not pretending to be something I am not. It is quite freeing

510   (Rose, 50-59).

The responses indicated a difference between the motivation to look authentic and the motivation

to feel authentic. The participants who reported wanting to *look* authentic also said they made

more effort with their make-up, skin care and clothing choices. Those who reported wanting to *feel*

more authentic did not. They did, however, say they experienced greater approachability and

515   respect. This suggests that, unlike those making compensatory effort with their appearance, they

were not seeking to distance themselves from the category 'old' but instead to reframe the

meaning of the category.

Benefits

Moving from a youthful or middle-aged appearance to an older one was not wholly

520   characterised as problematic but could also be welcomed. Cultivating an awareness of the benefits

of both being and appearing older was a strategy that some used to mitigate the loss of status and

feelings of shame discussed just above. Three forms of benefits were mentioned frequently by

participants: greater freedom, approachability, and respect.

Freedom The invisibility that participants experienced was distressing for some, but

525   appreciated by others who saw it as a liberation from constant scrutiny: "Noticed slowly becoming

invisible to some people...mostly men...but ok with it. It is freeing. Removes some pressure"

(Penny, 50-59). Some were ambivalent, both regretting and welcoming it:

Where strangers are concerned I can move about in public more freely and unnoticed….

My idea that others see me differently affects me quite a lot. I still have a need to be

530   admired at times, I wish I didn't...but at the same time I quite enjoy the anonymity and

being able to go out without making much of an effort and feeling that people won't be

looking at me anyway...it's all very conflicting (Elizabeth, 40-49).

In addition to these social freedoms, some also mentioned enjoying freedom from the practical

tyranny of frequent dyeing: "I've dyed my hair for most of my life, but it is so great to not have to

535   worry about dying [sic] anymore" (Amanda, 40-49) and "Going grey brings a certain freedom that

is very welcome!!" (Blythe, 50-59).

    Approachability. Paradoxically, perhaps, while *in*visibility can bring benefits, the

*hyper*visibility as 'old' that accompanies grey hair can also do so. Some participants found that

they were more approachable: "Just recently I noticed that more people want to talk to me and

540   approach in public settings [since going grey].... I especially notice younger men and women

making conversation with me" (Katie, 60-69). On adopting grey hair for the second time after

having reverted to dyeing for a period, Ditta said,

    I started again going grey 6 months ago and surprisingly I have the same experience as

    back then; people are nicer to me…, and especially teenage girls turn to me for protection

545   or help when I'm traveling. Nothing important, but I've noticed that they like staying

    around me in airports or train stations like they're looking for some kind of guidance (Ditta,

    50-59).

    Respect. Another agreeable effect of looking older for some was – in contradistinction to

marginalisation – greater respect both in life in general and in the workplace, which some found

550   surprising:

    I actually feel that as I have gotten "older" people are nicer to me, kinder to me, and show

    me more respect than ever in my life before [and] ask my opinion on certain things, and

    spend time in deep conversation with me. [I am] seen as a resource, a guide, a mentor, a

    role model, and even a mother-substitute (Ursula, over 70).

555   Others said, "I feel more respected…. As a nurse I feel more well received as knowledgeable,

trusted and [capable]" (Katie, 60-69); "I find younger people are really polite to me. LOL. Maybe

some sort of default respect because I am older? It's so strange!" (Alex, 40-49). Thus the shame of

old age was offset by focussing on its benefits. Alex, who (as quoted previously) struggled to

accept that ageing was "natural and good", was perhaps able to offset this by giving attention to

560   the greater respect that came with grey hair. Such attention may function as a strategy to maintain

self-esteem and wellbeing.

In the following section we discuss the findings in the context of extant literature and

theories. We consider what they indicate about older women's experience of and resistance to

societal pressures in relation to their appearance and the nature of the authenticity they seek, and

565   the tension between a (subjectively) authentic appearance and perceptions of competence.

Discussion

Eighty participants drawn from several countries composed our large data set, throughout

which we identified some of the ways that ageing women relate to and resist age-stereotyping and

stigmatisation.

570   The social shaming of ageing women is pervasive and insidious in our culture, and younger

people often view old women – if they see them at all – as "little old ladies, as old bags, as useless

nobodies" (Bouson, 2016, p. 2). In the face of trenchant ageism and sexism it is no surprise that

older women try to modify their looks to pass for younger or cover the revealing signifiers. It may

be more surprising that some choose not to. Older women are beset by hazards on all sides. They

575   run the risk of ridicule for being mutton dressed as lamb; the risk of social rejection, erasure and

invisibility; the risk of discredit by virtue of their hypervisible abominations of the body that

relegate them to a 'warm but incompetent' low-status position in society. Our participants gave an

indication of how they negotiate their way through the status-threatening changes that come with

age, and the inherent contradictions of their position given conflicting societal norms for older

580   women's appearance.

Decisions about their hair colour were made in full awareness of stigmatisation of old age,

particularly *women's* old age. Whether choosing to disregard societal expectations and go grey in

the face of others' – including significant others' – disapproval, or to conform to such norms by countering grey hair with cosmetics and careful clothing choices, our participants were attempting to circumvent the stigma they knew was an ever-present danger. Their actions were circumscribed by the shaming perpetrated by other people, whether directly (e.g., from acquaintances, or media commentary) or indirectly (marginalised through being rendered invisible), and from their own internalised age-stereotyping. This included, for example, shame to be seen as someone who tries too hard and fails to be 'age-appropriate', or conversely, as someone who does not try hard enough and looks neglected and incompetent.

A subjective authenticity

The stigma and shame with which participants had to contend stand in opposition to the authenticity they sought. Authenticity – the subjective sense of being one's true self (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013) – is an important psychological state and trait; it is associated with greater wellbeing, physical health, and meaning in one's life (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Clinical practitioners have noted the ways that stressful and stigmatizing experiences like contending with sexist forms of ageism sometimes function as a kind of crucible that produces satisfying subjective feelings of achieved authenticity in later life (Pipher, 2019). Yet practitioners also note that the desire to feel authentic and natural is one that brings women to therapy. Our findings suggest that one of the tensions they may wish to explore is the tension between desiring authenticity and desiring to be treated as competent.

In the case of our participants, a desire to look and feel 'natural' proved sufficiently motivating for them to reject dye and attempt to pass despite societal pressures and their own internalised ageism and self-stereotyping. They opted for an authentic appearance. It was, however, an authenticity constrained by wanting to avoid embodying the "least desirable persona" referred to in the opening quotation (Symonds & Holland, 2008, p29) and membership of a new, deeply ill-favoured social group.

Accordingly, participants made extra, compensatory effort with their appearance to

mitigate the effect of grey hair and conform more closely to an idealised youthful image. No

610   longer thinking it feasible (having acquired grey hair) to pass as younger, they instead covered by

means of careful attention to hair styling, cosmetics and clothes, in an attempt to reduce any

impression of having let themselves go. Through this strategy, which called into question the

character of their authenticity, they hoped to distance themselves from perceptions of unkemptness

and imputed incompetence, and so to retain status.

615   **Conflict between authenticity and perceived competency**

Our participants wanted to resist pressure to conform to an impossible, forever-youthful

image and instead present themselves as authentically grey-haired and thus inevitably older-

looking. However, this may be possible only at the expense of social value: To the extent that

gender- and age-stereotyping designate older women as incompetent, their relevance and social

620   standing depend precisely on *not* looking old.

In critical realist terms, the causal mechanism pushing women not to dye their hair was

society's prescribed and ultimately unachievable appearance norms and women's feelings of

inauthenticity when trying to meet them. The social costs incurred by those deemed to give

insufficient attention to their appearance explains the effort expended on other beauty work and

625   dress in order to maintain a youthful (and thus competent) image. This, however, may seem to

undermine the authenticity they sought.

If grey-haired women's social status can be maintained only by effort devoted to covering,

then the authenticity achieved is highly subjective and also potentially tenuous. While the term

authenticity lacks clarity in the literature, it pertains to internal, personal, and thus necessarily

630   subjective judgements (Newman & Smith, 2016). Vannini and Franzese (2008) conceptualise it as

involving two features: the emotional experience of being true or untrue to oneself and ideas about

what one's true self is. Participants' reports of feeling authentic indicate that they experienced

feeling true to themselves and that that trueness resided, in part, in their appearance.

635   The media coverage of successful ageing – with its depictions of youthful-looking, grey-

haired models, and in particular celebrities with their ages declared – may allow women to feel

authentically their age when they reject hair dye but not when also rejecting cosmetics or current

fashions. This subjective and selective authenticity means that the effort at appearance, post-dye,

may be at least as great as before and the effect, whether 'successful' or not, may be just as much

an artifice. In other words, participants are still pursuing a younger appearance, albeit by means of

640   different variants of beauty work, which still constitute covering and aim more at mitigation than

camouflage.

Limitations and future directions

Ageism and attributions of (in)competence are likely to differ between socioeconomic

groups, employment sectors, ethnic communities, and age cohorts. While the present study

645   benefitted from a large number of participants, they were necessarily confined to those who were

familiar with using the internet to access their peers, and sufficiently concerned about the

consequences of going grey to do so. And, as grey hair can start in early adulthood, we selected a

low age boundary for our participants, resulting in a large age range. Future research could

examine more stratified groupings to tease out the effects of appearance-related ageism and beauty

650   work for sub-groups of older women of differing age ranges who experience the intersection of

different stigmatised identities – for example, related to class, ethnicity or employment status.

Further research could also clarify the nature of the authenticity participants sought and

experienced – whether it was, as Newman and Smith (2016) suggest, a subjective state of feeling

true to oneself and free of social pressures to be otherwise. Interestingly, perceptions of being

655   authentically oneself have been found to increase through the lifespan (Seto & Schlegel, 2018).

However, we might ask whether attempts to be authentically true to oneself in a society where old

age is habitually coupled with incompetence are doomed unless the focus can shift from physical appearance to benefits like respect and approachability. Future research might investigate whether interventions could actualise such a shift.

660   Equally important is to understand whether engaging in the common practice of beauty work – with its trade-off between competence and authenticity – is beneficial to older women's wellbeing. Research might investigate whether continuing effort at appearance *confers* benefit through the maintenance of visibility and social status – or whether, on the other hand, it *threatens* wellbeing through the ever-increasing difficulty of passing, or effectively covering, and fear of

665 failure and being shamed. Conversely, one might ask whether foregoing beauty work bolsters wellbeing by engendering feelings of authenticity or harms wellbeing by exposing women to perceptions of dereliction and incompetence.

Conclusion

   Our study indicates that older women are alert to age-stereotyping and discrimination and

670 the hazard of invisibility, social devaluation, and irrelevance. They want to retain social status. However, they want to do so without resorting to camouflaging their age if that means feeling inauthentic. They may eschew hair dye in the pursuit of authenticity. But avoiding perceptions of incompetence, dependency, and other social decrements of old age demands effort, financial expense, and vigilance not dissimilar from that required to dye one's hair. Such efforts to pass or

675 cover, or on the other hand to desist from beauty work and 'let oneself go', can themselves all risk stigmatisation, discrimination and shaming. Consequently, women can find themselves constrained by incompatible societal expectations and ageist and sexist stereotypes, and beset on all sides by the threat of being shamed. Whatever their decisions about their self-presentation, their appearance will risk feelings of (in)authenticity and perceptions of (in)competence. Future

680 research should seek to quantify and clarify what the effects might be, as well as for whom it might be beneficial versus detrimental to engage in beauty work.

Footnote: 5. Reference number 2017/16619[rev2]

685

Declarations of interest: None

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Appendix

Questions about "age-related changes in appearance" that participants responded to in an open-

845   ended format. Each was followed by its own text box.

There are several aspects of this that we would like to investigate and would be grateful if you would share your experiences, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in response to the questions below. You do not have to answer them all, just as many as you are happy to share your views on.

850   Please write your answers in the text boxes which can be expanded by clicking and dragging the bottom right-hand corner so you can write as much as you like!

1. How do you feel about the changes in your appearance that come with ageing (for example hair, skin, body shape and size)?
2. In particular, what are your thoughts and feelings about changes in hair colour and your

855   hair care choices?
3. Do you take measures to alter your appearance in other ways so as to look younger? If so, in which ways?
4. How old do you feel?
5. How old do you think you look?

860   6. How old would you like to look?
7. Do you think that other people view you or treat you differently as a woman as a result of your changing appearance? Have you noticed other way in which people treat you differently? If so please explain.
8. Do appearance changes affect your work life (if you are working), your social life, your

865   home life? If they do, can you explain how?
9. Do you feel differently about yourself as you notice your changing appearance? If you do, can you explain further?
10. How do you feel about the whole process of your personal ageing, and about ageing in general?

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Table 1.

Major themes, subthemes and their aspects

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Major themes	Subthemes
Competence	Stereotyping and discrimination: life and workplace
	Shame: letting oneself go, mutton dressed as lamb
	Compensatory effort: hair, cosmetics, clothes
Authenticity	Looking authentic
	Feeling authentic
	Benefits: freedom, approachability, respect

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