



## Aging male bodies, health and the reproduction of age relations



Ilkka Pietilä <sup>a,d,\*</sup>, Hanna Ojala <sup>b</sup>, Neal King <sup>c</sup>, Toni Calasanti <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Gerontology Research Center, University of Tampere, FI-33014, Finland

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere, FI-33014, Finland

<sup>c</sup> Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA

<sup>d</sup> School of Health Sciences, University of Tampere, FI-33014, Finland

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 28 November 2012

Received in revised form 24 March 2013

Accepted 15 April 2013

#### Keywords:

Ageism

Generational intelligence

Men's aging

Unmarked status

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which a group of male factory workers uses bodies as bases for hierarchical categorization of men by age in their talk of mundane aspects of their lives. Analysis of interviews about health (4 focus groups and 5 personal interviews) with Finnish working-class men under 40 years old shows that they portray age groups to which they do not belong as careless, even irresponsible toward health and its maintenance. As they categorize youth and old people by age, they leave themselves unmarked by it, providing no vocabulary to describe their own group. Despite their tendency to distance themselves particularly from old people, they also distinguish among older men by familiarity, providing relatively nuanced accounts of their fathers' aging. We discuss the marking of age groups in terms of social inequality and talk of fathers in terms of intergenerational relations. Even family ties among men of diverse ages involve ageism, which familiarity serves both to mitigate and to make less visible. This article documents the maintenance of age inequality in everyday, mundane behavior.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

Despite their subject matter, gerontologists have tended to assume rather than explore ageism and the processes by which groups maintain it. Recently, however, scholars have paid greater attention to documenting ageism (e.g., Bytheway, 1995; Roscigno, Mong, Byron & Tester, 2007) as well as exploring the age relations that undergird this form of discrimination (Calasanti, 2003; Pietilä & Ojala, 2011). Scholarship on age as a relation of inequality has done much to show how discourses, from those of anti-aging medicine to those of retirement policies, help to skew distributions of authority, status, and other resources along the continuum of age. Still, such analyses have tended to focus either on the outcomes of ageism for old people, and the ways in which they grapple with losses of privilege, medical challenges, and discrimination, or the processes by which elders themselves engage in ageism,

distancing themselves from those whom they deem to be “old” (Minichiello, Browne & Kendig, 2000). Less attention has been paid to what younger age groups do to reinforce age relations and uphold the age order, and less still on behaviors of those who are privileged. Such investigations are critical for understanding and changing ageism; scholars need to explore both privilege and disadvantage, as well as the processes by which these are maintained or challenged (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Some maintenance of inequality in everyday life takes the form of marking differences between groups and membership in them. The temporal nature of age relations distinguishes them from other hierarchical inequalities; over time, people necessarily change their positions within age relations, whereas they may not shift locations within such other inequities as gender, class, race, or sexuality (Calasanti, 2003). And in reference to these categories among which people move over the courses of their lives, adults can create and maintain inequality. The framing of an identity as unmarked by its category, together with the association of other (younger and older) locations with lowered ability to work, allows the unmarked to create a status for

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 401901638.

E-mail addresses: [ilkka.pietila@uta.fi](mailto:ilkka.pietila@uta.fi) (I. Pietilä), [Hanna.L.Ojala@uta.fi](mailto:Hanna.L.Ojala@uta.fi) (H. Ojala), [nmking@vt.edu](mailto:nmking@vt.edu) (N. King), [toni@vt.edu](mailto:toni@vt.edu) (T. Calasanti).

themselves above that of the others whom they mark (Brekhus, 1998; Frankenberg, 1993; Pruit, 2012).

Family contexts can also play a role in making categorical status, an important element in sustaining inequality, more or less salient to speakers. Despite people's tendencies to distance themselves from old people, they often view aging members of their own family differently, describing them in more nuanced terms. However, the extent to which such closeness to a member of a disadvantaged group challenges ageism or not, and the processes by which this might occur, remain largely unexplored.

In this paper, we use interviews conducted among Finnish male workers aged 24–39 to ask how they use categories to manage relations of age and sustain or challenge inequality, and how the social contexts of family, occupation and class affect that use. Our analysis of these interview data gives us an opportunity to explore the process of age status change among working-class men, as it occurs within a generational context. We examine the role of our interviewees' unmarked status and family relations in elaborating age as a social relation of inequality, a system of subordination and privilege which remains invisible to most people.

### Markers in relations of gender and age

Groups tend to distinguish members by age, just as they do by gender and class. Age relations among adults position groups of different ages in hierarchical order in which old people suffer the greatest exclusion from sources of social resources and status, such as the paid labor market (Calasanti, 2003). Many scholars in the fields of gerontology and sociology of age have explored the ways in which groups sort unequal age categories in routine interactions (e.g. Nikander, 2009; Pietilä & Ojala, 2011). As Bytheway (1995: 14) puts it, “ageism legitimates the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people.” Members ‘do’, ‘act’, ‘accomplish’ and ‘perform’ age as mundane parts of everyday life (Calasanti, 2003; King, 2006; Laz, 2003). Their behaviors are accountable in the sense of being managed with an eye toward the judgments of others and the possibility of having to explain how they are appropriate to their age category. That is, even in failure to live up to ideals of group-specific behavior, people maintain senses of social competence by being seen as aware of and concerned for such ideals. By holding imputations of social competence hostage to members' overt orientations to age-specific ideals, groups inspire both attempts to conform to, and the naturalization of, many age-appropriate ideals of behavior. That is, they organize members to regard aspects of age relations as manifestations of their bodies and the effects of time upon them (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Twigg, 2004). Thus naturalized, these aspects of age relations can become both socially invisible and resistant to change.

The stakes in such categorizations can be high. Doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987), men associate their activities with skilled work deserving high praise and pay, but relate women's work with natural dispositions to provide care for low pay or for free. By doing this, groups maintain the segregation of many occupations (from governance to nurturance) and thus cornerstones of gender inequality (Collins, Chafetz, Blumberg, Coltrane & Turner, 1993; Connell, 2005). Masculinity, as what groups do to distinguish men from others, positions many men as receivers of women's care and high compensation for their work (for a

general review, see Calasanti, Pietilä, Ojala & King, 2013). It positions women in industrialized regions largely as dependents upon breadwinning men, for whom they provide unpaid care, often in heterosexual relationships. Masculinity, though affected by the inequalities with which gender intersects, gains privilege.

Likewise, doing age positions younger adults as workers in their prime and old people as too frail to contribute and too ugly to attract admiration. Cast aside, old women suffer high rates of poverty and dependence on transfers from states. Old men mostly remain buoyed by the privileges noted above, but lose much of the status enjoyed by skilled workers with healthy bodies, on which many of their privileges were based.

Groups use bodies as principal means of naturalizing these inequalities of gender and age, by taking visible aspects of bodies (including appearance, dress and behaviors, Laz, 2003) to indicate or mark members' social locations. Research on male bodies shows how people use them as signs of proper social locations for younger and older men, distinguished by physical stamina and thus fitness to work or claim authority (Calasanti, 2004; Connell, 2005: 55; Hearn, 1995), and to distinguish between classes as assessed in terms of discipline and respectability and thus entitlement to occupy particular public spaces (Skeggs, 1997, 2009). As a focus of ageism, an aged body can likewise indicate a proper place in an unequal structure. For instance, in a recent study Pietilä and Ojala (2011) found that middle-aged working class men used such terms as ‘codgers’ to denote other men who were roughly of the same age as them but whose health and physical condition was worse. This illustrates that age categories can rest less on chronological age than on invidious distinctions among bodies and functional abilities.

In everyday negotiations, people seldom call attention to such categorization and naturalization, focusing instead on the bodily signs that indicate category; and, by directing attention this way, they reify bodily signs and render systems of inequality less visible as social relations. Moreover, the greatest attention goes to deviants, or bodies that most groups find offensive or odd: bodies that are working class, dirty, unhealthy, old, female (Acker, 1990; Calasanti, 2003; Elias, 1994; Gullette, 2004; Skeggs, 2004; Twigg, 2004; Watson, 2000). Brekhus (1996: 499) argues that people engage in a “social marking” of such groups; they are able to impose these categories regardless of whether or not those so marked “politically identify with their labels.” Pruit (2012: 441) likewise argues that being unmarked gives power and an authoritative voice to those who define the marked. Members of privileged groups often occupy “unmarked” social locations, in which their claims to authority and deference go relatively unnoted (Frankenberg, 1993); the social construction of their normativity remains obscured (Pruit, 2012: 441).

Relations of familiarity, such as kinship or friendship, between group members can also affect categorization, by inspiring familiars to identify each other as members of relatively exclusive groups instead of as members of larger groups (i.e., as my parents, instead of as old people). This is most likely to occur in relations that generate impressions that disconfirm stereotypes (i.e., old people are inactive, whereas my father works hard) (Rothbart & John, 1985). Such exemptions of friends and family from categorization into larger groups may facilitate relationships between members of unequal groups in those specific contexts. But this social closeness can also occur without altering the stereotypes associated with them. This means that ageism might persist

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10513152>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10513152>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)