

Obituary photos suggest growing bias against aging faces

May 13 2009, by Jeff Grabmeier

A new study that looked at obituary photographs published in one metropolitan newspaper suggests that Americans may have become more biased toward youthful appearance, particularly for women.

The study found that the number of obituary [photographs](#) showing the deceased at a much younger age than when he or she died more than doubled between 1967 and 1997.

And women were more than twice as likely as men to have an obituary photo from when they were much younger.

In 1967, about 17 percent of the obituary photographs surveyed in the *The Plain Dealer* (a daily newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio) were "age-inappropriate" - meaning they showed the deceased at least 15 years younger than when they died. By 1997, the number had increased to 36 percent of the surveyed obit [photos](#).

"Obituaries and their photographs are one reflection of our society at a particular moment in time," said Keith Anderson, co-author of the study and assistant professor of social work at Ohio State University.

"In this case, we can get hints about our views on aging and appearance from the photographs chosen for obituaries. Our findings suggest that we were less accepting of aging in the 1990s than we were back in the 60s."

Anderson conducted the study with Jina Han, a graduate student in [social](#)

[work](#) at Ohio State. Their results appear in the current issue of *Omega-Journal of Death and Dying*.

The researchers looked at obituary photos in *The Plain Dealer* - which has the largest circulation of any newspaper in Ohio -- in 1967, 1977, 1987, and 1997. They didn't examine more recent photos because the newspaper changed the format of its obituary pages, making it impossible to make accurate comparisons after 1997.

Beginning in February of each of those four years, Anderson printed copies of the first 100 obituaries of local residents that had photos, for a total of 400 obituaries in the study.

He separated the text and photos before continuing the analysis.

Anderson estimated the ages of the people in the photographs and compared his estimates to their age at death as listed in the obituary. If the deceased were more than 15 years older than the estimated age in the photograph, the photos were labeled as "age-inaccurate."

Anderson said his estimates of ages in the photographs are necessarily subjective. But he took several steps to increase his accuracy.

For one, he had his co-author estimate ages in some of the photos, and checked to ensure their estimates were similar. If they were unable to come to an agreement, the photo was listed as age-accurate.

In addition, Anderson conducted an exercise before doing the study in which he estimated the ages of people in photographs for which he could confirm the actual age of those shown. Within the 15-year window, he was accurate more than four out of five times.

Results of the study showed that age-inaccurate photos increased steadily

each decade: from 17 percent (1967) to 27 percent (1977) to 30 percent (1987) and finally to 36 percent (1997).

The researchers found that each additional year in age at time of death increased the odds of having an age-inaccurate obituary photo.

Most strikingly, women were more than twice as likely as men to have an obituary photograph that was age-inaccurate.

"Aging is a double whammy for women, who get hit with more ageism and sexism," Anderson said.

Anderson said it is likely that either spouses or adult children of the deceased chose the photographs that accompanied the obituaries.

They understandably wanted to choose a photo that they thought represented their spouse or parent at his or her peak, he said. But what is remarkable is how we as a society define these peak years, and how that definition has changed over time.

"Adult children are thinking they want a picture of Dad when he was at his best - and, especially in the late 1990s, that was significantly younger than when he died. And the discrepancy was even larger for women," he said.

In addition to ageism, Anderson said there may be another factor in the growing use of age-inaccurate obit photos. Although there is no way to prove it, he said individuals may be living longer with chronic illnesses, and obituary photos may be selected that show these people in younger, healthier times.

But Anderson said he believes this couldn't account for all the change the study found between 1967 and 1997.

"Ageism seems to be increasing over time, despite our growing awareness of the issue," he said.

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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