

The feeling of appearance and the appearance of feeling: Exploring hair practices and cultures of the body in dementia care

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This paper considers appearance and the work invested in maintaining it in the context of dementia care. We report findings of the Hair and Care project an ESRC funded ethnographic study of the styling and management of hair by and for people living with dementia. The discussion will explore certain questions that have punctuated our investigation, including dilemmas of how best to understand and define appearance, ways of understanding the role it plays in the context of ageing and disability, and the opportunities it affords for rethinking how we approach care and support. Our research involved the development of 'appearance biographies' as a tool for exploring participants' embodied histories while we also set about investigating the more immediate bodily experience of the care-based salon through 'ethnographic encounters' using filming and in-situ conversations. Through this mix of methods we have gained insights into how appearance feels and in particular the multisensory and affective dimensions to visiting the hairdresser. As a result, we have arrived at an understanding of appearance as fluid and processual; gendered performances rooted in long-standing patterns of socialisation and enculturation. Our data suggest that appearance is meaningful beyond its culturally encoded and symbolic outward markers. How appearance is felt and sensed carries meaning as well, not least in how a particular configuration of sensations, such as are involved in a visit to the hairdresser, become sedimented in the course of a person's life to form the basis of embodied knowledge and memory. These findings offer some useful pointers for care practice and suggest further exploration might benefit our understanding of how people with dementia use their bodies and senses in the creation of meaningful worlds.

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