Body Image Issues of Women Over 50

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The CIA should hire as spies only women over fifty, because we are the truly invisible.
(Piercy, 2006, p. 1)

In her poem *I Met a Woman Who Wasn’t There*, Marge Piercy (2006) described a common sensation experienced by midlife women: the transition from visibility to invisibility. In cultures in which notions of beauty and femininity are closely tied to youth, there comes a point when women, no matter how healthy, well groomed, and nicely attired they are, can pass by without attracting the attention of men or younger women. The point at which this happens no doubt differs for different women, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is around age 50 when women, particularly women who had previously been praised as beautiful, suddenly realize that no one is looking at them anymore. This realization is a shock, but then what happens? Some women seem to react with relief—there is no longer any need to dress up and make up in order to impress; they can relax and simply be themselves. Other women panic—those who can afford it seek out cosmetic surgeons, personal trainers, and others who earn a living that derives in large part from the fear of aging. Is there any way to predict which women will react which way? How do women feel about the changes that accompany aging? How well or poorly do they adjust to those changes? These are some of the topics this chapter will address.

Youth-oriented Cultures

It can be a challenge to feel comfortable about aging in cultures where older women are rarely seen, and those who are seen are celebrated primarily for their “youthful” good looks (Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993). Although we are told that we are only as old as we feel, the dearth of images of women over 50 in the media drive home the message that women should either grow old “gracefully” by hiding the signs of aging (Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993) or stay out of sight. Wolf (1991) interviewed
editors of North American women’s magazines who admitted that signs of aging are routinely “airbrushed” from photographs through computer imaging, so that 60-year-old women are made to look 45. Lear’s, a U.S. magazine aimed at midlife women (it’s slogan was “the magazine for the woman who wasn’t born yesterday”; it ceased publication after only a few years), rarely published photographs of gray-haired women (Gerike, 1990), and a content analysis (Nett, 1991) of Chatelaine, a Canadian magazine for midlife women, showed that midlife women were absent from the covers and the fashion and beauty sections and underrepresented in the advertisements. The editorial decisions made by the magazines’ staff suggest that even midlife women do not want to see images of midlife women. Perhaps the editors are correct, but, if so, it is because the media shape women’s preferences. Midlife women told McFarland (1999) that they are well aware that the media create the beauty standards women espouse; even though midlife women have the wisdom to realize that the images represent fantasy rather than reality, many of them still wish that they could match those standards.

Most women in Hollywood films are in their 20s and 30s (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). It is not uncommon to see older men paired romantically on screen with women several decades younger than they are; for example, Clint Eastwood, Sean Connery, and Jack Nicholson have continued to play romantic lead roles well into their 70s. But as women approach midlife they begin to disappear from the Hollywood scene. Some who have had cosmetic surgery can hang on to their careers into their 40s, but eventually they find that there are few roles for them unless they start production companies and develop film projects for themselves. In the 2003 film Something’s Gotta Give Diane Keaton played a woman in her 50s who stole her daughter’s lover played by Jack Nicholson. It was both a shock and a delight to see Keaton on the screen—beautiful, yet clearly showing signs of age that had not been surgically altered. In a content analysis of the top 100 grossing Hollywood films of 2002, Lauzen and Dozier (2005) found that midlife and older women were seen on screen significantly less often than their male peers. As female characters aged, they were less likely to have goals or a purpose to their lives; as male characters aged, they were more likely to have power.

The same invisibility of midlife and older women is found on U.S. broadcast television. Over the years a number of content analyses (Gerbner et al., 1980; Glascock, 2001; Vernon et al., 1991) of prime time television programming have shown that the majority of female characters are 35 years old or younger, whereas male characters are more evenly distributed across the age range—at least up to the mid-50s. Davis (1990) found little gender difference in the number of female (12.1%) and male (14.8%) characters over age 50, but Vernon et al. (1991) pointed out that older men tend to be portrayed more positively than older women. The invisibility of older women is as common in news and public affairs programming as it is in entertainment programming. Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright is the only older woman I regularly see on these programs, and it is not unusual to find her on a panel with a number of men her age and older, usually being interviewed by male journalists over age 50. Barbara Walters has managed to continue her career well beyond the age when most women on television fade...