Most women are acculturated from the time we are very small to pay attention to our appearance. And for many or us, it is our faces that we see and notice—and that others see and notice as well. Early in our lives, as several women in this video tell us, we adopt an attitude toward our faces. Often influenced by our parents—or how we compare ourselves with our siblings—these early attitudes may be as important as contemporary media images and advertising in shaping our attitudes toward our faces as we age. One woman, considered the least attractive of her siblings, tells the viewer that she didn’t need to be pretty: “I’ll be unconventional.” She reflects this attitude into her 60s.

In this video—shot in Berkeley, California, in two segments, two years apart—a group of women, who have known each other for 15 years, meet to talk about their “aging” faces. They do not discuss their bodies or their health or even how their assessment of their faces affected their lives. This video provides an insider look at what women “of a certain age” might discuss with their friends and peers. It makes no judgments and offers no interpretations.

I gathered with four other colleagues to watch this video together. We all work in the field of aging; we are all aging, although we range in age from a woman in her 40s to a woman of 64 (me). Like the women in this video, we are all professionals, White, and middle class. After the video—like the consciousness-raising groups of the late 60s and early 70s—we discussed what we saw and touched upon our own experiences as we too face our own aging. Had we not been sitting in a comfortable conference room at Rush Medical Center in Chicago on a workday morning, our conversation about ourselves would have been both longer and undoubtedly more intimate. This response then is our first comment about the video—as it provoked discussion among women already thinking about the changes we are witnessing in our skin, our hair, and our bodies (although bodies were rarely mentioned in the video).

Each of us was able, in some way, to identify with what one or more of the women were saying. One woman in the video, with a rather massive head of blondish hair, referred to her hair as her crowning glory—something her mother had told her many years before. While we wished she would have some of that hair cut off, it suggested to us viewers that we often find one thing about ourselves in which we invest much importance; often, that is our hair. We, in that Rush conference room, started talking about our hair too—for some of us, thick and curly but as we get older, perhaps thinner and less curly. How will we feel when the hairdresser no longer compliments us on that lustrous thickness? Another women in the video, exuberantly threading her hands through her long pepper and salt hair, told someone who asked why she wanted to “be ugly” by letting her hair go gray, “We don’t do that [dye our hair] in Berkeley.” One of us—a former Californian, and tempted over the years to color away the gray in her hair, was familiar with the line, “We don’t do that in Berkeley.” For this colleague, letting her hair go gray is likewise a political and a feminist statement. But others of us, as the women in the video, did not share this view; and we all wondered how far we should go to conform to what is considered attractive in our society. Only one woman, for example, in the video acknowledged having a face lift, which she initially justified as a response to cancer and other difficult changes in her life. But two years later, she was proud of the face lift and regretted even mentioning the cancer as one justification for doing it. Although we would draw lines in different places, few of us, like the women in the video, are ready to give up being “fairly attractive” members of our society. We just don’t know yet how far we will go to preserve that norm.

One woman in the video reflected the common ruse of masquerade—the real me in inside—when she said, “Even if I have old baggy eyes, I don’t feel like an old bag at all.” Others in the video noted that they found their faces unfamiliar, and in our small group, the unfamiliar self reflected back at us was startlingly like our mothers. How did we get so old? Unlike the women in the video, we reflected on how surprising it was to look in the mirror and see our mothers, at least in appearance, even though we knew that the conventional images of 60-year-olds that we grew up with no longer seemed to resemble us. But we knew—imagining a newspaper story about us in our 60s—that we would be described as “elderly women.” How would that feel? Even among professionals in the field of aging, stereotypes linger, and we distance ourselves from them.

As the video drew to a close, more than one woman was able to affirm herself with statements like the following: “The older I get the more interesting I get, the more beautiful,” “As I get older, I have a greater sense that I can just be,” and “I want to walk in the world as I am.” The oldest woman in the video—just 65—and seemingly accepting of how she now looked, placed herself alongside an old rug, a wall hanging, and observed how we admire old things—like this rug—but not necessarily old faces. We, in the conference room, found these shifting sentiments affirming and wondered what words women a decade older or more would use to describe their faces. Would they be closer to that kind of acceptance? Do we ever let go of judging our appearance—often competitively—with other women our own age?

We observers chafed a bit about the singular focus on the face—but that was the video’s purpose. We wondered how men would react to it. One of us observed that her husband would fall asleep, but another thought her husband would be interested especially now that men (though not her husband) are also preening and are often unashamed about having plastic surgery or using cosmetic preparations.

The video was a direct encounter with the women—descriptive rather than analytical or normative; there was no commentary, no conceptual framework, no “feminist” analysis about cultural demands on women...
to conform and often to engage in Foucauldian “disciplinary practices” to keep up our appearances, no discussion about how these women’s perceptions of themselves might vary according to whom they were with. These women were in the safest environment possible for them—among peers whom they had known for a long while. In other communities of meaning, how free would they be to acknowledge the uncertainties and the sadness they often felt as they watched the changes occur? By so doing, would they then be reinforcing negative cultural images of aging? We smiled, too, when early in the video, they postured and pinched, to get the best view of themselves for the camera. How often have we older women done that—lifted our head for the camera so the wrinkles under our neck would be less visible? In many ways the video was familiar: an intimate gathering of women, mostly just approaching old age, talking to one another and for the camera, about their faces. Like women together so often do, they laughed and they affirmed one another. And for this alone the video is wonderful as a resource for women themselves getting older but perhaps also for younger women who might wonder what their mothers and aunts—or even their clients—are experiencing. They might see the 68-year-old caregiver as a woman still interested in her appearance despite the heavy load she may be bearing and understand why that trip to the hairdresser might be the respite of choice. Perhaps it will ratchet up our tolerance for women who have “let themselves go” as we realize that it is often a choice that women make—just how far will I go to conform, to meet an image of the “good” aging appearance that is beyond the capacity of many of us. And it may also remind us of class and social location. These women—and we in the conference room—have the luxury of thinking about such a thing as our face. And it is a luxury.

So it is important to note the location of these women. Feminists ask for social location because we always speak from somewhere in particular. This video made it quite clear that these were White women from northern California, bold about their bodies, questioning about their faces, and unlikely to be suffering from serious financial deprivation. For this reason, our group at Rush, although of different ages and from different parts of the country (three, however, are native Midwesterners), were very similar to these women. How, we wondered, would very different women see this video?

In conclusion, as a trigger for discussion and reflection the video worked admirably. As a source for any particular generalizeable knowledge, it was more generative of questions that are yet to be framed and asked than definitive. For students of gerontology, the video opens up for younger people what they may yet be reluctant to try on—a face that lacks the proverbial bloom of youth but is perhaps becoming more interesting. Perhaps old age will become more intimate, less in need of denial once younger people can see themselves in their mothers, grandmothers, clients, and patients. At the same time the video acknowledges the tension between that goal and the contradictory metaphor of a woman’s face that is not yet ready to be invisible—because the face is one way that women, who still want to be noticed and desired, connect to the outside world. For better or worse, we continue to care how we look.

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