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Clothing, Embodied Identity and Dementia:

Maintaining the Self through Dress

Abstract

Clothes are central to how we perform our identities. In this article we show how these processes continue to operate in the lives of people with dementia, exploring the ways in which dress offers a means of maintaining continuity of self at a material, embodied level. The article thus contributes to the wider cultural turn in ageing studies, showing how material objects are significant in meaning making even for this mentally frail group. The article draws on an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study “Dementia and Dress”, examining the implications of clothing for people with dementia, carers and careworkers, using ethnographic and qualitative methods. It showed, despite assumptions to the contrary, that dress remained significant for people with dementia, continuing to underwrite identity at both the individual level of a personal aesthetic, and the social level of structural categories, such as class, gender and generation. The article explores how identity is performed through dress in social interaction, and the tensions that can arise between narrative and embodied enactment, and around the “curation” of identity. Dress provides a lens for understanding the lives of people with dementia; while at the same time, focusing on dementia expands discussions of fashion, consumption and cultural meanings of ageing.

Introduction

Older people have been largely absent from fashion studies which, reflecting the values of the fashionable world, has focused its gaze on the youthful, subversive and transgressive (Hurd Clarke, Griffin, and Maliha 710; Twigg, “Fashion” 2). Though dress is widely theorized in terms of identity – its performance, expression and attribution – the identities explored in this

literature have been limited. It is often assumed that clothes cease to matter as people grow old. For people living with dementia this is all the more the case - a loss of interest in appearance is often regarded as symptomatic of the condition (Jenkins and Price 86; Twigg, “Clothing” 223), and is a visible signifier of dementia in medical advertisements (Downs 369). Dress is associated with expressivity, agency, and choice - qualities that are presumed to erode with the progress of the condition. In this article, by contrast, we argue that dress continues to be significant in the everyday experiences of people living with dementia. This understanding helps support the wider movement towards a greater recognition of personhood and the role of embodiment in the lives and identities of people with the condition.

In this article, questions of clothing and identity are explored drawing on the findings of the “Dementia and Dress” study. Our analysis builds on conceptual themes set out by Twigg and Buse in “Dress, Dementia and the Embodiment of Identity”, developing these themes through exploration of empirical findings. We begin with a brief overview of research on clothing, identity and age, before addressing its significance to literatures on personhood, embodiment and dementia. Our analysis is then organized into four key themes, firstly: Clothing, Dementia, and Embodied Identity examines the ongoing significance of dress as part of personal and social identities, and tensions between narrative and embodied enactments of self. We then explore the significance of clothing for Negotiating Frailty and Dementia, with potential to ascribe, as well as resist, “the classic look of the dementia patient” (Twigg, “Clothing” 228). The following section explores how Clothes as Biographical Objects can challenge the reduction of the person with dementia to their condition, evoking past identities. The final theme explores identity as intercorporeal, with family carers and careworkers drawn into Curating Identity through Dress. The concluding discussion considers implications for understandings of dementia, as well as for broader theories of

ageing, suggesting that the experiences of frail older people should not be positioned outside cultural and material analyses.

Clothing, Age and Identity

There is a long history of work exploring the relation of clothing to identity, and the role of dress in the constitution of social difference and social order (Entwistle 112-139). The focus has largely been on the master identities of gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity.¹ Age has been comparatively neglected, reflecting its wider treatment in sociology and cultural studies (Laws 12-18). There is, however, a small but growing body of work exploring the clothing experiences of older women (e.g. Church Gibson 322-37; Fairhurst 258-75; Hurd Clarke, Griffin, and Maliha 709-26). In *Fashion and Age* Twigg describes dress as “age ordered”, with the choices of older women constrained by cultural norms of age appropriate dress (25). At the same time, this literature suggests that norms of being older are changing, and that this is reflected in dress practice.

Dress has thus become implicated in current debates around the changing cultural constitution of age and the role of consumption in this, located within the wider “cultural turn” in gerontology (Gilleard and Higgs, *Cultures* 22). This involves a shift from conceptualizing age identities as determined by social structure, to examining changing meanings of ageing within the context of consumer culture, and the increasing fragmentation of the life-course. Identities – including age identities – are seen as increasingly diverse, marked by agency and choice, reflexively constituted through consumption practices (Gilleard and Higgs, *Cultures* 24-25). Images of “positive ageing” are emerging, associated with maintaining a youthful lifestyle and appearance (Featherstone and Hepworth 30), in which clothing is a part (Twigg and Majima 23). However, as argued by Katz and Laliberte-Rudman, contemporary ageing is also characterized by a “unique contradiction between

experiences of personal freedom and structural constraint” (48). They describe how ideals of “positive” and “successful ageing” can be oppressive, part of neo-liberal discourses of self-responsibility, which marginalize those experiencing bodily decline or impairment (49).

These tensions between structure and agency, “fixity and flux” (Biggs 47) are explored in theories of age identities as performative. It is argued that age is something we “do”, constituted through social interactions (Laz 86), and stabilized through repeated performances. However, as argued by Swinnen and Port: “since a repetition can never be identical to its original script, there is always the possibility of subversion and change” (12). Biggs (53) develops these ideas through the concept of masquerade, describing the performance of age as a “tactical manoeuvre” – a strategy for concealing “socially unacceptable aspects of ageing”, in order to protect a coherent sense of self. Dress can be conceptualized as part of how age identities are performed - a strategy for managing the complex interplay of age identities and bodily ageing (Twigg, Fashion 46). This may adhere to normative ageing, or allow for transgressive performances, either in the form of vivid, outlandish outfits that challenge invisibility (Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 57), or an unadorned appearance, that refuses to disguise the ageing process (Church Gibson 326).

These accounts of identity fit with a growing body of work exploring everyday experiences of dress as a “situated bodily practice” (Entwistle 11). This literature emphasizes the materiality of dress, which acts back on the self at a direct bodily level, shaping possibilities for identity construction. The relationship of identity to dress is not regarded as pre-given, rather as something which emerges through everyday practices of selecting, trying on and wearing clothing (Woodward 14). These daily clothing decisions are shaped by interplay between structure and agency, between broader social norms, and the intimate relationship of clothing to the wearer (Banim, Green, and Guy 1-8).

Discussions of dress, performativity and age have generally focused on the “young old”, who are physically and socially active (e.g. Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 54; Fairhurst 258-75). Those experiencing frailty or bodily decline by and large remain marginalized from these new possibilities for ageing. As argued by Gilleard and Higgs (“Ageing, Abjection” 168), images of positive ageing are rooted in bodily control, agency, and self-care, capacities diminished with the progression of dementia. Indeed a loss of interest in appearance is often interpreted as an early sign of the condition (Jenkins and Price 86). Dementia can disrupt the ability to recognize one’s image in the mirror (Twigg, “Clothing” 226), and to dress the body independently and expressively (Feyereisen, Gendron, and Seron 169-88), reflecting the “disruption of the skilled, habitual body” (Phinney and Chesla 288). Yet literatures on dementia, personhood and embodiment have also challenged these assumptions, reinstating the selfhood of people with dementia, and suggesting the potential of embodiment and appearance as part of this (Kontos and Martin 290-91).

Embodiment, Personhood and Dementia

Dementia has traditionally been conceptualized as the “erosion of selfhood”, a consequence of progressive cognitive impairment (Kontos, “Redefining Agency” 105). This notion of the loss of the person is central to the fear and stigma associated with the condition. Increasingly however, this is being challenged through the personhood approach, which emphasizes the relational aspects of the self that remain intact despite cognitive impairment (Sabat 295).

Kitwood defines personhood as: “a standing or status that is bestowed upon one human being by others, in the context of relationship and social being. It implies recognition, respect and trust” (8). The personhood approach challenges the marginalization of the experiences of people with dementia, instead bringing their voices to the center of research and practice (Downs, “The Emergence” 601-04).

Kontos has taken this literature forward, highlighting the embodied dimensions of selfhood. Drawing on Bourdieu and Merleau Ponty, she challenges the Cartesian dualist notion of the self as underpinned by a division between mind and body, arguing instead that selfhood continues to be enacted through habitual, embodied practices and gestures (“Ethnographic Reflections” 837). Agency and intentionality are re-conceptualized as something which can be enacted at a pre-reflective, bodily level (“Redefining Agency” 119). In her work she cites various examples, including ones relating to clothing and appearance. For instance, she describes Molly, a woman with advanced dementia and physical frailty, painstakingly reaching under her bib to draw out her string of pearls, placing them delicately on top: “with that simple gesture, Molly emerged from her world of decrepitude, incontinence, dementia, and helplessness” (“Embodied Selfhood” 198).

Kontos’ work therefore opens up a space for thinking about the significance of clothing, appearance and embodiment within the lives of older people with dementia. While the appearance and dress of people with dementia has been presented as part of the labor of care staff, a form of bodywork (Chatterji 227; Reed-Danahey 53; Twigg et al. 1-18), the subjective experiences of appearance have been relatively neglected. However, recent work is beginning to address this, for instance, Ward and Campbell’s research on hairdressing as an embodied and sensory experience (341) situated within “appearance biographies” (Ward, Campbell, and Keady 66). There is also growing recognition of the body as a site for more positive care interactions, which facilitate communication, engagement and recognition through bodily practice (Downs, “Embodiment” 370). While dress has not been the focus of previous research, reminiscence theatre work has utilized clothing in the enactment of memories (Schweitzer 251-53), and illustrates how clothes can trigger memories for people with dementia as they are touched, held and worn (Schweitzer, Bruce, and Gibson 61-2). The

significance of having one's own clothing is also recognized as part of person centered care (Brooker 55).

At the same time, research has begun to develop a more nuanced understanding of the social identities of people with dementia. Hulko critiques unitary conceptualizations of personhood, arguing for a focus on social identity as fluid, contingent and intersectional ("Social" 238). She explores how intersections of class, ethnicity and gender create different experiences and interpretations of living with dementia ("From Not" 131-44). There is also a growing body of work exploring the narrative identities of people with dementia, and their construction through embodied performance and gestures (Hyden and Orulv 211). Building on this research, and dress studies literatures, the Dementia and Dress study sought to further explore the implications of dress for embodied identity, using creative visual and sensory methods such as "wardrobe interviews" (Banim and Guy 218) to understand the experiences of people with dementia.

The Dementia and Dress Study

Dementia and Dress was a two year, ESRC funded study which explored the significance of clothing in the daily lives of people with dementia, their carers and careworkers, using ethnographic and qualitative methods. It was conducted across three Kent care homes and fifteen domestic households. Thirty-two people with dementia took part in the study: fifteen in domestic settings, and seventeen in the care home sample. Participants were selected purposively to reflect different stages of dementia (from mild to severe), different socio-economic backgrounds (see table 1), and to include both men and women (nine men and twenty three women). They were recruited with support from local voluntary sector organizations, and care home managers. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted

with twenty-nine family carers and relatives, twenty-eight members of care home staff (care-workers, managers and laundry staff), and two clothing company representatives.

Methods of data gathering included “wardrobe interviews” (Banim and Guy 218) with people with dementia and family carers, interviewing them alongside their wardrobes, and using the materiality of dress to prompt discussion. Interviews addressed the theme of identity by asking people with dementia: what is important about their clothes; their likes, dislikes and favorite clothes; and exploring how their style had changed over time. A range of visual and sensory prompts were used in one-to-one discussions and reminiscence groups, including: photographs, images, vintage garments, and fabric samples. The concreteness of these props helped to elicit responses from people who struggled to participate in more abstract verbal discussions. Twenty three participants took part in the wardrobe interviews – nine were unable to participate in these because of their more advanced level of dementia.

The experiences of participants with more advanced dementia were included in the study through use of observations and informal discussions (Hubbard, Downs, and Tester 352). Observations were qualitative and unstructured, taking place in the public areas of the care homes, as well incidentally during visits to domestic households. Activities which were observed included: assistance with dress in public spaces; the location of dress within care routines; informal discussions of dress among care-workers and residents; non-verbal responses to clothing and interactions with dress. Observation sessions lasted on average five hours, taking place one – two days per week in each care home over a three month period, on different days of the week and times of day.

Detailed field-notes were recorded after each session, and formal interviews were transcribed. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial analysis took place after each research visit, as part of the writing up of field-notes, identifying emerging themes and ‘puzzles’.

Formal analysis began with a careful reading and re-reading of transcripts and fieldnotes, noting down emerging themes and concepts. A list of themes was then developed collaboratively by the research team, and used to code transcripts and fieldnotes, assisted by NVIVO qualitative software.

As the study included people without capacity, ethical approval was obtained from the Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC). Where the person did not have capacity to give informed consent, family carers acted as personal consultees. Every effort was made to involve the person with dementia in the decision process, explaining the study verbally, and using simplified information sheets with visual aids (Bartlett and O'Connor 108). Consent was treated as ongoing process, and the researcher continuously assessed the willingness of the person to be involved (Hubbard, Downs, and Tester 353), monitoring verbal and non-verbal signs of assent or dissent (Black 4-5). The researcher also carefully monitored signs of distress or tiredness, and adjusted the length of fieldwork sessions according to the person's needs.

Clothing, Dementia, and Embodied Identity

It was clear from the study that dress continued to be significant for many people with dementia, remaining part of their embodied identity. Respondents often retained a sense of the clothes which were or were not "them": "I don't like big patterns ... no, it's not me" or "I'm more of a trouser person." Many retained a personal "set of rules" regarding dress - a sense of the colors, styles, and textures which constituted their "personal aesthetic" (Woodward 67) or "appearance signature" (Ward, Campbell, and Keady 67). Color was important, and some participants had a particular color which they felt defined them: for Ken, it was an earthy palette of plaids, blues, and soft browns; while Peggy described herself as a "pink person". While people with advanced dementia often lost interest in their dress and

appearance, family carers and care-workers described how they would still recognize or respond to color. Personal aesthetic related not just to the look of clothes, but also their fit. For instance, some participants had “never liked short sleeves”; others disliked clothes which were “tight against the body”; or having their blouse “tucked in” at the waist. Some preferences reflected responses to the ageing of the body, but others were carried forward from earlier life.

Some participants had favorite garments which were constantly worn and re-worn, becoming part of them, molded by their body and embodied practices (Lupton 144). Betty had a favorite cardigan, a chunky, hand knitted “jewel colored” garment, which she always wore; and her neighbors and friends had come to identify her by it. Norma had been wearing the same sets of clothes for many years, and her daughter remarked “Mum don’t believe in parting with clothes.” Norma replied: “I think it’s what you get used to and what you like, sort of thing ... what you feel comfortable in.” Feeling comfortable is not merely about “the physical sensation of comfort” but also “the notion of aesthetic fit: the wearing of clothes which are ‘you’” (Woodward 73).

For most men, fashion lies outside the dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Kaiser 126). In the study they were often quick to distance themselves, saying: “I’m not a lot for fashion really” or “I’m not really bothered with clothes”. However, this did not mean that clothes were unimportant to them. For many men, clothes were significant in terms of maintaining an aesthetic of smartness. Suits in particular embody masculinity and authority (Berger 31- 40), broadening the shoulders and chest; and were often part of work biographies, particularly for middle-class men. The appeal of suits derived not only from the image they created, but how they felt against the body; as one participant said he had “just felt right” wearing a tie and suit jacket. For working-class men of this generation, the ethic of smartness was more about neatness and respectability - polished shoes, and a smart shirt and tie.

Clothing was also part of enacting femininities. Whether women defined themselves as a “skirt person” or a “trouser person” was significant; and going against this was perceived as a disruption to their sense of comfort and being in the world. As one woman said “I never wore trousers” and “I could never feel comfortable going out in trousers”, adding jokingly “I’m a lady”. Skirts signify femininity at a symbolic and visual level, and also shape how gender is enacted at the level of the body, affecting the way the wearer moves and sits. In contrast, some women described themselves as feeling more “comfortable” in trousers. This reflects intersections of gender, generation, ageing and class. Some women had “got used to wearing trousers” or “slacks” during the wartime, or had embraced their wider popularization from the 1970s onwards. Others had switched from skirts to trousers in later life because their legs were “not as nice” as when they were younger. Women in the sample who had embraced trousers were often middle class, younger, and more career orientated, having had more opportunities for challenging conventional femininity (Skeggs 116).

The different femininities enacted through dress also reflected tensions in Simmel’s classic terms between “individualization and the desire to be merged in the group” (309), between an emphasis on glamour and a more conventional self-effacing aesthetic. Some women described themselves as a “plain Jane”, saying “I don’t like fussy, that’s not me”. There was often an emphasis on being “neat, clean and tidy” which was particularly prevalent among working-class women, embodying a desire for respectability (Skeggs 87), and an ideal of femininity “associated with modesty, neatness, and domestic responsibility” (Dyhouse 3). This class based pattern was also found in Twigg’s study of older women (Fashion 65). For other women, however, clothes were about glamour and standing out, the act of dressing up, and “the sensuousness of fur, silk and rich fabrics” (Dyhouse 4). Rita’s favorite clothes had been her beaver lamb fur coats, cocktail dresses, stilettos and gold lame jacket, and she remained drawn to anything which “sparkled” or “stood out”.

Working-class participants – both men and women - often located their clothing practices within a history of “making do”, and were reluctant to spend money on new clothes, or to throw out old ones. Norma’s preference for keeping old clothes not only reflected the comfort and familiarity embodied by these garments, but also her experience of being “very poor” growing up, and making do with “a lot of sort hand me downs.” Her daughter said: “I think that mentality still stayed with mum, because everything apart from us buying her new jumpers at Christmas, everything virtually has been handed down.” For working-class women, clothes were often literally part of the “fabric of their lives” (Goett), embedded in working histories as laundry workers, factory machinists, or dressmakers. Eva would only wear the clothes she had made herself, as her son Grant explained: “that’s what she is. That’s what she did. She was the best dressmaker ... that’s what was important to her.”

Despite the importance of clothing in the narrative accounts of participants, as dementia progressed this was often increasingly in conflict with their ability to maintain dress and appearance at an embodied level. Though Norma emphasized the importance of being “clean, neat and tidy”, her daughter said that she often forgot or refused to change her clothing, wearing the same dirty clothes day after day. Maggie talked about how she enjoyed dressing up for family occasions, but her grand-daughter Ellie suggested that while she used to “dress up smartly for such occasions ... now I don’t think so much ... she’s in the habit of just putting the same clothes on every day.” Embodied competence could also be disturbed by the “disruption of the skilled, habitual body” (Phinney and Chesla 288). Douglas still “likes to be smart”, however his wife described how the practical, tacit knowledge involved in dressing was lost:

“I don’t think he could do the ... the bow [on shoe laces] now because he has a job with his dressing gown tie ... Some things I think would come automatic, like playing the organ but no, it’s completely gone and yet he’s played it for what? Thirty five

years and all the chords he knew off by heart, they've gone. You know, because it's immediate memory.”

[Cora, family carer, age 80]

The loss of these competencies could threaten continuity of self, disrupting the ability to perform embodied identity independently. Ellie described how her Nan – a fiercely independent woman - disliked accepting help with dressing and washing: “I’m not daft. I don’t need all this help. I can do it for myself so leave me be.” However, these experiences were often “re-edited” to minimize disruption (Golander and Raz 279). During the interview, Maggie quickly explained away difficulties with dress as “just part of life”, locating them within life-long experiences of coping with illness and war. Other women would downplay any difficulties, leaving them undiscussed, or resituating them in terms of “just getting on with things”. Men more readily accepted, and openly discussed, their need for assistance with dress, perhaps reflecting continuity with earlier domestic roles and gendered assumptions about being assisted. For instance, Douglas described his wife as being “very good” and “looking after me”- she had always bought and maintained his clothing. Therefore difficulties with dress were differentially interpreted and constructed, reflecting gendered social location (Hulko, “From Not” 131).

Negotiating Frailty and Dementia through Dress

For people with dementia – and even more so for their relatives - dress can take on additional significance in terms of negotiating images of frail old age, avoiding, in particular, the “classic look of the dementia patient” (Twigg, “Clothing” 228). This can become an important part of maintaining social standing in everyday interactions. Particular styles of clothing embody the look of dementia or frailty, and were carefully avoided by some participants. Joe refused to wear the Velcro shoes a friend had passed on to him, telling his

wife “they look like old people’s shoes.” As he explained: “I don’t want people to think ‘oh there’s the old boy’” (miming frail bodily movements). Rosemary, an 82 year old care home resident with mild dementia, still liked to wear her jeans, saying “nobody’s ever said that I’m too old for them” and “I’m quite comfortable in them”. She described an aversion to Crimplene and “old fashioned” clothing, and still had her hair styled by her own hairdresser, avoiding the “old lady perm”.

Avoiding the look of dementia also involved fighting off signs of dereliction (Twigg, Fashion 64-5), epitomized in shabby, down-at-heel, neglectful dress that conveys negative meanings, eroding the moral standing of the individual, undermining their status as a ‘normal’ person. This, however, becomes increasingly difficult with the progression of dementia. Families became vigilant in monitoring and concealing “little slips” of dress – visible food marks, gaping buttons, rips and tears - which could be interpreted as “signs” of decline. These efforts often focused on cleanliness, and managing dirt: “I can’t bear an old man to smell an old man smell so I never ever let him get to that stage.” This is part of “curating identity” on the persons’ behalf (Kricton and Coch 365), which we go on to discuss below. Maintaining social identity and standing therefore becomes not only about what is made visible, but what is concealed, hiding “unacceptable signs of ageing” (Biggs 53).

While certain dress-styles carry negative images of frailty and dementia, dress may also be used to challenge these associations, subverting expectations of what a frail older person would look like. Mark described how maintaining his Mum’s elegant appearance of “stylish ageing” (Church Gibson 323) challenged perceptions of her as a woman with dementia:

“I could see my mum and there’s this white haired lady ... in a very nice suit and looking very elegant and I thought *she’s in there with hundreds and hundreds of*

people there and nobody knows that if you were to go up to her and ask her what her name was and where she lives she couldn't tell you."

[Mark, family carer, age 55]

These practices could continue within the context of care. Douglas described how he likes to "surprise" people at the day center by dressing in clothes which are "too smart", and not expected in this context; while Rita still liked to "stand out" in the care home in bright colors and sparkles. Her vivid outfits resist invisibility, and the dull colors associated with old age (Twigg, Fashion 63), reasserting images of glamour and vibrancy. Her son reflected that: "I think she sort of likes...her own individualness in the sort of the conformity that you have in a care home, so she likes to be a little bit different."

Dressing well could still elicit positive reactions within the context of care, and we observed residents with dementia - and care-workers - complimenting one another's clothing, remarking "I like your dress" or "that's a nice color", affirmations which could act back on the self in a positive way. Therefore clothes have potential for challenging the stigma associated with dementia, enabling more positive images. As Mark explained: "I think it normalizes it in a strange way, and makes dementia more acceptable."

However, the use of clothing to resist images of frailty remains bounded within age ordered norms of dress (Twigg, Fashion 25), often taking place through reasserting dichotomies of normal/abnormal ageing, and "othering" residents with more advanced dementia. Rosemary was keen to emphasize that she was "not like the others" in the care home, and read the disorderly appearance and dress of other residents as a sign that they had "really gone downhill". Similarly while Rita's and Douglas's dress expresses continuity of self, it also establishes their difference from other residents in care settings. As one care worker described, residents would still comment on appearance, and use it as basis for making social

judgments: “I’m all right but she’s really peculiar.” Dress therefore becomes part of the interactional order within care homes, a means by which categories of “normal” and “demented” were attributed (Golander and Raz 274), as well as holding potential for resisting these categories.

Clothes as Biographical Objects

Clothes through their status as “biographical objects” can also challenge the reduction of people with dementia to the condition. Entangled in the events of a person's life they are vehicles for selfhood (Hoskins 2). As material objects, they can be powerful triggers for memories (Ash 20), making visible the owner’s personal history and past identities.

Participants often had “kept clothes” in their wardrobes - garments which were rarely worn, but retained because of their significance as a source of memories and identity (Banim and Guy 204). These included outfits bought for special occasions – weddings and anniversaries – or which embodied their “working self” (Woodward 54). For middle-class men these were generally suits, but for retired builder Tom, his work clothes consisted of jeans, old shirts, jumpers, and boots, marked with plaster and holes. His wife said that he liked to wear them “pottering about in the garage and things ... he just likes to feel he’s at work I think.” Tom struggled to express his connection to these clothes verbally, but through wearing them he was able to re-enact this aspect of his identity, and remind himself and others about who he was.

For people living in care settings, small aspects of dress could similarly act as “transitional objects”, carrying with them connections to personal histories and memories (Parkin 303-20). Items of dress such as rings, necklaces, or cufflinks could embody memories of people or significant transitions, evoked through touching or holding. In this context, handbags could act as “identity kits” (Nippert-Eng 57), containing items relating to the owner’s identity and

personal history (Buse and Twigg 18). For instance, Marie's handbag contained: a pair of ballet slippers; a gold locket containing pictures of her parents; an army cap badge belonging to her Uncle; and her "hairdressing kit"- reflecting various facets of her occupational history, interests and family relationships. Hazel's daughter had deliberately put together a range of objects in one of her old handbags, including one of her drawings, a photograph album, knitting needles and wool – providing a resource throughout the day, but also carrying forward her identity. For Marie and Hazel, handbags acted as a 'talking point' with staff, residents and visitors - a prop in telling their stories.

Clothes could therefore act as springboard for telling broader life-narratives in care settings, evoking memories of relationships, past identities and life-events (Weber and Mitchell 4). This could provide a basis for more positive care interactions. During interview discussions and reminiscence groups, clothes triggered memories through their tactile and sensory properties (Woodward 5). For instance, when participants held a pair of vintage silk stockings they remarked on their "silky feel" and "fineness", conjuring up memories of getting ready and making up for a night out. The sensory properties of dress provided a way to interact with people who had even advanced dementia – particularly women – who would still respond to the tactility of fabrics like velvet and silk, smiling or exclaiming "ooh" as they touched them. As one careworker said: "they might not know what color it is ... but it's the feel of it." During one reminiscence group, a woman who had worked as a dressmaker grasped one of the garments and held on to the fabric tightly, smiling. One of the careworkers remarked: "No she can't say. But you remember, don't you?" Staff sometimes reported that using clothes in reminiscence sessions helped them to see the person differently. They learned things that they "didn't know before".

Nonetheless, despite their significance in triggering memories, clothes could also constitute a site of forgetting. Recently acquired clothes were most likely to be forgotten, reflecting the

increased impairment of short term memory, but also the fact that these clothes were not entangled with histories and memories in the same way (Banim and Guy 2006). For example, while Alice kept asking to see her wedding dress, her husband said: “if you bought her something new this week she wouldn’t ask for it” and would not remember it. The remembering and forgetting of clothes is suggestive of their varying affective significance - emotionally powerful memories remain more resilient as dementia progresses (Westius, Andersson, and Kallenberg 489). Diane could recollect the histories of her favorite garments, but had amassed a large pile of jeans in her room which she could not remember or recognize as her own. This suggests the significance of supporting people to maintain clothes which look and feel familiar. Clothes which have no functional use can still represent an “extension of the self” (Belk 140-42) – identity and memories in material form.

‘Curating’ Identity through Dress

When people with dementia are no longer able to maintain their identity through dress, family carers - and sometimes careworkers - become engaged in the process of “curating” identity on their behalf (Kricton and Coch 365). Identity becomes “intercorporeal” and “intertwined” (Weiss 22), involving practices of “working together” to maintain continuity of self (Ward, Campbell, and Keady 71). Family carers drew on biographical, tacit knowledge of the daily routines and nuances which formed part of the person’s embodied identity, as Ellie said with regard to her Nan: “I’ve grown up with her always having certain routines ... she always had her lipstick on and the way she did her hair and the way she dressed.” As her Nan’s dementia had progressed, Ellie had taken these practices “on board”, carrying them out “instinctively”. She said: “I think it’s important to me because I know, I understand, it’s important to her.”

Curating identity is embedded in intimate family relationships and the “depth of connection” to the person. It therefore becomes more challenging in care settings, where workers lack this depth of biographical knowledge. Family carers often sought to pass knowledge on through verbal and written accounts, pictures, and the materiality of clothes, hoping to “carry forward identity” into the context of care (Kricton and Coch 372). However, formally documented biographical information was in general scant, and detailed knowledge could only be acquired by talking to the families: “Well mum always has tights. She never wears high heel shoes ... she’ll always have a scarf ... she never wears her jewelry except for Sunday.” Where the person did not have any relatives and was unable to convey this information themselves, workers found it extremely difficult: they felt they were “leading it blind” or “starting with a blank piece of paper”.

By piecing together information from the person with dementia, their relatives, and looking for clues in photographs and care-plans, some care-workers became drawn into the process of curating identity. Working with residents over a long period could, in those with sensitivity, facilitate a nuanced understanding of different personal styles. Darren, who had worked in one of the homes for ten years, described his clients: “Rita’s a bit more likes sparkly ... Hetty’s just sort of always been quite smart, you know.” Rather than imposing a normative idea of older femininity, such as that associated with the “lounge standard resident” (Lee-Treweek 53), he recognized their different femininities and dress styles. When one woman reached the advanced stages of dementia, he tried to help her maintain the person she was: “she was like a real sort of lady ... so I sort of keep that in mind”, dressing her in the smart clothes and pearls that “if she was ... as she was back then would like to be in.”

However, the curation of identity through dress raises complex questions about agency and identity. Feminist and disabilities studies perspectives challenge the idea that identity is rooted in the autonomous, bounded body (Weiss 32-33), instead emphasizing the relationality

of our ‘becoming in the world with others’ (Hughes et al. 269). Family carers sought to maintain “seamless” continuity with earlier dress choices, and some participants agreed that their relatives “did very well”. However, in the advanced stages of dementia, the expressed wishes of the person become difficult to interpret, so that relying on a judgment of “what they would choose” had potential for mistakes. The identities, intentions, and aesthetic preferences of the various actors could become confused. Mark admitted, though he sought to “carry on” his Dad’s individual style, this merged with his own preferences: “there’s always an element of what I would like as well – there’s always going to be like that ... but I wouldn’t put [him in] anything that’s just not him.” In the advanced stages of dementia, maintaining visible continuity became perhaps more important to family carers than the person themselves, as Mark said: “if you change the way they look ... I think you’d be coping with losing another part of them.”

There is a tension here between maintaining continuity, and recognizing how clothing preferences and identities change (Twigg, “Clothing” 228). Clothing choices alter throughout the life-course, and family carers also described specific changes in dress style following the onset of dementia. Unless these changes in dress were seen as embarrassing or inappropriate, families generally supported the person to maintain their “their own volition” even “if they’re doing something that’s slightly random.” However, sometimes new clothing choices were described as inappropriate, clashing or disheveled, and family carers and care-workers were torn between respecting the person’s wishes, and avoiding the images of dementia and dereliction described above.

Changing bodies and care needs could also disrupt continuity, particularly in care settings, as routines of care and institutional laundry regimes meant that vulnerable fabrics like silk and wool were discouraged in favor of stretchy, easy-care garments. Smart trousers were sometimes replaced with jogging bottoms to increase ease of dressing. Jane agreed that her

husband Tom “wouldn’t have been seen dead” in jogging bottoms when he was younger, but now with incontinence, and struggling with zips and buttons these were easier for him to manage. Women were sometimes encouraged to wear trousers rather than skirts, which were easier than “dealing with tights”, and prevented them from rolling up their skirt in public, revealing the body inappropriately. These adaptations of dress therefore involved balancing continuity in embodied identity with maintaining “dignity”. They were often described as more “comfortable”, however, as noted above, comfort lies not only in the physical feel of clothes, but also in the sense of social ease that comes from habitual comportment (Woodward 73; Twigg, Fashion 22) – something such modifications of dress can undermine.

Sometimes people with dementia resisted changes to their dress. For instance, Donald protested about the jogging trousers the care home had bought him, so they resigned to dressing him in smart trousers again. Resistance was sometimes enacted at a bodily level (Kontos, “Redefining Agency” 105-21): Tom would often get changed out of his joggers into his scruffy work jeans; while Mabel, a care home resident with advanced dementia, would sometimes tear off her plastic bib at meal-times, exclaiming “this is terrible”. However, the possibilities for agency diminished with progression of dementia. Norma initially had a “big argument” about switching to flat shoes, but her daughter had since replaced her heels with flats, reflecting that: “I took all the others away so she’s not missed them really ... if you remove them they don’t always remember.” Similarly, Mabel’s daughter described how she would have “kicked up merry hell” if given trousers to wear in the past, but as her dementia has advanced she “just accepts” them. The close involvement of relatives and care workers in curating identity could thus support continuity of identity and agency, but it could also undermine this, prioritizing “dignity” and ease of care.

Conclusion

This article highlights the ongoing significance of dress in the lives of people with dementia, showing how clothes did continue to be part of how older people with dementia expressed their identity, embodying diverse life-histories and memories. The study therefore contributes to a growing recognition of the body and embodiment as significant to understandings of dementia (Downs “Embodiment” 368), highlighting the role of dress in this. In doing so, it also contributes to new ways of thinking about dementia, and sheds new light on the everyday lives and experiences of people living with the condition. However, the article also highlights tensions and difficulties relating to dress in the context of dementia. The involvement of others in ‘curating’ identity helped to maintain the self at a direct bodily level, but at times raised questions about whose wishes and intentions were being inscribed on the body.

Within dress studies the ageing body has traditionally been neglected, reflecting a bias toward the youthful, expressive and subversive. Nonetheless, research on the experiences of older women is growing, illustrating the significance of dress as part of performing identity, and negotiating bodily ageing, as highlighted by recent academic conferences: “Mirror, Mirror”, and “(a)Dressing the Ageing Demographic”.³ Our research extends these arguments into the context of dementia and frailty, shedding light on experiences of frail older bodies, and tensions between continuity and change, using dress as a “method of inquiry” (Weber and Mitchell 4). In doing so, the article takes dress studies into new ground, highlighting everyday, mainstream, practices and experiences of dress, showing how dress is a site of struggle as well as agency and subversion.

The findings of our research also hold significance for age studies more generally. Although research on older bodies is growing, it often focuses on age resistance, and on younger bodies

that encapsulate the new representations and possibilities for growing older. This leaves “deep old age” increasingly marginalized, surrounded by a “failure of meaning” (Cole qtd. in Featherstone and Hepworth 44). Here by contrast we show that material and cultural analyses can shed light on the condition of frail old people also. Their experiences do not lie beyond such approaches. Using dress as a lens, our research illustrates how cultural meanings of dementia and deep old age, and tensions between structure and agency, “self, identity and the body” (Katz and Laliberte-Rudman 49) are negotiated in everyday life. It adds to a rethinking of identity, embodiment and agency in the fourth age, and their location in interrelationships with other bodies and ‘things’ (Hepworth 125-35; Gilleard and Higgs, “Ageing, Abjection” 139-40). The article thus contributes to the wider cultural turn in ageing studies and its extension to all categories of the aged.

Notes

¹ See for example Crane Fashion and its Social Agendas, Breward “Cultures, Identities, Histories”, Davis Fashion, Culture and Identity.

² Maggie was part of the domestic sample, but moved into a care home during the study.

³ “Mirror, Mirror”, and “(a) Dressing the Ageing Demographic” were conferences held in London, United Kingdom in autumn 2013, focused on ageing, clothes and appearance.

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