

STRATHMORE

100% RA

PROBLEMS IN DRESS OF THE ELDERLY WOMAN

STRATHMORE PARCHMENT

100% RA U.S.A.

PROBLEMS IN DRESS OF THE ELDERLY WOMAN

By

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INTRODUCTION

"A century ago in the United States fewer than three out of every 100 survived to celebrate his sixty-fifth birthday. Now out of every 100,000 new-born Americans 50,000 will be alive at the age of 66."¹

From 1930 to 1940, the life span of people in the United States increased 5.5 years. This is almost twice the gain for the previous decade. The American population is becoming older.²

This increase in the number of elderly people is largely due to the advances made in the medical and biological sciences in prolonging life. But have the social sciences made equal advancement in meeting the problems which have resulted from this increased life span? How effectively have the personal and social problems been dealt with? For example, what consideration has been given to the clothing problems of the four and one-half million women in the United States past 65 years of age, many of whom have changed in stature, personal coloring, activities, and preferences until the common measuring stick of the average no longer gives satisfactory results.

✓ In this study an attempt has been made to bring to light some of the major problems in dress of this minority group, and, on the basis of the information collected, to make suggestions that will help to solve some of the difficulties.

¹ H. Ward, "Old Age: Asset or Liability," New Republic, 107 (September 14, 1942), p. 314.

² Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Statistical Bulletin, (August, 1943), Table I, p. 2.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to the 1940 United States census, there were in Oklahoma at that time 144,934 people, or 6.1 per cent of the population, 65 years of age or over.³ In the entire United States there were 9,019,314 or nearly seven per cent in this age group.⁴

"The average length of life of the American people in 1942, corresponding to the mortality conditions then current, was 64.82 years, the highest on record to date. This new figure represents an increase of more than $15\frac{1}{2}$ years since the beginning of the century when the average length of life was only $49\frac{1}{4}$ years.

"In the white population the increase for females was somewhat greater, namely $17\frac{1}{2}$ years. White girl babies celebrating their first birthday have, on an average, 70 years of life before them. This means that the average age at death for these babies will be 71 years, exceeding the proverbial three score and ten."⁵

Someone has said, "Everyone wants to live long, but no one wants to be old." For many people, the beginning of old age brings uncertainty, insecurity, and an increasing dependence upon others.

"Two-thirds of the Americans at the age of 65 are dependent either on relatives or on the government for support... The problem of financial security is one that the individual in a modern industrial civilization cannot himself completely solve."⁶

³ U. S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population, Vol. II. U. S. Summary Part I. Table 26, p. 74.

⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵ Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, "Longevity of the American People at a Peak in 1942," Statistical Bulletin, (April, 1944), pp. 6-7.

⁶ George Lawton, "Finding Happiness in Old Age," Mental Hygiene, (April, 1943).

Our social security laws are endeavoring to offer a solution to this problem. Financial assistance to old age groups is being extended throughout the United States.⁷ Total payments in old-age assistance of \$56,870,076 were made in the continental United States to 2,148,716 recipients during the month of November, 1943. This represents an average payment of \$26.53. To more than one-half of the old-age population of Oklahoma, during June, 1942, the sum of \$1,591,000 was paid in old-age assistance. Payments averaged \$20.46.⁸

Monetary assistance is certainly an important consideration, and undoubtedly those persons receiving such aid are deriving satisfaction especially from knowing that, in the event they become ill or unable to care for themselves, they will not be wholly dependent.

"The security of a people, however, rests upon all measures which enable individuals to live out their lives with personal satisfaction and independence."⁹

⁷ No. 439. Old Age Assistance, Growth: 1915-1940.

Year	No. of State and Territorial Laws in Effect	No. Recipients at End of Year	Total Payments	Average Monthly Payments
1915	1	42	\$ 2,000	\$ 4.70
1925	3	817	146,000	14.86
1930	9	10,648	2,138,000	16.73
1940	51	2,069,763	475,730,000	20.26

Statistical Abstract of the United States, (1941), p. 414. U. S. Bureau of the Census.

⁸ U. S. Social Security Board, Social Security Bulletin, Vol. 6, No. 5, (May, 1943).

⁹ Ibid, "A Basic Minimum Program of Social Security," Social Security Bulletin, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Januray, 1944).

The satisfaction that comes from being appropriately and becomingly dressed is the phase of the problem of security with which this study is concerned. A good personal appearance has a marked psychological effect on both one's self and her associates. Wholesome family relations are more easily maintained when the elderly member who has survived her contemporaries, dresses so that she is accepted by the young people of the family unit instead of being thought of by them as queer and out-moded. It is not intended that she should make the often repeated mistake of attempting to dress as if she were youthful. It is both ludicrous and pathetic to see one whose skin, hair, stature, and activities have changed with age, still trying to cling to youth by wearing the colors and styles planned for the modern miss. But by accepting her age and making the most of her possibilities, the elderly woman can dress attractively and thus pave the way for more harmonious social relations.

One cannot overlook the fact that as long as there is purchasing power, no matter how meager, there is interest in dress. Women never live too long to stop being persons. Gordon says, "No man can possibly realize how women are influenced by the clothes they wear. Put even the plainest woman into a beautiful dress and unconsciously she will try to live up to it."¹⁰ Attractive and appropriate clothing has a marked psychological effect on women. It helps them to maintain self-confidence.¹¹

¹⁰ Lady Duff-Gordon, "About Women," Ladies' Home Journal, (June, 1944), p. 56.

¹¹ William H. Dooley, "The Enjoyment Value of Clothes," Practical Home Economics, (March, 1942), p. 89.

"Recently it has been shown that many illnesses and disorders arise from personal difficulties and emotional conflicts which are expressed through disturbances in the digestive system, the heart, or other functional processes."¹²

A feeling of inferiority is one of the most common of these difficulties. For this condition, nothing is more helpful than the "psychological vitamins" of correct dress. But according to evidence obtained from reading and investigation, this suggested remedy is most difficult to secure.

Of the five pattern companies consulted about patterns for elderly women, only one reply indicated that any thought was being given to the question of sizing and designing patterns for this age woman. An excerpt from this letter reveals the fact that the small elderly woman has been entirely overlooked by the designers.

"We design patterns for matrons which are sized for matron's figure. In addition to the matrons' size range, designs selected for this classification have lines and style features suitable for the matron rather than for the more youthful type of figure. These patterns are shown in the Butterick catalogue under the classification, Large Women, Sizes above 44."¹³

It is difficult to imagine designs especially becoming to both the little old lady who wears size 32 and the woman of any age who wears size 44 or above. Certainly if a pattern is sized for the woman with a well-developed figure, many alterations would be necessary for the small elderly woman.

¹² U. S. National Resources Planning Board, Human Conservation, (March, 1943), pp. 102-103.

¹³ Letter from T. D. Griffette, Fashion Department, The Butterick Company, Inc., New York, (June 29, 1943).

Each person who develops normally from childhood to old age shows marked changes in his physical being. Those most noticeable have to do with three dimensions: height, width, and thickness.¹⁴ "The figure settles in the front and curves more in the back."¹⁵ Color and texture are also influenced by increasing age.

Chambers says that for many years all manufacturers made women's and misses' garments in regular sizes only. Alterations were so frequent, however, that many houses expanded their size range to include regulars, misses, junior miss, little women or half sizes, and stouts. The regulars are made for the well-developed figure of average height and the little women or half sizes for the short mature figure.¹⁶ Thus we see that although the ready-to-wear industry is making advancement in widening the size range, none meets the needs of the elderly woman. Dresses labeled the same size, but made by different manufacturers, vary greatly, and comparatively few fit without alteration. This entails extra expense and trouble.

In a recent study the weight and 58 measures used in pattern and garment construction were taken on each of 14,689 women living in the United States. Results of the findings indicate that to be satisfactory, sizing must be based on a stature-weight combination. The use of the information gained from the study will undoubtedly make possible more nearly accurate sizing of women's clothes. But as yet, fewer elderly women have been measured than are necessary to secure correct

¹⁴ Alpha Latzke and Beth Quinlan, Clothing, pp. 65-67.

¹⁵ Ruth Wyeth Spears, Better Dressmaking, p. 77.

¹⁶ Bernice G. Chambers, Color and Design in Apparel, pp. 349-350.

generalizations; and too, the problem of design for the small elderly woman is still a matter for consideration.¹⁷

PROCEDURE

In beginning this study, the first question considered was, "What age is old?" This can never be answered for everyone alike. As long as one has vitality and mental flexibility she is young, and when she loses these she is old even though she may still be young in years. But to give a starting place for the investigation, 65 was chosen, since it is the minimum age at which social security laws provide federal old-age benefit payments.¹⁸

The next consideration was the formation of a questionnaire to be used in recording the desired information. For the purpose of determining the items and problems that should be included in the form, available literature was examined, and clothing instructors and alteration ladies were interviewed. Replies were received from letters written to five of the leading pattern companies asking if they had patterns sized and designed for the elderly woman. (For questionnaire see pages 9 and 10).

The investigation was made by personal interviews with 100 white women in the state of Oklahoma who had passed their sixty-fifth birthdays. Thirty-four of the women resided in Stillwater, and of the

¹⁷ Ruth O'Brien and William C. Shelton, "Women's Measurements for Pattern and Garment Construction," Miscellaneous Publications No. 454, (December, 1941), pp. 1-25.

¹⁸ U. S. Statutes at Large, Vol. 49, Part I, Sec. 202, p. 623.

remaining 66, about equal numbers lived in Guthrie, Oklahoma City, Shawnee, El Reno, and Frederick.

According to statements made by the women, their ages ranged from 65 to 93 years, and their weights from 80 to 230 pounds. Eight per cent of the women weighed less than 100 pounds, and 20 per cent weighed 112 pounds or less. They seemed less certain about their heights, but from information given, the range was from four feet and eleven inches to five feet and eight inches. The median height was five feet and four inches.

Some of the women owned their homes, some rented, and others lived in a home maintained by a fraternal order. In some cases they lived with their children, and sometimes their children lived with them. Several were renting out apartments, and others were living alone. Many were widows, and a few had never been married. Judging from observations made during the interviews, the women were living in conditions that ranged from plenty to poverty. Most, however, were comfortably situated. Many were receiving old-age assistance. In general, there was not a spirit of complaint.

Very few of the women contacted refused to be interviewed. Some were hesitant until convinced that the study had grown out of an interest in them, that there were no right and wrong answers, that their opinions and preferences were just as valuable in the investigation as anyone's, and that they were not going to be asked to buy anything. Often it was just as difficult to bring the conference to a close as it had been to get started satisfactorily. Many of the women not only responded to the inquiries, but they showed their wardrobes and told which dresses they liked best and why.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview No. _____ Age _____ Weight _____ Height _____

1. Do you buy your dresses ready-made? _____
2. If not, who makes them? (a) Yourself _____ (b) Other family member _____ (c) Dressmaker _____.
3. Would you prefer (a) Ready-made _____ (b) Home-made _____ (c) Dressmaker _____.
4. Do you purchase (a) Your dresses _____ (b) Dress materials _____.
5. Do you indicate to whoever buys your clothes your likes or dislikes? _____.
6. What are your favorite colors? _____, _____, _____.
7. Light, _____, Medium _____, or dark _____; Bright or Subdued _____.
8. Dress fabrics: (a) Solid colors _____ (b) Prints _____.
9. Motifs in fabric: (a) Small _____ (b) Medium _____ (c) Large _____.
10. Sleeves: (a) Elbow _____, (b) Three-quarter _____, (c) Long _____.
11. Dresses (a) With collars _____, (b) Without collars _____.
12. Are you pleased with commercial patterns for yourself? _____. If not, why? _____.
13. In ready-made dresses do you like, for yourself, available colors? _____. Styles? _____.
14. Do you have dresses that give you more self-confidence than others? _____.
15. To what do you contribute it (a) Color _____, (b) Fabric _____, (c) Design _____, (d) Fit _____, (e) Comfort _____.
16. Would you rather have (a) More clothes _____, (b) Clothes of better quality _____, (c) Later styles _____, (d) Better fit _____.
17. About how many years do you wear your dresses? _____.
18. Do you tire of them? _____.

19. Is the convenience of dressing important to you? _____.

20. Details in dresses	Have Used	Like	For Looks	Convenience
(a) Buttoned down front	_____	_____	_____	_____
(b) Zipper placket in side	_____	_____	_____	_____
(c) Snaps in side placket	_____	_____	_____	_____
(d) Long front zipper openings	_____	_____	_____	_____

21. If dresses are made at home is commercial pattern used? _____.
What size? _____.

22. Does pattern fit without altering? _____, Ready-made dresses?
_____.

23. Do you usually have dresses altered? _____. If not, are they comfortable? _____.

24. Alterations needed either in patterns or ready-made dresses:
(a) Shortening of blouse: All around _____, In front _____, Back _____.

- (b) Altering for flat chest _____.
- (c) Adjusting for low bust _____.
- (d) Altering for sloping shoulders _____.
- (e) Narrowing the shoulders _____.
- (f) Altering for round shoulders _____.
- (g) Fitting a thin neck _____.
- (h) Increasing waist size _____.
- (i) Increasing hip size _____.
- (j) Altering for prominent abdomen _____.
- (k) Adjusting hem line _____.
- (l) Others _____.

25. Does the dress of the lady being interviewed fit well? _____.

26. Other findings _____.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Of the entire number of women contacted, 73 per cent bought all or some of their dresses ready-made, 24 per cent bought all ready-made, and 25 per cent either did all of their own sewing or had it done. There seemed to be little consistency in the differences in practice of the four age groups, except that the percentage of women who bought no ready-made dresses was almost twice as high for the ones past 75 years of age as it was for those younger. For all home-constructed dresses, the percentage distribution of women making their own was, in order of progressing age groups, 60, 47, 23, and 9. As might be expected, the percentage was highest for the youngest group and it decreased consistently as the ages increased. Practically the same number of women had dresses made by relatives as had them made by dressmakers, however, the percentage of those who had them made by relatives increased with advancing age. Beginning with the youngest group the percentages were 8, 18, 23, and 55. There was not such a wide difference in the percentages of those having dressmakers do their sewing.

TABLE I. COMPARISON OF THE NUMBER OF WOMEN PURCHASING READY-MADE DRESSES AND THE NUMBER MAKING THEM OR HAVING THEM MADE

Age Groups	Number in Groups	Women Who Purchase Ready-to-Wear						Other Dresses Made by					
		All Dresses		Some Dresses		No Dresses		Self		Kin		Others	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
65-69 yrs.	35	8	23	20	57	7	20	21	60	3	8	7	20
70-74 yrs.	32	8	25	18	56	6	19	15	47	6	18	4	12
75-79 yrs.	22	6	27	6	28	8	36	5	23	5	23	6	27
80 yrs. & over	11	2	18	5	45	4	36	1	9	6	55	2	18
Total	100	24		49		25		42		20		19	

Table II shows the numbers in the different age groups who had a decided preference for dresses ready-made and for those made at home. Although 56 per cent of the women expressed a desire to purchase their dresses ready-made only 24 per cent of them actually did so.

TABLE II. COMPARISON OF THE NUMBER OF WOMEN PREFERRING DRESSES READY-MADE AND THOSE MADE AT HOME

Age Groups	Number in Groups	Decided Preference for Dresses			
		Ready-Made		Made-at Home	
		Number	% of Age Group	Number	% of Age Group
65-69 yrs.	35	22	63	13	27
70-74 yrs.	32	19	60	12	39
75-79 yrs.	22	11	50	11	50
80 yrs. & over	11	4	36	7	64
Total	100	56		43	

Among the reasons given for preferring ready-made garments were wanting not to be bothered with sewing, inability to sew, failure to judge how home-constructed garments would look from pattern and fabric selection, and better style in ready-to-wear. Many of the women 75 years of age or over expressed a preference for ready-to-wear. Seemingly they had as their chief object a desire to be relieved of the responsibility of making their dresses which all too often did not excel in either fit or workmanship those that they could buy ready-made. In fact, neither the ones that they themselves made nor those that they bought were satisfactory.

There were three reasons frequently given by the 43 per cent who had a decided preference for home-constructed garments. They were economy, better fit, and pleasure in sewing. Better fit was the reason given most often by all groups. Pleasure in sewing was seldom mentioned

in the older groups. A few of the women, however, still found enjoyment, they said, in doing not only their own dressmaking but even some for others.

Forty-two per cent of all the women interviewed said that they made their own dresses. Several were doing so only because to them it seemed necessary since dress materials had been given to them, there was no family member to relieve them of the task of sewing, and going to a dressmaker seemed impractical on account of the cost involved and the effort expended in making the necessary contacts with the dressmaker. According to percentages shown in Tables I and II it is apparent that both interest in doing one's own sewing and desire for ready-made dresses were in inverse proportion to increasing age, while preference for dresses made at home was in direct proportion to progressing age. It seemed that the older the women were, the more pleased they were to be relieved of both sewing and shopping if they could have some interested family member assume the responsibility for them.

The percentages of those who selected their own dresses and dress materials are, in the order of age groups, 82, 50, 36, and 27 respectively. See Table III. Hardly one-half of the entire group, in answer to questioning, expressed difficulty in finding colors and styles suitable for themselves. They seemed, however, to have a little fear lest they should be judged hard to please. This acceptance of the situation on their part is, no doubt, one of the reasons for little having been done in the study of dress for elderly women.

TABLE III. THE SELECTION OF DRESSES AND MATERIALS AND THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED AS TO LIMITATIONS IN COLOR AND STYLE

Age Groups	Number in Groups	Dresses and Dress Materials Selected by				Limited Choices in the Selection of			
		Self		Others		Colors		Styles	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
65-69 yrs.	35	29	82	6	18	17	49	18	51
70-74 yrs.	32	16	50	16	50	18	56	15	47
75-79 yrs.	22	8	36	14	64	8	36	8	36
80 yrs. & over	11	3	27	8	73	4	36	5	45
Total	100	56		44		47		46	

Ninety-four of the 100 women interviewed said that convenience in dressing was important to them. Seventy-five per cent enjoyed wearing dresses buttoned down the front and seventy-one per cent liked zipper-openings because of their convenience. Only five of the women who had used zippers expressed a dislike for them.

TABLE IV. PREFERENCES FOR CERTAIN DETAILS IN DESIGN OF DRESS

Age Groups	Number in Groups	Necklines Preferred				Certain Sleeve Lengths for Either Part or All-Time Wear					
		Collared		Plain		Elbow		Three-Quarter		Long	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
65-69 yrs.	35	17	48	10	28	22	63	13	37	11	31
70-74 yrs.	32	19	59	8	25	14	44	13	42	16	50
75-79 yrs.	22	15	68	3	14	11	50	8	36	17	77
80 yrs. & over	11	8	73	0	0	3	27	3	27	8	73
Total	100	59		21		50		37		52	

Almost three times as many women expressed a preference for dresses with collars as did for those without. Many felt that the use of a collar made possible a light color near the face which seemed both effective and practical. Others definitely preferred its use to conceal a

wrinkled or thin neck. A similar reason was given by many for choosing long sleeves. The remark was often made that old people ought to wear long sleeves because their arms were so ugly. Contrary to expected results, however, it was found that for either part or all of the time, 50 per cent of the women preferred elbow-length sleeves, 37 per cent three-quarter length, and 52 per cent long. The use of short-sleeved dresses with jackets, sweaters, or shoulderettes was more prevalent than has been generally recognized perhaps. The results of this particular part of the investigation may have been influenced by the extremely hot weather in Oklahoma at the time most of the interviews were made. On the other hand, the results may be entirely consistent with the general opinion of elderly people.

There was disagreement as to preferences for solid colors or prints. Only 63 women expressed a choice. Twenty-eight of these favored solid colors, and the remaining 40 preferred figured materials. The most frequently given reason for preferring solid colors

TABLE V. PREFERENCES FOR SOLID COLORS, PRINTS, AND SIZE OF DESIGN IN PRINTS

Age Group	Number in Groups	Solid Colors		Figured Material		Size of Design		
		No.	%	No.	%	Small	Medium	Large
65-69 yrs.	35	12	34	9	26	14	21	
70-74 yrs.	32	9	28	17	53	17	14	1
75-79 yrs.	22	5	23	10	45	6	16	
80 yrs. & over	11	2	18	4	36	6	5	
Total	100	28		40		43	56	1

was that they looked dressier, while that given most often for preferring prints was that they offered a better chance for wearing colors that could not be worn otherwise. There was a preference for medium and small motifs in the design of fabrics. Only one of the entire group preferred the large design. A preference for the medium-sized design was 13 per cent higher than for the small figure. Several of the women expressed embarrassment over the size and color of the motifs in the dresses they were wearing. But limitations of the market and selections made by others, were their reasons for the condition.

TABLE VI. PREFERENCES CONCERNING DIMENSIONS OF COLOR

Age Groups	Number in Groups	Hue				Value			Intensity	
		Blue	Wine	Black	Rose	Light	Medium	Dark	Bright	Subdued
65-69	35	26	11	9	12	3	29	19	3	32
70-74	32	27	7	7	9	7	23	14	3	29
75-79	22	16	10	6	4	2	18	10	3	19
80 & over	11	9		4	1		5	7		11
Total	100	78	28	26	26	12	75	50	9	91

The majority of women were very decided in their choice of color. From a study of customer attitudes toward color and line in dress conducted by the New York University School of Retailing, it was found that blue was the favorite of half the women studied.¹⁹ This finding was further substantiated by the color preferences expressed by the elderly women in this investigation. Blue was named by 78 per cent of the group as a preference. There was a wide range in color-choice

¹⁹ Edith Newton, "Customer Attitudes Toward Color and Line in Dress," Journal of Retailing, (October, 1936), p. 83.

among the women, however, depending likely upon the background of the individual. Blue, as has been said, was decidedly the favorite of the majority. Wine, black, and rose, although far in arrears, were the colors receiving the next highest frequency of mention. More women liked medium and dark values than did light values. The greatest number of those preferring light was 23 per cent in the 70 to 74 year-old group. Only nine per cent in each of the 65 to 69 and the 75 to 79 year-old groups and none of the oldest group expressed a preference for light-colored dresses. Four of the women interviewed, however, expressed a decided preference for white. To them it signified cleanliness and purity. The problem of laundering prohibited their wearing it as much as they liked. Often a preference was expressed for red but with the qualifying remark, not for herself any more. Burris-Meyer says,

"When the matter of color selection is absolute, that is, when a selection of color is made without any regard for the use of the color, all ages of both sexes choose the bright colors..... But the color appeal of merchandise is always relative, since the consumer buys it considering the color in relation to its use and to himself. Relative color preferences, therefore, change with the individual taste, age, season, class of merchandise, fashion trends and many other influences."²⁰

No doubt what was considered bright by some would have been termed subdued by others. But in general, the concensus of opinion of the elderly women seemed to be that the more-subdued hues were best for them.

²⁰ Elizabeth Burris-Meyer, Color and Design in the Decorative Arts, pp. 54-55.

"Yes, the colors which were becoming in youth grayed: red grayed to henna or soft rose; blue to steel-blue; yellow to beige; orange to citron; golden brown to taupe; violet to heliotrope; green to olive."²¹

Unless the hues are similar in quality to the wearer's color-tone, they will defeat her usual purpose in wearing them by calling attention to, instead of from, her age. Bright hues drain the natural coloring from the face and contrast unkindly with the elderly woman's characteristics, while soft, neutralized colors express refinement and help make the skin appear clear and healthy.

"Dress is known to influence behavior. How apparent is the self-reliance of the well-dressed person as compared with the social ill-at-ease of the poorly-clad one.... Public opinion associates correct dress with ability."²²

Proof of these statements can be found in the fact that 94 per cent of the 100 women answered emphatically in the affirmative to the question, "Do you have some dresses that give you more confidence in yourself than others?" One of the six who answered negatively was living alone in a poorly-furnished apartment the only access to which was through a beauty parlor and up a dark stairway on which were stored many of the shop's supplies. This woman was one of the most discouraged and seemingly lonely persons interviewed. When asked the question just mentioned, her reply was that it did not make any difference, as she had lost all confidence in herself anyway. She was wearing a skirt of solid blue percale and a print blouse of large bold plaid with brown predominating. That, according to her statement, was one of her two best dresses.

²¹ Margaret Story, Individuality and Clothes, p. 163.

²² Freida Wiegand McFarland, Good Taste in Dress, p. 14.

The 94 women who answered that some dresses did give them more self-confidence than others were next asked to which of the following reasons they attributed it: color, material, design, fit, or comfort. See Table VII. Each one was then asked to name those factors that had the most influence on her preference for certain dresses. Fit headed the list, being mentioned by 78 women. Color and comfort were voted about equal in their influence. Color was mentioned by 52 and comfort by 50. Material came next with 16 votes, and design last with 13. It has long been an accepted fact that color greatly affects merchandising, but for it to be placed equal to comfort in influencing the preferences of a group of elderly women was at first surprising. After taking into account, however, the fact that many women named fit then added, "If it fits, it will be comfortable," it seemed likely that the first impression received from the tabulation was erroneous, since many of the women apparently considered the fit and comfort together.

TABLE VII. RELATIVE IMPORTANCE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT OF CERTAIN FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PREFERENCES IN DRESS

Groups		Color	Fabric	Design	Fit	Comfort	More Clothes	Better Quality	Later Styles	Better Fit
Ages	No.									
65-69	35	22	6	8	27	8		25	4	26
70-74	32	15	6	4	26	17		26	4	23
75-79	22	9	3	1	17	15	4	13	2	15
80 & over	11	6	1		8	10		9		8
Total	100	52	16	13	78	50	4	73	10	74

In a further effort to learn the relative importance of more clothes, clothes of better quality, later styles, and better fit, the women were asked to name any or all of these points that they considered important.

Only four out of the 100 preferred more clothes. It seems evident that clothes have a different significance in the elderly woman's thinking than they had to her when she was younger. Quality, both in material and workmanship, has a higher value to her than do many clothes. Years of experience have taught her values that are more lasting than those she once thought important. Considering the fact that 74 voted for better fit, 73 for better quality, 10 for later styles, and 4 for more clothes, it is evident from the results of this investigation that most of the women preferred good quality and fit rather than a large number of dresses. With a few exceptions, the women had more clothes than they seemed especially to care for. This situation can be explained in the fact that many dresses were given as special-day gifts.

Approximately one-half of the women wore their dresses from four to seven years, and 17 per cent wore them more than ten years. The long time that elderly women wear their dresses can be explained by the facts that: many of the women go less than they once did, they take less active part in physical activities, and they choose to wear over and over a few favorite dresses. Although it seems natural to suppose that everyone tires of her dresses, it was found that this supposition was not entirely true. More than two-thirds of the women said that they tired only of the dresses that they had never cared for, but hated to see the ones wear out that they had liked originally. From this study the correctness of what one buys was found to be of major importance in the women's thinking but a dream not realized in practice.

The problem of fit was approached through two different questions, as shown in Table VII, and in each instance approximately three-fourths

of the women attached great importance to it. Since of all the women interviewed, 95 per cent stated that dresses and patterns did not fit them without alterations, it is apparent that the problem of fit is a major one for elderly women.

TABLE VIII. SIZES OF PATTERNS AND DRESSES PURCHASED AND THE NEED FOR MAKING ALTERATIONS

Groups Ages	No.	Use Commercial Pattern		No. of Women Who Purchase following sizes								Alterations Needed		Have Altering Done	
		Yes	No	12	14	16	18	38	40	42	44-50	Yes	No	Yes	No
65-69	35	29	2		1	1	1	8	5	6	3	32	3	19	6
70-74	32	21	4	3	5	3		2	5	3	1	30	2	10	6
75-79	22	12	4		4	2	1	2	2	2		22		8	5
80 & over	11	6	3	3	1		1		2	1		11		4	1
Total	100	68	13	6	11	6	3	12	14	12	4	95	5	41	18

The wide range in sizes worn by the 68 women who used commercial patterns makes the problem of fit even more difficult. There are certain physical changes that normally take place in the human body after one has passed the age of the models used for sizing patterns and garments.

As women grow older their heights decrease while their girths increase. Height of bust and height of abdominal extension show greatest declines, the former more than two inches during 55 years. Weight shows an increase up to about 50 to 54 years of age, and then a decline. The girth measurements show the same tendency as weight. Abdominal extension and waist show an increase of more than seven inches. The hips increase about half as much.²³

²³ Miscellaneous Publication No. 454, Op. Cit., p. 31.

These typical changes that take place during adult life should serve as a basis for sizing patterns and garments for the age-group under consideration. True, a scientific and satisfactory solution of the problem will require measurements of many more elderly women than have been made thus far. But with 95 per cent of the women conscious of improper fit, even though they are a minority group and represent a very small segment in the field of purchasing, experts should not ignore their responsibility for solving the problem.

Although a satisfactory solution will require expert advice, there is no reason to take a fatalistic attitude and assume that nothing can be done until the complete answer is passed out. Certain alterations that are common to many elderly women are listed in the order that they were most frequently mentioned by the women interviewed:

- Shortening of blouse front
- Adjusting hem line
- Altering for round shoulders
- Narrowing the shoulders
- Increasing hip size
- Altering for protruding abdomen
- Increasing waist size
- Fitting a thin neck
- Altering for flat chest
- Adjusting for low bust
- Altering for sloping shoulders

Some of these were spoken of as problems because of difficulties involved, others because of the frequency of their occurrence. Although attempt will not be made to solve all of these problems, a few suggestions may prove helpful, in view of the fact that although there were 95 women whose dresses and patterns did not fit without alterations, only 41 said that they had altering done. See Table VIII.

"A well-fitted garment conforms to the structural lines of the body, seems anchored to it, and permits freedom of movement with comfort."²⁴

Generally speaking, the center front and center back lines and the warp yarns of the fabric should be perpendicular to the floor, while the filling yarns should be parallel to the floor. The underarm seam should appear to be a continuation of the shoulder seam. In fitting the ill-shaped or abnormal figure, care must be taken not to fit the garment so closely that the defects will be emphasized. This is especially significant in fitting the elderly woman.

If wrinkles run diagonally from the neckline to the underarm seam, it is evident that one's shoulders are sloped more than is the shoulder line of the garment. To correct this, if the seam is wide enough, make it narrower at the neck but gradually widen until the seam is the original width at the armseye. This method does not interfere with the size of the armhole. It may, however, affect the size of the neckline. If the shoulder seam is not wide enough for this method to be used, take the shoulder seam deep enough at the armseye end, that the diagonal wrinkles disappear. Then, usually, it is necessary to trim under the arm to keep the armseyes from being too tight. Shoulder pads of the triangular type are an aid in building up the shoulders so that the figure appears better balanced.

A satisfactory method of altering for narrow shoulders is to add tucks, darts, or gathers to take up the excess shoulder width in the front, and a dart on the shoulder to care for fullness not needed

²⁴ Alpha Latzke and Beth Quinlan, *Clothing*, p. 153.

there. If this front fullness is not desired, use a pattern and recut the armseye. Again the use of shoulder pads is recommended to help balance the figure by giving shoulder width. The shoulder of a garment should be wide enough to avoid a pinched effect, yet narrow enough that the sleeves do not fall below the shoulder tip.²⁵

The alterations for round shoulders are more complicated. First make the shoulder seam of the back deeper near the armseye and narrower near the neck and have the shoulder seam come slightly back of its regular position. Then take small neck darts to take up the excess fullness caused by the first change. Ease the back into the front shoulder seam as much as is possible without its being obvious. Let the back underarm seam slip up higher than the front and trim out the back to match the front armseye. Adjust the underarm seam so that it is kept perpendicular to the floor. Except in extreme cases, this adjustment will be adequate. Little more can be done to fit a garment that has already been cut. If the adjustment can be made in the pattern, slash it from the center back, and perpendicular to it, to within about two or three inches of the armseye. Begin the slash at the height where the person's back bulges most. Then spread the pattern making a wedge shape where the slit was cut, and pin a paper underneath to make a straight center back line. Remember not to fit the garment too snugly or round shoulders will be accentuated.

Round shoulders and full backs are often found in combination with flat chests. If the resulting bulge in the neck and waist front is slight, raising the front at the shoulder seam, lowering the neckline in front, and taking the front of the sleeve up a little at the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

underarm seam will be sufficient. If, however, the bulge is large, it will be necessary to rip the shoulder seam and smooth the front of the garment out toward the end of the shoulder. This adjustment pushes the material beyond the armseye line and necessitates trimming to form a new armseye, and unless one's neck is very large, building up the neckline with pieces of material. A collar or some kind of trimming should be used to conceal the piecing. If a flat-chested person has a low full bust, it is best to put the extra fullness into tucks, gathers, or darts in the front shoulder. This leaves the armseye unchanged, builds up the sunken chest, and allows for fullness over the bust as well. Under-arm darts used to adjust for a low bust should slant downward.

If the neck of the garment is too large, small darts radiating from the back neckline will ordinarily care for the excess back fullness. But this adjustment in some cases, makes necessary the same front alteration that was suggested for flat-chested people. If the bulge is small in either front or back, the extra fullness can be eased in, when finishing the neck edge. If this finish is a collar, it should be stretched slightly and the neck of the garment eased in generously.

"The figure with a large abdomen is the most difficult to fit, especially if the bust is small."²⁶ Yet this figure defect is one of the most pronounced results of change that the adult body undergoes. To bring the skirt that pokes out in front, as a result of the large abdomen, back to position so that the underarm seams fall perpendicular to the floor and are continuous with the underarm seams of the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

waist is the problem involved. To do this raise the skirt at the waist-line beginning a few inches from center front and gradually increasing the amount raised across the back until the side seams fall into position perpendicular to the floor. Rip the side seams and let out the front sections to allow extra fullness over the abdomen, and, if necessary, take the back skirt seam deeper to insure a continuous seam from underarm to bottom of skirt.

As has been suggested, fitting difficulties may be classed as problems for either of two reasons: the frequency of occurrence or the difficulty of solution. Although some of both types have been listed, only those that are both recurrent and difficult to solve have been discussed.

It would likely never be possible, and certainly not practical, to make every alteration that some dresses need; but the cost in money, time, and effort is well spent in making whatever adjustments are necessary to convert ill-fitting garments into those that give, not only comfort, but assurance without self-consciousness.

SUMMARY

The average length of life in America has increased more than 15½ years since 1900. All phases of security need to be considered in helping this increasing number of elderly people to have satisfaction and independence as long as they live. The social security laws are making possible financial aid; but monetary assistance, although important, is only one phase of security that older people need. They need especially to feel that they are still useful and wanted members of a group, and one of the best tonics for women's morale is attractive and appropriate clothing.

This investigation of some of the problems encountered by elderly women in an effort to be well-dressed, was made in view of the fact that so little consideration has been given to many of the problems of this increasing age-group of our population. Through personal interviews 100 white women in the state of Oklahoma, 65 years of age or over were questioned to determine, in so far as possible, their preferences, practices, and problems concerning dress.

Personal preferences and practices differed greatly in many details. But according to results of this study, there was definite agreement that blue was the favorite color, that convenience of dressing was important, that the right clothes were more desired than many clothes, that to be satisfying to the wearer dresses had to fit and be becoming in color and design, and that under existing conditions, it is almost impossible to have dresses that meet the requirements for satisfaction to the wearer.

Elderly women have not been considered in either designing or sizing of patterns and dresses. The designs made for mature women are reasonably appropriate for the large elderly woman, but not so for the small woman of this age group. Sizing has been done from measurements taken on models too young to show physical changes that normally take place in the human body during adult life. The most obvious of these changes are: decline in height of stature, height of bust, and height of abdominal extension, a drooping of the shoulders, and an increase in waist, hip, and abdominal measurements that are often out of proportion with the width of the shoulders. Few, if any figures, undergo all these changes, but they are typical of the changes in the elderly person. Ninety-five per cent of the women interviewed said that it

was necessary to have alterations made before they could have properly-fitted dresses. To more than three-fourths of this number, correct fit was of major importance, yet the trouble and expense involved in altering prohibited the majority from realizing much enjoyment from their dresses.

From this study it appears that a solution of the clothing problems of elderly women can not be solved by the women alone, for many of them are no longer capable of solving their own problems. It would seem, in fact, to be a responsibility of other interested persons, of designers, pattern makers, manufacturers, and retailers to bring about desired changes in clothes for a group who, though in a minority in numbers and in consumption of clothing, still desire to be appropriately and becomingly dressed.

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