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Representations of Gender and Ageing - Lessons for Well-Being

Lorna Warren, University of Sheffield

Introduction

Slide 1 This paper provides input to the 'Healthy Ageing in the 21st Century' Policy Commission, focussing on the theme of 'Ageing and wellbeing: flourishing in later life' and drawing from the Representing Self – Representing Ageing project funded under the 'New Dynamics of Ageing' programme (www.representing-ageing.com).¹ The project looked at images of women and ageing and has highlighted some important findings about inequalities relating to the intersection of gender and age as well as lessons learnt from responding to those inequalities evidencing older women's resilience but also the need for educational and policy change.

Slide 2 The study of visual representations of ageing is relatively new. Nevertheless, historical accounts show how visual representations have defined age for UK women since the 1500s (Botelho, 2001) as well as being used by women in campaigns for political representation (Parkins, 1997). They are a sharp reminder of the changing and multi-faceted context of representations.

Slide 3 Within cultural studies, the greater diversity of C21st visual representations of middle aged and older women has been noted but so has a considerably increased chance of the misrepresentation of women in digitally enhanced or airbrushed images (Hurd Clark, 2010).

In general, there are fewer images of women compared with men in the media. An analysis of the use of front page photographs in the major UK national daily newspapers showed females to feature in 36% of the photos compared with males in 50%, while the females who were most commonly the subjects of those photos were young (Women in Journalism, 2012:9-10). Cross-national studies evidence the continuing paucity of images of women's ageing compared with those of men (Zhang et al, 2006).

Slide 4 For women, the physical signs of ageing may be negatively stereotyped, become the butt of humour, the target of an ever expanding and increasingly sexualized beauty industry, or simply hidden from view (Greer, 1996; Hurd Clarke, 2010). Political economists have highlighted the assigning of social value, resources and opportunities by such perceptions (Arber and Ginn, 1991), which are perpetuated through popular media channels (Gill 2006).

Slide 5 A contributory factor in the skewed representation of older women in the UK is undoubtedly the male-domination of the media. Ageing female presenters continue to disappear as TV programmes get "refreshed" (Plunkett, 2011). A log of BBC 1's Question Time in 2011 revealed the show to feature 71.5% male contributors (including David Dimbleby) compared with 28.5% female (Cochrane, 2011).

Slide 6 The more general 'straight-jacketing' of women – young and old - through restrictive ideals concerning appearance, is generating new critiques by commentators interested in the body, ageing and gender (Gill, 2006; Hurd Clarke, 2011; Shilling, 2011; and Twigg, 2004).

¹ A separate powerpoint presentation provides slides of visual images and data to illustrate the points made in this paper (BPC HealthyAgeing ppt LW - Feb 2013.pptx)

Representing Self – Representing Ageing

Slides 7-10 The originality of the Representing Self – Representing Ageing (RSRA) initiative lay in the involvement of ‘ordinary’ older women in that challenge. RSRA was an interdisciplinary project, funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing programme, and involving a team of 12. The initiative enabled older women to work together to critique dominant images of women and, using creative arts, to make their own individual images of ageing. A total of 41 women were involved in the project from start to finish and their ages ranged from 43-96. They participated in workshops using art therapy, phototherapy and community arts based approaches. The images produced were displayed in an exhibition entitled Look at Me!, held in a range of venues in Sheffield in the North of England. The paper draws on findings from the project workshops, interviews with participants conducted before and after the workshops, and questionnaires completed by people attending the project exhibitions.

Older Women and the Media

Slide 11 Asked about the general usefulness of images, participants ranked sight as one of the strongest senses and noted the power and centrality of images in people’s lives. Yet media images were perceived to promote youth, ignore the knowledge and experiences of older women, and, compared with men, treat their appearance more critically. Media images were believed to affect people “subliminally” and from a young age. A high currency was placed on the “airbrushed look” and there was a need for “more images to give positive guidance.” However, a number of the women felt that there was a general absence of any sort of imagery of older women in the media - especially, according to one participant, of images of older lesbians or, accordingly to another, of the portrayal of women’s sexuality in later life. When older women did feature, it was either with surgically or digitally enhanced bodies, or as lacking in confidence, looking passive, dependent, or helpless.

Images which were generally disliked included stereotypes of “vulnerability and frailty”, of being “lonely, housebound, cold and in poverty” and of “helplessness or stupidity” played on in order to elicit help from men.

Specific examples of images disliked by participants included named female celebrities employed to sell anti-ageing beauty products or famed for their denial of ageing through facelifts, strenuous daily workout regimes and a “plastic” glamour.

Cynicism was expressed towards initiatives supposedly bucking trends in media ageism such as the older models in the UK Guardian newspaper.

Slide 12 Representations judged as positive comprised images of women of considerable character and achievement who convey a sense of “solidarity”, “confidence” and “fun”, “don’t apologise for who they are... and continue to survive.” Other women identified work produced by artists, photographers and sculptors that was not necessarily easily found in the media.

A paradox was noted between wanting to see images of good looking, active and coping older women and the reality of inevitable physical and mental deterioration. There was a similar ambiguity of opinion concerning the power of media imagery to influence individual expectations of ageing.

The women participants produced a range of images as a challenge to media representations, or the lack of them, typically showing that women feel ageing at the site of the body.

Art Therapy Workshop

Slides 13-18 Highly personal and tactile art therapy images focused particularly on the look and feel of ageing bodies, skin and hair - including aspects hidden to view, the sense of feeling different inside to the outside that others saw, and to the general sense of the increasing invisibility of women's bodies as they aged. The desire to resist the pervasiveness of anti-ageing and beauty discourses was clear in this imagery.

Phototherapy Workshop

Slides 19-20 Phototherapy is about "using photography to heal ourselves" (Spence, 1986:156) and engages a form of "re-enactment" which involves performing different roles from one's biography in front of the camera. The slides capture the transformative potential of working in a participatory way, exploring ageing as a process and not an end state. Participants dressed flamboyantly or engaged in play and struck poses not usually associated with older women.

Both sets of images – art- and photo-therapy - challenged invisibility and were expressive of the women's reluctance to conform, as well as their creativity.

Community-based Workshops

The final set of 2 community-based workshops were led by professional photographers working to a brief.

Slide 21 The first set of images were taken in the style of portraiture and succeeded in avoiding the 'flashiness' of images currently dominating the media.

Slides 22 and 23 The second set, in contrast, were intended to poke fun at the 'before/after images in magazines and on TV programmes. Compared with the baby boomers dominating the other groups, the women in this group were far less conscious of media images and instead discussed ageing predominantly in the context of health and mobility. Taking the photographs was a source of great fun for the participants.

Nevertheless, analysis of the community-based images shows the difficulty of creating 'alternative' images of ageing. While they may escape the 'heroes of ageing/bodily decline' binary, they potentially fell into other dualistic categorisations of nostalgic/melancholic and humorous/carnavalesque tropes used to depict older people (Richards *et al*, 2011).

Discussion

The traditional identity of, as well as the current political climate framing UK social gerontology has been shaped by a 'politics of method' (Holmwood, 2011) which comprises, on the one hand, the development of a positivist social science and a bio-medical gaze on ageing and, on the other, a modernist project of the welfare state and a political economy concern with (class) inequalities. Alongside other research evidencing the importance of representations (cf Ylänne, 2012), the RSRA project's embodied understanding of age uncovered by taking a participatory visual approach offers a number of important new angles on ageing and well-being:

First, ageing is a highly nuanced process (Botelho and Thane, 2001)

Second, knowledge that originates through living an experience or experiences provides effective challenges to traditional understandings of age. The direct involvement of older women in the Look at Me! project demonstrated the radical or transformative potential of such challenge. It also led to self-sustaining activities and highlighted the key role of resilience.

Slide 25 Those women who took a more personal approach were more likely to find the experience “affirming” and to adopt a new “positive attitude” to ageing as well as an increase in body confidence. In the phototherapy group in particular, women bonded through the “positive reinforcement” they received from one another, and an atmosphere of solidarity was evoked as the women shared and performed their experiences of ageing. This group continues to meet.

Slide 26 The ‘diversionary’ appeal of the community arts-based workshops meant the women in the associated groups “had a whale of a time”. Both groups experienced increased integration, one went on to set up a lunch club for local older people as a result.

Slides 27 & 28 The greater impact for participants in both groups was in seeing their images in the various exhibitions, and the attention/validation they received from friends, family, and the wider public.

Slide 29 Findings from the exhibition questionnaires (n242 in total) show that 87% of visitors found the exhibition either ‘good’ or ‘very good’; 83% found it ‘thought-provoking’ and 88% of visitors said they would like to see more images of older women displayed in public. Comments from visitors expressed both this appreciation but also the desire to participate in similar projects:

The third lesson from research findings is to make sure that investigations of ageism in the media do not place older people in isolation. Quite clearly there is a cross-fertilisation of attitudes to body image - positive and negative - across generations. Today’s younger people are tomorrow’s older generation, and participants stressed the importance of raising awareness of ageing issues early on in children’s education.

Slide 30 & 31 The importance of generations working together can be seen in the ESRC Festival of Social Science activities which Sarah Howson – NDA administrator - and I have held in a local primary school in Sheffield. Collaborating with older women from the Look at Me! project, as well as volunteers from the NDA Older People’s Reference group, we have run Act Your Age! workshops with pupils aged 10-11 years to explore children’s understandings of ageing and later life. In one of the workshop exercises, the children were asked to provide words to describe a selection of images from the Look at Me! project, chosen for their clear potential to challenge representations of older people typically found in the media. The outcome was a range of adjectives and phrases not commonly applied to older people. A new conversation had clearly begun (ESRC, 2013) and the aim is to take forward this work in schools with the support of follow-on funding.

A final important lesson is that images alone are unlikely to transform attitudes to ageing in the same way that the infirmities of old age can not necessarily be resisted through body work alone, despite policy discourses promoting ‘active’ ageing. Indeed, the stylised nature of leisured retirement imagery (McHugh, 2003) – cruises and ‘jolly’ bike rides - was criticised by some project participants as an unrealistic reflection of the lives of older women. The RSRA project has contributed to creating a ‘cultural milieu within which things will be understood differently’ (Lacy in Barnett, 2013: 20). However, policy change is also needed. For this reason, RSRA has recently drafted a Charter against Ageism and Sexism in the Media (ChASM) calling for the media to recognise the role they play in shaping perceptions of women and ageing and to better represent the diversity, complexity and potential of older women. This is to be achieved through equality in the representation, portrayal and employment of women aged 45+ in the media, the avoidance of stereotypes combining ageism and sexism, and the boycotting of ‘graywashing’ (Larkin, 2011) and anti-ageing advertising making false claims about the age-associated benefits and outcomes of a product.

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