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Embodied ageing and categorisation work amongst retirees in the Faroe Islands

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses ageing and embodiment and explores how age is negotiated in interaction using Membership Categorisation Work. Data were derived from group and individual interviews with home-dwelling retirees in the Faroe Islands. The analysis showed that the interviewees negotiated age by drawing on two contrasting categories, placing themselves and others in the categories of 'old' or 'not old'. Good health was the main predicate tied to the category 'not old' and keeping busy and taking care of oneself were the main activities that the interviewees ascribed to the category 'not old'. The analysis also demonstrated how health as a moral discourse was actualised during the interviews. Staying active and in good health were not just talked about as ways to achieve personal well-being. The interviewees talked about having a responsibility to stay 'fit' for as long as possible to avoid being a burden to the society or to their families.

Introduction

This paper addresses ageing and embodiment and explores how age is negotiated in interaction using membership categorisation work (MCW). Data were derived from group and individual interviews with retired women and men aged from 68 to 91 who lived in the Faroe Islands, an archipelago in the North Atlantic Ocean. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study on how retired people living in the Faroe Islands made meaning of ageing in their everyday lives.

Powell and Longino (2001:206) have argued that social gerontologists can study people of a certain age, 'but their reality seldom reflects that of the subjects of study when ageing bodies are ignored, because becoming and being old are embodied social processes'. Laz (2003) has similarly argued that social scientists can usefully theorise age and embodiment as mutually constituting accomplishments. From this perspective, growing older means that it is in and through our bodies that we experience both the social and physical realities of ageing (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). We are embodied selves. Our bodies do not just 'hold us'; they are fundamentally part of who we are and how we are (Andrews, 2012:390). Embodiment relates to how people experience growing old in and through the body (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011), and embodied ageing should be realised as a biological process, something that happens to the body, a social phenomenon, and a personal and individual experience (Andersson, Kvist, Nilsson, & Närvänen, 2012). How people interpret, perceive and act on embodied ageing is not, however, 'the same for all people at all times' (Coupland, 2009). It depends on how experiences from the past and expectations for the future are incorporated into perceptions of the present (Närvänen, 2004; Tulle, 2003). It also depends on the available interpretive resources in social structures and cultural discourses (Coupland, 2009; Laz, 2003; Powell & Longino, 2001).

Age is something people do, something that requires action and effort and something that persists as part of the landscape of self (Krekula, 2009; Laz, 2003:506). All social practices bring the body into play (Tulle, 2003). Although people do not always do it consciously, they do age in different ways depending on the interactional settings, whether they are mundane conversations, interviews, group discussions, public appearances or other situations during which one presents oneself as a certain type of person.

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A number of studies have documented the phenomenon whereby people assert that their chronological age deviates from how they feel (Andrews, 2012; Degnen, 2007; Hurd, 1999; Laz, 2003; Lundgren, 2010; Öberg & Tornstam, 2003). Physical well-being has been shown to have a positive influence on the subjective feeling of age, and defining the self in relation to 'real elderly people', e.g., those who reside in nursing homes, has been demonstrated to reinforce these subjective feelings (Hurd, 1999). Poor health, in contrast, has been shown to make people feel older than their peers (Kaufman & Elder, 2002), and in the case of illness, this often results in what Bury (1982) called a 'biographical disruption', which challenges a person's self-esteem and age identity. Remaining in good health has become a crucial objective for many people, and preventing deterioration by living an active and healthy life has been put forward as the recipe for staying healthy in later life (Jolanki, 2008; Katz, 2000).

To capture how embodied ageing 'is done' in interactions, I draw on membership categorisation analysis (MCA). This tradition, which originated in the work of Harvey Sacks (1995), draws on notions from both ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. MCA has proved fruitful in analysing how (age) identities are negotiated in and through talk (Nikander, 2000) and how speakers proffer their category work as common cultural knowledge (Stokoe, 2012). MCA thus makes it possible to study the practices by which people make sense of embodied ageing by categorisations and how common-sense knowledge of embodied ageing is displayed in interactions. The people who participated in this study had all passed retirement age (67 in the Faroe Islands). Both 'retirees' as a whole and 'old people' constitute what Sacks (1995) called as the membership categorisation devices (MCDs), an apparatus through which categories are understood to belong to certain collections of categories; for example, the category 'retiree' might be heard to belong to the MCD 'old people'.

To date, a number of studies have shown how social interaction can be studied for its identity production processes (Coupland et al., 1991; Henwood, 1993; Nikander, 2000; Paoletti, 2004; Pietilä & Ojala, 2011; Pietilä, Ojala, King, & Calasanti, 2013), and as Paoletti (2004: 136) argued, 'conversational membership categorisation activities are particularly salient features of identity work'. Nikander (2000) analysed how Finnish men and women close to their 50th birthdays used stage-of-life categories when negotiating their age identities. By analysing one lengthy excerpt from an interview with a 50 year-old woman, the author found that two contrasting categories, 'old' versus 'little girl' as stage-of-life categories, were activated in the interviewee's account of being 50 and showed how moral notions about age-appropriate behaviour were mobilised in interaction. Pietilä and Ojala's (2011) study on 'acting age in the context of health' focused on the interplay of age, gender and class in middle-aged working-class men's interpretations of ageing and identity work. The authors found, amongst other things, that age identity was negotiated by positioning oneself between the categories of 'young' and 'old' and that ageing was conceptualised in terms of health and functional ability and as an embodied process. In another study based on the same data, Pietilä et al. (2013) found that the interviewees had negotiated their own age identities solely by distancing themselves from the categories of 'young' and 'old', without tying any predicates or activities to their own category of 'middle-age' men.

The studies mentioned above focused on categorisation work amongst middle-aged men and women. At that stage of life, people are no longer young but are not yet old (Pietilä & Ojala's, 2011), and although they cannot deny their ageing, 'they are neither yet forced to include themselves in the group of old with all the primarily negative cultural meanings attached to old age' (Pietilä & Ojala's, 2011: 381). In contrast to these studies, the research reported in this paper was based on interviews with men and women who were 'old' from a societal point of view. They were past retirement age and thus at risk of being considered old by others (Öberg, 2004; Öberg & Tornstam, 2003).

A number of earlier studies have focused on identity work from the interplay between people of various ages. Coupland et al. (1991) investigated age-categorisation processes between women aged 70–87 and those aged 30–40. They found that age identity was best considered an intrinsically rhetorical projection and that age, health and experiential accounts were important in the construction of age between women of various ages. Taylor (1992) based his study on participants of various ages and genders. The participants in the study were elderly dependent homeowners and college students who lived with them as part of a housing programme in Salt Lake City. The study showed how frailty was used to construct elderly identity and how the construction of frailty could be beneficial if an elderly person wanted to signal the need for affiliation and physical care.

In this study, my aim was to obtain a mixed sample of interviewees with a wide variation of ages (above retirement age), genders, careers and places of residence to analyse how common-sense understandings of ageing were constructed in interactions. What the interviewees had in common was the Faroe Islands as the social and cultural context of ageing. Thus, they shared the experience of living in a small society in which, amongst other social trends, taking care of the elderly has changed from being a family matter to a state matter and where 'old people' have been increasingly considered a social problem (Kristiansen, 2009). As a whole, the Faroe Islands is an understudied area regarding ageing and later life. A quantitative study of living conditions for pensioners on the islands was undertaken in 2010 (Fróskaparsetur Føroya, 2010), but to date, qualitative research on ageing has been scarce or even absent in the case of qualitative research using a discourse analytic approach. Thus, this study will contribute to filling in the gap concerning research on ageing in the Faroe Islands and to the research on how retired home-dwelling men and women make meaning of ageing.

To explore how retired men and women make meaning of ageing, the following research questions came to guide the analytic process: How is embodied ageing talked into being? Which categories related to age are mobilised during the interviews? What predicates, activities and images do the interviewees tie to these age categories? How do age norms interfere with how embodied ageing is negotiated in interactions?

Material and method

I will start by shortly introducing the context of the Faroe Islands.