



# Designing ‘older’ rather than denying ageing: Problematizing anti-ageing discourse in relation to cosmetic surgery undertaken by older people

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 August 2012

Received in revised form 21 October 2012

Accepted 1 November 2012

### Keywords:

Older people

Cosmetic surgery

Anti-ageing

Foucault

Ethics

Care of the self

## ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes anti-ageing discourse and interpretations that cosmetic surgery is an ageist practice and older people who undergo cosmetic surgery are denying ageing. It argues that conceptions of cosmetic surgery as anti-ageing are premised on an essentialist conception of the ‘naturally ageing body’. Interview data and media texts are used to demonstrate how, through the notion of “re” suggested by terms such as rejuvenation, reversal and renewal, anti-ageing discourses inscribe ‘ageing’ in the practice of cosmetic surgery by older people. The oppressive interpretation that older people who undergo cosmetic surgery are ‘denying ageing,’ and associated subjection to moral critique, are effects of this discourse. To counter interpretations of cosmetic surgery as ‘anti-ageing’, the paper takes up the idea that cosmetic surgery is undertaken to look better not younger. To advance this argument, the paper suggests that the forms of rationality associated with cosmetic surgery constitute a contemporary regimen of ‘care of the self’ which enable ethical agency and creative self-stylisation. Through this framework cosmetic surgery can be re-imagined as a practice for designing ‘older’ rather than denying ageing.

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## Introduction

This paper problematizes the interpretation that older people who engage in cosmetic surgery are ‘denying ageing’. Not only is this interpretation mobilized in popular discourse as a form of social critique targeting those who elect to have cosmetic surgery, but it also emerges in academic scholarship as an oppressive discourse limiting understandings of older subjectivities. In what might be considered ‘cultures of ageing’ scholarship, ‘older’ is currently positioned at the centre of an ethical problematization in which practises such as cosmetic surgery are considered constitutive of an identity of “staying young, choosing not to grow old” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000: p.60). Higgs, Leontowitsch, Stevenson, and Rees Jones (2009: p.699) state for instance, that ‘anti-ageing medicine’ including cosmetic surgery comprise practices of self-care that “seek to overcome the ageing process or mask the signs of ageing”. These self-care practices generate ethical anxiety because they

are considered to produce an appearance of “non-agedness that further reinforces the undesirability and fear of old age” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000 81). In this scholarship, the ‘ageing’ body is at the centre of the problematization and cosmetic surgery is inscribed by anti-ageing discourse as an ageist practice employed to resist or deny ageing (see for example, Bayer, 2005; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Clarke, Repta, & Griffin, 2007; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000).

The problem with interpretations such as these is that they are premised upon essentialist conceptions of ‘ageing’ and “problematically construct a natural, essential, authentic body” (Pitts-Taylor, 2009: p.121). In terms of the ‘older’ body, to borrow from Twigg (2004: p.60), “[e]ssentializing discourses in relation to the body need to be replaced by ones that recognize its nature as a social text, something that is both formed and given meaning within culture”. Conceptualizations of the body as a surface or plane of signification can generally be traced to Foucault who describes the body as “the inscribed surface of events...totally imprinted by history” (Foucault, 1984a: p.83). What he suggests is that the materiality and comportment of the body are shaped and given meaning

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through practices of discursive inscription. Through these practices, power is invested in the 'text' of the body and operates to shape the way in which it is 'read'. Given this theorisation of the body, the "path to ageing 'naturally' is highly problematic" since "If there is no natural body, then there is no natural way to age" (Twigg, 2004: p.63). If there is no natural way to age, then interpretations of cosmetic surgery as 'anti-ageing' are destabilized and questions are raised about what it means to look a particular age and attempts to look 'younger'. It becomes evident then, that cultural constructions of 'age' are imprinted on the body through a normative schema.

Using theoretical and empirical resources, this paper problematizes the essentialist rendering of cosmetic surgery as 'anti-ageing'. As a practice of body modification, cosmetic surgery is significant because the body is the nexus or site where "forces of cultural reproduction, social structuration, and reflexivity" intersect to constitute the 'self' (Gabardi, 2001: p.88). As post-essentialist feminist scholars have argued, cosmetic surgery is therefore implicated in processes of becoming a subject and possible forms of subjectivity in western society and culture (Fraser, 2009; Heyes, 2007; Jones, 2008; Pitts-Taylor, 2007). In this context, Foucault's (1990a,b, 1994a, 2005) work on ethics, in conjunction with contemporary social theory literature on ethics, provides the basis for an analytic approach to understanding cosmetic surgery as a practice for self-stylisation. In addition, this paper insists, following Twigg (2004: p.62), that an empirical approach is needed that "recognizes that personal struggles and experiences offer an important touchstone for academic theorizing" and is "grounded in the voices of those who are themselves subject to" the discourses that seek to interpellate them. However, as Butler (2005: p.7) reminds us, discourse establishes limits to the ability to give an account of the self since "there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence".

The methodological approach pursued in this paper takes up 'interpretations of interpretations' (Foucault, 1994c: p.276) where the referent is thought itself. This is consistent with Foucault's (1984b: p.388) conceptualization of problematization which entails "the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself". The aim is to problematize anti-ageing discourse and generate cultural space in which it becomes possible to "think differently" (Foucault, 1990b: p.9). Using theoretical and empirical resources, this paper offers an interpretation of older people and cosmetic surgery that evokes artistry and freedom of self-stylization. One that suggests older people who undergo cosmetic surgery are designing 'older' rather than denying ageing.

### Care of self and ethical self stylization

In his later work, Foucault (1990a,b) takes up the problem of ethical self-formation to problematize the dominant western mode of ethics where the principle target is a 'hermeneutics of the subject' that produces essentialist conceptions of the subject. Through historical analyses of ancient Greek and Roman texts, Foucault (1990a,b, 1994a, 2005) locates an aesthetic mode of ethics anchored in a stylistics of existence associated with a life of virtue and beauty. This ethos was dominated by the principle of 'care of self' which meant continually 'working on' or 'being concerned with' the self (Foucault, 1994d). This work on the self was not an obligation

imposed on the individual but rather associated with an active freedom. To engage in 'care of the self' was therefore to reflect upon oneself and freely cultivate oneself as an ethical subject by engaging in practices of self care (Foucault, 1994b).

Foucault's analyses explored "how one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject" and "the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being" (Foucault, 1990b: pp.26, 30). He defined these practices of self as "the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, offered or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, transform it in terms of a certain number of ends" (Foucault, 1994c: p.87). These practices were associated with a "matrix of practical reason" (Foucault, 1994f: p.225) which Foucault (1991: p.79) suggests "inscribe themselves in practices" and are 'folded in' (Deleuze, 1986) during processes of self-formation. These processes entail self-reflection, self-examination, self-decipherment, self-transformation and so on and constitute a reflexive relation of self to self.

Given that 'care of the self' entailed critical reflection, Rabinow (2003: p.10) observes that it "was also a form of critique, a critique of the self that entailed perpetual self examination". Foucault considered the practice of critique a virtue, linked to an ethos of what it means to be and how being might be experienced differently (Foucault, 1997). As Lloyd (1996: p.250 original emphasis) explains, "self-fashioning, when allied to critique, can produce sites of contestation over the meanings and contours of identity, and over the ways in which certain practices are mobilized". That sites of contestation over meaning can be generated by critique is in line with Foucault's conception of resistance and his proclamation that "discourse is the power which is to be seized" (Foucault, 1981: p.211). Moreover, Lloyd is suggesting that through critical engagement, the rationality associated with practices of self can be negotiated or influenced. Adopting this position draws analytic attention to the ways in which agency, freedom and resistance are performed through the body using cosmetic surgery to stylize appearance in ways that challenge the normative schema of 'ageing' and 'anti-ageing'.

### The contemporary ethos

Given that Foucault's analyses of ethics were based on ancient Greco-Roman texts, this paper requires an exploration of contemporary ethical contexts in which to situate the analyses. Rose (2007) observes that in contemporary neoliberal consumer culture, selfhood has become intrinsically somatic and ethical practices increasingly take the body as a key site for work on the self. He suggests that "somatic ethics" are "ethics not in the sense of moral principles" but rather "the values for the conduct of a life — that accords a central place to corporeal, bodily existence" (Rose, 2007: p.6). Prior to Rose's work, Baudrillard (1998: p.129) argued that "the body has today become an object of salvation" and has "literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul". This contemporary ethical domain compels individuals "to put themselves in the service of their own bodies" because "[o]ne has a duty to take care of oneself" (Baudrillard, 1998: p.140 original emphasis). Taking care of the body has become synonymous with taking care of the self and practices for cultivating the body operate in the context of virtues belonging to an art of living.

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