

II—NO DUTY TO RESIST: WHY INDIVIDUAL RESISTANCE IS AN INEFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO DOMINANT BEAUTY IDEALS

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In this paper I argue that the way to reduce the power of overdemanding beauty ideals is not to advocate that individuals have a ‘duty to resist’, a duty to stop engaging in appearance enhancing practices and body work. I begin by arguing against the claim that women who ‘do’ beauty are suffering from false consciousness. I then give four further additional arguments against advocating a ‘duty to resist’ as an effective means to challenge dominant beauty norms. First, that as a tactic it is ineffective. Second, it is an individual approach which divides and silences. Third, it induces shame and blame, and undermines effective collective action. Fourth, it fails to recognize the privilege of the group norms which make resistance possible.

I

Introduction. In this paper I return to an argument I made in *Perfect Me* (Widdows 2018). There I argued that the way to counter dominant beauty norms was not to focus on what individuals do or don’t do to their own bodies. However, that resistance should be at the individual level—that individuals have a duty to resist beauty engagement and that resistance should be promoted as a means to reduce the power of dominant appearance norms—remains a widely held view in philosophical circles. While this view is widespread, it is often assumed rather than explicitly argued for. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find detailed arguments in the literature for why individuals should resist, and whether this is a duty or, perhaps, a tactic intended to reduce the power of the social norm. In this paper I recreate this argument, drawing on parallel claims from second-wave feminist literature and the activism of the Women’s Liberation movement. The second-wave literature and activism is primarily

concerned with women's beauty practices, usually make-up. I extend this to include the whole range of adornment and body modification practices, from face and body painting to injectables, treatments, tweekments and surgery. I seek to make plain the assumptions and implications of the argument for individual resistance and show that there is no individual 'duty to resist', and that, as a response to beauty ideals, it is ineffective. The 'just resist' approach divides women into groups in a way which undermines collective action; it invokes shame and blame in a particularly destructive way; and it increases attention to appearance and the body rather than reducing it, negatively affecting all of us (whether or not we engage).

To be clear, I am not promoting engagement, but arguing against focusing on individual engagement or lack of engagement. In the current moment, when appearance is becoming more important in a visual culture, to focus on individual practices increases attention on bodies. I fully recognize the harms of the dominant beauty ideal; indeed, my recent work is all about the rise of an increasingly demanding and dominant, and importantly, global, beauty ideal. The consequences of a normalized and naturalized highly modified body are truly devastating. Already this is true for many, particularly the young, and if current trends continue, it will be for all. My argument is not that there is nothing harmful in how appearance is valued and in the rise of body modification practices, but that there is no individual 'duty to resist', and that promoting a duty to resist is ineffective, counterproductive, and unethical.¹

II

False Consciousness, Consciousness-Raising and 'A Duty to Resist'. The argument that there is a 'duty to resist' is not well set out in the literature. I seek to recreate the view as one which likely derives from broader second-wave feminist arguments and practices of consciousness-raising. The second-wave feminist activist response to demanding appearance ideals was that women should simply stop engaging. It was grounded in the thought that once women understood

¹ Elsewhere I propose more effective communal measures which aim at culture change. I work with anti-bullying charities and policy-makers to campaign for the recognition of lookism as a key form of discrimination, and I seek to challenge lookism, for example, in the everydaylookism campaign (<https://everydaylookism.bham.ac.uk/>).

that focusing on appearance and engaging in practices to improve it was a means to keep them in their subordinate place, they would stop worrying about appearance and spending time on it. They would reject such practices as worthless and oppressive, and presumably by doing so they would encourage others to do the same, and so reduce the power of the norm. These arguments are essentially a version of false consciousness arguments, arguments that were dominant in this period of the Women's Liberation movement, particularly in activist circles.

There are many versions of false consciousness, all of which provide an analysis of how one class dominates another in systems of hierarchical power relations.² False consciousness explains how the subordinate class, despite having the numbers or means to resist, are compliant and accept their subordinated status. Those suffering from false consciousness are deluded or mistaken about their position. Not only do they fail to see their disadvantage, but they may even believe they benefit, defend the status quo, and resist change. The solution to false consciousness is to make the subordinated class aware of their subordinated status and reveal the reality of the power dynamics. The assumption is that once consciousness is raised, the subordinated will see the delusion they have been misguidedly operating under. As a result, they will throw off their chains and refuse to engage in the practices which make them subordinated, or at least they will recognize they are complying with oppressive norms.

The Women's Liberation movement used the false consciousness critique to challenge numerous social norms, changing the behaviour of individuals and changing social norms and gender expectations for all. For example, second-wave feminists used false consciousness arguments, implicitly and explicitly, to debunk myths such as the 'happy housewife' (Friedan 1963). Similarly, views which were once widely held, for example, that only men understood the public sphere and therefore only men were permitted to vote, or that only men were intelligent enough to be doctors or lawyers, have been systematically rejected. Key to these projects of emancipation was the practice of 'consciousness-raising' which showed that the claims that men had inherent skills and capacities which women did not were false. Consciousness-raising was *the* tactic of the Women's Liberation movement, which had its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s.

² Eyerman tracks the development of the false consciousness analysis, from its beginnings in Marx and Engels, where it effectively means 'a distorted and limited form of experience in society that could be applied to all social groups and classes' (Eyerman 1981, p. 43).

This version of feminism has been critiqued for universalizing the experience of white middle-class women. And in the years since, feminism has sought to be overtly inclusive and diverse, and intersectionality is now a watchword.³ Yet this period of feminism was vibrant, and on many issues the false consciousness critique and the practice of consciousness-raising was exceptionally effective. Women, and society more broadly, did recognize that many gendered practices were not the natural order, or justified. Essentially, the false consciousness analysis worked: it showed such gendered practices were products of patriarchy, used to subordinate women and often to keep women secluded in the private sphere. Key second-wave feminist texts which give a flavour of this movement include *Woman Hating* (Dworkin 1974), *Sexual Politics* (Millett 1970), *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone 1970) and *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963). Andrea Dworkin is explicit about the role of consciousness-raising as a means of recognizing unjust gender norms and as a method to change behaviour. In *Woman Hating*, she describes this process:

We recognized all of our social behaviour as learned behavior that functioned for survival in a sexist world: we painted ourselves, smiled, exposed legs and ass, had children, kept house, as our accommodations to the reality of power politics. (Dworkin 1974, p. 21)

This view that engaging in beauty practices and body work is false consciousness persists in philosophy, although it is more often assumed than explicitly argued for. That beauty is assumed to be a default form of false consciousness is shown by Natalie Stoljar's use of it as a paradigmatic example of a deformed desire or preference. She cites Benson's example of a college student deluded into thinking that appearance is important:

Consider the eighteen-year-old college student who excels in her studies, is well-liked by her many friends and acquaintances, leads an active, challenging life, yet who regularly feels bad about herself because she does not have 'the right look'... So, on top of everything else she does, she expends a great deal of time and money trying to straighten or curl her hair, to refine her cosmetic technique, to harden or soften her body, and so on... (Benson 1991, p. 389, quoted in Stoljar 2013)

³ As Amia Srinivasan writes, mainstream anglophone feminist thought and practice, the most visible and dominant form of feminism, is now 'receding, not least because the most exhilarating recent expressions of feminist energies have come from outside anglophone contexts' (Srinivasan 2021, p. xiv)

That the student is deluded is assumed to be obviously true.⁴ The position is not argued for, but stated. Stoljar continues that the student's 'desire for an excessive number of beauty treatments is deformed because it is the product of adopting values that are oppressive to her, and it is a desire that she would not have absent the oppressive conditions' (Stoljar 2013). In this model, those who engage in appearance work are deluded or tricked; sometimes described in the literature as 'dupes' or 'dopes'.⁵ In this example, as with the assumption that there is a 'duty to resist', false consciousness is assumed rather than argued for. However, for the false consciousness analysis to work, two claims must be true. First, it must be wrong to believe that beauty engagement—and here I am including broader body modification and body work practices—is beneficial. Second, engagement must function as a means to differentiate the classes of men and women, and to mark women as inferior. In the sections which follow I will reject both of these claims.

2.1. *Deluded and Duped into Doing Beauty.* First, then, the claim that women do not benefit from engagement and they are duped or tricked into thinking they do. The mere fact that women, en masse, have not stopped engaging in appearance work, despite the longevity and prominence of this position, might give proponents of the position pause for thought. Other feminist claims of this type did resonate, and did lead to cultural change. Women, and society more broadly, have rejected the view that men are the cleverer sex and uniquely able to manage in the public-sphere. Consciousness-raising worked. This didn't happen for appearance, so either women *did* see benefits of engagement or they regarded the harms and costs of giving up engagement as too high. If resistance is too costly, this does

⁴ Stoljar is using this as an example of adaptive preference, yet given the extent to which she presents the student as deluded, this account of adaptive preference is effectively a false consciousness argument. I address the argument that beauty is adaptive preference in detail in *Perfect Me*. I engage directly with Serene Khader's account, which I claim avoids many of the pitfalls of false consciousness and is respectful of women's lived experience in a way which, I argue, false consciousness critiques are not. Ultimately, I reject adaptive preference as an account of engagement with beauty practices, as it does not work in situations not characterized by deprivation (Widdows 2018).

⁵ For example, Meredith Jones rejects the term 'dupe', criticizing much feminist thinking on cosmetic surgery as implying those who engage are 'are dupes of the beauty myth' rather than 'accepting that cosmetic surgery is now a meaningful part of our world' (Jones 2008, p. 29). Likewise, Kathy Davis criticizes Susan Bordo for reducing those who engage in cosmetic surgery to 'cultural dopes' (Davis 1995). Davis and Jones are responding to the implicit rather than explicit claim that engagement is deluded.

not undermine the false consciousness analysis. An individual could recognize engagement as oppressive but continue nonetheless. But it does make resistance a tactic which is unlikely to succeed. If the second is true, while we might all be better off with less demanding appearance norms, individual resistance will not deliver this. Indeed to ask for individual resistance when the costs are high is problematic for reasons I will return to below.

First, that there are benefits from engaging in beauty and body work is contested. Some argue that there are; for example, Hamermesh talks of a ‘beauty premium’ and ‘ugly penalty’, documenting a 17 per cent difference in earnings between good-looking men and bad-looking men, and a 12 per cent difference between good-looking women and bad-looking women (Hamermesh 2011, p. 46). Psychological studies suggest a correlation between being regarded as attractive and being treated more positively (Rubenstein 2005). The ‘halo effect’ is well documented and leads to attractive individuals being assumed to have positive personality traits, such as friendliness, competence and intelligence (Eagly et al. 1991). These benefits are often short-lived, for instance, they improve your chances of getting a first date or being called back for an interview (Busetta, Fiorilli and Visalli, 2013), but to succeed once in a relationship or in a job requires demonstrable skills and expertise. Nonetheless, some material rewards attach to appearance, as Nancy Etcoff states: ‘Beauty conveys modest but real social and economic advantages and, equally important, ugliness leads to major social disadvantages and discrimination’ (Etcoff 1999, p. 25). While collectively we would be better off with less demanding and more diverse appearance ideals, at this moment of time in a visual culture, it is not true to say there are no benefits.

In addition to some modest, short-lived and contested benefits of increased employment and relationship equity, some forms of engagement are pleasurable. Some practices are intrinsically pleasurable, such as the caressing of the self and others, or because beauty is positioned as ‘self-care’ or ‘me time’, in our particular cultural moment.⁶ Likewise, beauty practices sanction adult-to-adult human

⁶ For many women juggling caring and work commitments, ‘me time’ can be hard to justify. Because body work and beauty are regarded as virtuous and necessary, beauty work is a common choice for legitimate recreation. For example, slimming clubs or exercise classes are socially sanctioned leisure activities that are easier for women to justify than socializing in other contexts. Likewise, having one’s hair cut or dyed or one’s nails manicured is ticking off a required task, again reducing the guilt at spending time on oneself.

touching in non-medical and non-sexual ways. Mothers spend hours braiding their daughters' hair, friends spend time doing each other's make-up, painting nails, painting henna, and so on. And for some—for instance, an elderly person in a care home—the only non-medical touch routinely available is that of the hairdresser or beautician. Beauty-talk is often a means to establish and cement connection. It is friendship-talk, a way to signal care, affection and admiration. This type of bonding can be problematic, and some find beauty-talk excluding and alienating. But for very many there is pleasure in these practices which enable connection with other women and across groups. There are also times when appearance has been empowering of groups. For example, the slut marches are a potent symbol which seek to reclaim sexy bodies, and the afro was very deliberately embraced as a symbol of black empowerment by the civil rights movement.⁷ Even practices that are not pleasurable in themselves, such as hair removal or cosmetic surgery, can feel empowering, as they are agential acts which are regarded as improving the body, which is intimately connected to our sense of self.

The proponent of false consciousness can object on two grounds. First, that the critique is accurate, but that the costs of non-engagement are too high. As Clare Chambers states, '[P]eople might autonomously choose to follow harmful norms because they believe they cannot access the desired benefit without complying with the norm' (Chambers 2008, p. 193).⁸ However, if this is the case, then asking for individual resistance will not be effective. Second, they could argue that these are not real benefits, but simply the product of ubiquitous false consciousness and mass delusion. This would seem particularly the case in those activities that are not pleasurable but feel empowering because individuals experience them as such. This is an intellectually coherent position, but a politically and ethically problematic one, as it dismisses the lived experience of very many who *do* experience engagement as beneficial and enjoyable,

⁷ Using appearance for empowerment is complicated. It always increases the focus on appearance and can be counterproductive. For instance, Shirley Tate recounts the story of Teresa, a mixed race woman who plaited her hair and wore a head wrap to hide the straightness of her hair, which she felt was not authentically black enough (Tate 2007).

⁸ Chambers's solution is not consciousness-raising or education, precisely because what is happening is not false consciousness. Rather her solution is 'to alter the social circumstances that justify the harmful practice, and banning the practices is a good way of doing this' (Chambers 2008, p. 194). Precisely because choice is constrained in unjust ways, for Chambers, it should not be left to the individual.

even after they have been exposed to false consciousness critiques. As Ruth Holliday and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor point out, '[F]eminist discourses of victimization or internalized oppression are likely to alienate a generation of young women for whom sexual self-determination, expressed through the glamorous body, is a central component of identity, associated with pleasure and success' (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor 2006, p. 192). Alison Jagger has criticized invoking such arguments in other contexts, stating that 'raising questions about adaptive preferences and false consciousness only when confronted by views that oppose their own encourages dismissing those views without considering them seriously' (Jagger 2014, p. 58). Telling individuals that they are wrong about the pleasure they experience, that they are deluded or duped, is to take a particular kind of high argumentative ground that is not justifiable in this instance. It is to assert one group's values over another, with little evidence or argument. Moreover, even if the false consciousness argument is true, if it does not resonate and consciousness-raising does not work, then resistance as a tactic will fail. It will not feel liberating and inspire more resistance. On the contrary, it will seem perverse, rejecting real benefit and pleasure. Again, I am not advocating engagement, nor suggesting that we should not be critical of homogenizing and demanding appearance norms. But I am claiming that dismissing lived experience of pleasure and benefit as false consciousness cannot ground an individual duty to resist. If the critique does not resonate it cannot succeed.

To claim that there are no benefits to body work and appearance engagement is not true. Working on appearance is sometimes pleasurable, and there are other benefits. While some of this is consistent with a false consciousness critique, none of it suggests that individual resistance is a duty, or that it would be an effective tactic to reduce the power of beauty norms. Moreover, while the harms of the current beauty ideal are extensive, part of the reason non-engagement seems so alien for some is that the pleasures of body decoration and modification might be more important than the 'just resist' approach allows. Stephen Davies's first sentence of his book *Adornment* reminds us, 'We *Homo sapiens* are decorators. We adorn our bodies, clothing, possessions and environments' (Davies 2020, p. 1). Adornment, he goes on to say, is ubiquitous. Eschewing body work, adornment and appearance enhancement altogether might be to lose something important, something which contributes to human

flourishing. This does not endorse any of the forms of modification which are currently required by the beauty ideal; indeed, potentially it pushes against a global and homogenous ideal. However, it does bring into question whether a simple refusal to engage could ever be a duty of individuals, and points to its likely ineffectiveness as a tactic.

2.2. *Women, and Only Women, Worry about and Work on Appearance.* The second claim of the false consciousness argument is that one class—the dominating class (men)—benefit from the power hierarchy. Sheila Jeffreys sums up this position:

Beauty practices can reasonably be understood to be for the benefit of men. Though women in the west sometimes say that they choose to engage in beauty practices for their own sake, or for other women and not for men, men benefit in several ways. They gain the advantage of having their superior sex class status marked out, and the satisfaction of being reminded of their superior status every time they look at a woman. They also gain the advantage of being sexually stimulated by ‘beautiful’ women. These advantages can be summed up in the understanding that women are expected to both ‘complement’ and ‘compliment’ men. (Jeffreys 2005, p. 32)

Engagement demarcates and differentiates; separating the superior class (men) from the inferior class (women). It enforces a clear distinction, as women do beauty and men do not. The superiority of men and the inferiority of women is established in a number of ways. Women are presented as ‘complementing men’ by beautifying for them, making women secondary to and dependent on men’s approval. Simultaneously, the skills and work which women have to master to succeed in beauty are devalued and cast as trivial and inferior skills which women, the inferior class, need but men do not. Only women are valued for their superficial appearance, while men are valued for their intellect, earning power, physical prowess, provider status, and so on. Taken together, engagement marks women as different from men and enforces their inferior class status.

The claim that women ‘do’ beauty, understood broadly as spending time, effort and care on one’s appearance, and men do not, or that women are defined by appearance and men are not, is false. Sandra Bartky memorably stated, ‘the “art” of make-up is the art of disguise, but this presupposes that a woman’s face, unpainted, is

defective. Soap and water, a shave and routine attention to hygiene may be enough for *him*; for *her* they are not' (Bartky 1990, p. 71). This, if we extend the claim from make-up to appearance modification and body enhancement, is no longer true. If men too are being defined by appearance, then engagement in body work cannot mark women as the inferior class.

Men are engaging in appearance practices and body work in ever-increasing numbers, and are valuing how they look. The harms of the rising demands of beauty and those of body image dissatisfaction and anxiety are increasingly falling on all of us, irrespective of gender. A 2016 YMCA report ranked body image as the third most important issue for young people in the UK across genders (YMCA, 2016). Statistics on eating disorders suggest that as many as a third of young sufferers are male (Griffiths, Murray and Touyz 2015). Likewise, the 2010 'Sexualisation of Young People' report, details that boys are under pressure to display their semi-naked bodies in the virtual world (Papadopoulos 2010). Men are doing body work, including diet, exercise, and chemical and surgical interventions. For example, BAAPS reports a rise in operations on men, dubbed 'the daddy makeover', including an 'epic rise of 20 per cent in male liposuction and a 13 per cent jump in "man boob" reductions' (BAAPS 2016). The number of men feeling dissatisfied with their bodies and exhibiting body image anxiety is rising, along with harmful consequences (Griffiths, Murray and Touyz 2015).

Naomi Wolf, in her landmark book *The Beauty Myth*, jokes about the beauty ideal falling on men. She invites us to imagine 'penis implants, penis augmentation, foreskin enhancement, testicular silicone injections to correct asymmetry, saline injections with a choice of three sizes, surgery to correct the angle of erection, to lift the scrotum and make it pert' (Wolf 1990, p. 242). Her purpose is to show how unimaginable it is that demands like these could fall on men in a parallel way to the way they fall on women. Yet much of this has come to pass: penis enlargement adverts fill inboxes and Botox (scrotox) is used to smooth testicles. If Brazil is at the top of the beauty curve for men as it is for women, then the fact that men are the fastest-growing demographic of cosmetic surgery recipients in Brazil might foreshadow a general trend for men to engage in cosmetic surgery.⁹

⁹ Edmonds (2010, p. 321) reports that 30 per cent of operations are already performed on men, with common anxieties being losing weight, gaining muscle, hair loss and virility.

The false consciousness analysis relies on class differentiation between men and women. For it to hold, women must do beauty and men must not. But men are engaging in appearance work and suffering from body image anxiety. This doesn't mean there are no harms involved in engagement—there are, and these are real and rising, and some of them are highly gendered—but it does mean that the false consciousness critique does not explain appearance engagement.¹⁰ There may be other reasons to argue for a 'duty to resist', but it is not the case (to rephrase MacKinnon) that we recognized all of our beauty behaviour as learned behaviour and as accommodations to the reality of power politics. Practices which both men and women do cannot be the result of a patriarchal norm.

III

Four Further Reasons to Reject 'A Duty to Resist'. In the rest of the paper I give four further reasons to reject the notion that individuals have a duty to resist, and argue that promoting resistance as a tactic to reduce the power of appearance norms is ineffectual.

3.1. *Repeatedly and Consistently Failed.* The first reason to move away from focusing on individual resistance is, as noted above, that the 'light bulb moment' simply did not happen as it did for other issues. While there were women on both sides of the argument for women's votes or access to education, overall the arguments for male superiority were ultimately rejected by social consensus. That it was false to think men were more intelligent, such that only they deserved the vote, or to practice in certain professions, resonated. It chimed with what women knew to be true—and across demographics: working-class women already knew they were equal to their men—they worked in the same fields and factories (as well as doing childcare); middle-class women knew they could out-argue their brothers; and so on. Once the sexism of the practices was called out, the argument was over: it was culture, not nature, that stopped

¹⁰ A criticism might be that the practices which men and women are engaging in are different, and they do serve to differentiate the genders. There is some truth in this in some places, for instance, the hyper-sexualization of the 'buff male' and the 'thin-with-curves' female. But this would require further argument and empirical evidence. It is also to change the argument in a significant way. For this argument to succeed I merely need to show that appearance is no longer too trivial for men to worry about or take time on.

women voting or working. That our practice has not yet caught up with our principles does nothing to change the success of the argument. It is largely accepted that inequality between men and women is sexist social practice, not innate difference. We no longer think the gender pay gap is justified, even if it has not yet been eradicated, just as we no longer think domestic violence is a domestic matter.

When it came to appearance, there was no equivalent ‘light bulb moment’. As a response to demanding body ideals, the project of consciousness-raising has manifestly failed. As other feminist goals have been attained, body work has not been rejected but further embraced and embedded. As Kathy Peiss notes in her history of beauty, feminist ‘critique has increased women’s scepticism toward the beauty industry, but it has hardly stopped them from buying cosmetics, reading fashion magazines, trying out new looks, and sharing makeup tips with friends’ (Peiss 1998, p. 269). Moreover, as discussed above, men too are engaging in significant amounts of body work, and are judging themselves on their appearance and valuing appearance. The ‘just resist’ approach is a demonstrably failed project, and irrespective of other reasons, we should stop promoting it as a way to challenge harmful beauty norms. To repeat, I am not advocating engagement in any shape or form; rather, I am suggesting we stop paying attention to what individuals do and don’t do.

3.2. *Individual and Isolating.* The second reason to reject the ‘just resist’ approach is that the call to resist beauty engagement is individual, and individual in problematic ways. In second-wave feminism, it likely felt less individual than it does now. When second-wave feminists were first making these claims, resistance had some prospect of success. Appearance critiques tapped into the bigger Women’s Liberation movement and were part of a larger pattern of resistance. Rejecting beauty engagement as a private and trivial pursuit was part of rejecting the relegation of women to the private sphere. It is not hard to imagine how, in that context, rejecting beauty engagement would feel empowering. Appearance work was private, like housework and homemaking, and was categorically only women’s work, designed to trivialize and privatize women’s experience. Set in the wider Women’s Liberation context, growing body hair and rejecting constraining garments and beauty regimes could have felt collective and empowering. This no longer seems to be the case, as resisting beauty norms is something, in most contexts, one does

alone, reducing the empowering elements of resistance. Moreover, in an increasingly visual culture, where appearance has become a primary source of individual identity and esteem, not conforming to appearance norms is a higher-stakes activity than other forms of resistance.

There are attempts to make the rejection of beauty norms communal. For instance, body and fat acceptance movements, body positivity movements and the Januhairy campaign (which I will return to). The extent to which such campaigns actually challenge dominant appearance norms rather than embed them is open to question.¹¹ But even if such movements make resistance less lonely in some contexts, there are contexts in which resistance is always individual. Unlike other forms of activism, appearance resistance is not an activity one does only sometimes.¹² Resistance is obvious at a glance: the bare face shows, the undyed hair shows, the wrinkles, the jowls, the fat show. Similarly, engagement shows: the red lips, the dyed hair, the injected lips. Where one stands is always visible. It is written on your body, and obvious before you speak or communicate in some other way. Compare this to, for example, marching for a cause or vegetarianism as a form of animal rights or environmental activism. Those who march for a cause are only visible when in a collective group. Vegetarianism is more similar to individual resistance to appearance norms, but is not always visible.¹³ Conformity or lack of conformity to appearance norms cannot be concealed (although of course the meaning for non-conformity is not immediately obvious), but it is always on view.¹⁴ The high visibility of beauty engagement, especially as the culture becomes more concerned with appearance, makes

¹¹ Elsewhere I have argued that the focus on the body, which all body-positive campaigns endorse, might further embed the importance of appearance, despite the opposite intention (Widdows 2019).

¹² An example of a collective campaign is the Januhairy campaign, which I discuss in more detail in §3.3 on ‘Shaming and Blaming’.

¹³ Vegetarianism might have been more visible a few decades ago, when it was less common and needed more defence and discussion, but even then it is not always visible in a way which engagement in beauty practices is.

¹⁴ The reasons for non-engagement is not obvious at a glance. One might be resisting because one believes one has a feminist duty to do so, or one might simply not care about appearance norms. However, as the norms become more demanding, non-engagement will become assumed to be political, an active choice. This is already the case with some practices, such as body hair removal, where displaying visible body hair is now a political statement, rather than a fashion choice, as evidenced by the Januhairy campaign. The more normal body modification becomes, the more non-engagement will be read as resistance.

individuals vulnerable and isolated, including those involved in collective movements when they are not in activist spaces.

Activism for a cause usually focuses attention towards collective ends and away from individual preoccupations. Collective action induces feelings of solidarity, well-being, shared purpose, and being part of something bigger than oneself (Klar and Kasser 2009).¹⁵ A duty to resist is very different from other forms of activism. It draws attention to your own and to others' bodies. It encourages judgement of others' bodies as we assess the extent to which they engage; it also likely increases anxiety and self-consciousness about our own bodies. Only by assessing ourselves and others can we tell who is resisting and who isn't. The focus on individual resistance increases the focus on appearance and encourages criticism and judgement. This does nothing to challenge demanding beauty norms, but focuses attention on individuals' bodies and their personal engagement. Resistance is an awful lot to ask of individuals, and the ask becomes more demanding as our culture becomes more visual and images more dominant in the virtual world. Ultimately, the individual ask turns out to be self-defeating and destructive of collective action.

3.3. *Shaming and Blaming.* The third argument against a duty to resist is that it induces negative emotions of shame and blame. We feel shame, we are disgusted by visible body hair, and we are routinely ashamed of our appearance failures. We blame people for not acting to improve their appearance and we blame them when interventions go wrong. For instance, women were blamed in the PIP scandal, and 'botched' surgery is entertainment.¹⁶ Shame and blame are evident across appearance discourses, and that these emotions attach to appearance is regarded as normal and even inevitable. In childhood we learn to routinely shame bodies to the extent that 'physical appearance is the number one reason why people bully' (Ditch the Label 2019). From as young as three we attach negative qualities, such as

¹⁵ For example, in his ethnographic study of anti-globalization protests, Jeffrey Juris states that 'as performative rituals, counter-summit mobilizations operate by transforming affect: amplifying an initiating emotion, such as anger or rage, and transferring it into a sense of collective solidarity' (Juris 2008, p. 65).

¹⁶ For example, the stated aim of the TV series *Botched* is to 'remedy extreme plastic surgeries gone wrong'. That it is successful entertainment is evidenced by the fact that it is now in its seventh series, and has had numerous specials and a spin-off series, *Botched By Nature* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Botched_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Botched_(TV_series))).

laziness, to fat people (Harriger 2015). Being silenced by shame is not only individually painful, but it reduces effective action.

Shame can be induced even when there is an attempt at collective action. For instance, the Januhairy campaign, begun by students at Essex University, challenged women to grow their body hair for the month of January. Its stated aim was to convince women to ‘love and accept’ their body hair while raising money for charity. No doubt this felt empowering for those engaged, but the result might have not been what the students intended. The media coverage highlighted the students’ young bodies, which, despite their body hair, all fell within the acceptable range. The campaign only challenged one feature of the beauty ideal, the smooth feature; it did not challenge the other three features, thinness, firmness and youth. As such, it likely reinforced the overall dominance of the ideal, as features can be traded off against each other (Widdows 2018, pp. 20 ff.). Campaigns like this, including many body-positive campaigns, are well-intentioned, but they risk reinforcing rather than challenging the beauty ideal. They increase rather than reduce focus on bodies, again making the issue about individuals’ engagement, and rarely are they radically inclusive and diverse.¹⁷

Elsewhere I have argued for a response which overtly rejects blame and shame (Widdows 2021). I have drawn on Iris Marion Young’s account, which is emphatic about the corrosiveness of blame, stating that blame ‘usually produces defensiveness and unproductive blame-switching’ (Young 2013, p. 117). As Virginia Blum states, ‘We need to transcend feminist criticisms of body practices that can wind up being as shaming as the physical imperfections that drove us to beautify in the first place—as though some of us are superior to the cultural machinery while others desperately fling ourselves across the tracks of cultural desires’ (Blum 2003, p. 63). We need to stop shaming and blaming individuals for appearance engagement or lack of engagement. Promoting a duty to resist does

¹⁷ Body-positive campaigns conform to three of the four features of the ideal. For example, campaigns to ‘embrace curves’ use otherwise conforming models, models who are young, firm, smooth, and often heavily made up and in recognizably ‘pin-up’ poses. Indeed frequently these campaigns don’t even challenge the ‘thin’ feature of the beauty ideal, as ‘fat’ models are ‘hourglass’ shaped, so ‘thin’ in the crucial places, and conforming to the ‘thin with curves’ ideal. In the Januhairy campaign, only the smooth feature is challenged; the other features, being thin, smooth and young, are not. Likewise, when it comes to challenging age, older and obviously ‘grey and ageing models’ are always thin, remarkably smooth, and (in clothes at least) appear firm, conforming to the ideal silhouette.

little to challenge the dominance of appearance ideals and is likely to be counterproductive, increasing blame and shame.

3.4. *Discriminating and Privileged.* The fourth and final reason that we should reject both an individual duty to resist and resistance as a tactic to challenge dominant appearance norms is that not only does it divide individuals, but it divides on group lines, and often according to hierarchies of privilege and power. It assumes that non-engagement is a simple choice, open to everyone, and fails to recognize that the possibility of resistance depends on context, class and privilege.

As appearance becomes more important, and connected to identity, rejecting body work becomes harder. Very few of us have absolutely no concern for being thin, firm, smooth and young. And those who do reject engagement very rarely do so as individuals, but rather they do so as part of a protected community, where non-engagement is common and even commended. For instance, it is much easier for Professors of Philosophy to reject beauty norms than it is for barmaids or retail workers.¹⁸ Working in a profession where appearance matters makes it far more costly to ‘resist’, even to the extent where it might seem impossible. This is much more than complying with employer expectations, in many groups engagement is simply routine, such that non-engagement is almost unimaginable, not a live choice. Engagement is hugely dependent on group membership, and the cultural and social norms of the group. This is evidenced clearly in cultural differences, for example, that American and British teeth straightening and whitening practices differed, at least in previous decades, is so obviously the case that it is the stuff of comedy (Parkinson 2015). In Brazil, there is talk of a ‘right to Beauty’ and cosmetic surgery is regarded as a form of ‘public health’ and it is generally agreed that the poor should be able to access such procedures (Edmonds 2010). Elsewhere I argue that these cultural norms are converging in a global ideal, but nonetheless the options

¹⁸ Even when it comes to professors of philosophy, simply rejecting beauty engagement might be more complex and less liberating than is sometimes assumed. The resistance approach, as discussed in §1, is underpinned by uncomfortable gendered assumptions about the status of the mind, as if the more male one is (or the more male one presents), the more intelligent one is. One might wonder if this influences the rejection of overt femininity in academic circles.

that are available to individuals as realistic choices is fundamentally constrained and shaped by group membership (Widdows 2018).

Calls to resist fail to recognize the fundamentally communal nature of appearance norms. The demands of body work are rising across demographics but they are not uniform. They fall more heavily on those who are not privileged in terms of class, education and race and less on those who are protected by privileged communities and who have alternative ways to access the goods of the good life (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor 2006). We must not ignore the fundamental communal nature of beauty norms, and the place of power and privilege in shaping the live choices of individuals. Promoting a ‘duty to resist’ or thinking that individuals have such a duty fails to recognize these constraints and therefore is not an ethical call for action.

IV

Conclusion. To conclude, individuals don’t have a duty to resist engagement and promoting individual resistance does not challenge demanding appearance norms. False consciousness does not explain engagement, nor ground a ‘duty to resist’. Instead it obscures the actual power-dynamics of appearance, which are far more complicated than women’s subordination by men, and it ignores lived experience. Indeed, one might think that it is false consciousness to focus on individual engagement and non-engagement at all. Moreover, as a tactic, resistance has been proved to fail, it is individual, it increases attention on bodies, divides and silences, induces shame and blame and fails to recognize the communal nature of beauty requirements.

There are serious harms which are the consequence of the current globally dominant and demanding ideal. If we continue on our present trajectory then extensively modified bodies will become normal and required. If we want to loosen the hold of the ideal, then working together to make a kinder and more inclusive, less body-shaming and more body-celebrating culture, is more likely to deliver than a response which focuses on what individuals do or do not do.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thanks to the Aristotelian Society for allowing me to present an earlier version of this paper in September 2021, and to those who were kind enough to attend and engage with me on this topic. I am exceptionally grateful for comments on versions of this paper from Clare Chambers, James Lewis, Guy Longworth, Merten Reglitz, Ema Sullivan-Bissett and Jeremy Williams.

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