



"I'll do anything to maintain my health": How women aged 65–94 perceive, experience, and cope with their aging bodies



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ABSTRACT

We explored how physically active women perceived, experienced, and coped with their aging bodies, and examined their perceptions of the utility of self-compassion to manage aging body-related changes. Findings from a thematic analysis of interviews with 21 women aged 65–94 revealed that they were appreciative of how their bodies worked and accepting of their physical limitations, yet concurrently critical of their body's functionality and appearance. Participants engaged in physical activity and healthy eating to maintain their health and body functionality, yet also used diet, hair styling, anti-aging creams, makeup, physical activity, and clothing to manage their appearances. To assess their bodies (in)adequacies, they engaged in upward or downward social comparisons with others their age. Participants perceived self-compassion for the aging body to be idealistic and contextual. Findings highlight the importance of health and body functionality in influencing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral management of the aging body.

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1. Introduction

Population is aging rapidly in Western countries; estimates suggest that one in four people in Europe and North America will be 60 years or older by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2015). As a result, researchers have become increasingly interested in the factors that influence how older adults manage the physical changes accompanying age, such as loss of mobility (Korotchenko & Hurd Clarke, 2016), a perceived inability to meet societal body norms of health and youthfulness (Tiggemann, 2011), and chronic health concerns (Hurd Clarke & Bennett, 2012a). The study of body image, a multidimensional construct reflecting a person's body-related perceptions, cognitions, emotions/affect, and behavior, has been central to this inquiry as older women's body image issues may influence life satisfaction, appearance management, physical activity behaviors, social engagement, and healthy eating (Cash, 2011; Tiggemann, 2011). Researchers have examined the influence of widespread cultural representations of ideal feminine bodies in the media, including the marketing of appearance-related products such anti-aging cosmetics, clothing, grooming, hair dye, dieting,

and surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures (Hurd Clarke, 2010). Women have been inundated with ageist cultural messages that they should strive to remain youthful and healthy looking evidenced by toned, thin, and wrinkle-free appearances (Bordo, 2003; Bouson, 2016; Grogan, 2008; Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011).

The physical age-related changes that prompt older women to deviate from Western feminine societal beauty standards have been shown to be negatively associated with their self-perceptions (Grogan, 2008; Hurd, 2000). Older women have reported engaging in dieting (Lietchy, 2012) and "beauty work" (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007; p. 187), such as the use of hair dye, make-up, anti-wrinkle creams, and (non)surgical cosmetic procedures to retain their femininity, physical attractiveness, and youthful appearances, to counter the negative effects of ageism, such as social invisibility. They have reported strategically choosing 'age appropriate' clothing (i.e., not too colorful or revealing) to project a healthy and independent self to others, and to conceal changes in body shape and size, wrinkles, and sagging skin (Jankowski, Diedrichs, Williamson, Christopher, & Harcourt, 2016). Many older women have also adopted cognitive strategies in the face of aging body-related challenges. For example, they have rejected the internalization of societal beauty norms, have used cognitive reappraisal (e.g., lowering their expectations as they move away from the youthful ideal; Piran, 2016; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003), have become increasingly accepting of their aging bodies (Bailey, Cline,

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& Gammage, 2016; Lietchy, 2012), and have shifted their concerns from appearance to functionality as health issues and body restrictions have come to the forefront with advancing age (Hurd, 2000; Jankowski et al., 2016).

At the same time, women have reported managing their aging bodies by engaging in health promoting behaviors such as physical activity and healthy eating (Bailey et al., 2016; Hofmeier et al., 2016; Hurd Clarke & Bennett, 2012b; Piran, 2016). Older women exercisers have reported discontent with their weight, loss of skin elasticity, and changes in body composition, yet simultaneous appreciation of their height, muscle tone, and body functionality as a result of their engagement in physical activity and the absence of major health concerns (Bailey et al., 2016). They have recounted the importance of eating well and being physically active to maintain their health (Hofmeier et al., 2016; Piran, 2016). Older women have also engaged in physical activity and healthy diet due to the belief that they are responsible for their own health, to maintain their independence, and to continue to adhere to feminine norms of selflessness and sensitivity to the needs of others (Hurd Clarke & Bennett, 2012b).

1.1. Aging, self-compassion, and the body

While societal pressures to embody gender norms of femininity may negatively influence later life perceptions and experiences, self-compassion could be an effective resource to enhance psychological well-being (Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade, 2015). Self-compassion is “an emotionally positive self-attitude that should protect against the negative consequences of self-judgment, isolation, and rumination (such as depression)” (Neff, 2003, p. 85). It is comprised of three components, namely, (a) self-kindness, being kind and non-judgmental towards oneself when facing challenges; (b) common humanity, perceiving one's imperfections and difficulties as part of the shared human experience; and (c) mindfulness, a balanced awareness of cognitions in which emotional difficulties are not ignored but also not overly identified with. Self-compassion has the potential to enhance psychological health, as it focuses on self-acceptance as opposed to social comparison and self-evaluations (Neff, 2003), has been associated with healthy eating, sleep, exercise, and stress management (Dunne, Sheffield, & Chilcot, 2016; Sirois, Kitner, & Hirsch, 2015), and has been found to reduce the adverse effects associated with younger women's perceived inability to meet societal beauty norms and expectations (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015; Tylka, Russell, & Neal, 2015).

Findings from quantitative research measuring older adults' self-compassion have suggested that those high in self-compassion tend to be more positive about the aging process (Allen, Goldwasser, & Leary, 2012; Allen & Leary, 2013; Phillips & Ferguson, 2013). Self-compassion has also been positively associated with psychological well-being (Homan, 2016; Smith, 2015), health promoting behaviors, the use of adaptive coping strategies when dealing with health concerns (Allen et al., 2012), positive affect, ego integrity, and meaning in life (Phillips & Ferguson, 2013) in older adults. At the same time, research with younger populations has suggested that some may fear and resist self-compassion (Kelly, Carter, Zuroff, & Borairi, 2013; Robinson et al., 2016). Individuals low in self-compassion associated self-compassionate responses with negative attributes that involved low motivation, self-indulgence, low conscientiousness, and poor performance (Robinson et al., 2016). In addition, a subset of patients undergoing treatment for an eating disorder who were lower in self-compassion and higher in fear of self-compassion experienced more shame and eating disorder pathology over a 12-week treatment period than their counterparts higher in self-compassion and lower in fear of self-compassion (Kelly et al., 2013). However, the

fear of self-compassion in the face of aging body-related difficulties remains unexplored.

To our knowledge, no qualitative research to date has focused on older adults' experiences of self-compassion. Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, and McHugh (2010) conducted interviews with young women exercisers to explore their experiences with self-compassion in relation to their body, thereby coining the term *body self-compassion*, a non-judgmental attitude an extension of self-kindness in the face of body-related challenges. The participants' experiences of body self-compassion were buttressed by the avoidance of social comparison, body-acceptance, body self-care, and positive and non-judgmental support of others. While these findings shed light on younger women's experiences, older women's self-compassion in relation to the body remains unexplored.

1.2. The present study

A growing body of research has highlighted some of the negative and adaptive ways in which older women relate to their bodies. However, research is needed to further explore the complexities associated with how women cope when faced with aging-body-related changes to their appearances, body functionality, and health. There is some evidence to suggest that self-compassion may be an effective resource to cope with the aging process and with body-related challenges in younger women, yet little is known about older women's experiences of self-compassion in relation to the body.

Building on the aging body and self-compassion literature and aiming to address these gaps in the extant research, the primary purpose of this study was to explore how women aged 65+ perceived, experienced, and coped with the physical changes that accompany aging. This included an examination of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies they employed to manage the demands associated with changes to their body's appearance, functionality, and health (Lazarus & Lazarus, 2006). A secondary purpose was to examine the women's experiences of self-compassion, and their perceptions of its utility as a resource in the face of aging body-related changes. We aimed to better understanding of the complexities of women's body perceptions and experiences, and to extend the limited existing research on older women's body image and self-compassion.

Because there is evidence to suggest that physical activity participation may influence older women's body-related experiences (Bailey et al., 2016; Hofmeier et al., 2016; Piran, 2016), we chose to speak to women who engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity as this may have influenced how they perceive, experience, and cope with their aging bodies. Drawing on data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 physically active women aged 65–94, we addressed the following research questions: (a) how do physically active older women perceive, experience, and cope with their aging bodies? and (b) what role might self-compassion play in shaping physically active women's perceptions and experiences of their aging bodies?

2. Method

We adopted a constructionist qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews and analyzing the data through a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016), to explore the meanings women ascribed to their bodies and how these meaning-making practices shaped their aging body-related perceptions and experiences. To highlight the importance of participant and researcher interpretation in constructionist qualitative research, we considered the research context in which the findings were constructed,

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