



Who theorizes age? The “socio-demographic variables” device and age–period–cohort analysis in the rhetoric of survey research

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that quantitative survey-based social research essentializes age, through specific rhetorical tools. We outline the device of ‘socio-demographic variables’ and we discuss its argumentative functions, looking at scientific survey-based analyses of adult scientific literacy, in the Public Understanding of Science research field. ‘Socio-demographics’ are virtually omnipresent in survey literature: they are, as a rule, used and discussed as bundles of independent variables, requiring little, if any, theoretical and measurement attention. ‘Socio-demographics’ are rhetorically effective through their common-sense richness of meaning and inferential power. We identify their main argumentation functions as ‘structure building’, ‘pacification’, and ‘purification’. Socio-demographics are used to uphold causal vocabularies, supporting the transmutation of the descriptive statistical jargon of ‘effects’ and ‘explained variance’ into ‘explanatory factors’. Age can also be studied statistically as a main variable of interest, through the age–period–cohort (APC) disambiguation technique. While this approach has generated interesting findings, it did not mitigate the reductionism that appears when treating age as a socio-demographic variable. By working with age as a ‘socio-demographic variable’, quantitative researchers convert it (inadvertently) into a quasi-biological feature, symmetrical, as regards analytical treatment, with pathogens in epidemiological research.

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Introduction

We chose the title of this article in dialogue with Gubrium and Wallace's (1990) “Who theorises age?”. We argue that researchers in quantitative survey-based social research are involved in an implicit theorizing work regarding age. By relying on common-reason knowledge of age, they crystallize it into a vocabulary of ‘age as internal causal factor’,¹ useful as a rhetorical tool in survey argumentation, largely disregarding

current conceptualizations of age in social theory. Widespread practices of working with age as a ‘socio-demographic’ variable not only restrict theoretical options for asking questions and making sense of data, but also accomplish a theorizing work on their own – similar with the theorizing power of ‘variables’ discussed in Danziger and Dzinis (1997) and Firestone (1987).

In what follows we set out to clarify this theorizing work and to discuss its significance. Our research setting consists of the survey-based literature investigating adult scientific literacy, in the so-called “Public Understanding of Science” (PUS) field. While all our empirical evidence comes from PUS articles, we propose, based on our experience of reading, doing and discussing survey-based research on PUS and also on ethnic identity (Rughiniş, 2010, 2011a,b; Rughiniş and Toader, 2010), that the theorizing work of socio-demographic

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¹ We use double quotes to point to *ad litteram* citations, and single quotes to highlight relevant formulations.

variables is shared across fields of quantitative research that are not directly focused on age, life course, gerontology, or other age-related topics. Thus, in our investigation, we pursue *two levels of analysis*: (1) we reconstruct the rhetoric of social survey analysis in general and, within it, (2) we outline the role of a more specific 'socio-demographic variable' device, that includes age.

We discuss *survey research as a genre of scientific literature* that relies on distinctive rhetorical devices as tools for reasoning with academic and policy-minded publics. We start from the theoretical assumption that *rhetoric is constitutive of argumentation* in daily and professional settings (Billig, 1989), including scholarly inquiry (Billig, 1987; Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987). Still, for all theoretical and cautionary statements to the effect that rhetoric *constitutes*, rather than *invalidates* argumentation, it is easier to outline specific devices in a discourse that we observe from a critical distance. A rhetorical apparatus is often rendered visible against a background of frustrated expectations, or in comparison with other rhetorical practices. In this paper our (frustrated) expectations are grounded in an *interactional and constructionist theory of age*, as outlined in the next section.

Our research contributes to several lines of inquiry. By choice of empirical setting, our paper is part of the methodological literature in the PUS field. Our analysis also stands as a discussion concerning the use of age and other concepts as 'socio-demographic variables' in quantitative social research. Through our attempt to highlight rhetorical devices in survey research work, we engage the literature on *rhetoric of inquiry in quantitative social research*. There is an inspiring related tradition in psychology, tracing the constitution of psychological constructs through experimental work, such as Danziger (1990) or Lopes (1991). We aim to contribute to the thread of sociological reflection about the theoretical import of quantification in sociology, following the work of Blumer (1956, 1966), Cicourel (1964), Smith (1974) and Abbott (1997). Abbott (1997) argues that positivist research relies on ambiguity that "disappears into the cracks between studies" (p. 387); we continue his inquiry, as well as Jasper and Young's (2007) critical analysis of the "rhetoric of sociological facts" by pointing out *three other types of ambiguity* that are instrumental for the internal chains of argumentation in positivist articles: (1) the use of quasi-dispositions, (2) the use of constant variable names to point to meanings that change through multivariate analysis, and (3) the use of a quasi-causal vocabulary.

The paper is structured as follows: in *Age as social classification in use* section we briefly outline an interactional and constructionist understanding of age, which informs our analysis. In *Aging as "memory decay": working with age as a central variable in PUS research* section we discuss PUS research that focuses on age and disambiguates it into cohort and aging, and we observe that this conceptualization remains marginal in the field. In *Old age as "ignorance": working with age as a socio-demographic variable* section we analyze how age is used and implicitly theorized as a socio-demographical variable. We outline survey research as a set of games of inquiry, and we examine the device of 'socio-demographic variables' and its rhetorical functions. In *Discussion: the rhetorical production of disattention to age in survey research* section we discuss the systemic disattention to aging in discussions of Public Understanding of Science, even

where age is the topic of analysis. This disattention maintains a stereotypical view of 'aging as forgetting', despite evidence to the contrary. *Discussion: the rhetorical production of disattention to age in survey research* section discusses the possibility of avoiding these traps, and *Conclusions* section concludes the paper.

Age as social classification in use

Our starting point in an interactional and constructionist understanding of age (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) is that *age is a set of classifications* that people (re)define in interaction as they go ahead with their daily lives in various ordinary and institutional contexts. These classifications make reference to generational differences and family relations, to life stages, and to bodily transformations through time, among others. In any given situation, membership in an age category is an achievement (Laz, 1998): people affiliate and disaffiliate with age categories, impute or deny them to others, create new categories, and monitor and enforce age-related moral orders.

In modern societies, age is strongly related to a number — that is, the number of years that have passed since one's year of birth. This number becomes known to virtually all individuals, is recorded in various media, and is a resource for social organization in fields as diverse as education, health care, romance, sexual relationships, trade, sports, and many others.

The social relevance of age largely derives from its widespread use in social coordination: bringing together people through synchronization or separating them through lack thereof; regulating interaction between people of different or similar ages; affording interpretations of people's actions, and supporting attributions of personal (in)competence. As Baars (2010) notices, the widespread reliance on chronological age for social organization creates 'age effects' as self-fulfilling prophecies: if we organize an action based on the idea that age is consequential, age becomes consequential. When used to explain social events, 'age' is a *pointer* toward forms of social organization that make use of it and that have played a part in the respective events. Any understanding of the 'influence of age' over a certain outcome requires an understanding of the role of age in the social organization of that outcome. Although age is used to describe individuals, its influence does not come from within the individual; at any point in life, the import of age derives from how our life is socially organized in relation to it.

Against this theoretical understanding, we set out to examine the use of age in survey research in Public Understanding of Science (PUS) survey research. We notice that even when age is a central variable in analysis, there is substantial disattention to understanding the social process of aging, relying instead on the common-sense framing of aging as decay and forgetfulness. Disattention occurs even more when age is used as a socio-demographic variable. Starting from the case study of PUS survey research, we argue that survey research in general is an arena in which researchers essentialize age as a quasi-biological individual attribute, by working with it in conjunction with the rhetorical device of "socio-demographic variables" (Fig. 1).

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